



Agency, Social Relationships, and Desistance of Ex-Offenders with Drug Abuse History

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Background

Desistance: Termination of offending, maintaining non-offending

Primary desistance is a termination of offending, commonly measured by length of time spent crime-free or the absence of any criminal offences. However, termination of offending does not guarantee that the individual will not offend in the future. Maruna (2001) suggests that secondary desistance would be a more reliable indicator of maintaining non-offending. Secondary desistance is defined as a change from a criminal to a non-criminal identity (Maruna, 2001). One aspect of secondary desistance is generativity, defined as the concern for and commitment to promoting the next generation.

Key Factors: Agency, Social Relationships

Studies suggest that desisters are more likely to have a 'language of agency' in their narratives and report a greater self-motivation and belief over their actions to stay away from crime (Maruna, Porter, & Carvalho, 2004). Satisfying prosocial relationships from key institutions (family, marriage, employment) bring about social bonds which act as indirect social controls over deviant behaviour. When offenders are satisfied with their social relationships, their tendency to return to crime is reduced (Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Holmes, & Muir, 2004).

Aim: How did ex-offenders desist from crime?

When we talk about desistance from crime, we shift the focus from why people offend to how they stay away from crime. By understanding desistance in Singapore, we can improve the work we do to help offenders desist and reintegrate into their communities. SPS conducted a multiple-methods research study to examine 2 research questions:

- What is the relationship between agency, social relationships, and desistance? (Quantitative)
- How did agency and social relationships help desisters? (Qualitative)

Methodology

Participants

For the quantitative survey, 78 male desisters who have been out of prison for at least one year participated. Their average age was 48.2 years (range: 28-62 years old), average years of desistance was 8.3 years (range: 1-32 years). 86% had prior history of drug consumption, possession, or trafficking, and had an average of six prior offending records (range: 1-13 times).

For the qualitative interview, 44 out of the 78 participated in interviews and focused group discussions.

Measurements

Table 1 shows the questionnaires used, while Table 2 shows the qualitative questions.

Table 1: Factors and their scales

Factors	Scales
Perceived Agency	
General Agency	Hope Scale (Snyder et al., 1991)
Agency to Desist	Agency to Desist Scale (Lloyd & Serin, 2012)
Social Relationships	
Family Support Satisfaction	FACES IV Satisfaction (Olson, Gorall, & Tiesel, 2006).
General Social Support	Social Provisions Scale (SPS-10) (Russell & Cutrona, 1984 in Hoven, 2012)
Desistance	
Primary Desistance	Length of Desistance (in years)
Secondary Desistance	Loyola Generativity Scale (McAdams & De St. Aubin, 1992). Criminal Social Identity Scale (Boduszek, Adamson, Shevlin, & Hyland, 2012).

Table 2: Interview Questions

1) What helped you to stay away from crime?
2) Was there a significant decisive moment that led you to change?
3) What steps did you take to stay away from crime?

Key Findings

Table 3: Correlation Output

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Primary desistance	-							
2. Secondary desistance (Generativity)	.19	-						
3. Secondary desistance (Criminal Identity)	.21	-.07	-					
4. Agency (Hope Total)	-.03	.36**	-.27*	-				
5. Agency (Hope Agency)	.02	.43**	-.38**	.80**	-			
6. Agency (Hope Pathways)	-.06	.21	-.13	.91**	.46**	-		
7. Agency (Agency to Desist)	-.04	.32**	-.34**	.39**	.37**	.31**	-	
8. Social Relationship (Family Satisfaction)	-.12	.28**	-.32*	.34**	.33**	.27*	.22	-
9. Social Relationship (Social Support)	-.03	.53**	-.30*	.47**	.46**	.37**	.56**	.36**

Note. * p < .05. ** p < .01

Higher Agency, Higher Secondary Desistance

There was a positive correlation between agency measures ($r = .36, .43, .32$) and secondary desistance (generativity). Secondary desistance (criminal identity) was negatively correlated with agency measures ($r = -.27, -.38, -.34$). Results suggest that those with higher agency has higher secondary desistance seen in their higher generativity and lower criminal identity. Through interview, participants' agency was seen in their motivation to change and them taking concrete actions for change.

Motivation for Change
 "There were some who mocked me, but I persisted and stood my ground in what I believed in."
 (Subject 28)

Taking Action
 "When you work it out [take action], you will see results. You don't work it out, you think – everybody also can think, – I mean sometimes thinking is deceiving."
 (Subject 19)

Better Social Relationships, Higher Secondary Desistance

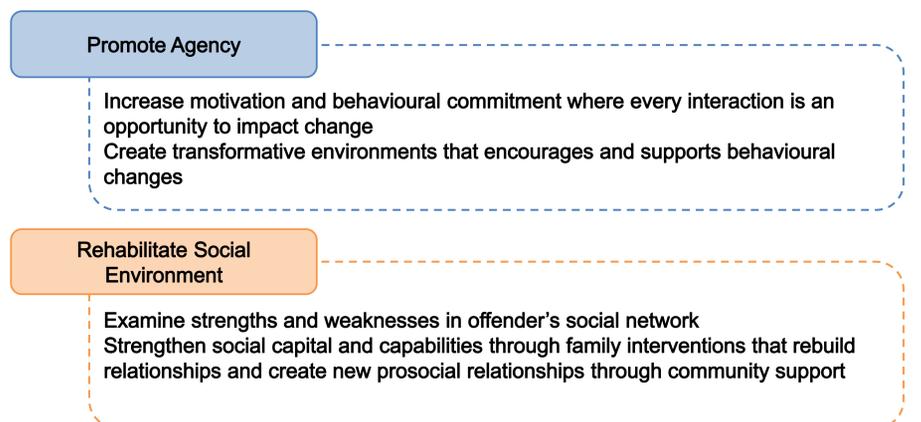
There was a positive correlation between social relationship measures ($r = .28, .53$) and secondary desistance (generativity). Secondary desistance (criminal identity) was negatively correlated with social relationship measures ($r = -.32, -.30$). Results suggest that those with higher social relationships has higher secondary desistance seen in their higher generativity and lower criminal identity. Participants' social relationships helped to trigger and maintain their change.

Trigger Change
 "When my son came to visit me, he shouted at me, because I promised him that I won't go into prison anymore ... I realized that I hurt him so much... Yes, that was my turning point."
 (Subject 1)

Maintain Change
 "But now it's that we have a family, am I going to give up all these things just because of some fun things [drugs] like that?"
 (Subject 34)

Implications

Overall, the study showed that agency and social relationships helped in ex-offenders' journey of desistance (majority with drug abuse history). There are two implications.



Limitations

- Small sample size (n = 78) limited the type of analyses that could be done. A priori sample size calculation for regression suggests a sample size of 131 for a medium effect size
- Sample consists of only desisters, thus variance is limited. Future studies could consider a mixed sample of desisters and offenders.

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