

Some cognitive transformations about the dynamics of desistance

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Abstract

This article explores the role of cognitive transformations in the process of desistance from crime. Based on our own and others' subsequent research, clearly, some aspects of our initial theorizing warrant revisiting and adjustment. The discussion describes changes to ideas about the sequencing of various types of cognitive shifts, suggests the importance of emotional processes in tandem with changes in perspective, and highlights the need to move out of the comfort zone of crime itself when thinking about redefinitions that support desistance. Yet, a consistent notion remains that social and broader structural factors are deeply implicated—directly and indirectly—in all aspects of the change process. This includes the important area of “derailments” from a pattern of forward progress, where additional processual research is needed. The discussion concludes with the argument that individualistic policies and programs centered on cognitive deficits requiring correction are likely to be limited in their effectiveness.

KEYWORDS

cognitive heuristics, desistance, recidivism, social networks

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One of the distinguishing ideas within the expanding literature on desistance is that crime cessation should be conceptualized as a process, both in terms of measuring progress toward a more prosocial path, and in understanding factors associated with such journeys (Bushway et al., 2001; Rocque, 2021). This view also has significant implications for broad-based policies and local programmatic efforts alike. Within the context of desistance work, episodic derailments from a generally positive turn are often conceptualized as an expected feature of the process of making changes, rather than as a complete failure experience (Bushway & Uggen, 2021). These dynamics have also been amply demonstrated in studies of recovery from substance use, and in recent attempts to integrate these somewhat distinct research traditions (Best & Colman, 2020). These lines of inquiry thus represent a departure from recidivism studies that have historically focused on the odds of committing a new offense after official justice system contact, or examined timing to the next offense (Bersani & Doherty, 2018). Aside from generally “leaning in” toward the negative side of things, the recidivism focus remains intimately linked with much criminal justice policy. An important illustration of this is that probation and parole violators make up a substantial share of jail and prison populations (Oudekerk & Kaeble, 2021).

In practical terms, however, it remains tempting to require a substantial time free of offending to classify someone as a “true” desister. Quantitative researchers have developed methods to capture the processual aspects of crime cessation (Bushway et al., 2001) and those who have relied on qualitative methodological strategies, in particular, the use of “life history” narratives, often emphasize dynamic processes, bring in the individual’s own viewpoint, and at times suggest frameworks that add coherence to our understanding of the hows and whys of change (Veysey et al., 2013). Nevertheless, it remains challenging to isolate the most important factors associated with a sustained period of desistance. The discussion below describes an evolution (a cognitive transformation...) in my own perspective on the desistance process as I have conducted additional research on this issue, benefited from the insights of other scholars, and reflected on how these ideas link up to current and possible future programmatic efforts.

1 | BACKGROUND

Early on, my research focused on the nature and effects of intimate social ties on crime. This interest developed as a counterpoint to some of the tenets of control and attachment theories, my perception of an overemphasis on crime-involved individuals’ “deficits,” and clearly, exposure to sociological theories in graduate school. For example, studies of delinquent girls we conducted documented that, in contrast to many depictions (i.e., the loner idea), young women who self-reported delinquency or were interviewed in juvenile institutions reported significant peer affiliations (Giordano, 1978). Consistent with this portrait, later research showed that neither boys nor girls reported a lack of attachment to their friends (Giordano et al., 1986). And as many studies then and now have shown, it is important to consider the normative orientation of peers as a critical part of the equation (Haynie, 2002; Kim et al., 2021; Thornberry et al., 1994).

When we decided to do a 10-year follow-up of sample of girls and boys originally interviewed in several state institutions, the interviews consisted of lengthy in-depth interviews, as well as structured surveys. Most of the former were conducted by a very skilled interviewer, but after a long correspondence, Stacy, one member of the sample still incarcerated in the state prison for women, decided that she wanted me to interview her after she was released from prison. I drove to southern Ohio armed with our general set of eight broad questions designed to elicit

her life history narrative, and particularly to explore issues of persistence and desistance. And, reflecting my background and prior work, several questions focused on the role of intimate others (peers, parents, romantic partner) both in relation to continued difficulties and possibilities for desistance. Yet, in spite of this network focus, Stacy clearly described a cognitive shift or transformation that appeared central to understanding the beginnings of a desistance journey:

You know. I'm really, really, really tired of that life. I don't want it no more man. I laid it down. Just things are different. You know the last time I was on parole I worked two jobs, and I was doing really good but I would go to bars, right. I hadn't fully gave up the ghost. I was still trying to live both worlds. I mean this last time I went back [to prison] you don't know what an awakening that was, because I did three years day for day [but now] "I mean everything's different when you got a kid involved." [Stacy, age 31] (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph, 2002:1023)

This became a critical case—a kind of “hook” for a shift in my thinking about how change happens. Subsequent study of the other life history narratives reinforced the idea that it would be difficult to understand desistance fully without including attention to cognitive processes. This view represented a departure from Sampson and Laub's age-graded theory of informal social control (Sampson & Laub, 1993), a perspective that emphasized the importance of events such as marriage and employment that had the potential to act as a controlling influence. Indeed, they had suggested that “many of the desisters did not seek to make good—they simply desisted with little if any cognitive reflection on the matter” (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 279). The control perspective thus subscribes to an “external” view of the change process (Kazemian, 2007). Yet, the idea that social networks are influential in relation to crime patterns also to a degree possesses an exteriority bias. This is in spite of the general recognition that individuals are influencers as well as being influenced by intimate others (Giordano et al., 1986; Thornberry, 1987). More generally, affiliations to a degree reflect conscious choices (family being a key exception). This points to the role of attitudes and intentions as individuals attempt to align their social lives with more positive identities and goals for the future (Copp et al., 2020; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Giordano et al., 2003; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

A number of other scholars have drawn on qualitative data that seem generally more amenable to uncovering the role of subjective processes, including the place of human agency (Bottoms & Shapland, 2016; Farrall & Calverley, 2006; King, 2013; Maruna, 2001). The use of in-depth interview materials undoubtedly captures that individuals like to be the star of their own life history narratives, particularly when they are “making good” (Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 2018). Yet, our own and others' research suggests that changes in perspective and motivation are more than an artifact of method. This focus on cognitive processes and the subjective aspects of life course experiences seems especially useful within the contemporary context. Thus, many of those in our sample had achieved a measure of “desistance” even though they had not acquired the stable job and good marriage that control theorists had emphasized (Giordano et al., 2002). Conversely, mere exposure to job programs or movement into marriage has not been shown to be universally effective in promoting desistance from crime (Uggen, 2000). Underscoring the potential role of subjective changes, later on the work of Lyngstad and Skardhamar (2013) documented that for many in the cohort studied, declines in offending had begun to occur prior to the marriage “event.”

1.1 | The seductions of an individual-level focus

The idea of cognitive transformations seems at first glance to promote an individualistic, internal view of change—a perspective that, in turn, is relatively compatible with many “real-world” applications. Why is it that the individualistic emphasis remains so attractive, and continues to be relied on so heavily in various kinds of programming? In most instances, it is not that practitioners have been guided by the desistance literature (but see Bushway & Uggen, 2021, for an excellent discussion of the promise of this approach). Yet, multiple factors continue to support an individualistic emphasis. In general, scholars focused on a range of problem health behaviors frequently emphasize changes in the individual’s own attitudes, beliefs, and associated actions (i.e., the Health Belief Model—see Skinner et al., 2015). This is in spite of other developing strands of research that have underscored the need to recognize many social determinants of health (Braveman et al., 2011). The area of crime cessation is complicated by additional considerations:

- A. The need to take responsibility for one’s own actions is a cornerstone of the criminal law and the entire criminal justice apparatus.
- B. Those involved in the system generally have only the individual to work with, and there are practical and ethical difficulties in attempting to incorporate families and partners much less peers into programmatic emphases. For example, some federal and state regulations prohibit or discourage the use of couple-based programs in connection with intimate partner violence (IPV) (Barth & Jiranek, 2022).
- C. Many of those who work within the criminal justice system have been trained in psychology or related disciplines. In short, prisons and treatment centers are much more likely to employ a staff psychologist or program leader than a staff sociologist. This is generally appropriate given the substantial percentage of individuals within these settings who are contending with mental health difficulties (Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017). Yet, that alone is not evidence that an exclusive focus on individual-level factors is the best way to structure programming related to the cessation of crime, IPV, or even substance abuse.
- D. It is much less expensive and ideologically more comfortable. There is less need to confront basic inequalities, or include attention to neighborhood or other broader contextual factors (e.g., discrimination based on race/ethnicity) as criminogenic influences. Further, these individual-level approaches decrease the need for interagency coordination across different kinds of social service areas that might strengthen chances for sustained desistance.

1.2 | Social determinants of desistance

In spite of a turn toward the subjective realms of experience that the notion of a “theory of cognitive transformation” implies, a goal from the beginning of our research has been to explore the extent to which and ways in which social experiences, opportunities, and capital figure into the transformation process. Over time and additional research, we have strengthened our view that the social aspects of desistance “matter.” For example, early on we found that delinquent peers and partners inhibited the odds of sustained desistance (Giordano et al., 2003), and more recently drew on multilevel models that provided a more adequate basis for examining within-individual change (Copp et al., 2020). The latter study, relying on five waves of data from the Toledo Adolescent Relationships Study (TARS) showed that across the adolescent to adult

transition, involvement with delinquent peers was associated with continued self-reported criminal involvement. And importantly, these models included measures of identity changes that have figured so heavily into descriptions of the process within the desistance literature, albeit most often relying on qualitative methods. Identity changes, were, however, also significantly related to crime patterns over the study period. Yet, it is potentially important to note that of those individuals whose responses indicate a shift in the direction of positive identities, and distancing from negative ones, about 25% nevertheless retained their affiliations with delinquent peers. These individuals then reported greater involvement in crime than those whose subjective changes and peer contacts were in alignment. Forney and Ward (2019) drew on 11 waves of the Pathways to Desistance study and cross-lagged models, and further delineated the importance and interrelationships between identity changes, peer delinquency, and an index of resistance to peer influence.

Thus, while we continue to believe that cognitive transformations are important to an understanding of behavior change, our research has stressed that social experiences often serve as catalysts for these shifts in perspective, and later on help to solidify or derail moves toward more prosocial pathways (see Turanovic & Tasca, 2019). Jessica, an Ohio Longitudinal Study (OLS) respondent, had experienced a spiritual transformation and noted that virtually of her friends were from her church. She emphasized that “They showed me the type of person that the Lord is. He’s with you through thick and thin. Their friendships have really helped me understand how the Lord walks with me side by side even when I don’t feel it” (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1037). Clearly, individuals have a key role in “putting it all together” in ways that are compatible with their backgrounds, current positions, and future aspirations. Yet, positioning this as an individualistic process—whether in building theory or building programs—is potentially limiting, if requiring less of all of us who have an interest in fostering sustained desistance.

Paternoster and Bushway (2009; Bushway & Paternoster, 2013) have critiqued our approach to desistance as in effect too social, preferring to focus more exclusively on the role of individualistic mental processes. A key contribution of their depiction of desistance is that, more than most previous work, including our own, the authors focused on the importance of an accumulation of negatives associated with criminal activity. This piling on of negatives can then result in a turning point, and an accompanying desire to change one’s identity. We had also argued that crafting a satisfying and achievable replacement self is important to the desistance process. However, we had suggested that even though the individual may express a sincere desire to change direction, this may not prove an easy path without access to social capital, opportunities, and prosocial affiliations.

This difference in approach is well illustrated by an example from our work that Paternoster and Bushway (2009) had drawn upon. They noted that having a blueprint for change is an important part of the process, a point that we had made, but qualified in pointing out that “some hooks for change provide more of a blueprint or roadmap than others.” For example, we argued that jail/prison may be an initial catalyst for making changes, but often provides little direction about how to proceed as a changed individual and often no support for the new direction (Giordano, 2017). However, Paternoster and colleagues’ theorizing differs in suggesting that the key is the individual’s *own* construction of a new possible self and plan for how to achieve it. In this regard, the authors quoted one of the respondents from our OLS study:

I see me getting’ a house and a job, by the time this year is out I’ve set goals to have a job and be off welfare. My plan is to get into a house when school starts in September

to start going to school be a nurses' assistant. (Giordano et al., 2002:1026, as cited in Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 1115)

While the authors noted that Nicole's "specific and realistic sense of her future self" would be critical to the success of her desistance efforts, the interviewer notes cited in the article provided a less positive depiction of Nicole's prospects:

"Nicole is very unlikely to get a real job because she has no child care, no skills, no social skills, no permanent address, no phone to even get notified of a job, weighs over 300 pounds and could not pass a normal employer screening which most jobs have in the form of a police check, because she is wanted. Her kids are very lovable." (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1026)

One of the problems with completing desistance studies is that it would always be desirable to see into the future to gauge whether an apparent desister continues on a positive trajectory. In the above case, in addition to the helpful summary the interviewer provided, we returned to the OLS participants some 13 years later and the subsequent wave of interviews provided an updated assessment (Giordano, 2010):

Nicole remained unable to find employment, continued to have problems with the law (including a murder charge related to a friend's drug overdose), garnered additional prison time, experienced ongoing housing insecurity/instability and maintained a daily drug habit that contributed to a siege mentality within the home (e.g., children and mother hiding and hoarding food). (Giordano, 2010, p. 48)

It is also important to note that Stacy, the earlier cited "critical case" for our own theory of cognitive transformation, although a bit better positioned, eventually reoffended as well (Giordano, 2010). One consequence of our exposure to such outcomes is the view that it is important to conduct additional research on the "derailment" process. This line of research would benefit from the approaches developed to study desistance, as contrasted with the idea of developing what are essentially lists of risk factors for recidivism as in traditional studies. Our own research clearly still foregrounds the more hopeful story represented by desistance. Yet, as we have shifted our views on the role of individual and social factors in understanding crime cessation, some of these ideas may connect to the equally important issue of these derailments.

2 | THE NATURE AND SEQUENCING OF COGNITIVE TRANSFORMATIONS

2.1 | The last shall be first

In connection with our original discussion of cognitive transformations and the desistance process, we described four types of cognitive transformations, as well as an ideal-typical sequence. Aligning with much applied work, we suggested that the first step in the process is a general openness to change (Ryan et al., 1995). This was followed by our notion that the individual then needed exposure or at least an openness or receptivity to specific hooks for change. For example, someone in prison may have decided to go "straight" upon release, but still not resonate with

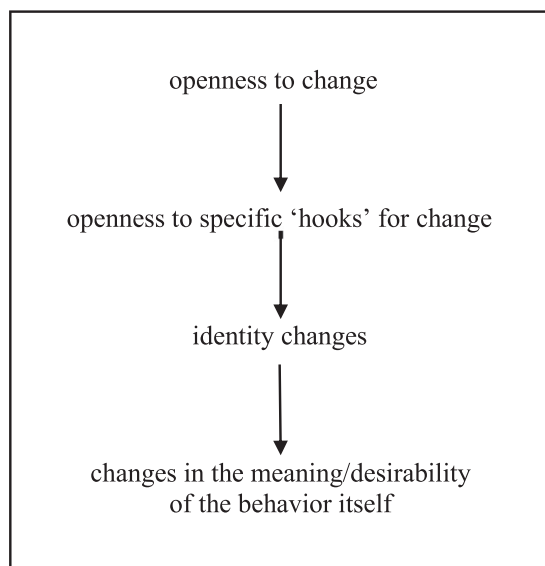


FIGURE 1 Initial description of cognitive transformations related to desistance

prison ministries who had offered up spiritual growth as a specific pathway to a more prosocial lifestyle (Giordano et al., 2008). And while Paternoster and Bushway argued that identity change was the first transformation along the desistance path, we had suggested that the broad outlines might be present, but additional “meat on the bones” would likely develop later—with additional experiences and social relationships that reinforced the new identity and more broadly the more prosocial pathway. Finally, we argued that a sustained pattern of desistance would eventually be linked to a transformation in views about the criminal/deviant behavior itself. Clearly, we were influenced in this by the number of individuals who had substance use problems. Thus, some respondents highlighted that the desire for drugs or alcohol would often linger, even after some of the other steps had been accomplished. The initial sequence thus looked like Figure 1 (Giordano et al., 2002).

Subsequently, we developed the idea that, along with a number of other limitations of our provisional theory of cognitive transformation, a general openness to change is likely not the first step in the process, as illustrated in Figure 2 (Giordano, 2016). A key conundrum is that placing an “openness to change” first, while a popular view within treatment settings, does not answer a basic question—why it is that some individuals but not others begin to develop such an openness, or more to the point, why does a specific individual develop this openness when closed to the idea at earlier periods? Across time and different studies, we concluded that while all of these processes are clearly interrelated, it is perhaps most useful to consider that redefinition processes occur early on and set the stage for the other kinds of transformations. In short, our view is that redefinitions are primary in the sequences of cognitive shifts, and these kinds of changes bring about a subsequent openness to change and so on.

In turn, agentic moves are the behavioral manifestations of these redefinition processes (Giordano, 2016). These are, however, distinct, as has been demonstrated in research on prejudice and discrimination. This basic distinction is critical, because it is clear that many sincere cognitive transformations occur among offenders, including the more global ones (desire to “go straight,” quit using drugs). Yet, the associated agentic moves may not be implemented or only

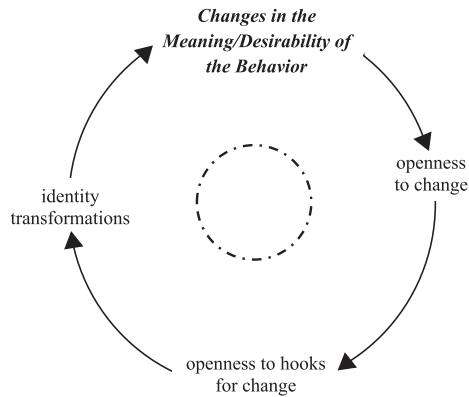


FIGURE 2 Revised description

enacted on a temporary basis (Dhami et al., 2006). This differs from the idea that individuals who reoffend simply do not have sufficient openness or motivation to change direction. The focus on redefinitions as setting the stage for change is also potentially useful because transformations may or may not involve a singular turning point (an eureka moment). To a degree this accords with Laub and Sampson's view that many of the men they interviewed had desisted without any "cognitive reflection on the matter" (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 279). However, we would argue that all such major behavioral changes involve redefinitions, even though this may not involve a singular, dramatic turning point. Further, within the contemporary context, that criminal behaviors are so entwined with substance use increases the chances that shifts in attitude and intention are necessary for enacting these kinds of behavioral changes. That is, one does not typically give up a serious drug habit almost without noticing it.

2.2 | Back to social learning theory

This focus on redefinitions is generally compatible with social learning theories, albeit through a life course lens (Giordano, 2020). If we accept that learning definitions (favorable to the violation of law [Sutherland, 1947]) is important to understanding the onset of crime, it is reasonable to expect that redefinitions will be critical to the desistance process. Our view is that social learning theories should not be relegated to the study of carryover effects (as, e.g., the finding that parental violence as a risk factor for the child's later use of aggression) or confined to the adolescent period. Instead, it is useful to conceptualize the life course as a site of life-long learning. And while Sutherland's version did stress the importance of definitions, in practice, social learning theories have often consisted of studies of peer influence, generally focusing on peer behavior during the teenage years (but see, e.g., Megens & Weerman, 2012, for an illustration of a study that included peer attitudes as well as behavior). We have suggested that symbolic interactionist versions of social learning theory are potentially most useful, as these social psychological frameworks take into account cognitive processes. At the same time, scholars in this tradition argue that thoughts, while located within the individual, are to a great degree shaped by social experiences (Matsueda, 2006; Mead, 1938). Below we review additional considerations about these important redefinition processes.

2.3 | Social aspects of development

Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) argued that much about the age–crime curve reflected simple maturational reform, and scholars have taken up studies of biological factors as underpinnings of crime onset and the trend toward crime declines as a function of age (Beaver et al., 2014). However, in a recent study, Steffensmeier et al. (2017) documented that Taiwanese individuals evidence a different age–crime curve (including later onset and divergence in observed patterns). These findings provide important clues about the impact of cultural and social influences. However, even within U.S. samples, researchers have shown that different patterns exist within the same group of similarly aged respondents (Day & Wiesner, 2019). Such findings are consistent with the symbolic interactionist notion that development is to a considerable degree social (fostered by a continuing, and somewhat unique mix of social experiences) and proceeds along myriad fronts. Individuals are not mere recipients of social influences, however, as redefinitions are worked out through interaction and communication with others, as well as through observation. For example, as Carlsson (2013) pointed out, the character of masculinity expectations may change with development and exposure to the dynamics occurring across one’s own social network—from an emphasis on being tough and always up for a party to the felt need to provide for one’s partner and children. These cognitive shifts could take place prior to actually acquiring a partner and/or children, as Lyngstad and Skardhamar’s (2013) research shows. Yet, a key notion is that many changes that occur in connection with ongoing social development are not connected to major roles, or even to crime itself. Again, this differs somewhat from Paternoster and Bushway’s (2009) view that the accumulation of negatives around criminal actions (in essence a negative cognitive transformation) leads to the desire for a new identity such as family man.

2.4 | Emotional changes as part of the redefinition process

Even during the initial process of analyzing life history narratives and writing about “cognitive transformations,” we recognized that focusing only on cognitive processes offers a somewhat limited view of changes that may be associated with crime cessation. Additional data collection and analyses of life history narratives from the same OLS respondents elicited some 13 years after the first follow-up strengthened our view of the need to take emotional processes into account (Giordano et al., 2007). Based on additional exposure to the more general literature on emotions (learning!), particularly symbolic interactionist treatments, as well as the content of the newer narrative accounts, we came to the view that emotions are not oppositional to but fellow travelers with cognitive processes. This is the case even though in everyday parlance and at times even within the context of treatment programs, references to emotional processes are often theorized as a thing apart (“my emotions got the best of me”).

We have argued that even though desistance research has been distinguished by its emphasis on adult life course matters, the early risk factors, the individual’s changing perspective on them, and linked emotional responses may be associated with reductions in criminal activity. For example, it is well documented that family problems are a risk factor for delinquency onset, and using drugs, lashing out at others, or running away from home may be responses to these conditions (Agnew, 1992; Shaw, 1930). A key point is that these negative emotional responses may not be due to apocryphal beliefs, or developed as a result of a stable trait of negative emotionality, but undergirded by relatively logical assessments about sometimes intolerable situations (e.g., sustained

periods of abuse). Stacy's 13-year-old son Jason, who participated in our intergenerational study, expressed outrage about his mother's tendency to steal things of his when she needed money for drugs:

Little things will come up missing. Sometimes like \$5 or maybe like \$2 will come up missing. Like if I have a bunch of quarters, like, half of them will come up missing and stuff... I've got Game Boy pieces like my Game Boy Advance I bought. I bought all those games and they just keep coming up missing. And she, like, comes up and she just can't, like, walk and stuff. It's just so weird... like, why would she steal off me? If she was gonna steal off anybody why would she steal off me? Why her own son? Like why her own mom? Why her own cousin? Why wouldn't she steal off a stranger? You don't steal off somebody... you don't steal off somebody you know. [Jason] (Giordano, 2010, pp. 145-146)

Across time and additional social development, however, reassessments about the sources of initial risk and associated "diminution of negative emotions" may be related to reductions in criminal behavior. Thus, 34-year-old Kim's interview conveys an emotional mellowing, as she reflected on early family problems: "now I know she [her mother] was doing the best she could with what she had" (Giordano et al., 2007, p. 1623). Cid and Marti's (2012) idea of reframing relationships with family over time as a factor in desistance adds to this notion, as their analyses show how family members may "step up" later as key sources of support. In turn, the incarcerated individuals they interviewed indicated that they felt quite positive about this support and family members' belief in them, and these positive emotions could serve as catalysts for change. In this way, positive emotions are part of the reassessment or reframing process. Yet, we know that family members' support is not universal, nor effects universally positive. Based on our research on intergenerational transmission, for example, family members with substance use problems or histories of incarceration can be a source of continuing stress for the adult child (Giordano, 2010; Giordano et al., 2019). Based on interviews with children of chronic offenders, we have suggested that some children learned to adapt by emotionally distancing from the parent as a strategy that allowed them to move forward in more positive ways. Finkeldey et al. (2020) using quantitative measures of identity, and the larger TARS survey, recently found that a certain amount of distancing and deidentification with parents who had been incarcerated was associated with more favorable outcomes.

Another example is provided by consideration of peer factors. Peer delinquency has long been linked to continued criminal involvement, even into adulthood (McGloin & Thomas, 2019), and scholars have also examined the phenomenon of susceptibility to peer influence as a somewhat separate risk factor (Monahan et al., 2009). As one of our respondents put it succinctly, "being a follower ain't gonna get you nowhere but trouble" (Giordano et al., 2003, p. 309). While research has shown that reductions in perceived peer influence are associated with age and lower reported criminal involvement, our view is that these changes involve more than a clinical re-assessment. For example, Wilkinson and Fagan (2001) found that many gang youth did not have a strong interest in moving ahead with the violent acts in which they had participated, but feared being considered a punk and thus humiliated if they were to walk away. Additional social experiences provide a basis for understanding that the world is not totally preoccupied with one's own behavior (i.e., a reduction in the "imaginary audience" associated with adolescence [Elkind, 1967]), and for developing strategies to avoid feelings of demoralization or humiliation if one is a disappointment to individuals in one's social network.

Even when considering the dynamics underlying the key life course events such as marriage, we have argued that emotional processes are an important part of the change process. While Sampson and Laub's life course perspective emphasized the extent to which the good marriage operated a source of informal social control, we suggested that high-quality relationships (with a prosocial partner) engage positive emotions that give energy to new lines of action. This is a potentially useful addition that nevertheless accords with the general notion that the individual changes in multiple respects, as contrasted with the view that the spouse or partner is central in keeping the individual in check. Further, even though these and other researchers have emphasized the stability and longevity of the marriage bond, positive emotions are available early on, during the early phases of behavioral transformations.

These notions seem at first glance to be consistent with attachment theories. Yet, the emphasis of traditional theorizing on attachment processes is on carryover effects: the lack of attachment early on within the family results in an inability to form close relationships with peers, and later romantic partners (Santona et al., 2019). This is also consistent with early ideas about self-control (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983) (but not with studies that have documented changes over time in this "trait" [Hay & Meldrum, 2016]). In contrast, a life course perspective on social learning emphasizes that as individuals become adults, they may acquire a new level of responsiveness to and felt need for close relationships. Related to this, we have argued that each type of relationship represents "something of a new ballgame" from a developmental standpoint, with different expectations, qualities, and potential for growth (Giordano et al., 2006). Thus, some criminally involved individuals may experience positive emotional benefits as they begin to form a new intimate relationship. Yet clearly, for some individuals, carryover in terms of what has been learned within the family of origin (including but not limited to lack of attachment), or based on peer norms, may affect conduct within these relationships. Certainly, these lessons can foster ruptures in relationships that would have had outstanding "conventionalizing" potential.

2.5 | It is not all about crime

Many of the scales used in research and treatment settings are composed of items tapping attitudes associated with criminal conduct. It is intuitive to stick close to home in this regard, because criminology is our field. Thus, whether focused on onset, continuation, or redefinitions that support desistance, crime is front and center. To illustrate, the TCU (2022) criminal thinking scale contains items such as "when asked about your motives for engaging in crime, you point out how hard your life has been;" "You must get back at the people who mess with you; the victims of some of your crimes were asking for it;" "It is hard to resist acting on your emotions." These are excellent examples of thought processes that have been shown to be associated criminal behavior. Some researchers have included attention to other conceptual domains such as lack of or growth in empathy (see Simons & Burt, 2011) that tap more basic but relevant attitudes. Clearly, these can be good targets for intervention. Nevertheless, as we have noted in previous work, there is more to life than crime, even for criminally active individuals.

Observations about research on areas that we typically consider "predictors" support this notion. Thus, we theorized and along with other researchers have shown that improvements in relationships with parents, reductions in susceptibility to peer influence, and positive feelings about one's romantic partner are generally associated with lower levels of involvement in crime. Yet, researchers could benefit from more specific research on the *content of attitudes and behaviors* related to the nature and impact these and other domains of life. To illustrate, below is an

example from our research on desistance from IPV. Andrew's structured data and life history narrative support that he is in the process of desisting:

I used to could tell how it used to make Lisa feel when I used to do it... It is like OK I don't want that to happen to me so I'm not gonna do it no more... cause like she usually just be crying and stuff and I'd be like dang she really hurt. [Andrew] (Giordano et al., 2015, p. 349)

Andrew's account of change points to the development of empathy, a domain we noted is often included in criminal thinking or attitude scales. However, it is potentially important to note that here Andrew is not talking about hitting his girlfriend, but instead about his prior infidelities. Several studies relying on the TARS data have shown that cheating (not merely jealousy, as in traditional accounts) is associated with high levels of conflict within romantic relationships, including physical IPV (Giordano et al., 2015). Further, a more recent analysis indicates that while either or both partners' cheating is associated with IPV, men's infidelity is more strongly related to physical violence (as evidenced by male as well as female respondents' reports), at least within the context of this general population sample (Giordano et al., 2021).

This small example illustrates the potential value of extending our research beyond crime or a related final outcome (IPV) to learn more about how individuals live their lives in ways that foster or limit criminal involvement. This could be a useful addition to the idea that developing positive strategies for handling conflict (the skill-building approach) will be sufficient to overcome keenly felt issues in relationships. Thus, if Andrew had received training in anger management, but continued to cheat on his girlfriend, it is not likely that levels of conflict would remain low in the long run. Extending this line of inquiry, a more recent analysis showed that reports of infidelity were related not only to IPV but also to more general patterns of criminal behavior. Copp et al. (2022) estimated a multilevel model and documented that within-individual variation in infidelity was related to self-reported criminal involvement across multiple waves of data encompassing the adolescent to adult transition periods. The models took into account sociodemographic characteristics, traditional measures of life course transitions (marriage, full-time employment), and even peer delinquency. Another way of thinking about this finding is that it provides additional concreteness to our understanding of what kinds of relationship attitudes and behaviors—other than longevity itself—underlie “the good marriage effect.”

2.6 | Some limitations of social support as a conceptual framework

2.6.1 | The normative orientation of significant others

As noted at the outset, our research has focused heavily on the role of close ties in understanding delinquency and crime. These studies are thus generally compatible with research on many other physical and emotional difficulties that has shown that close ties and social support decrease the likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes, or play an ameliorative role in recovery (Uchino et al., 2018). In his Presidential Address to the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences, Cullen (1994) argued that it was potentially useful to consider social support as an organizing framework that connects many strands of research in criminology as well as applied work aimed at crime reduction. Based on our research, this view has much merit, and provides an important way of linking criminal behavior and/or substance use, and even aggression to the broader concept of

(behavioral) health. A key contribution is that the idea of social support encompasses not only family members and other close ties but institutional actors as well. This view fits in well with recent research and programmatic efforts in fields such as probation, where the goal has been to shift the balance in terms of providing support versus monitoring possible violations (Farrell, 2021). Nevertheless, basic social learning principles complicate the idea of social support as a uniformly positive dynamic. As Cullen noted, citing his personal communications with Al Cohen and Ron Akers, support from nonconforming others may increase crime, as stressed in classic subcultural and learning theories. Our ideas about the importance of this additional layer of complication were shaped by these traditions, research on adult desistance, as well as the earlier studies focused on the adolescent period.

One of the OLS respondents, for example, had committed a burglary at a construction site with his father, and was later incarcerated in a prison where his father also served time for the offense. Upon his release, this respondent found housing, but it was at his father's home. Records show that he was subsequently arrested on a burglary charge, and a codefendant lived next door to his father's residence. In this example, the provision of housing would certainly be considered a positive as it relates to the perception of support availability and the actual provision of support. However, his father's own disadvantaged circumstances and incarceration history may have limited his role as a support provider. Further, his father's physical and social location potentially limited access to other kinds of affiliations with individuals who might be better positioned to offer prosocial forms of support.

Another example is potentially useful because it explicitly highlights the potential influence of communications of significant others. This case illustrates the role of one's affiliations even after the commission of a given antisocial behavior (Akers, 1992). Tony recounted a time when he had recently hit his girlfriend Jessica. He described feelings of remorse, but Jessica nevertheless elicited immediate support from her father—a generally positive development. Her father Jake came right away to see about the situation, but it is important to note that Jake himself had recently been in jail on a domestic violence charge. As he began to quiz Tony about the fight, he focused on what Tony had had to drink. When Tony mentioned “Jose Cuervo,” Jessica's father offered that “that shit will do it to you.” He nevertheless chided Tony for what he had done, and threatened him with bodily harm if he ever did it again. These admonitions can be considered negative reinforcement for what had occurred. Yet, the references to the effects of the tequila provided Tony with a “technique of neutralization” that to a degree served to mitigate his own responsibility (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Further, raising the specter of violence in the future provided less than ideal lessons about ways of handling these problem situations.

2.6.2 | Some additional downsides of social support

Another line of research further “conditions” the character and impact of close ties on patterns of criminal involvement. Considering adolescent children within the same family, Siennick (2011) found that delinquent children actually received more utilitarian support from parents relative to their more conforming siblings. More recently, Longmore et al. (2022) found that adults who are criminally involved continue to receive more utilitarian support from their parents. Further, no differences were found between conforming and criminally involved respondents in the parents' provisions of emotional support.

Parents, then, often are responsive to the needs of children, but the family dynamics are more complex than where, for example, a child who has serious physical health problems. Parents and

other family members may be conflicted about whether to continue to provide support, recognizing that this could also represent the “enabling” dynamic. These family dynamics and problems potentially result in negative psychological and even physical health effects from the felt difficulties of parenting of a “problem child”) (Birditt et al., 2016). And even when they do offer significant levels of support (et al., family members comprise the largest share of individuals who care for children when a mother has been incarcerated)—this may be associated with continued conflict. To illustrate, even after John, a TARS respondent, had made significant steps to get his life together, he felt that his mother and sister had “taken over” in terms of his ability to help make decisions about his child and to develop as a father (see, e.g., Turanovic et al., 2012). In turn, family turmoil and feelings of demoralization and resentment may under some circumstances be associated with the adult child’s return to illegal substances as a way to cope with these negative emotions.

The phenomenon of intergenerational transmission is another potential complication in the provision of various forms of social support. It is quite possible that those individuals providing long-term support, including housing and child care, may have substance use problems, or resort to harsh parenting practices that may have been implicated in the onset of their adult children’s original difficulties (Giordano, 2010). These patterns could then affect the next generation’s functioning, particularly if the family interacts frequently, or coresidence is involved. To illustrate, Stacy’s son Jason, quoted at the outset as a critical case for the theory of cognitive transformation, was interviewed at the age of 13. While his mother had an extensive history of incarceration, drug use, and violence, Jason was adamant about going down a different path. He also recounted in detail about how he often poured alcohol down the drain or threw drugs away, to try to deter his mother’s substance use. However, other family members who cared for Jason when his mother was incarcerated also had significant problems (his grandfather had a heroin addiction and served a long prison sentence, and grandmother was an alcoholic). Other aunts, uncles, and cousins also had reputation in the town for being aggressive. Thus, in sharp contrast to Jason’s strong intentions to develop a different way of life, unfortunately, as a 30-year-old, Jason is currently incarcerated on a charge of “Drug Trafficking.”

3 | CONCLUSION

We have argued that cognitive transformations serve as foundations for social development, and this includes behavioral changes related to involvement in criminal behavior. Yet, as we have conducted additional research in the area of desistance, we have found it useful to emphasize to a greater extent that: (a) cognitive shifts need not entail a singular “eureka” moment and (b) not all cognitive shifts are related to criminal conduct itself. This led to our view that redefinitions (about crime and many other things) are first in a sequence that eventually results in an openness to change one’s lifestyle or behavior and to specific catalysts that are more concrete as “hooks” for sustained behavior change. These cognitive changes and lifestyle developments then provide underpinnings of more complex identity transformations.

Yet, while this sounds in many respects like an individual’s journey, we cling to basic symbolic interactionist tenets that have long emphasized the extent to which changes—or continuity—in perspective and behavior are fostered by social interaction and communication. As Bushway and Uggen (2021) recently pointed out, women and men who have committed crimes are finding their way around as adults in a manner that is at the core similar to the journeys of their more conforming counterparts. Symbolic interactionists theorize that cognitions and emotions come to the fore in response to problematic situations (Mead, 1938). Accordingly, significant others are

deeply implicated in the definitions that become somewhat habitual or taken-for-granted (learning destructive ways of handling conflict), and in fostering the sense of the problematic that fosters redefinitions and associated behavior change. Indeed, our view is that a key contribution of Pateroster and Bushway's (2009) theorizing is including specific attention to the initial buildup of negatives, rather than hurrying on to the positive "hooks for change" that may play a role in the process. This, mix of negatives and hoped for future selves, is not inconsistent with our view that an individualistic emphasis—whether in connection with initial onset (i.e., deficit approaches, the idea of low self-control) or desistance, does not provide a comprehensive perspective on pathways associated with criminal continuity and change.

3.1 | Suggestions for future research on desistance processes

3.1.1 | Macro-micro linkages

While our research has focused primarily on the role of close ties in understanding patterns of criminal involvement, as many scholars have documented, broader structural disadvantages affect life chances and myriad aspects of daily life. In a sense, for many individuals growing up in the most disadvantaged communities, life itself sometimes seems to consist of a series of "problematic situations." Accordingly, many aspects of identity and behavior (e.g., developing a tough persona—see, e.g., Anderson, 1990) are forged not only by individual proclivities and immediate social ties, but by the lived realities of these broader contexts (Bell et al., 2021). Additional research is thus needed that ties together specific aspects of structural and cultural characteristics, including racialized and gendered processes, and pathways to persistence or desistance. Ideally, this would entail not just studies that estimate the role of neighborhood context on the odds of desistance, but how neighborhood features affect the microlevel processes we and other desistance researchers have tended to emphasize in our research. This cross-level work is needed because ultimately criminally involved women and men must make individual-level choices, and somehow navigate the relationships that mean the most to them.

3.1.2 | Derailments as a process

While studying the phenomenon of desistance is attractive in emphasizing the hopeful story, our research has convinced us that additional research is needed on the process of derailments that occur after experiencing cognitive transformations. Thus, many individuals appear to experience such cognitive shifts (in the original sense, wishing to avoid further criminal involvement or to end their pattern of substance abuse), yet is well established that recidivism and relapses are extremely common. Thus, it is an oversimplification to argue that these individuals simply lack the proper motivation to change, or concrete plan about how to move in a different direction. Our studies have also shown that changes in life circumstances that extend well beyond the commission of a crime are integral to an understanding of sustained desistance. However, more is required than changes of heart. This research would delve into social psychological, social, and broader structural impediments and challenges that individuals associate with significant derailments after a positive beginning. In this regard, qualitative approaches could elicit accounts that follow up systematically on the well-accepted view of desistance as a process. However, a longitudinal lens is going to be helpful in moving beyond a single narrative about where individuals stand in

their desistance journeys. Research on “naturally occurring” desistance *and* derailment processes would add to studies of recidivism that often do not show how various factors and levels of risk combine to produce a range of different outcomes (Halsey et al., 2017).

To illustrate, one of the OLS respondents indicated that she had been doing well, and was heavily involved in activities at her church (i.e., religion as a hook for change, fellow church members provided access to more prosocial definitions). Yet, during a stressful period, that a crack dealer lived immediately below Angela’s apartment proved pivotal to her eventual “derailment.” Thus, it is important to understand overall risks for recidivism, but it is arguably most useful to document derailments after individuals have expressed what appear to be sincere cognitive transformations. As we have suggested since we began our research on desistance, cognitive transformations are important to an understanding of the process, but in many important ways, they are not nearly enough.

Quantitative approaches could also prove useful for capturing the interrelated nature of risks for persistence, derailments, and episodic offending. To illustrate, we have suggested the utility of linking social factors that are often pitted against one another in multivariate models. Our research has shown that a pattern of encapsulation (i.e., the situation where a romantic partner, parents, *and* peers are criminally involved), is, perhaps not surprisingly, associated with greatest risk (Lonardo et al., 2009). This is generally similar to Haynie’s (2002) original finding that most adolescents are involved in mixed peer networks that include some delinquent and non-delinquent youth. Yet, those whose networks are almost entirely composed of delinquent friends report the highest levels of involvement. Our research extends this line of inquiry and shows that the idea of encapsulation applies to offending and desistance when we consider different types of relationships, school, and neighborhood, as well as peer contexts.

Following from our general notion that “it’s not all about crime,” additional research is needed on attitudes and lifestyle factors that are not directly criminogenic (i.e., often victims deserved what they got) that nevertheless inhibit or promote the likelihood of successful desistance. For example, we still know relatively little about the specific qualities and dynamics that promote “the good marriage effect.” Graduate students will gain from additional exposure beyond research and theorizing about criminal behavior, as they link scholarship regarding family dynamics, intimate relationships, demography, and/or economics in more comprehensive ways to patterns of criminal continuity and change. Each of these domains and others would benefit from additional attention to the subjective realms of experience, as well as to objective and perhaps more easily measured factors. For example, in addition to dates of marriage or cohabitation, or of the timing of the transition to parenthood, one could examine levels of commitment within the context of cohabiting relationships, or perceived stresses and challenges associated with parenthood. The latter is particularly important because entry into parenthood is an often referenced “hook for change,” but quantitative studies have shown that this is not a uniformly successful catalyst (Giordano et al., 2011; Schinkel, 2019).

3.2 | Implications for policies and programmatic efforts

The most basic lesson from desistance research is that it is necessary to address the realities of desistance as a process. Accordingly, programs that have developed strategies for handling derailments and/or relapses are likely to have greater promise than zero-tolerance policies. The criminal justice system will always be tasked with addressing public safety concerns, but there is nevertheless considerable room for recognition of the need to absorb and address episodic derailments,

or violations of probation/parole conditions. The burgeoning literature on incarceration and its consequences provides ample evidence of what occurs when the “get tough” on crime approaches predominate (Kazemian & Walker, 2018). The mismatch between the justice system’s approach and offenders’ needs is particularly jarring when we consider individuals who have experienced significant cognitive transformations, but then approach a system that does not take this into account. To illustrate, one TARS respondent Brian told the interviewer about his last arrest on drug-related charges, and how after this happened, he had for the first time realized he needed help with his drug problem. Yet, while he later explained this to the judge who was handling his case, the latter simply looked at him and said, “You’re going down.” Of course, many offenders develop insincere stories about such transformations. Yet, this does not obviate the need to make available high-quality drug treatment and many other concrete resources that elevate chances for success. This would be the case for individuals who have experienced cognitive shifts on their own or for those exposed to cognitive-behavioral approaches that seek to hasten various cognitive transformations.

3.2.1 | Add to the focus on individual differences

For many reasons sketched out above, the individualistic focus in criminal justice will likely always remain attractive. Yet, our own and many other researchers’ findings indicate that social relationships and broader social contexts are consequential—directly and indirectly as they undergird the cognitive processes that serve as guides to action. It is a bit more abstract, but we believe useful to highlight the extent to which emotional processes are not oppositional to rational action, or something that one loses control over or learns to “manage” better. Instead, experienced emotions are also undergirded by beliefs that are often given shape by social experiences.

Clearly, there is a pressing need for offenders to take full responsibility for their own behavior. Yet, program content could nevertheless incorporate more fully ways in which social interaction and communication within relationships affects thinking, behavior, and identity. This differs from “deficit” approaches that stress the individual’s lack of essential skills and extensive repertoire of “thinking errors.” The lists and worksheets related to these errors of thought revolve almost exclusively around individual personality problems that need correcting. Offenders may be more likely to endorse these attitudes, but the individualistic focus does little to situate the development and change in such self-views within a broader life course context. At a basic level, thinking about a particular cognitive set as a personality profile may be demoralizing for offenders (I am fundamentally different from and “lacking” compared to others), and does not in itself enhance understanding of circumstances that perpetuate or modify these kinds of attitudes toward self and others.

The popular saying in rehabilitation settings (Stay away from [certain] people places and things...) provides a general recognition of these broader influences on attitudes and behavior. Yet, involvement in social relationships includes influences *on* others, as well as the ongoing coconstruction of reality. The admonition to “stay away” is also fundamentally complicated when it involves not only the need to avoid bars or other risky settings, but also close-in ties such as family members and even one’s romantic partner. Research and programmatic efforts focused on IPV to an extent are compatible with the “thinking errors” approach, as the perpetrator is often depicted as one who demands power and control within the relationship is lacking in empathy, and attributes negative motives to others (i.e., jealous of a female partner’s actions).

Theorizing about IPV does include the idea that these views are fostered by gendered socialization practices. However, research has shown mixed results in establishing links between IPV and variations in patriarchal attitudes (Sugarman & Frankel, 1996). Further, other research has documented dyadic elements related to these forms of interpersonal conflict. The consequences of IPV are far from equal for men and women, but research has shown that both partners' past histories and current characteristics "matter" for understanding risk (Herrera et al., 2010). In addition to these starting points, our recent study relying on a couple-based data set has shown a relatively high level of concordance in understandings (cognitions) about causes of conflict and more complex "reasons" that may become reified based on recurrent interaction and communication (Giordano et al., 2022). We referred to the latter as "microcultures" of conflict to emphasize that these shared understandings cannot be completely explained either by imported attitudes or each partner's history. Yet, in many jurisdictions, couples counseling is not available (for reasons of safety, and to avoid "blaming the victim"). Although safety should remain a critical consideration, some individuals and couples could potentially benefit from a dyadic approach, as a way to address and challenge couple-level understandings that may be related to ongoing conflicts. Sometimes, these understandings fit with traditional portraits (i.e., the phenomenon of gaslighting one's female partner), but other times the content of the microculture does not accord with such depictions. Adding a couple component or at a minimum attending to couple dynamics is important, as attitudes and behaviors may be more malleable relative to either personal traits or even—in the short term—system-level inequalities.

3.2.2 | Get beyond crime

A recent analysis showed that both parental behavior and the parent's history of incarceration contribute to variability in adult child outcomes, including criminal involvement (Giordano et al., 2019). This is consistent with an early paper focused on adolescent offenders that had documented higher levels of self-reported delinquency relative to those in the companion neighborhood sample who scored higher than their counterparts in that sample group (Cernkovich et al., 1985). These results indicate that criminal behavior is a part of the package of disadvantages that are related to odds of system contact, and effects on child well-being. Nevertheless, most of the life course is not given over to crime, even among criminally involved individuals (Thrasher, 1927). Accordingly, policies focused on these other aspects of life are critical to the process of enabling cognitive transformations that would in the average case take hold and anchor more prosocial lifestyles. Thus, it is not just that certain individuals are unlucky enough to be caught, but often they are "unlucky" in having limited access to prosocial romantic partners, criminally involved relatives who are their main sources of "support," poor prospects in housing and employment choices, limited access to child care, and friends who have delinquent repertoires and system contact. Discrimination in various criminal justice responses and feelings of demoralization following incarceration are integral to the package. Andrews and Bonta (2010) focused their attention primarily on criminogenic thinking because they found that attitudes about other aspects of life did not distinguish the offenders and nonoffenders (see also Sutherland's, 1947, proposition). Yet, this focus is not inconsistent with idea, as Bushway and Uggen (2021) recently emphasized that criminally involved individuals are in the process of sorting through developmental challenges that all individuals traversing the adolescent to adult transition must address. Expecting the former to affect cognitive transformations related to criminogenic thinking alone is not the most adequate theory, nor is it likely to offer the most sound basis for developing programs that will over the long haul support

sustained behavior change. Positive developments include “strength-based approaches” that not only focus on upbeat themes, but recognize the need for longer term community support, including mentoring from “experienced peers” (successful desisters) and other forms of tangible capital that are needed to buttress the individual’s good intentions (Best & Colman, 2020).

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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