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SUBJECTIVE DESISTANCE AND THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

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Abstract

This paper introduces two new conceptualizations of desistance based on individuals' personal assessments of their own movement away from crime. Drawing from qualitative accounts of changes in offending, we develop survey items indexing *subjective desistance* and *reference group desistance*. We then use a representative community sample of young adults to compare these new conceptualizations of desistance against more established measures derived from changes in arrest and self-reported crime. The results indicate that the prevalence and the predictors of desistance vary with these alternative conceptualizations. While relationship quality is consistently related to each desistance measure, the effects of prior crime, peer relationships, race, gender, and parental status depend upon the outcome under consideration. These results show both the generality of the desistance process and the utility of comparing subjective accounts of this process alongside official and self-reported behavioral measures.

As the papers in this special issue make clear, the significant conceptual breakthroughs and powerful empirical studies of recent years have increased understanding of the process of desistance from crime. Yet the field has developed unevenly with regard to both theory and measurement. We seek to build upon past developments and push the boundaries of desistance research in two ways. First, we develop survey items to tap the subjective accounts of desistance that emerge so powerfully in qualitative research (Maruna 2001; Shover 1996). Second, we extend desistance research beyond officially-defined delinquent populations to consider movement away from crime among a more representative community sample.

Like deviance, desistance is a relative conception that extends well beyond those incarcerated or otherwise labeled delinquent. Following Travis Hirschi's (1969) use of a general community sample to explicate his social control theory of delinquency, desistance researchers may similarly benefit by looking to general samples to explain the general decline in delinquency with age. As Emile Durkheim ([1895] 1982) noted long ago, even in a "society of saints" where serious crime is unknown, people are judged and judge themselves as more or less deviant in relation to their peers. Extending this logic to life course criminology, even saintly individuals experience greater and lesser involvement in delinquency at different stages of life. A general model of desistance helps explain the cessation or diminution of offending that occurs among "secret deviants" (Becker 1963) as well as among those who have received a formal deviant label. For those whose activities have escaped the attention of law enforcement, it makes little sense to base desistance measures on the continued absence of a criminal record. Instead, a

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model that emphasizes behavioral changes, or subjective assessments of movement away from crime, provides a more meaningful reference point.

Development of a general model of desistance to explain the steady movement away from anti-social behavior would contribute to life course studies, in part by generalizing and validating other work. For example, adult status markers such as employment and family relationships appear to be linked to desistance among the general population and officially-defined delinquents alike (Sampson and Laub 1993; Warr 1998). More generally, what is the relationship between movement away from illicit behavior and other indicators of adult status such as having children, educational attainment, and civic participation? We seek to inform such questions by examining a range of desistance measures among a representative sample of individuals.

Desistance is generally examined using one of three general measurement approaches, each with different strengths. Recently, a great deal of research examines changes in arrest, conviction, or incarceration over time (e.g., Le Blanc and Loeber 1998). Some researchers in this tradition then examine the relationship between offending trajectories and biological processes of aging or social processes such as marriage. These studies provide invaluable information, but are subject to biases associated with law enforcement priorities, errors in reporting, and criminal justice administration more generally.

A second measurement approach uses narratives or interviews to describe and explain the movement away from crime (Laub and Sampson 2003; Maruna 2001; Shover 1996). These methods offer rich detail about the process of desistance as it is being experienced. Individuals can provide subjective accounts of their movement away from crime in their own words, as well as their difficulties in overcoming barriers to reentry and reintegration. While interviews can offer greater depth and insight from first-person accounts of movement away from crime, generalizing the results beyond the sample interviewed can be problematic.

A third approach uses survey methodology to examine self-reported changes in delinquent behavior (Massoglia 2006; Warr 1998). As with other approaches, surveys also endeavor to study how patterns of offending change over time and to estimate the extent to which life course characteristics such as gainful employment and family formation engender movement away from crime. Self-report surveys are likely to be more generalizable than small-scale qualitative studies and less subject to the biases of the criminal justice system than administrative records or official statistics. Nevertheless, few surveys contain information that would allow researchers to triangulate and validate the data derived from official, self-reported, and subjective measures.

The present study uses a survey approach to ask questions about desistance that have typically been reserved for qualitative studies. We develop survey items to assess individuals' subjective sense of change in their own delinquent behavior over time. We use the term "subjective desistance" to characterize respondents' self-reports of whether they are involved in more, less, or approximately the same amount of a series of delinquent activities, relative to their behavior five years ago. A second subjective measure, "reference group desistance" asks respondents whether they are involved in more, less, or approximately the same amount of these delinquent activities relative to others their age. These conceptualizations of desistance stress respondents' perceptions of movement away from crime and tap into two criminologically important arenas: changes in individual behavior over time and differences in behavior relative to same-age peers.

DATA AND MEASURES

To assess these alternative measures of desistance, we analyze data from the Youth Development Study (YDS) (Mortimer 2003). The YDS is a longitudinal survey of 1,000 young

people who attended Saint Paul, Minnesota public schools in the 1980s. Since 1988, when respondents were freshmen in high school, they have reported information about their school, work, family activities, civic participation, and delinquent involvement. Descriptive statistics for the variables to be analyzed are presented in Table 1. The sample is approximately 75 percent White and approximately 43 percent male. By 2002, approximately 45 percent of respondents were married and 55 percent had children. The Youth Development Survey remains generally representative of the St. Paul cohort from which it was drawn, although sample attrition has been somewhat greater among racial minorities and less advantaged respondents (for details on panel attrition in the YDS, see Mortimer 2003:37–43). In the 2002 wave of data collection, when most respondents were 29 to 30 years of age, we developed and included a battery of questions designed to analyze desistance and the transition to adulthood.

Because our new desistance measures are untested, we introduce them alongside more traditional or established indicators. The Youth Development Survey includes self-reported measures of criminal behavior and arrest, spanning from high school to age 30. We utilize the longitudinal nature of the YDS to measure desistance four different ways. We adopt Uggen and Kruttschnitt's (1998) distinction between *official* desistance, as measured by arrest, and *behavioral* desistance, as measured by self-reports. Our official measure codes individuals as desisting if they report arrests earlier in the life course, but have remained arrest-free for at least three years. Behavioral desistance is measured through changes in respondents' self-reported substance use, theft, and violence. Individuals who have desisted behaviorally reported being involved in crime at earlier points in the life course, but have ceased or moderated this behavior during the preceding three years.

Reference group desistance is assessed relative to same-age peers, using items with the following wording: "compared to other people your age do you think you do more, less, or about the same amount of these activities." The specific activities enumerated include partying, breaking work rules (such as "calling in sick when I'm not really sick") and breaking other rules (such as driving after excessive drinking).]

Subjective desistance uses the same behavioral indicators, but asks individuals "compared to 5 years ago, do you now do less, more, or about the same of these activities?" Individuals are coded as reference group desisters if they report less of these activities than others their age and they are coded as subjective desisters if they report less crime at the most recent wave of data collection (measured at age 29–30) than five years earlier.

In addition to demographic variables and four different conceptualizations of desistance, the YDS offers a basic set of predictors that prior research has linked to desistance. In particular, the YDS includes indicators of relationship quality (Sampson and Laub 1993). Respondents are coded as having high relationship quality if they report being satisfied with their current relationship and that activities with their partner are important to them. Work commitment measures whether the respondent's job is related to their long-term career goals. Individuals who report that their job is related to their long term career, either because it will continue as their career or because it provides skills directly related to their career, are coded as having work commitment. To assess peer effects, we consider how often respondents socialize with their work friends while away from the job. Individuals who report that they get together with work friends at least two or three times per month are coded as 1. Finally, as mentioned above, these data include indicators of prior arrests and self-reported crime, the latter indexed by a summary scale of high school theft, drunk driving, vandalism, and violent behavior. In sum, the YDS offers longitudinal data on crime, deviance, and the markers of adult status most closely associated with desistance.

LOGIC OF ANALYSIS

The analysis seeks to situate new conceptualizations and measures of desistance alongside more traditional indicators based upon self-reported crime or arrests. We do this in two ways. First, we examine the prevalence of desistance across the different conceptualizations of desistance. Second, we examine the relationship between our new measures of desistance and a set of predictors with established relationships to existing conceptions of desistance. In so doing, we hope to provide an empirical foundation for future development of subjective indicators of desistance.

RESULTS

We first present the prevalence indicators of different conceptualizations of desistance. Figure 1 shows results generally consistent with prior work on behavioral and official desistance. By age 29 to 30 most people have moved away from crime by each of the measures. When desistance is measured by arrest, the great majority (85 percent) of individuals have desisted. Among all four indicators, conceptualizing and measuring desistance through official arrest yields the highest level of desistance. The self-reported behavioral outcome indicates significantly less desistance than the arrest-based measure. The difference in desistance rates between official (85 percent) and behavioral desistance (65 percent) is likely the product of undetected crime, official biases, and low-level behavioral deviance that fails to attract the attention of law enforcement authorities.

The prevalence rates of subjective desistance (72 percent) and reference group desistance (60 percent) suggest that these conceptualizations capture movement away from crime at levels roughly similar to more traditional measures of desistance. Nevertheless, these indicators suggest a non-trivial difference in desistance rates. Individuals are much more likely to say that they have moderated their *own* behavior over the past five years than to say that they have desisted relative to their same-age peers.

These results indicate the importance of considering different conceptualizations of desistance. Who moves away from crime depends on the way that crime is measured and the reference points used to assess desistance. For instance, some individuals would be labeled desisters because they are no longer being arrested and have moderated their criminal behavior. Yet crosstabulations of these desistance measures reveal that many of these same individuals have not moved away from crime as measured by self-reports or relative to their same-age peers. Having shown how the prevalence of desistance varies across different conceptualizations of desistance, we now examine how basic predictors of desistance co-vary across different indicators of desistance.

Table 2 presents logistic regression estimates predicting desistance across all four measures of desistance. Analysis is restricted to those who are “at risk” to desist. That is, for subjective and reference group desistance, the analysis is restricted to those who report earlier involvement in the acts under consideration—workplace deviance, substance use, and drunk driving. For behavioral desistance, we restrict analysis to those who report earlier involvement with crime and deviance. Finally, for official desistance, we restrict analysis to those with earlier arrests. We limit the analysis in this fashion to ensure that those classified as desisters have actually moved away from these activities and that they are not abstainers who never participated in crime or even minor deviance.

Table 2 indicates that relative to females, males are significantly less likely to desist from crime when measured by arrests (official desistance) or by behavior at earlier points in the life course (subjective desistance). In contrast, males report that they are more likely than females to desist relative to their same-age peers (reference group desistance) and not significantly different

from females in the rate of self-reported (behavioral) desistance. Thus, males are not universally more likely than females to desist. Rather, the relationship between desistance and gender appears to depend upon definitions of desistance. A similar pattern is evident when considering race differences in desistance. Relative to non-Whites, Whites are more likely to move away from crime when desistance is measured through self-reported behavior. In contrast, Whites are significantly less likely to move away from crime relative to same-age peers. No significant racial differences emerge when desistance is measured subjectively or when measured by official reports.

As with demographic indicators, the relationship between earlier criminality and desistance is largely dependent on how desistance is measured. Earlier crime significantly increases the likelihood that individuals will desist relative to their same-age peers. Similarly, earlier criminal behavior is associated with increased levels of official desistance. In contrast, prior arrest is associated with decreased behavioral desistance but unrelated to other indicators of desistance, net of the other variables in the model.

Given the literature on the relationship between desistance and adult work and family bonds (e.g., Sampson and Laub 1993; Warr 1998) it is somewhat surprising that we find no significant relationships between work quality and movement away from crime in the Youth Development Survey. In contrast to our measure of workplace quality, however, our measure of relationship quality is a consistently strong predictor for all four desistance measures. More specifically, a quality relationship increases the likelihood of subjective desistance by 72 percent (logit = .543), reference group desistance by 89 percent (logit = .638), behavioral desistance by 102 percent (logit = .704), and official desistance by over 250 percent (logit = 1.313). In our analysis, the estimate for relationship quality is clearly the strongest in magnitude and the most consistent predictor across measures of desistance.

In contrast to relationship quality, the effect of children upon desistance again depends on how desistance is conceptualized. Individuals who have children are 43 percent *more* likely (logit = .360) to desist from crime relative to same-age peers, but 70 percent *less* likely (logit = -1.179) to desist from crime using official measures. Having a child is unrelated to either subjective desistance or behavioral desistance. Finally, socializing with work friends significantly decreases the likelihood of subjective desistance -- moving away from crime relative to five years earlier -- but is unrelated to the three other conceptualizations of desistance.

DISCUSSION

Before discussing the results presented in Table 2, we address the appropriateness of the new conceptualizations of desistance presented in this paper. The defining characteristic of desistance measures is the ability to capture movement away from crime. The results presented in Figure 1 indicate that the new measures yield prevalence rates consistent with more traditional measures of desistance. The measurement and conceptualization of desistance -- whether by arrests or self-reports, or in relation to peers or to oneself earlier in life -- seem to us to be open questions with the potential to advance an understanding of desistance both within and across persons.

We are troubled by the contemporary predominance of official measures in desistance research because these measures are likely to be biased by law enforcement behavior. We therefore seek to expand the alternative indicators available to desistance researchers. Despite the rapid expansion of the justice system in recent decades, most Americans have never had any formal contact with the justice system. Accordingly, inferences drawn from studies using only arrest measures are limited if we endeavor to use desistance as a general framework to understand

cessation or moderation of common delinquent behavior. In our view, even more problematic is the potential bias introduced from variation in police behavior. A long line of research examines variation in police patrol and enforcement with regard to gender, race, class, and geography, yet desistance studies based upon arrest counts often turn a blind eye to these potential sources of bias. While such considerations are clearly beyond the scope and reach of the current research project, the subjective measures introduced in this paper provide alternatives to official measures that are consistent with foundational work in the sociology of deviance.

The results presented in Table 2 also demonstrate the utility of alternative measures of desistance. Consider the relationship between gender and desistance. Males are more likely to be arrested, and therefore *less* likely to desist by official measures, a finding evident in this study (logit = -1.859 in Table 2) and other works. Nevertheless, because males are likely to have more delinquent peers, they judge their behavior against a more delinquent reference group and thus report even greater reference group desistance than females.

The estimated effect of children similarly highlights intriguing variation in desistance processes. Conventional wisdom suggests that having a child engenders moderation in criminal behavior as individuals take up the role of parent. This expectation is supported in Table 2, as parents are 43 percent more likely to desist than same-age peers who do not have children. Among individuals with a history of arrest, however, childbearing decreases the likelihood of official desistance by over 70 percent (logit = -1.179). We might speculate that among the most disadvantaged individuals, those likely to have repeated arrests, having a child creates an earnings imperative (Uggen and Thompson 2003) that increases the motivation for economic crime.

Our analysis also suggests areas where additional research is warranted. For instance, we find no relationship between any measure of desistance and work quality as measured by holding a job related to long-term career goals. This finding stands in contrast to other research on desistance that emphasizes work quality as a significant predictor of movement away from crime (Sampson and Laub 1993). Given our operationalization of work quality and the simple models used in the present analysis, we are hesitant to make any strong claims about work and desistance. To date, however, the majority of the literature on work on desistance finds significant effects only among older ex-offenders (Uggen 2000) or among individuals with high work commitment (Sampson and Laub 1993). In light of the conditional effects evident in other work, the non-significant findings presented in Table 2 may illustrate the need to further examine how and under what conditions the workplace facilitates movement away from crime.

Finally, the relationship between desistance and earlier crime and arrest warrants brief discussion. As expected, crime and deviance is significantly associated with patterns of official and behavioral desistance. Neither, however, is significantly associated with subjective desistance. Given the age of the sample, 29 to 30, it is possible that our reference point (five years earlier) does not tap a period in the life course when individuals were meaningfully involved in crime. Nevertheless, these non-significant findings also show how both sinners and saints moderate their earlier delinquency -- albeit from different levels -- during the transition to adulthood. It also provides a first look at how these subjective assessments of behavior are related to problematic behavior at earlier points in the life course. Future studies may find it informative to consider how these alternative conceptualizations of desistance vary with other measures taken in adolescence, such as school achievement, and how subjective desistance is linked to other markers of adult status and attainment.

CONCLUSIONS

Qualitative work shows the importance of the subjective dimensions of desistance, but these dimensions have rarely been addressed using survey methods. This paper offers a first attempt at measuring these subjective aspects of desistance. In so doing, we examine the prevalence and predictors of official, behavioral, subjective, and reference group conceptualizations of desistance. Not surprisingly, our research suggests that both the prevalence and the predictors of desistance vary considerably across these different conceptualizations.

While we have presented very simple models, we hope to motivate researchers to reconsider the role of demographic considerations, such as gender and age, as well as life course markers, such as work quality and family formation, in predicting movement away from crime. More importantly, we hope our alternative conceptualizations of desistance help push desistance research beyond what we view as a relatively narrow focus on officially-defined criminal populations. In our view, the methodological emphasis on modeling desistance based on changes in arrest counts may be moving researchers away from what we consider an essential consideration in desistance research. We therefore, hope for a renewed focus on *what* desistance is from the standpoint of both sociologists and criminologists and *who* these researchers choose to study.

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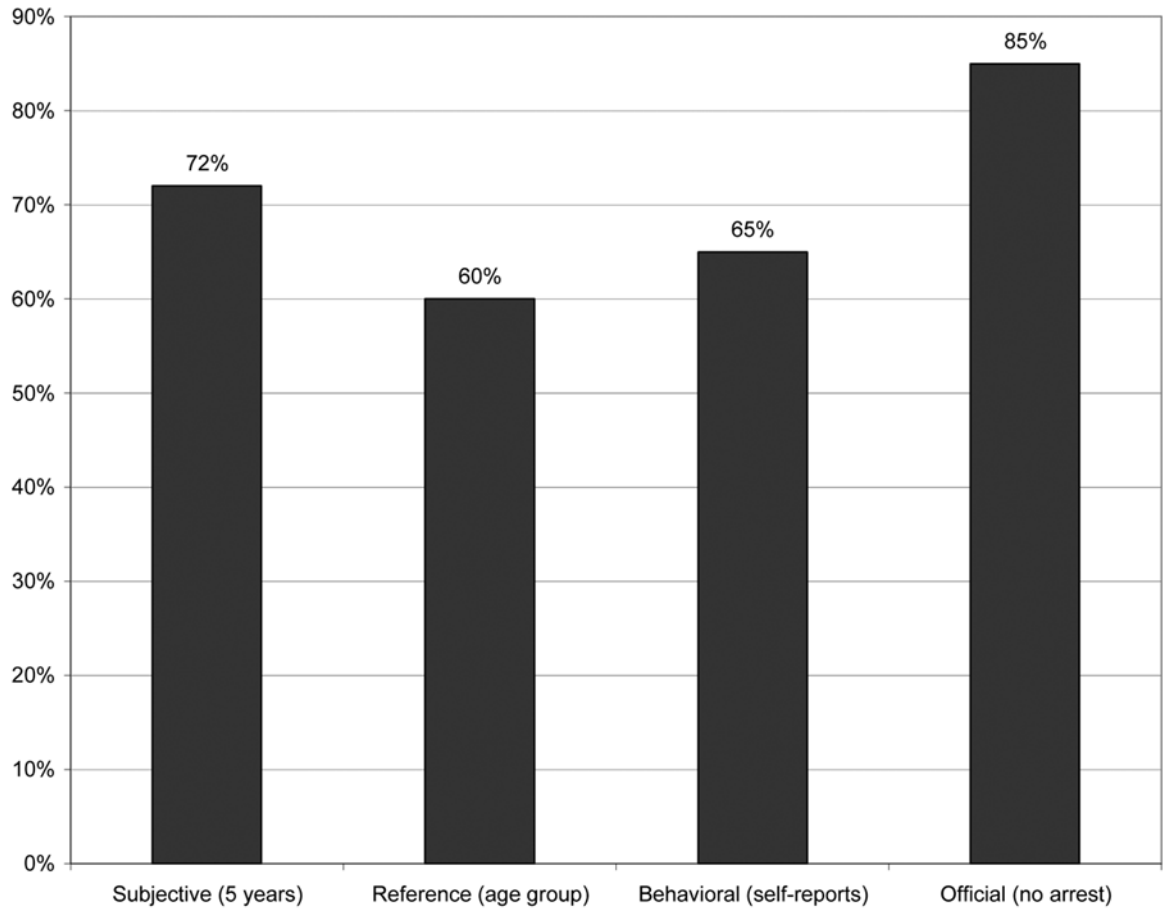


Figure 1.
Desistance Rates by Four Measures.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Description	Coding	Mean	Std. Dev.
<i>Desistance Measures</i>				
Subjective	Compared to <u>5 years ago</u> , do you now do more, less or about the same amount of these activities?	0 = more or same 1 = less	72%	.45
Reference	Compared to <u>other people your age</u> do you think you do more, less, or about the same amount of these activities?	0 = more or same 1 = less	61%	.49
Behavioral	Moderation or cessation of self-reported drunk driving, theft, and violence in past three years	0 = more or same 1 = yes	47%	.50
Official	Zero arrests in past three years	0 = arrested 1 = not arrested	94%	.23
<i>Background</i>				
Male	Self-reported sex	0=Female 1=Male	44%	.50
White	Self-reported race	0=Other 1=White	75%	.44
<i>Prior Crime</i>				
Youth self-reported crime	Self-reported crime through 1998, reported at 24–25 years of age.	Scale of theft, drunk driving, vandalism, and violence items	5.36	2.30
Youth Arrest	Arrest through 1998, reported at 24–25 years of age.	0=No 1=Yes	21%	.41
<i>Adult Bonds</i>				
Work quality	The respondent's current job is related to long-term career goals	0=No 1=Yes	60%	.49
Work friends	How often respondents get together with friend from work off the job.	0 = Infrequent socializing 1 = Socializing	23%	.42
Relationship quality	Respondent's satisfaction with relationship and importance of partner	1 = Satisfied with partner and relationship is important; else 0	56%	.50
Children	Presence of children	0=No 1=Yes	56%	.50

Note: Desistance rates in Table 1 represent those observed for the full sample. Desistance rates in Figure 1 represent those observed for those at risk of desistance by virtue of prior delinquency.

Table 2
 Logistic Regression Estimates Predicting Desistance by Four Measures

	Desistance Measure			
	Subjective (5 years)	Reference (same age)	Behavioral (self-report)	Official (no arrest)
Intercept	.972 (.829)	-1.399 (.744)*	-1.513 (.854)*	2.348 (1.78)
<i>Background</i>				
Male	-.436 (.240)*	.401 (.209)**	-.243 (.239)	-1.859 (.804)**
White	-.150 (.292)	-.420 (.254)*	.637 (.316)**	.531 (.616)
<i>Prior crime</i>				
Youth crime	-.023 (.067)	.172 (.059)**	.068 (.072)	.271 (.159)*
Youth arrest	.043 (.297)	-.133 (.267)	-.718 (.290)**	-.563 (.597)
<i>Adult bonds</i>				
Work quality	.355 (.257)	-.363 (.229)	.067 (.268)	-.578 (.646)
Relationship quality	.543 (.230)**	.638 (.201)**	.704 (.238)**	1.313 (.608)**
Children	.359 (.234)	.360 (.202)*	.171 (.240)	-1.179 (.605)*
Work friends	-.558 (.256)**	-.195 (.241)	.201 (.536)	-.316 (.602)
-2 log likelihood	503.1	644.6	469.8	134.5
Chi-squared (df)	23.8 (8)**	38.5 (8)**	29.7 (8)**	29.8 (8)**
N	436	477	339	335

* p<.10

** p<.05