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Maruna, Shadd: Redemption Scripts and Desistance

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Observers of politics and popular culture are likely familiar with the idea of the habitual offender: the criminal with a long record of past offenses. Political platforms and fictional plot lines often focus attention on the super-predator and the career criminal, dramatizing the notion that crime is intractable and offenders unchangeable. A powerful fact of criminology, however, is that virtually all criminals—including those with long and serious histories of criminal involvement—eventually stop committing crime (Blumstein & Cohen, 1987; Farrington, 1992). This process of abstaining from crime is referred to as desistance.

Although much of criminology is concerned with explaining why people commit crime, or why they continue to commit crime (a process referred to as persistence), there is good reason to ask why people desist from crime. Not only is desistance the most likely outcome, but there is also a strong public interest in understanding the factors that make desistance more or less likely. Annually in the United States, for example, more than 700,000 inmates are released from prison (Sabol & Couture, 2008) and another 2 million are released from probation supervision (Glaze & Bonczar, 2007). As a matter of public safety, it is important to facilitate the process of desistance and avoid official actions that make it more difficult for people to abstain from crime.

In *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*, Shadd Maruna proposes a theory to explain how people with long and serious records of criminal involvement turn their lives around and desist from crime. Maruna's work is identified with a branch of criminology known as life-course criminology, which is concerned with understanding how and why patterns of criminal involvement change over the course of individuals' lives. Maruna proposes that ex-convicts have a lot to explain—to themselves and to others. They need a story that helps make sense of their criminal past and assert convincingly their reform. “[E]x-offenders ... need a logical self-story to help them deal with their own feelings of culpability, external stigma, and the potential emptiness and void of their lives” (p. 55). Moreover, Maruna suggests that these self-stories are instrumental in shaping behavior. How individuals respond to situations depends in part on interpretations and self-perceptions.

Based on a narrative analysis of the life stories of 20 active offenders and 30 desisting offenders [p. 575 ↓] from Liverpool, England, Maruna discovered that the stories

interviewees told about themselves followed certain distinguishing patterns. Active offenders told stories that followed a *condemnation script*, a self-narrative characterized by a lack of personal agency, a sense that they had nothing left to lose, and a focus on the pursuit of happiness through consumption and material gain. Desisting offenders, in contrast, constructed a story to redeem themselves of their past and assert a meaningful future, a so-called *redemption script*.

The two groups of interviewees were carefully matched on characteristics related to criminality. In other words, the study participants shared remarkably similar backgrounds and future prospects: both groups were extensively involved in crime (usually from a young age), had poor employment records, struggled with drug and alcohol addiction, grew up in “tough” neighborhoods with few legitimate economic opportunities, experienced physical and emotional abuse, and had spent significant amounts of time incarcerated and under criminal justice supervision. Interestingly, although they confronted similarly bleak prospects for success, the desisters managed to find a “tragic optimism” in their circumstances and an almost zealous hope for their future. In contrast, the active offenders “seemed fairly accurate in their assessment of their situation (dire), their chances of achieving success in the ‘straight’ world (minimal), and their place in mainstream society (‘need not apply’)” (p. 9). The sections below takes a closer look at the concept of desistance from crime and provide a fuller explanation of condemnation and redemption scripts. Finally, the entry concludes by briefly exploring how knowledge of how people voluntarily “go straight” can inform efforts to support desistance from crime.

Desistance from Crime

In his book, Maruna relates an old joke: “stopping smoking is easy—I do it every week.” This joke aptly illustrates the definitional challenges associated with studying desistance. Some criminologists define *desistance* as an event, like quitting a job. The trouble with thinking about desistance as an event, however, is that crime is not a continuous, uninterrupted activity. In this respect, the criminal career analogy, which suggests that offenders “go to work” committing crime five days a week or more, is misleading. Offenders are involved in crime sporadically and “stop” committing crime frequently. If an offender does not commit a crime for a year, have they desisted?

What about five years? Can we know if they “really” desisted only after they are dead? Other criminologists have conceptualized desistance as a decision, the point at which someone decides to stop committing crime. This definition is also problematic. Like the smoker in the joke above, deciding to desist and actually desisting can be different things.

In Maruna's research, desistance is conceptualized as a process of maintaining crime-free behavior in the face of life's obstacles and temptations. “Desistance might more productively be defined as the long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in a persistent pattern of criminal offending” (p. 26). Rather than an event or a decision, desistance is a *process*. In turn, this definitional distinction shifts our focus from trying to understand turning points in a person's life (why did they desist?) to instead thinking about *how* people desist from crime. Research by scholars such as Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub finds that having a meaningful job and a supportive marriage are important structural factors related to desistance. As noted above, Maruna thinks that the answer to how people desist is at least partially explained by differences in how they think about themselves, their past and the future—reading from a condemnation script or a redemption script.

Condemnation Scripts

Contrary to popular portrayals, active offenders in the Liverpool Desistance Study (LDS) were not so much committed to a criminal lifestyle as they were resigned to it. Maruna found that active offenders believed they were doomed to deviance. Their self-stories lacked personal agency and active offenders tended to attribute their criminal involvement to poverty, stigma, and criminal peers. Interestingly, Maruna notes that active offenders tended to have a realistic view of their life prospects and the significant social challenges they confronted. Another distinguishing feature of the condemnation script is a sense of freedom that comes from no longer worrying about succeeding [p. 576 ↓] in conventional terms. With nothing to left lose, active offenders were able to find some psychological shelter: “intentionally failing may be less stressful on a person's ego than trying to succeed and failing anyway” (p. 78). A third distinguishing feature of the condemnation script was an emphasis on making the “big score” and finding happiness through consumption and material gain. A surprising number of the active

offenders, for example, mentioned that one of their life objectives was to win the lottery. Rather than being motivated by greed, however, the active offenders expressed the desire to share the elusive big score, seemingly in an effort to fill with excitement, drugs, and popularity, an otherwise empty life characterized by a sense of personal failure.

Redemption Scripts

Desisting offenders' self-views are not simply the opposite of those of active offenders'. Indeed, desisting offenders espoused a tragic optimism about their lives, a sense that something uniquely good (redeeming) could come from a criminal past. A central feature of the redemption script is that the self-story asserts the essential goodness of the narrator. When talking about their past, desisting offenders drew a clear distinction between crime and their true selves, psychologically distancing themselves from their crimes and from other criminals. Many maintained that deep down they were *always* a good person. Moreover, they described their criminal involvement as "it," something that happened. Crime was not "them," rather "it was the drugs," or it was the people they were around. Thus, rather than reinventing themselves, desisting offenders re-embraced an earlier identity—not the "new me" but the "real me." Part of this process involved identifying a positive attribute that distinguished themselves from other criminals. For example, they always had a "good heart" or a "good brain."

Whereas active offenders tended to characterize themselves as pawns with little or no control over their future, desisting offenders expressed an exaggerated sense of self-determination, efficacy, and hope for their future. Rather than "burning out," their stories suggested they were "firing up." Their vision of desistance was a comeback story—a story of renewal, gaining strength, and realizing their true selves. This mindset included a belief that they could beat the odds of The System that keeps people like them trapped in a cycle of crime. As Maruna et al. (2004, p. 227) explain, "by transforming desistance from an acquiescence to authority into a rebellious act, they can simultaneously preserve their identities [as defiant rebels] and change their behavior."

Finally, the redemption script involves a wish to make good and give something back to society as a display of gratitude and possibly cosmic restitution. A common theme

of the redemption story is that the bad (the criminal past) had to happen in order to achieve some larger good. The almost zealous desire to make good was illustrated in the frequent telling and retelling of the claim that even if just one person was prevented from going through what they did, a lifetime of waste could be put to use. The desire to give something back to society and make good may allow the former offender to find a moral high ground. As Maruna explains, this framework enabled desisting offenders to cope with the shame and stigma of their past. Defining the past as prologue to a higher calling allowed the desisting offender to announce their criminal history instead of running from it.

Maruna's work makes an important contribution to criminological theory by bringing into focus how offenders desist from crime. Desisting offenders frame their criminal past and law-abiding future with the use of a redemption script. The redemption script includes three important elements: the assertion of a good "core self"; a sense of control over and hope for the future; and, generativity, the desire and effort to give something back, especially to future generations.

Maruna's work may provide direction for efforts to reintegrate former offenders into our communities. If the way people talk and think about themselves and their pasts have implications for their futures, it follows that those who work with and care about former offenders should be careful about the words they use and the stories they tell. Encouraging and supporting those who have been involved in crime to find the good in themselves, take responsibility for their future (not just their past crimes), and to make good, may be instrumental in supporting the process of desistance from crime.

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See also

- [Criminal Career Paradigm](#)
- [Giordano, Peggy C., and Stephen A. Cernkovich: Cognitive Transformation and Desistance](#)
- [Moffitt, Terrie E.: A Developmental Model of Life-Course-Persistent Offending](#)

- [Sampson, Robert J., and John H. Laub: Age-Graded Theory of Informal Social Control](#)
- [Shover, Neal: Great Pretenders](#)

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