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# Using Desistance Narratives as a Pedagogical Resource in Criminology Teaching

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## Abstract

Desistance is the study of pathways out of offending and desistance narratives are expressions of 'going straight'. This paper explores the impact of using desistance narratives in criminology teaching. A lecture around desistance was delivered and students at an English University completed a questionnaire (n=82) to establish perceptions of offenders, the UK criminal justice system and the relationship between desistance and peer work, which is one possible "hook for change." Data was also collected around students' future employability aspirations in the criminal justice system. Key findings suggest that real-life desistance narratives challenged expectations of the criminology syllabus, humanized offenders and proved effective when delivered by an ex-criminal justice practitioner. The session allowed some students to envisage a future self in the criminal justice system. As future practitioners, criminology graduates need to understand desistance theory and application. Desistance is absent from the Quality Assurance benchmark for criminology in the UK.

## Keywords

Criminology teaching;  
desistance; desistance  
narratives; criminology  
undergraduates; positionality;  
ex-practitioner

## Introduction

Criminology as a subject in Higher Education and Post Graduate study in the UK is attracting increasing numbers of applicants, due to the popularity of crime on television (Independent 2016). At the time of writing this paper, there was a spate of prison documentaries in the UK offering a very negative and damaging portrayal of prisoners, which can influence student perceptions of offenders and the criminal justice system. In most UK institutions, criminology courses studying prioritize studying onset and persistence of offending over the study of desistance. It is important to set the UK Higher Education scene for non-UK academics in relation to criminology courses. Criminology in the UK is an interdisciplinary subject and falls under different faculties including law, health sciences, social science and social work. 125 universities in the UK offer a range of criminology courses and the courses range from 3 to 4 years. Universities also offer post graduate qualifications in Criminology. Some universities offer generalist criminology courses, whereas other universities are more specialist and offer accredited criminology courses that are linked to criminal justice careers, for example probation service, policing and prison officer post-graduate schemes. In the UK the Prison Service and Police forces are gradually upskilling the workforce through a change in entrance requirements, where new recruits are required to have a degree qualification in a drive to professionalize these occupations. In the UK University places are offered on the bases of UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) points gained from further education college courses. The Higher Education Statistics Agency collect and analyze data on key performance indicators and universities are graded in terms of student satisfaction, student feedback, quality of teaching based around the National Student Survey, which is completed by final year undergraduates. In the UK, universities are also assessed on research excellence, through the Research Excellence framework (REF). Each subject has a quality framework, which are a set of guidelines to ensure academic integrity and offers a benchmark for quality in Higher Education. The criminology framework is collaborated by a team of academics within criminal justice and sets out guidelines for what students graduating from a criminology course should have learnt, including subject knowledge, skills and understanding alongside generic transferable skills gained within academia. Whilst the quality assurance framework for criminology sets out the topics that students should develop a critical understanding of, a critical understanding of desistance is omitted. There is currently little research exploring the impact of desistance narratives in Higher Education criminology teaching. This paper seeks to demonstrate the need for desistance to be made more prominent on criminology syllabuses and this should be reflected in quality assurances in curricula.

The underpinning rationale for this study was to offer students an opportunity to think critically about the dominant paradigms that exist within criminology. A critical pedagogical approach endeavors to challenge social injustices that result from structural inequalities present in society (Kershaw, 2012). Critical pedagogy aims to challenge dominant ideologies, deconstruct power relations and empower those who are oppressed (Barton, Corteen, Davies, & Hobson, 2010). The underpinning philosophical orientation of this research was transformative, seeking to give voice to a marginalized subgroup (offenders) and attempting to raise consciousness of inequality, and advance an agenda for change (Cresswell, 2011; Mertens, 2009). Brown (2002) identifies the importance of listening to prisoners' accounts to achieve a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of being marginalized and suppressed; hidden voices need to be heard to appreciate the complexities of marginalized status (Brown, 2002). Using desistance narratives in lecturing offers students an alternative perspective, rather than just theorizing the onset and persistence of criminal activity. Students should be given opportunities to reconceptualise taken for granted facts and issues and understand the relationships between individual experiences and broader social and shared realities (Barton et al., 2010). Giving students the opportunity to develop an empathetic consciousness, criminology teaching can provide a forum for "raising self-awareness around fundamental social values with the aim of developing a more tolerant and inclusive culture" (Barton et al., 2010, p. 24).

Students were instructed that they would receive a research informed lecture on desistance and peer work, using success narratives to illustrate the processes of change. A key desistance theory was outlined (see Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002) and the model was illustrated with in-depth narratives from prisoners, probationers and former probationers.

In exploring this it was helpful to interrogate the impact of desistance theory on:

- How desistance narratives might influence undergraduate criminology students' perceptions of (ex) offenders in the UK criminal justice system?
- How might ex-practitioner status impact upon pedagogical approaches in criminology teaching?
- How might desistance narratives influence students' future employability aspirations within criminal justice?

### *Desistance*

Desistance research focuses upon exploring the pathways out of offending, drawing upon primary desistance, identified as a lull or cessation in offending behavior, and secondary desistance, which is a shift in identity and self-concept (Farrall & Maruna, 2004). McNeill (2016) identifies tertiary desistance, which is acceptance at the wider community level. Desistance is not a linear path, rather one littered by setbacks, forming a zig zag pattern of offending and cessation (Glaser, 1964). Desistance is a series of theoretical perspectives seeking to understand the individuals' journeys away from offending, rather than the outcome of programmes to "change the offender" at the hands of the institution and the criminal justice system. There has been "a discernible backlash against professionalized, pathologising medical treatments in favor of support for grassroots mutual-aid recovery communities" (Maruna, 2017, p. 11). Rehabilitation is focused around the medical model, where offenders are perceived as broken, in need of fixing. Criminology students are potential future practitioners in criminal justice, so they need to be encouraged to think about the difference between desistance and rehabilitation, particularly in terms of agency and desistance enabling relationships and environments. It is important to note however that whilst not making explicit reference to "desistance," criminology students are taught a range of pathways out of offending, for example through drug rehabilitation, or "turning points" in their lives (Laub and Sampson, 2003) for example education, where the "convict criminology" movement is embedded into some criminology courses.

Desistance is contingent upon relationships with others, for example family and friends, but also criminal justice practitioners who recognize potential and help offenders to build upon existing strengths. Burnett and Maruna (2006) identify strengths based resettlement, where prisoners and ex-offenders are treated from an asset based perspective, with a focus on their strengths and capabilities. Paternoster and Bushway (2010 in Maruna & Mann, 2019, p. 7) argue that research about desistance from crime is one of the most exciting, vibrant and dynamic areas in criminology and the authors advocate "reframing the understanding of desistance as not just an individual process but rather a social movement", which is key to understanding the importance of educating undergraduate students on desistance and desistance enabling criminal justice agencies.

### *Using success narratives in teaching: Humanizing offenders*

Roth (2016) advocates using success narratives of desistance in lecture delivery, recruiting guest speakers and using real life case studies. "True life stories of desistance can open student's eyes to offender's capacity for change. First-hand personal accounts of desistance from offenders can be

particularly effective at illuminating the potential of justice reform for students” (Roth, 2016, p. 1). This is supported by Belisle, Boppre, Keen, and Salisbury (2019) who found that guest speaker with an offending background helps students to cultivate empathy and emotional intelligence, which are essential to successfully work with diverse groups of offenders. Rockwell et al. (2009) argues that students must be challenged about what they know or what they think they know. Dewey (1997) states that student learning is most effective when they recognize the relevance and immediate applicability in their learning. A social constructivist approach is relevant to delivering desistance narratives, and through creating “real world” and case-based learning, students are helped to understand the purposeful creation of knowledge around desistance. Engagement with real life experiences enhances learning, develops confidence, motivation and interest to undertake intellectual challenges that were previously unavailable (Rockwell et al., 2009). In addition, Payne, Sumter, and Sun (2003) advocate bringing the real world into criminal justice courses, which offers a powerful pedagogical tool for students to learn about the lived experience of criminal justice and creates a sense of authenticity. Guest speakers and desistance narratives bring criminology to life. Easton (2016) explores the impact of using narratives in medical lecturing. Narratives tap into several key learning processes and provide a relevant context for students to understand the subject more thoroughly. Narratives allow learners to elicit emotional responses and create new meaning in the learning environment. Use of narratives engage learners and promote a sense of empathy and compassion for (ex) offenders, connecting new knowledge with lived experience (Easton, 2016). It is important to imbue potential future criminal justice practitioners with a level of emotional literacy to be able to work with offenders (Knight, 2014).

Easton (2016) argues that the use of narratives in medical lecturing helps students to develop an identity, in which they can see more clearly future trajectories beyond their degree programme. Marsh and Maruna (2017) state that individual success stories are often discarded as anecdotal evidence in evaluating the work of criminal justice agencies, but such individuals may have a great deal to teach those interested in improving justice interventions. However, there are limitations with using narratives in pedagogy. Students can be overwhelmed by too much information which lacks context for them (Easton, 2016). It is imperative to state that not all students accept new information that challenges their existing preconceptions. Mentor (2009) argues that criminal justice education should not perpetuate an “us” and them’ dichotomy between offenders and the rest of society. Instead, criminal justice education should aim to humanize offenders, especially if students may become future practitioners or policy makers. Mentor (2009) states that stereotypes should be challenged; Bruck (1991: 525 in Mentor, 2009, p. 2) identifies the criminal justice system as

containing “a variety of dehumanizing mechanisms that assist in an effort to define ‘them’,” which needs to be addressed. Many students, according to Quinney (1993: 438 in Mentor, 2009, p. 3) come to study criminology with entrenched conservative ideologies of crime. Criminology teaching can offer alternative narratives; however, as Quinney (1993: 438 in Mentor, 2009, p. 3) warns, “to advance an alternative...humane approach to crime, is met with considerable dismay and resistance”. It is the responsibility of criminology lecturers however, to offer an alternative perspective and challenge such rigid beliefs. Currie (1992: xii in Mentor 2019, p. 4) advocates that “it was only by hearing their own stories that we could appreciate the complexity and uniqueness of each of their lives”. Mentor (2009) concludes that the humanistic criminal justice educator should always use simple stories or experiences that illustrate the humanity of those who are caught up in the criminal justice system. Wakeman (2014) writes that emotion is often lost in criminological texts. When referring to narrative accounts of participants; transcribed words are privileged over emotive processes and they are assigned numbers rather than names, thus dehumanizing them. Bosworth, Campbell, Demby, Ferranti, and Santos (2005) conclude that contemporary criminologists often present data in an “inhuman” form, which gives little personal biography away to the readers. Hartjen (1985) calls for a humanistic criminology designed to protect and promote human dignity and survival, and Merten’s (2009) concept of the transformative paradigm is a useful addition to this, through using academia to empower marginalized individuals. Matza’s (1969) stance to understand the world of deviant subcultures through an appreciative criminology is another relevant perspective to draw upon, to humanize offenders.

*(Ex) practitioner status: Bringing criminology to life*

Research Informed teaching, is a sharp and strong way of teaching a subject, driven by the lecturer’s own research experiences. Research led sessions, or modules increase student satisfaction and develop an intellectual curiosity, which can impact upon development of their ideas for future research both at undergraduate level and post graduate study (Walkington, 2015). Griffiths (2004) identified that research informed teaching creates shared environments for doing research through talking about motivations and experiences, drawing upon interesting examples from the lecturer’s own research experience. Students can be given a voice and share their perceptions of the session, and the delivery can challenge taken for granted assumptions held by students. Lindsay, Breen, and Jenkins (2002) argues that lecturers who are involved in research are perceived as “credible” in the eyes of the students, and hold an “enhanced currency status” and an expert knowledge framework, which is enhanced even more when their knowledge is gained from direct personal experience.

Ancrum (2015) adopts the use of personal biography in criminology teaching. As an ex-offender, he offers personal narratives to illustrate the link between theory and real life. This has not always been met positively, particularly around his liberal attitudes towards drug use; however, students appreciated the realistic and honest accounts provided for them by a lecturer who has first-hand, authentic experience of the criminal justice system. Ancrum's use of personal biography may help students to make an informed contribution to the learning process and he therefore argues for criminal biographies as pedagogic devices in criminology teaching. Revell and Wainwright (2009) explored what makes lectures exciting and conclude that passion and enthusiasm for the subject are key to student engagement and attendance. Lecturers who can bring the subject to life are effective in the learning environment. This aligns with authentic learning, where lectures have real life relevance and offer an opportunity for students to reflect on what they have learnt. Pearce (2016 in Wornyo et al., 2018) identifies authentic learning as learning designed to connect what students are taught to real world issues, problems and application that mirror the complexities and ambiguities of real life.

#### *Student perceptions of offenders and the criminal justice system*

Keuhn, Ridner, and Scott (2017) found that criminology classes have an impact upon student's attitudes and beliefs and over time, students became more liberal through engaging in criminal justice programmes. Frailing and Slate, (2016) explored how student perceptions of people with mental illness generally changed after lecture delivery, and found that current criminal justice and criminology students developed more positive attitudes towards people with mental health issues, which is an important step in reducing stigma towards this demographic. Negative attitudes, according to Frailing and Slate, (2016) can be improved through drawing upon user experiences in classroom education.

Miller, Tewksbury, and Hensley argues that the media distort information regarding criminal justice issues, leading to an over exaggerated belief of crime, justice and punishment. In addition, Ridley (2014) concludes that increasing media distortion and populist political rhetoric about imprisonment has influenced the way in which students think and reflect about prisons and punishment. However, criminal justice students have received education in this area over others students, which balances out the effects that they have learnt via the media. Benekos, Merlo, Cook, and Bagley (2002) found studying student perceptions to be useful in helping faculties develop teaching strategies that will better educate students about critical issues in the criminal justice system. There is a public fascination with the world of prisons and the wider criminal justice system; however, unrealistic



portrayals have led to an incorrect and almost naïve view of the criminal justice system (Levin, 2018).

## Methodology

During lectures in “Understanding criminology,” (first year undergraduates) and “Prison, Punishment and Rehabilitation” (final year undergraduates), students at a UK university received a lecture around desistance, including theoretical approaches and then desistance based narratives in the context of peer work/peer mentoring. The concepts of “peer work” and “desistance” were defined, alongside an overview of Giordano et al. (2002) theory of cognitive transformation and desistance, which framed the desistance narratives. Students were presented with quotes to support desistance at each stage of the model to highlight the processes of change. The aim of this exploratory study was to create a snapshot of the impact of desistance narratives rather than longitudinal research to follow up impact; this is because there is little existing research that reflects desistance narratives in criminology teaching.

Upon completion of the session, students were invited to complete a questionnaire. Students were informed that this was completely voluntary, and that data would be anonymised and kept confidential and secure. A convenience sample was used, based around who attended the lecture and who was willing to complete the questionnaire. A consent form was completed by each student advising of the aims of the study and also around data protection and confidentiality.

The sample size for the survey was (n=82); 60 level 4 undergraduate criminology, criminology/sociology and criminology/psychology students and 22 level 6 students studying Prison, Punishment and Rehabilitation. Students were asked a range of questions on the following topics (see below) to address the research questions

- Reasons for enrolling on criminology/joint honors course
- Do the participants want to pursue a career in Criminal Justice after graduation?
- Will they be working directly with offenders/ex-offenders?
- How did the session impact upon perceptions of prisoners/offenders?
- Impact of learning that prisoners/ex-offenders help others through peer mentoring/ peer support
- Did students expect to study desistance pathways out of offending as part of their criminology degree?

- What impact (if any) did hearing about lecturer’s PhD research have upon learning?
- What impact (if any) did an ex-prison officer presenting desistance narratives of prisoners/ex-offenders have on students?
- Has this session had any influence around future career aspiration in Criminal Justice?

As the study was qualitative and exploratory, the questionnaire format used open ended questions to allow students to express their opinions.

*Thematic analysis of data*

82 questionnaires were collected and analyzed thematically. Thematic Analysis (TA) is a method of identifying themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to a research question (Braun and Clarke, 2006). TA involves an active role played by the researcher in identifying patterns and themes, selecting which are of interest and thus reporting them to the reader. Inductive thematic analysis was used; the themes originated from questions given to the students and were used to code from the responses provided. The themes were broadly arranged into lecture content and lecture delivery style (see table below).

<i>Lecture content: Perceptions of criminal justice agencies and actors</i>	<i>Lecture delivery: on peer work and desistance</i>
Raised awareness of desistance in relation to peer support work	(ex) practitioner status: bring criminology to life
Attitudes towards prisoners/ex-offenders- humanized offenders	Challenged expectations of the criminology syllabus
	Creation of a future self in criminal justice: Self-efficacy to work with offenders

*Positionality and use of self in research/teaching*

Students were aware of lecturer’s former status as prison officer from previous teaching. Students were informed that what they learn is a very subjective account of the relationship between desistance and peer work, influenced by the researcher’s positionality. Students were advised of the lecturer’s passion for desistance, so an emotive account of this process ensued, which is in no way representative of all prisoners’ and probationer’s narratives of desistance. Jewkes (2012) argues that emotion and use of self are intellectual resources in criminological research. “Criminology that is fixated with methodology, objectivity and restrained language effectively discourages any form of biographical or emotional intrusion by the researcher” (Jewkes, 2012, p. 65), therefore this research wanted to explore the use of self and emotion in the research process. Students were aware of the

researcher's reasons for leaving the prison service, which was motivated through disillusionment and a desire to transition into academia. As the approach towards desistance narratives taken is extremely positive, personal negative emotions expressed towards former prison officer role would not likely have had a significant impact upon student perceptions in this study. A venture into academia from a criminal justice practitioner role seemed a viable way of embedding desistance narratives into criminology teaching, drawing upon real world experience.

## Findings and discussion

As desistance is not included on the qualitative framework for criminology, this exploratory study demonstrates some of the ways that desistance narratives can prove powerful in the delivery of criminology teaching, which may benefit students beyond undergraduate study.

### *Raised awareness of desistance in relation to peer support programmes*

I didn't realise the extent to which they helped one another through peer mentoring. I've realised how important that support is. It made me think differently and not be judgemental (student participant 19).

There is a wealth of literature documenting the extent to which prisoners and probationers help and support others through peer mentoring and the <sup>1</sup>Listener programme in the UK. Prison reform Trust, the Howard League and St. Giles Trust are advocates for the power of offenders helping others (see Kavanagh & Borril, 2013), but this is not disseminated widely to the general public. Why is this the case? Does the notion of prisoners and ex-offenders being useful and helpful to others challenge our understanding? Are the public happy creating monstrous personas out of prisoners and probationers, rather than opening their minds to alternative conceptions of offenders, many of which are not inherently dissimilar to ourselves? Ashworth and Hough (1996, p. 779) state that media reporting is inevitably selective: news values favor the surprising or frightening or outrageous rather than the mundane. Archbishop William stated that the prisoner is *never only a criminal and nothing else* (Payne, 2017); however, public perception of prisoners and ex-offenders as helpful to others is lacking from public awareness. However, some students expressed optimism in the criminal justice system through hearing desistance narratives

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<sup>1</sup> The Listener scheme is a peer support service which aims to reduce suicide and self-harm in prisons (<https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/prisons/listener-scheme/>).

...it (the session) gave an in-depth view of the desistance based programmes in prisons, allowing me to see what the prisons and criminal justice system is doing to help offenders, rather than locking them up and throwing away the key, which is an approach that merely incapacitates the offender and does not help them to become better people (student 2)

Perceptions of rehabilitation are poor, with a focus being on punishment and deprivation, rather than prisons as places for growth and social change (see Crewe and Levins (2019) and Bennett (2019) for research to support the prison as an enabling environment). Criminals are not normally perceived as having generative and altruistic qualities, but there is a growing body of research highlighting the contributions offenders make in supporting others (see Buck; Jaffe, 2012; Kavanagh & Borril, 2013; Nixon, 2018, 2020; Perrin & Blagden, 2014). Framed through a desistance based theory (Giordano et al., 2002), narratives illustrated desistance in a real world context. Prisoners and ex-offender narratives illustrate the positivity of engagement in peer work programmes, bringing to life the ways in which this “hook for change” supports the desistance process. However, hard targets, for example rates of recidivism, take precedence when evaluating the impact of criminal justice interventions, rather than softer targets like developing pro-social skills and empathy. Undergraduate criminology students need to understand the humanistic transformations that occur through offenders engaging in desistance-based interventions.

#### **Attitudes towards prisoners and ex-offenders: Humanized offenders**

68% of students stated that the session had a positive impact towards perception of offenders which included humanizing them, and whilst this is not generalizable to all criminology students, this is encouraging to support the utility of desistance narratives in criminology teaching

Yes, hearing the success narratives of prisoners changed my perception that people who have been to prison or are in prison are willing and open to amending their lives and fit back into society, whilst at the same time helping others (student participant 14)

However, some students already held positive attitudes of offenders, often through personal connections and therefore hearing success narratives reinforced what they already believed

I have personal experience with hearing success stories of prisoners and ex offenders, but hearing a range of success stories in lectures, with guest speakers who have been in prison, consolidates what I already believed, in the ability for people to change (student participant 21)

Whilst students do not specifically refer to “desistance” as a concept or theoretical perspective, it is encouraging that over half of them had a positive response to desistance narratives. Broader conceptions of rehabilitation and “turning points” were expressed, but students were less familiar with “desistance” as a paradigm. The implications are that desistance should take more of a center stage in aspects of criminology teaching. Offenders do desist from crime, challenging the notion of persistent and repeat offending. Guest speakers who have desisted and recovered from substance abuse give light to the fact that change is possible, bringing the real world into criminology courses (Belisle et al., 2019; Payne et al., 2003). One of the most significant findings was that the lecture enabled students to humanize offenders, which is supported by Belisle et al., (2019).

I loved the lecture, it was full of meaningful narratives and in particular the quotes from offenders showed the human perspective. It gave me more empathy towards prisoners and ex-offenders in their struggles towards desistance (student participant 39)

It was really encouraging to see the potential of undergraduate students to not harbour negative opinions of offenders, and embrace alternative perspectives in their learning

Some approaches to criminology tend to give a deterministic view on the way offenders behave and imply that they are all bad and cannot be changed. This ignores how vulnerable and human these people are. They are like us, they have thoughts and feelings, which I feel traditional criminology tends to ignore (student participant 54)

Using desistance narratives in lecturing can serve to humanize offenders and demonstrate the efforts that they are making to transform their lives.

...I never perceived them as “normal people.” Hearing real life narratives show they are people who make the wrong choices, but what I found really surprising

was how much they wanted to ensure that other people didn't mess up their lives and not make the same mistakes – a quality you don't normally associate with the stereotypical "criminal" (student participant 56)

This can be linked to the Good Lives Model (Ward and Brown, 2004). Many offenders are not inherently different than the rest of society. They aspire to the same "primary goods" (for example inner peace, relatedness and agency), but due to multiple barriers and stigma, opportunities become blocked and criminal activity is the only way that they can satisfy these primary needs. Thus, the "us" and "them" distinction must be challenged through criminology lecturing to reduce these distinctions. However, students did recognize some similarities between themselves and offenders desisting from crime, rather than differences, which was inspiring. Prisoners are reduced to stereotypes, with the emphasis upon dehumanizing them, perpetuating fear, danger and risk. There are counter narratives hidden from the public gaze, which involves offenders behaving pro-socially, engaging in purposeful activities that benefit others and those who are actively desisting from offending, (both in prison and the community).

The desistance-based session challenged stereotypes and media portrayal of offenders, painting them as altruistic and generative. Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1998) is the dominant form of masculinity portrayed through the media and alternative versions of masculinity are hidden

It made me realise that not all criminals are out to get everybody. Some of them are capable of helping others and want to prevent the kind of behaviour that they might once have displayed. Through helping others they show selflessness, something not associated with criminals (student 7).

Prison documentaries create a profoundly important media space for considered and thoughtful reflection (Bennett, 2006); however, the audience will view them through the lens of pre-existing cultural resources, experiences and prejudices. Therefore, criminology teaching can offer students a real life alternative understanding of criminality and desistance which challenges existing beliefs and prejudices. This is why criminology lecturing from current and ex-practitioners can prove useful to challenge preconceptions through a carefully considered application of personal experience of working with offenders. The session drew upon the author's humanitarian approach towards offenders whilst working as a prison officer which had a positive impact upon student understanding of the "hidden" working personalities of prison officers

It proves that not all prison officers think that prisoners are lost causes and it also provides a passion for work and shows that not everyone in a position of authority has given up...this is a positive attitude and a humanistic approach that everybody should adopt.... not all prison officers have the “lock up and throw away the key” mentality (student participant 7)

Care and a humanitarian approach towards offenders, if articulated through criminology teaching, can leave a powerful impression and challenge stereotypical assumptions.

Tran et al., (2018) identify the importance of language used to depict offenders. Words matter. A humanizing and respectful language should be adopted rather than judgemental and incriminating, which only serves to stigmatize and dehumanize offenders further. Tran et al., (2018) advocate a person-centred language. The purpose of this research was to give a marginalized population a platform in academia, aligning with a transformative worldview (Mertens, 2009), where desistance is possible. This session humanized (ex) offenders (see Belisle et al., 2019), challenged the stigma associated with criminality and contextualized criminality/offending in relation to their wider social lives. Tran et al., (2018) argue for a vocabulary towards offenders that embodies respect, dignity and humanity, which is something that was embedded into this session, aligning with appreciative criminology (Matza, 1969).

#### *Challenged expectations of the UK criminology syllabus*

A review of study guides around studying criminology in the UK<sup>2</sup> do not place desistance as central to the criminology syllabus; this may be embedded into module content but unrecognizable to students as “desistance” and conceptualized more broadly as “turning points” or rehabilitation. However, drug rehabilitation features quite prominently in UK criminology-based courses. The link between drug recovery, drug resistance and criminal desistance needs to be more widely exposed to students (see Colman & Vander Laenen, 2012) who desire to work with offenders post-graduation. Most UK criminology syllabuses focus upon onset of offending and persistence of offending. Why is this the case? And how does this feed into student perceptions of what they think they will study?

I thought enrolling on this course I would learn about serial killers and what makes them tick. I did not think we would go into depth about prisoners in this

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<sup>2</sup> (60 second subject guide, Guide to studying criminology and Guardian.com education criminology).

way because when you think of criminology, you think blood, murder and psychopaths (student participant 15)

Katz (1988) explored the moral and sensual attraction to offending, with a sharp focus on the seductive foreground around risk taking. Crime is “sexy” and the sneaky thrills and sensual dynamics are intriguing to students. Is the fascination around serial killers because these crimes are so far removed from our own bounded understanding of what it means to be a human being, hence generating a morbid fascination for the macabre? The reality is that most future criminal justice practitioners will never meet serial killers; granted they may be involved in homicide cases, but the reality of working in the CJ system is that most days will be spent working with low-level repeat offenders who navigate the zig zag paths of desistance and persistence (Glaser, 1964), therefore the criminology syllabus should place more emphasis upon this.

The session around desistance narratives enabled students to think critically about the way that offenders and ex-offenders are labeled (Becker, 1963) and who has the power to label in the criminal justice system. Some universities place an emphasis upon desistance, for example SHU (Sheffield Hallam University UK) have a final year module entitled “making desistance and recovery a reality.” Undoubtedly desistance does feature in all criminology syllabus, but it lacks recognition by most institutions as a topic in its own right (including the author’s university) as it is embedded in a wider criminological context

I thought that I would learn the basics such as rehabilitation, retribution, things like that, but I didn’t expect to go into so much detail about desistance and how it is successful...I have never heard of this before (student participant 14)

Desistance is a relatively new addition to criminology, but it is starting to feed into evidence-based practice, particularly in probation (see McNeil & Weaver, 2010 for more around this). In the UK, Probation Inspectorate launched a new series of specially commissioned papers, including one to explore the evidence around desistance and rehabilitation, with the aim of informing probation practice (see Maruna & Mann, 2019). Many criminology students will progress into probation work, or work alongside probation as part of multi-agency teams, so to have a basic understanding of desistance during their degree is imperative to successful multi agency working.



*(Ex) practitioner status: Bringing criminology to life*

Narratives from (ex)-practitioners can bring lecturing to life, through application of personal experiences to contextualize the learning content

The session helped to demonstrate one of the positive sides of working with prisoners which I think is important as it is something that is not often discussed. It is also a more powerful message when it comes from an ex-prison officer, because they have worked with criminals, so have a better understanding of them (student participant 11)

Ex-practitioners have a unique insider perspective around the criminal justice system and use of self and positionality is one of the methodological areas covered in the research. Earle (2014) states that insiders have access to cultural practices and norms that are obscure to those outside of the group. An insider has an intimate experiential knowledge of the environment (Hodkinson, 2005). The lecture drew upon “insider knowledge” to expose the hidden world of the prison to the students, particularly in relation to pro-social aspects of prisoner’s behavior. Through application of personal experience as a prison officer, the session gave an opportunity to display a level of passion and commitment for prisoners and probationers who do desist, which aligns with the underlying transformative motivation for this research. Sharing this with undergraduate students who may become future criminal justice practitioners is a personal endeavor as well as a pedagogical obligation in criminology teaching.

*Desistance narratives to create a future self for students in criminal justice*

The research explored the (desistance based) career orientations of criminology undergraduates, and how desistance narratives might influence this

It has definitely encouraged me to want to pursue a career in the criminal justice system. Seeing that positive approaches such as peer mentoring can be put in places to help criminals rebuild themselves and try to defer reoffending excites me, and in the future, I would love to be part of this and help criminals find desistance (student participant 8)

In addition, the session generated a level of motivation and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), where students felt that they could work with offenders once they have graduated, based around hearing success narratives:

It (the session) has made me feel more comfortable with the idea of working with prisoners and ex-prisoners. It is something that I had thought about but was unsure about. It would make me feel so good to know that I am helping someone build a better future for themselves and others. The session has shown me that some prisoners really do want to change for the better (student participant 4)

Obviously further longitudinal work would be needed to consolidate these aspirations, but in an exploratory study, student views are encouraging. This research suggests that self-efficacy can be generated by lecture delivery from an ex-practitioner with has a strong message of desistance, grounded in real-life research and first hand narratives to support the processes of change. Self-efficacy according to Ritchie (2016) is the belief in one's own capability to succeed in certain situations. It can come from observing people around us, as they act as role models in transmitting a particular message.

Some students already have firmly designed conceptions of where they are going in their careers prior to starting their undergraduate degree; others may need to "knife off" (Maruna and Roy, 2007) past identities in order to progress from undergraduate student to a career in criminal justice. Markus and Nurius's work (Markus & Nurius, 1986) identify future possible selves and also raise consciousness of potential fears, hopes, goals and threats. It is important to consider the reality of working in criminal justice. Kershaw (2012, p. 38) identifies the limitations for students who have aspirations of changing the world. She writes that "many of the entry-level (criminal justice) occupations that the workers fill are plagued by bureaucratically-structured management that is marked by an unyielding hierarchy, where there is little room for personal influence, ability to engage in actions that deviate from the institutionalized framework, or feeling like making a difference is possible". The mundane realities of working in criminal justice also have to be considered for students graduating in criminology, something that an (ex)-practitioner can convey succinctly in criminology teaching.

The quality framework for criminology sets out the abilities, skills and areas of knowledge which someone graduating in criminology should possess. There is no mention of desistance in this UK framework. Given the future destinations of criminology students, understanding individual pathways out of offending is crucial to supporting offenders to desist from crime, with a focus upon asset based reintegration. Donald, Ashleigh, and Baruch (2018) stated that a primary purpose of university institutions is to facilitate career transition from higher education to the labor market. Improving perceived employability and promoting self-efficacy in the classroom is an integral role for lecturers (Sewell and George, 2000). "A major goal of education is to equip students with the knowledge skills and self-belief to be confident and informed citizens" (Sewell & George, 2000, p. 59).

## Conclusion

The aims of this research were to explore the influence that desistance narratives might have upon undergraduate criminology students' perceptions of offenders and the criminal justice system, explore the influence that ex-practitioner status has upon student perceptions, and also how desistance narratives might influence students' future employability aspirations. Students' perceptions were captured via a questionnaire and findings indicate that desistance is an exciting topic for students, contrasting with expectations of the UK criminology syllabus. Whilst only an exploratory study, this research found that student perceptions can be positively influenced or consolidated through (ex) practitioner delivery, and the authenticity of first-hand desistance narratives has proved stimulating for the participants in this research. Learning about desistance is a fundamental necessity for students who express ambition to work within criminal justice.

However, there are limitations with this study. The sample was a small convenience sample from one UK university and the findings are in no way generalizable to all criminology students both in the UK and globally. A larger scale study across different universities could prove useful to explore further the impact of desistance narratives on a wider demographic. The lecture only focuses upon positive desistance narratives, which is not always the case and ignores the possibility of fatalism in the desistance process. There is the issue of social desirability bias, where students might have expressed the responses they thought their lecturer would want to receive. In exploring the link between desistance narratives in lecturing and future employability, longitudinal research would be needed, and a cohort/alumni followed post-graduation to assess the long term impact of a lecture around desistance narratives. A pre and post-test to capture changes in student attitudes might provide a more robust methodology when drawing conclusions from the findings; however, as

previous stated, this study was exploratory to contribute towards a limited understanding of how desistance narratives might influence the learning process for undergraduate criminology students.

However, this paper has demonstrated that there is a need and utility in using desistance narratives as a pedagogical tool in criminology lecturing. Graham and McNeill (2017) argue that desistance research can be seen as an “alternative criminology” in both the way that it frames the objects of inquiry and in the way that it pushes towards disciplinary borders and intersections. One of the key findings was that the research raised awareness of desistance contextualized through the act of providing peer support for others. Desistance narratives humanize offenders and can be useful in transforming student perceptions of (ex) offenders and the wider criminal justice system. This paper demonstrates that ex-practitioner lecture delivery can generate confidence and optimism in the criminal justice system for students. In terms of pedagogy, the interplay between “what is said” and “who is saying it” is important in conveying desistance narratives to students who thought that the criminology syllabus would be largely comprised of studying onset and persistence of offending. Ex-practitioners making the transition into academia (such as the author of this paper) can offer a blend of experiential knowledge and research informed content around desistance, which adds to the authenticity of criminology lecturing. The impact on student future employability is encouraging, showing that desistance narratives can increase self-efficacy in students to work with offenders after graduation.

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