

# **“I’VE NEVER BEEN ARRESTED AT A 12-STEP MEETING”: HOW STRUCTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL MECHANISMS OF 12 STEP PROGRAMMES MIGHT SUPPORT CRIMINAL DESISTANCE**

*Sarah Nixon, University of Winchester*  
Contact: [Sarah.Nixon@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:Sarah.Nixon@winchester.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

This article aims to highlight how the structural and functional mechanisms of 12 step programmes (12SPs) might support criminal desistance. Drawing upon a small sample (n=7) from a wider PhD study (n=38) on peer work and desistance in prisoners, probationers and former probationers in England, narratives were reanalysed thematically to explore the desistance potential of 12SPs. The author has personal experience of 12SPs and has also worked within criminal justice (Prison Service). Themes identified suggest that 12SPs can be a ‘hook for change’ and allow for ‘changing of playground’. Tools offered through 12SPs can help structure and shape daily routines, develop discipline and manageability of self, and the collective responsibility of 12 step groups can develop social, human and recovery capital which might potentially support desistance supporting roles like employment and parenting. Not all 12 step members are involved with the criminal justice system, so this article presents a small sample of participants with extensive criminal careers. 12 step sponsorship (peer support) can allow for development of generativity, altruism and empathy where self becomes an ‘expert by experience’ thus transmitting experience, strength and hope to others. Redemptive narratives and moral agency were also evident. The aim of this article is therefore to help criminal justice practitioners to understand (from an ‘insider perspective’) the transformative potential that 12SPs might offer in supporting criminal desistance.

## **Keywords**

12-step recovery; peer support; desistance; recovery; hope; generativity.

## **Introduction**

12 Step programmes (12SPs) offer one potential solution for recovery from substance use/addiction and this article aims to explore how the structural and functional mechanisms

of 12SPs might support criminal desistance. It is important to state from the outset that I have personal experience of 12SPs and have also worked as a prison officer, so 'insider positionality' has shaped data collection and analysis when writing this article, which will be expanded later on. My aim is to develop criminal justice practitioners' knowledge around how 12SPs can potentially support criminal desistance within prison and community settings.

Best et al. (2016:1) state that "the populations involved in recovery and desistance research significantly overlap, yet there has been little shared learning across these areas", which presents a suitable rationale for this article. Indeed, Maruna (2001:64) identified that substance use and crime are so closely related that the study of desistance is "almost necessarily a study of abstaining from both types of behaviour". Whilst it is important to state from the outset that there may be no correlation between these two domains, this article seeks to present first-hand narratives on how engagement with 12SPs can reduce opportunity, attractiveness and motivation to continue with further offending. This article draws upon narratives of seven ex-offenders (from a wider study on peer work and desistance)<sup>1</sup> who, at the time of interview (2014-2015), were engaged in 12SPs (Narcotics Anonymous and Cocaine Anonymous). All participants were known to me in a professional/research capacity through being prisoners/probationers in England; in addition, all participants were known to me through direct involvement in 12SPs. Data identified complex interrelationships between substance use and crime, and participants indicated that a 'general openness to change' (Giordano et al., 2002) was needed, in order to address substance use and prevent further involvement with the criminal justice system.

Desistance is the process of abstaining from crime among those who previously have engaged in a sustained pattern of offending<sup>2</sup>(Maruna, 2001) and desistance scholars seek to understand 'how' and 'why' people stop offending. Factors that support the desistance process are hope and motivation (Farrall and Calverley, 2006) and opportunities to give something back. Formal recognition towards helping others, through for example mentoring, can further support the desistance process (Burnett and Maruna, 2006) and feeling connected within a social group allows for development of social capital. Mutual aid groups (e.g. 12SPs) are one way of increasing social capital. Maruna (2001: 117) states that individuals connect past negative experiences to the present in such a way that the present 'good' seems to be an almost inevitable outcome from the past and involves reworking a delinquent history into sources of wisdom, which has relevance for 12SPs. It is important that desisters have people who believe in them and recognise that they have something to offer society (see McNeill et al., 2007). In supporting desistance, (ex) offenders must be granted opportunities to move upwards by increasing their social standing, de-labelling, moving from being a stigmatised outsider to a citizen and stakeholder in society (Graham, 2016). Notwithstanding the stigmatised identities of 'addict' and 'alcoholic', 12SPs can potentially allow individuals to have a 'stake in conformity', through trust and responsibility

---

<sup>1</sup> See Nixon (2018) I just want to give something back: peer work and desistance Unpublished PhD De Montfort University

<sup>2</sup> There are multiple conceptual definitions/theoretical perspectives of desistance, debating when it starts, what it looks like, and the processes of change that occur

in sponsorship and service positions, aligning with tertiary desistance (McNeill, 2016). The desistance paradigm suggests that criminal justice practitioners should encourage, recognise and celebrate progress and achievements with (ex)offenders, helping to build hope, social capital and civic engagement (see McNeill et al., 2012).

Empirical evidence from this study suggests that 12SPs can provide a ‘hook for change’ (Giordano et al., 2002), a ‘new playground’ of peers, commitment, structure, discipline, manageability of self, conformity, ‘playing by the rules’ and the development of moral agency. This article also seeks to demonstrate how generativity (at the heart of 12 step interactions, particularly sponsorship<sup>3</sup>) might further support the desistance process. As stated already, I have direct experience of 12SPs which has helped to shape analysis, interpretation and knowledge of the structural and functional mechanisms offered through 12SPs. The integrity and honesty of narratives shared during interview between ex-offenders and an ex-prison officer who all have direct experience in 12SP recovery will hopefully develop further understanding of the importance of 12SPs within criminal justice in supporting desistance. Positionality of researcher to researched is important for this article and my direct observations through 12SP engagement and seeing what desistance and recovery looks like for the participants was nothing short of inspiring.

### **12SPs, 12 Traditions and 12 Step Groups (12SGs)**

This next section will present a brief overview of 12SPs, including Cocaine Anonymous (CA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) which follow similar formats to traditional AA (Alcoholics Anonymous). Working the 12 steps is more than just going to weekly meetings to gain the full benefit of the programme. 12SPs require the individual to undertake a series of tasks, including working with a ‘sponsor’ (mentor), taking moral inventories, identifying resentments, fears, harms and sexual conduct. Defects of character are identified, and the individual takes responsibility and accountability for past negative and damaging behaviours (which may or may not relate directly to drugs or alcohol). These processes require courage, integrity, willingness and humility, and can reveal existential truths about the individual.

Amends are made to others and parallels between 12SPs and restorative justice can be made within criminal justice (see Maruna, 2014). Whilst there is a fluid membership to 12SPs, with many transitioning in and out of the programme, working the 12SP for some is a continuous lifelong project (Swora, 2004) and recovery involves “profound identity work for years after the factual cessation of the problem behaviour” (Laudet, 2008:200). Personal agency, commitment, discipline and manageability of self could enhance commitment to other social bonds that might support the desistance process, for example employment, parenting and personal relationships.

There are no hierarchical structures in 12 step groups, yet there are informal social controls that operate to keep members in check (Hoffman, 2006). The 12 traditions give a set of

---

<sup>3</sup> Sponsorship in 12SPs involves peer support in carrying the message to others and working the 12 steps

organisational principles governing intergroup relations and conduct both inside and outside the 'rooms', exerting a protective function (Krentzman et al., 2011) upon individual personalities within the group. Meetings can contain (ex)offenders that are periodically removed from society and incarcerated, yet order is maintained in 12SGs in the absence of institutionalised authority structures (Room, 1993). Meetings start punctually, there is a 'negotiated order' to proceedings and home group members<sup>4</sup> send apologies for absences, which can help to develop accountability and responsibility. 'Service' positions<sup>5</sup> are created to help organise 12SGs, thus giving legitimacy to members through trusted positions granted on a democratic basis (voting). Social, human, relational capital and transferable skills can be developed within 12SPs and 12SGs, helping to build foundations for desistance supporting domains like employment. There is something fundamentally simple about 12SPs, and the routine and structures offered can help to develop social bonds, discipline and manageability of self. It is important to note however that 12SPs are not impactful or successful for all members and it is beyond the scope of this article to explore the sustainability of 12SPs on permanent identity change. The fundamental aim is to highlight the structural and functions mechanisms of engagement with 12SPs and how they might help to lay foundations for criminal desistance and recovery, in the words of those succeeding within both domains.

## **12 Step Sponsorship**

12 step sponsorship is the act/process of somebody (who has completed the 12SP, abstinent and working the programme daily) helping another person to gain abstinence through support and mentoring. The role of sponsor includes encouraging 'sponsees' (mentees) to complete the 12 steps, attend regular meetings, provide support, keep within the boundaries of 12SP sponsor/sponsee relationships and carry the 12-step message. The expectations on the 'sponsee' helps to set patterns of behaviour including manageability, routine, structure and discipline, for example punctuality around contact and attendance at meetings.

Johnson and Chappel. (1994) identify that sponsorship is mutually beneficial for both sponsor and sponsee, which is supported by Saltzer et al. (2002) who state that self-help groups allow people to use 'experiential knowledge', thus giving empowerment and self-determination. Drawing upon the mutuality of helping enables the helper-therapy principle (Reissman, 1965), and Le Bel's, (2007) work with formerly incarcerated prisoners identified a helper orientation, whereby helping others in recovery increases self-esteem, improved satisfaction with life and negative attitudes towards further criminality. Not all 12SP members are (ex)offenders; however, Maruna (2001) states that (ex) offenders who find ways to make contributions to society through mentoring, assisting and enhancing the lives

---

<sup>4</sup> A home group is where members choose a group that they are likely to attend regularly, often based on geographical proximity (although Covid 19 and Zoom platforms have changed this). Having a home group encourages attendance and accountability and service positions can be obtained.

<sup>5</sup> Service positions include meet and greet, literature secretary, making teas, setting the room up, treasurer, group secretary and regional secretary

of other people appear to be more successful at giving up crime, and if these achievements are *formally recognised* by others, then the effect may be stronger. Peer support is an underutilised resource within criminal justice; however, the evidence base is growing to highlight the influence and importance of using ex/offenders and recovering addicts within criminal justice domains, serving as auxiliaries to support criminal justice agencies and staff to deliver desistance and recovery- based interventions. Therefore, the role of sponsorship needs to be understood in relation to the growing research on peer mentoring/support, generativity and desistance within criminal justice (see for example Kavanagh and Borrill, 2013; Nixon, 2019; Buck, 2020).

Generativity has been described by McAdams and De St Aubin., (1998:20) as “the concern for and commitment to promoting the next generation, manifested through parenting, teaching and mentoring”. These are activities that transcend self-related interests and involve giving oneself to others and giving back to society (Nixon, 2019). Peer support allows individuals to draw upon experiential knowledge, this becoming ‘experts by experience’. Because they have direct understanding of addiction (and criminality), they can play a crucial role in supporting others and become a role model for recovery and desistance because they understanding the trajectories involved. Maruna (2001) identifies redemption scripts, where desisting individuals recast negative experiences as redemptive suffering and self is used as a credible source of wisdom to help others, which captures the essence of 12 step sponsorship. At the heart of effective practice with offenders should be the development, encouragement and facilitation of generativity (McNeill and Maruna, 2007) and 12 step sponsorship engagement can give opportunities to develop generativity as a mechanism to support recovery and criminal desistance.

## **Method**

The data presented in this article was obtained as part of a wider PhD study exploring peer work and desistance (See Nixon, 2018) in prison, probation and CJDT (Criminal Justice Drugs Team) in England. The aim of original research was to explore the impact that peer support schemes had to provide a ‘hook for change’ (Giordano et al., 2002) and how engagement might support the emergence of a replacement self where future criminality was no longer attractive or desirable, aligning with Giordano et al.’s (2002) desistance model. Data was collected during 2014-2015 and only one interview was conducted with each participant, because the plan was to gain a snap-shot of peer support schemes and the impact on desistance currently rather than a longitudinal research design.

Peer support schemes in the original study included prison Listeners, substance misuse peer mentors, education peer mentors and community peer mentors working for probation and CJDT. 12SPs were not originally intended to arise as a peer support programme because of a lack of prominence compared to other peer work schemes, but through narratives provided in interviews (and also my positionality with addiction/recovery) 12SPs gathered momentum both during interviews and in re-evaluation of data in 2021. (n=7) participants were 12 step members from a sample of (n=38).

The semi-structured interview schedule was based around how peer support roles could be a potential 'hook for change' and how providing peer support might support criminal desistance. Interviews were conducted face to face in a Category 'B' local prison, Probation (CRC) and CJDT (all in England) after permission was granted from relevant gatekeepers. Interviews lasted between 30-90 minutes and were recorded on a Dictaphone with permission granted by management authorities at the prison, probation and CJDT venues to bring recording equipment in. Participants were given an information sheet (and consent form) about the purpose of the study prior to interview, with an overview of the proposed vision of the research. Ethical approval was granted by De Montfort University and participants consented to use of data for future publications with the assurance of continued anonymity. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically (Braun and Clark, 2006), using Giordano et al.'s (2002) desistance framework to structure and organise narratives.

### **'Insider' Positionality**

Between 2014 and 2021 I was engaging intermittently with 12SP recovery (NA/CA), researching for a PhD, and also working as a criminology lecturer, teaching students around prisons, substance misuse and desistance. In 2021 I felt that due to the limited knowledge around desistance and 12 step recovery that a reanalysis of original data was necessary to enhance criminal justice practitioner knowledge of potential synergy between these two domains. Transcripts were revisited in 2021 and anything pertaining to enhance understanding of 12SPs as a mechanism to support criminal desistance were extracted. I knew all participants in a professional capacity as an ex-prison officer (at a category 'B' prison in England) and also from direct involvement in 12SPs, which adds a dimension to interpretation and analysis of data as both researcher and somebody who understands personally the process of being in a 12SP.

As a prison officer I witnessed first-hand the problems of addiction and struggles towards recovery and desistance in prisoners. Indeed, my own struggles with addiction started with the pressure of being a prison officer and the complexities of the role. Leaving the prison service in 2009, starting a PhD in 2013 and at the same time entering into a 12SP, my professional background was immersed and integrated with the participants I researched. It is important to note that all the data included in this paper was with probation and CJDT participants; prisoner interviews were conducted in a different way because of proximity to staff and my status as an ex-officer on HMP premises was evident, so disclosure around 12SP involvement was limited.

Familiarity with 12 step members and their understanding and knowledge of my ex-prison officer status made rapport, trust and integrity easy during interviews because of the shared principles of 12 step recovery. Aligning with a transformative worldview and an appreciative approach of their lives, I aim to give voice and representation to a marginalised population (Mertens, 2009) in my writing. My own recovery trajectory has been a key driver in presenting narratives of ex-offenders who I know personally, admire and respect. Walking into my first 12 step meeting in 2014 and renegotiating my identity

from “Miss/officer Nixon” to “Sarah” was a powerful shift and allowed me to connect with them.

Being an ‘insider’ to 12SPs has allowed for the formulation of themes based on personal connections and understanding the lived experiences, successes and frustrations of those involved in this research. I understand the language used in 12SPs and the commitment it takes to maintain sobriety. I learnt to acknowledge the similarities and not the differences and as I analysed narratives, there was no judgement from my positionality as an ex-officer because in 12SP there are values around equality and support that cut across boundaries. Coupled with a criminological insight into desistance theory and application, analysis was formed through a synthesis of academic knowledge and personal/professional experience.

Findings from this article are not claiming to be representative of all recovery/desistance trajectories, merely an insight into how 12SPs might support criminal desistance to enhance current knowledge within criminal justice. I aim to present data to evidence how the practical mechanisms of 12SPs can give structure, discipline and manageability of self, but this article does not extend to explore the deeper spiritual/God dimensions of 12SPs which are beyond the scope of discussion. In addition, identity change that may accompany 12SP engagement in supporting criminal desistance is also beyond the scope of this paper, although there is potential to explore this longitudinally.

Future selves were contemplated during interviews and 12SPs were part of a myriad of peer support engagement for these seven participants. The range of clean/recovery time and desistance varied between months to a decade for the seven participants (between 2014 – 2015) and through social media connections in 2021, it was established that all seven participants were still actively engaged with 12SP and still progressing in both recovery and criminal desistance. Thematic analysis of data identified four themes to help illustrate the desistance potential of 12SPs:

- 12 Step Programmes to ‘change playground’ and provide a ‘hook for change’
- Commitment to ritualistic practices of 12SP – structure, discipline and manageability
- ‘Helping others’ – 12 step sponsorship, generativity and transmission of experience, strength and hope
- ‘Playing by the rules’: conformity and moral agency through 12SPs

## **Findings**

This section will present findings and narratives to support the four themes identified above before a discussion and implications for criminal justice practice.

### **12 Step Programmes to ‘change playground’ and provide a ‘hook for change’**

I got introduced to NA by someone I used to do crimes and take drugs with, and that’s what sealed it for me... meeting guys in recovery, changing my playground, staying away from the people involved in negativity...just

supporting each other... he suggested that I come to a meeting and from there I haven't looked back. (LG NA)

LG demonstrates agency by intentionally latching on to NA as something he feels can contribute towards recovery and desistance. 'Hooks for change' will be more successful when they provide a gateway to conforming others (Giordano et al., 2003) and offer social realignments that further reinforce the journey into more prosocial territory. '*Changing playground*' is key here through developing a new social network of recovering and desisting peers

Another addict in 12 step....reached out and told me a few home truths...about life...direction and discipline and without these, we can't win...He put a lot of time and effort into me...showed me a lot of love...if you can get a tiny bit of hope into people so they think "fuck I don't want this" ...I will do this until I die. (RE NA)

It is often former criminal peers who provide identification for others through their 12SP progress. They present a new, clean/sober and desisting self to others, no longer in the chaos and madness of active addiction and criminality. Through these 'hierarchies of influence' (Nixon, 2019) 12SPs can be an attractive 'hook' on which to latch on to, and a 'new way of life' seems possible through 'differential associations' (Sutherland, 1939), with others also seeking and exhibiting desistance and recovery.

### Commitment to 12SPs – structure, discipline and manageability of self

I do a lot of sponsoring in CA...that takes up a lot of my time doing that stuff...going to meetings, taking people through the big book of AA...going and sharing at conventions...ringing my sponsor, doing my daily inventory, prayers and meditation...my wife thinks she's a CA widow...but, If I don't do this stuff I'm heading straight back out there to drugs and crime. (DD CA)

Commitment to 12SPs is labour intensive and requires daily action. 'Working the programme' is more than just attending 12 step meetings. DD was a persistent career criminal who demonstrated frequent offending, prison and self-destructive behaviours (problematic substance use, low impulse control and immediate gratification) and previous unmanageability was evident, yet as he explains, 12SPs help with discipline and manageability of self (and notwithstanding, distracting from further opportunities to offend). Similarly, JG explains how discipline and manageability of self are greatly improved through engagement with 12SPs

...the moment I admitted that my life had become unmanageable, I started to move on and living became easier...what I needed to do now was immerse myself within the recovery world, so I replaced all the negative people, places and things...I would go to 12 step groups every evening, all day my day was structured with positive people, places and things...people kept saying to me ""if you want what we have and you like what you see, do what we do, get a



sponsor, work the 12 steps and be abstinent”” That kind of hit home, I wanted what they have got. I want that recovery. It’s very attractive to me....it was the ethos of freedom from active addiction. (JG NA)

Ritualistic practices and tools of 12SPs become habitual and woven into time in recovery and daily routines of everyday life<sup>6</sup>

There is no known cure for addiction, but recovery is possible...as long as I carry on doing my programme daily I can stay on top of this stuff. My experience tells me that if I stop going to meetings and doing my step work, I notice this stuff creeping in...isolating again...I can never say never, but as long as I do today what I did yesterday and do tomorrow what I do today, the view looks quite sunny. My ‘fuck it’ button is still within reach. If I don’t work the programme, my life slowly becomes unmanageable. (JG NA)

BG, who exhibited the longest length of recovery and desistance stresses the importance of 12SP ritualistic practices to help cope with day to day living

My attitude has changed over the years...I have an awareness of what is going on with myself and I know when I am at my worst and what I need to do to maintain what I have got. It is a continuous progression...I can’t do this on my own...I have been shown a way of doing something...I read the meditation stuff in ‘just for today’ (NA Literature) ...and reading those few little lines sets me up in a way where I can focus on being internally calm...I need to have stability and structure...if I don’t have these I just get unwell. (BG NA)

In addition, RE identifies the pitfalls of stagnation in recovery

... you can’t stagnate in recovery... if I weren’t to do certain things in a day or a week in NA then I become stuck down that hole again...I feel toxic...full of self-pity...being selfish, resentful, spiteful. That is why I have to work on certain things every day. (RE NA)

It is common in 12SPs to hear that the family “have also recovered”, thus helping the individual to strengthen the desistance process. BG expresses the importance of commitment to the 12SP in building a relationship with his daughter

...the importance lies with me...unless I attend to and do certain things to maintain myself and keep growing and progressing, then there is a ripple effect, that is transferred to people that I care about, my daughter for

---

<sup>6</sup> Ritualistic practices performed daily include the Serenity prayer, the Step 3 prayer, step 7 prayer, step 10 daily personal inventory, step 11 prayers and meditation and step 12, carry the message and also do daily gratitude lists.

example...the responsibility lies with me...there is a fight in me to keep what I have got through recovery... (BG NA)

### **‘Helping others’ – 12 step sponsorship, generativity and transmission of experience, strength and hope**

Generative roles can provide fulfilment, embeddedness and offer alternative sources of meaning (Maruna, 2001)

I am an expert by experience...in NA we talk about keeping what we have by giving it away...I can only keep my recovery by helping others in recovery. We talk about spirituality...altruistic...the amount of empathy and compassion I can offer to the still suffering addict; that is insurmountable. (JG NA)

LG explains his role around generativity within the recovery community and also his progression from volunteer to paid/employed treatment worker

...I enjoy seeing people recover and making progress in life...it is instilling hope and aspirations back into them, carrying the message... someone did that to me and that’s what I want to do...get it out there, that we can change our lifestyles...it is possible to go on and lead productive lives. (LG NA treatment worker)

LM identifies how former criminal and substance using peers ‘role modelled’ desistance and recovery capital, transmitting experience, strength and hope through supporting others in 12SPs

I could see LG and BG doing well, they were clean and sober. I used to go out robbing and scoring with them. There is something different about them now and that gives me hope...it’s a decision to either keep on offending, being a homeless junkie, or learn from what they have done in NA... (LM NA substance misuse coordinator CJDT)

### **Playing by the rules: conformity and moral agency through 12SP**

There is something fundamental to 12SPs that generate conformity to a set of principles governing collective behaviour and actions (both in and out of 12 step groups)

...I’ve spent 22 years in prison...I got so violent I had to be removed from society...today I am clean and sober...today I try to be as honest as possible...I’m married to a copper...I am part of the solution...I pay taxes today...today I am manageable...I’ve never had a fight or been arrested at a 12 step meeting!...today I play by the rules!. (DD CA treasurer and Self-employed)

In addition, RE, a former addict/dealer and convicted armed robber who served 10 years in prison demonstrates how 12SP practices can become a ‘cognitive blueprint’ (Giordano et al., 2002) to help him to make future decisions that centre around moral agency. RE

organises his life around helping others, symbolising social, human and relational capital, and generativity is evident in his service towards another addict

...I couldn't even nick a penny sweet now...I haven't been in trouble for a good 6-7 years. I do lots for the community and recovery community...I don't want to die...I don't want drugs or alcohol...it doesn't give me freedom now... I do NA and am heavily involved in the fellowship. That has been my journey and I have not used...as I speak now I am totally abstinent...It feels beautiful. It is freedom on another level...dodgy things don't sit right with me anymore...yesterday I accompanied a young woman to a medical, 27, broken, wanted to kill herself, the stuff she has been through and seen. She is struggling with drugs and I'm sat there not using, just to be beside her and give her a bit of encouragement and to be next to her and try and guide her, really is why I want to get up in the morning. Being there for another person who is fucked and wants to die, is why I do what I do. (RE NA community engagement volunteer)

### **Discussion: How 12SPs can support desistance – building hope and signalling desistance**

Acceptance of unmanageability, as evidenced by a series of catastrophic consequences presented a 'general openness to change' (Giordano et al., 2002) for seven participants. It takes courage and bravery to admit defeat or being "fucked and unmanageable" (JG NA). It is painful to take a critical look at self, and determination, courage and agency to locate self as the source of the problem. I know this having been through the 12SP and this needs to be recognised by criminal justice agencies/practitioners. All participants demonstrated a shift from 'avoidance goals' (stop taking drugs) towards 'approach goals' (personal growth, spirituality, moral agency and desistance). Best (2019) identifies the social contagion of hope in recovery, which is an excellent metaphor to support 12SP influence. McNeill and Weaver (2010:8) assert that desistance could be "supported by a kind of 'virtuous circle', where hope and hopefulness is realised through opportunities that in turn vindicate and reinforce hope and hopefulness". Whilst experience, strength and hope are role-modelled and transmitted in 12SPs, discipline and manageability can also be role modelled and transmitted. Once the 'stakes in conformity' have been observed (for example seeing former criminal peers gain employment, move away from offending and establish legitimate social bonds), then desistance and recovery become desirable and attractive. A sense of self efficacy is developed that they can also recover and desist. 12SPs and 12SGs can therefore potentially give a social platform to develop recovery capital and consolidate desistance.

12 step sponsorship can signal desistance to significant others, including family, partners, and the criminal justice system and 12 step sponsorship offers a legitimate opportunity for a 'stigmatised underclass' (Jacobs, 2006:387 in Maruna, 2021:75) to signal to others that "I am not now who I was" (Toch, 2010 in Maruna, 2012:75). Through 12SPs, (ex) offenders can redefine their criminal and substance using past in terms of 'making good', and

through helping others an unfavourable past is refashioned into a new redemptive narrative (Maruna, 2001). Former criminal behaviours are an almost necessary prelude to helping others through “some newfound calling” (Maruna, 2001:9), which is evidenced through 12 step sponsorship and generativity. Enthusiasm for 12SPs, as evidenced here, suggests an “inflated, almost missionary sense of purpose in life” (Maruna, 2001:9). Generative roles can allow for presentation of self as a legitimate and credible source of wisdom and, according to Maruna (2001) ex-offenders are experts on deviance and desistance.

### **Civic reintegration through 12SPs**

All participants referred to the internal structure, negotiated order and ‘rules of engagement’ of 12SPs in helping to support criminal desistance. All participants had extensive involvement with crime, prison, violence and drugs and 12SPs are part of their desistance trajectories. “Playing by the rules” is something that they avoided during offending and substance using, yet at time of interview DD, BG and LG were trusted treasures for their 12SG and given responsibility for internal finances by the groups’ democratic decision-making process. Parallels can be drawn with tertiary desistance (McNeill, 2016) where ex-offenders are welcomed into a community and experience a sense of belonging, trust and reintegration. At the time of interview DD had 10 years clean time within CA, had been out of prison for six years, had employment, paid taxes, was married to a police officer and had his children back in his life. Goodwin (2020) identifies agentic moves towards ‘keeping busy’ in early desistance, but DD’s commitment to 12SPs extends way beyond early desistance. In his 11th year of sobriety, he still remains busy through 12SP activities and attributed his desistance supporting roles of father, husband, employee and taxpayer to 12SPs. However, despite exhibiting a ‘stake in conformity’, he expressed fear at what might happen if he lets up on the structure and discipline of his 12SP.

LM got heavily involved in the NA fellowship alongside peer mentoring schemes within CJDT. Seeing others performing well generated hope, self-efficacy and kickstarted his own recovery and desistance. LM’s role commitment to peer support programmes (including 12SPs) and supporting the recovery and desistance of other service users led him to be a self-professed “face of recovery”. He went on to become a substance misuse coordinator; a paid position within Probation/CRC (England). JG worked alongside a police substance misuse coordinator in setting up ‘recovery’ activities, and through “having an affinity with that officer” (JG NA), he reclaimed his ‘stake in conformity’ and his identity, recovery and desistance were validated by the criminal justice system. VW was a support worker within Probation, LG was a treatment worker for substance addiction, BG was a Probation Volunteer/ trainee addiction counsellor and RE was a volunteer support worker with young offenders. All these roles required validation from the criminal justice system and gaining trust is important in helping to sustain sobriety, desistance, generate hope and allows for potential to ‘give something back’ (Nixon, 2019). All seven participants attributed 12SPs as one of the key mechanisms through which criminal desistance was achieved. The transferable skills demonstrated from 12SPs to the realms of employment, personal relationships and civic engagement need no further explanation, and 12SPs therefore cannot be underestimated for the participants in this study. Not all 12SP members are (ex) offenders; however, through 12SPs it is possible for (ex)-offenders to

become firmly rooted in 'the solution', rather than a continuing problem for the criminal justice system.

### **Implications for the criminal justice system**

In accepting 12SPs as a potential solution, immersion in the recovery world develops manageability, 'recovery capital', and a social identity connected to recovery. 12SPs gives discipline, a sense of self-efficacy, purpose and a 'replacement buzz'. However, JG states that 'fuck it' buttons are always close by. 'Fuck it moments' are 'visceral reactions to block you on the road to sustaining a replacement self' (Halsey, 2017:17) and are a form of self-sabotage. It is important for criminal justice agencies to recognise the micro and subtle processes of improvement, self-development and change rather than a binary success/failure dichotomy. In addition, the commitment to 12SPs needs to be recognised and acknowledged as one potential way of dealing with drugs/crime, as previous discussion of participants' narratives illustrates. Therefore, the urgency and priority with which participants give towards 12SPs must not be underestimated to sustain both recovery and desistance long term.

There needs to be greater recruitment of recovering ex-addicts and desisting ex-offenders within prisons to deliver 12SPs, to allow for hope and recovery capital to be built before release. This rests on the prison governor's discretion in terms of security, risk management and category of prison, but recovered addicts/desisters are valuable role models to showcase desistance and recovery. As an ex-prison officer and insider to both prison and 12SPs I can see potential, but I also understand the operational scepticism of facilitating programmes like 12SPs within a prison setting. Sharing of successful best practices between institutions would help to generate confidence in the viability, application and durability of these programmes.

12SP members who role model recovery and desistance need to be supported, recognised and encouraged to work as 'recovery champions' within the wider criminal justice system (with obvious preservations around anonymity and identity when requested), and their unique trajectories need to be perceived as assets to inspire other service users in recovery and desistance, aligning with strengths-based desistance work (see Burnett and Maruna, 2006). In sustaining recovery and desistance, recognition from key stake holders in criminal justice is important to validate and consolidate new emerging identities that can support tertiary desistance. Greater levels of trust from the criminal justice system can and does produce feelings of self-worth and happiness for ex-offenders, which fuels further motivation to continue with desistance and recovery, as they start to claim their place in the 'moral community'.

### **Conclusion**

This article has explored how the structural and functional mechanisms of 12SPs might support criminal desistance. Whilst the sample (n=7) is small, there are important points to consider around the synergy between 12SPs and criminal desistance. There were four themes identified including how 12SPs can provide a 'hook for change' (Giordano et al., 2002) and allows for 'changing playground'. Commitment to the ritualistic practices and

utilisation of the 12SP tools of recovery can start to build structure, discipline and manageability within those living in chaos of addiction and criminality. Through 12 Step sponsorship (mentoring), generativity allows for giving back and helping others. Experiential knowledge is transmitted in 12SPs, generating hope around recovery and desistance potential. Conformity to the rules of 12 step groups allows for discipline to be built; adherence to internal structures, negotiated order and 'rules of engagement' are transferable skills to desistance supporting domains like employment and parenting. 12SPs allows for the development of moral agency which can be a driver to sustain desistance, recovery and helping others. This paper therefore advocates that attributes of 12SPs can be the building blocks upon which both recovery and criminal desistance is built.

Maruna et al., (2004) identify that criminal justice staff should communicate strong messages of optimism about desistance potential. Indeed, Maruna and Mann., (2019) state that desistance research should take 'success stories' seriously and be counted as 'evidence' (Maruna, 2015). Desistance is a subjective process and thus, the importance of 12SPs must not be underestimated if the (ex) offender places this as a key priority for their own desistance and recovery 'success', rather than sole reliance on mandatory programmes (tick box culture). In strengths-based rehabilitation work, (ex) offenders must be allowed opportunities to display agency and self-determination, and 12SPs are a way of signalling these. Desistance is understood in the context of relationships between offenders and those who matter to them. 12SPs, centred around concepts of 'unity' and 'fellowship' provide recovery-based platforms built around development of social, human, relational and recovery capital. Hope is crucial in supporting desistance and 12SPs give (ex) offenders hope, self-efficacy and motivation for their future. As an ex-prison officer, researcher and also part of a 12SP recovery community I know the people included in this article both professionally and personally, and I am proud to have been part of their recovery and desistance journey. It is imperative that criminal justice practitioners understand and promote the desistance potential of 12SPs in their working practices.

#### **Acknowledgments:**

I would like to express my gratitude to the following people who took time to offer constructive comments: Professor David Best, Professor Rob Canton, Associate Professor Gila Chen and Dr John Hockey. This research was granted ethical clearance by De Montfort University Leicester England.

## References

AA Big Book: *Alcoholics Anonymous 2001* 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Great Britain

Best D., Irving, J and Albertson, K (2016). Recovery and desistance: what the emerging recovery movement in the alcohol and drug area can learn from models of desistance from offending. *Addiction Theory and Research*, 25 (1), 1-10.

Best, D. (2019) *Pathways to Recovery and Desistance: The Role of the Social Contagion of Hope* (pp. 203-216). Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in psychology*, 3, 77–101.

Buck, G (2020) *Peer mentoring in criminal justice* Routledge: London

Burnett, R. and Maruna, S (2006) The kindness of prisoners: Strength's based resettlement in theory and action: *Criminology and Criminal Justice* Volume 6 issue 1

Farrall, S. and Calverley, A (2006) *Understanding desistance from crime*, Crime and Justice Series, Open University Press: London

Giordano PC, Cernkovich SA and Rudolph JL (2002) Gender, crime and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation', *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 990-1064

Giordano, P; Cernkovich, S; Holland, D (2003) Changes in friendship relations over the life course: *Criminology*; Columbus 41.2; 293-327

Goodwin, S. (2020) 'Keeping busy' as agency in early desistance', *Criminology & Criminal Justice* (43-58)

Graham, H. (2016) *Rehabilitation Work: Supporting Desistance and Recovery*. London: Routledge

Halsey M, Armstrong R, Wright S (2016) 'F\*ck It!' Matza and the Mood of Fatalism in the Desistance Process *British Journal of Criminology* (1041 – 1060)

Hoffman, H (2006) Criticism as deviance and social control in Alcoholics Anonymous: *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* December 2006 (669-695)

Johnson, N. P., & Chappel, J. N. (1994). Using AA and other 12-step programs more effectively. *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment*, 11(2), 137–142

Kavanagh, L. and Borrill, J. 2013. Exploring the experiences of ex-offender mentors. *Probation Journal*. 60 (4), pp. 400-414.

- Krentzman, Amy R. , Robinson, Elizabeth A. R. , Moore, Barbara C. , Kelly, John F. , Laudet, Alexandre B. , White, William L. , Zemore, Sarah E. , Kurtz, Ernest and Strobbe, Stephen(2011) 'How Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) Work: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives', *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 29: 1, 75 — 84
- Laudet, A B (2008) *The Impact of Alcoholics Anonymous on other substance abuse related Twelve Step programs*: (Online) (accessed on 06/04/2022) [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2613294/](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2613294/)
- Laudet, A. B. (2008). *The impact of Alcoholics Anonymous on other substance abuse-related twelve-step programs*. In M. Galanter & L. A. Kaskutas (Eds.), *Recent developments in alcoholism: Vol. 18. Research on Alcoholics Anonymous and spirituality in addiction recovery* (p. 71–89).
- Le Bel (2007) An Examination of the Impact of Formerly Incarcerated Persons helping others: *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* Vol 46, 2007 issue 1-2
- Maruna S (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association
- Maruna, S., L. Porter, and I. Carvalho. (2004). The Liverpool Desistance Study and probation practice: Opening the Dialogue. *Probation Journal*, 51, 221-232.
- Maruna, S (2012) Elements of successful desistance signalling American Society of Criminology 73 *Criminology & Public Policy* Volume 11 Issue 1
- Maruna, S (2014). The role of wounded healing in restorative justice: an appreciation of Albert Eglash. *Restorative Justice*, 2(1), 9-23.
- Maruna, S (2015), Qualitative Research, Theory Development and Evidence-Based Corrections: Can Success Stories Be “Evidence”? in *Qualitative Research in Criminology: Advances in Criminological Theory*. Vol. 20, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, NJ, pp. 311-337
- Maruna, S and Mann, R (2019) Reconciling ‘Desistance’ and ‘What Works’ *HM Inspectorate of Probation Academic Insights* 2019/1
- McAdams, DP and de St. Aubin, E (1998) A theory of generativity and its assessment through self-report, behavioural acts and narrative themes in autobiography. *Journal of personality and social psychology* 62, 1003-1015
- McNeill, F. and Weaver, B. (2010) *Changing Lives? Desistance Research and Offender Management*. Project Report. Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, University of Glasgow, Glasgow



- McNeill F (2016) Desistance and criminal justice in Scotland. *In*: Croall, H, Mooney G and Munro R (eds) *Crime, Justice and Society in Scotland*. London: Routledge, 200–216.
- McNeill, F. and Maruna, S. (2007) 'Giving Up and Giving Back: Desistance, Generativity and Social Work with Offenders', *in* G. McIvor and P. Raynor, (eds), *Developments in Work with Offenders*. London: Routledge.
- McNeill, F; Farall, S; Lightowler, C and Maruna, S (2012) How and why people stop offending: Discovering desistance (Online) (accessed on 06/04/2021)  
[www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/how-why-people-stop-offending-discovering-desistance](http://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/how-why-people-stop-offending-discovering-desistance)
- Mertens, D M (2009) *Transformative research and evaluation* NY: Guilford
- Nixon S (2018) *I Just Want to Give Something back: Peer Work and Desistance*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK
- Nixon, Sarah (2019) "I just want to give something back": Peer work in prison. *Prison Service Journal* (245). pp. 44-53
- Reissman, F (1965) The helper therapy principle: *Social Work*, Volume 10, Issue 2, 1 April 1965, Pages 27–32
- Room R, Greenfield T. Alcoholics anonymous, other 12-step movements and psychotherapy in the US population, 1990. *Addiction*. 1993 Apr;88(4):555-62.
- Salzer, M. S., & Shear, S. L. (2002). Identifying consumer-provider benefits in evaluations of consumer-delivered services. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 25(3), 281-288 Scheme in one adult male prison. London: University of Greenwich
- Sutherland, E. H. (1939). *Principles of Criminology*. JB Lippincott Company.
- Swora, M G (2004) The rhetoric of transformation in the healing of alcoholism: The twelve steps of alcoholics anonymous, *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 7:3, 187-209

