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Circles of Support and Accountability, Assisted Desistance and Community Transition

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Introduction

In the previous chapter, Chris Wilson outlined the historical and theoretical foundations of Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) and explicated the CoSA model. This chapter builds on the previous chapter and examines where CoSA fits within the desistance literature. Recent empirical research concerned with offender rehabilitation and reintegration has focused on what promotes desistance from crime. A central aspect of the desistance process is the transformation and changes in the narrative identity of crime desisters (Maruna, 2001). Desistance researchers argue that successful desistance hinges on internal promoters (such as narrative identity shift) and external promoters (such as employment and marriage). Furthermore, there has been a move within the literature to consider not just the risk and criminogenic needs of those who have com-

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mited sexual crime, but also to understand the process of desistance and the need for individuals to address protective factors, for example, positive self-identity (de Vries Robbé, Mann, Maruna, & Thornton, 2015). However, an under researched aspect of the desistance process is the role of community members in integrating released offenders back into the community (Fox, 2015). The aim of this chapter is to consider where COSA may fit in terms of the wider desistance literature and recent models of desistance.

CoSA are an intervention used with medium to very high risk individuals who have been convicted of a sexual offence. The aim is to support and enable their reintegration back into society, whilst still holding them accountable for their behaviour (Cesaroni, 2001) (see Chap. 1 for more detail). A Circle consists of three to six members of the local community who volunteer to meet weekly with the Core Member (the individual who has committed a sexual offence). Supervised by a project coordinator, a Circle aims to establish a pro-social network around the individual, providing practical and emotional support. There are several significant dimensions to community-based integration programmes like CoSA. First, the model illustrates the power of positive labelling in moving an offender from a state of temporal desistance to a more enduring identity (Fox, 2015). Indeed, there are inherent benefits from moving individuals away from the 'sex offender' label, as this can impair positive self-identity (see e.g. Blagden, Winder, & Hames, 2014; Maruna, 2001). Developing a sense of belonging and constructing desirable identities is important for the self-change process and ultimately for tertiary desistance (Farmer, Maruna, & McAlinden, 2016; McNeill, 2014). "As such, community integration can be seen as a precursor to successful desistance, rather than an outcome of desistance" (Fox, 2015, p. 91).

Desistance and CoSA

The concept of narrative identity is important for the rehabilitation and crime desistance of those convicted of sexual offences, as those lacking a coherent narrative identity are often thought more likely to continue to offend (Ward & Marshall, 2007). In the desistance literature, identity

change/transformation has been linked to 'redemptive' episodes whereby the negative past self is reconstrued as positive because it has led to the transformation of that person; the past self is construed as qualitatively different from the changed self (McAdams, 2006b). Consequently, shifts in personal identity have been argued as important for desistance (Göbbels, Ward, & Willis, 2012). Such redemptive narratives can restore moral agency, in turn empowering the narrators to imagine and pursue generative futures. They allow for 'real selves' to be emphasised and for negative past incidents to be reconstrued as life experiences that made them stronger, wiser, better prepared for the future and wanting to give something back (Stone, 2015). Stone (2015) argues for the importance of identity-repairing narratives in the desistance process and the how the internalisation of oppressive master narratives may restrict opportunities for desistance. Thus, allowing offenders to enact/portray *good* selves can lead to *living* those roles as people tend to act in line with the stories they present about themselves (Blagden et al., 2014; Friestad, 2012; McAdams, 2006a).

This chapter will now turn to how CoSA fits within established models of desistance and how it may facilitate/assist with desistance. Given that desistance rests upon an interplay between structure and agency, the chapter will focus on CoSA's potential contribution to meaningful narrative and psychological change, the process of CoSA, that is the contribution of the relational dynamics to the desistance process, and how it reintegrates individuals with convictions for sexual offences back into the community.

CoSA, Narratives of Change and Identity Change

Göbbels et al. (2012) have emphasised the importance of positive practical identities in the desistance process and the importance of 'turning points' or constructive outlets which provide opportunities for the momentum of change in which the self is construed in a positive light. It may be that CoSA provide such possibilities and have the potential to

assist with positive identity change as individuals transition from prison to the community. Indeed, research by Kitson-Boyce, Blagden, Winder, and Dillon (2016) highlights how prison CoSA can further bolster the traditional CoSA model by preparing individuals for release and bolstering their identity pre-release. LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, and Bushway (2008) found that self-identification and positive self-image were significant predictors of post-prison outcomes. In contrast, feelings of stigmatisation predicted reoffending (Chiricos, Barrick, & Bales, 2007).

Göbbels et al. (2012) formulated the Integrated Theory of Desistance from Sexual Offending (ITDSO). This is a four-stage theory describing the processes by which individuals with sexual crime convictions transition from incarceration to living a crime-free life. Phase one is labelled 'decisive momentum' and refers to the stage at which a former sexual offender makes a conscious decision that their offending behaviour is problematic and needs to stop. This occurs through processes of self-realisation, or as a result of some external catalyst (e.g. a new relationship, or changes in life circumstances). In phase two ('rehabilitation'), formal sexual offender rehabilitation procedures (e.g., prison-based Sex Offender Treatment Programmes) are introduced to focus on the successful "reconstruction of the self" (Göbbels et al., 2012, p. 457). The aim at this point of the desistance process is to provide support to those who want to change their sexual offending behaviour by helping them to develop the skills needed to do so through positive identity restructuring. It can be noted that CoSA fits well within this stage, as the relationships with volunteers not only provide support, but also nurture pro-social narratives. As Fox (2015) found, volunteers within CoSA encourage Core Members to reconstruct and maintain a more positive sense of self though the inclusive nature of the initiative. Phase three ('re-entry') highlights the importance of an external rehabilitation-reinforcing environment, within which people with convictions for sexual offences can begin to rebuild and maintain their new identities as non-offenders. The emphasis here is on maintaining the commitment to change, which requires the construction of a new, positive, non-offender identity achieved in the previous phase (Göbbels et al., 2012). CoSA volunteers have the opportunity to assist in this process by providing ongoing empathic support and encouragement to the Core Member, something Göbbels et al. (2012)

suggested can be achieved through mentoring. This is not always easy in a society where those who commit sexual crime are deemed as the worst of the worst (see Chap. 6 for a focus on attitudes towards sexual offenders). However, by the volunteers not only offering their own support, but encouraging Core Members to socialise outside of the Circle, this can reinforce and strengthen their new identity as a non-offender (Elliott & Zajac, 2015). Höing, Bogaerts, and Vogelvang (2013) found that the positive relationships and engagement in prosocial activities led to an increased motivation to build on this in their own social world. One Core Member in the study reported that he had shown more interest in others and that "expressing interest in others has proven to be a positive experience in the Circle" (p. 284). This finding is also supported within the findings of Kitson-Boyce where a Core Member described becoming less isolated and integrating more into society after experiencing the support within his CoSA. More on this can be read in Chap. 4 of this book. Finally, in phase four ('normalcy'), these individuals fully adopt this new identity, and view themselves as non-offenders. Stages 3 and 4 of the model focus more on the conditions necessary for successful identity change, that is social context and social relationships. This fourth phase would see the ending of CoSA for the Core Member, where meetings are reduced and eventually cease, as support from the volunteers is required less and less due to the adoption and integration of their new identity.

Göbbels et al. (2012) identified the importance of a rehabilitation-reinforcing social environment, such as the maintenance of positive social relationships and a strong non-offender identity. However, they also point out the difficulties associated with achieving these social conditions with a history of sexual offending, through the processes of stigmatization, labelling, and strict probation restrictions (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Indeed, punitive social attitudes towards individuals with sexual crime convictions can interfere with the desistance process. There are paradoxical findings when examining community attitudes towards individuals with sexual crime convictions. For example, it has been found that 95% of people agreed that persons convicted of sex crime should receive therapy (Brown, 1999) and that 39–49% agreed that 'Society has an obligation to assist sex offenders released into the community to live better lives' (McAlinden, 2007). However, there are pervasive beliefs

about the irredeemability of individuals with sexual crime convictions. For example, 23% of the public agreed that 'Most people who commit sexual offences against *adults* can go on to live law abiding lives', while 16% agreed that 'Most people who commit sexual offences against *children* can go on to live law abiding lives' (McAlinden, 2007). Moreover, 64% would oppose the locating of a treatment centre in their neighbourhood (Brown, 1999). Attitudes towards individuals with sexual crime convictions are important for the rehabilitative process (see Chap. 6 which explores this and media representation in more detail). Indeed, attitudes towards individuals with sexual crime convictions are important for the rehabilitative process and have been found to predict whether staff who work with such individuals have positive or punitive views towards their rehabilitation (Craig, 2005; Kjelsberg & Loos, 2008) and are associated with beliefs that offenders can change (Blagden et al., 2014). Importantly, attitudes towards individuals with sexual crime convictions have been linked to therapeutic effectiveness and therapeutic alliance.

Relational and Reciprocal Aspects of CoSA

Since desistance is about, in part, discovering agency, interventions need to encourage and respect self-determination; this means working with offenders, "not on them" (McCulloch, 2005). The importance of individuals convicted of crimes 'owning' their own rehabilitation, being invested in it or having a stake in it should not be underestimated. This has led some to argue that there is a need for offenders *to do* desistance and not just *talk* desistance (Blagden & Perrin, 2016). Given the emphasis that CoSA places on community integration, the relational exchanges between Core Members and volunteers and the dual process of emotional/pastoral support and accountability give rise to the conditions that allow for Core Members to 'own' or have a stake in their own rehabilitation. The relational aspects of CoSA have been found to assist with desistance-based narratives (see e.g. Fox, 2015) and could contribute to self-determination and 'active citizenship' (Perrin & Blagden, 2014). As previously highlighted, belonging to a group and encountering meaningful social relationships are crucial in the desistance process—it is

rarely a solitary pursuit. Weaver and McNeill (2015) reported that the social relations that were most influential in supporting desistance were those characterised by a sense of belonging and solidarity. Desistance from crime, it appears, is much easier for those who are able to embed themselves within social networks, which support their new pro-social identities (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). This links to a fundamental aspect of CoSA and points to the importance of the relational dynamics within Circles.

In an attempt to provide a theoretical underpinning to CoSA, Höing et al. (2013) interviewed Core Members and found that CoSA volunteers are able to provide exactly that which Weaver and McNeill described. Core Members felt a sense of togetherness, and it being about "all of us" (p. 278), rather than just focusing on the Core Member. Inclusion was identified as one of the essential functions of a successful CoSA in this study. As well as the more obvious inclusive functions of a Circle, such as the regular meetings and discussions about the Core Member's issues, some of the most meaningful elements of a Circle for the Core Member were the more generic discussions about both the volunteers' and Core Members' interests. In particular, the sharing of personal information from volunteers contributed to a greater "sense of belonging" and being part of a community once again (p. 283). This fits with the findings of Weaver and McNeill (2015), who demonstrated that the social relations most influential in supporting desistance are those categorised by a sense of 'we-ness', which in turn shapes a sense of belonging and reinforces the new pro-social identity.

There is a growing evidence base that relationships in correctional settings and supportive rehabilitative settings assist with the desistance process. So much so that the relationship between service user and practitioner has been reinstated as a core condition for changing both the social circumstances and behaviour associated with recidivism by policy-makers (Burnett & McNeill, 2005). This is in light of research demonstrating the impact that staff attitudes have on the success of rehabilitative interventions (Craig, 2005). The importance of the therapeutic relationship/working alliance however is not a new one, and has long been recognised as one of the most (if not the most) important factors influencing therapeutic change (Rogers, 1951; Horvath & Greenberg, 1989; Horvath

& Luborsky, 1993). Recent research demonstrates that the relational dynamics of staff-prisoner interactions is an important aspect in individuals' rehabilitation (Blagden & Perrin, 2016; Blagden, Perrin, Smith, Gleeson, & Gillies, 2017; Perrin & Blagden, 2014). Participants spoke of reciprocal relationships with both staff and fellow prisoners that were based on respect, mutual helping, and learning. These relational interactions appeared to represent a testing ground for relationship building post-prison. Indeed, establishing social relationships is vital in terms of triggering, enabling, and sustaining change (Weaver, 2015). One of the aims of CoSA is to foster companionship and trust between the Core Member and volunteers, something which is thought to be essential to successful reintegration (Youssef, Casey, & Birgden, 2017). The most effective reintegration is thought to be possible in communities where significant interpersonal relationships are many (Braithwaite, 1989).

Furthermore, Vaughan (2007) has argued that change narratives require continuous validation. Indeed, validation that change is recognised is important to the desistance process and that this change is not only recognised but reflected back to them. There is a body of research that highlights the importance of pygmalion effects (high expectation produces higher outcome) and interpersonal expectancy effects on prisoner outcomes (Maruna, 2004).

Maruna, LeBel, Naples, and Mitchell (2009) have argued that self-change occurs not only through self-appraisals and attributions but also from the reactions and reflected appraisals of others. In Tate, Blagden, and Mann (in press) the reciprocal nature of interactions within the prison constituted a source of validation for the prisoner participants. This again points to the relational properties in the 'self-change' process (Mead, Hilton, & Curtis, 2001). This validation process through reciprocal relationships is also something that is particularly important for individuals with sexual crime convictions who experience high levels of shame and stigma (Blagden, Winder, Thorne, & Gregson, 2011).

Sexual crime is often deemed the worst of the worst, and communities as a whole tend to view those who commit these crimes with hatred and fear (Petrunik, 2003). This can lead to stigmatisation and shaming of this group of individuals, something which increases the risk of an individual reoffending (Braithwaite, 1989). Braithwaite's (1989) theory of reinte-

grative shaming however, distinguishes between negative shaming (disintegrative) and good shaming (reintegrative). He explained how actively shaming the behaviour rather than the individual, coupled with forgiveness, acceptance and respect can help prevent sexual crime from occurring. Conversely, disintegrative shaming only serves to stigmatise and isolate, factors that increase the likelihood of reoffending. Thus, if the reactions and reflected appraisals of others are negative, self-change may be impaired or hindered. CoSA acknowledges this literature and does not in any way aim to shame the individual for their past behaviour, but instead supports the Core Member and focuses on active responsibility-taking. Furthermore, volunteers are encouraged to discuss the power of stigmatising labels such as 'sex offender' and 'paedophile' with the Core Member, and in fact the simple use of the neutral term Core Member serves to remove the individual from their previous behaviour.

Another element of Braithwaite's theory of reintegrative shaming relates to the power of 'significant others' in deterring criminal behaviour. The idea is that shame associated with letting those close to us down and causing disapproval can serve to promote desistance. For individuals with sexual crime convictions however, they are often ostracised from family and society, and so the idea of significant others may be something alien to these individuals. However, when part of CoSA, research suggests that the volunteers become a very important and integral part of the Core Member's life and social circle, and Braithwaite's role of significant others can be seen at play. For example, a CoSA coordinator stated 'Sometimes I get the feeling that they [Core Members] are like children, and that we are their family and that they'd disappoint us if they reoffended. That's it, I think—they don't want to disappoint us' (Silverman & Wilson, 2002, p. 173). This relates back to the idea of inclusion referred to above, as it is the 'family-like' relationships accomplished through CoSA that help the Core Member to once again feel a part of the community (Hannem, 2011 p. 278). Through this, Core Members have the opportunity to demonstrate change in the community (Höing, Vogelvang, & Bogaerts, 2015) as they 'buy into a sense of doing good and not letting fellow group members down'. It is through this sense of belonging to the CoSA group that Core Members are reinforced to take responsibility for their behaviour and ultimately be accountable (Kewley, 2017).

CoSA and Social Capital

A large body of research has highlighted how individuals convicted of sexual crime are publicly denigrated in the extreme and consequently find it more difficult than other types of offenders to reintegrate (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Braden et al., 2012). Research has also found that public shaming and the subsequent social isolation experienced by those convicted of sexual crime constitute risk factors in terms of further offending, and this has prompted the emergence of various reintegration initiatives (Braden et al., 2012). The paradox of further isolating released individuals with sexual crime convictions is that it increases their risk of further offending and like many offenders they find themselves 'in' but not 'of' society (Irwin & Owen, 2005). Recent research has found that the social resources people have, that is, their social capital can be a massive contributor to crime 'desistance'. Such resources/capital are linked to protective factors. Social capital has been defined as "a network of relationships, which facilitates social action by generating knowledge and a sense of obligation, expectation, and trust" (Göbbels et al., 2012, p. 456).

Ullrich and Coid (2011) examined the predictors of desistance in 800 sexual and violent offenders. The only four significant protective factors were all related to pro-social supportive networks: social support, emotional support, spare time spent with family and friends, and closeness to others. Farmer et al. (2012) found that a main distinguishing feature between active and desisting individuals with sexual crime convictions was that the latter had found a place within a social group or network. Thus, having support, belonging to a group and being believed in cannot be under estimated in the desistance process (Maruna, 2001). CoSA can assist in this process and be a social resource which provides support and inclusion, while holding the individual to account (Höing et al., 2013). The process of being in a Circle, and being supported by those in the community, provides a 'surrogate social network', which assists the Core Member in developing their own personal social networks that are appropriate and pro-social (Höing et al., 2013, p. 271). This process is important as it has been found that forming new and meaningful relationships can provide individuals with the emotional and social capital they need to sustain a crime free life (Farmer et al., 2016).

Narratives of Re-entry and CoSA

There are three narratives of re-entry described by Maruna and LeBel (2002): control, support, and strength based. Control narratives are risk-based and are embedded within a belief that those who have committed crimes are dangerous and must be monitored and controlled at all times (Maruna & LeBel, 2002). In the UK, this is the basis of most interventions with those who have committed sexual crime in the community. The focus is heavily on supervision and management of risk through organisations such as MAPPA (Multi-Agency Public Protection Arrangements) and MOSOVO (Management of Sexual Offenders and Violent Offenders).

Support based narratives are arguably the direct opposite of control narratives. The idea here is to provide support and care based on individual needs, specifically and most importantly, their criminogenic needs (Maruna & LeBel, 2002). This concept is supported by the literature regarding 'What Works', which attempts to demonstrate that treatment can effectively reduce recidivism when an individual's criminogenic needs are directly matched to treatment. However, this approach is focused on *doing to* the ex-prisoners, through for example treatment in the community. As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, working with offenders rather than *on them* is crucial to the desistance process. Without this, individuals are not discovering agency or owning their rehabilitation.

This leads into an alternative and emerging narrative, titled 'strength based'. The idea behind this narrative is to build on the existing capabilities and capacities of individuals to support change. The concept is about looking at the strengths of individuals and identifying what positive contributions they are able to make. This is in complete contrast to the control narrative which focuses on deficits and areas of need. This is arguably the narrative within which CoSA sits most comfortably. Although it should be noted that CoSA runs the risk of acting as another social control, along with supervision and the other community requirements that are made on ex-prisoners. This is due to the 'accountability' element of CoSA, which should be adopted appropriately and with caution, or it may undermine the other strength based components of CoSA which arguably

have the greatest potential in terms of desistance (McNeill, 2014). CoSA's focus on community integration by use of community volunteers heavily supports the resocialisation of Core Members and works to counteract some of the negative consequences of imprisonment.

This narrative links in with the Good Lives Model (GLM: e.g. Ward, 2002a, 2002b; Ward & Stewart, 2003), which provides a strength based approach to rehabilitation and desistance. The central premise of the GLM is that there are a number of 'actions, states of affairs, characteristics, experiences and states of mind that are intrinsically beneficial to human beings and therefore sought for their own sake' (Ward & Brown, 2004, p. 246). These are defined by the GLM as primary human goods. Specifically, eleven primary goods have been identified: life; knowledge; excellence in work; excellence in play; excellence in agency; inner peace; relatedness; community; spirituality; pleasure; and creativity (Purvis, 2010). According to the GLM, offending is the result of attempting to pursue primary goods through inappropriate methods. As such, from this perspective the rehabilitation of offenders focuses on providing opportunities, building capabilities and supporting individuals to achieve these via appropriate means in order to reduce the risk of reoffending and allow individuals to live fulfilling, crime free lives. CoSA are well aligned to the GLM, in that it aims to support Core Members in achieving human goods via pro-social methods in order to construct a balanced, fulfilled and socially supported crime free life (Bates, Macrae, Williams & Webb, 2012; Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009). CoSA goes beyond the focus of criminogenic needs and targeted risk reduction and instead looks at individual needs, something that traditional programmes often fail to fully address due to practical barriers (Wilson & Yates, 2009). CoSA offers 'goods' such as support, advice and human communication which in turn increase wellbeing, enabling individuals to meet their needs in a prosocial way rather than through crime.

Conclusion

It is clear that the current predilection for exclusionary "criminology of the other" (Garland, 2001) type attitudes particularly focused at individuals with sexual crime convictions will not serve our communities'

best interests. However, rehabilitative initiatives like CoSA and the simple acts associated with community inclusion and de-labelling of offenders promote enhanced (normative) identities among ex-offenders (Fox, 2015). They also provide a greater sense of sense of empowerment, autonomy, and contribution to a positive culture (Arrigo & Takahashi, 2006). This chapter has demonstrated how CoSA fits with the desistance literature and how they can contribute to the developing of a positive narrative and identity of the self and to improve human and social capital.

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