

Examining sexual offences through a sociological lens: A socio-cultural exploration of causal and desistance theories

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Abstract

This article considers often contrasting theoretical approaches to sexual and non-sexual offending by comparing some influential accounts of the causes of sexual offending and examining the role of socio-cultural factors in the offending process. It also examines how desistance theories may be applied to this complex interaction between psychological factors and socio-cultural ones. The article concludes that there is a strong theoretical argument for substantial socio-cultural elements of sexual offending. It also argues that desistance theories may be applied for the same reason, but also because the causal and desistance process may be thought of as two separate processes. Moreover, and related to the second point, many criminological theories position offending behaviour not in the action that is considered a crime, but the fact that this action is a crime, meaning that both resistance to and desistance from sexual offending can be viewed in the context of general criminological theories.

Keywords

Criminological theory, desistance, offending, sexual offences, offending

Introduction

Sexual crimes have tended to be neglected in major work regarding criminological and desistance theories until relatively recently, and similarly desistance theories have traditionally been omitted from psychological literature regarding sexual offending, despite empirical evidence that people do desist from sexual offending (Laws and Ward, 2011). It is often hard to reconcile what initially appears to be a fundamentally different causal

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process of sexual offending with causal factors and processes of desistance from general offending. Furthermore, whether sexual offending is explained and interpreted from a psychological or socio-cultural perspective is important. For example, how might a psychological focus on the causes of sexual offending relate to a sociological perspective on desistance? On the other hand, how does one move on from offending behaviour if such behaviour is to some extent entrenched in the values of a patriarchal society?

From a rehabilitation perspective, sexual offending is often perceived very differently to non-sexual offending, and this positions the sexual offender as the 'other'. As Ward (2014: 131) stated, 'While there may not be a gene(s) for rape or child sexual offending, there is a growing conviction that the cognitive neurological systems of sex offenders may be functionally abnormal in some way'. This is in contrast to predominant (but not all) views of non-sexual offending, which is that offending behaviour is heavily influenced by environment and social structure. This article considers often contrasting theoretical approaches to sexual and non-sexual offending by comparing some influential accounts of the causes of sexual offending and examining the role of socio-cultural factors in the offending process.

Sociological approaches to 'general' offending

In criminology, the debate over whether the main influences on criminal behaviour are individual or socio-structural has broadly tended to favour the sociological perspective (Laub and Sampson, 1991), although views on this differ. To give just one example, principles of differential association suggest that interaction with others, directly or indirectly, results in courses of behaviour consistent with the social group's actions or norms/values (Akers and Jensen, 2006), and these can include friends/family or wider influences such as the media. These associations can encourage or discourage criminal behaviour, resulting in risk or protective situations. These risk or protective factors may occur at different times in life and this may affect when a person commits crime. For instance, a protective factor when young may be a supportive family, whilst a risk factor may be residing in a disadvantaged neighbourhood (Losel and Farrington, 2012; Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2002). If either of these situations are reversed (for instance when a person leaves home or if relationships change), then the propensity to offend may also change. In adulthood, a move towards having one's own family may be a protective factor; however, a breakdown of this family may be a risk factor.

Smallbone et al. (2008) argued that cultural norms influence attitudes and actions according to the 'proximal-distal' continuum'; that networks closest to us such as friends and family will have a stronger influence than wider society. Similarly, Wikstrom's (2010) situational action theory stated that 'humans are rule-guided actors' (p. 217), and that the decision of whether or not to commit a crime depends on a person's internal system of rules, along with those of the situation. Hence, different situations result in different moral rules, and these may change at different points in life. Akers (1990: 164) argued that association with 'norm-violating peers' is one of the best predictors of general recidivism. Theoretically, it is not hard to imagine that this may be the case, since direct association with others who normalise such activity may have a counter effect to the moral rule of society in general. Farrington (1992) also suggested that peer attachment can explain the

general life course trajectory, with criminal behaviour beginning in adolescence when offenders have a stronger relationship with their peers instead of their parents, and declining when the main influence is the spouse. There are many other theories of why people commit crime, however many of them share the view that the behaviour is heavily influenced by a person's position in society. It is interesting to consider this position in the case of those who have committed sexual offences, and surprisingly, there has been little empirical research into this.

Causal theories of sexual offending

Theories of sexual offending have taken a somewhat different route, often being studied from a psychological perspective, and offenders treated in a clinical setting (e.g. Hanson and Yates, 2013; Hanson et al., 2002). However, the literature now recognises the highly complex nature of sexual offending and presents integrated cross-disciplinary approaches that encompass psychological factors and processes as well as how these are affected by other factors such as environment.

Ward et al. (2006) described different levels of theories. Level 1 theories are multifactorial and seek to explain how many complex factors combine to get a person to a point where they offend sexually. This takes place in the context of the heterogeneous nature of sexual offending, and the fact that actually different types of offence are likely to have different causes (Ward, 2014). These level 1 theories include Marshall and Barbaree's (2006) Integrated Theory, and Ward and Siegert's (2006) Pathways Model. Level 2 theories are single factor theories and describe one element of the multifactorial theories, generally psychological or socio-cultural factors such as intimacy deficits or feminist perspectives. Level 3 theories are descriptive models that describe the offending process.

In this section, I will consider what three significant causal theories (attachment theory, feminist theory and cognitive distortions) say about sexual offending. Whilst not intended to fully encompass integrated or etiological theories (the theories outlined would be considered level 2 theories), they have been chosen since they represent influences on sexual offending that are generally not considered widely when discussing non-sexual offending. The most obvious difference between the two approaches is the focus on socio-structural influences on non-sexual offending, and in particular whether sexual offending may be amenable to change according to different environments in a similar manner to non-sexual offending. Hence, this will be discussed for each of the three causal factors.

Attachment theory

Attachment theory is well established within the neurobiological field (Kraemer, 1992) and is one of the theories most often linked to analysis of the causes of sexual offending (e.g. Bowlby, 1969; Smallbone and Dadds, 2000; Ward et al., 1996). Attachment theory describes how the infant mimics behavioural and emotional characteristics from its primary caregiver, generally the mother. This is particular to social primates and is not learned behaviour, but rather a type of imprinting. Depending on how this attachment forms, the infant sometimes has a higher risk of some form of social dysfunction.

Sometimes this manifests in intimacy deficits that results in a person committing a sexual offence in order to meet these needs. Many authors have developed models of different attachment styles (e.g. Ainsworth and Wittig, 1969), and Ward et al. (1995) devised arguably one of the most comprehensive models of attachment styles in relation to those who have committed sexual offences. They argued that the type of attachment will influence the characteristics of the offender, and hence their victim type and offence type. These are briefly defined as the following:

- In the *anxious/ambivalent* attachment style, the individual has a negative view of themselves but a positive view of others, which leads them to seek approval from others. They will desire intimacy but fear relationships. If this type of attachment style manifests as a sexual offence, they will seek someone whom they can control and who 'looks up' to them. Hence, the victim of this offender type will often be a child who is known to the offender, and offending will require minimal use of coercion or force. They are likely to groom and attempt to form a relationship with their victim.
- In the first type of *avoidant* attachment style, the individual has a negative view of themselves and also a negative view of others, seeing them as untrustworthy. They may seek a sexual relationship but avoid intimacy, and lack the social skills to form a healthy adult romantic relationship even if they desire one. This will result in the person seeking impersonal sexual contact, and some will resort to coercion if necessary. Their victims may be adults or children, and they are less concerned with a specific gender.
- In the second type of *avoidant* attachment style, the individual has a positive view of themselves and a negative view of others, blaming others for any problems in their lives. They are hostile and do not desire close relationships. This type of offender is the most aggressive and will use force against adults and children. The use of force is a way of expressing aggression and not simply instrumental to committing the act.

These theories are attractive as they attempt to explain the complexities of different types of sexual offences that other theories cannot, and there are few types of sexual crime that would not fall under at least one of those categories. It may initially appear that such attachments must be fixed for life without treatment, however there is some evidence that attachment styles can change according to socio-structural elements: 'changes in caregiver environments and stressful life events (severe illness, parental illness, divorce) have been shown to alter attachment patterns from infancy, through childhood and adolescence, to adulthood' (McKillop et al., 2012: 593). For example, Smallbone (2006) argued that being a caregiver can bring about a sexual offence since the offender confuses adult and parental attachment and seeks sexual intimacy with the child. This suggests that a person, rather than not having the opportunity, did not have the propensity to offend until becoming a caregiver. Different attachment styles may also result in different quality of relationships, where for instance the anxious/ambivalent individual may appear to have a good intimate relationship, however they may maintain an emotional distance within this relationship (Marshall, 2010). This further

complicates the situation: the mere fact of being in an adult relationship or a peer group is not necessarily indicative of secure adult attachment. Hence, attachment theories do to some extent support the possibility that experiencing different environments may actually alter the propensity to offend.

Feminist theory

Gendered theories of sexual crime consider how the position of females in society may sanction their sexual abuse. Feminist theory broadly states that a patriarchal society 'create[s] and maintain[s] male control over females' (Waldby et al., 1989: 97), and that sexual abuse is one of many ways used to dominate and suppress women in a world where women take second place to men and are merely 'object[s] for male manipulation' (Waldby et al., 1989: 98). The feminist interpretation of child abuse (of both genders) also relates to this system of power and domination of children. This is all caught up in the socio-structural lack of power that these subordinated groups experience, and is analogous to the power exerted over other groups such as race and class.

As such, an offender's motivation to offend is heavily influenced by the culture around them, which continually reinforces these messages. Whilst arguably there has been some progress in terms of society's general view towards the role and treatment of women, there remains some way to go before these views are fundamentally changed. The proliferation of new technology has meant that depictions of the commodification of women and the sexualisation of children is now more accessible, to the point of becoming mainstream (for instance through violent pornography or even mainstream media (Lim et al., 2015)). Images of female children dressed up to look like sexualised adults as well as adult women posing in infantilised positions are also common occurrences (Paul and Linz, 2008). At the very least, those who abuse others may use these facts to legitimise or excuse their behaviour. At worst, this may actually perpetuate this type of behaviour. Hence, whilst on the one hand the majority of society appears to abhor those who commit sexual offences, on the other hand feminist theory argues that in a patriarchal society abuse and oppression is widely accepted. Therefore, it may be considered that far from deviating from widely held values, those who abuse are actually acting within the patriarchal norms of society (Ward, 1985).

Schwartz et al. (2001) presented an interesting paper on a feminist approach to routine activity theory in which they examined the effect of peers as guardians who may prevent or encourage the offender. They argued that 'men who belong to these all male, patriarchal, homosocial networks are more likely than non-members to be motivated to abuse women sexually' (p. 628). This suggests that social control from a feminist perspective changes according to a particular ecological situation. Cossins (2000) also argued that gender is not a static factor but a construct of particular situations. This then implies that offending may be promoted by different socio-cultural contexts, peer involvement being one of them. There have been few studies that examined peer approval of or involvement in child abuse. One recent exception is Ashurst and McAlinden (2015), who found that young people participating in harmful sexual behaviour could very much be influenced by their peers. It is also thought that there may be a certain level of networking amongst those who commit sexual offences (Hanson and Scott, 1996), and this may be facilitated

by the growth of the internet: '[r]esearch demonstrates the strong sense of social support and reinforcement that child pornography offenders may experience as a result of their involvement in online networks' (Carr, 2012: 104)

Cognitive distortions

Cognitive distortions are one of the most commonly linked individual factors in respect of sexual offending. Put very simply, cognitive distortions are ways of viewing and interpreting the world around us which may not necessarily reflect the reality. In the case of sexual offending, these may be ways of justifying the offence. It is also thought that those who commit sexual offences develop implicit theories, based on cognitive distortions, which are unconscious scripts about their own and the victims' actions. These may be beliefs that they are not doing anything wrong and that societal beliefs are wrong when they consider the harm caused by sexual offences. This is said to explain why they offend when it is against the law and moral code of society, as their internal belief system can justify the act. These implicit theories may include beliefs that children are sexual beings and willing participants (Polascheck and Ward, 2002; Ward and Keenan, 1999), or that men are entitled to sex and it is a woman's (or sometimes a child's) responsibility to meet these needs.

However, there is also a theoretical argument, based on the feminist perspective, that cognitive distortions may be influenced by socio-cultural elements. Gagnon (1990) described different levels of sexual scripts that indicate how to behave in a sexual encounter: internal, interpersonal and cultural. The cultural script tells a person what is allowed according to the norms and values of society. In addition to cognitive elements distorting these scripts, socio-cultural views may also confirm these unhealthy attitudes towards relationships. Finkelhor (1984) also posited that social attitudes may act to overcome internal inhibitors to committing the offence. The radical feminist perspective (outlined in Ward et al., 2006: 169) also argues that 'features commonly noted in sexual offenders (e.g. cognitive distortions) are derived from being socialised as males and not from any unique characteristics associated with being sexual offenders'.

For example, Griffin (1979: 188) argued that '[h]eterosexual love finds an erotic expression through male dominance and female submission'. Seal and Ehrhardt (2003: 302) described one of the discourses for sexual intimacy for heterosexual men as sex as conquest. As one interviewee in their study stated:

. . . [d]ating is all about sexual harassment—sort of pushing the limits to see how far the other person is willing to let you go. Society believes that it is the man's role to test the waters. It is certainly expected by women.

Whilst this may be viewed as an implicit theory, it is arguably one held by a substantial number of people in society. This is echoed by Cowley (2014: 1262), who argued that, 'the normative elements of the traditional heterosexual sex script are eerily similar to the events that precede a sexual assault'. Similarly, other views, such as that a rape is a less serious offence if a woman is under the influence of alcohol, dressed in a certain way or has consented to some sexual activity, are also not limited to those who have been con-

victed of sexual offences. Therefore, what are sometimes perceived as cognitive distortions may actually be commonly held societal beliefs.

Discussion of the above issues has outlined the fact that there is no theoretical reason that sexual offending should not be sensitive to different social and cultural contexts. This is important to consider from a preventative point of view, although there may be some theoretical differences when compared with non-sexual offending. For instance, becoming a caregiver may result in a sexual offence either owing to opportunity or altering attachments. On the other hand, becoming a caregiver may prevent a person being involved in non-sexual offending since this activity may compromise the care they are able to give the child. Consequently, different offending patterns may appear over the life-course for sexual and non-sexual offences. Nevertheless, this viewpoint would lead us to believe that propensity towards sexual offending behaviour is something that can be lessened in the right environmental conditions.

Finally, there is some suggestion that situational factors or opportunity may provide the impetus for a sexual offence. Ouimet and Proux (1994) found some evidence that recidivism was increased for people who commit sexual offences against children whose routine activities took them in higher proximity to children. Farmer et al. (2015) also found that many of their interviewees had viewed their offending as something that had occurred in a particular situational context, that they had not sought out that particular situation and that they had been surprised to find themselves offending (although, as Farmer et al. pointed out, there may have been an element of shame management involved in their accounts). Whilst there are likely to be other factors involved in addition to situational events, it certainly seems to be a substantial contributory factor (Beauregard and Leclere, 2007; Beauregard et al., 2007).

Desistance theories

The previous section has outlined some of the key causal factors in terms of sexual offending, and how these may also be influenced by socio-cultural elements. It is of particular importance to consider the role of these socio-structural contexts in relation to whether or not a person re-offends after their initial offence, as this is the stage at which intervention is most commonly carried out.

Desistance theories attempt to explain the journey from (arguably) relatively persistent offending to an offence-free life. Having generally stemmed from research into non-sexual offending, they are approached from a different perspective to the general literature on sexual recidivism, which is more often based on a treatment perspective. The desistance process is generally thought to be a combination of agency and environmental factors/informal social controls (Farrall et al., 2010; Laws and Ward, 2011), along with a cognitive shift (Maruna, 2001). In terms of the environmental factors, similar common life events are suggested to promote the desistance process as those thought to prevent the offending process (such as social relationships and employment), although there is a distinction in that there is thought to be a substantial element of having reconsidered one's life as a consequence of the offence.

There is some debate about the extent to which the factors which promote desistance after the commission of the offence mirror the initial cause. Laub and Sampson (2001)

suggested that the predictors of desistance are the same as (or the reverse of) the predictors for offending, although others disagree (Stouthamer-Loeber et al., 2002; Uggen and Piliaven, 1998). As stated, similar environmental events are generally suggested in relation to the promotion of desistance (relationships, employment, etc. (LeBel et al., 2008)), however whilst this may be true on an aggregate level, this is not necessarily true on an individual level. Desistance research looks at how the decision not to re-offend may be supported (or not undermined) by life events, rather than being directly related to causal elements, although these events may sometimes be similar. However, if cause and desistance are not related, this provides more evidence that desistance processes for sexual and non-sexual re-offences may be aligned.

Inevitably, though, the desistance process will have the added complication of having been an ‘offender’. As Farrall et al. (2010: 548) argued, ‘the process of having been convicted as a recidivist adult offender entails a degree of *social exclusion*, and – unless the offender is exceptionally fortunate – probably also an element of rupture of pre-existing social ties’. In addition to the decision to change, the desisting ex-offender will face societal difficulties that he or she did not face prior to the offence, which may be exacerbated for those who have committed sexual offences. Conversely, being detected as an offender and the subsequent associated events may also be a factor in an identity shift: ‘[p]ositive events are rather unlikely to elicit self-evaluative needs’ (Gobbels et al., 2012: 456).

Desistance from sexual offending

Laws and Ward (2011: 99) stated that in respect of current treatment of those convicted of sexual offences, the:

. . . etiological assumption appears to be that sexual offending is a product of faulty social learning and individuals commit sexual offenses because they have a number of skill deficits that make it difficult for them to seek reinforcement in socially acceptable ways.

A key distinction between desistance and rehabilitation research outlined by Laws and Ward is that from a desistance perspective, changes occur ‘outside the direct orbit of influence of practitioners’ (p. 204): in fact for many non-sexual offenders (and arguably many sexual offenders) this change occurs without intervention. Laws and Ward also argued that ‘correctional practitioners concentrate on deficiencies whereas desistance researchers pay more attention to the presence of protective factors’ (p. 206). Whilst socio-structural factors are increasingly coming to attention in respect of sexual offending, it should be noted that those in the practitioner field do not generally advocate moving away from treatment of offenders and relying on ‘natural’ desistance supported by changes in environment, as criminological researchers have previously been more inclined to do (Laws and Ward, 2011). However, there has been a move to incorporate both psychological and socio-structural elements. Models such as the Good Lives Model (Laws and Ward, 2011) increasingly align these two different approaches.

Literature on desistance from sexual offending is in its infancy, although a small number of recent studies have looked at sexual offending through a desistance lens (e.g. Farmer et al., 2015; McAlinden et al., 2016). These studies have generally found support

both for the socio-structural (such as employment and social support) and self-narrative aspects of traditional desistance research. Some desistance theories also incorporate psychological, socio-structural and self-narrative factors (e.g. Gobbels et al., 2012). Whilst desistance research (and practice) has traditionally come from a different perspective to that of the rehabilitation of those who have committed sexual offences, theoretically these approaches can be aligned for two reasons. Firstly, this article has outlined the evidence that there is a socio-cultural element to sexual offending, which is one of the key elements of desistance research. Moreover, if the desistance and causal processes are separate, this provides more weight to the argument, since desistance theories may operate *regardless of cause*.

General criminological theory and the relationship between cause, resistance and desistance

Thus far, I have discussed how causal and desistance elements of sexual offending may be prone to socio-structural influences throughout the life-course. There are also influential theoretical standpoints from the general criminological field that the cause of any offence is less important than the fact that it is an offence. This final section will discuss the role of some of the most well-known general criminological theories in relation to causal and desistance factors, and whether these are important to our theoretical understanding of sexual offending.

Social control theories posit that a person's desire to commit a certain act is overcome by the moral code of a certain community or wider society (Hirschi, 1969). A person conforms to this code because if they do not, they risk losing something; that is, whatever benefits being part of this society brings them. Similarly, rational choice theory suggests that individual actors weigh up the consequences to themselves of embarking on a particular course of action (Clarke and Cornish, 1985). Thus, the main focus is not the act itself, but the commission of the act despite it being against commonly accepted societal, moral or legal rules. Laws and Ward (2011: 208) argued that criminological (desistance in this case, however it may also be applied to causal theories) theories are 'weaker when it comes to explaining why people (and offenders) are motivated to desire and seek certain outcomes'. Of course, they do not necessarily seek to do this.

These theories therefore assume that the act has crossed our mind or is an attractive proposition: indeed, the main question is not 'why do you want to do this?', but 'how do you stop yourself doing this?'. The motivation to commit sexual offences is often harder to understand than for non-sexual offences. However, if we view intimacy, power and control (as outlined in the theories about causation) as desirable goods, this may take us closer to theoretical similarities between those who commit sexual offences and other offenders. As Willis et al. (2012: 126) pointed out, the issue is with the 'secondary goods—the activities/means individuals use to achieve primary goods—and not the primary goods themselves'. Viewing them in this way makes the connection between sexual and non-sexual offending clearer.

The act of a person countering their desire either in order to conform with those around them or to weigh up the negative and positive consequences of their actions is important as it implies a propensity to offend may be addressed *regardless of cause*.

This, then, suggests that an internal desire may be countered by external processes. There is some evidence that this is the case with sexual offences. For example, Laws (1994) found that in his study, the control group who had never committed a sexual offence were found to have some overlap in fantasies of rape and child abuse, arguing that they 'harbour many of the same feelings, have the same fantasies, but fail to act upon them' (p. 8). This, then, is relevant to the causal process, since what needs to be altered is not the desire to commit the act, but the decision, the ability, and the environmental conditions required in order to resist this desire. The original 'cause' is less important than the decision to resist. This is not necessarily in opposition to psychological theories: for instance, different attachment styles can affect self-control: '[i]nsecure personal attachments and weak social attachments in turn lead to general problems with individuals' capacity for and commitment to self-restraint' (McKillop et al., 2012). Of course, the whole process is likely to be a complex and individual one as is noted in the integrated theories.

This also appears to be particularly true of the desistance process after offending. Some people who have committed sexual offences state that a fear of returning to prison is the main reason they do not wish to re-offend (Ward and Laws, 2010). This is in line with Maruna's findings (2001) that few desisting ex-offenders came to the conclusion that an offence was wrong, only that the paths that they were on had a negative impact on their lives. Farmer et al. (2015) also found in their study that 'in the early stages of desistance, they [people who had committed sexual offences and who had desisted] made a rational choice about their behaviour based on a growing realisation of the disadvantages of persistence' (p. 328). This was based partly on the realisation of the harm caused by the offence, but partly on the concerns about the likelihood of being caught. This may be considered similar to many criminological theories that assume that the reason most people do not commit crime is because they fear the consequences, whether these are social or judicial, and as previously stated the consequences of detection may have been the starting point for a change in self-identity. This would suggest that addressing the willingness to commit an act that is against societal rules *regardless of what caused the desire to commit this act*, is an important part of the desistance process. In this way, sexual offences may be considered in a similar theoretical manner to other offences.

The substantial interaction between sexual and non-sexual offending appears particularly important here. People who commit sexual offences very often commit other offences (Hanson and Bussiere, 1998) and in fact general rule-violation has been found to be a significant predictor of sexual recidivism (Hanson and Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Tewksbury et al, 2011). Offenders with a proclivity towards sexual offences are more likely to commit a range of offences if social bonds are already weakened. As Smallbone and Wortley (2004: 295) argued, 'men who already have some experience of serious rule-breaking, dishonesty, exploitation, and/or aggression may be more likely to take the opportunities to sexually abuse a child'. This suggests that those who do not have a propensity towards general criminal behaviour are less likely to take the opportunity to commit a sexual offence, however this does not necessarily mean that they do not want to. This is consistent with Ward and Siegert's (2006) pathways model, which describes 'antisocial cognitions' as being one pathway into sexual offending.

Conclusion

This article has considered the relationship between causal theories of sexual offending, desistance theories and general criminological theories, with a focus on how socio-cultural elements may be important in these processes. The theoretical literature tends to support the case that propensity to offend, including relating to sexual offending, can and does change depending on different socio-structural circumstances, as well as for internal cognitive reasons. Decision-making in terms of the negative societal consequences of committing an offence also plays a part, particularly in terms of the desistance process. This suggests that desistance from sexual offences is not dependent only on the original 'cause', certainly in respect of the causal theories discussed in this article, and also that the underlying desistance process is similar to that of those who have committed non-sexual offences.

Whilst there is no reason to suppose that people who have committed sexual offences are not capable under the right conditions of desisting from crime, whether or not they follow the same course as other offenders is less clear, and there is a lack of empirical research into the relative importance of different life events that would assist a probation context. The point in life when these protective and risk factors occur, as well as opportunity, may be very different for those who have committed sexual offences compared to other offences. For example, gaining employment or having a family may present an opportunity to someone inclined to commit a sexual offence, whereas arguably it is more likely to act as a protective factor for other offending. The negative consequences of detection may also be more exacerbated for sexual offences than for other offences, in terms of additional stigma and labelling, and this may impede the desistance process. In addition to this, there is a more fundamental issue of whether society implicitly condones such behaviour, as suggested by feminist theory. If propensity to offend is affected by the moral rules of society, then a society that continues to support the abuse and exploitation of women and children will inevitably continue to contribute to such actions.

Of course, the difficulty lies in how we may support and encourage the desistance process amongst those who have committed sexual offences, as well as preventing these crimes from occurring in the first place. This article has argued that sexual offending is influenced by wider socio-cultural issues, and addressing these is an important yet challenging issue. There are many important treatment and educational programmes currently being developed that aim to help individuals deal with thoughts and situations that may lead to offending behaviour, and to assist them in replacing these with appropriate emotional and sexual attachments. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide critique of these programmes. Further research is needed into the impact of risk and protective factors throughout the life course in terms of sexual offences. Challenging the traditional normative masculine and feminine roles and preventing wider societal tacit approval of the abuse of women will also provide clearer boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

From a desistance perspective, following McNeill's (2012) framework of four forms of rehabilitation, in addition to assisting the individual with their personal process ('psychological rehabilitation'), there are three areas which require wider input from society as a whole. It is important to address the potentially counterproductive nature of the

aftermath of the judicial process ('legal/judicial rehabilitation'), which may be exacerbated for those who have committed sexual offences. Linked to this, perhaps the most difficult area in light of the embedded moral panic and increased stigma in relation to sexual offences, is seeking to improve society's contribution to the desistance process by accepting that those who have committed a sexual offence may desist the same as everyone else ('social rehabilitation'). As Laws and Ward (2011: 109) argued: 'the delivery of treatment is not enough. We need also to be seeking to strengthen offenders' social networks and their relationship to the world beyond the therapy room'. It is this issue that artificially constructed social environments such as the Circles of Support and Accountability (Wilson et al., 2007) aim to address; by creating the type of environment in which it is thought the desistance process is most encouraged.

Furthermore, McNeill (2012) makes an excellent point about 'moral rehabilitation', in which reparation cannot be overlooked. Restorative justice, for instance, is still in its early stages for sexual offences and has been somewhat controversial, however early research suggests positive findings (e.g. McGlynn et al., 2012), and it may give back a sense of power and control to the victim. It may also be argued that the issue of reparation may not lie solely with the offender in the case of sexual offences, but potentially with the criminal justice system in some cases (which may have re-victimised or blamed the victim), and even wider society, which provided the environment that facilitated the abuse. This reparation may take the form of allowing the victim's voice to be heard and preventing societal approval of such abuse in the future.

These theoretical reflections emphasise the need for further research to consider the socio-cultural aspects of the offending and desistance process from the perspective of those who have committed sexual offences, and to consider how we may use this information to prevent offending and encourage desistance in the future.

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