

# Religion, spirituality, and desistance from crime

## Toward a theory of existential identity transformation

*Sung Joon Jang and Byron R. Johnson*

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### Introduction

Although the etiology of crime has traditionally been a primary interest of criminological theory and research (Beccaria, 2008 [1764]; Bernard *et al.*, 2010; Lombroso, 2006 [1876]), the past three decades have witnessed an increasing focus on desistance from crime as a result of criminal career research and the emergence of developmental or life-course perspectives in criminology (Blumstein *et al.*, 1988; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Le Blanc & Loeber, 1998; Shover & Thompson, 1992). Conceptually, criminal desistance might be understood as the reverse of criminal offending and thus, to some extent, has simply been explained in that way. However, desistance theories tend to be more than an inverse of their etiological counterparts in that they emphasize human agency compared to theories of offending that generally neglect or mention it only in passing.

Specifically, while the initial explanations of desistance were based mostly on social structural and relational factors (e.g. Sampson & Laub, 1993; Warr, 1998), later theories tended to focus on internal as well as external factors to conceptualize the role of human agency in terms of a change in self-identity. Giordano and her colleagues (2002) emphasize an offender's adoption of "replacement self" as a new, anti-criminal identity via cognitive transformations, subsequently adding a notion of "emotional self" to highlight the role emotions play in a neo-Meadian theory of desistance (Giordano *et al.*, 2007). Similarly, from a rational choice perspective, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) posit that one's choice between "possible self" and "feared self" is crucial to criminal desistance.

These theories, focusing on cognitive and emotional aspects of the self, help us understand how human agency is involved in the process of desistance, but religious and spiritual dimensions of identity have also been proposed to explain the process (O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002). Recognizing that the terms "religious" and "spiritual" are often used to refer to different parts of reality (e.g. Jang & Franzen, 2013), we treat them as two related, but not interchangeable, concepts. In this chapter, the term "religious" has to do with organized religion, not only institutional doctrines, rituals, and activities but also an individual's perceptions and experiences associated with them (e.g. closeness to God). While the term "spiritual" is often

used to refer to the same perceptions and experiences (e.g. Giordano *et al.* 2008), we conceptualize it without any religious connotation to use in relation to an individual's search for existential meaning in life.

Although the religion–crime relationship has been empirically established since Hirschi and Stark's (1969) landmark study and the concept of religion has potential contributions to the study of desistance, religion has not been incorporated into leading theories of criminal desistance, just as the concept has been neglected by major theories of crime causation (Cullen, 2010; Johnson & Jang, 2010). Furthermore, previous studies on religion and criminal desistance are limited, and life–course research on the subject remains scant. To address these issues, we begin with a critical analysis of criminological theories of desistance, followed by a review of previous studies on religion and desistance. We then discuss how the concept of spirituality as well as religion would contribute to the explanation of criminal desistance. Finally, we propose a theory of existential identity transformation along with suggested measurement of existential identity for future research on religion and desistance.

### Criminological theories of desistance

While conceptual and measurement issues of desistance have not been fully resolved among criminologists, a consensus has been the conceptualization of desistance as a *process* rather than being confined to a discrete event. For example, Laub and Sampson (2001:11) define desistance as “the causal process that supports the termination of offending.” Similarly, Bushway *et al.* (2001) define desistance as a developmental process of declining criminality, which is time-varying and driven by social, biological, and psychological factors. In sum, desistance is a causal process that results in a trajectory of decreasing offending and eventually leads to the state of non-offending (Jang, 2013a).

Existing theories of criminal desistance tend to focus on two key factors that contribute to the process of desistance: one is external, social (relational or role-related) and structural (institutional or opportunity-related); whereas the other is internal, psychological (cognitive and affective) and agentic (or volitional). The former is the key emphasis in Sampson and Laub's (1993) life–course theory of age-graded informal social control, which explains post-adolescent desistance as a result of structural turning points associated with new social control institutions during a transition to young adulthood. Their research empirically demonstrates how a “good” marriage, a “quality” job, and service in the military function as turning points of institutional control, decreasing crime in adulthood (Sampson & Laub, 1993, 1996; see also Uggen, 2000). While their later works recognize internal as well as external factors (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 2005), the primary focus of their theory remains on structural factors and what they call “desistance by default,” which is “not necessarily a conscious or deliberate process” on the part of a desisting individual (Laub & Sampson, 2003:278).

However, other theorists tend to emphasize the “conscious or deliberate process” of human agency in explaining desistance, at least, as much as they emphasize institutional sources or structural opportunities for change. For example, while acknowledging the necessity of environmental catalysts for change or turning points, which they call “hooks for change,” Giordano *et al.* (2002) posit that four types of interrelated “cognitive transformations” are also needed for desistance. They include: (1) one's openness to change (a general cognitive readiness for change); (2) one's exposure to a particular hook (or set of hooks) for change and its perceived meaning or importance for the individual; (3) one's construction of a conventional “replacement self” or new identity; and (4) one's perception of crime and deviance to be negative, unviable, or even personally irrelevant.

In their theory, unlike Laub and Sampson (2003), Giordano *et al.* emphasize the importance of cognitions and human agency for any intentional, sustained behavioral change to take place. But, at the same time, their symbolic interactionist theory stresses that an individual's cognitive shifts and agentic moves for desistance are to be explained in the context of an actor's immediate social world but also the structural and cultural forces that influence the chance of desistance. One's identity is "social" in that it is a result of symbolic interaction between an individual and a society, whether other people in an immediate environment or a distant context of structure and culture.

One of the dimensions of social identity is cognitive, which is the focus of Giordano *et al.*'s (2002) theory of identity transformation. Also important is affective dimension, for which Giordano *et al.* (2007) proposed to add the concept of "emotional self" based on a neo-Meadian view on the interconnectedness of human cognitions and emotions: that is, emotions as well as cognitions emerge in a symbolic interactionist process of role taking and criminal desistance. While acknowledging the importance of social control theory's (e.g. Laub & Sampson, 2003) transition events as catalysts that provide an impetus for change, Giordano *et al.* argue that those events are not sufficient for sustained behavioral change that requires a basic motivation for such change, which control theory assumes to be constant or irrelevant. Just as Agnew (2006) focused on negative emotions to explain deviant motivation, Giordano *et al.* posit that a basic motivation for change involves not only cognitive but also "emotional transformations" for the actor's new emotional identities with "an increased ability to regulate or manage the emotions in socially acceptable ways" (p. 1610, *emphasis in original*), which in turn increase the likelihood of desistance by connecting negative (e.g. shame and embarrassment) rather than positive (e.g. thrills and excitement) emotions to crime.

Besides control and symbolic interactionist perspectives, rational choice has a theoretical implication for desistance (Farrall & Bowling, 1999; Shover & Thompson, 1992). Most recently, Paternoster and Bushway (2009:1105, *emphasis in original*) proposed an identity theory of desistance based on "a distinction between . . . one's current or working identity and . . . the kind of person that one wishes to be – and, more importantly, not be ["feared self"] – in the future: one's *possible self*." The working identity of an offender, they posit, is fine as long as it brings more benefits than costs, but becomes gradually problematic as one increasingly attributes one's (1) perceived failures and dissatisfactions in the present life; and (2) expected future failures and "feared self" to the current identity. This "crystallization of discontent" provides an individual with the initial motivation to break from crime and engage in a deliberate act of intentional self-change, which begins with a new, anti-criminal identity along with the "feared self." This is then followed by new relationships with conventional institutions and others. It is worth noting that Paternoster and Bushway recognize both cognitive (i.e. attributing the expected future to the present) and emotional (i.e. fear) motivations for desistance, like Giordano *et al.* (2007).

In sum, existing theories tend to emphasize the importance of human agency as well as structural catalysts (e.g. turning points) in explaining desistance. From a symbolic interactionist point of view, an individual-society interplay occurs as human actors, being "knowledgeable agents" (Farrall & Bowling, 1999:255) who not only understand but also define the situations and consequences of their actions (Thomas & Thomas, 1928), chose particular courses of action. Thus, when an offender comes to define situations of life not only as dissatisfying but also unbearable, he or she may be motivated to make an agentic move to cope with the crisis. While the coping could be deviant and self-destructive, it is likely to be instrumental for positive change, including desistance from crime, when one encounters a turning point or is exposed to a hook for change. According to Giordano *et al.* (2002, 2007) and Paternoster and Bushway (2009), the constructive coping begins with identity transformation that involves cognitive and

affective changes that motivate one to move from a current or "old" self to a new, "possible" or "replacement self."

### Prior research on religion and desistance

As theories of desistance were being introduced, researchers examined whether religion contributes to desistance among offenders, including those in prison during incarceration and after release. Cross-sectional associations between various measures of offenders' religious involvement (e.g. service attendance, Bible study, and faith-based program) and their behaviors inside and outside of prison (e.g. prison misconduct and recidivism) clearly have implications for research on desistance (Clear & Sumter, 2002; O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002). However, a proper study of desistance as a developmental process (Bushway *et al.*, 2001) requires longitudinal research, and in particular panel research, which we focus on below.

#### *Research on desistance from crime*

Benda and his associates (2003) conducted a five-year follow-up study of boot camp graduates to explore factors that explain different types of recidivism: non-recidivism (i.e. desistance), felony recidivism, technical parole violation, and drug parole violation. Results from their discriminant analysis show that a six-item index of religiosity (church attendance, private prayer, Bible study, financial contributions to religious organizations, talk about religion with others, and trying to convert someone to faith in God) was significantly associated with one of three discriminant functions: non-recidivism vs. recidivism and parole violation. That is, religiosity was found to be a positive discriminator between non-recidivism and any type of recidivism, whether felony reoffending or parole violation of either type, along with other discriminators, such as marriage, employment, number of children, education, age, and perception of desirable change while in boot camp. They attributed the positive role of religiosity in the desistance to religion that "offers a meaning and purpose for life, and a set of beliefs that explicitly denounce criminal behavior and strongly support informal bonding such as marriage, children, and employment" (p. 547).

Consistent with Benda *et al.*'s (2003) finding, Ullrich and Coid (2011) reported that religious involvement was a significant predictor of desistance from violent offenses based on their two-phase study that followed up a total of 1,396 prisoners in England and Wales over a period of 2–6.2 years (mean = 5.3 years) with 60.2 percent ( $n = 813$ ) being interviewed in the second phase. Logistic regression analysis of data from 800 participants (after removing 13 because of a follow-up period less than 2 years) show involvement in religious activities (including attendance of church/services) was likely to protect ex-prisoners from violent reoffending after release into the community.

Unlike the above studies based on a systematically selected, large sample, other researchers conducted qualitative interviews with a small sample of offenders to better understand the processes of desistance, which often evade observations when quantitative approaches are used. For example, Schroeder and Frana (2009:724) conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with a sample of 11 men living in a halfway house in a major metropolitan city in the Midwest. Their interviews revealed that religion helped offenders desist from crime by providing not only a sense of belonging (i.e. religious community) but also positive feelings (e.g. peace and love) so they might cope with negative emotions. Importantly, they identified a key theoretical implication of their findings, suggesting that desistance be stimulated by religion because they help offenders forge a new emotional self (Giordano *et al.*, 2007).

Other theories of desistance were applied to Hallett and McCoy's (2015) analysis of the life-history narratives from unstructured interviews with 25 "successful" ex-offenders in a large Florida city over a period of, on average, 8.7 years. While indicating the importance of social support and resources as essential for sustaining agentic moves away from offending, the ex-offenders attributed their criminal desistance to the concepts of "cognitive transformation" identified by Giordano *et al.* (2002) and Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) identity theory. Specifically, these narratives revealed how conversion to Christianity offered a "replacement self" (e.g. "born again" or "new men in Christ") and helped them avoid becoming their "feared selves" as a touchstone for behavioral change. However, unlike the redemption scripts of Maruna (2001), Hallett and McCoy found "desisters" to assume full responsibility for their criminal histories, rather than portraying themselves as victims of society and a product of "making good." Similarly, in their interviews with 23 male ex-prisoners in Hong Kong, Adorjan and Chui (2012) found the Christian religion to be a key motivating factor for their desistance from crime.

Unlike the above qualitative researchers, Giordano *et al.* (2008) conducted a longitudinal study based on a mixed-method approach, following up 127 serious adolescent offenders in Ohio over two time points (13 and 21 years after initial interviews). Their qualitative data showed that the offenders' perceived closeness to God was a "hook for change" (Giordano *et al.*, 2002) and their religious involvement (church attendance) offered them social networks of "prosocial capital," though their quantitative analysis failed to confirm significant effects of both measures of religion. They also found the offender's perceived closeness to God to be associated with positive emotions "*for emotion-coping*" (Schroeder & Frana, 2009: 117) and thus a new, positive "emotional self" motivated offenders to desist from crime (Giordano *et al.*, 2007).

### *Research on desistance from substance use*

To date, several studies on religion and desistance from substance use have been published. A first of such was conducted by Chu (2007) based on panel data from Waves 5–7 of the National Youth Survey, when respondents were 21–27 years old (mean = 23.87). Applying multinomial logistic regression to analyze the data, she found religious behavior (frequency of service attendance), though not religious salience (perceived importance of religion in life), to be positively associated with desistance, specifically, termination of marijuana and other illicit drug use. The religiosity–desistance association was also found to be partly mediated by conventional values.

Ulmer and his associates (2012) replicated Chu's study by using other measures of religiosity besides service attendance (religious denomination, born-again Christian, and religious literalism) to test mediation of other variables than conventional values (parental attachment, school attachment, delinquent peers, negative emotions, and self-control), while controlling for parental religiosity. Multinomial logistic regression results from analyzing Waves 1–3 data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) showed adolescents who believed in a literal interpretation of religious scriptures, though not the other measure of religious conservatism (born-again Christian), are more likely to desist than persist once they initiate marijuana use. This relationship between religious literalism and desistance was also mediated by all but one (negative emotions) intervening variables. However, unlike Chu (2007), Ulmer *et al.* failed to find significant effects of religious service attendance on desistance from marijuana use perhaps because they examined adolescent religious behavior, instead of adult religiosity as Chu had.

This speculation seems to be confirmed by another study based on national survey data, which examined religious influence on desistance from binge drinking in "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2005). Jang (2013a) applied three regression methods to analyze the five-wave

panel data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988: ordinary least squares, logistic, and zero-inflated negative binomial regressions. Controlling for binge drinking in adolescence and its alternative predictors (attachment to parents, attachment to school, deviant attitudes, deviant peer association, and negative life events), he found not only at-least-once-a-week participation in religious activities at ages 19–22 (mean = 20.4) and 25–28 (mean = 26.4) but also an increase in religious participation between the two time points to have significant effects on desistance, including termination, from binge drinking at ages 25–28.

### Summary

While previous studies tend to report findings consistent with anticipated, positive association between religion and desistance, they are limited not only in number but also theoretical and methodological approaches. First, methodologically, besides the generalizability problem due to qualitative researchers' study of non-random, small sample of subjects without control groups for comparison purposes (Adorjan & Chui, 2012; Giordano *et al.*, 2008; Hallett & McCoy, 2015; Schroeder & Frana, 2009); quantitative researchers have not applied methods suitable to examine the dynamic process of desistance, like group-based trajectory and latent curve modeling (Bollen & Curran, 2006; Nagin, 2005). Theoretically, while previous studies empirically demonstrated non-spuriousness of the religion–desistance relationship (Benda *et al.*, 2003; Jang, 2013a; Ullrich & Coid, 2011) or criminological predictors mediating the relationship (Chu, 2007; Ulmer *et al.*, 2012); most of them failed to examine not only existing theories of desistance but also why, as well as how, religion would help explain desistance. This is what we intend to address in the remainder of the chapter, but a brief overview of criminology of religion is in order as a broader context.

### Criminology of religion: a paradigm shift

Scholarly discussion and empirical study of the relationship between religion and crime goes back to the beginning of criminology (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Jang, 2013b; Lombroso, 2006 [1876]). Although religion has rarely been incorporated into major theories of crime and criminological research (Cullen, 2010), the influence of religion on crime has been increasingly studied particularly since the publication of Hirschi and Stark's (1969) study, "Hellfire and Delinquency." After more than four decades of subsequent research, including systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Baier & Wright, 2001; Chitwood *et al.*, 2008; Johnson *et al.*, 2000; Johnson & Jang, 2010; Kelly *et al.*, 2015; Koenig *et al.*, 2012; Regnerus, 2003; Yeung *et al.*, 2009; Yonker *et al.*, 2012), the debate over whether the religion–crime relationship is nothing but spurious has been settled. The influence of religion on crime is now well documented.

Thus, putting the debate behind, we should move beyond not only the almost half-century-old "hellfire" hypothesis which has been studied for decades, to pursue a new research agenda on criminology of religion, as Johnson and Jang (2010) argue. For example, numerous researchers have examined whether "secular" or non-religious predictors of crime explain the religion–crime relationship, and found the predictors—drawn from all major theories, including deterrence, social bonding, self-control, social learning, and general strain theories—to mediate the relationship (Benda & Corwyn, 2001; Burkett & Ward, 1993; Cochran & Akers, 1989; Desmond *et al.*, 2009; Desmond *et al.*, 2011; Evans *et al.*, 1995; Evans *et al.*, 1996; Jang & Johnson, 2011; Jang & Franzen, 2013; Johnson *et al.*, 2001; Li, 2011; Reisig *et al.*, 2012; Ulmer *et al.*, 2012). That is, religious involvement tends to decrease crime in part because it is likely to increase the levels of fear of punishment, social bonds, and self-control, while decreasing criminal learning

and strain-related negative emotions. The influence of religion on crime, however, is often found to remain significant after controlling for those variables.

To explain the remaining religious influence, Johnson and Jang (2010) suggest criminologists should explore uniquely religious factors, whose influence on crime may not be fully mediated by non-religious variables (Ulmer, 2010). For example, other things being equal, religious individuals are less likely to react to strain (e.g. death of child or loss of job) in a deviant manner than their non- or less religious counterparts (Jang & Johnson, 2003). This may be because they are more likely to engage in *religious* coping, looking for a stronger connection with God rather than wondering whether God had abandoned them (Pargament, 1997); in this case, the influence of religion is uniquely religious in that their non- or less religious peers are not or less likely to employ religious coping. Furthermore, they argue a paradigm shift is necessary in criminology, proposing that “criminologists look beyond biological, psychological, and social dimensions and seriously consider the religious or spiritual [i.e. existential] dimension” (p. 128) of offender, because

all human persons, no matter how well educated, how scientific, how knowledgeable, are, at bottom, *believers* . . . who must and do place [their] faith in beliefs that *cannot themselves be verified except by means established by the presumed beliefs themselves.*

*Smith, 2003:54, emphasis in original*

Put differently, whether we are religious or not, we all hold some metaphysical beliefs in “moral order” that helps constitute, direct, or make our lives significant, clarifying “what is right and wrong, good and bad, and worthy and unworthy, just and unjust” (Smith, 2003:8). In this sense, though not all of us are religious, we are all spiritual beings in that we are born with an inclination to seek self-transcendent, existential meaning in life (Frankl, 1984 [1946]). To the extent that we are spiritual or existential as well as biological, psychological, and social beings (O’Connor & Perreyclear, 2002), criminology is incomplete in explaining crime and criminality because it is based mostly on naturalistic assumptions about human beings (Bernard *et al.*, 2010; Cullen, 2010).

### **Beyond cognitive and emotional identity transformation**

While both Giordano *et al.* (2002, 2007) and Paternoster and Bushway (2009) focus on the cognitive and emotional aspects of self, Farrall (2005) emphasizes an existential dimension of self: a meaningful self. We agree with Farrall (2005) that existentialism “has received little attention in criminology . . . , [while it] captures the ‘internal’ changes in self-identity and the processes which foster such changes” (p. 368). So, drawing from existential and positive psychology (Frankl, 1984 [1946]; Lopez & Snyder, 2009) and existential sociology (Douglas & Johnson, 1977), we argue offenders are spiritual beings in that they may search for a new, meaningful identity in response to an existential crisis (e.g. “hitting rock bottom”) or epiphany after a turning point—whether an event (e.g. entering into a “good” marriage or becoming a parent) or not (e.g. inner emptiness or “crystallization of discontent”)—that generates intense feelings of ontological insecurity. Their search is likely to motivate them to work toward a future self (i.e. a “replacement self” or “possible self”) and eventually desist from crime.

Thus, the offender’s search for a meaningful self is likely to be a prerequisite for cognitive and emotional identity transformation (Giordano *et al.*, 2002, 2007) and deliberate act of intentional self-change (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) rather than their consequence. The spiritual (not religious) search for a new existentially meaningful self involves cognition (e.g. beliefs about

right and wrong) and emotions (guilt and shame at one's past actions and deeds), so spiritual or existential identity transformation is related to, though conceptually distinct from, its cognitive and emotional counterparts. The former is antecedent to the latter, not *vice versa*. What is being searched for is to be found in a system of meaning that transcends the self, whether created afresh or discovered among extant meaning systems, including religion. For this reason, spiritual identity transformation is *not* synonymous with religious conversion, though it may involve such change among desisting offenders (Giordano *et al.*, 2008).

For example, in their analysis of religious conversion as shame management among prisoners, Maruna *et al.* (2006) emphasize the importance of creating a new social identity to replace the label of prisoner. Besides helping construct a "replacement self" (Giordano *et al.*, 2002), a prisoner's "conversion narrative" (1) imbues his or her life in prison with purpose and meaning; (2) empowers the largely powerless by turning him or her into an agent of God; (3) provides the condemned with a language and framework for forgiveness; and, finally, (4) gives the prisoner hope by allowing a sense of control over an unknown future. A prisoner's religious conversion involves both cognitive and emotional change as the theories of desistance suggest. However, Maruna *et al.*'s (2006) analysis goes further by discussing "larger-than-life" issues individual prisoners are likely to face as a result of imprisonment, and ultimately a "hitting bottom crisis." In such an identity crisis a prisoner is being forced to question who he or she really is and whether his or her worldview is efficacious as a meaning system.

As an offender encounters a situation whereby their current self-identity is being questioned or threatened with annihilation, he or she struggles with fundamental questions about existence, life, death, and meaning. In this process of existential struggle, the "divided self" (James, 2007 [1902])—"a contrast between what is and what might be me" (Maruna *et al.*, 2006:171) or between "one's current or working identity and . . . one's *possible self*" (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009:1105, *emphasis* in original)—looms large. As a result of this identity crisis (which is a strain), an offender experiences shame, depression, and self-hatred, and may engage in deviant coping (e.g. violence or suicide) as Agnew (2006) posits.

Such existential crisis, however, might also motivate the offender to search for answers about existence and its meaning in his or her life by adopting a new interpretative system that offers guidance, meaning, and forgiveness. For those who have religious upbringing or structural opportunity (e.g. a neighbor's invitation to a church revival meeting or a new faith-based program in prison), a new system of meaning may be found in religion as it enables an offender to adopt a new "living narrative" (Smith, 2003) or "conversion narrative" that offers new identity, new life goals or "calling," and a new hope for the future. Moreover, a "second chance" that religion offers through redemption may further motivate the offender to keep living a positive and purpose-driven life and with a desire to "go straight" and "give something back" to others and the community.

### Toward a theory of existential identity transformation

While existing theories and prior research help us understand how desistance takes place, they tend to be incomplete in explaining *why* it happens in the first place. In fact, this was a key criticism Giordano *et al.* (2007:1635, *emphasis* added) had of Laub and Sampson's (2003) desistance theory of social control: "Laub and Sampson's theorizing does not provide a full understanding of *why* it is that some individuals but not others are able to forge and/or maintain stable marital ties and take full advantage of available job opportunities." To address this issue, they proposed emotions to be incorporated into the theory of cognitive transformation (Giordano *et al.*, 2002) because an actor's affective state influences his or her ability to benefit from turning points.



We agree with Giordano *et al.* (2007:1637) that “the idea of openness to change and receptivity to various hooks for change needs to encompass emotional as well as cognitive dimensions of [an actor’s] world and self-views.” But what causes this openness to change and receptivity to hooks for change? Why else would an offender who is serving life or death sentence even want to change?

We propose that the answer resides in the offender’s existential dimension of identity, which has been alluded to but not fully theorized to explain desistance (Farrall, 2005): existential identity. This concept, we posit, helps explain why some offenders but not others become motivated to change the current and future direction of their lives. Existential identity is defined as an individual’s view of self with respect to the meaning and purpose of his or her own existence. This identity is essential not only to the individual’s self-view but also attitudes and behaviors because human “will to meaning”—striving to find meaning in life—is a primary motivating force in human life (Frankl, 1984 [1946]:121). The self-transcendent dimension of human nature has been emphasized in both existential sociology (Douglas & Johnson, 1977) and cultural sociology (Smith, 2003) as well as existential and positive psychology (Lopez & Snyder, 2009), but has not yet been applied to criminology.

Thus, we suggest that offenders be assumed to be not only social, cognitive, emotional, and physical beings but also existential or spiritual beings in the sense that they have an innate need to live meaningful lives and thus search for narratives that arrange their actions and events into organized wholes in a way that bestows meaning in actions and events. These narratives are all spiritual, though not necessarily religious, in that they transcend the offender’s existence and self, contextualizing their actions and experiences and thus conveying meaning of their lives. For example, a Christian metanarrative may help offenders define what is real and significant and answer who they are, where they came from, what they are doing in this world, and why. However, a grand story can also be non-religious, being based on other meaning systems than religion, like “capitalist prosperity” or “liberal progress” narratives (Smith, 2003) and humanism or “nature and cosmic spirituality” (O’Connor & Duncan, 2011).

We argue all humans are spiritual beings in the existential sense, but we are different in terms of spirituality, the extent of awareness of the existential need and pursuit of system of meaning to live accordingly (Jang, 2016). In other words, some individuals are more spiritual than others for various reasons, biological, psychological, and sociological. For example, individuals raised by spiritual parents who, whether they are religious or not, socialize their children to live a meaningful and purpose-driven life are more likely to, though not necessarily, become spiritual as they grow up rather than their peers who had less or non-spiritual parents. Even if some do not have such an upbringing, they may become spiritual as a result of a turning point, which could be negative (e.g. imprisonment) but also positive (e.g. having a first child). In other words, strain could become a turning point. Although strain is, by definition, negative (Agnew, 2006), but is potentially positive in a consequential sense when it triggers a series of changes that result in positive outcomes. Such strain is *ex post facto* “positive strain.”

A turning point, therefore, may cause an offender to experience an existential identity crisis in which he or she is confronted with the reality of having lived a meaningless life or one that lacks any sense of meaning (see Figure 6.1). Although the strain of identity crisis may result in deviant coping (Agnew, 2006), it may also lead him or her to seek and adopt a new system of meaning, one of which may be religion. The offender’s choice between the two courses of action will be made based upon conditioning factors, like spiritual upbringing or individual traits, and within individual and structural constraints (Agnew, 1995). If religion is chosen as a system of meaning, it may influence or alter the offender’s existential identity. This process of existential identity transformation is accompanied by the processes of cognitive and emotional

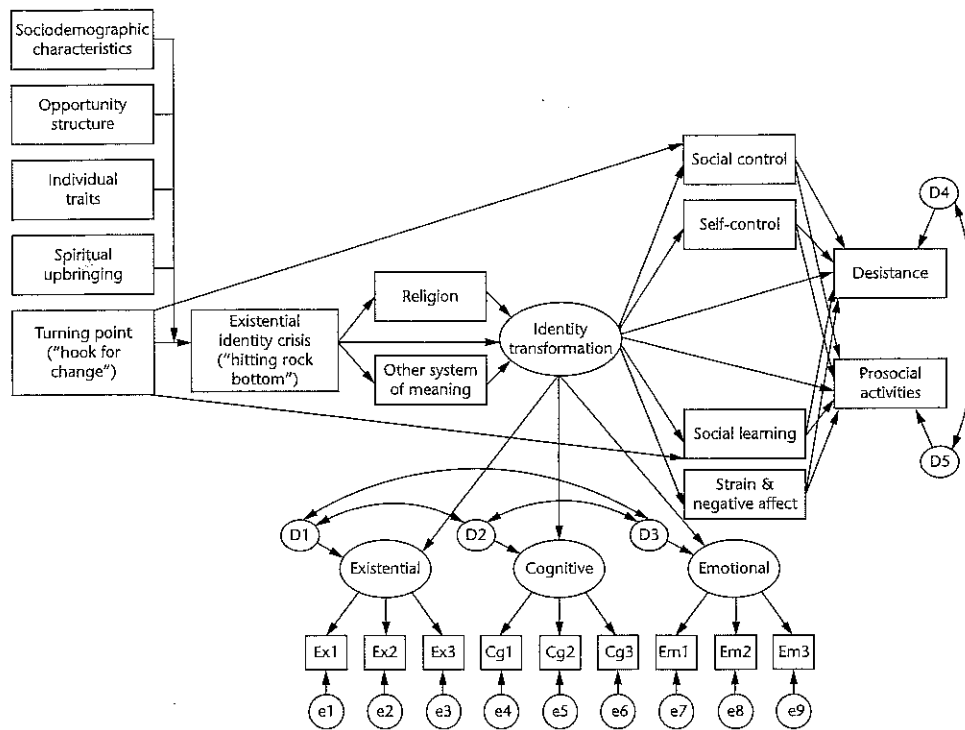


Figure 6.1 A schematic model of identity transformation and desistance

identity transformation as Figure 6.1 shows. Finally, the identity transformation may lead to the offender's desistance and prosocial behaviors (which further increase the probability of desistance) not only directly but also indirectly by increasing social control and self-control and decreasing criminal learning and deviant coping of strain and its resultant negative emotions.

Whether measured quantitatively or qualitatively, we propose the concept of existential identity be operationalized in terms of ultimate truth, meaning, and purpose in life. For example, we may ask, "How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree)":

- I believe in ultimate truth in life.
- It is useless to try to discover the purpose of my life.
- It is important to have a significant philosophy.
- I know my purpose in life.
- My purpose is part of a much larger plan.
- I do not believe there is any ultimate meaning in life.

### Conclusion

While religion has not been incorporated into major theories of desistance from crime, there has been an increasing interest in applying religion to the explanation of desistance not only for theoretical but also cost-benefit, and other practical reasons (e.g. Hallett *et al.*, 2016; O'Connor & Perreyclear, 2002). Previous studies tend to provide some evidence of religious involvement

being a potential contributor to desistance from crime and deviance. However, they are limited theoretically as well as methodologically, which needs to be first addressed via life-course research on religion and criminal desistance. As a first step toward the task, we propose a theory of existential identity transformation with the existential dimension of identity as a key source of motivation for an offender's agentic move away from criminal offending.

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