



University
of Glasgow

McNeill, F. (2012) *Counterblast: a Copernican correction for community sentences?* *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 51 (1). pp. 94-99.
ISSN 0265-5527

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/58982/>

Deposited on: 15th February 2012

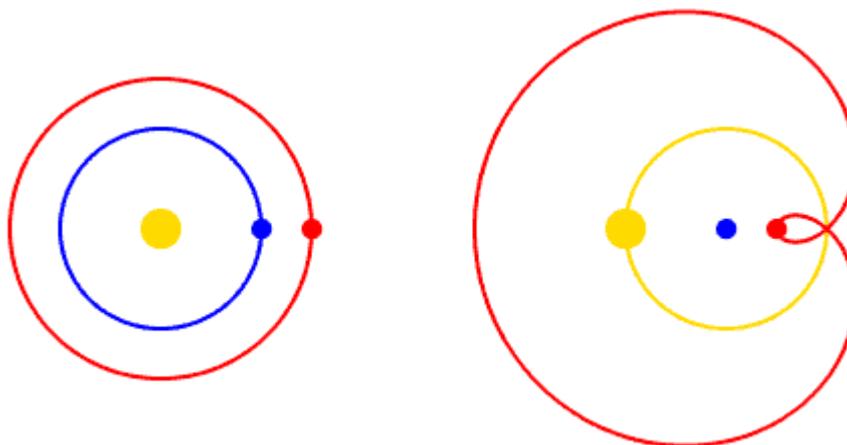
A Copernican Correction for Community Sentences?¹

Just before his death in 1543, the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus published his celebrated book, *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres). Wikipedia says that Copernicus's book:

'...is often regarded as the starting point of modern astronomy and the defining epiphany that began the scientific revolution. His heliocentric model, with the Sun at the center of the universe, demonstrated that the observed motions of celestial objects can be explained without putting Earth at rest in the center of the universe. His work stimulated further scientific investigations, becoming a landmark in the history of science that is often referred to as the Copernican Revolution.'

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicolaus_Copernicus, accessed 31st May, 2011).

The diagram below (also borrowed from Wikipedia) captures very elegantly the key differences between Copernicus's heliocentric and Ptolemy's geocentric models of the solar system; here, the Earth is blue, the Sun is yellow and Mars is red. You'll notice that in order for the Ptolemaic view (on the right hand side of the diagram) to work, the orbit of Mars needs to include an extra loop, to account for Mars appearing to change direction as it crosses the night sky and (supposedly) orbits earth.



Increasingly, I've been wondering whether it is time for a similar sort of Copernican revolution for the field of offender rehabilitation. Since the revival of academic and policy interest in rehabilitation in the 1980s we have been preoccupied with one central and important question: 'What Works?'. The story

¹ An earlier and somewhat different version of this speech was delivered at the annual conference on NOTA Scotland in Polmont on 5th May 2011, and will be published in due course in NOTA Scotland's Newsletter.

of the attempts to answer and address that question and to re-design rehabilitation programmes in the light of our discoveries is, by now, a very familiar one. A number of influential meta-analyses (i.e. studies that use statistical techniques to aggregate the findings from smaller scale experimental programmes and interventions) have produced powerful evidence that programmes which conform to certain principles can reduce recidivism. However, attempts to engineer these principles into probation practice in some jurisdictions (most notably England and Wales) have met with more limited success. Those evaluating the large-scale innovations tend to point to implementation problems, though some critics have questioned the underlying principles on which the reforms were based.

But what if in some senses, the question was wrong? Or at least, what if the focus that it implied on interventions and how best to design them was only one part of the story of developing research-minded policy and practice? More recently, a different form of evidence – and a different form of research/practice engagement has emerged. In essence, ‘desistance research’ begins from the observation that almost all people who have developed persistent offending careers nonetheless eventually desist from crime. Desistance studies therefore aim to examine the social and personal processes by which they achieve desistance; this evidence seeks to explain not why people *get into crime*, but how they *get out* of it, and what can be done to assist them in this process. Although this evidence does not point to any one programme or practice methodology, its implications for practice are nonetheless far-reaching.

There are three main perspectives in desistance research which focus respectively on age and maturation, on life transitions and the social bonds associated with them, and on narrative changes in personal and social identity. Increasingly, desistance theorists have drawn these strands together, arguing that the process of desistance is produced in the *interplay* between these three sets of factors. Because early desistance research was mainly concerned with understanding ‘natural’ or spontaneous processes of development and change, relatively little attention has been paid until recently at how one might ‘force the plant’; that is, how criminal justice services might accelerate the ‘natural’ process of growing out of crime. However, those studies that have been done in the last twenty or thirty years tend to stress six central themes (for more detail see McNeill and Weaver, 2010):

1. Since desistance is an inherently individualised and subjective process, approaches to supervision must accommodate and exploit issues of identity and diversity. There are therefore important limitations for one-size-fits-all approaches to rehabilitation.
2. The development and maintenance not just of motivation but also of hope becomes a key task for probation staff.
3. Desistance can only be understood within the context of human relationships; not just relationships between workers and those they

- supervise (though these matter a great deal) but also between probationers and those who matter to them.
4. Although we tend to focus on probationers' risk factors and needs, they also have strengths and resources that they can use to overcome obstacles to desistance – both personal strengths and resources and strengths and resources in their social networks. Supervision needs to support and develop these capacities.
 5. Since desistance is about discovering agency, interventions need to encourage and respect self-determination; this means working with people not on them.
 6. Interventions based only on human capital (or developing people's capacities and skills) will not be enough. Probation needs to work on social capital issues with communities and offenders.

More recently, it has been suggested that even desistance itself is not the ultimate objective. People do not simply desist, they desist *into* something. Desistance is perhaps best understood as part of the individual's ongoing journey towards successful integration within society – towards living good lives as good citizens (Maruna, 2001; Ward and Maruna, 2007). Of course, the history of moral and political philosophy teaches us that it is far from simple to negotiate and understand what the good life is and what the good citizen does.

Over the course of the last decade or so, I've been trying to engage with policy and practice colleagues in trying to work out exactly what difference this body of evidence should make. I have come across four main reactions to desistance research that I have come across – and I have some sympathy with all of them.

- **Vindication:** “Good old fashioned social work has been vindicated at last - we always said relationships, families and social contexts were what mattered”

The vindicated are on to something – it has taken research a while to catch up with some aspects of ‘practice wisdom’ and to help to identify why and how probation came so close to throwing the baby (effective relationships that attended sensitively to personal and social problems) out with the bathwater (‘unstructured counselling’, whatever that was). But if what works has taught us anything, it is that relational skills and good intentions are not enough, even if they are vital components of supporting change.

- **Vexation:** “Oh, sh*t, we're going to have to redesign all our systems, processes and practices again -- where do we buy the desistance programme?”

The vexed are, frankly, right to be vexed; they keep investing in the latest innovation only for some smart Alec to show up saying their methods are out-moded and they need a new correctional toy (which usually the very same smart Alec happens to be marketing). But they won't be able to buy the desistance

A later version of this draft was subsequently published as: [McNeill, F. \(2012\) Counterblast: a Copernican correction for community sentences? *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 51 \(1\), pp. 94-99. ISSN 0265-5527 \(doi:\[10.1111/j.1468-2311.2011.00699.x\]\(#\)\)](#)

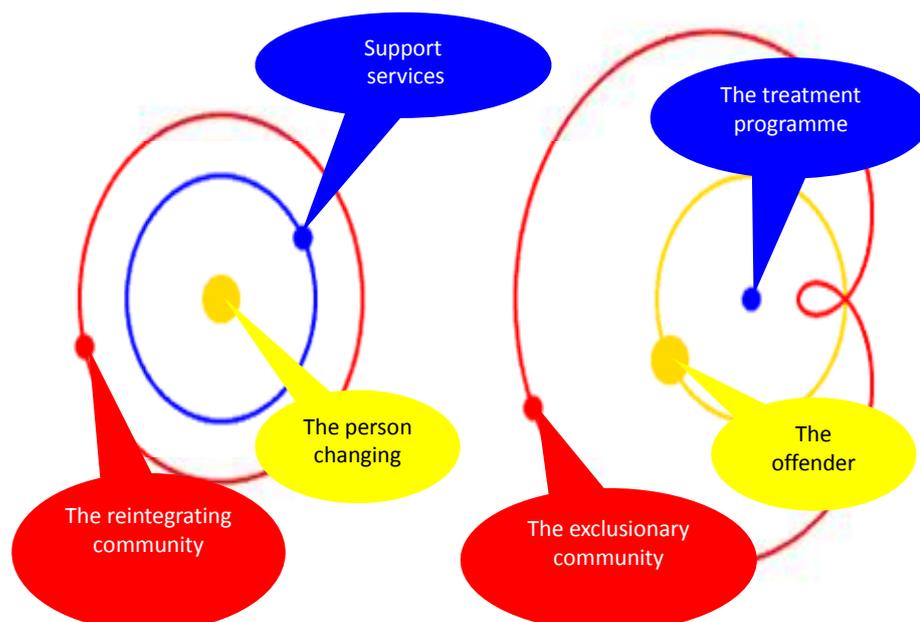
programme (at least not from any reputable desistance scholar), since the evidence about desistance is that it is highly individualised and subjective and so requires highly adapted forms of support.

- **Guilt:** “We thought we were part of the solution; turns out we’ve been part of the problem. How do we change that?”

I sympathise with the guilty -- I am, after all, one of them: the evidence that the wrong kinds of intervention (even well-meaning ones) can prolong criminal careers is becoming more and more compelling. But guilt isn’t always the most productive of emotions.

- **Reconfiguration:** “Change actually belongs to ex-offenders and reintegration is about communities so how do we place them at the centre of what we do, as opposed to putting ourselves and our interventions at the centre?”

Reconfiguration, I think, is the reaction that offers the best prospects of progressive development of community sentences – and it is reconfiguration that I most associate with Copernicus. It may be an exaggeration to say that offender rehabilitation requires a Copernican Revolution – after all the most effective (‘what works?’ based) interventions are by definition those that support desistance – but perhaps we can speak of a ‘Copernican Correction’. The key dimensions of this correction are outlined in a revised version of the diagram we started with above:



A later version of this draft was subsequently published as: [McNeill, F.](#) (2012) *Counterblast: a Copernican correction for community sentences?* [The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice](#), 51 (1). pp. 94-99. ISSN 0265-5527 (doi:[10.1111/j.1468-2311.2011.00699.x](#))

The 'old' treatment-centric worldview is represented on the right; the offender revolves around the programme, and the exclusionary community lurks somewhere in the background, occasionally interfering with the offender as his or her life revolves around the programme.

A desistance-based perspective is represented on the left. Here, we think first about the process that the person doing the changing is experiencing; what it means for them and to them; how its personal social and cultural contexts impel or impede it. The support services revolve around the individual, but they also look outward at the community, and ask how the relationships between individuals and communities can be rebuilt so that desistance and reintegration can be achieved. In other words, a desistance perspective drives us to ask what reintegration (or integration) in communities actually means and what might permit and obstruct it practically, psychologically, politically.

These are not the only questions that matter, but they are questions that matter, in their own way, as much as that more familiar refrain, 'what works?'. Perhaps most importantly, these are questions that neither researchers nor practitioners (nor researchers and practitioners together) can answer; rather, they are questions that researchers and practitioners must examine in genuine partnership with the people doing the changing and the communities hosting or hampering it.

All of this may not be as revolutionary as placing the sun at the centre of the solar system, but in its own way it is as unsettling as the realisations that the apparently solid ground on which we are standing is actually moving and that we are not at the centre of the known universe. Rather, we are all spinning through space, hanging somehow to the surface of a tiny planet, always on a journey of our own, and always dependent on each other to find some way to travel together. That's basically what community sentences need to be about – not 'correcting offenders' so that we can reinsert them into 'solid society', but rather supporting service users and communities in working out how to travel together towards better lives.

Fergus McNeill is Professor of Criminology and Social Work at the University of Glasgow. Some of the arguments summarised above are discussed at more length in his latest book, co-edited with Peter Raynor and Chris Trotter, *'Offender Supervision: New Directions in Theory, Research and Practice'*, published by Willan/Routledge: (<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9781843929352/>).

References:

A later version of this draft was subsequently published as: [McNeill, F.](#) (2012) *Counterblast: a Copernican correction for community sentences?* [The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice](#), 51 (1), pp. 94-99. ISSN 0265-5527 (doi:[10.1111/j.1468-2311.2011.00699.x](#))

Maruna, S. (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives*. Washington: APA.

McNeill, F. and Weaver, B. (2010) *Changing Lives? Desistance Research and Offender Management*. Glasgow: Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (available at: <http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/50116/>).

Ward, T. and Maruna, S. (2007) *Rehabilitation: Beyond the Risk Paradigm*. London: Routledge.