Rethinking social capital in the desistance process: The ‘Artful Dodger’ complex

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Abstract
Social capital has become a core component of our understanding of desistance in recent years. Some of this work, however, seems to present social capital as inherently positive, suggesting that increasing stocks in social capital is fundamental to the desistance process. Knowledge surrounding exactly how social capital is utilized within the desistance process, with the exception of acquiring social capital as a social good, remains underexplored. Through an analysis of the desistance narratives of young adult men serving community orders under the supervision of the probation service in England and Wales, this article argues that, instead of being considered to be inherently good, social capital is perhaps better thought of as value neutral, consisting of both positive and negative aspects (some of which occur simultaneously). Desistance, then, is not simply about obtaining social capital (because many people with convictions possess stocks of social capital that supported their offending); rather it is about reorienting the type of capital available to them at any given time, from relationships that imbue ‘anti-social capital’ to those that imbue ‘pro-social capital’. This distinction has significant theoretical and policy interventions, arguing that it is pro-social capital that the literature makes reference to in terms of supporting desistance efforts. The article concludes by offering some tentative suggestions for future research, along with ways in which this distinction can further support how we operationalize desistance within criminal justice policy and practice.

Keywords
Desistance, social capital, social relations, criminal justice

Introduction
Over the course of the last three decades, research surrounding the process of exiting a criminal career has received increasing attention. Studies investigating ‘desistance from crime’ or the underlying process which supports the maintenance of a crime free life after
a period of offending (Kay, 2016a) have found that, in order for desistance attempts to be successfully maintained, an interaction between individual agentic action and engagement with a range of structural factors is required (see Farrall and Bowling, 1999). Indeed, the majority of desistance research has highlighted the importance of engaging with structural factors such as familial relationships and paid employment in the desistance process (Farrall, 2011; Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 1993). More recently, studies have also begun to explore the situational and spatial dynamics of desistance, investigating how the process can be co-produced between formerly offending social groups (Weaver, 2016), along with the ways in which desistance attempts are mediated through an interaction with time and space (see Farrall et al., 2014; Flynn, 2010; Sagev, 2019).

In this article, I attempt to add to this developing body of literature surrounding desistance from crime by challenging the current consensus on the role of social capital within the desistance process. It has been argued that improving stocks of ‘social capital’ is an ‘essential’ or ‘crucial’ part of the desistance process (King, 2014). Although fundamentally this may be the case, the way in which such arguments are presented suggests two particular assumptions. First, suggesting that boosting stocks of social capital can promote desistance seems to indicate an assumption that social capital is inherently positive. Second, the idea of ‘strengthening’ or ‘boosting’ low levels of social capital assumes that those who are attempting to desist are lacking in such capital. Neither of these assumptions, I would argue, is necessarily accurate. Instead, the research demonstrates that people with convictions may well have considerable stocks of social capital, but this capital is anti-social rather than pro-social (Hucklesby, 2008). Therefore, in order for desistance processes to be successfully maintained, individuals may not necessarily have to simply acquire capital, but rather need to reorient their avenues for capital acquisition and its expenditure. This article extends this argument by suggesting that it may be better for desistance scholars to take influence from the wider literature, which recognizes that the concept of social capital is fundamentally neutral – it is neither inherently positive nor inherently negative (Beckett-Wilson, 2014; Cloud and Granfield, 2008). As such, it has the potential to propel an individual towards both desistance and offending. Desistance, then, is not simply the process of accumulating social capital; rather, it is the process of reorienting the ways in which such capital is acquired and subsequently utilized. Such a position alters the way in which we operationalize desistance, and it also impacts upon the ways in which desistance efforts can be supported in policy and practice.

Social capital and desistance

As a concept originating from mainstream economics, social capital refers to ‘the productive value of social relations’ (Scriven and Smith, 2013: 8). In earlier work, Coleman (1990) identified three main forms of capital: human, physical and social. Human capital relates to the skills and competencies that an individual possesses. Physical capital refers to the physical equipment that is required in order to undertake certain tasks or produce certain outcomes. Social capital, however, is not as straightforward or quantifiable:

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they
facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain aims that in its absence would not be possible. (Coleman, 1988: 98)

As such, the very nature of social capital means that it can be different things at different times. The key idea here relates to the fact that social capital, like both human and physical capital, is a resource that can be used by individuals to achieve certain goals. The difference arises from the fact that social capital is perhaps more relational in its existence than the other two forms of capital. Hagan and McCarthy (1997: 229) argue that social capital ‘originates in socially structured relations between individuals [and that] these relations facilitate social action’. As the nature of these relations changes, so too does the strength and availability of the social capital such relations imbue.

Such an idea can be seen throughout the literature surrounding cessation maintenance more generally, not just in relation to desistance from crime. The field of recovery from problematic substance use, for instance, has been seen to adopt social identity models in order to understand the ways in which individuals actively move away from addiction. The Social Identity Model of Cessation Maintenance (Frings and Albery, 2015) and the Social Identity Model of Recovery (Best et al., 2016) both suggest that the more time an individual spends actively interacting with a social group oriented around the same goals (that is, recovery), the more likely it is that this individual will continue to work towards this goal as opposed to falling back into habitual action and relapse. Such a position is in line with the conceptualization of social capital by Bourdieu (1986: 247), who argues that ‘the volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent . . . depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize [sic.] and the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected’.

In relation to desistance more specifically, there is a general consensus that improving stocks of social capital is more likely to result in the successful maintenance of desistance efforts, and that the strengthening of social capital should be a priority for criminal justice policy and practice (Farrall, 2011: 71). Given the prevalence of the structural factors of employment and familial relationships in the literature surrounding social capital (see Hagan and McCarthy, 1997), desistance research has tended to operationalize social capital in the form of stable employment and the development of strong familial and social networks. So much so that Farrall (2011: 61) referred to them as the ‘two of the most important ingredients of social capital for individuals in Western societies’. Indeed, the links between employment, family formation and social capital are ever-present throughout the available desistance literature (see Hagan, 1997; Mischkowitz, 1994; Savolainen, 2009). While this is the case, the mechanisms that underpin the relationship between social capital, desistance and recidivism remain underexplored (Farrall, 2011). This is something that I aim to address through a discussion of the ways in which social capital is both conceptualized and operationalized by individuals attempting to maintain desistance efforts.

Yet questions remain about the ways in which social capital is utilized within the currently available body of work surrounding desistance from crime. Bosker et al. (2013: 67) state that ‘research on desistance from crime has shown that improving the so called
social capital of offenders can be an essential part of an effective rehabilitation process’, and King (2014: 39) suggests that ‘enhancing social capital can be a crucial aspect of the desistance process, as it entails creating opportunities for change and makes it harder to renege on certain responsibilities’. Such positions would seem to suggest that social capital is inherently positive, that, by obtaining or enhancing levels of social capital, desistance attempts are more likely to be successful.

Returning somewhat briefly to the ways in which social capital is defined, for Boeck et al. (2008: 8) ‘social capital is seen as a set of relationships and interactions that have the potential to be transformative’; Solow (2000: 6) argues that ‘capital stands for a stock of produced or natural factors of production that can be expected to yield productive services for some time’. The important thing to note here is that neither in these definitions, nor in those provided earlier in this article, is social capital given a value, positive or negative. This is an important distinction to make, particularly in the field of desistance studies. If, as such definitions would suggest, social capital is neither inherently positive nor inherently negative, but simply exists within relations in order to ‘yield productive services’, it is just as likely that these productive services can be (to utilize terms coined by Hucklesby, 2008) ‘anti-social’ (or geared towards continued offending) as well as ‘pro-social’ (or geared towards continued desistance).

We therefore need to rethink the ways in which we conceptualize social capital within desistance research. Instead of accepting that social capital is important for the desistance process, we need to examine what type of social capital is important to the process, along with how capital acquisition is necessarily reoriented in order to continue the successful maintenance of desistance efforts. Beckett-Wilson (2014: 64), in her work on recovery from problematic substance use, argues that ‘all individuals possess social capital, but . . . desistance and offending are processes in which the balance of licit and illicit social capital differs’. She suggests that, instead of assuming that recovery and desistance are processes of acquiring capital, they should instead be considered as processes of increasing the value of licit social capital and the devaluation of illicit social capital. Although this work was undertaken with a specific focus (probation managed drug policy), there remains considerable applicability across the fields of desistance and rehabilitation. The following discussion uses this as its starting point, arguing that the distinction between pro-social and anti-social capital allows for a more nuanced understanding of the value and expenditure of social capital in the desistance process.

**Anti-social capital and desistance: The ‘Artful Dodger’ complex**

‘Make ’em your models’, tapping the fire-shovel on the hearth to add force to his words; ‘do everything they bid you, and take their advice in all matters – especially the Dodger’s my dear. He’ll be a great man himself, and will make you one too, if you take pattern by him. (Fagin, Oliver Twist)

Research that suggests that capital can be put to negative use is far from new. Streten, for instance, suggests that ‘there is of course, nothing surprising in the fact that social capital, like all other factors of production, can be put to bad uses as well as to good ones’
(2002: 11; see also Portes and Landolt, 1996). Just as Oliver Twist found in the novel by Charles Dickens, certain social relations (such as those developed alongside Fagin and the Artful Dodger) allow for the potential for anti-social behaviour, where others promote the development of pro-sociality. The more time and investment that is put into these social relations, the stronger their potential for positive (or negative) outcomes. Loughran et al. (2013) provide a detailed discussion of the link between human capital and ‘criminal capital’, which McCarthy and Hagan define as a type of capital that ‘can facilitate successful criminal activity’ (1995: 66). They suggest that the processes for the accumulation of criminal capital mirror those of human capital; along with the idea that, although human capital can be accrued through social capital, ‘criminal capital [. . .] is arguably more reliant on criminal social capital because of the informal social nature of most criminal enterprises’ (Loughran et al., 2013: 6, emphasis added). Lindegaard and Jacques (2014) provide an account of the potential for agency to lead to continued offending, suggesting that, ‘although agency may lead people away from offending, it can also do the opposite’ (2014: 96).

The notion that negative forms of social capital are inherent within particular social groupings has featured, albeit rarely, across a range of disciplines, from public health (Campbell and McClean, 2002), to disability studies (Bates and Davis, 2004) and international conflict (McDoom, 2013). Yet, although studies within the field of criminology (and desistance studies more specifically) have highlighted the idea that family ties, for example, can be criminogenic (Farrington et al., 1996), little work has framed this within the context of criminogenic social capital. Those studies that have so framed it tend to come from the field of drug use/policy. Beckett-Wilson (2014: 64), for instance, makes the distinction between ‘licit’ social capital (‘socially legitimate, promoting cohesion [or] law abiding’) and ‘illicit’ social capital (‘socially illegitimate, often self-serving or illegal’). Gosling (2018) differentiates between ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ recovery capital (see also Cloud and Granfield, 2008), and Wakeman (2015, 2016: 368) discusses the role of illicit social capital as part of the ‘moral economy of heroin’ or the ‘numerous small exchanges that facilitate users sharing heroin with each other so they do not experience withdrawal’. This body of work supports the argument that capital, in its most basic form, is value neutral and that research should instead be looking to explore the ways in which capital is obtained and utilized in order to achieve a particular end.

It would seem that, for the most part, desistance studies have fallen foul of applying a directional value upon social capital, arguing that increasing stocks of social capital is a positive endeavour that supports the continuation of desistance transitions. This is subsequently operationalized into suggestions that criminal justice policy and practice should focus on increasing stocks of social capital when working with people with convictions to assist the desistance process; this, although not necessarily wrong, is arguably misleading. Instead, as Streeten (2002: 11) suggests, ‘it is preferable to define [social capital] by its characteristics rather than its desirable (or undesirable) effects’. In relation to social capital, then, we should not simply refer to social capital as relations that have potential to yield productive services in a purely pro-social sense, but in an anti-social sense as well. In her study investigating the role of electronically monitored curfew orders in the desistance process, Hucklesby (2008: 56, discussed above) makes the distinction between ‘pro-social capital’ and ‘anti-social capital’. This is a useful distinction
because it opens up the possibility for further investigation of the ways in which different types of social capital can be utilized by individuals in different ways at different times. Although this study is of particular utility in relation to understanding the considerable heterogeneity of capital expenditure, the account provided is limited in relation to how stocks of anti-social capital can impact upon the desistance process. The argument that the use of electronically monitored curfews can decrease stocks of anti-social capital by reducing ‘links with situations, people, places and networks correlated with their offending’ (Hucklesby, 2008: 66) is useful, but arguably downplays the importance of agentic action in the process. Indeed, the value of the distinction between pro-social and anti-social capital, which has, until now, received little attention, lies in the fact that it requires us to change the way in which we view capital in the desistance process. Put simply, desistance may not be about acquiring social capital; rather, it may in fact be about reorienting the avenues through which such capital is acquired and, subsequently, spent.

To elucidate this notion, the remainder of the article will draw upon two case studies from a study that sought to understand the impact of structural change on the day-to-day realities of early desistance efforts for a group of young adult men on probation. I will demonstrate that, for each of the young men involved in this study, both pro-social and anti-social capital were available to them and had the potential to both support and hinder their efforts towards desistance. For the purposes of this article, I use the terms pro-social and anti-social capital in line with the work of Hucklesby (2008). Anti-social capital refers to social capital that is criminogenic and facilitative of (re)offending, whereas pro-social capital refers to social capital that is facilitative of continued desistance. I will argue that what is required is not simply the acquisition of social capital, because such capital (albeit predominantly criminogenic) already existed, but rather a reorientation of the types of capital being acquired, from anti-social to pro-social. In doing so, I seek to add to the available knowledge surrounding the role of social capital in desistance from crime. However, before the findings of this study can be discussed in relation to social capital it is first important to highlight the research methodology adopted for the work.

Methodology

The 20 young men who were involved in the study were all sentenced to an Intensive Community Order (ICO) in a large city in England. The ICO offers community supervision to young men aged 18–25 who have committed an offence that could receive a custodial sentence of 12 months or less. The order requires an intensive level of supervision (usually two supervisory meetings a week), along with undertaking a range of requirements (totalling 30 hours a week) tailored to the individual needs of the individual (see Clark et al., 2012, for a detailed evaluation of the ICO scheme). The research consisted of two narrative interviews with each of the 20 participants spaced roughly six–eight months apart. These interviews were supplemented with 10 semi-structured interviews with probation staff, including probation officers, probation service officers and administrative staff, and a 12-month period of observation within the probation office itself.

All of the convicted participants in the study were aged between 18–25, because this was exclusively the age range adopted by the ICO office within which the fieldwork was
taking place, and all had a minimum of the duration of the fieldwork left on their community order. Desistance in the research was measured through participants self-reporting no involvement in offending since the commencement of their order. Although concerns about the validity of self-reporting in this way have been raised in the available literature (see King, 2013), because the main focus of the study concerned the early desistance transitions of young adult men (which, as the literature suggests, is arguably the point at which such transitions are at their most frenetic), relapses into offending were not grounds for expulsion from the study. Rather, such relapses were considered sources of further exploration.

Access to the field was negotiated with the probation trust in which the fieldwork was due to take place. After several meetings with senior management within both the probation trust and the specific ICO office, I attended a series of short meetings with the ICO team before the fieldwork commenced in order to introduce them to the project, its aims and objectives. I spent the first two weeks of the observation period in reception, getting to know my way around, but also getting to know the young men who were being supervised in the office. After this two-week period, probationer participants started to be recruited for the study. This was done both informally, with me asking some of the probationers I had developed a rapport with over the previous two weeks if they would be involved in the research, and more formally through recommendation by their probation officer, who had been briefed on the aims, objectives and inclusion criteria of the study. This process was repeated until 20 participants had been recruited for the study (for a more detailed account of the recruitment process, see Kay, 2016b).

The majority of the young men in the sample had previous experience of both custodial and community sentences. The average age of first conviction was 13 years, with almost half of the sample (45 percent) serving an ICO for an acquisitive offence such as burglary or theft from/of a motor vehicle. Drug offences were the second most common offence type (15 percent of the sample). The mean number of convictions for the sample was 18, with a median of 3. The average age of the sample at the time of the first interview was 21. Of the sample, 60 percent (12) noted that they had not completed any form of formal education, and, of those who had, only two noted having any form of qualification (GCSE or NVQ) at the start of their ICO. During the first interview, 60 percent (12) of the sample also noted that they lacked a stable relationship with family, being either estranged or having an antagonistic relationship.

The boundaries of this study need to be acknowledged in order to contextualize the findings. First, the sample was taken from a specific form of community order and, as such, may not be representative of all of those undertaking community orders outside of the ICO template. Respondents were also complying with their probation orders, as indicated by their availability to participate. Those who did not regularly frequent the ICO office, had they been available to the study, might have yielded different results. And, finally, the study was of an ICO office catering only for males aged 18–25. Different ages and genders are therefore not included. Because the sample was taken from an ICO office that catered only for young adult males aged 18–25, all other people with convictions who did not identify as male or who were outside of the 18–25 age category were not available for involvement in the study.
Jason’s story

The narrative provided by Jason is perhaps most indicative of the difficulties experienced by probationers in the sample in relation to the role of capital acquisition in transition. Jason was 24 at the time of the first interview but the offence for which he was serving his ICO was his 25th conviction; he had amassed 10 convictions under the age of 18 and another 15 over the age of 18, making him one of the most frequently convicted members of the sample. He demonstrated both pro-social and anti-social capital throughout the narratives provided in both interviews, along with a changing interaction with social structures in order to successfully stay out of trouble.

As with most of the young men in the sample, Jason suggested that the majority of his convictions were for offences he committed with other members of his immediate social network:

[It was] petty stuff mate, petty stuff really, it is just the people I was with. It weren’t even really like I was going, like if I was on my own, I wouldn’t have gone and done it, it just, you roll with everyone and they say let’s do it and you just, do it like.

Jason demonstrated a considerable stock of anti-social capital, which could be seen as a contributory factor in his offending. He described being part of a local gang with whom he undertook the majority of his offending. Although his involvement with gangs was presented unfavourably throughout his account, the stock of anti-social capital that supported his offending was still evident throughout:

I don’t know it was just, the people I was chilling with, hanging around with. I was involved with gangs and all stupid stuff, so all that stuff came along with it, committing crime and that. When I was involved in gangs and that mate, if you asked me how many friends I had I would say hundreds, you know what I am saying? If you are involved in that, obviously you are committing crime to make money, that is the only way to make money. It is not good mate but, like, at the time you know when you are living that life you think it is alright. But once you move away from it yeah you see like; I think back I was an idiot, you know what I’m saying? I was dumb man.

The role of social capital (or, in this case, anti-social capital) in gang culture has been discussed elsewhere (Portes and Landolt, 1996; Streeten, 2002). For Jason, this continued involvement in gang culture perpetuated his offending:

I got a 12-month sentence once, so I was locked up for 7 months altogether. To be honest with you mate I was still involved in gangs then, I know I was a dickhead still then man. I was just fighting and all that, other gang members and shit you know what I am saying.

Upon leaving prison for the final time, however, he noted that he had come to realize that he could class none of his fellow gang members as ‘friends’ because none of them had contacted him while he was inside. For Jason, this resulted in a re-evaluation of the quality of the social networks he previously aspired to (along with the kinds of capital such networks provided) and the ‘kinds of people’ he wanted to associate with:
All of them are idiots, untrustworthy people man, they are not loyal. That is what sort of people they are that are involved, trust me man, that is what it is like, all them people are idiots. Not good man, not a group of friends you want anyway.

It was not until Jason decided to step away from involvement in gangs upon his release from prison that he began to see his past life for ‘what it was’ and began to move towards more positive individuals and networks, improving his levels of pro-social capital and his social mobility.

In order for Jason to successfully maintain his desistance transitions, his involvement with social structures (such as anti-social networks) and the nature of his capital acquisition needed to transition with him from those that were likely to result in offending, towards those that were not. He discussed the formation of pro-social relationships that provided a stock of pro-social capital, which allowed him to avoid falling back into old friendship groups:

I got with a girl and that yeah, and that’s that three year break, you get what I am saying? When I got out of jail I was with a girl and that for three years yeah. Sorted my life out, I like sort of, obviously when I was with her, I got something to be out here for, if I was to do something I would go to jail and lose my girlfriend.

It is important to note here that, although both pro-social and anti-social capital can atrophy through disuse (see Robertson, 1956; Streeten, 2002), this is a slow process. Thus, anti-social capital can still be re-activated in the face of obstacles and frustrations on the road to desistance, particularly when such transitions are in their infancy (see King, 2012). Ultimately Jason’s relationship did not last, resulting in Jason falling back into habitual action and subsequently reoffending. The birth of Jason’s daughter, however, provided a new social role (father) and, subsequently, a new source of pro-social capital. He suggested that his desire to stay out of trouble was now driven in part by his desire to be with his daughter, which, if anything, overrode his commitment to previous anti-social friendship groups. It was also important to Jason that she did not see him as a bad person:

I got a daughter and that to think about, I can’t be doing, how is my daughter going to feel if, oh you dad is in jail, what for? Burglary. You know what I am saying? Plus, obviously I have got to be there for my daughter. If I am in there, I can’t be there for her, so I have got to be outside, yeah man. I am a dad for the baby. I have the baby overnight and that, I have the baby overnight a couple of nights a week and that. Obviously, that has made me realize, like 100% man I need to just fix myself up, for her.

The subsequent avenues for pro-social capital acquisition sought by Jason were then in line with those highlighted in the available desistance literature, namely employment and the development of pro-social relationships. Once he had acquired this capital, at least in part, he was then able to utilize it to develop more. For instance, the stigma Jason perceived to be attached to his criminal record caused him to feel like a ‘down and out’ and was a major factor in his failing to find employment by the time of the first interview. The only way he could see himself getting work was to make use of the pro-social capital he had obtained outside of work and ask a friend to put in a good word for him:
I don’t think I can get a job like go round and hand my CV in; I think I need to like get my way in there somehow, you get what I am saying? Like knowing someone, obviously I am willing to work.

Where, previously, frustrations and stumbling blocks in relation to obtaining structural support would have resulted in the potential for reoffending, this increasing stock of pro-social capital allowed for other avenues of structural engagement to be considered. Ultimately Jason successfully completed his ICO and had found work by the end of the fieldwork period. He had not been in contact with the criminal justice system again by the end of the project.

Kamran’s story

At the time of the first interview, Kamran was 20 years old and was serving a 12-month community order for theft of a motor vehicle, driving without a licence and leaving the scene of an accident. He has an older sister and was raised by his mother and, up until recently, her partner. Kamran was one of the few young men participating in the study who had gained qualifications. He had previous experience of being in prison, serving 10 months for supply of class A drugs, and his offence history listed shoplifting and burglary as his primary offence type. The majority of offences for which Kamran had been convicted were committed ‘with friends’, something he identified throughout the narratives he provided during both interviews:

I wouldn’t say I have got itchy fingers, but I would say that I make bad decisions, so if I had a friend saying oh let’s go and do this, not that I am easily influenced but I just think oh fuck it, let’s do it.

However, the narrative accounts provided by Kamran demonstrated that he possessed avenues for both anti-social and pro-social capital acquisition, with each being drawn upon when necessary and dictating the extent to which the other was utilized. The pro-social capital that Kamran possessed was drawn from the relationship he had with his family, his mother in particular:

She has always done her best for me, everything that she has ever done. If I have ever got a problem, I know I can always say, mum can you sort this out for me?, or, mum can I have this? She will always help, so in a way I am lucky, I am very grateful to have my mum.

It was the strength of this relationship with his mother that caused him to question his previous associations and the anti-social capital that they imbued. During the second interview, Kamran recounted how the offending behaviour he was undertaking along with his friendship group was beginning to attract notoriety amongst his peers. As such, he noted that others began to approach with a view to infiltrating this group and sharing in the capital that the group possessed. A tipping point for Kamran occurred when one such individual arrived at his house:

There were other people from around our area looking at us and thinking, oh they are doing a bit well for themselves. I could see how it was going and I just remember, someone knocked on
my door and I didn’t like the person who knocked on my door, like I have had problems with him. I walked out into my garden, closed the door behind me and said, why is he in my garden for one, because he never knew where [I lived], even though I had problems with him, he’d never come to my house before.

This event gave Kamran a wider perspective on the impact of his involvement in pro-criminal social networks because it concerned the safety of his mother. This reinforced his desire to remove himself from such networks:

I say to my mates, it is all good if it was my house, that is different, but if I ever choose to move away that is still my mum’s house; I don’t want my friends knocking on my door, phoning for me, you know what I mean? So, I was a bit pissed off when he found out where I lived. Like when he was coming around with my mates, I thought I don’t want nothing to do with none of you because if you are seen with him you are all corrupt aren’t you? I don’t want you in my life kind of thing, so I just distanced myself from it.

For Kamran, the decision to desist was not simply facilitated through acquiring social capital because he already had stocks of both pro-social and anti-social capital; rather, it required a reorientation of the avenues through which this capital was accumulated and subsequently spent. In the second interview, Kamran noted that he had abandoned his former friendship group and now associated with others who were more ‘relaxed’. He remarked that this reduced the likelihood of him finding himself in a difficult situation:

That was a very hyper situation, like volatile, like I have been there a couple of times, I have been stood there before and someone has said something and I have just been looking like, he is going to beat him up, any second he is going to beat him up, and then there has been fights. I am glad my friends now are more mature, and it is just, it is a less stressful lifestyle. I can call them up and say how are you and have a laugh then put the phone down, you know what I mean, I am not going to get a phone call at half three in the morning saying I am just coming out of the pub what are you doing! I just don’t need it, so I am grateful for that. It is helping me stay out of trouble definitely. I wouldn’t say they got me in trouble, but their mentality was that so being around them it was a lot easier for me to get myself into trouble than it was to keep myself out of trouble.

As with Jason, changing friendship groups allowed for a reorientation of the avenues through which he was able to build stocks of social capital. For Kamran, in similar vein to what Jason outlined, this reorienting of his friendship groups allowed for other avenues of pro-social capital acquisition to become available. For instance, as noted above, his new social network meant that he was less likely to be called in the middle of the night and would, therefore, be in a better position to engage with structural factors likely to facilitate the acquisition of pro-social capital such as paid employment. Kamran expressed a desire to find work and was confident in his ability to avoid reoffending upon completion of his community order. He too had not been in contact with the criminal justice system since the end of the project.
Reflections on the role of social capital in the desistance process

The desistance narratives provided by Jason and Kamran (along with the other members of the sample), although distinct, offer some useful insights into the nature of desistance from crime, particularly in relation to the role of social capital in this transition.

The available desistance literature, as discussed above, highlights the importance of capital acquisition in the desistance process. However, some accounts tend to read as if simply acquiring capital (in all its forms, but specifically social capital for the purposes of this article) is the key. This, however, suggests two rather specific assumptions: first, that social capital is inherently positive and, second, that those who are undertaking initial transitions towards desistance (along with those who are still offending) are lacking in social capital. Both of these assumptions are, arguably, inaccurate.

The narratives from Jason and Kamran demonstrate that, during periods of offending, both had an abundance of social capital; it was just that the relationships that imbued this social capital were facilitative of offending as opposed to desistance. Suggesting that both Jason and Kamran’s desistance trajectories could benefit from enhancing their social capital would be somewhat misleading because enhancing or improving stocks of anti-social capital are more likely to result in continued offending than desistance. Instead, what we should be suggesting is that a reorientation of the types of social capital they acquire is what is important. It is pro-social capital that is an ‘essential part of an effective rehabilitation process’ (see Bosker et al., 2013: 67), whereas stocks of anti-social capital are more likely to support continued offending. By making the distinction between pro-social and anti-social capital, as adopted by Hucklesby (2008), we are able undertake a more detailed investigation of the role of social capital in the desistance process.

This distinction is of considerable importance in relation to desistance studies in numerous ways. First, this distinction changes the way in which we operationalize our understanding of the role of social capital in the desistance process. Until recently, the desistance literature has viewed social capital as a social good, arguing that, to facilitate desistance, one’s stocks of social capital must increase. Creating a distinction between pro-social and anti-social capital problematizes this conception. Instead, the role of social capital in desistance almost becomes not just one of accumulation but also one of ontological reorientation, shifting from the (at times well-embedded) associations and avenues that imbue within them the accumulation of anti-social capital, towards those that are more supportive of desistance. This can be exceptionally challenging for individuals such as Jason and several other members of the sample who have a long history of offending and are well embedded within their criminogenic social networks. More attention therefore needs to be paid to the ways in which individuals who are attempting to desist reorient the ways in which they acquire and spend social capital.

Secondly, making a distinction between pro-social and anti-social capital can have a significant impact upon the ways in which desistance efforts may be supported through criminal justice policy and practice. The available research suggests that criminal justice policy and practice are well placed to improve stocks of ‘human capital’ through such things as short-term skills programmes. It also recognizes that such programmes may be
of limited success because they ‘are unable to get at the heart of the problem facing many of those on probation: low levels of social capital’ (Farrall, 2011: 71; Bosker et al., 2013). Although this remains an accurate assessment in principle, failing to recognize the potential negative aspects of social capital is problematic. Portes and Landolt (1996: 18) suggest that ‘ignoring the downside of social capital can result in ineffective policy recommendations’. Indeed, it is argued here that, although efforts should be made within criminal justice organizations to support the development of pro-social capital in people with convictions, attention also needs to be paid to supporting the shift away from avenues of anti-social capital for those attempting to desist. Building upon the recommendations put forward by Farrall (2011), increasing individuals’ stocks of pro-social capital and supporting the move away from avenues for anti-social capital acquisition could mean helping people with convictions address family problems and maintain the development of new, pro-social relationships, both of which will ‘foster the sorts of ties and social contacts which allow for the development of pro-social capital’ (Farrall, 2011: 75), potentially instead of the ties and social contacts that are more likely to support continued offending. The probation relationship could also be seen to be another avenue of bridging social capital (Putnam, 2000) and promoting upward social mobility (see also Albertson and Hall, 2019, and Nugent and Schinkel, 2016).

By focusing more on the potential value of social relations, the types of social capital that such relations possess, and the ways in which such forms of capital interact with each other, we are also able to obtain a better understanding of the relational dynamics of both desistance and persistence. The narrative provided by Kamran, for example, did not fall within binary classifications of either pro-social or anti-social capital, but rather revealed an interaction between the two, with both being drawn upon depending upon their relevance in a given context. It was only when his anti-social relations began to threaten his pro-social relationships that Kamran took action to predominantly associate with one over the other. Thus, more attention should be given to this decision-making process, in an attempt to understand what causes individuals to reorient the ways in which they interact with social structures and the capital that such structures imbue. Weaver (2016: 26) argued that more attention needs to be paid to ‘how social relations motivate, enable or constrain decision-making and action and contribute to identity formation and change’. Distinguishing between forms of capital allows for a closer investigation of this than the singular notion of social capital as a social good can afford.

All of this is to suggest not an overly structural account of desistance, but rather an interactionist and spatial one (see Weaver, 2016), suggesting that desistance is undertaken through an agentic re-evaluation of individual goals and the strategies for obtaining these goals ‘in light of incoming information’ (Weaver, 2016: 25; see also King, 2014; Maruna and Farrall, 2004). Such information is largely dictated by the situations, spaces and places with which one interacts. For both case studies, as was the case for the majority of the sample, agentic re-evaluation of social relations and social capital acquisition was generally undertaken as a result of particular situational or spatial events – the commencement (and breakdown) of relationships, threats to the family home, close calls with the criminal justice system, the ‘hassle factor’ (Barry, 2010), and many more. In order to successfully understand the role that social capital (both pro- and anti-) plays in
the desistance process, more research attention needs to be paid to the ways in which this capital is temporally and socially constructed.

**Conclusion**

This article has suggested that current conceptualizations of desistance that make reference to the notion of ‘social capital’ tend to see social capital (or ‘the productive value of social relations’ – Scrivens and Smith, 2013: 8) as inherently positive. Defining this concept by its effects rather than its components represents a fatal flaw within some desistance research, which misses a fundamental aspect of social relations – they can be both positive and negative. Instead, it is argued that a distinction between pro-social capital and anti-social capital is perhaps more accurate. By making the distinction between pro-social and anti-social capital, we are able to view the relationship between desistance and social capital as a process of ontological reorientation as opposed to one of simple acquisition. It becomes a process of reorientation of one’s social relations, and the social capital such relations imbue, away from those facilitative of offending, towards those facilitative of desistance. Such a position also changes the ways in which criminal justice policy and practice operationalize social capital and desistance. Instead of suggesting that enhancing ‘social capital’ should be a key focus of criminal justice agencies, it is the enhancement of pro-social capital that is important, along with supporting the continued reorientation and management of relations that are more likely to promote anti-social capital.

The research here could be further developed by work that specifically examines the ways in which social capital is reoriented in order to support the desistance process. Because the work was also undertaken within a particular community order format, and the specific population this format worked with, it would be interesting to see if similar accounts are provided with other populations within the criminal justice system, in both community and custodial settings.

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**Notes**

1. See also Moyle and Coomber (2015) and their discussion of the ‘nominated buyer’ and Sandberg’s discussion of ‘street capital’ (2008).
2. There was evidence of such capital reorientation across the sample. However, the accounts provided by Jason and Kamran were the most amenable to presentation for the current article.
3. This is theoretically interesting from a desistance perspective because the literature would suggest that it is at this point that the majority of young men actively involved in offending begin to curtail such involvement.
4. It should be noted, however, that participants mentioned no reoffending during the fieldwork. This was subsequently confirmed by their probation officers at the end of the project.

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