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Don't Stop Believing

Joseph Arvidson, M.S.

Lou Holtz, known for his many accomplishments in the arena of college football, up-to-and-including coaching Notre Dame to a victory in the Fiesta Bowl, and the national championship in 1988. His rise to the pinnacle of college football is a storied one, including a fateful evening back in 1967. Holtz was 28 years old. He was an out-of-work assistant coach, with his third child on the way. His wife had given him the book "The Magic of Thinking Big" by David Schwartz, as inspiration. So, he sat down at the kitchen table and made a list of 107 things he wanted to accomplish in his life. His thought was that he would create these audacious goals and be a participant in his life...not a spectator.

Since the creation of that list, Lou Holtz has accomplished 102 of those 107 goals. These have included jumping out of an airplane, appearing on the Tonight Show, having dinner at the White House, meeting the Pope, sinking a hole in one (twice), and of course, winning a national championship. Holtz himself will say that the key to his attainment of these goals was simply belief. A belief in himself that he could reach his goals (Whelan & Stone, 2009).

The predominant risk-reduction approach, embraced by Correctional practitioners today, examines known risk and poses the question of, "How do we design interventions to treat those risk variables?" It is based on a medical treatment model; administer a dosage of treatment and watch what happens. Specifically, observe how long it takes for the patient/client to re-offend. When that happens, provide another dose of treatment. This approach, however, externalizes the issue. It focuses on what the correctional practitioner needs to do to "fix" their client. It is essentially a risk-averse management strategy (Liebling, Hulley, & Crewe, 2011).

On the other side of the coin are the

desistance theorists. This theorist-camp focuses on what it means to stop offending AND not begin again...not merely what it means to stop-offending. Desistance research does not examine what the corrections practitioner does to fix the client, but rather on what happens in that individual's life that leads to both stopping the commission of a crime and staying stopped. Put it another way; the risk reduction camp examines the characteristics of those who re-offend (as opposed to those who have not). What is lost in that exploration, however, is the consideration of any variable that may NOT play a role in re-offending. In re-offending, the locus of change is the effort of the criminal justice system. In desistance, the locus of change is that of the individual (O'Sullivan, Williams, Hong, Bright & Kemp, 2018).

In an attempt to ascertain what some of those internal mechanisms of change might be, Serin and Lloyd (2012) developed scales to measure the beliefs of justice-involved individuals. Specifically, their views as to their ability to remain crime-free (agency) and expected outcomes for crime and desistance (expectancies). Their results lend support to the desistance theories that focus on the agency as a primary mechanism of offender change (Lloyd & Serin, 2012).

Individuals who have a belief in their ability to change, specifically to desist from crime, are more likely to do so. Clearly then, our criminal justice interventions, specifically our correctional interventions, should be designed to augment an individual's belief that they can change; that they have agency. Sadly though, that is not the case.

At their best, correctional agencies operate under what is commonly referred to as the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model of supervision. As referenced above, when noting the prevailing risk-averse model, by

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way of assessment, criminogenic needs AKA "crime generators" are identified and addressed through case planning. When these criminogenic needs are addressed, there is a correlating reduction in recidivism. These significant correlates of re-offending are variables such as criminal thinking, anti-social peers, issues with employment and education, substance misuse, and family dysfunction (Bonta & Andrews, 1994).

Nowhere to be found among the major, or even minor correlates to re-offending, do we find agency or a belief that one can desist from deviant behavior. More to the point, nowhere in the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model do we find a strategy or argument to augment one's belief in their ability to desist. The current risk aversion model focuses on fixing the client by assessing what drives their criminality and suppressing it...not on searching for those factors that have been successful in others desisting and endorsing them, such as belief and agency.

Beyond a belief that one can change, desistance also involves larger systems of belief. Beliefs that no longer gel with the belief systems held during periods of criminality. These arcs or trajectories of criminality are generally viewed as two types. Adolescent Limited, those who begin offending early in adolescence and abandon their deviancy soon thereafter; and Life Course Persistent, those who begin offending even earlier in their lives and continue well beyond their teenage years. How might belief or systems of belief impact these trajectories, in particular, the longer Life Course Persistent arc of offending?

During one's trajectory of criminality, an individual's belief system comes into play to support that sustained behavior. These beliefs are consistent with criminality and a criminal lifestyle. During the desistance process, that belief system changes, though, to reflect one which is incongruent with the crime (Walters, 2002).

Agency, and a belief that one can change, would appear to be a factor worth exploring for progressive correctional policymakers. Is there more to be learned as to the efficacy of examining the beliefs of justice-involved individuals? Shadd Maruna's (2001) groundbreaking Liverpool Desistance study eventually morphed into his book, *Making Good*. How Ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives. He dedicated an entire chapter of that work to the rhetoric of redemption. That is, how does a would-be desister change their narrative script from

one of condemnation to one of redemption...or of making good (Maruna, 2001). Maruna (2001) posits that it is not merely a belief that one can change, but that one needs a coherent narrative to explain and justify their about-face.

This, of course, poses the question; how can we ascertain if a justice-involved individual is attempting to buy back or redeem a pro-social identity? If that is, in fact, a piece of the desistance puzzle, how can a practitioner determine or perhaps even measure that variable? One study, in particular, set out to do just that. Specifically, to create a belief in the Redeemability scale. The themes that emerged were those of Belonging, Agency, and Optimism (O'Sullivan, Williams, Hong, Bright & Kemp, 2018).

Most correctional case plan strategies follow a similar template, give or take a step here or there. In general, the case plan involves an assessment of the client (preferably of their criminogenic needs), narrowing down a target of change, conducting some type of intervention (ideally a cognitive-behavioral intervention), and developing the next steps to take/documentation. This includes; What current correctional case plans do not assess is the client's sense of belonging. What they do not take into account is the client's sense of agency. What they neglect to consider is a lack of optimism on the part of the client. Belief is simply not a part of the current case plan landscape.

Without the current state of correctional case plans addressing an individuals' belief in a change to push them toward desistance, where would a progressively minded correctional practitioner look for guidance toward that aim? Or, more broadly, from a systems standpoint, are there at least things Criminal Justice professionals should be aware of? More to the point, to what degree should they be aware of their bias as to the causes of deviance and criminality influencing their practice? Does it even matter?

Maruna and King (2009) found that those who believe criminality is a manifestation of free will and autonomous choices are more likely to be punitive than those who feel crime is the end result of outside forces and circumstances. In effect, an internal versus external locus of control. Alas, a belief in redeemability (Maruna & King, 2009). Acknowledging that a belief in redeemability is a relatively new concept, the

authors believe that highlighting success stories may be one way to operationalize this new variable.

Before going down that avenue, though, a moment to reflect on that information vis-a-vis the current correctional landscape. Where do those charged with instilling change within their caseloads fall on the belief in redeemability question? If probation officers and other correctional practitioners do not believe that their clients can be redeemed, what effect do they have on their efforts to do just that? Can a probation officers' belief that "once a criminal always a criminal" have a deleterious effect on desistance efforts? That is a question worth exploring for correctional policymakers, administrators, and those in positions of hiring and promoting.

In addition to an individual's beliefs in oneself, and one's ability to change, what other types of beliefs enter into the orbit of change. Much has been discussed as to the client's belief in procedural justice. If the Criminal Justice system is not viewed as legitimate, it is an obstacle in reformation efforts. Conversely, if a justice-involved individual holds legitimacy beliefs, that can lead to reductions in offending and eventual desistance. Moral disengagement refers to the process of convincing oneself that ethical standards do not apply in certain situations (thereby disabling self-condemnation). Maintaining legitimacy beliefs promotes desistance by inhibiting moral disengagement (Walters 2018).

Another question for Criminal Justice leadership is how to operationalize this new knowledge to drive decisions. Highlighting success stories, as noted earlier, is one illustration of how to promote redeemability. Too often, staff conversations and water-cooler-talk tend to focus on failures — specifically, their client failures. Perhaps there is a need to change that culture, to focus on individual/client success stories. Or more to the point, highlight those success stories by utilizing desisted individuals in the process of client change.

The idea of enlisting the services of desisted individuals in the reformation process is not novel, particularly with prisoner reintegration efforts. The Wounded Healer or Professional Ex brings certain attributes to the table that appear to have a positive effect on the desistance process. These include their ability to reconcile their criminal past, overcoming stigma, active coping strategies, as well as their pro-social attitudes and beliefs (Lebel, Richie, and

Maruna, 2015).

Lou Holtz created his list so-as-to-be a participant in his life, as opposed to a spectator. Having an internal versus external locus of control, whereby that approached worked with an impressive list of accomplishments. Accomplishments he attained because he believed that he could. Justice involved individuals wishing to desist need to realize that they have agency, that they control their pathways to persistence or desistance. They, too, can be participants and not merely spectators being "fixed" by the Criminal Justice system. Criminal justice professionals need to adopt a new mindset, as well. One of redeemability and redemption, as opposed to cynicism and condemnation. A mindset that further pushes an agenda of belonging, agency, and optimism. We all need to start believing.

Author Biography:

Mr. Joseph Arvidson is the Executive Director of The Paragon Group, LLC, who's scope of services includes speaking engagements, training, and consulting as to evidence-based practices and desistance-based models. Joseph Arvidson's career in Corrections spans over 30 years. He spent the bulk of his career as a probation officer supervising high-risk clients, but in 2011 he segued into an administrative role, focusing on strategic planning and implementation. He has extensive experience training and facilitating a variety of Evidence-Based Practices ranging from Cognitive Skills programs, Motivational Interviewing, Risk Assessment, and Case Planning. Mr. Arvidson received both his B.A. and M.S. degrees from St. Cloud State University in the discipline of Criminal Justice Administration. He currently serves as a member of Concordia University's Criminal Justice Executive Advisory Board.

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