

# **Desistance and Prison Culture: A Trifurcated Prisoner Classification Theory**

*Ruth Utnage*

---

## **ABSTRACT**

Social scientists have debated “real desistance” (Maruna et al., 2004) from crime for years. Criminal activity happens before incarceration and institutions are expected to correct the offending behaviour. In the current article, I explore prison culture through the lens of a participant observer with 9.5 years of direct cultural immersion. Prisoner culture is unique and the prison environment has an impact on what a prisoner views as possible within the carceral space, but prisoner culture also impacts what information is transmitted about prison. I introduce a trifurcated classification theory of people in prison as: Active Persistors, Passive Desistors, and Dedicated Desistors.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this paper, I propose that to understand why or how desistance occurs, we must start with an exploration of prisoner culture. I posit that a more holistic understanding of prison cultures’ impact on desistance can be better understood via cultural immersion or “participant observation”—a process through which a researcher becomes a temporary member of the group being studied (Shepard, 2013). Most prisoners’ behaviour and presentation of self is altered significantly in interactions between non-prisoners and prisoners, which I attribute, at least in part, to prisoners wanting to appear socially acceptable (see “Incarcerated Offender Culture”). Prisoners seek to satisfy their non-prisoner observers and differentiate the authority/power or perceived authority/power of the staff/volunteers. I also explore in the current article the trifurcated classification of the incarcerated population. My hope is that instead of challenging current theories I can provide an intelligent and coherent exploration that will spur further and more comprehensive research.

## **TRIFURCATED CLASSIFICATION THEORY**

In the *Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory* desistance is defined as “...a process of maintaining crime-free behavior in the face of life’s obstacles

and temptations” (Sundt, 2010). The definition makes clear that “rather than an event or a decision, desistance is a process”, which shifts our focus from trying to understand turning points in a person’s life (why did they desist?) to instead thinking about how people desist from crime” (Sundt, 2010). I believe the distinction is critical because environments can have influence on human behaviour. However, what is less known is the degree of impact of different environments have on different individuals. Prison culture distinctly differs from other cultures (see “Incarcerated Prisoner Culture”). I assert that prison culture plays a critical role in understanding how prisoners may or may not engage in the desisting process. My experience as a current incarcerated individual allows me to conduct participant observation. In my experience I have observed three types of incarcerated individuals, which I distinguish through a “Trifurcation Classification Theory”.

In my admittedly limited capacity to research (I am in prison with no open library currently due to statewide COVID 19 protocols, no access to the internet, and an education confined to self-teaching), I have only found a bifurcated classification system of prisoners that is painfully polarized. I assert that new terminology is completely necessary to understand the realities I have, and still do, reside in – multiple prisons in Washington State as a prisoner in a variety of custody levels that range from maximum to long-term minimum security and a general population to protective custody. The terminology currently used to describe desistance from crime, that I am familiar with, is persistence and desistance. When applied, all prisoners become siloed into either ‘persistor’ or ‘desistor’ categories. The two categories are insufficient to accurately describe the process of “desisting”. Desistance is a process and, as with all processes, there are stages, phases, or steps.

In my first iteration and attempt to theorize prisoner classification I apply simplistic operationalizations of conceptions: those who refuse to change and currently embrace criminality (active persistors), those who do nothing to change (passive desistors), and those who are going to change no matter what (dedicated desistors). I compare my concepts to that of Havens and Cerruti (2022), who informally describe prisoners as: those who refuse to change (convicts), those who do nothing to change (inmates), and those who will change no matter what (anomalies). A challenge with the Havens terminology is that the terms are informal and have been used in other ways previously that may cause confusion. To diffuse terminological

discrepancies or potential confusion I provide the following terms and their operationalization below.

Active persistor – similar to Havens and Cerruti (2022) “convict” – refers to an individual who is currently embracive of criminal engagement, and resistant and adverse to change (both in theory and practice). Active persistors, perhaps unintentionally, maintain the ‘us vs. them’ (inmates vs staff, gang vs gang, ‘solid’ vs sex offender, ‘me’ vs the world, etc.) culture and a gang’s hierarchal dominance, as well as significant cultural influence. Active persistors may participate in rehabilitative programs often for the sole purpose of claiming social capital. Perhaps most important to the categorization is that self-initiation (i.e. any change actively being pursued) and personal agency is geared toward becoming a better criminal and/or resisting pro-socialization.

Passive desistors – consistent with Havens and Cerruti (2022) “inmates” – comprise a large majority of the incarcerated population, and are easily recognized by their idleness and lack of self-initiation. They do exclusively what is required of them – no more, no less. Reasons for their stagnant position, as I have observed, range from fear to self-doubt to a core belief that they do not need to change. Passive desistors display a sense of powerlessness and a lack of agency while incarcerated, and will speak of a successful life and happiness as something to be obtained once ‘something’ (i.e. probation, drug addiction, gang, prison, etc.) is no longer present. While they are not actively engaging in criminal activity they are doing nothing to correct whatever underlying issue led them to commit crime in the first place.

Dedicated desistor – terminology I employ here is consistent with that of Havens and Cerruti (2022) call “anomalies” –are committed to their future desistance and focus on identifying positive and prosocial ways to pass their time. Said prisoners self-initiate a strengths-based approach. This may include:

- construction of personal “redemption scripts” (Sundt, 2010);
- creation and/or leadership, as well as full participation in cognitive change programming;
- influencing/promoting pro-social/cultural change by passively displaying or directly providing mentorship; and

- seeking a more comprehensive understanding of self-awareness to both cope with incarceration and embrace restorative justice practices as a matter of principle.

The term “restorative justice practices” means to take the time to understand and actively pursue practices that can legally and safely restore a sense of safety and/or justice to the victim(s) and/or the community. They are cognizant of this in their endeavours and seek ways to ‘make amends’ for their wrongs in some meaningful way.

In my observation, prisons are not yet equipped to understand, promote or recognize dedicated desistors. For instance, risk-based assessment tools may under-account for the unusually high level of achievement that these individuals present, which I evidence by outlining two unique cases. First, a dedicated desistor in a Washington state prison published new mathematics, much to the befuddlement of the prison system (see Havens et al., 2020). Second, another dedicated desistor at the same prison in Washington state has over 65 certificates, awards, and degrees accumulated over a 9-year period (for reference, nearly 10x the normal amount of awards over a 10-year period). How two anomalous prisoners live within the same prison seems like an exceptional coincidence, yet I posit that anomalous prisoners exist at the prison because of the prison’s culture – not having to fear for safety. Nonetheless, risk assessments do not acknowledge or capture that level of achievement, which suggests that positive change is disregarded, even ignored, in prisons. By extension, then, dedicated desistors too are anomalies that prison systems appear to not know how to support.

Dedicated desistors exist despite not being actively cultivated or nourished within prison, while active persistors and passive desistors are expected. Prisoners then may miss out on experiencing the Pygmalion Effect (Rosenthal, 1977). For example, when an educator believes their students are of a higher caliber of intelligence they are treated differently by the educator resulting in higher test scores. Thus, I am suggesting that if the prison environment can provide support to prisoners (i.e. if we can revise prison environments to at least recognize achievement and help prisoners), these cultural adjustments will result in a greater frequency of dedicated desistors. Prisoners move between the three different categorizations. A prisoner may fluctuate between being a passive desistor to active persistor many times before, if ever, truly desisting. Dedicated

desistors find their strengths through various ways, such as through the construction and pursuit of more complex goals, defining personal morals and values, seeking critical analysis of self from others and taking corrective actions, pursuing higher education, volunteering, developing extraordinarily high levels of personal drive (or ‘grit’) unencumbered by risk of failure and attempting to achieve goals that are perceived as unrealistic by others, actively seek ways to improve self-awareness and self-compassion, and attempt to reshape their environments into one that fosters the growth they desire and know they need. I observe such practices when prisoners shift their peer-base to account for new directions in their life course. Dedicated desistors, which I self-identify as, look for tell-tale signs that someone is actively changing from one group to another because people change often and rarely does one who proves themselves a dedicated desistor regress into a state of criminality. Signs of dedicated desistance include, but are not limited to, a shift in peer-base, refusal to associate with active persistors, denouncement of any form of segregation, and dedication toward strengths-based pursuits. Dedicated desistors also tend not to concern themselves with the crimes of other individuals and remain extraordinarily busy (i.e. playing card games is no longer appealing). Moreover, if a dedicated desistor is regressing toward persistence, observers will notice their efforts toward positive change decrease and, typically, intervene by offering peer support.

I now turn to review prisoner culture drawing from my participant observations. Specifically, I focus on prisoner culture as evidenced in the actions and perceived beliefs of prisoners across the categories defined above.

## **PRISONER CULTURE**

Given prison culture varies by institution and by the type of institution, I use the term prison to refer to State institutions housing individuals sentenced to a year or more (i.e. not county jails, work release centers, and transitional housing). Within the prison context, I speak from my experiences of participant observation to provide some insight into what prisoners value, which may aid in understanding why desistance occurs. One must not assume that the values of prisoners mimic those of members of free society for many reasons including a significant cultural lag and the behavioural adjustments demanded by prison environments. For instance, without

traditional currency, prisoners require a new economic system. Within prisons, as well, prisoners are often unable to differentiate themselves from each other in terms of clothing, which increases the value of other forms of identity expression (e.g. tattoos and jewelry). I now turn to present what I conceptualize as the nonmaterial values of prisoners, and how these values change among active persistors, passive desistors, and dedicated desistors.

### **Values**

Prisoners value freedom and community contact. Prison enforces a feeling of isolation from the community upon prisoners that drives a higher value being placed on community contact. Communicating with other prisoners does not alleviate the feeling of isolation because prisoners are intentionally isolated from free society. Many prisoners desire being accepted in society, seeking to make community connections and are proud to demonstrate these connections. The desire for societal acceptance and the resulting social capital can, in part, explain why communication with other prisoners is not an alternative to community support. Prisoners, I argue yearn to be an accepted back into the communities in which they are separated and deemed unfit. To feel ‘normal’ once more, imprisoned people require community acceptance more than rehabilitation or desistance although both are key to community acceptance. Prisoners in “doing” rehabilitation and “working” towards desistance are creating their “pathway or process” (Turner et al., 2019) toward the end goal of community acceptance, which marks the cessation of the stigma of incarceration.

### **Impacts of Values on Non-Criminalized People**

I argue that some prisoners try to ‘please’ the non-prisoners (e.g. staff, volunteers, a visitor or other community member) they meet in prison. The objective of pleasing is to persuade further contact and/or prolong interactions with them. Despite the difference in objective, just like how the subject of a research study may act to please the researcher,<sup>1</sup> prisoners try to please non-prisoners. The desire to please can influence how prisoners self-present, including opting for atypical self-presentations, especially if the non-offender has community prestige. The practice is particularly valuable because in prison social capital differentiates status from prisoner to another, not material wealth.

Only the active persistor is maliciously deceptive when pleasing. For the most part the prisoner, largely the passive and/or dedicated desistor, is

unaware of their atypical presentation of self and I would go so far as to say their atypical self-presentation is normal and socially acceptable. To present one's best self is standard practice for most people, however, for prisoners opportunities to engage with those that will increase their social capital (i.e. non-prisoners) is limited; hence its 'value'. For many prisoners, these infrequent interactions are the only opportunities to differentiate themselves from other prisoners, or better yet, to feel accepted by a community member. Social interactions with virtually anyone who is a non-prisoner is a reward, both personally and within prison culture.

I argue that researchers and penal/correctional administrators either ignore or underestimate and overlook the prisoner's presentation of an atypical self. Prisoners are unique in that they live around one another and see each other's backstage self (Goffman, 1959). An atypical self-presentation includes, for instance, when a prisoner who is aggressive and derogatory or engaged in criminal or hurtful behaviour when only around other prisoners becomes the 'ideal prisoner' and sells this to non-prisoners. The ways non-prisoners appear to accept the prisoner atypical self-presentation as true is often much to the dismay of onlookers who see the discrepancy in self-presentation. Moreover, there are two additional problems with this phenomenon to which I now turn.

## **SOCIAL INTERACTION AS A BEHAVIOURAL AND PUBLIC REWARD FOR IMPRISONED PEOPLE**

The act of an active persistor presenting an atypical self to some non-prisoner who seemingly believes the façade and engages the prisoner socially can become problematic due to the social capital gained. Administration may unknowingly place these individuals in peer leadership positions (which happens quite frequently) because of their atypical (but 'ideal') presentation of self. In other words, active persistors are well-practiced at hiding their persistent offending and are often charismatic, even charming, and are able to present themselves as agents of change because they are well-versed in what the community or prison administration desires to hear. Moreover, the active persistor also receives the more often sought after reward of social interaction for the purposes of gain in the social hierarchy because, even though it may be staff, non-prisoner social capital is still the value that holds the strongest currency.

Desistors (especially dedicated desistors) who witness the non-prisoner accept the atypical presentation of self often opt not to engage with the non-

prisoner in the future. The non-prisoner earns the stigma (Goffman, 1963) of being easily manipulated or not being credible (e.g. they choose to reward the active persistors behaviour with positive social capital). Programs that are peer, group therapy, or cognitive behavioural therapy based and are sponsored by non-prisoner individuals, prison administration or otherwise, who have succumbed to this dynamic (even if only perceptually), may not see the success they would have probably experienced otherwise. Passive and dedicated desistors will perceive that program sponsor as incapable of spotting, or worse, being indifferent to, true change. This gives the impression that applying cognitive changes is not valued in that program. Essentially, it puts passive and dedicated desistors at moral odds with program sponsors leaving little perceived differentiation between persistors and the program sponsor.

When a prisoner with healthier motivations (dedicated desistors especially) engages with non-prisoners the hope is to build social capital. Social capital provides a reward. What occurs is that the prisoner constructs a self that reflects any positives suggested in the opinion of the non-prisoner. The motives behind this presentation of self differ from that of active persistors to passive and dedicated desistors, specifically active persistors seeking to ‘fool’ non-prisoners and gain potential social capital, while dedicated desistors seek to understand how to change and impact the community positively. This ‘self’ can also be influenced by media outlets which portray a culture of constant criminal persistence, malicious manipulation, disjointed mental capacities, violence and aggression, drug addiction as acceptable reasoning for victimization, and making a conscious choice to remain criminologically persistent. The media portrayal can become a default expectation to live up to in the prisoner’s subconscious and, in my experience, an expectation the non-prisoner seeks to affirm, which can result in inaccurate representations of prison culture and prisoners, especially when active persistors are at the centre of providing such information.

### **CLARIFICATION OF A CLASS SYSTEM**

Many of the non-prisoners I have spoken with hold a common belief that the social hierarchy in prisons is constructed based on crime. Many prisoners also come to believe this to be true through anticipatory socialization in county jails, prison receiving and processing centres, and televised prison documentaries. This crime-base ‘hierarchy’ has ‘solid prisoners’ such as



people who have committed murders and gang members at the top of the hierarchy, which other non-sex offender prison gang members are in the middle ‘rungs’ and the lower ‘rungs’ occupied by LGBTQ2+ prisoners and those who have committed sex offenses (Ricciardleli & Moir, 2013). The hierarchy is more pronounced in maximum security or closed custody facilities. However, as prisoners enter prisons that house medium and minimum security prisoners the hierarchy becomes obscured even further if not erased entirely. From my experience, a social hierarchy based on crime is reinforced through anticipatory socialization, however, I draw on nearly a decade of participant observation, from the position of a transgendered women incarcerated in a men’s facility to propose a different model of social stratification or social hierarchy among prisoners.

I observe that as prisoners leave maximum and closed custody facilities they are introduced to a world where traditional active persistor mindsets no longer dominate in social positioning and where there are more passive desistors. Here, active persistors and dedicated desistors are polarized on the hierarchy with active persistors typically having more social capital among prisoners that determines one’s position in the hierarchy because of underlying fears among the passive prisoner population who worry about the potentiality for violence or predation. Put another way, higher levels of social capital equate to higher levels of popularity among prisoners and popularity equates to a ‘higher’ status on the prisoner social hierarchy (see *Figure 1*).

### **Figure 1: The Revised Prisoner Social Hierarchy**

Tier 1 – Popular, supported, and visited prisoners with social capital

Tier 2 – Well supported prisoners, who receive regular visitations but are less sociable or highly sociable with other prisoners with little or no non-prisoner support

Tier 3 – Unsociable or socially inept prisoners with or without support from non-prisoners (there is an inability to popularize oneself)

As a prisoner obtains more and more non-prisoner social capital the general outcome, or proof, of such capital is an abundance of material

goods being provided by the social capital via purchasing books, food, electronic devices, music, and the like, alongside higher frequencies of visitation with different non-prisoner people. In short, as it becomes visible that someone is universally accepted, the prisoner population also accepts that prisoner. I posit this status elevation stems from a belief that if society accepts this person, so should I. I believe that prisoner class systems are undergoing constant nuanced changes to step in line with society (but always with cultural lag). As the prison itself (to include emphatically the beliefs of its staff) changes its beliefs and perspectives in the form of policy changes the prisoner population reacts in adjustment by accepting new norms that they perceive are more in line with free society. Such examples can include the tolerance of certain demographics that were previously shunned, like LGBTQ2+ or disabled persons, and the adoption of political beliefs, for example.

### **HOW CULTURE DIFFERS IN DIFFERENT INSTITUTIONS**

Just like a class system of prisoner culture differs from maximum or closed custody institutions to lower custody levels (e.g. minimum or medium security facilities), so do most other aspects of prison culture. Differences in prison culture tend to revolve around prisoner perceptions of personal safety. If a prisoner feels safe enough to explore new social dynamics, they generally will, especially if that kind of behaviour is encouraged. However, when personal safety feels at risk, prisoners find it increasingly difficult to entertain notions of future planning on how to positively change their intrinsic values and cognitive behaviour toward desistance as they are too focused on safety. In maximum security and closed custody prisons, prisoners may turn to prison gangs and/or segregation for safety. Although less common in less secure facilities, such practices (e.g. checking into segregation for safety) do remain because some prisoners believe they have more safety in said institutions comparatively, especially in prisons that house protective custody prisoners. Protective custody labelled prisons are deeply associated with safety, such that there is little violence and the institution itself bears a stigma due to the nature of offenses of those housed within said facilities (see Ricciardelli & Moir, 2013). Prisoners have long understood that if an active persistor wants to change their lives they need

to exit maximum security, which typically entails permanently disavowing their gang affiliations and being transferred on good behaviour to a prison with a reputation of little to no violence. Dedicated and passive desistors can be found throughout all custody levels in all institutions, but the majority will be found in facilities where there is less of a risk for violence.

## CONCLUSION

Prisoner culture needs to reflect the values of normal societies to encourage more dedicated desistors. Passive desistors comprise the overwhelming majority of the prisoner population and are prime candidates for the significant reduction of recidivism, but we need to provide an environment that nurtures positive growth.

Desistance is a process. It is not a singular event and it can be witnessed before death. One of the most powerful lessons I have learned in prison is that I have agency and autonomy. As I began to self-educate and interact with prison staff, I began to shift from a thought pattern of “I equal bad criminal and staff equal good who hate bad criminals” to one of “I am a good person and staff are limited by their understanding of me to help me”. The difference has been astounding and my hope is that desistors become standard and prison becomes a system of recovery and healing. My sincerest hope is that I have provided targets for further investigation.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The Hawthorne Effect refers to “when unintentional behavior on the part of the researcher influences the results, they obtained from those they are studying” (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1964 cited in Shepard, 2013).

## REFERENCES

- Goffman, Erving (2012) “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life”, in Craig Calhoun, Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Steven Pfaff, Indermohan Virk (eds.), *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 46-62.
- Goffman, Erving (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, London: Penguin Books.
- Havens, Christopher, Stefano Barbero, Umbreto Cerruti and Nadir Murru (2020) “Linear Fractional Transformations and Nonlinear Leaping Convergents of Some Continued Fractions”, *Research in Number Theory*, 6(11).

- Havens, Christopher and Marta Cerruti (2022) “Desistance, Anomalies and Rabbit Holes: A Transformative Experience from Inside Out”, *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, 31(1): 10-19.
- Maruna, Shadd, Thomas P. LeBel, Nick Mitchell and Michelle Naples (2004) “Pygmalion in the Reintegration Process: Desistance from Crime Through the Looking Glass”, *Psychology, Crime and Law*, 10(3): 271-281.
- Ricciardelli, Rosemary and Moir Mackenzie (2013) “Stigmatized among the Stigmatized: Sex Offenders in Canadian Penitentiaries”, *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 55(3): 353-385.
- Roethlisberger, Fitz Jules and William Dickson (1964) *Management and the Worker*, New York: Wiley
- Rosenthal, Robert (1977) “The PONS Test: Measuring Sensitivity to Non-Verbal Cues”, in Paul MacReynolds (ed.), *Advances in Psychological Assessment (Volume 4)*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Shepard, Jon (2013) *Sociology (11<sup>th</sup> edition)*, Cengage Advantage Books.
- Sundt, Jody L. (2010) “Redemption Scripts and Desistance”, in Francis T. Cullen and Pamela Wilcox (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of Criminological Theory (Volume 2)*, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, pp. 574-577.
- Turner, Emily, Rose Broad, Caroline Miles and Shadd Maruna (2019) “Learning Desistance Together”, *Journal of Prison Education and Re-entry*, 6(96): 353-385.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Ruth Utnage* is the Program Manager at the Prison Mathematics Project, whose goal is to reduce recidivism through desistance by helping prisoners explore higher education through mentorship and community support. She is transgender and formerly incarcerated. She loves mathematics, sociology, networking, and public speaking. Please feel free to reach out to her by email at [ruth@pmathp.org](mailto:ruth@pmathp.org). She welcomes all.