Social capital, mutual aid, and desistance: a theoretically integrated social capital building process model

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Social capital, mutual aid, and desistance: A theoretically integrated process model

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Abstract

Positive social capital building outcomes were identified in a longitudinal evaluation of a veteran-specific initiative supporting desistance from crime, and substance misuse. A secondary analysis of the qualitative data generated is presented here. We identify three transformational subjective re-alignments occurring across the veteran cohort who sustained their engagement in the mutual aid initiative. These re-alignments are linked to the mobilisation of bonding, bridging, and linking sources of social capital. We directly align mutual aid practice dynamics with the micro-, meso- and macro- distinctions highlighted in relational desistance explanatory frameworks. Our analysis provides unique insights into the relationship between social capital building and desistance. We present a theoretically informed social capital building process model highlighting the generalisability of our findings to wider (ex-) offender populations.

Key words: social capital; social capital and desistance; veterans and desistance; building social capital; mutual aid and desistance.

Introduction

Sustaining long-term desistance from crime trajectories is widely acknowledged as going beyond (ex-) offenders' enacting behaviour and identity change to involving a shift in their sense of belonging to – and active participation in – non-offending networks, communities, and wider civic society (Barry, 2006; McNeill and Maruna, 2007; Farrall, 2013; Weaver, 2015; Wright, 2017). While crime is often conceptualised as being socially constructed, desistance is similarly increasingly acknowledged as a profoundly social and relational process (Bazemore, 1996; Maruna and LeBel, 2012; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Weaver, 2016; Albertson et al., 2020). Thus, identifying how (ex-) offenders' relationships are repaired with their families, communities and the state becomes a pressing priority

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(McNeill, 2012). Desistance-supporting interventions are conceptualised here as objective relational structures that enable (ex-) offenders to both identify and implement realistic strategies towards living more fulfilling lives. In other words, we assert identifying effective opportunities to work with and through the reorientation of one's relationships (McNeil et al., 2012) means (ex-) offenders are not simply "left alone to 'get on with'" the difficult and complex "business of self-change" (Maruna and LeBel, 2012, p. 81).

The mobilisation of avenues via which pro-social social capital can be built is acknowledged as a key correlate sustaining desistance (McNeill, 2003; Farrall, 2013; King, 2013; Kay, 2020). Social capital resources can be conceptualised as spanning micro-, meso- and macro-level relational boundaries, having been defined by: Bourdieu (1986, p. 248) as "individual resources…linked to possession of a durable network of…institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition"; by Coleman (1988), as social connections enhancing the development of human capital facilitating community engagement; and by Putnam (2000) as collective resources lubricating engagement with civic and democratic spheres. However, the mechanisms and motivations underpinning the relationship between desistance and building new social capital resources remain underexplored (Farrall, 2013). While there is widespread recognition of the positive benefits of social capital supporting the desistance process, few examples of the types or characteristics of intervention modality by which these resources are either generated or mobilised have as yet been proffered. This is where our contribution lies. This study provides unique insights into the relationship between social capital building and desistance. We relate social capital acquisition to mutual aid practice dynamics, as an objectively structured intervention, facilitating desistance by utilising a relational desistance lens. Mutual aid is defined as "the reciprocal exchange of help; the group member is both provider and recipient of help for the purpose of co-producing mutual/collective and individual goals" (Weaver, 2013b, p 199).

This article begins by contextualising our approach to integrating relational desistance and social capital analytical frameworks. We provide an integrated typology of existing desistance-focussed social capital research. The specifics of this social capital building focussed example of mutual aid are outlined. Our methodology is set out and, following this, three findings' sections identify significant subjective re-alignments across micro-, meso-

and macro- relational desistance spheres which are allied with social capital resource levels. We present our theoretically informed social capital building process model. The wider implications of this objectively structured relational based initiative facilitating the mobilisation of positive social capital are discussed in concluding sections.

Theoretical and conceptual development

Development of our theoretical alignment of mutual aid practice dynamics, social capital building resources and relational desistance acknowledges the desistance from crime canon is both a dynamic and contested literature (Maruna and LeBel, 2012). However, the desistance process is generally accepted as occurring in three stages or across three less linear spheres, indicating the emergence of an increasingly cohesive conceptualisation of the integration of "the world outside, within ourselves and in our relations with others" (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016, p. 570, and c.f. ; Maruna and Farrall, 2004; McNeill, 2016). The first of these phases or spheres, primary – or act – desistance indicates a cessation of offending behaviour; secondary – or identity – desistance refers to when the desistor no longer thinks of themselves as an offender; and tertiary – or relational – desistance refers to the recognition of this change by others (Maruna and Farrall, 2004; McNeill, 2016; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Weaver, 2016). The relational desistance sphere is distinguished by three further different levels by Nugent and Schinkel (2016). They categorise the micro-level as referring to relationships in the (ex-) offender's intimate social setting, the meso-level as referring to local community relations and the macro-level as applying to interactions with wider civil society (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016, p 570).

Similarly, the two main approaches emerging from the study of social capital – network and structural – both distinguish between different dimensions of social capital resources: At the micro-level, bonding or relational ties refers to relationships between intimate individuals (Moran, 2005); At the meso-level, cognitive or bridging social capital, refers to more community-based network resources (Krishna and Uphoff, 2002; Szreter and Woolcock, 2004); and at the macro-level, structural or linking social capital refers to access to institutional or societal levels of authority (Gittell and Vidal, 1998; Hitt, Lee and Yucel, 2002). Importantly, both network and structural approaches endorse optimising the strength and quantity of connections across all three levels as indicative of one's building

stocks of social capital (Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 2001; Costa and Kahn, 2003; Pahl and Spencer, 2004; Chapman and Murray, 2015).

From our mapping of social capital focused desistance studies across these micro-, meso- and macro-level distinctions, a clear typology emerges. Sources of social capital supporting the desistance process have been established at the micro-level, in the realm of intimate family and romantic relationships (Wright, Cullen and Miller, 2001; Mills and Codd, 2008), and 1-to-1 therapeutic alliances (Rex, 1999; Burnett and McNeill, 2005). At the meso-level, they have been largely identified in (ex-) offender-community focused projects, such as Restorative Justice, Circles of Support (Levrant *et al.*, 1999; Bazemore and Stinchcomb, 2004; Fox, 2016), volunteering (Uggen and Janikula, 1999; O'Connor and Bogue, 2010) and collective-employment initiatives (Weaver, 2016). Finally, at the macro-level, sources of social capital supporting desistance have been identified as residing in: engagement with education or training; employment (Farrall, 2013; Brown and Bloom, 2018; Segev and Farrall, 2019); and in civic or democratic realms indicating full citizenship status (Uggen, Manza and Thompson, 2006; Farrall, 2014). The originality of this consolidated typology of sources of social capital supporting desistance by level enhances theoretical and conceptual integration. Thus providing a theoretical framework within which to present our analysis of a mutual aid initiative as an objective relational structure across which the pains of desistance (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016) are shown to have been addressed.

Mutual aid

The premise of the mutual aid model for social work with groups is as a vehicle for mediation of a three-way interconnected system of relations between the self, the group, and institutions in wider society (Schwartz, 1969; Gitterman, 2017). A skilled mutual aid practitioner is therefore required "to neither change the system, nor to change the people, but to change the ways in which they deal with each other" (Schwartz, 1969, p. 41). This mutual aid model has three primary functions: to harness individual strengths; to establish effective group building skills and; to foreground the purposeful use of self (Steinberg, 2014, pp. 14–18). The nine distinct dynamics of mutual aid practice structuring this objectively structured professional methodology are: Knowledge/ data sharing; Dialectical; Taboo; Universal perspective; Mutual support; Mutual demand; Individual problem solving; Rehearsal; Strength in numbers (Shulman, 1986, 1999; Steinberg, 2014). These dynamics are

contextualised further in the finding's sections. The mutual aid model adopted by the veteran-specific project outlined here is thereby founded on principles of reciprocity and empowerment, operating to facilitate group members' imagination and actualisation of strategies to enable participants to secure more fulfilling lives for themselves and the communities of which they are a part (Katz, 1981; Shulman, 1999; Shepard, 2014; Spade, 2020; Steinberg, 2014).

The literature on social capital, desistance and mutual aid is wide-ranging. In a previous discussion we have highlighted key integrative analytical themes, however there is no encompassing theoretically informed construct or model which relates them together. This limits application and generalisability. Our key purpose here is to motivate and develop such a construct alongside prompting further empirical and theoretical discussion. Our methodology is based on a secondary inductive analysis of the qualitative data set collected during a mixed methods longitudinal evaluation of a mutual aid initiative described below (Albertson et al., 2015; Albertson et al., 2017).

One of the UK's largest drug and alcohol treatment charities piloted an innovative veteran-specific mutual aid project in 2014, which was rolled out to four further sites in the UK in the following year. Recruitment to the project involved the treatment charity approaching early and more established service users and making them aware of the nature of mutual aid group working expectations. Underlining the voluntary nature of engagement and managing expectations is significant here, as it is member-to-member, not worker-to-member interaction that underpins empowering consensus-based decision making (Shepard, 2014; Steinberg, 2014; Spade, 2020). Aiming to create not one but many helping relationships, the model adopted here focusses on expanding the experiential awareness and enrichment of behaviour patterns within groups (Schwartz, 1969). Four interrelated helping phases are encompassed in this model (Schwartz, 1971): Preparation, where group members, including the practitioner "tune in" (Gitterman, 2017, p. 117) to this distinct group experience; Development of a mutual agreement, or contract, where common goals are agreed; The actual work, in which members co-operate on group tasks and address obstacles; and Termination, the phase in which members or the worker leaves or the group ends (Gitterman, 2017; Schwartz, 1971). Importantly, this model of mutual aid practice is distinctive as it empowers groups to develop their own sets of goals, and termination is part

of the process. This contrasts with more 12-step/recovery mutual aid group models, where steps are mandated, non-negotiable and membership continues indefinitely (Banks, 1997).

This veteran-specific mutual aid project was initiated with weekly meetings in the five separate delivery sites. All the mutual aid group members reported getting to know each other intimately and working together, facilitated by the mutual aid worker, to generate their own distinct mutual aid agreement. To meet their own agreed group goals, problem solving strategies were discussed and agreed. This process involved requesting assistance from other institutions in their own local community and wider civil society, to address any barriers they faced together. All five mutual aid group sites project benefitted from local organisations responding positively to knowledge exchange requests (e.g., the DWP, Local Authority Accommodation service). Further, the mutual aid groups all benefitted from their attachment to the national substance misuse charity, by way of ease of access into local community-based mentor training, and volunteering opportunities. Similarly, wider national agencies facilitated many of the mutual aid group's requests for opportunities to feed into regional and national service design forums (e.g., The British Legion, Armed Forces Covenant steering groups).

Data and methodology

The original two-year evaluation, commissioned by the Forces in Mind Trust was conducted between 2015 and 2017. The outcome evaluation objectives required a before and after repeat measure evaluation design. Ethical approval was granted by Sheffield Hallam University's Research Ethics committee. Data collection was conducted in the five different project sites from across the North of England. While each site had their own distinct mutual aid group, these groups interacted and conducted activities together where there was correspondence between mutual aid group goals. During the first data collection sweep, 35 veterans engaging in the mutual aid groups volunteered to engage with the evaluation activities from across the five intervention sites. There was some degree of churn between the first and second evaluation data collection sweeps, such that only 23 veterans of the original 35 were available to engage in the second data capture activities. Despite repeated attempts, the evaluation team received no information on the outcomes, whether positive or negative from those who were not available to engage in the second data capture activities. This is a limitation of the original evaluation study design.

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The final sample of 23 veterans who engaged in first and second evaluation data capture were aged between 33 and 70 years old; all identified as white British, having left the armed forces on average 23 years previously. Contact with criminal justice was reported by 74% (17 of 23) of the sample, nine had their most recent contact between five and ten years ago and eight within the last five years. More than 30 separate offences were reported prior to joining the mutual aid group: nine (37%) were public order/criminal damage offences; eight (27%) driving offences; seven (23%) offences against the person including, assault with injury, actual bodily harm and one sexual offence; and four (13%) property crime offences including armed robbery, forgery, and drug supply were reported. Eight separate custodial sentences had been served.

The first of the two data collection visits conducted per site were undertaken in 2015, and the second data sweep occurred between 10 and 15 months later. In addition, longitudinal telephone interviews were conducted 18 months after initial site visits and life history interviews were undertaken between 18 and 20 months after first contact. The qualitative interview method adopted was episodic (Flick, 2000) and participative evaluation workshops were also conducted (Reason and Bradbury, 2001) during first and second site visits. These workshops facilitating researcher access to the meanings and motivations that lay behind group assessments, collective judgements, and normative understandings (Bloor, 2001). Importantly for this analysis, these workshops revealed and corroborated how the sample members' opinions and attitudes were "created and above all changed" (Flick, 2002, p. 119) by the intervention. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Workshops notes were drafted by researchers in-situ and typed up subsequently.

At the second data collection stage, no subsequent criminal justice contact was reported. Of the nine (39%) of the sample who reported active addiction status when first joining the project, all had gained recovery status by second data collection stage. The remaining 14 (61%) of the sample had successfully maintained their pre-group in-recovery status. All (100%) reported an increase in friendship groups and increased engagement in wider community/ social networks. Significant improvements in relationships with family members since joining the project were also reported by 18 veterans (78%). Further, 65% (15 veterans) reported engaging in meaningful activities and/or employment at second data

collection stage. Individual veterans' journeys did differ however, as 8 veterans (39%) reported less pronounced positive progression. These veterans, whilst still attending their mutual aid groups, reported the extent to which they were engaging in additional employment-related activities was hampered due to coping with severe mental or physical health issues. A deductive analysis of the originally mixed quantitative and qualitive data sets was conducted for the evaluation report which was focussed on identifying the largely externally mandated positive outcomes due to project engagement (see Albertson et al., 2017). Between first and second data collection stages, an increase in the number and pro-social nature of social capital resources (friendships, social groups, support networks and connections) was identified using quantitative measures. Significantly these findings highlighted the success of the mutual aid group model in supporting its members to build new social capital networks that did not exist before project engagement. It was clear the intervention had succeeded in meeting the relational and social capital aspirations of the sample.

For this present secondary analysis of the qualitative data, we aimed to identify what means this success was achieved by focussing on establishing theoretical generalisations (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003[3]) to ensure lessons for generalisability could be drawn out of our analysis. An inductive analysis was conducted on the qualitative data set, which consists of: first and second site visit interviews and workshop data collected with 23 mutual aid group members (one female and 22 male veterans); ten longitudinal interviews and; fifteen life history interviews with male respondents only. This secondary analysis was conducted to address three distinct research questions:

1) Did engagement result in subjective re-alignments or re-positionings?

2) If so, what are the motivations and rationales underpinning the construction of these subjective re-alignments and what are the objective structural mechanisms supporting these re-positionings, and how are they linked to building social capital?

3) Which, if any, of these process dynamics can be linked to supporting desistance?

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[3] Lewis, J., and Ritchie, J. (2003) Generalising from qualitative research, in Lewis, J., and Ritchie, J. (eds) Qualitative research Practice, London: Sage, pp 263-286.

The decision to conduct an interpretative inductive analysis was predicated on the phenomenological assumption that social reality is neither singular nor objective but is rather shaped by both human experience and social context (Giorgi and Giorgi, 2003). Interpretive analysis has the advantage of being well-suited to exploring rationales behind complex, interrelated, or multifaceted social processes within a real-life setting (Bhattacherjee, 2012). Our initial open coding of the data addressed research questions 1 and 2, with classification by units of meaning per respondent transcript. A comparison with second interview, and longitudinal and life history interview transcripts identified changes and re-positionings in common (Flick, 2002; Thomas, 2006). The analysis was a recursive process (Neeley and Dumas, 2016) where three subjective re-alignments across the cohort were identified (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Elo *et al.*, 2014). We then shifted to a comparison from first to second order narratives across the collective narrative (Elliott, 2005) corroborating these re-alignments and associated rationales from the workshop generated data. Our analysis identified three significant subjective re-alignments across the engaging cohort linked to the mobilisation of social capital at the micro- meso- and macro-levels:

1. Subjective realignment re-positioning 1: From resignation and solitude to mutual acceptance, self-worth, and hope, linked to the mobilisation of bonding social capital at the micro-level of relational desistance.

2. Subjective realignment re-positioning 2: From apathy and immobilization to a sense of purpose in life and participation in acts of generativity, linked to the mobilisation of bridging social capital at the meso-level of relational desistance.

3. Subjective realignment re-positioning 3: From disenfranchised to a sense of social inclusion and citizenship, linked to the mobilisation of linking social capital at the macro-level of relational desistance.

These findings are detailed in the three subsequent findings' sections. We revisited theoretical frameworks of desistance to directly address research question 3, for a deductive comparison (Bradley, Curry and Devers, 2007), thus identifying the relevance of Nugent and Schinkel's (2016) typology. Pseudonyms are used to ensure respondent anonymity.

Engaging in new bonding social capital at the micro-level of relational desistance

On entry to the initiative, our sample reported having largely achieved some measure of act or primary desistance and abstinence from substance misuse, indicating a significant accumulation of social stigma as a barrier to the change process for our cohort (Stone, 2016). Pains of social and emotional isolation (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016) were characteristic of our respondent's limited relational network status on entry, largely rationalised as necessary to maintain and/or initiate these primarily behavioural changes (Bottoms and Shapland, 2011).

By drawing together individuals with similar life experiences, this mutual aid initiative provided a substitute for alternative support systems, such as friends and relatives, that were unavailable (Gitterman, 2017). As at second data collection stage, our sample had secured a significant subjective realignment, narrated as having found a measure of mutual acceptance, an increased sense of self-worth and hope for the future:

> *Before [the mutual aid group] came along I was like five years out of trouble [crime] and four years in recovery, but something was missing. It was like, it was sort of "I hate myself" and "self-worth – zero". So people that know me, that were closest to me know that I am a waste of space and I just used to avoid people like the plague. I just still didn't relate properly to people and that, but this [group] was the big thing that helped me come out of me self….and I got a lot more acceptance around it. I got hope. It's just that I feel like I'm worth something (Jack, Interview 2).*

As a purposeful helping medium, this illustrates engaging in mutual aid practice promoted an increased awareness and insight at an emotional level (Steinberg, 2014) for our sample. This suggests that engaging in mutual aid groups may provide an opportunity for the period of reflection and reassessment of what is important that is highlighted as a common feature of the desistance process (Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986; Farrall and Bowling, 1999). This finding was reinforced by the workshop derived data, as respondents described preparing for meetings by reflecting on things alone and then bringing their thoughts and ideas back into the group (Workshop 2 researcher notes). These collective discursive exchanges are a core component of mutual aid practice during which the group perceived their individual situations together (Steinberg, 2014).

I felt something click, something break, upstairs. In my head. I got erm referred to one of the psychotherapists. But he said I'd have to be clean and sober [before addressing mental health issues]. He was saying that we'd go back and stuff would be painful and I just ran for the hills, cos I just found I didn't want to face it all, so I just never went back (Peter, Interview 1).

I used to go into [town] and get tanked up, loads of drugs and just brawling with people. People started asking me about guns, like y'know drug dealers basically. And I thought I'm gonna end up going so far over the line here that there will be no way back (David, Interview 1).

The preparation stages of setting up these mutual aid groups involved outlining the expectations of participant interaction as exchange and debate. The key mutual aid practice dynamic of 'knowledge/data sharing' facilitated this debate mechanism (the 'dialectical' dynamic) of sharing and critiquing ideas and experiences (Steinberg, 2014). Through the expectation of the 'discussion of taboo' dynamic, group members reflected on gathered uncensored/authentic alternative perspectives on their own and others' life experiences. Our sample reported being encouraged to work together in their groups to discuss and debunk these commonly stigmatised myths. This activity was similarly narrated in the workshops as providing opportunities for self-destructive cycles to be broken down together (Shulman, 1999). In direct contrast to the examples of initial reflections on experiences quoted above, evidence of an increased emotional awareness across the later data set is identified:

I've never done anything for other people to say "Well that's great" …they're like indicators for me [now]. When people are giving you compliments or stuff, well I'll just keep going and erm, trust me instincts. They've sort of been buried deep down and you know, and self-worth, determination, motivation, and self-worth just weren't there. I just buried them and it [the group] sort of relit everything" (Robert, Interview 2).

…facilitators of the group help you make sense of the chaos and how to support one another, through our experiences, not training, but through…what we've been through (Workshop 2, researcher notes).

The [mutual aid] lot help you prioritise, it helps you bring out all that, it's heavily morally based, if you like, on doing the right thing. It helps you prioritise, like what's right and what's wrong, because you can get wrapped up in, you know, like the criminal world, because it is probably the closest thing that you can get to feeling like you belong but the [group] helps you to see that there's other ways (William, Interview 2).

These observations reinforce the desistance supporting potential of engaging with a discussion group that progresses beyond any narrow criminogenic focus (Gelsthorpe and McIvor, 2007). As when individuals embark on transformations, "it is recognition of their ability to change which they seek" (Hunter and Farrall, 2018, p. 292). In contrast to other interventions experienced by our sample, this exposure to a structured relational interaction provided an innovative opportunity to both hear and think about out "new ways of thinking, being and doing" (Steinberg, 2014, p. 36) as illustrated in the quote below:

So, the unusual way that it [the group] was set up was a big plus, the special thing that it gives you is everyone…. it's like the friendships, there is more substance…So it's having that willingness, to be part of something [opens arms suggesting something 'bigger']. So, you've got to take on certain things, open your mind to certain things…. I just knew from that first meeting this was something special this, definitely." (David, Interview 2).

Our sample reported discussing, challenging, and arguing about their past lives and experiences in a group setting, indicating a gradual integration of their past selves into one present self (Maruna, 2001). Through the give-and-take of this mutual interaction group members developed greater clarity and personal synthesis (Gitterman, 2017):

I am just seeing things a bit differently, like I didn't before. It opened my eyes to things, because I listen to their stories, their problems, and we counter act each other. That's a good thing that we do we learn off each other. And I might have tried something that they've not thought of, and they might know something I don't know. It's just like communicating with others and being with people who I can offer things to (Robert, Interview 2).

I never felt anywhere where I felt safe and secure where I could... I started to feel trust like I do with these others I think it's…I had no hope before I came into [the group] and I am full of hope now. What I got out the group was a connection and to give help and support and to receive help and support. The group gave me the confidence in my own ability and the chance to be able to take risks again, you know, cos I was terrified of failure (Peter, Interview 2).

These structured weekly exchanges were narrated as the groups' members having developed the ability to communicate, share and reflect (Workshop 2, researcher notes). These were skills which some in the sample reported utilising outside of the group context, impacting positively on their wider intimate relationships at the micro-level:

All of my relationships, whether it's friends or family, have improved, especially with me parents. I had a lot of guilt and shame and obviously they've disowned me several times (David, Interview 2).

These findings illustrate the effective harnessing of new bonding social capital resources generated at the micro-level of relational desistance, illuminating a potential medium of "supporting the generation of reflexive relational networks within and beyond services, to realize our shared responsibilities to relate to others" (Weaver, 2012, p. 409). Engaging in bonding social capital at the micro-level is illustrated here as facilitating the subjective realignment re-positioning from resignation and solitude to mutual acceptance, self-worth, and hope.

Mobilising bridging social capital at the meso-level of relational desistance

The pains of goal failure (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016) were evident across the respondent sample on entry to the project. All but one of the cohort was unemployed, inactive and/or not engaging in any meaningful social roles or activities at the meso-level of relational desistance. By second data collection sweep however, two thirds (65%) of the sample were engaged in further education, training or were undertaking voluntary work or paid employment. In addition, the majority (86%) reported an improved sense of purpose and direction in life and feeling more confident about achieving their own individual life goals.

Our analysis identifies the sample narrated having secured a second significant subjective realignment by second data collection stage, as having found a sense of purpose in life. A re-positioning for our sample that is symbolised by choice, agency, and purpose over the apathy and immobilisation respondents narrated on entry to the initiative. The mutual aid groups engaged in learning 'bureaucracy craft' (Todd-Kvam and Todd-Kvam, 2022), alongside engaging in acts of generativity (Maruna, 2001). This re-alignment is identified as being motivated by their engagement with meso-level social capital building resources in the form of committing to goals (Paternoster, 2017).

Mutual aid group members narrated this significant re-alignment as a result of no longer feeling alone in their coping efforts, which facilitated the contextualisation of their own experiences. This process is described in the mutual aid literature as evidencing having experienced the mutual aid practice dynamic of developing a 'universal perspective' (Steinberg, 2014):

> With the [mutual aid group] what I found is, they go: "Look you've got problems, we know you've got problems, but we will help you through it together". Now if you don't want to be a part of 'we'..., but "If you can see a chink of light and you want to get to your first goalpost, we will help you get there", which I've never found before. I've got goals now, so improving other people's lives through my actions is one of my goals and starting my little business and giving something back (David, Longitudinal interview).

This empowering and therapeutic involvement in generative roles is described as a common feature of the desistance process (Maruna, 2001), operating to endorse transformational change (Farrall, 2002; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002). Similarly, committing to purposive, intentional action and goals that fulfil a purpose are also emphasised as key features of the process (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Paternoster, 2017). Our sample narrated having learned to understand the different feelings and experiences of those around them, reflecting their response to the 'mutual support' dynamic of practice (Steinberg, 2014).

However, it is via the realisation of both the mutual support and the 'mutual demand' dynamic (Steinberg, 2014) where the most powerful mutual aid group work was identified

in our analysis as occurring for our sample. This realisation of reciprocity - that respondents were able to be able to help others alongside the realisation they had people they could rely on to help them - was a profound realisation for the majority of our sample. The significance of relations of reciprocity is identified as a core component supporting the desistance process (Weaver and McNeill, 2015[4]). Having established these reciprocal interactional expectations, group members collectively reflected on their personal experiences being re-framed as assets (Maruna, 2001) which were used as "gateways to insight, empathy and innovation" (Steinberg, 2014, p. 18) in the groups. This mechanism utilised by the mutual aid worker is a way of introducing analogical[1] thinking processes, which helps mutual aid group's co-production of a purpose, or mutual aid agreement, defined as "a common cause that binds members individual goals to one another" (Steinberg, 2014, p. 4).

While each of the five different mutual aid groups developed their own distinct mutual aid agreement, three common overarching goals were identified in our analysis, representing priorities in common as essential to living a more fulfilling life, which were drawn together during workshops (Workshop 1 and 2, researcher notes): Goal 1: Engaging in fulfilling relationships, social connections, and new hobbies; Goal 2: Gaining an improved sense of self-worth, purpose, and direction in life and; Goal 3: Being able to address practical day-to-day essentials. Our sample narrated the impact of establishing their own collective mutual aid group goals with expressions of a sense of ownership and agency:

> *having this [agreement], it's sort of filled…it's give us a purpose again. I've been and done recovery but wasn't…not really as happy as I used to be but I am now with this [group] because I can do [achieve] my goals- to help others so they don't have to go through this and make sure if can make a difference or be part of making a difference, because yeah it's just it's, it's only my life but my experience of all that and the isolation, I don't want other people to go through that (Thomas, Longitudinal interview).*

Having generated their own set of goals that were meaningful to them, the mutual aid worker facilitated group discussion of potential strategies towards realising these goals. Each of the 5 mutual aid groups all decided independently that they needed more detailed

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[4] Weaver, B., and McNeill, F. (2015). Lifelines: Desistance, social relations, and reciprocity. *Criminal justice and behavior*, *42*(1), 95-107.

knowledge and information to inform their goal achievement plans. To address the goal of addressing practical day-to-day issues for example, each of the five groups decided they required knowledge and information about organisations, agencies and services that could potentially help them. The groups came up with individual list of the agencies, services and processes they felt they needed to know more about in their locality, which are drawn together here:

> *'The Bermuda-triangle that is health care'; 'How the benefits system works'; 'What a P45 is'; 'Budgeting'; 'PTSD and Gulf-war syndrome'; 'Where are the veteran-friendly local services located'; 'Help with finding accommodation'; 'How do I find out about local hobby groups'; 'Where to go to make new friends' (Workshop 1 and 2, researcher notes).*

Facilitated by the mutual aid practitioner, mutual aid groups discussions then turned to consider how to go about accessing the information they required. They decided to invite key agencies they had identified to talk to the group. This meant individual group members accepting the responsibility of contacting relevant local, regional, and national organisations:

> *It took me a month of contacting everyone to get us that slot with the Job Centre, but it was worth it. The group got a lot out of it (Stuart, Interview 2).*

Our sample narrated embracing these collective obligations and responsibilities and reflected on their successes which also increased individual members sense of agency and capability:

> *It's helped being able to go out into the world and sort of realise…those speakers, it's like changed my thinking (William, Interview 2).*

> *It's been a chapter in my life that I'm able to look back on and I've learnt a heck of a lot from. It's that switch that turns on to give me, us, that stability and pride (Phillip, Longitudinal interview).*

This illustrates a collective process from which individual mutual aid group members narrated as learning they could also "become better problem solvers in all areas of life" (Steinberg, 2014, p. 5):

I can self-motivate now and focus on something that needs doing. The [mutual aid group] taught me that, and now I go "Right I'm going to make this the best thing because I've got the opportunity to" and just you know.... Bam! There you go, and it was like I was searching for that because I'd lost it and you know.... so I sort of re-found that, that spark, that drive" (Jack, Interview 2).

be[ing] able to think on your own, just be[ing] able to think on your feet, problem solving (Ned, Interview 2).

Many of the mutual aid group members began attending mentoring training in their locality. Each of the five groups benefitted from their existing connection to the national alcohol and drug service, meaning ease of access into an existing Recovery Champion training scheme. Once initial volunteering training had been completed, it is important to note that many of the mutual aid groups members went on to seek out volunteering roles in local organisations which were neither military history nor substance misuse related:

Between this group and my local church, when I am helping them – I am not only just helping them I am helping myself as well (Robert, Longitudinal interview).

I help out, a few hours every week at the local football club and a few hours at the fishing club I go to – just with its finances and stuff (Phillip, Interview 2)

These findings illustrate how a newly generated group setting can be the context in which the rights and responsibilities of citizenship can be given practical expression (Faulkner, 2003). This section outlines the mutual aid group practice dynamics facilitation of the mobilisation of social capital building resources from the micro-, and into meso-level relational desistance contexts. Our analysis illustrates how engaging in social capital mobilisation at the meso-level facilitated the transition from apathy and immobilization to having a sense of purpose in life for our sample.

Linking social capital at the macro level of relational desistance

On entry to the mutual aid initiative our respondents narrated a sense of hopelessness and effective disenfranchisement from wider society. Our sample's experience of social isolation and goal failure culminating in the resignation to the "impossibility of them living a fuller life" (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016, p. 575). However, by follow up, many of the sample

narrated having secured a further significant subjective realignment, narrated as having secured a sense of social inclusion and citizenship status at the meso-sphere of relational desistance. Mutual aid group members narrated how their group discussions had increasingly turned their attention to contributing to wider Armed forces community-related decision-making settings. As a cornerstone of the mutual aid group process, these activist-linked tendencies can be seen as individuals coming "together as a force of advocacy or social change" at the macro-level of civic engagement (Steinberg, 2014, p. 15):

> *We take it in turns to go along to the Armed Forces Covenant meetings – where decisions are made regionally. If we all stick together, we can get more achieved hopefully on a national level that way (Peter, Longitudinal interview).*

Volunteering is considered one of the most prominent indicators of active citizenship in the UK (Lie, Baines and Wheelock, 2009), but, from a desistance perspective, our findings highlight a range of activities at the macro-level of civic and democratic decision-making spheres, which epitomise "social and interactional processes of empowerment and reintegration" (Maruna, 2001, p. 13). The potential role of citizenship values and status has been established as a common element involved in the longer-term process of moving away from crime (Farrall, 2014). These processes are characterised as movement from "a stigmatized status as outsiders to full democratic participation as stakeholders" (Uggen, Manza and Thompson, 2006, p. 283).

Due to the group's successes in achieving their mutual aid goals at the meso-level, members narrated increasingly turning their attention to addressing the stigma associated with the rising numbers of military veterans in addiction, criminal justice, and mental health services. In this way, the step from micro- to meso- then to macro-level relational desistance illustrates the impact of the mutual aid practice dynamic of 'rehearsal' (Steinberg, 2014). Framed by desistance framework narratives, exposure to these relational-based interactional dynamics can be seen as having provided a safe environment in which problem-solving strategies could be rehearsed and amended (Bottoms and Shapland, 2011).

The sample narrated having gained strength and courage to have committed to a new resolve 'in-action', illuminating the impact of the 'strength in numbers' dynamic of mutual aid practice (Steinberg, 2014). An increasingly coherent and positive 'military veteran

citizenship' (Albertson et al., 2017, p 73) identity was evidenced as groups progressed from generating social capital resource opportunities from meso into macro levels of relational desistance. Illustrating a group-based civic expression of action which can range "from the use of group force to advocate on behalf of one of its members to the use of its collective muscle to promote social action" (Steinberg, 2014, p. 37):

> *We've organised a few sponsored walks to help out some local charities. Great feeling. That and all the people on the streets shouting us on, smiling and waving. It felt really great and not the kind of attention I am used to! (David, Longitudinal interview).*

> *We manned a stall in the city centre – talked to loads of people (...). Everyone seemed really impressed with the work we were doing (Thomas, Life-history interview).*

The mutual aid group members mobilised their resources by engaging with wider institutions in civic society, such as joining community steering boards, organisational committees, and associations. This also included contacting national Armed Forces related charities to secure opportunities to contribute to service provision decisions and national debates:

> *I have been to London and spoke to the top bosses there. We met the top man from XXX in London. That was a proud moment. I have been in and gone into conferences. We've given talks about what we [the mutual aid group] are about (Robert, Life-history interview).*

> *I'm actually doing a couple of talks for them in different places across [the region] (David, Life-history interview).*

> *My goal is to y'know is to talk to as many people as I can – the higher up the better to make sure if I can make a difference or be part of making a difference (Jack, Life history interview).*

> *I've been down to Portcullis House at Parliament or whatever you call it. So, I have mingled in with all the top brass there and spoke to them (Thomas, Life-history interview).*

These findings are suggestive of the broadening of vertical social capital horizons, in a process mirroring the "re-communalising [of] the disenfranchised" (Arrigo and Takahashi, 2006, p. 313). Here, the mutual aid groups generated and mobilised the kinds of social capital through which they could achieve a sense of participation and inclusion in society at the macro-level (Farrall, 2002). In this section our analysis identifies engagement in macro-level activity as facilitating a subjective realignment re-positioned group members from disenfranchised individual status to agents with a sense of social inclusion and citizenship.

A social capital building process model

The social capital building process model presented below visually represents the theoretically informed progressions identified as facilitating these subjective realignments. Our model integrates the types, levels and characteristics of social capital building opportunities as they correspond to levels of relational desistance (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). An additional aim of presenting our social capital building process model here is to prompt further empirical and theoretical discussion.

Figure 1 here.

Discussion

Our analysis maps the evolution of the social capital building process from micro- through to meso-level spheres linked to the collective relational mechanisms embedded in mutual aid practice. The mutual aid model is thus conceptualised here as a sustainable and tangible objective relational structure providing opportunities to change the direction of one's life, and reconfigure their relationships with, and to, families, communities and the state (Weaver, 2013a).

Our findings illustrate how mutual aid practice dynamics facilitated the building of positive social capital opportunities alongside providing the motivation to mobilise these resources (though group members would not think in those terms). Following Nugent and Schinkel (2016), we highlight that, despite our sample's pre-project experience being characterised by social isolation, goal failure and hopelessness, their subsequent engagement with the project culminated in significant subjective transformations. We have effectively detailed a

process via which our respondents achieved "situating" themselves differently than previously (Farrall, et al., 2010, pp. 552–3).

The development of a mutual aid agreement described here can be seen as effectively representing or encapsulating the priorities, values, aspirations, and largely relational concerns that are generated by – and therefore meaningful to – its group members (Porporino, 2010; Weaver, 2013a). Further, given the range of activities outlined at the macro-level of relational desistance, our findings reinforce the potential opportunities created via utilising the social movement lens (Maruna, 2017).

The mutual aid model process it is an extremely dynamic process to capture, as any desistance supporting potential is uniquely co-produced in a very specific group setting. Hence the activities and goals undertaken by other mutual aid group projects may differ. This issue however is as an inherent limitation of any small qualitative study. Due to the lack of project drop-out data gained in the original evaluation these findings also potentially represent exaggerated success claims, as detailed in the methods section. However, as the main focus of this present study was to identify the process via which successful social building processes occur, these concerns were somewhat mitigated. The small sample of five mutual aid groups made up of solely of military veterans may also be considered as impeding the potential generalisability of the intervention to wider (ex-) offender populations. Addressing these potential limitations however informed the study's aim of identifying successful process elements by establishing theoretical generalisations that may be applied outside the specific research setting (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003[5]).

Our theoretically informed social capital building process model identifies progressions between enabling relational contexts and sources of social capital from micro- through meso- to macro-spheres of relational desistance. Our analysis illustrates that the motivation and agency underpinning the building of new capital resources are mobilised via valued meanings emerging from relational context which appear "out of the very way in which figurations of relationships … are patterned and operate" (Emirbayer, 1997, pp. 291, 292).

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[5] Lewis, J., and Ritchie, J. (2003) Generalising from qualitative research, in Lewis, J., and Ritchie, J. (eds) Qualitative research Practice, London: Sage, pp 263-286.

Conclusion

This study provides new insights into the relationship between social capital building and desistance. Conceptualising the social work model of mutual aid practice as an objective relational structure, we have illuminated an example of the interaction of agency and structure involved in building new social capital resources that support desistance. Our theoretically informed social capital building process model is an original contribution to the further theorisation of the relationship between desistance and social capital.

We acknowledge a lack of a full consideration of wider theoretical and conceptual difficulties pertaining to our prioritising interpretive meanings and social interactions (c.f Muncie and McLaughlin, 1997[6]), which are particularly pertinent to discourses surrounding the veteran in criminal justice debate (Albertson, 2019; Banks and Albertson, 2018; Albertson, Banks and Murray, 2017). Notwithstanding, this study adds to existing calls for desistance scholars attend to co-produced relational opportunities as "an explicit component and criteria" (McCulloch, 2021, p. 418). Our study further emphasises that the motivation to mobilise social capital resources supporting desistance are "defined and conceptualised relationally" (Weaver, 2012, p. 397: Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). This study reinforces calls for a broader conceptualisation of relational-based interventions underpinning social capital building supporting desistance, as we align with the wider co-operative, mutual aid or co-desistance research context, which is currently still in its infancy (Bazemore, 1996; Maruna and LeBel, 2012; Weaver and McCulloch, 2012; Weaver, 2013a; 2013b, 2015, 2016; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; McCulloch, 2021; Albertson et al., 2020).

Ultimately, while interventions can support desistance, it is established that desistance exists largely independently of criminal justice interventions (McNeill, 2006). Yet excluded and stigmatised communities commonly have little in the way of social capital resources on which to build (c.f. Farrall, Bottoms and Shapland, 2010). We contend that identifying opportunities to engage the "unpredictable but latent power of groups" (Halsey and Mizzi, 2022, p. 14) from within the communities (ex-) offenders already belong, may reveal more effective, if not more disruptive avenues (McCulloch, 2021) to supporting long term transformational change.

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[6] Muncie, J., and McLaughlin, E. (2001) Introduction: Reading the problem of crime, in Muncie, J., and McLaughlin, E. (Eds) The problem of crime, Second edition, London: Sage.

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Notes

1. Analogical thinking is what we do when we use information from one domain (the source or analogy) to help solve a problem in another domain (the target). Thinking by analogy helps to bring about creativity and insight and is a system of thought that can be learned. Analogic thinking is characterised by extrapolations from the familiar to the unfamiliar- an important problem-solving skill

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Figure 1: A theoretically informed social capital building process model.

Levels of social capital	Levels of relational desistance	Nine mutual aid practice dynamics	Subjective re-alignments	Social capital building process model
Relational/ bonding social capital	Micro-level: Immediate setting.	Knowledge/ data sharing Dialectical	Solitude and resignation To: Acceptance, sense of self-worth, and hope	**Stage 1:** Strength-based, enabling relational experience
				Stage 2: Capacity building: Problem solving
Cognitive/ bridging social capital	Meso-level: Wider community.	Taboo Universal perspective Mutual support Mutual demand	Apathy and immobilization To: A sense of purpose in life and generativity	**Stage 3:** Committing to and working towards achieving group authored goals
				Stage 4: Engaging in the local community/ generativity
Structural/ linking social capital	Macro-level: Society as a whole.	Individual problem solving Rehearsal Strength in numbers	Disenfranchised To: A sense of social inclusion and citizenship	**Stage 5:** Input into regional service delivery decision-making settings
				Stage 6: Input into national service delivery decision-influencing settings/ debates