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Desistance Habitus: Strategically using Experience in Practice

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Abstract:	<p>This article introduces the forward-thinking concept of Desistance Habitus. The analysis and approach are situated within an auto-ethnographical embodied insider experience of navigating both persistent criminality and the revolving door of incarceration through to the transition into employment within statutory youth justice services. The auto-ethnographic analysis is posited within Bourdieu's conceptual frameworks of Habitus, Capital, Field, and Doxa to analyse the relational dynamic that underpins the axiomatic understanding of many peer mentors when they work with mentees in the criminal justice system. It is argued through lived experience that these constructs provide an innovative approach to explore how legitimacy is obtained through the strategic use of habitus within the relational dynamic between those involved in the criminal justice system - persistent offenders - and criminal justice professionals who have been exposed to similar lived experiences of persistent crime and punishment. This method of analysis is lacking within the limited criminological investigation that has taken place on peer mentors in criminal justice practice. The data suggests that both street and carceral experiences can engender legitimacy and credibility which generates the ability to promote desistance pathways as a strategic tool within criminal justice practice.</p>

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Desistance Habitus: Strategically using Experience in Practice

Abstract

This article introduces the forward-thinking concept of Desistance Habitus. The analysis and approach are situated within an auto-ethnographical embodied insider experience of navigating both persistent criminality and the revolving door of incarceration through to the transition into employment within statutory youth justice services. The auto-ethnographic analysis is posited within Bourdieu's conceptual frameworks of Habitus, Capital, Field, and Doxa to analyse the relational dynamic that underpins the axiomatic understanding of many peer mentors when they work with mentees in the criminal justice system. It is argued through lived experience that these constructs provide an innovative approach to explore how legitimacy is obtained through the strategic use of habitus within the relational dynamic between those involved in the criminal justice system - persistent offenders - and criminal justice professionals who have been exposed to similar lived experiences of persistent crime and punishment. This method of analysis is lacking within the limited criminological investigation that has taken place on peer mentors in criminal justice practice. The data suggests that both street and carceral experiences can engender legitimacy and credibility which generates the ability to promote desistance pathways as a strategic tool within criminal justice practice.

Keywords: Desistance, Habitus, Capital, Bourdieu, Peer Mentors, Legitimacy

Introduction

This article outlines how lived experience can be used strategically by practitioners with first-hand knowledge of crime and punishment through an autoethnographic reflection of how I leveraged personal experiences of crime and imprisonment to build legitimacy and cultural acceptance as a youth justice practitioner. Utilizing Bourdieu's conceptual frameworks of Habitus, Capital, Field, and Doxa, I will analyse how these concepts emerge and interact within criminal and carceral social contexts, demonstrating their transferability from one field to another, particularly from the street to the carceral field. Throughout this article, I will trace my transition through childhood poverty, crime, and incarceration to youth justice practice, situating my autoethnographic analysis within Bourdieu's sociological framework that explains human behaviour in different social settings. I will present my current positionality as a Senior Lecturer in a university that builds on my personal experience of four prison sentences for various criminal offences, providing a unique perspective on the analysis and reflexive approach of being both an 'insider' and 'outsider' simultaneously.

I will engage with and discuss desistance theory and outline my own experience of the process and introduce the new concept of Desistance Habitus which closely aligns with the findings of a U.S. study on 'The Professional-Ex' (Brown, 1991), which explored how practitioners utilized their previously stigmatized identities—formed through deviant acts—to operate effectively within institutions treating drugs, alcohol, and eating disorders. Desistance being the causal process which underpins why people involved in persistent offending cease the behaviour and maintain a crime free life (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Maruna & Farrall, 2004). There are various theoretical frameworks that aim to explain how the desistance process takes

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3 place, but ‘critically, there is no agreed upon one theory that can adequately explain how and
4 why people stop offending in general’ (Weaver, 2019: 653).
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10 Bourdieu’s contributions to criminological research provide a crucial entry point for
11 analysing criminalized groups, state power, and inequality, all of which are integral to
12 criminological theory and research. His concepts offer practical ‘thinking tools’ applicable in
13 social scientific analysis (Fraser & Sandeberg, Forthcoming: 5). Thus, I will scrutinize my
14 personal journey from prisoner to youth justice practitioner through Bourdieu’s lens,
15 demonstrating how knowledge, habits and legitimacy can be developed through experience to
16 foster an intuitive understanding of crime, punishment, and desistance by those closely
17 acquainted with the phenomenon. Furthermore, I will reflect on how my street and carceral
18 experiences became a central feature to my work with children and young people encountering
19 the law in youth justice practice. Ultimately, I will argue that I utilized my street and carceral
20 habitus to cultivate legitimacy and trust within criminal and carceral fields. I will present data
21 that outlines how I strategically combined these habitus elements to obtain legitimacy and trust
22 from those I worked with within youth justice practice and simultaneously operated as a
23 professional within a criminal justice institution and define this as Desistance Habitus.
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45 To develop the concept of Desistance Habitus, this article will highlight the importance
46 of insider knowledge and provide an overview of autoethnography as a methodology.
47 Autoethnography is used to gather rich, in-depth data from marginalized groups, offering
48 unique insights through the collection of insider perspectives. The article will illustrate how
49 Desistance Habitus can be operationalised in criminal justice and youth justice practice. To
50 contextualise the concept and ensure Desistance Habitus builds on current theoretical and
51 empirical foundations, the article will critically evaluate and engage with criminological
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3 literature which has capitalised on Bourdieu's sociological frameworks. This will include
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5 engaging with street habitus and carceral habitus as concepts and outlining my own
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7 interpretation of how the carceral experience can shape habitus positively, moving away from
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9 a deficit lens towards previously incarcerated people, which is critical to understanding how
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11 people with lived experience of crime and prison operate as criminal justice professionals or
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13 peer mentors. The article will then conclude by presenting an overview of how these complex
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15 social fields and concepts can converge and evolve into Desistance Habitus.
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21 **From the Inside Out**

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26 Robert Merton (1972), in his seminal work defined the insider-outsider concept as an
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28 epistemological principle focused on the challenges researchers can have in accessing data
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30 when undertaking ethnographic investigation as outsiders of the group being studied. He
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32 argued that 'insiders are the members of specified groups and collectivities or occupants of
33
34 specified social statuses; outsiders are the non-members' (Merton, 1972: 2). It is under the
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36 guise of this insider epistemology that this article will undertake a collection of data through
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38 self-reflexivity and the unique position of being an insider of the transition from criminal and
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40 prisoner to becoming a youth justice practitioner with lived experience of crime and prison.
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42 The article will evaluate *why* peer mentors (Buck, 2020) can be effective criminal justice
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44 practitioners, that builds on criminological understanding that has found peer mentors have the
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46 capacity to 'care, listen and encourage small steps' (Buck, 2018: 203). After all, these features
47
48 of practice are hardly unique to professionals with lived experience of transitioning from
49
50 persistent offending to crime free lives. Coupled with this unique insider status,
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52 autoethnography can be a methodology grounded in subjectivity that allows subjugated groups
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54 exposed to racism, classicism, heterosexism, sexism, and critically for this article and data
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3 collection, incarceration to resist oppression and interrogate power through the use of cultural
4 voice in research (Calafell & Moreman, 2009; Denzin, 1997; Jones, 2005; Warren, 2001).
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6 There is currently little to no investigation undertaken on peer mentors that is carried out by
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8 the insider perspective of those with lived experience of the transition *and* practice.
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10 Nevertheless, this article addresses this limitation, elevates a previously excluded voice, and
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12 provides embodied knowledge (Tanaka, 2011).
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20 Critically evaluating narrative criminology and criminological research as an endeavour
21 conducted by researchers in positions of power, Rebecca Bunn (2023: 1563) argues that
22 criminologists researching criminalized individuals without firsthand experience engage in a
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24 ‘discursive fascination’ that relies on a ‘privilege of distance.’ As someone with firsthand
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26 experience of the transition from crime and prison to youth justice practice—the focus of this
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28 article and the framework underpinning the exploration of peer mentor practice in criminal
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30 justice—one strength of this approach is that it provides an insider's perspective on the
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32 phenomenon being investigated. However, a recognized limitation of such an approach is its
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34 reliance on memory, subjectivity, and positionality, which inevitably influence the researcher’s
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36 epistemological stance. I make no apology for this. Furthermore, a common critique of
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38 autoethnography as a research method is the need to situate personal narratives within broader
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40 social, cultural, or political frameworks (Reed-Danahay, 2021). While it is important to
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42 acknowledge Bunn's (2023) argument, one could also propose that a solution-focused approach
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44 to addressing this ‘discursive fascination’ would involve criminologists with a ‘privilege of
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46 distance’ recognizing and valuing the lived experiences of those with a ‘privilege of insight.’
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48 This approach can help prevent criminology from becoming a field where scholars engage only
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50 with work that aligns with their own views, write for like-minded audiences, and publish
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3 exclusively in journals that they and their colleagues already read (Bosworth & Hoyle, 2012:
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5 3; see also Maruna & Liem, 2021).
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10 In recognition of the strengths and limitations of the insider epistemology,
11 autoethnography presents an emerging qualitative research methodology that enables the
12 author to provide embodied lived experience as data and seeks to disrupt canonical ways of
13 doing research (Ellie et al., 2011). The methodology allows for investigation of a phenomenon
14 by using the personal analysis of experience as a ‘way of acknowledging the self that was
15 always there anyway and of exploring personal connections to our culture’ (Wall, 2006: 178).
16 I will therefore use this method to reflect on the embodied skills and knowledge that can be
17 assembled within the prison terrain and how prisoners can – and often do – develop legitimate
18 knowledge and skill sets in the street and carceral fields that can – and often is – transferred
19 into employment and even education. Indeed, it is this basis that underpins the framework of
20 *Convict Criminology* (Aresti et al., 2012; Earle, 2018; Richards & Ross, 2001; Ross et al.,
21 2014), a research field that enriches criminological thinking through the inclusion of
22 knowledge and skill sets of formerly incarcerated prisoners. This autoethnographic analysis
23 will illustrate the transition of legitimacy, knowledge, and competency as key features that
24 develop respect in crime and prison as social fields into criminal justice practice to build on the
25 limited criminological investigation into peer mentors (Buck, 2020) from a unique inside
26 perspective (Brierley, 2023).
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51 **Street Habitus**

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56 Individuals developing embodied skills, knowledge and behaviours that formulate
57 human perceptions, actions, predispositions, behaviours, and habits is what Pierre Bourdieu
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3 originally defined as *Habitus* (Bourdieu, 2017). To fully grasp the concept of any form of
4 habitus and its relevance, it is essential to first understand Bourdieu's initial conceptualization
5 of habitus and its functioning. Bourdieu describes habitus as the partly unconscious
6 assimilation of the rules, values, and dispositions that shape our behaviours and social practices
7 (Bourdieu, 1990). He defines it as the 'durably installed generative principle of regulated
8 improvisations... [which produces] practices' (Bourdieu, 1977: 78). In simpler terms, habitus
9 can be understood as the 'ingrained values and dispositions derived from our cultural history,
10 which generally persist across different contexts' (Webb et al., 2002: 44). These values and
11 dispositions enable us to respond to cultural rules and contexts in diverse ways, allowing for
12 improvisation and so evolution, but 'our responses are largely regulated by our past cultural
13 experiences' (Webb et al., 2002: 44). Drawing on how habitus applies to criminality and street
14 living as a unique understanding of skills and knowledge that is developed by those navigating
15 criminality and social exclusion was first defined by Loic Wacquant (2002) as *Street Habitus*
16 and later developed by Fraser (2013) outlining that street space can ingrain in a street identity.

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19 Sandberg & Pedersen (2011) outlined how street habitus can form into capital in their
20 Norwegian study exploring how socially excluded black and refugee males develop Street
21 Capital selling drugs at The River to obtain respect and self-esteem. The researchers used the
22 French Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concepts that are capitalised on here as theoretical
23 frameworks for analysis and found that the young men developed skills and competencies that
24 created an ability to perform successfully within social and economic contexts of
25 marginalization and as a result coined the term *Street Capital*. In arguing that narrative and
26 language are central to the development of forms of capital within the street, Sandburg &
27 Fleetwood (2016) posit that stories of crime business, violence, drugs, and the hard life
28 produces and even upholds forms of street capital. Sandburg & Fleetwood, (2016: 378) also

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3 argue that ‘Bourdieuian studies of the street field illustrate the importance of social structure
4 in shaping individual action, through the notions of street habitus, capital and field’ (see also
5 Bourdieu, 2002). Sandberg (2008) also posits that ‘in the context of violent street culture, street
6 capital can be seen in the actor’s mastery of criminal activity and violence within a street culture
7 prescribing values with its own rewards, gains, profits, and sanctions’ (Sandberg, 2008: 157).
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19 The practical application of habitus is best illustrated by one of Bourdieu’s most famous
20 quotes: ‘when the habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself as
21 a fish in water; it does not feel the weight of water and takes the world about itself for granted’
22 (Bourdieu, 1989: 43). This metaphor highlights how individuals with a natural understanding
23 of a particular social world, such as the criminal and street fields, seamlessly navigate and take
24 that world for granted. Street habitus, specifically, is shaped by structural inequalities and
25 evolves as a cultural product, adding nuance to the longstanding sociological debate about
26 agency and structure (Sandberg, 2008). Being a fish in water in criminal fields represents a
27 habitus that can be identified, validated, and respected within street and criminal relational
28 contexts, yet is often rejected or misunderstood by the wider public (Sandberg & Pedersen,
29 2011; Wacquant, 2002). This form of habitus is crucial for understanding how individuals from
30 marginalized backgrounds develop the competencies, skills, and knowledge necessary to
31 navigate and develop capital in the street and criminal fields yet not possess the skills required
32 by employers or colleges. By recognizing the legitimacy of street habitus, we can better
33 appreciate how those with firsthand experience in such social contexts can contribute to fields
34 like youth and criminal justice practice, such as peer mentors (Buck, 2017; Buck, 2018; Buck,
35 2020), as we can better understand the value placed on surviving such social contexts.
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Knowing how to play the Carceral Game

Drawing on first-hand experience as thick data, I will outline how legitimacy, knowledge, and competency are key features that often play a role in how prisoners can navigate and manage the carceral sphere ‘without’ being dependent on hegemonic conduct or asserting power over others, which requires specific contextual knowledge of prison and criminal relationships, often obtained prior to incarceration, but can certainly be developed and enhanced throughout a prison sentence[s]. It is from personal experience of prison that I draw on the skills, knowledge, and developed understanding of prison life that is often pivotal to obtaining homosocial respect, validation and recognition which enables one to manage difficult and at times dangerous social situations. I have previously written about my experience of habitus in prison, outlining that ‘it wasn’t about fighting, it was about making others think you were willing to fight. Then keeping certain people close so they wouldn’t bother you. This came naturally to me. I would use my skills to make friends, this made it easier for me to build relationships with like-minded kids’ (Brierley, 2019: 90).

Linked to his concept of habitus are Bourdieu’s concepts of *Doxa* and *Fields*. *Doxa*, according to Bourdieu is ‘a set of core values and discourses which a field articulates as its fundamental principles and which tend to be viewed as inherently true and necessary’ (see Webb et al., 2002: x). In the street and criminal culture, I have personally obtained capital using specific values, performance to the culture and participating in specific language or behaviours such as rejecting authority and knowing how to deal with conflict confidently and without being perceived as vulnerable. This required developing mannerisms and strategies over time that would project the idea that I was ‘tough.’ I would learn to walk a certain way, dress a certain way, and use language such as, ‘listen, I can have it [fight] with anyone ya know.’ This

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3 would be slightly embedded in humour, but would outwardly suggest that I am tough, when
4 the truth is that I was using my developed street habitus to present this as a reality, yet it was
5 often on shakey ground. I would always prefer to avoid violence where possible and be
6 reluctant upon the thought of having to get involved in interpersonal violence. These are ways
7 the street field articulates the fundamental principles of the street and shapes street habitus.
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17 Fields, according to Bourdieu are a social metaphor outlining different sites of cultural
18 practice. Shamma & Sandburg (2015: 100) propose that ‘fields revolve around social games,
19 a term that is not intended to make light of the activities involved, but rather to draw attention
20 to the fact that they are activities that involve certain rules and logics that nevertheless permit
21 a certain spontaneous and skilled engagement with social reality.’ Therefore, although there
22 are similarities between the street and the prison as social and cultural fields, there are also
23 distinct differences in rules, language, values, discourses, and expectations [Doxa]. I argue here
24 then that both social fields require slightly different types of habitus to be successful within
25 different sites of cultural practice or the game. One example is that street rules do not include
26 having to manage the intense nature of prison rules within the total institution and expectations
27 of the prison hierarchy or the carceral game. The following data from my incarceration
28 experience illustrates this point: ‘I even began selling tobacco but only to new inmates and I
29 tried to keep this quiet. I would undercut most people and give a quarter-of-an-ounce for a half-
30 an-ounce back. The going rate was an eighth for a half. I kept to a select few which meant I
31 didn’t get into conflict’ (Brierley, 2019: 94). I didn’t have to consider these prison rules when
32 I sold heroin in the community which was the crime that resulted in my first prison sentence at
33 17 years old.
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Through my embodied experiences of various episodes of incarceration, I found that to obtain a level of symbolic capital – cultural or social - or credibility within the harsh conditions of prison life, one must know how to navigate the cultural street game *and* carceral game. A recognised embodied skill that seems to have had limited criminological investigation in peer mentor practice. The doxa within each field is shaped by where (and who) we have been ‘in culture,’ and the carceral doxa requires a specific cultural capital that shapes what Caputo-Levine, (2012) defined as *Carceral Habitus*. Although there is a clear intersect with Street Habitus, they are *not* quite the same in terms of knowing the Doxa or sense of the game of the street or the prison as individual social fields. In specifically exploring how field theory can contribute to criminological investigation, Shammass & Sandburg (2016: 201) explain that a ‘university student might come to expand their vocabulary or learn to write essays according to certain formula, so too might drug dealers come to learn how to measure out a pound of cannabis without the aid of a scale or come to adopt preferences for clothing or music specific to their world.’ In my experience, it is one thing to be able to measure a pound of cannabis (or heroin) in the street in one’s local area, but something else to walk onto a prison landing in the carceral field and navigate the regional and at times national field with confidence and competence.

This may be a result of what Bourdieu describes as the *Cultural Field* (Bourdieu, 2002) which he explains takes place when ‘groups or individuals attempt to determine what constitutes capital within that field and how that capital is to be distributed’ (Webb et al., 2002: x). Caputo-Levine (2012: 175) first coined the term *Carceral Habitus* within an ethnographical study of formerly incarcerated people accessing the Second Chance project, an agency that provides various services to people who have been incarcerated or on an Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) programme in New York, United States. Although the study focussed more

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3 on the negative outcomes of how the carceral field can and does shape a prisoner's habitus, the
4 study does highlight that 'men who are more insecure in their identities are likely to use
5 aggression to bolster their masculine identity.....' Furthermore, that 'men with better, more
6 secure self-images are likely to be men who are better at negotiating the prison environment'
7 (2012: 168). This component of the theoretical concept aligns closely with my argument that
8 not all prisoners have access to capital in custody, and often, from my perspective and
9 experience, those with most valued carceral habitus – skills, competencies, and knowledge -
10 would access most cultural and social capital, thus requiring less involvement in interpersonal
11 violence to obtain capital, whether social or cultural. Therefore, I offer a nuance to the concept
12 that leans 'away' from a solely focussing on the deficits and leans 'into' the skills and carceral
13 habitus required to navigate prison well.
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31 Having legitimate capital within the prison hierarchy requires one to have access to street
32 *and* carceral habitus through an embodied understanding of the culture, not solely the ability
33 to assert violence on others, but a strategic and embodied position of making others believe
34 that we can take care of ourselves and 'build relationships' in prison without having to perform
35 violence (Brierley, 2019: 90). This would require a knowledge of how to strategically enter a
36 prison room, how to greet someone new and how to speak in a way that was validated and
37 respected to uphold any form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). This carceral habitus was
38 something I obtained whilst incarcerated. Although I knew how to manage the street field to
39 generate street capital, it took some time to generate carceral capital though carceral habitus. I
40 argued that it was the 'survival of the fittest and I was used to it from all the poor role models
41 in my life. Although the violence was intense, I quickly adapted to it as this was all I'd
42 experienced from a young age. It was the regime, language, knowledge of other criminals and
43 lack of criminal knowledge that I was struggling with' (Brierley, 2019: 101). This data outlines
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3 that in both the street and carceral fields, habitus generates cultural and social capital and as a
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5 result often shapes how we practice maintaining that status.
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10 **Habitus and Social Practice**

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15 These guises of varying capital manifest into forms of Habitus as a ‘resource of
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17 knowledge’ (Huang, 2019: 45). Returning to Fraser & Sandberg’s (Forthcoming: 6) overview
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19 of Bourdieu’s criminological contribution, they outline that ‘Bourdieu’s formula $\text{Habitus} \times$
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21 $\text{Capital} + \text{Field} = \text{Practice}$ suggests, the interaction of all three elements is what produces social
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23 practice.’ This equation illuminates how street and carceral habitus can generate cultural and
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25 social capital to develop how we practice in street and carceral fields. Furthermore, within the
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27 context of criminal justice practice, this illustrates how professionals who have developed street
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29 and carceral habitus can strategically use such habitus features to develop cultural and social
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31 capital from those who remain involved in persistent offending as practitioners or peer mentors.
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33 I argue that professionals can activate their street and carceral habitus to promote non-offending
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35 lives for others which are key principles of what underpins the effectiveness of wounded
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37 healers, experiential peers, and peer mentors in criminal justice practice (Buck, 2020; Lebel et
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39 al., 2015; Lenkens et al., 2021).
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47 Both street and carceral habitus can generate varying forms of cultural and social capital
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49 within the criminal hierarchy that is not solely based on hypermasculinity or hegemonic
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51 structures, but instinctively understanding the culture, knowledge and skills acquired over time
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53 to develop a ‘sense of the game’ and validate homosocial relationships (Fraser & Sandberg,
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55 Forthcoming: 6). The notion of capital itself is any resource that can be accessed or acquired
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57 in a structured arena or social field that produces specific benefits, developed within that arena
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3 (Bourdieu, 1985). The knowledge criminal justice professionals require for recruitment into
4 practice which generates professional capital, respect or validation is often academic
5 qualification, professional training, or previous service delivery experience. This ‘conflict of
6 warrants to knowledge’ (Brierley, in press) is a challenge that I experienced through the
7 transition from prisoner to criminal justice practitioner, that has lacked criminological
8 investigation. Throughout my professional career, I found that this knowledge was
9 undervalued, disregarded, and misunderstood by many colleagues, who placed this type of
10 knowledge or habitus at the bottom of the hierarchy of knowledge, which has been found in
11 peer mentor research (Creaney, 2020; see also Buck 2018). This tension of priorities between
12 legitimate peer mentor relationships and professional or institutional agendas was outlined in
13 Gill Buck’s research. Buck (2019: 203) argued that ‘even those who excel at this [peer mentor]
14 work may find their skills unrecognized by a criminal justice ‘marketplace’ which is
15 increasingly ‘results’ driven.’ To be a successful ex-prisoner within criminal justice practice,
16 one of my most significant challenges was to embrace and respect both epistemologies, *equally*.

37 **Introducing Desistance Habitus**

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42 Within the criminal justice system, the ‘what works’ programmes, and professional
43 interventions focus on rehabilitation and recidivism (reducing reoffending) as key measures of
44 impact or positive outcomes (McCulloch & McNeill, 2007; see also McGuire, 1999). However,
45 from spending four years in prison myself to then becoming a youth justice practitioner, I have
46 often argued that the missing ingredient to achieving these objectives often overlooked is the
47 absence of legitimate relationships between those delivering criminal justice interventions and
48 those on the receiving end, make achieving any such objective of changing behaviour futile
49 (Brierley, 2021; Brierley, 2023; Brierley & Myles, 2024). Relationship based approaches have
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3 been argued to be key components to offender management within both the community settings
4 by Fergus McNeill (2006) and within the work of co-production in custody by Beth Weaver
5 (2019). Andrew, a 25-year-old young man who I worked with in the youth justice system on
6 licence when he left prison at 18 years old elegantly outlined this position. This is what we
7 found discussing the relational dynamic of him working with me as an ex-prisoner after he had
8 been to prison in our book *Connecting with Young People in Trouble: Risk, Relationships and*
9 *Lived Experience* (Brierley, 2021: 114). He elegantly stated that working with someone with
10 similar life and carceral experience made a significant difference when leaving custody because
11 of where he was in his pathways out of crime. He felt it might not have been required in his
12 earlier years, but once he identified an offender and obtained the label of prisoner, the shared
13 experience made a relational difference.
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33 Andrew states that the reason it was significant to work with someone who had been
34 involved in persistent offending and prison, derives from him developing a similar identity
35 through his embodied experience that we shared. He felt that our connection was due to our
36 shared understanding of the street and carceral environments that shaped our habitus,
37 behaviour, and identity. Andrew went on to further explain how that shared identity through
38 experience shaped the relational connection (Brierley, 2021: 114): ‘You knew how to read me
39 which was rare for justice professionals.’ Andrew explained that he felt other professionals just
40 didn’t quite understand him as organically as I did. Andrew now lives in Australia, but we
41 speak from time to time over the phone and as suggested, if relationships are key components
42 of interventions that enable people to live a crime free life, this data and relational dynamic
43 between people with similar experience of crime and punishment could prove critical to the
44 objective of supporting others to follow in the footsteps of those like me who have made such
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3 a transition and developed an internal redemption script that Maruna (2001) argues can become
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5 generative.
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11 In this interview, Andrew is suggesting that he felt my real life understanding of his
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13 behaviour, values, relational interactions, and communication style was better understood by
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15 myself than other criminal justice professionals, specifically because of where he was on his
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17 own pathway out of criminality, leading to a belief that he would change. He felt that embodied
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19 understanding of mannerisms that develop within criminal and carceral social environments
20
21 were critical to relationship building. Having been on both sides of the criminal justice system
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23 for over two decades, this is something I have intuitively understood to be true. I outlined this
24
25 subjective insider position when I first joined the Youth Justice System in 2007 as a practitioner
26
27 with lived experience of crime and prison, which developed my street and carceral habitus. It
28
29 was a central to my introduction to becoming a youth justice practitioner that I argued in my
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31 memoir (Brierley, 2019: 226):
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40 *'Face-to-face work with the kids wasn't difficult for me. They were labelled as hard to*
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42 *reach due to their disengagement with services and their persistent offending. However, to*
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44 *me they were simply kids from the estates on which I grew up. They were not difficult to be*
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46 *around and opened up to me as I gained their trust. They knew I was a local lad who spoke in*
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48 *a similar way to them, so they didn't view me as authority.'*
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55 This autoethnographic data suggests that embodied street and carceral habitus and
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57 cultural understanding enhances the ability of professionals to access cultural, street capital,
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59 legitimacy and trust when working with those involved in persistent offending. This outlines
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3 that professionals with an embodied understanding of criminal identities, values, behaviours,
4 and perspectives can form a habitus that remains, even if they transition through the desistance
5 process and the habitus can be used strategically in criminal justice practice. Those who have
6 made such a transition, who like me, have persistently offended and gone on to desist were
7 once in a similar position of having their identity develop criminal behaviour and punishment
8 that can result in perceived internalised stigma and alienation (Moore et al., 2016). This is
9 particularly true when considering different identities, cultures, social contexts, and locality.
10 For example, my involvement in criminality is from the perspective of a white, heterosexual
11 youth experiencing poverty in the north of England, and although there are commonalities
12 within groups who travel through the desistance process, for other races, ethnicities, localities,
13 and sexes, there may derive different lessons or produce different strategies, epistemologies,
14 skills, and competencies.
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33 My own experience of the desistance process was one of continual flowing in and out of
34 criminal behaviour, addiction, and prison throughout my childhood years and young adulthood.
35 Nugent & Schinkel (2016) argue that the process of desistance is far from linear and that there
36 are many ‘pains’ attached to transitioning from persistent offending to desisting from
37 criminality, such as leaving those involved in crime behind. This relational pain is intertwined
38 in my present life and remains a constant, as my siblings continue to be involved in crime,
39 children’s service interventions, addiction, and incarceration. However, as the oldest sibling, I
40 remain committed to being a role model for my younger siblings, inevitably creating
41 complexity and a continuing pain to the desistance process. For me personally, the childhood
42 impact of economic and relational poverty, social isolation, adversity, complex trauma, being
43 removed from family as a child and being placed in the care of the local authority means that
44 it is unlikely for me to ‘detach’ from the pre desistance space, in totality. Just because I reached
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3 a point of maturation that enabled me to address the internal consequences of such a traumatic
4 childhood (Brierley, 2019), doesn't mean this is generalisable across families like mine. This
5 reiterates the point of understanding that although there is a desistance process, it is an
6 individual one and should not be generalisable across families, let alone race, gender and
7 ethnicity. However, within my youth justice work in the North of England, my street and
8 carceral habitus affording me legitimacy and cultural capital with children and young people
9 across different races, religions, and genders, often due to sharing locality knowledge, social
10 class, and shared accents with those I worked with (Brierley, 2019).
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25 Although, acknowledging that there is a myriad of ways one would experience being on
26 both sides of the desistance process, nevertheless, there is a process that everyone must travel
27 through, from persistent offending to non-offending behaviour and identity shifts (Maruna,
28 2001). Indeed, both David Honeywell (2023) and Wayne Hart (Hart & Healy, 2018) outline
29 this complexity in their lived experienced contribution to desistance literature, illustrating that
30 desistance can be an iterative process, and one that requires structural support, cognitive
31 transformation, individual agency, and hope for the future. They highlight distinct challenges
32 on a personal level when shifting from one identity to another, which requires acceptance of
33 that new identity and elevation of a new habitus by others. This is critical when recruiting
34 people who can visually demonstrate the transition and use their street and carceral habitus to
35 obtain legitimate relationships with people involved in persistent offending on the other side
36 of the desistance process and become a bridge that develops hope.
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56 Here, I define the concept of *Desistance Habitus*, as 'a dual habitus produced from being
57 on both sides of the desistance process which generates the ability to promote desistance
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3 pathways as a strategic tool within criminal justice practice.’ This definition of Desistance
4
5 Habitus is less concerned about agreeing with any one theoretical framework that explains how
6
7 desistance as a social process takes place but is constructed through the ability to legitimately
8
9 navigate both sides of the process *simultaneously*. Although Desistance Habitus can and does
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11 play a role in less formal settings, in a generative way, it is most relevant as strategic tool in
12
13 the field of criminal justice practice due to it playing a specific role in promoting desistance for
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15 others.
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22 As Andrew outlined, Desistance Habitus allowed me to obtain legitimacy from him in
23
24 practice by strategically activating my habitus prior to desistance to create a safe relationship
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26 by ensuring he understood that I had shared similar mannerisms, behaviours, and perspectives,
27
28 whilst simultaneously working as a youth justice practitioner and developing professional
29
30 credibility through legitimate professional knowledge within the youth justice institution. This
31
32 complexity of managing this myriad of social spaces is no mean feat. Having transitioned
33
34 through the desistance process and allowing justice involved people to know we have been in
35
36 similar positions, seemingly develops an understanding that is readily accessible for
37
38 professional’s and peer mentors with Desistance Habitus. The criminal behaviour is
39
40 discontinued, but the street and carceral habitus remains as an embodied state, constructing a
41
42 relational practice tool that can be used to strategically to develop cultural capital in the
43
44 criminal field. Although there is a growing body of research on the deployment of peer mentors
45
46 in criminal justice practice (Buck, 2020), Bourdieu’s conceptual frameworks seem to offer a
47
48 unique lens of understanding the effectiveness of the approach.
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56 **The Application of Desistance Habitus**

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3 When considering that people with convictions make up 92 percent of offender mentors
4 as peers in parts of England (Buck, 2017: 191), it could be argued that there is a need for
5 empirical investigation of how behaviours that are developed through criminal activity are
6 understood, recognised, or validated by their mentees, such as how Andrew validated mine.
7
8 Transferring into youth justice as a practitioner with personal and extensive experience of crime
9 and punishment, ranging from community disposals to several prison sentences, I developed a
10 way of being, a posture, language and strategy that could always be used whenever I
11 encountered people who have developed a similar habitus from navigating similar fields. An
12 autoethnographic example of Desistance Habitus would be my initial contact with either young
13 people on community disposals or the adults and children I have worked with in custody. I
14 would meet and greet my colleagues and senior staff on a Monday morning with ‘morning,
15 how was your weekend.’ However, just meters away, in the next room, I would meet and greet
16 those on court orders – when it was required – with ‘what’s your weekend sayin.’ This might
17 seem subtle, but this was the habitus I used strategically in the street and in prison ‘to make
18 friends.’ The criminal behaviour may desist, but the behaviours used strategically to obtain
19 legitimacy continues within the embodied state. Further data to illustrate Desistance Habitus
20 can be drawn from another young black male from Zimbabwe I worked with, named Atticus:
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46 *“Then you reoffended and came to the Intensive Supervision and Surveillance*
47 *Programme which I worked within, and I became your key worker. Did you feel having*
48 *someone with a similar criminal history made a difference to the relational experience in*
49 *youth justice?” Atticus stated “Yeah, I really did ya know. I felt relaxed and it didn’t feel like*
50 *you were my worker, it felt like you were a colleague. I felt like yo, Andi understands it so I*
51 *can relax and speak more freely about things without judgement” (Brierley, 2021: 194).*
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6 I intuitively knew that my habitus becomes activated when required to gain, street capital,
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8 legitimacy, respect, and validation from those I worked with who had similar experiences of
9
10 persistent offending. I would walk into a room and greet the children with handshakes or fist
11
12 bumps and approach them in ways that they would recognise as someone who has navigated
13
14 their street environments. I did this subconsciously – at the time - as I would have in prison,
15
16 instead of greeting them with statements such as ‘my names Fred, I am a Youth Justice
17
18 Practitioner, and I am your new case manager’ like my colleagues would often say. I would
19
20 approach them and say ‘where you from, lad/lass. You will be working with me now, so you
21
22 can relax and smile. We are gonna get along like a house on fire. What you are sayin, anyway?’
23
24 From lived experience, I knew that this strategic use of language would make them aware of
25
26 my embodied experience being close to theirs, generating capital, legitimacy, and a level of
27
28 trust within the relationship without verbally communicating anything about my history, but
29
30 demonstrating my Desistance Habitus. All three young men I interviewed in the book
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32 *Connecting with Young People in Trouble* outlined this within a chapter that focussed the
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34 relational dynamic between myself and them, titled *Joint Enterprise* (Brierley, 2019).
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43 **Looking Back through a Different Lens**

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48 My current positionality as a University Lecturer allows me to better understand these
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50 experiences as I am now also an outsider of the criminal justice field and analyse these
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52 experiences through reflexivity that my street and carceral habitus did indeed transition with
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54 me across contexts and remains with me, today on campus. Within the classroom environment
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56 as a field, my Desistance Habitus and understanding of teacher student hierarchies and power
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58 differentials has influenced my pedagogy and how I see and recognise the conventional
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3 education structures as problematic. Due to being excluded from school as a result of being
4 exposed to high doses of relational challenges and adverse childhood experiences (Felitti et al.,
5
6 1998), I have constructed what Paulo Freire (1970) outlined as the critical consciousness of
7
8 how traditional education can create and maintain inequalities through domination, rather than
9
10 liberation. I centre relationships and connections at the heart of the learning environment,
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12 recognising students as co-learners, aiming to reduce the traditional power dynamics that I
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14 rejected in my time of need, creating spaces where voices can be heard.
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22 I now strategically use Desistance Habitus in my current work with children and young
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24 people in a Young Offenders Institution (YOI) on a 10-week Clear Approach project that gives
25
26 voice to children in Wetherby YOI. Even though I work in a university and activate my
27
28 professional habitus with colleagues and students on campus, I will strategically return to my
29
30 street and carceral habitus when I enter the prison to access legitimacy and trust, or to provide
31
32 voice to students who may otherwise be ignored or socially excluded. Again, as soon as I meet
33
34 the youth when they enter the room, I will stand up, fist bump them and say, ‘what’s going on,
35
36 boys. You good, yeah. My name is Andi. I am here to work with ya for a few weeks while
37
38 you’re in here, but I do so because I once sat where you are now.’ Not language I would ever
39
40 use with colleagues on the campus in which I work, due to me working with predominantly
41
42 middle-class colleagues and this wouldn’t make them (nor me) feel comfortable. I do use this
43
44 language if and when I detect it appropriate with students as I work in a widening participation
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46 university and many students have similar habitus features. This does illustrate that the habitus
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48 constructed prior to the desistance process can remain with us and can be activated when
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50 required within practice and pedagogy.
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3 One of the incarcerated youths in Wetherby YOI recently stated in the group that ‘they
4 prefer to work with people who have been to prison because they don’t have to explain
5 everything, they can just focus on a relationship.’ This is the very essence of Desistance
6 Habitus. This has become a conscious [previously subconscious] switch from how I behave in
7 a pro-social space to a pro-criminal social space as a strategic use of Desistance Habitus. This
8 specific use of habitus and how it develops legitimacy in criminal and carceral fields has
9 significance for criminal justice practice and requires further investigation. I have used
10 autoethnographic data to suggest that specific skills can be used strategically as Desistance
11 Habitus and a presented examples of how I would use this in my youth justice practice.
12 Furthermore, I have illustrated how this is recognised by the children and young people as
13 Desistance Habitus. A friend and colleague who has transitioned from the carceral field to
14 youth justice practice in Jersey also believes she uses her habitus and lived experiences in
15 practice (Brierley & Myles, 2024).
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34 Time after time whilst in practice, particularly in the earlier years, I was often told by
35 children and young people I worked with in the youth justice system, that I was more ‘one of
36 them than I was a professional.’ I specifically remember one young man suggesting that I ‘knew
37 what I was talking about, but these lot didn’t know what they were talking about.’ He meant
38 my colleagues who had mostly completed school, grown up in communities that were not
39 infiltrated with drugs and crime, and those who had, for any number of reasons, hadn’t
40 experienced addiction, school exclusion, criminality, and prison, resulting in the development
41 of street and carceral habitus. I specifically recall a young female who had been incarcerated
42 state that ‘it makes you wonder why there are so few professionals that work here like you,
43 Andi. It is so obvious that people who have been involved in offending would make good
44 professionals.’
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3 I believe she meant those who had also stopped offending, but she didn't stipulate that.
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5 It was in a room full of other youth who felt the same. It was a challenge to unpick why they
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7 felt this way as they would claim it was due to other 'staff just reading from textbooks.' I
8
9 believe it was more to do with them not valuing textbook knowledge, but as many of them
10
11 were excluded from school, this isn't a surprise. Desistance Habitus is the ability to promote
12
13 desistance whilst navigating both pro-criminal and pro-social contexts, so this data validates
14
15 the concept as legitimacy was obtained, even though I remained a valued professional and
16
17 member of staff and the children and young people recognised my Desistance Habitus by
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19 distinguishing my difference to many of my colleagues. Not better, or worse, just different, and
20
21 a diverse workforce should be promoted.
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28 Initially, as I wrote in my memoir *Your Honour Can I Tell You My Story* (Brierley, 2019),
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30 in the beginning, this made me feel a little insecure as I wanted to be seen as a credible
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32 professional, not just an ex-prisoner in the eyes of the children and young people or my
33
34 colleagues. My manager stated that 'this was positive and that the children saying this meant
35
36 that me being a youth justice practitioner was challenging their preconceived ideas about who
37
38 can and can't work in the youth justice system.' It is only now that I have access to education
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40 and completed a PhD. with many years of practice experience that I can start to unpack and
41
42 reflect on what was unfolding within the relational dynamic. Furthermore, why I was granted
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44 legitimacy and trust within that relational context by children who were obtaining their own
45
46 street and carceral habitus due to their experiences that correlated with mine quite strongly. It
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48 was simply because they valued my Desistance Habitus from their own position of crime,
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50 drugs, and criminal justice interventions, which constructed legitimacy within the
51
52 relationships. It is not a claim that this is a causal factor for promoting desistance pathways for
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54 others, but a development of the kind of trust that is presented through embodied experience
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56 of the desistance process, whilst demonstrating that we don't have to 'give up' our spoiled
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3 identities but build on them as they can come in handy from time to time and be used to develop
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5 relationships.
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8 9 **Conclusion**

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12 I have argued throughout this article that I used my embodied experiences of crime and
13
14 prison strategically within my practice as *Desistance Habitus*. That my experiences of crime
15
16 and punishment formulated a knowledge base that allowed me to obtain legitimacy and
17
18 validation from children and young people in the youth justice system over a 15-year career. I
19
20 have drawn on Bourdieu's concepts of Habitus, Capital, Field and Doxa and built on conceptual
21
22 frameworks such as Street Capital and Carceral Habitus. I posit that this epistemological
23
24 position requires further empirical investigation within criminological literature focussed on
25
26 practitioners within the youth and criminal justice system who have operationalised their
27
28 *Desistance Habitus*. It is essential to explore whether my practice experiences are generalisable
29
30 or simply an isolated phenomenon, or whether other criminal justice practitioners with a history
31
32 of criminality and incarceration believe they also activate their *Desistance Habitus* to develop
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34 legitimacy and trust. This would provide insight into the distinction between the way they
35
36 practice to how practitioners without such habitus would practice; and if this is the case, what
37
38 effect does this have for mentees and mentors in their desistance journey's. Furthermore, would
39
40 *Desistance Habitus* positively impact on recidivism for those caught up in a cycle of crime and
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42 punishment if it was better understood, deployed, and evaluated.
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