

*Desistance from Sexual Offending: Narratives of Retirement, Regulation and Recovery.* By Danielle Arlanda Harris. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

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Danielle Harris' book *Desistance from Sexual Offending* opens with the story of Ross, a formerly incarcerated man who has lived in the community for 7 years without reoffending. Ross' criminal record haunts him and destroys his efforts to find proper housing, start a job, or attain higher education. Ross is articulate, intelligent, self-effacing, and remarkably sincere about his outer and inner struggle; as you read his words, you feel empathy and compassion for him, as well as bitterness toward a system that would not let go. Then, Harris tells you that Ross was convicted for the forcible rape of a 6-year-old girl and self-reports having committed similar crimes against more than 30 child victims.

Harris' book is a refreshing work of ethical and moral complexity, especially against the Manichean backdrop of an era in which taking victims' experiences seriously and feeling compassion for offenders are often considered mutually exclusive. The book is based on extensive Life History interviews, conducted in three phases, with 74 sex offenders in the Northeastern United States who have desisted from crime. Beautifully written and lightly edited to allow the men's words room to breathe and shine, Harris' book offers readers a window into a world of self-reflection, shame, bitterness, and the long shadow of past behavior.

The complications begin right at the outset, when Harris provides a rich and complex soliloquy on the slippery concept of desistance: Desistance from what sort of activities? For how long? Does intermittent desistance count? Does "forced desistance" while being behind bars count? Is a clean criminal record sufficient for establishing desistance? Are recidivism and desistance mutually exclusive? Harris thoughtfully struggles with these categories, explaining her choices in choosing her subjects and making sense of their experiences.

It immediately becomes evident that, if the analysis is to get to the bottom of the men's experiences, Harris must eschew clichéd and categorical taxonomies (such as the common distinction between people who victimize adults and children, which does not explain differential desistance modes). Harris constructs the men's histories by relying both on their narratives and on official records pertaining to their cases. Relying solely on official records when assessing desistance proves problematic, as many of the men admit to multiple offenses for which they have not been caught. The act of being caught, though, is not without considerable significance:

in many cases is a pivotal event in the men's lives, albeit not universally in paving the road toward desistance. Similarly, Harris finds that the definitions of "stopping," "slipping," and "reoffending" can be fluid and difficult to grasp: for example, desistance while in prison, which does not mean much to outsiders because of the lack of opportunity to commit crime anyway, is a source of great pride for several of the incarcerated interviewees.

Harris identifies three broad categories of desistance: retirement (natural cessation of the offense, sometimes "aging out" of offending), regulation (shaping one's life to conform to the registration limitations), and recovery (through rehabilitation or resilience). Again, any effort for easy characterization fails. In some cases, the men's cognitive resources and support network can predict, to some extent, their ability to find meaning in rehabilitation and therapy; in some cases, age plays a role in parting ways with a life of crime.

The most heartbreaking of the categories is "regulation": here, men whose perspective on regulation and therapy is cynical and negative structure their lives not around rebuilding, but around avoiding opportunities to get caught. One of Harris' most striking findings is the way in which some men religiously avoid places with children, such as fairs and amusement parks, and express hypervigilance—not out of a genuine need to protect victims, but out of a need to protect themselves from being falsely accused of having committed a crime, even when the crimes they had committed had nothing to do with these stereotypical locations and circumstances.

Another striking finding is that, even for the men in the "recovery" category—arguably the most optimistic outcome in the sample—there is a complete absence of a redemption script. Even these men's self-perception is still saturated with the master status of sex offenders. All one can aspire to is managing one's life day to day, rather than coming full circle back into the family of man. Harris ascribes this sad finding to the social ignorance of the fact that desistance, for sex offenders, is a modal and natural outcome.

In light of these findings, Harris recommends educating the public about the empirical realities of desistance—its commonness and its variations. She also reminds us that the passage of time matters and should matter when crafting public policy. Finding that the therapeutic emphasis with the men is invariably on their sex offense (which is an unhelpful factor for many of the men), she recommends instead to focus on acquiring life skills and pursuing good lives in general.

Harris also recommends repealing the sex offender registry. This aspect of the men's experiences is underemphasized in the book, and one wishes that the men's words about the impact of the registry on their lives (which Harris reports were extensive

and deeply critical) would be provided in the book. The choice to exclude these comments came from Harris' perception that there is already plenty of writing on the horrors of the registry, but having these critiques resonate in the voices of the people on the receiving end of these policies would have been an important contribution. Harris briefly reports that the harmful and pervasive effect of the registry was notable in all interviews, and it is hoped that future publications from the study will highlight this important aspect.

This small quibble notwithstanding, *Desistance from Sexual Offending* stands out as proof that one can still write a book the likes of which have never been written before, and as evidence that insisting on complexity and heterogeneity, rather than oversimplification and overexplanation, is important and instructive in its own right. It is the kind of book that confronts readers not only with serious theoretical and methodological dilemmas, but also with the extent of their own capacity for empathy and compassion, and makes for an unforgettable read.

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