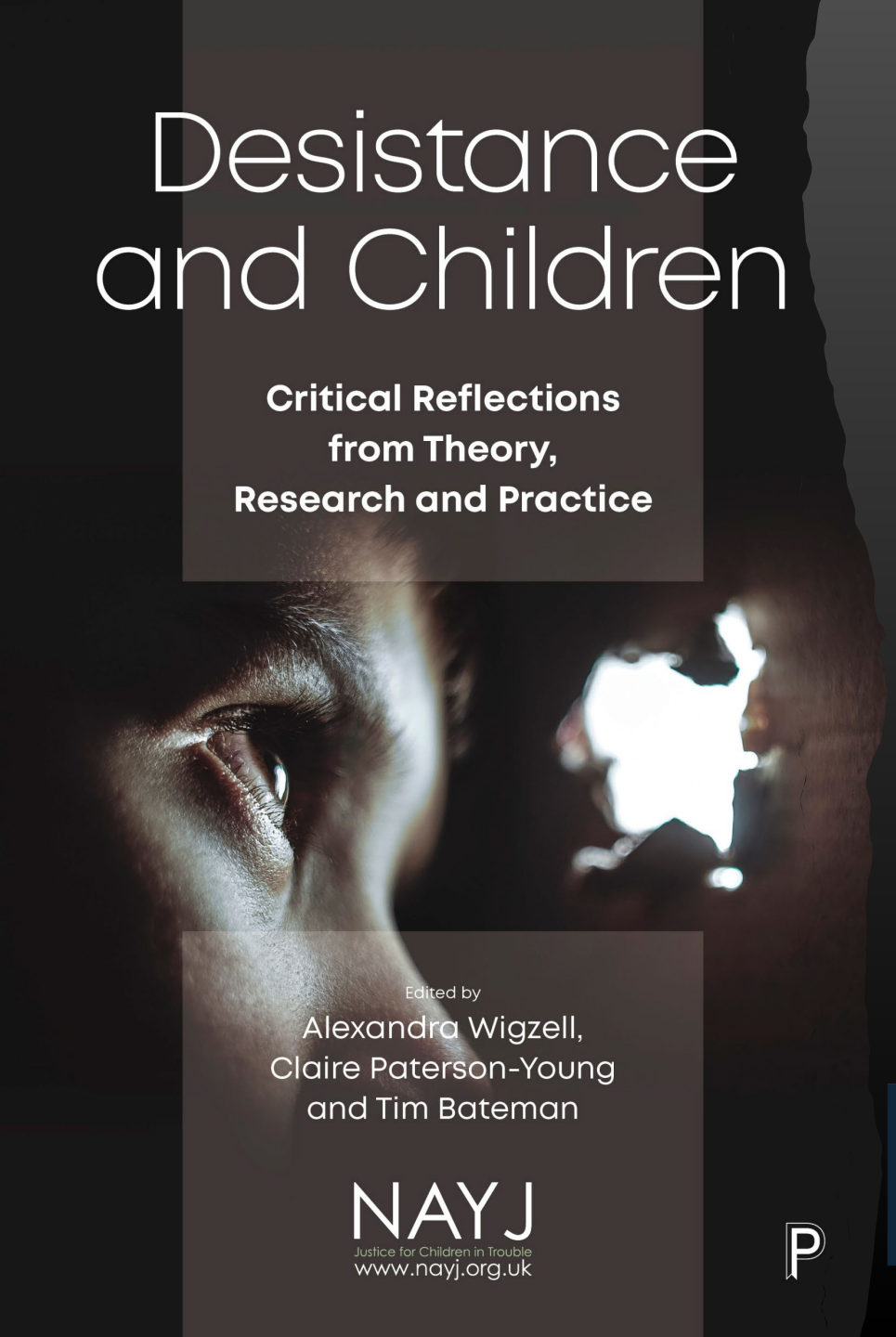

Desistance Practice in Youth Justice

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NAYJ
Justice for Children in Trouble
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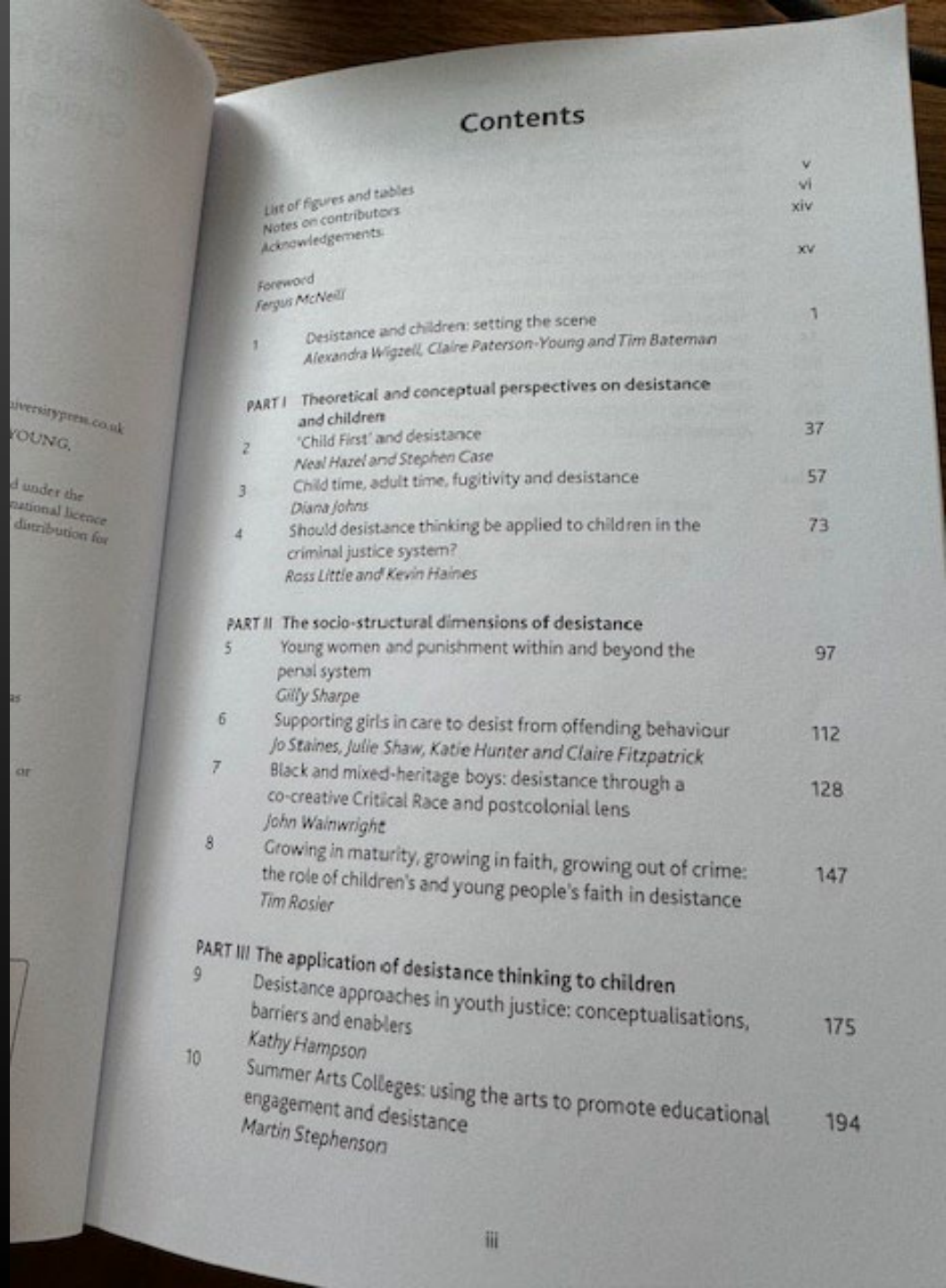
Why Desistance and Children?

- Isn’t desistance an ‘adult affair’…?
- A turn towards desistance in youth justice policy over the last 10 years…
- But most desistance research is adult centric or focused on ‘serious offenders’…
- We can’t assume that the lessons from adult research apply similarly to under-18s.
- But very little discussion about this….

The Book....

- Overarching question: how useful is desistance thinking to understanding children's pathways out of crime & what are the implications for youth justice?
- Open call –> 15 chapters by practitioners and academics covering desistance & child first, gender, ethnicity, faith, participation, implementation, and more.
- Deliberately encompasses a range of perspectives.
- Aims is to start discussion, not to be the final word!
- It's free! Thanks to the generous funding of Unitas and NAYJ.



Contents

What we will talk about

- A context dependent approach
- Caring relationships – and care for practitioners
- The importance of structural support
- Healthy development

A context dependent approach

- What do we mean by this…?
- Desistance will mean very different things to individual children.
- This has emerged from research on the role of identity change/ development in children's desistance (Wigzell and Bateman, 2024).
- International research also indicates that identity plays differing roles in children's pathways away from offending.

Illustrating context dependence (Wigzell and Bateman, 2024)

Group	Offending history	Nature of offending	Narrative of offending	Starting self-identity	Self-identity development and behaviour trajectory	Perceived role of YJS in pathways
Conformists	0 -1 prior out of court disposals	Criminal damage, assault	Due to immaturity – a 'silly mistake'	Positive self-identity	See themselves as having 'grown up' and put offending behind them	No support with desistance felt to be needed
Uncertains	1-2 prior out of court disposals	Violence	Uncontrollable anger, Internalised shame	Faltering self-identity	Continuing uncertainty about who they are and might become – can see both possible positive future self and negative offending future self (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009)	Despondent about the YJS's capacity to help
Shifters	1 or more prior convictions	Robbery, domestic burglary, assault, PWITS	Adversity and involvement in the YJS seen as a 'wake-up call'	Faltering self-identity	Focused on 'becoming' the best version of themselves. Express optimism and aspiration for future. Want to 'give back' to society (Maruna, 2001)	YJS worker helps them to feel 'believed in' and hopeful for their future
Survivors (custodial sentence)	Multiple prior convictions	Violence, robbery, domestic burglary	Offending provides status, belonging and sense of control	Identity embedded in offending	Emphasis on self-reliance. Focused on day-to-day survival rather than future. Self-identity change perceived as a risk to safety and survival	Emotional detachment and resistance to support due to fear of disappointment

What might this mean for YJ practice?

- Some argue that practice should focus on supporting children's pro-social identity development, but crucially this should not assume a pre-existing offender identity (Hazel and Case, 2024: 38).

- Others caution about the benefits of a practice focus on identity development

→ Focus instead should be on nurturing children's long-term healthy development (of which identity is just one potential part) through caring relationships (Wigzell and Bateman, 2024).

Caring professional relationships for all

- Increased recognition of value of relationships at central policy level.
- But critical role of ‘care’ in relationships often missed.
- Children & research evidence say ‘care’ is key to fostering trust, hope, self-worth and, in turn, desistance.
- Care communicated through e.g., going the extra mile, persistent presence, showing interest in child beyond their offending/needs.
- Even professional caring relationships not a magic bullet – need wider social and structural support.

Cultivating caring relationships

- Relational work too often seen as something that ‘just happens’, but it is an aptitude & craft that needs individual AND organisational development & support.

- What sort of support is needed? How do we know that good quality relationships are in place?

- We think care ethics is helpful – it sees relational connection and meeting needs of others as key factors in (moral) decision making.

- Understands caring relations = meeting needs of another in unequal power dynamic through empathy, sensitivity and support.

Interconnected nature of care (Tronto and Fisher, 1993)

Caring about	Recognising that a need exists for which care is necessary.
Caring for	Assuming some responsibility for identifying the need and determining how it should be responded to. i.e. service providers and managers.
Care giving	The direct provision of care, i.e. face-to-face practitioners.
Care receiving	The response and experience of the care receiver to care, i.e. service users.

Determining good care (Tronto, 2010)

- Good care depends on those receiving it to perceive it as caring → importance of listening to service users about their needs and experiences.

- Good care is reliant on institutional and organisational processes that facilitate care: ‘when care givers find themselves saying that they care *despite* the pressures and requirements of the organisation, the institution has a diminished capacity to provide good care’ (Tronto, 2010: 165).

- Good care requires care for those engaged in care giving; one cannot care well or be attentive to the needs of others when stretched.

- Good care must involve spaces for professionals to reflect on the quality and delivery of care e.g. clinical supervision.

d, or disillusioned oneself

Structural Inequalities and Youth Desistance

- **Impact of socio-structural factors:** Overlooked in favour of individuals/personal shortcomings (Gray and Smith, 2024; Wigzell and Bateman, 2024).
- **Environmental factors:** Impact of issues like food insecurity, unsafe areas, and exposure to violence disrupt development (Sharkey and Faber, 2014).
- **Education: u**nder-resourced schools and large class sizes and limited support hinder academic and social engagement (Laub and Sampson, 2001; Barry, 2007).
- **Gendered** experiences, especially for girls, contribute to a cumulative effect of punishment and negative labelling (Sharpe, 2024).
- Wainwright (2024) explores the **impact of poverty, racism, and educational exclusion** on Black and Mixed-heritage children's desistance opportunities.

Social Environments, Support Networks, and Entitlements

- **Neighbourhood influence:** High-crime areas normalise delinquent behaviour and a lack of role models can increase risks(Farrington and Loeber, 2000).
- **Support systems:** Positive influences from mentors, community programmes, and supportive community can help children view prosocial behaviour as achievable - maximise children's access and outcomes (Haines and Case, 2015).
- **Social bonds:** Life transitions like family formation, employment, and shifting away from delinquent peers are linked to desistance, especially in young women (Laub and Sampson, 2003).
- **Capabilities and opportunities:** Create environments where children have the chance to achieve their capabilities and lead positive, healthy lives (Sen, 1999; Paterson-Young et al., 2024) - ensuring children's access to essential resources.

Promoting Healthy Development and Desistance

- Centred on **fostering their healthy long-term development**, moving beyond a narrow focus on reduced offending.
- **Structural inequalities** impact children's ability to develop healthily and desist from offending.
- **Challenges in socio-structural environments impact healthy development - c**hildren in low-income neighbourhoods' facing food insecurity, unsafe areas, and exposure to violence, hindering healthy development (Sharkey and Faber, 2014).
- **Positive family relationships provide** a foundation for children that, when supported by peer relationships, participation in school activities, and structured recreational environments, serve as essential elements for healthy development.
- **Secure attachments** help children feel safe, understood, and valued, fostering trust and reducing impulsivity or negative reactions when faced with challenges (Paterson-Young et al., 2019) – caring professional relations are key.

Promoting Healthy Development and Desistance

- **Creating stable and supportive environments** through family and community support, education, and/or or professional relationships.
- **Healthy development promoting access** to essential resources, such as housing, health, and education, supports children's ability to achieve their full potential (Sen, 1999).
- Meaningful **participatory engagement** with children has proven benefits in helping children shape decision making processes, which can in turn support desistance (Creaney et al. 2024).
- **Child-centred programmes** can be beneficial when non-stigmatising and delivered alongside or within socio-structural support.
- There should be emphasis on designing **provision centred** on well-being in schools and the community (Sharpe, 2024; Rosier, 2024) and responding to diverse needs (Staines et al., 2024; Wainwright, 2024).

Conclusion

Context-dependent desistance: Desistance means different things for different children, with identity playing a varying role in their pathways away from crime.

Caring professional relationships: Strong, supportive connections between professionals and children are essential for successful desistance. Youth justice policies should prioritize these relationships, while also supporting practitioners and managers.

Desistance as a social justice issue: Non-stigmatising, socio-structural support is critical in guiding children away from offending, making desistance inherently linked to social justice.

Long-term healthy development: Desistance thinking should focus on children's long-term healthy development, not just the reduction of offending.

Progressive desistance practice: Emphasizes children’s long-term healthy development, moving beyond just reducing offending, with a child-focused approach central to effective youth justice practice.

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Thank you for listening

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