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Social Relational Space in the Process of Desistance from Crime: The Case of Motocross Communities

ABSTRACT

Desistance from crime has become an increasingly prominent topic among Polish researchers in the field of rehabilitative pedagogy. These scholars seek to understand how individuals disengage from criminal behavior and identify the factors that support this process.

The main purpose of this article is to show the importance of social bonds and interpersonal relationships in the process of desistance from crime, using motocross associations as a case study. The analysis is based on research conducted through ethnographic methods, including interviews and participant observation. The study group consisted of members of motocross communities with criminal backgrounds. The issues discussed in this article have not been widely addressed in either theoretical or practical rehabilitative pedagogy. Moreover, the conclusions drawn from this research—and particularly their practical applications—could offer an alternative to the ineffective methods currently used with individuals transitioning out of correctional facilities.

The research findings presented here are part of a larger project undertaken in preparation for a doctoral dissertation entitled *Desistance from Crime Among Individuals Involved in Motocross*. The data collected suggests that former offenders emphasize the importance of support in building relationships within their communities, which, in

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turn, strengthens their efforts to desist from crime and facilitates successful reintegration into society.

Introduction

Desistance from crime has firmly established itself as a significant topic in the scholarly discourse of rehabilitation and criminology (Rocque 2021: 2). Polish researchers of the phenomenon, Justyna Kuształ and Maciej Muskała, note in their article that “although desistance research has emerged as a kind of antithesis to institutional rehabilitation interventions, there seems to be no conflict between desistance and rehabilitation, as evidenced by the growing number of studies on ‘supporting’ the process of desistance from crime” (Kuształ, Muskała 2022: 208). The term “desistance” in academic literature is generally explained through two main perspectives. Muskała, tracing the evolution of its definition, states that “most simply, desistance is defined as the ‘end point’ at which crime ceases. However, doubts arise as to what this actually means and when this ‘obvious’ fact occurs” (Muskała 2017: 136). Additionally, questions emerge about how long the cessation of criminal activity must last before it can be considered an endpoint. After all, individuals who engage in crime do not spend their entire lives committing offenses, and crime-free intervals can often be observed in their criminal careers—periods between successive criminal acts. From this perspective, desistance is often equated with “non-recidivism.”

The second perspective defines desistance as a process that requires effort and, most importantly, the willingness of the individual. Change must begin with the offender’s readiness to transform, which involves equipping them with the necessary tools for this readiness. These tools are categorized into internal factors (personality and identity, cognitive and emotional aspects, volition, and behavior) and external factors (resources, support, circumstances, opportunities, location, and program type) (Ward et al. 2004: 650). Witold Klaus, a Polish criminologist, describes desistance as “a process that begins with an individual’s decision to make changes in their life so that they can live without breaking the law. This process is long and difficult, and the person withdrawing faces many obstacles along the way. While the process has a clear direction and goal—to stop

committing crimes—further offenses may still ‘happen’ along the way” (Klaus 2021: 423–424).

The understanding of desistance as a process indicates its staged nature. Consequently, distinctions are made between primary, secondary, and tertiary desistance. Thomas Ugelvik suggests that “the terms ‘primary,’ ‘secondary,’ and ‘tertiary’ do not necessarily imply a linear process. Individual desisters do not reach secondary desistance before they can move on to the next level” (Ugelvik 2022: 624). Secondary and tertiary desistance are likely to occur simultaneously, continuously reinforcing one another. The zigzag nature of desistance from crime is influenced by factors that either facilitate or hinder an individual’s progress toward “non-crime.” These factors are often categorized as anchors, traps, and torments, which can both positively stimulate the change process and undermine it (Klaus 2021: 436). Anchors are defined as institutions, as well as people and relationships, that positively influence an individual and their behavior. Conversely, traps and torments are factors that weaken the transformation process but may also provide space for change to materialize.

Overcoming difficulties related to broadly understood traps and torments is addressed through support services provided as part of desistance activities, which can be either formal or informal. Formal desistance activities comprise the work of judicial staff and correctional officers who work towards reducing and managing recidivism among prisoners. They serve two main functions: support and assistance. Formal support is delivered through programs (designed and implemented by the prison service) that aim to modify problematic behavior and preparing individuals for life outside prison. These programs often focus on rebuilding relationships with the outside world, strengthening family ties, or stimulating professional activation.

It is worth noting that the staff and contributors to these programs do not have to be correctional officers. They can also be organizers of informal activities that support personal change. Through their efforts, individuals striving to desist from crime gain decision-making and problem-solving skills, which contribute to developing a non-deviant identity. As desistance researchers Marie-Pierre Villeneuve, Isabelle F.-Dufour, and Stephen Farrall observe, informal activities are usually carried out by volunteers, even within prison settings, who help participants acquire or enhance their potential, skills,

and resources which foster a positive self-image, build pro-social networks, and develop hope for a better future (F.-Dufour, Villeneuve, Perron 2018). Informal support offers individuals the opportunity to reflect on their past and seek redemption, which entails liberation from personal weaknesses. As Villeneuve, F.-Dufour, and Farrall state, “Volunteers are not tasked with managing risks or monitoring participants’ behavior” (Villeneuve, F.-Dufour, Farrall 2021: 76–77). The absence of excessive control and pressure from those involved in informal support allows individuals to determine the timing and intensity of the relationship and its impact on their desistance process. A similar dynamic may occur in a non-institutionalized setting. Informal groups, such as associations or communities, can sometimes provide mechanisms to sustain desistance.¹

Several theories in the literature adopt specific perspectives to highlight the importance and relevance of particular elements in the change process. Beth Weaver identifies four key perspectives: the individual and subject causation perspective, the social and structural perspective, the interactionist perspective, and the situational perspective (Weaver 2019: 3). In the context of this discussion, the social and structural perspective—which emphasizes the role of an individual’s relationships and interactions with their environment in shaping desistance—is the most pertinent.

Lila Kazemian and Shadd Maruna argue that “desistance occurs gradually, as a result of the accumulation of social ties and socially changing associations” (Kazemian, Maruna 2009: 280). The key assumptions of this perspective will be outlined below, with particular attention given to the principles of informal social control theory. This article aims to draw the reader’s attention to the concept of relational social space within the motocross environment. This space is a platform where ex-offenders, seeking to rebuild their lives, are provided with opportunities to pursue their passions and form new bonds and social relationships within the community.

1 In the climate of freedom, we observe the efforts of organizations, volunteers, and streetworker groups which meet the needs of individuals in crisis or requiring various forms of support. One such organization is PRO Domo, which operates in the Małopolskie Voivodeship and provides support and assistance to ex-convicts transitioning out of correctional facilities.

A perspective on social ties in the desistance process

As Krzysztof Biel points out, the theory of informal social control, developed by John Laub and Robert Sampson, is the most prominent framework explaining desistance from crime in terms of social bonds and structures (Biel 2022: 164). This theory focuses specifically on the social influences affecting offenders, especially on the importance of bonds and relationships, which provide a protective space for meeting an individual's needs and expectations.

Laub and Sampson note the significance of turning points in the criminal careers of offenders (Laub, Sampson 2003: 149). Muskała identifies these turning points as events such as marriage (family), employment, and, depending on the study, interests, military service, or education (Muskała 2017: 152). These events enable individuals to focus on the present, effectively cutting them off from their criminal past, while simultaneously creating the conditions necessary for them to fully participate as free members of society. Through a sense of belonging to a well-functioning group and the strengthening of social bonds, individuals are motivated to work on their own behavior, which can, in turn, enhance their sense of agency in their actions. These relationships instill a sense of obligation to the group, as well as attachment and identification with it.

“Turning points that foster the abandonment of a criminal career refer not so much to a change in the personality of the socially maladjusted individual as to a change in his or her social situation, largely shaped by the social ties the individual establishes throughout life” (Bernasiewicz, Noszczyk-Bernasiewicz 2025: 114). Sampson and Laub conclude that most offenders embark on the path of desistance in response to structurally induced turning points that support long-term behavioral change. While the scholars acknowledge that a full explanation of desistance must incorporate both structural and subjective factors, they argue that structural factors, which externally influence the individual, play a primary role, while individual choices and actions are their consequences (Laub, Sampson 2001: 50–51; 2016: 161; Biel 2022: 165).

Nevertheless, it is not the turning point itself but its quality that determines its usefulness in the process of change. A turning point may sometimes be insufficient on its own, as it has little significance

without meaningful context. This can be exemplified by marriage: marriage alone is not enough to deter crime. Its effect may depend on the reasons for the marriage (e.g., pregnancy), the perceived happiness in the relationship, and the character traits of the spouse (Farrington, West 1995: 278). Therefore, when discussing turning points and the relationships and social interactions that support the desistance process, it is essential to consider their quality, as some may negate the entire effort toward change (Muskala 2017: 154–159).

Regarding turning points, it should also be noted that there is no certainty they are causal factors in the desistance process. However, it is clear that they can both support and undermine the process. Thus, the impact of turning points on desistance is ambiguous. What is important is that, as reality and social processes evolve, ties and relationships also undergo transformation. As a result, it becomes difficult to definitively label certain ties as “valuable” at a given time. Muskala points out that “it, therefore, seems important to adapt measures of social ties to changing social norms and values. Failure to take these transformations into account may lead to a misinterpretation of the roles played by social ties in the process of desistance. However, it must be emphasized that these variables provide little information about how and why desistance occurs, and even less about how it can be initiated” (Muskala 2019: 116).

Characteristics of motor communities

Motocross sports are commonly classified as a branch of land sports which include a variety of disciplines and ways of practicing them. In line with the subject under consideration, this article focuses on motocross and the specific features of how communities within this discipline operate. According to the regulations of the Polish Motor Association, “motocross is an off-road race on a marked and properly prepared track, in accordance with licensing requirements, with natural and artificial obstacles formed from natural ground such as clay, sand, earth, or materials composed of their mixtures” (Polski Związek Motorowy 2022: 4). Each motor association operates under a specific name and possesses legal personality. These associations are self-governing and voluntary organizations functioning within the Republic of Poland under the provisions of the Act of 7 April

1989: *Law on Associations*. Their activities are guided by internal statutes, which outline decision-making processes, define the rights and obligations of participants, and establish objectives and methods for achieving them in practice. The objectives of motocross societies include promoting the development of motocross sports, encouraging and disseminating physical education and sport, creating conditions for safe riding, and improving riders' sporting skills.

The functioning of rights and obligations within individual motocross communities is tailored to each association and determined by a predefined hierarchy based on roles within the community. Despite some variations, the structure is generally consistent across associations. Typically, motocross communities are organized with a board of directors, audit or supervisory committees, and ordinary members or participants. Discrepancies mainly occur in the number of individuals serving in these bodies. Each participant in the community is granted full rights and freedoms, has the ability to express their opinions, and holds a decision-making role in planning activities undertaken by the group. Among the primary activities within the motocross environment are sport and work, both of which serve an educational purpose. This means that the associations not only offer participants enjoyment but also provide opportunities for learning and socialization. Since no records are kept regarding participants' criminal backgrounds, these communities also create a space where re-socialization processes for socially maladjusted individuals can take place.

Motocross is undeniably an extreme sport that demands patience and diligence. To support these qualities, associations organize their activities to ensure that those interested can participate in regular training sessions, which provide opportunities for increasing self-awareness and self-efficacy, alleviating negative emotions, and experiencing the adrenaline rush inherent to the sport. The second key area of activity within motocross communities is work, which is one of the fundamental forms of human engagement. It is socially valuable work. Marek Kluz and Artur Sylwester Słomka observe that "in work and through work, all dimensions of human life are fulfilled: somatic, emotional, mental, spiritual, and moral. For this reason, it is impossible to separate work from the process of education. The responsibility for education to and through work always has a social

context and concerns a certain community that produces a specific formative environment” (Kluz, Słomka 2016: 63). In motocross associations, work primarily involves organizing and maintaining the training space, as well as tidying the areas surrounding the tracks where races take place. Before participants can use the track, they must first prepare it, which provides an opportunity to learn responsibility. This work is always carried out in groups, on days and at times designated by the management in order for the participants to get a chance to learn new skills from one another, build a sense of community, and develop the ability to work effectively as a team.

Waldemar Janiga draws attention to another significant aspect of work: “Through his actions, man creates something ‘outside’ but also ‘inside’ himself, and thus develops—both physically and intellectually—and, by improving himself, he shapes, changes, and creates not only a new world of material things but also a world of spirit. Obtaining qualifications, enriching knowledge, extending competences and skills, and constant work on oneself are the fundamental directions for the development of one’s personality, educational, and self-educational activity. It is a factor of human development on both an individual and social scale” (Janiga 2002/2003: 237). Work is “important and meaningful for every individual, influencing decisions related to education, employment, ongoing functioning, and personal development. It is perceived not only as a value in itself, but also as a source of other values” (Baraniak 2016: 14).

The motorsport environment includes not only participants but also their families and supporters, among whom bonds, friendships, and student–master relationships are often formed. In motocross associations, participants are treated as equals, regardless of their role, with no division into “better” or “worse” members. As a result, each of them is entitled to support and assistance from the group in caring for themselves and their holistic personal development. The relationship between student and master in the motocross environment takes the form of guidance and carries many characteristics of mentoring. Agnieszka Barczykowska and Sonia Dzierżyńska define mentoring as “building a relationship in which a more experienced person mentors a less experienced person. The mentor conveys not only general knowledge, information, and skills related to increasing work effectiveness but also ‘tacit knowledge,’ i.e., habits and best practices that

are used unconsciously but are indispensable for proficiency in a given field” (Barczykowska, Dzierżyńska 2012: 263).

A mentor in this context is someone who, through their behavior and attitudes, inspires the mentee to work on himself or herself. The mentor provides advice and guidance, helping the mentee work toward clearly defined goals while allowing space for independent decision-making. Rather than offering ready-made solutions to problems, the mentor shows the options and possibilities available, and encourages the mentee to take responsibility for their choices and growth. In motocross, authority figures and mentors are often sought among highly qualified coaches, riders, and individuals with a wealth of experience and life skills. Their presence is especially significant for individuals facing multiple problems, including deficits in personality and cognitive structures, and particularly for those actively desisting from crime. The collaboration among participants in the motorsport space in the local environment, outside formal institutions, results in greater freedom and avoids the administrative labeling of relationships.

It is worth noting that knowledge about the specific functioning of motor associations has been derived from publicly available sources published by the Polish Motor Association. These include regulations, announcements, documents, and internal statutes of the associations. In the literature on rehabilitation, there is little to no research into a connection between motocross and social rehabilitation or desistance from crime. Foreign-language publications on motocross are mainly concerned with the risk of injuries associated with this extreme sport.

Methodology of the study

My personal curiosity and observations of behavioral transformations among participants in the motorsport environment evolved into a desire to construct a research procedure intended to answer the persistent questions in re-socialization pedagogy about supporting the process of desistance. Consequently, from the preliminary stages, my research activities were directed toward specific objectives. In the case of this study, these objectives are related to my research interests, as I simultaneously serve as a member of the management board

of a motocross association. Moreover, the objectives were chosen to ensure their feasibility.

The cognitive aim of this research is to diagnose and clarify the role of relationships and social ties in the desistance process in the motorsport environment. The practical aim is to identify interventions that facilitate the creation of spaces for relationship-building among socially maladjusted individuals undergoing change. These goals and the focus of the analyses stem from theoretical gaps and a lack of research on how relationship development can support desistance, particularly in the context of motorsport. The analyses were carried out to address the question: *How can the development of bonds and relationships support the desistance process among participants in motocross communities?*

The chosen analytical strategy is qualitative, with an idiographic approach aimed at producing detailed insights into the specific functioning of motocross associations in Poland and their members. Data collection was facilitated by employing the ethnographic method according to which the researcher acts as both an observer and an active participant in the studied community. This approach was complemented by oral histories from the subjects, which, according to Michael Angrosino, “is a field of research dedicated to the reconstruction of the past through the experiences of those who lived in it” (Angrosino 2015: 95).

I arranged the data using descriptive analysis (organizing the data obtained, extracting thematic categories, and developing patterns of information presentation) and theoretical analysis (comparing the patterns with the available literature on the subject and scientific reports by other researchers). I reached the target group of respondents through a preliminary pilot study conducted using a quantitative strategy. This pilot study was carried out indirectly through an online survey questionnaire, and a brief overview of its methodology is presented below.

The questionnaire consisted of closed questions addressing topics such as an individual’s role in a motocross association, stays in closed institutions, and issues related to addictions and conflicts with the law. It was targeted at adults residing in Poland. The final section of the questionnaire included an optional field for respondents to provide their contact information. The pilot study identified respondents

who had experienced at least one of the following: a prior conflict with the law, struggles with addiction to psychoactive substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs), or time spent in closed institutions. At this stage, the diagnostic criteria relied solely on the subjective judgments of the respondents.

As a result of the pilot study, I obtained contact information for seven respondents who met at least one of the three identified criteria. An additional four participants, drawn from my immediate environment, voluntarily agreed to be part of the research procedure and were subsequently interviewed as part of the analyses. Thus, a total of 11 respondents participated in the study, conducted using a qualitative strategy. The characteristics of the target group are summarized in the table below. The first seven entries represent respondents identified through the pilot study, while the last four correspond to participants from outside the pilot study.

Table 1. Characteristics of the study group

Age	Role in the association	Addiction(s)	Conflict with the law	Stay in a closed institution
24	Active member	Yes	Yes	No
21	Passive member	Yes	No	No
18	Active player	Yes	Yes	No
50	Member of the Management Board	Yes	Yes	No
38	Active member	Yes	Yes	Yes
43	Active member	Yes	Yes	No
54	Active member	Yes	Yes	Yes
29	Active member	Yes	Yes	Yes
27	Active member	Yes	Yes	Yes
45	Active member	Yes	Yes	Yes
30	Active member	Yes	Yes	No

Source: The author's own research.

To adhere to standards for respecting sensitive data, the statements of respondents in this article are presented using symbols such as R1, R2, R(...), and R11, following the chronological order of their profiles as shown in the table. The research focused on the relational social space of the motocross environment, which encompasses the domain of motorsports. This includes the operational areas of motocross societies, motocross tracks, and facilities where organized sporting events and training sessions are periodically held. At these venues, both the behavior of respondents and their interactions with the environment were observed.

Interviews with respondents were conducted in secluded settings without the presence of third parties. The discussions covered the respondents' entire life stories, with particular attention given to significant and difficult events. After respondents shared their narratives, follow-up questions were asked about issues relevant to the research, including the process of desistance from crime and the relationship between the motocross community and the respondent.

The importance of relationships in respondents' narratives

Relationships and bonds among members are of great importance for the functioning of motocross communities. Proper communication, a willingness to cooperate, and a sense of group responsibility are evident even when passively observing the basic activities performed by their members. The research distinguished two categories of analysis regarding the value of bonds in the desistance process for individuals involved in motocross: interpersonal relationships with the environment and leadership and authority as elements supporting personal development.

Interpersonal relationships with the environment

Ex-offenders leaving the confines of closed institutions, as well as socially maladjusted individuals, often need to overcome social resistance in rebuilding relationships with their environment. This is often associated with the common experiences of marginalization and stigmatization. As one respondent noted:

people are afraid of you. News travels fast, and not everyone wants to come into contact with a criminal. And even when they talk to you, you sense the distance and a kind of cautiousness. (R10)

As a result, individuals are looking for a place where they will be accepted despite their past experiences. One such space is the motocross community, which comprises a diverse group of people:

fanatics of adrenaline, fast riding, and survival, but also very brave people. ... there are others in the association who, join simply because they want to because they like watching someone else ride, or because they want to make a contribution by working, for example. ... it's a mix of different people and personalities who want to do something for others and also for themselves. It's a very cool group; you can learn a lot from it. You know, I think even I am learning at this age—I am learning about life above all. (R6)

Another respondent described the motocross environment with these words:

work, training, perseverance, sweat, defeat, success, coaches, fans, motorbike, the track, but I guess if I had to sum it all up in one word, it would be —the people. (R3)

This is a place where you can find friends, but also take on commitments and responsibilities:

However, any work with these people is fun. You can have a chat while getting things done, all the while knowing that you are doing something useful in the process. (R7)

Members of motor clubs come from different professions and learn from one another values such as responsibility for the group, diligence, patience, and, above all, respect. Importantly, there is no pressure to talk about one's private life. However, as one respondent noted:

over time, as you become friends with someone, you naturally talk to them about yourself. (R4)

For newcomers with a criminal past, the mere fact that someone takes an interest in them in the association becomes important; that they have the chance to form new connections despite a lack of valuable contacts. One respondent recalled:

I was standing off to the side when he came up to me, still with his helmet on, and asked how I was. I felt this strange motivation just because someone approached me. I was there alone, didn't know anyone, and was honestly worried I'd be on my own with no one to talk to. And I thought people might be thinking, "What's he doing here, messing things up?" Then he just asked, "What's up?" I told him I hadn't ridden in a while—actually, I hadn't ridden much at all. He just gave me a thumbs-up and rode off. . . . That moment really stuck with me. Now we know each other well, and I really appreciate it there very much. . I remember once I said something and thought maybe he's angry with me or something? Honestly, it's just been really good friendships. (R11)

Many respondents also noted how relationships formed on the track often extend into the family sphere.

We have a group of friends who visit us at home or meet up somewhere more private, so we've really bonded. (R5)

There are so many interesting people to meet—at competitions and during training sessions. You end up making friends. For example, you might have a fellow club member who's a mechanic, a plumber, or a logistician. If you have a problem in your personal life, you can always turn to someone there for help. There's always something to learn from others, too. (R10)

The primary objective of motocross associations is to support the comprehensive physical development of their members. This includes fostering relationships between individuals and the sport, as well as among competitors themselves. Active riders, in particular, often feel a sense of responsibility to represent their club with dignity in the broader community:

As a rider, I have in a way committed myself to setting a good example at competitions in other parts of Poland or abroad because, after all, I represent a community. I wouldn't want someone from the club to feel ashamed of me. (R1)

Engaging in sport not only teaches new skills but also boosts self-esteem:

sport and training are a solid dose of education. I learnt to be conscientious, diligent and that I've got to handle responsibilities. (R9)

Sport really does teach humility. (R8)

It's sport, there are rules. (R3)

The respondents also emphasized the relationships they form with fellow competitors. While races require them to be committed

and competitive, this does not diminish the friendly bonds that exist off the track:

I remember standing on the starting machine with other riders, actually rivals, and racing at my best fighting for a spot. Then after the competition, we'd high-five and talk about random stuff. (R9)

Another respondent shared a similar sentiment:

Only after the race will the person who scolded you still come over and thank you for the fierce fight. That's what I really like about it. (R5)

Motocross associations often provide a space for individuals to reintegrate into a group. Strong bonds and friendships formed through motocross extend beyond the realm of sport into both family and private life. Many respondents noted that they turn to people “from the track” for help in managing the basic difficulties of everyday life. They believe that their friends from the associations can offer support not only in their daily lives and work but also in non-sport-related activities—especially when broader society, stigmatizing them for their past, may be reluctant to do so.

These friendly relationships often contribute to the transformation of a deviant personality into a non-deviant one, by promoting cognitive and emotional growth. This dynamic became apparent during my analysis of the respondents' life paths, as shared in interviews, as well as through observations of their behavior and interactions within the motorsport environment. Many riders also involve their families in the duties of the associations. For respondents' wives and children who express interest, the motocross environment offers an opportunity to make new friends, spend leisure time productively, learn new skills and abilities, and become acquainted with the sport. Despite being a competitive discipline, motocross is characterized by a strong sense of respect and understanding for others. I would like to point out another important relational aspect of motocross, which lies in the rules that govern the community as well as provide opportunities for forming friendships that inspire individual change. As one respondent explained:

Standards and values, it's about fair play on the track and in life. We stick together, we respect each other, we don't insult each other, we help out when someone needs it. And I make it a point to respect others, even when they annoy me. (R2)

Above all, members of motocross associations look out for one another and reprimand each other in situations where someone disrupts the group's dynamic. However, this does not lead to exclusion from the group. As one respondent explained:

In my club, mistakes are forgiven, but you can't keep making the same ones over and over. Even the most patient person would eventually get fed up. (R1)

Most importantly, the motocross environment often serves as a surrogate family—unrelated by blood, but loving and supportive. This sentiment was echoed by many respondents. For example:

Motocross is like a family, it's a group of people united by passion. Everyone's got each other's back, no matter what. Someone who's never been part of that group won't understand that. It's hard to explain that the freaks on the motorbikes are actually great, hard-working and happy people, and that's what it's all about. (R5)

Observing the functioning of this motocross “family,” I noticed a dynamic also pointed out by the respondents themselves. In cases of non-compliance with rules and regulations, vulgar or inappropriate behavior, members of the associations admonish one another and ask one another to conform to shared values. One gets the impression that, in addition to formal regulations, the group operates under an unwritten code of conduct—a set of shared behavioral norms that guides and sustains the group's functioning.

Leadership and authority in motor sports

In the motorsport environment, leadership aimed at achieving sporting goals and the mechanism of role modeling are commonly observed. Respondents frequently point to a variety of authority figures, including parents during their youth and prominent riders as they grow older.

You've got to give a lot of credit to the coaches too—they put in so much time and patience for us riders. (R1)

Every rider has someone they look up to, and I'm no different. I've got my role models, both on the international scene and here in Poland. But these are usually the top riders, the ones who are held to even higher standards. (R3)

Coaches are often seen as figures whose relationships with riders are built on respect, understanding, and, most importantly, trust. They are typically individuals who have achieved a high level of success in their careers and are also admired for their personal qualities. According to one respondent, a coach is someone who

shows a really high level of professionalism and respect. (R10)

Another respondent emphasized the responsibility of accomplished sports figures:

I think athletes who have achieved something understand that young people look up to them. They feel a responsibility to be well-mannered and avoid bad habits. And honestly, if they have a lot of class, it's not hard to do because the sport itself demands so much sacrifice and humility from them. (R9)

Also ... you definitely learn more from people like that—not just how to ride, but also how to be patient and humble. (R6)

Motocross clubs also offer a supportive environment for children and young people from dysfunctional families. One respondent described how these clubs can provide mentorship and guidance:

Kids and young people who don't have a parent at home or are dealing with family problems often enroll in the clubs. And this is where they look for support and help. But don't worry, there are so many 'uncles and aunts' here (laughs) that we make sure to take care of everyone. I feel like they come here to learn about life and develop their talents. That's the beauty of it. (R10)

Although it might seem that the pupil-champion relationship is confined to the realm of motorsport, much like the bond with club-mates, this relationship often extends into the private sphere.

At first, my coach was only—well, maybe I should say 'as much as'—my guru. But over time, during our training sessions, we developed a real understanding. I think it's fair to say it's turned into a friendship. We like and respect each other a lot and even lean on each other for things outside the track. We spend time together, and if there's a problem, we call and help each other. It's cool that we've become very close to each other without losing that coaching relationship. Honestly, for someone like me—troubled, addicted—this kind of support was very important. I'd even say it was necessary for motivating me to change. (R1)

As noted earlier, parents can also be role models for their children.

As I mentioned before, parents can also be role models for kids. You often see children copying someone they admire, simply imitating their behavior. Most

of the time, you notice this in father-son or father-daughter relationships. And sometimes, it's the fathers who take on the coaching role—either because they used to ride themselves or because they can't afford an expensive top coach. In those cases, the child grows up wanting to be just like their dad. (R6)

Through their involvement in motocross associations, some members have the opportunity to strengthen and improve relationships within their own families. Relationships established with an authority figure not only help individuals become better riders—enabling them to achieve their developmental goals—but also contribute indirectly to personal growth. This is especially significant for individuals in the process of change, who are often seeking someone to act as an ideal worthy of imitation. In motocross clubs, this emulation frequently manifests in copying the guide's riding style, clothing, competitive behavior, and personal interactions with others.

Having witnessed many private conversations between association participants, I noticed that some seek advice or guidance on a wide range of topics, including those unrelated to motorsport. These conversations occur both in the presence of other club members and in private. Riders often invite motocross guides into their personal lives, sharing their vulnerabilities and joys, and seeking support and assistance in their daily lives. Importantly, guides—like mentors—do not provide ready-made solutions, but only help them discover their own paths toward achieving their goals. Among younger children, there is often an intense fascination with coaches and motocross specialists, which attests to the enormous influence these figures have on young people.

Summary

Efforts to support desistance from crime focus on two types of factors: internal and external. External or environmental factors are often defined in terms of turning points that stimulate efforts to modify an individual's behavior. Examples of such turning points include marriage, work, and personal interests. All these areas are based on the individual's relationships with the world, which develop within their respective structures. Numerous studies in the literature support the validity of the theory of informal social control (Biel 2022; Laub, Sampson 2001; 2016; Muskała 2017). However,

it is important to remember that the mere occurrence of a turning point is insufficient for meaningful change. The quality of these turning points is extremely important (Giordano, Cernkovich, Rudolph 2002; Bersani, Doherty 2013). Furthermore, ignoring an individual's internal resources, abilities, and motivations is a significant oversight. These internal factors, when combined with social support, greatly enhance the likelihood of achieving desired outcomes in the desistance process. Raymond Paternoster and Shawn Bushway have criticized the theory of informal social control for neglecting the role of individual subjectivity and agency in the transformation process (Paternoster, Bushway 2009: 1149).

In the context of motorsport communities, it is important to highlight the existence of a relational social space. Within this space, bonds are formed not only between individuals and their environment but also between mentors and students, as well as among riders and their competitors. According to respondents, the relationships they establish in motocross clubs create a sense of obligation to comply with rules and function responsibly, while still allowing for natural human errors and failures. The observation of specific places and events, understood sequentially rather than merely as isolated acts, combined with knowledge of factors that are significantly influencing the process of desistance from crime, led to the identification of two significant categories, namely: relational social space and guidance, both seen as potential turning points.

In the context of the motocross environment, turning points can be defined as joining an association and participating in its activities, as well as forming a relationship with an authority figure or mentor who guides individuals toward their overall development. Consequently, I propose that the informal relational social space and the bond with a mentor, alongside traditional turning points such as work, marriage, and personal interests, can represent new and significant milestones in the desistance process. The opportunity to reintegrate into a group and the openness of its members to forming new relationships are particularly impactful for individuals with criminal records or social difficulties who are striving to transform their personalities. Through activities within the realm of motorsports, participants are given the chance to assume new social roles and establish

valuable connections that often extend beyond the confines of the associations, positively influencing their private lives.

The question arises: could greater focus, by social rehabilitation pedagogues on informal social control, outside the institutional framework of social work interventions, offer a more effective means of supporting the desistance process in open environments? Undoubtedly, such interventions could provide an alternative to ineffective methods of working with individuals who exhibit recurring destructive behaviors. The success of practitioners in this regard could lie in expanding their range of rehabilitation interventions to include mentoring methods that operate within inter-subjective relationships in local environments.

The literature offers numerous research reports affirming the legitimacy and effectiveness of mentoring projects in prevention and social rehabilitation (Barczykowska, Dzierżyńska 2012; Buck 2017; Chojecka 2021). Today, most programs target children and young people who are either at risk of social maladjustment or are already maladjusted, as well as those whose parents are serving sentences in closed institutions (Barczykowska, Dzierżyńska 2012). In Poland, for example, the Probation Association based in Kraków offers mentoring support for the youngest. Preventive and corrective activities are also available for adults serving prison sentences and struggling to reintegrate into their communities. In the United States, such programs include the “Delaware Mentor Program” and “Ready4Work” (Barczykowska, Dzierżyńska 2012: 271–274).

These programs cater to a diverse range of participants, allowing their implementers to offer a range of opportunities for cooperation and to create spaces for change for individuals of different ages, varying degrees of social maladjustment, and different stages in their criminal careers. Participation in such projects helps mentees connect with others, discover paths for personal development, and find sources of support—something they often struggle to achieve despite their genuine efforts and desires. Although mentoring in its pure form is not present in the motorsport environment (as the authorities and guides in this field do not practice the sport professionally or employ typical mentoring methods), the student-master relationship observed here shares many characteristics with a mentoring relationship.

One thing is certain: despite the absence of a direct link between motocross associations and formal rehabilitation, their positive impact on participants is evident, regardless of their past. Furthermore—and this deserves emphasis—the most influential environment for the informal social control of an individual is their immediate surroundings. For such an environment to support the desistance process, it must not only accept the individual's presence within the group but also create opportunities for them to form new valuable relationships. In the space of motorsports, this occurs naturally.

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