

Why Childhood Trauma Matters for Justice-Involved Individuals

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JoAnn Lee [00:00:06] From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome to the inSocialWork podcast. I'm JoAnn Lee. Welcome to my very first episode. Today, we delve into criminological theory through the work of Dr. CJ Appleton, an assistant professor in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. Why would I start with crim theory on a social work podcast? Because that's where I started as a doctoral student. I am fascinated by the ways that crime and deviance are socially constructed phenomena and therefore act as a mechanism of social stratification. Fascinated as in we need to understand these processes so that we can disrupt them. Sometimes it's small acts of resistance, right? And although CJ is a trained criminologist through and through, he speaks like a social worker and he thinks like a Social Worker. I met CJ during his first year in his doctoral program, and his work is incredibly relevant to social work. Although he starts with desistance, he covers a lot of ground from behavior change to childhood trauma to healing. I hope you all enjoy today's episode. Hello, hello, hello CJ, it's good to see you. Welcome to the inSocialWork podcast. I am so excited to have you on this show. Did I meet you in your first year of your doctoral studies?

CJ Appleton [00:01:34] I think that you did. It's been quite a while now, I was telling my wife, I was like, yeah, she was like who are you doing this podcast with? And I was like, I think they were colleagues now. But we started off and she was a mentor of mine and we worked on a project together and I was like wow, that's like seven to eight years ago now. So it's been it's been quite some time.

JoAnn Lee [00:01:53] For sure. And so I, watching you kind of grow and develop, I'm so excited to be able to bring your work into the social work world. It is something that I think that you and social workers would have so much to talk about. But before we get into it, can you share a little bit about yourself and your research interests?

CJ Appleton [00:02:12] Yeah, so I broadly am a researcher of behavior change and specifically the desistance process, which is the ending of a person's criminal career. And so the criminal career is broken up into three pieces. You have the onset, which is beginning. Why did a person begin to commit crimes in the first place? Then you have what happened during the times when they were committing crimes, which is criminal career itself. And then you have the back end, which is desistance processes. And each one of these components is its own different process, its own, different phenomenon to study. And so I'm interested in the back end of this and how and why do people stop committing crimes. Very, very fascinated with this process because it captures so many different things that I'm also interested just as far as our society and how do people live good lives? How do we maximize human potential? How do we open up pathways so people can be seen as the best version of themselves instead of always being judged by the mistakes that they've made in their past? So it's really this topic that brings together so many things that I am interested in more broadly. And so I have a person-centered part of this research which really looks at formerly justice involved individuals analyzing their

narratives, life story narratives to better understand that process. But I also have a systems approach which says which parts of the justice system, which parts our society are set up to help these individuals and how can we improve those areas in order to streamline pathways out of crime for those people.

JoAnn Lee [00:03:51] So you answered why desistance broadly, but I'm going to push you a little bit because I'm curious why that back end, what is fascinating about that to you?

CJ Appleton [00:04:02] Well, there's a couple of things. There's this way that we think of desistance, right? So you can think of the ways that, let's say somebody who used to commit crime, somebody we know went to prison, and you could say, oh, well, this person changed their lives. The average person that you may see, they may think, wow, somebody made it. Somebody made it out of this cycle that we all know is so devastating and gets people caught up and it's so hard to escape. But what's fascinating to me is the more that I learned about the systems, the more I realized most people desist. It's empirically almost the truth that people desist. The question is not whether they desist or not, it's when. And that's a fundamentally different way of looking at the ending of people's criminal career because we often think once a criminal, always a criminal. Once they're risky, they're always risky and they stay risky for the rest of their lives. And so there's this really, you know, old criminological finding of the age crime curve, which is, you know, their offending behavior is at the highest at late adolescence early adulthood and then across their 20s into their late 30s their criminality uh their criminal behavior it tapers off until it gets to really really low levels um and while that is an empirical truth that is not mapped onto the way that we talk about. A crime and criminal behavior and risk within our society. So this difference between how society talks about this and the realities of it when you look at it empirically is just very, very fascinating to me. And so my goal is to better understand that process to begin to get that slope to be a bit steeper, right? Like, how can we get people years of their lives back? So if normally they would have stopped committing crimes or stop offending in their 40s, How can we get that to be in their early 30s? How can get somebody to stop offending in their 20s instead so they can have this life back and also our society can be safer? So I also view it as like a two birds with one stone type of situation as well. Keeping the community safe while also increasing the quality of people's lives as well

JoAnn Lee [00:06:13] That's interesting, because you said that you're interested in behavior change. And I think a lot of people say in that world, right? The best predictor of behavior is past behavior. And here you're saying with desistance, that's actually not true.

CJ Appleton [00:06:26] Well, the interesting here, I have a very fascinating, I have very fascinating take on best predictor of future behaviors, past behavior. Because what's frustrating to me about that is which past behavior? Are we only picking and choosing the past behavior that we think that we don't like? And now since you have past behavior that we're fearful of, then that's the only past behavior that is predictive of your future behavior. And I have an interesting story about this within my dissertation research. There was one gentleman who grew up in a neighborhood and he lived in a building and at the bottom floor of his building, they sold drugs. There was people selling drugs there every single day of his childhood. And every single he says from the time he was like seven years old, all the way into high school, they tried to get him to sell drugs. And he said no every single day every single day he said, no and and you're thinking of a building probably multiple times a day for his whole life until he was 17 years old and he finally said you know I'll try I'll, try it and then he decided to sell drugs at 17 years old and so now the question is how

do we judge him do we, judge him by the thousands of no's that the thousands, of times throughout his life that he said No, I'm not going to do that. I'm not interested in that. Or since he said yes once, and now he has decided, is that now the only way that we can predict his future behavior? Is that now, the only thing that we can look at is now that he crossed that line, now we have to be worried. And so for me, I think that we got to take a life course, more holistic view of it. And then if we do that, then we can say, there is something to be worried about in your past behavior, but there's also a series of things that we can hold on to, that we can link to to say. Let's bring a bit of that other behavior into this forefront and let you know that that you haven't always been this person who made bad choices. You haven't always been in this person who did necessarily bad things that we don't want. There's a lot of good there. And let's bring that to the forefront because that potential still lies within you. And so I get a little snarky when people say that because I think it's not looking at all of what people have done in their lives up to that point.

JoAnn Lee [00:08:45] Absolutely. Absolutely. And that's a very social work perspective to sort of leverage a strength based approach and sort of leveraging the strengths that he does have. And remembering that and building on that. Thank you for that. Absolutely critical. So I think that brings us to your dissertation, which is what I was aware of and which had me wanting to bring you on to the podcast so What was the research question that you started with and what was your journey to landing on that question?

CJ Appleton [00:09:16] So my dissertation, I was in school older, right? And so I've been very strategic throughout this whole process. So I think I got to George Mason, I think was 34 years old. And so, I always trying to be very strategic. And so in my theory class, my crime theory class first year, we read a book, Shad Maruna's Making Good. Which is a narrative examination of the desistance process. So he, you know, briefly, he took a group of people who used to commit crimes and are not committing crimes anymore. So people who have desisted. And then he took up a group of people who are still actively committing crimes. And then, he examined their life narratives and he said, are there substantive and meaningful differences between the ways that people tell stories about themselves who have moved on and changed their lives compared to people who are still actively committing crimes. And it was this incredible book. It's been really, really influential. It's, I mean, I don't know. It has probably like over 10,000 citations now. I mean it's just, it's this like seminal study in our, in our field. And I remember thinking so much of this book is incredible. Um, but there are many things that just like with every book, many things that he didn't, you know, tackle and one of them was race. Right. So it was like, there's no, it was a study. It's almost all, um, white people. It's. It's in the United Kingdom. There's no mention of race and there's no attempt to mention race. It's not like this is something that he's trying to grapple with. So one of my big questions is what about the differences and the stories that are told between black and white individuals? Between different cultures. I think that that's a really interesting question. And I did like a search to see if other people had, you know, picked up that research question and saw that it was still, people had talked about it, but there was no theoretical, you know. There was no big effort to build a theory to better understand what role race plays.

JoAnn Lee [00:11:20] You talked about Shad Maruna's seminal piece. I'm not sure if you explained what his findings were, which I think we might have, since we both know it, we would have glossed over it, but can you give us a brief kind of understanding of what Shad Maruna's kind of key findings were?

CJ Appleton [00:11:39] Yes, so in Shad's work his key finding, he found that there were differences between the ways that people who had desisted told stories versus people

who were persisting. And so for the persisting group, for the people who are still active in their criminal careers, he found that they told what were called condemnation scripts. They used, they told stories that were marked with condemnation script. And you can think of narrative condemnation as a story that started in a good place and then has a downward arc into a negative space. And when you think of scripts, it is you have scripts throughout a narrative. So you're going to be telling different parts of your story. And when you tell that part of the story, oftentimes you're going to put a positive spin on it. You're going to put a negative spin on it. They're going to be constantly doing that throughout the course of telling your story. And so as a narrative scholar, you can count the instances of somebody taking something positive and then putting a negative spin on it, or taking something negative and trying to make it seem like it's better than it is. And so that's what he did. And he found that these condemnation scripts were marked with a negative self-perception. So people would constantly be downing themselves and downing who they were in this world. Within these stories people's past negative experiences served as proof that they were kind of doomed to failure. Uh, so these were very fatalistic worldview. I don't don't really have any control over my life You see these terrible things that have happened to me This is the reason why I am who I am and who I'm right now is not good I don't have a lot of worth I don't want to have a lot of value I don't have a lot of control and what's going on I can't seem to stop making mistakes or hurting the people in my lives and then uh because I have no control I have very little hope for the future. So future orientation And oftentimes people, I don't think about the future, I'm just living in the moment, but not really in a positive way. So a very fatalistic look on the future as well. And also a very interesting, the positivity that they have, they're often looking for luck. So he points out that many of those people are like, man, I hope I win the lottery. And I hope that just some dumb luck thing happens to me in my life that changes my life because they don't see themselves as having the agency or the ability to make that change themselves. And so he found those were the stories basically told by the Desisters. The Desisters told redemptive narratives. And so redemption is the opposite, right? A story that starts negative and actually ends in a positive space. And he found that one of the core features here is that people told narratives that protected that core goodness. So we talked about this idea that a person should not feel like they're always judged by their past negative experiences. What people did is they told a story that had like a you arc. So it started off in a normal place. So when I was young, um you know life was normal family life was normal i had a good life something happened i had a negative turning point at some point and that really turned my life in an in a bad direction while i was doing whatever i did during that bad time that that happened but that's not who i am that as a core the core person right the core self of who i am was always that sweet boy or girl. That normal person, and now that I've changed my life, I'm actually able to return to the person who I was always meant to be. And so in doing these and telling stories that are sequenced that way, they're basically saying, I'm not acknowledging what I did, but I'm just setting that to the side because I don't want to be judged by that. I want to be judged by who I am now and what I'm doing in the current moment. And so this is really interesting because, Shad's big, big kind of finding is that in order to desist, you need a believable story of change. And you don't need just a believable story of change for the world, you do need it for the world. You need, let's say you want to get a job and you have to explain, well, this gap in your job history, or you have explain the fact that you just got out of prison, you need to believeable a story of a change. You need a believeable story for your family who you're trying to convince things are to be different. Even when you're dating, if you go on a date and they're like, well, what's going on with you? And you're trying to build a connection with somebody in order to invite them in, you need a believable story that like, hey, this is a part of who I was, but the person who you're tryna build a relationship with is actually somebody different. But fascinatingly enough, you also need that story of change for yourself because across all of these domains and all

these things you're tryna change, you're carrying yourself with you. And if you don't in your core believe that you have changed and believe that things are going to be different it's going to be really hard to have the amount of resilience that you need across all these different domains in life to truly make the changes and then build that sustainable kind of new life.

JoAnn Lee [00:16:31] So then it sounds, it sounds implied that a believable story is the redemption scripts, but the the condemnation scripts where I will change if I get lucky. That sounds like that's not a believable story is am I am I inferring that correctly?

CJ Appleton [00:16:54] Yeah, and so you can think of a person who's just in your life, and you can think of the person who you have been seeing who's stuck. And they're not going anywhere or moving or taking action on this thing that they've been wanting to take action on. And think of the way that they talk about it and think about the way that they talked about themselves and are they making excuses? Are they constantly saying, oh, well, if something external to me changes, then I'll be ready to make it happen. Or they're constantly passing the buck or they're speaking very negatively about themselves. That person, if you heard that person telling that story, you would leave that conversation no matter how supportive you've been, being like, you know, hey. I don't know if they're ready, you know what I mean? I just don't know if they're ready to make a change. They seem like they're still in the rut. Whereas if you talk to somebody and they were like, actually, like, I'm fired up about it, I got a plan. I think I'm going to be able to do this. This is what I've been thinking about. You know, like they have that energy. They have that, you know, I've actually moved on in this place and I've grown and that story will make you think, oh, actually this person has moved on. This person is in a positive space. They acknowledge the fact that they were in a negative space, but they're trying to tell me that they're actually now in a different. Different headspace. And a lot of this redemption and this condemnation scripts, they've been linked to real world action, right? Psychological well-being as well as actually putting action behind your intentions as well. So it's not as simple as like, oh, well, people are just trying to convince themselves that things are better. That is a part of behavior change. Especially something like Desistance, where we're asking people to change across so many different domains of their lives. It's not as simple as just going to the gym Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. It is a lot of work that we're asking people

JoAnn Lee [00:18:50] Gotcha. And so it sounds a lot like social work in terms of sort of, um, just connecting it to narrative theory therapy. Um, and also what I hear is people are taking ownership. They're being proactive. They're, they're, um feeling a little bit more in control of things that they actually can control. Um, so that's great.

CJ Appleton [00:19:13] Yeah, there's a great deal of overlap between these. And so, yeah, it probably is very, very similar.

JoAnn Lee [00:19:22] To social work approaches. Yeah. Cool. Yeah, okay. So, um, you set out to write a dissertation, and you got Shad Maruna on your committee.

CJ Appleton [00:19:30] So I emailed Chad and I said, hey, I love your book. I think that there are these looming questions and he was gracious enough to email me back. And it was this very exciting thing. And then I said I want to replicate. We're also in another research methods class where we're talking about replication and about how qualitative work never replicates even though it makes some sense to in different settings because, you know, the You always know you have a small sample size. You know that it's not, you

know, generalizable. So using similar methods in different spaces with different populations could be an effective strategy because then now you're building a body of knowledge but taking a similar approach. And so I was like, oh, like I'm gonna replicate his study. I'm going to take his methods. I'm to do it in the United States within like a major urban area. And then I'm go to ask the question, what role does race play? In the development of a narrative identity and how are there differences in the ways that black and white individuals narrative identity affects their desistance process. This was my original kind of question and I set out to do that study and I ended up collecting 83 life story interviews and So I basically set a for all the this might be this might be controversial but. I was being told the whole time, like do a small study, just get your dissertation done, get out of here. It doesn't have to be your magnum opus. It doesn't have to. I was told all this stuff, but like, as you know, JoAnn, this, that type of language, that type messaging does not, you know it doesn't, it doesn't vibe with me. And I, my question was what if I wanted to be really cool? What if I want this study to be incredible? But what if I wanted to push myself? To see what I could do with this study. And I surrounded myself. I found some people who were cautious but also supportive of that. And they suggested, OK, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to collect data on a project that you're only working on this project. Once you become a professor, you'll never have this much time again. They said, so do something special with it, but draw boundaries. And so for myself, I said, OK. I'm going to collect data for the next four months. And however much data I can collect, I'm gonna collect as much as I can over the next four months. And that's what I did. And I ended up with 83 interviews, which is a lot of data. They last between two, two and a half hours and it's covering people's entire lives. So, I mean, I have a ton of data and I have black and white individuals, also men and women, and I three different justice populations. So I have people who are still committing crimes. People who have desisted but they have less than a year of desistance. So this is primary desistance and then I have people who are more than a years of desistance which is secondary desistance so I have the ability to make these comparisons across justice population, across race, across gender and so now I have this really dynamic and this really cool data set that I wouldn't have had if I would have just said I'm gonna interview 40 people and then just try to get this project done.

JoAnn Lee [00:22:48] Yeah, you set out to, uh, I think I've described it. People have looked at me and like, what are you talking about? You set out, to racialize redemption strips, or you set out to racialized, uh decisions theory. Is that, is that accurate?

CJ Appleton [00:23:04] Yeah, I mean, I set out to yeah, I think it's I think that if you just ask somebody, you know, whether it may be that people these two groups of people may tell different types of stories about themselves. I think I think the assumption is yes, the question is, is what? Where's the overlap? And where's the differences? And are those differences meaningful in any way? That's what I set outside to do. And it didn't end up being what my dissertation was on.

JoAnn Lee [00:23:33] Right, so what happened?

CJ Appleton [00:23:35] So what ended up happening is I blame it on the interview guide. And so I used an adapted version of Dan McAdams. Dan Mc Adams is the scholar who developed narrative identity theory. And I use an adapted version of his narrative identity interview protocol. And in this interview protocol, you first ask people to think of their life as a book. To name the chapters of their life story and then to summarize what happened in each chapter. And what this is meant to be, and it literally says this in the interview guide, it says this is made to be a 10 to 15 minute summary of a person's life. And I still have to

talk to him about how this is possible. To keep somebody to, like this is a very profound exercise. And I think that I could do an analysis just on people's chapter choices. I mean, it was like poetic, almost like the way that people talk about their lives. But what ended up happening is while I'm collecting this data, so many people's first chapter or second chapter included this just these harrowing stories of just trauma and difficulty and abuse and neglect. And these stories are just... I mean, they, it was just story after story after story. It was really, really kind of like just, it was challenging to listen to that and to be like, Oh my God, like this is not like this major part of what I'm going to do, but like, like I have been taught, stay focused. Like I have this study that I'm more trying to do. So in my mind, I'm like, I know trauma is clearly needs to be a part of the story, but I said, Oh, Well, I'm gonna write three substantive chapters. Why don't I just make one of the chapters about trauma and then I can focus the other couple chapters on what I was originally gonna study on. So that's kind of how I dealt with it in my mind. But it was very difficult because, you know, qualitative research, you can't just say, I'm not gonna use those variables for this analysis. Right? Like you can't just go, oh, I'm just gonna I'm just gonna take race out of it, and I'm just gonna use that as a control variable. And I'm not gonna, you know, like I'm not gonna I'm gonna take trauma, and I'm going to exclude that from this, you know, regression. You can't do that. And so in my mind, I had a hard time separating them because no matter what story I was trying to tell with the data, people were narrating their lives through a lens of trauma, especially their childhood. Um, and so you can think of When I was talking about how Shad talked about that redemptive arc that people had in their lives where life was at one point really good, it turned negative, and then now it ended up in a good place. Well, that turning point that people were talking about was childhood trauma. It wasn't just any turning point. It was childhood, trauma and different types of it. And so it really, I did, I just had a hard time and I, and it was getting down to the wire. I was like, I don't. I couldn't conceptualize my project all the way until August of my last year in the program. And then what I did was I, because people kept telling me, don't change your topic. Do not under any circumstances change your topics. You already wrote a proposal on this, you already did so much work, do not change your topic, and so I was trying to do that. And then I sat back, it was almost like a Yoda, and I remember my qualitative professors saying. You know, you tell the story that the data is saying the data is telling a story and so stop trying to impose your desires and your wants on the data. What is the data saying? And once I did that, I said, well, the data is telling the story of trauma and how trauma is impacting these people across their lives. That is what, that's the story that I am seeing that being loud and clear. So I said if I started this all fresh and I said that is the story that I'm trying to tell. Then I can see very clearly there's trauma that occurs not just in the household, but across contexts and that we can talk about that. And then that gets people, their onset, their criminal onset stories were stories of childhood trauma, the outcomes and the effects of childhood, trauma across many contexts. Then they start committing crimes and that sets their life on a whole nother thing. But then there's an effect that childhood trauma has on the desistance process, even when they try to change their lives 20 years later. 30 years later, they still have to deal with whatever it is that happened. So I said, oh, that's going to be my dissertation, the effects of childhood trauma across the criminal career. So how does it affect onset? How does it effect assistance? And how should we, as criminologists, take childhood trauma off the sideline and put it in the game? And it's not a secondary risk factor. It could be a central component to this criminal behavior puzzle that we're trying to solve.

JoAnn Lee [00:28:33] Yeah, I, um, I'm just trying to collect my thoughts a little bit.

CJ Appleton [00:28:37] I know that was a lot.

JoAnn Lee [00:28:38] No, no, it was good. Yeah, because I was because I think I shared with you, I was reading halfway home by Ruben, Ruben Miller, I'm still in it. And the trauma jumps out. I mean, all the stories he tells, there's so much trauma in it, and I find it fascinating, because I think you're right, people are sort of like, we're taught to stay on target, we were taught to focus. And it's so interesting, right? Because that's something that was just nagging you. But I think it must be something about you and trauma that sort of broke through the oughts, the shoulds, the this is what I'm supposed to be doing. And I really love your Yoda moment.

CJ Appleton [00:29:24] Yeah, yeah, because we get we I mean, think of all the advice that we've been given. Think of all the do's and the don'ts that people have been telling us. But when you're actually doing research and you need to get it done, then like not all of that is always helpful. And sometimes you need to take a couple steps backwards in order to move forward if you're at a barrier. And that was really my experience. And so I made incredible progress. Obviously, I wrote my entire dissertation. Like changed my topic and wrote my entire dissertation in a year when I had to work it on the other project for the last four years. And but when I when I took those two steps back and I landed on something that was clear to me that I saw very clearly I was able to make incredible progress on that topic. And now I have this branch of childhood trauma research that was never on my mind at all. I never in a million years thought I would have childhood trauma as a part of my research agenda. And now like I'm working on like five projects right now, four of the five are on childhood adversity. And so it's really, really awesome. And it's been this incredible addition to my life that I never really anticipated.

JoAnn Lee [00:30:39] So we'll get to that, but first you want to tell us what some of your findings are from the research study, what are some of the key takeaways?

CJ Appleton [00:30:47] So really interesting. This is also an example of how not being, so we're all searching to try to be as well-versed as we can be in all of the things that we're supposed to have expertise in, for good reason, right? We wanna know what we're talking about. My story is actually an example of how, not knowing, actually led me down paths that the research would not have led me down. And so originally when I found out what the ACE framework was, I didn't know that it was a household framework. What I did was I said, oh, there's this thing that's capturing physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, witness vicarious exposure to violence. And I just saw this framework. And so what I did was I coded my data for wherever this was happening. Like I was just coding my data for these instances. And then as, and I'm coding and reading at the same time, cause I'm in this like crash course in childhood adversity, then I read that it was just the household and I was incredibly disappointed. And I was like, well, wait a minute, not that there's anything wrong with the framework, but just maybe that it was called that a childhood adversity adverse childhood experiences and not the household adverse childhood experience. Maybe that's my big gripe, but I had coded in my data across context. It's not just in the home. Physical and emotional abuse is happening outside of the home, it's happening in schools, and it's happening in jail. Many of my participants went to juvenile jail and juvenile prison. And some of them went to adult prisons while juveniles. They're experiencing physical abuse, emotional abuse, witnessed vicarious exposure to sexual assault and solitary confinement and all of these different things within those spaces as well. And oftentimes within our research. We're treating those things as endpoints and not taking a life course perspective on people's lives. That person's life didn't end when they went to jail. They had to get out of jail. And that experience, while in that place, affected how they were experiencing the world afterwards. And so I had this very clear vision that adversity. My participants' stories were stories of adversity across

context and how that adversity, once it began, it really began to compound for them until they hit 18. And so they're 18-year-olds now that have experienced multiple experiences of adversity across context, and that really sets them off into young adulthood, really behind the eight ball. And I thought that that was an incredibly important story to tell, not just that Childhood adversity is happening within the home, but if we expanded our conceptualization to just capture these domains anywhere, then you'll find that these things exist in a lot of places. And so my first substantive chapter was that, what would we find if we expanded our conceptualisation of childhood adversity to exist outside of the home? And when I did that, I found that if you just look at homes, my black and my white participants, the white participants actually reported more ACEs than a higher A scores. They had a higher score than my black participants. If you expand just to the neighborhood that flips on its head where the neighborhood scores are fundamentally different, particularly for black boys where they experience their neighborhoods in a fundamentally different way than even the black girls did. And so this was less so, interestingly enough, this was the less so in the interpersonal experiences of abuse and. Emotional abuse, physical abuse, or sexual abuse, and more so in the witness vicarious exposure. So the Black boys in particular were reporting very high witnessed exposure to crime or violence or death or substance abuse or like these things, they talked about these things being these forces within their lives that they had to navigate and they had, this was fundamentally different than the other groups. And so I found that to be the difference and I found that there were many ACEs that were reported in institutional settings that had a great impact and that these all fed back into each other. So some people's ACE story begins in the neighborhood and then now this disrupts their home. So their household ACEs actually came as a result of their behavior change that began in the neighborhoods. And so I was exposed to these things in my neighborhood that changed my behavior. Now I'm arguing with my mom and my dad about this change in myself. They don't see, they don't understand who I am and the decisions I'm making. Now I am having trouble in home that was never there before. Now I don't want to be at home anymore because I have consequences in home. Now I've back in the street with no home, which causes me to interact with my neighborhood in a different way than even I was before. I'm also committing crimes. Crime is. Opens people up for adversity too, because if you're selling drugs, you're much more likely to be robbed. You're much more likely to have negative things happen to you. So it was this cycle of adversity between contexts, which was just, I mean, absolutely fascinating. And, and so

JoAnn Lee [00:36:02] So that, yeah, sorry, because I'm here in connection to two things in my brain. The first is William Julius Wilson and the truly disadvantaged and the concentration of poverty, the concentration of poverty in black communities versus white communities. And so that would speak to sort of the higher risk in the communities, the higher risks for trauma exposure in the community. So I think that's cool to see that connection between your work. And I think the second piece that I'm hearing is sort of the inadequacies of a checklist of trauma. Were you exposed to this? Were you exposed to this, were you exposed this? But you're talking about this dynamic system, the way that these things interact and feed on each other and there's feedback loops and it's accumulating and that sort of thing.

CJ Appleton [00:36:50] Yeah. And the main reason why we capture aces the way we do is to try to capture the effect of cumulative exposure. So we don't do frequency. We don't do severity. We do, were you exposed to it or not? And then we add the domains. Were you exposed the different types? That's what we do. But we know that kids don't spend all their time at home. As a matter of fact, they spend most of their time not in home. And as a matter of fact if the home is not in a good place, they might not be home on purpose. And

so if we're interested in cumulative exposure, then we have to understand where they're exposed to all of these things across the board. And otherwise we just risk overestimating the effects of what's happening in the home. Not to say that the house is not important, it's just the house is not the only thing that's happening in some of these people's lives. And so that was like kind of my major thing within my first substantive chapter. And then how that... People narrate their stories of criminal onset saying it was really a trauma was the beginning. And so it's just very fascinating.

JoAnn Lee [00:37:58] Yeah, yeah. And it sounds like a sort of an explanation of some of these racial disparities that might be playing out in the ways that ACEs actually may be under-reporting for black communities versus white communities, generally speaking.

CJ Appleton [00:38:11] Yeah, and I think that it's interesting because remember when you're thinking of narratives, a narrative and some of the pushback that I got when I went to publishes, examining somebody's narrative is not a good substitute for surveying somebody about ACEs, right? There's a lot that's going to be left out. It's not an equal, you know, one-to-one comparison between an ACE score. But if you ask somebody with a blank slate, because I didn't ask anybody about adversity. I asked no questions about childhood trauma. I asked no questions about adversity. I said what happened to you in your life and tell me your life story and people chose to narrate their stories including trauma as these as these uh catalysts as these things that move the story forward and um many of the black and white participants and even the black women versus black men. They lived in similar neighborhoods, right? Like I got my sample from D.C., from Alameda County, which is the Bay Area, and from Portland, Oregon. They grew up in similar spaces. How they chose to narrate their childhood was fundamentally different, where something about the Black boys' experience within their neighborhood, that part was a really important part of them telling their story of how they became who they were. When they were trying to explain how they become who they where, they needed to include their neighborhood and the impact that their neighborhood had on them. Whereas other, the white participants, as well as some of the black women, they may mention, hey, you know, there were some gangs in the neighborhood, but that was it. It was just a mention, and then they moved on to talk to me about their experiences of adversity that really shaped their lives, which are often interpersonal, things that happened at school, things that happen in a more localized within their family. Those were the adversities that were really pushing their, you, development of a negative. You know, self-conception and kind of their downfall at the beginning of their lives.

JoAnn Lee [00:40:09] Yeah, that's fascinating. So fascinating.

CJ Appleton [00:40:11] Very interesting.

JoAnn Lee [00:40:12] Um, so you, you've talked about trauma and onset, but you also said trauma is childhood trauma is related to desistance. So how do you see that connection?

CJ Appleton [00:40:23] Oh my goodness. There's so much here. So, you know how you talked about there's part of, you know, us. There is always going to be a part of us as researchers that is a part of this data analysis process, especially qualitative data. And so, in the work that I've done in recovery, substance use recovery, a huge part of substance use recovery, especially 12 step recovery is. Uh, doing the inventory, right? So the fourth step and the 12 steps is doing a fearless and moral inventory. And so if people don't, I feel like, I feel like there's less of an understanding of why the 12 steps work and what are the

mechanisms within those 12 steps that really, because it's a, it's uh, um, a program of action. It's actionable steps that people take. It's not just repeating mantras, right? And one of those actionable steps is you're supposed to write a list of every single thing that you've ever done wrong to anybody in your life. Supposed to write a list of everything that has been done wrong to you by anybody in your entire life from birth all the way up into the current moment when you're doing that and this is a harrowing task and what ends up happening is that people realize and they recognize that let me take a step back oftentimes people cope through life and adulthood by analyzing their lives and saying, oh, I know why I am the way that I am. And this has affected me, this affected me. This affected me and they like that story and they carry that with them. And those things may be true to a certain point, but oftentimes people don't do the full digging and they don't, there's always something they're holding back. There's always secrets that they won't tell anybody. There's stuff that is kind of what I like to call anchors. There's things that are still in the backpack that are weighing them down. It really makes it difficult for them to view themselves in a positive way for long periods. It makes it really difficult for them to have a lot of faith that things are gonna be good all the time, right? It leads to pessimism. And what the moral inventory does in recovery is, it says, we're looking at everything, whether you think it's important or not. We're gonna uncover everything. And what they found is, in the process of uncovering everything, you deal with whatever it is that's bothering you because we've looked at everything. And so I know that to be this thing where the past is carried with us in many different ways. And we understand like the research on childhood trauma, they have linked empirically. People who've suffered childhood trauma they have worse outcomes in adulthood. They have higher chance of obesity, higher chance hypertension, higher chance all of these different negative things are more likely to commit crimes, all these different things. What's less understood is the mechanisms that what is it that's carrying this childhood? Experience through the life course with us. And one of the things I'm interested in is the self. Childhood trauma impacts the development of the self and we carry ourselves with us, you know the saying everywhere you go, there you are. And so if you have a damaged part of yourself, a damaged sense of self, it doesn't matter if you get the job or if you got the girlfriend or if get the this, you still can view yourself as a bad person even with all the external things that we think are so important. And I think that if we look in our lives, we know people who have it all and they still don't see themselves as the amazing person that they are, there's still something holding them back from really viewing themselves in the way that you view them maybe. And so I just know that to be this thing, like we carry these things with us. What fascinated me is when I tried to look for literature on the effects of childhood experiences on adult behavior change within the desistance process, there's almost none. Um, there's one article that I could find, um, by Jessica Craig, a scholar out of North Texas, and it was just like this, like, well, wait a minute guys, like wait, wait, way, way way, wait way, like this is like insane. Like if you were to walk down the street and ask somebody whether they think that childhood trauma plays a role in people trying to stop committing crimes, almost anybody would say, well probably. And I just realized it was something that we hadn't, it was like hidden plain sight. Uh, we know it's a thing, but somebody has to do the research. Somebody has to, to look at this empirically to better understand the process. And so what I did was I, um, used narrative theory, which talks about coherence and talks about the need in order to tell a strong, redemptive story, we need to bring coherence to the past, right? So how did the person who I was become the person who I am today? And how did these different elements, so if I'm trying to tell you that I'm this good, whole, healthy person, but I told you that I was sexually abused when I was a kid, the question is, is how did the sexually abused child become the happy, healthy, whole person? And so the narrative theory, it says that in order for us to tell a coherent narrative, we need to make sense of those things. If we brought it up at the beginning, then often we would expect them to have to tie

a bow in that at some point in their story in order for the story to have coherence. And so that's basically what I did. I checked my sample for individuals who unprompted told a story of childhood trauma as a part of who they were and their life story early in life. So sometime between birth and 18 and within their change story, their desistance narrative. Where and when did they tie a bow in these things? Did they bring these childhood traumas back up? Did they talk about finding resolution in any way? And was that resolution an important part of their change process? And what I found was as it was, and there was kind of two distinct ways that this happened. And so for one, they found their trauma resolution, I say as a prescribed part of their institutionalized recovery process. And so many of them, their stories are, the arc is life was good or life was never good. There was a whole group of people where life was just terrible from the beginning, but life was normal at some point generally. Then I got abused or I suffered some type of trauma and then I got on drugs. And there was many different avenues and pathways that people got on drug, but they got on the drugs and once they got the drugs, their story was a life course persistent drug use. From that point forward, I dealt with addiction. And then addiction becomes the major part of their story. Right. Right. And so the addiction is the thing they're trying to get away from. I know I can't move forward in life until I stop being addicted to drugs. So their desistance narrative is I got into treatment or I finally went to some type of program or this was the last program I went to. But a part of that program is often this looking into the past. And I realized that that program, that it wasn't The drugs weren't my problem, I was my problem. And something had happened to me. I was damaged by these things that happened to me when I was young. And there's all these different avenues through which the institutionalized recovery process actually opened up and prescribed trauma healing for these individuals. And when they tell these stories, the reason why I use the anchor analogy is they talk about it being like free. Like, I felt like I had been putting backpack rocks in my backpack my whole life. And then now I was able to finally take those rocks out of my backpack. And and so there was this freeing element, but they weren't seeking this out. It was prescribed to them as a part of recovery for other people. They didn't have a prescribed recovery blueprint because they weren't drug addicts. And this was actually a racial difference as well for my black participants who weren't drug addicts. They didn't have access to drug recovery and we don't treat a recovery from robbing people or recovery from drug dealing the same way that we treat addiction. I think in our society we're much further along the path of thinking that if somebody is an addict they need a holistic approach where we need to help a person heal as a human and really wrap our arms around them and offer them this 360 support in order for them to move on. We do not do that with other people within our society. And so without that, what I argue is they had to become entrepreneurs really of their own healing process. They had to go and get it wherever they could get it from. And so they tell very agentic stories of saying, like, I decided I wanted to change. Right. I matured. I decided. I wanted to change I decided, I wanted a new life. And I knew that I needed to I knew that this was bothering me. I needed it to go find resolution to that. I knew that this was a problem in my life. I needed to go find resolution. So they went to programming, but they went to programming purposely to find the resolution. They didn't just randomly get it while they were there. And so there's these two really interesting kind of stories told, one passive healing story and one agentic healing story of childhood trauma being resolved. There was a third group who did not find resolution, And I say that that's the loose ends group. And interestingly enough, these were people who told redemptive narratives, but those narratives were mainly tied up around getting a job, becoming a parent. These like social informal institutions that we have within our society, that was really their anchor for their desistance. But those people told very pessimistic, they had negative self-perception. They had very fatalistic views of the future still. So they had parts of their narrative that were actually more in alignment with what the theory would say would be told by a person as

opposed to a d sister. So it seemed like those individuals who hadn't found full coherence within their life narrative, who hadn't talked about trauma resolution, they told less believable or less strong desistance narratives than those individuals who had found resolution or who were able to find that coherence. Or bring that coherence to the narrative.

JoAnn Lee [00:50:31] Were those Lucen groups, were they a little younger in their since life, so to speak.

CJ Appleton [00:50:36] No, it was, it was a mix. That's mix. It was a mix. And so there was one gentleman who he was, I think, from 45. But his mother made him hustle when he was like 12, because he was the man of the house. So she made him go out and hustle. And no matter how much money he brought home, she never it was never enough for her. And he talks about this like being this and never got love from the one person in my life that I that I wanted love from. And he has a job, he has kids, he has a wife, he has a good job, he has all this stuff, but he talks about himself very negatively. And then when I asked him, well, like have you ever have you ever been able to like find resolution to this? He's like his mother has passed away. His mother's gone now. Yeah, and I was like, have you well, how have you gotten over this? And he goes, I haven't and it's like this this thing. He has all these other things that are positive and he's doing well generally. But he's still plagued by this thing in his life. And my argument is that in order, if we're looking at things through a human flourishing lens, and we want people to be living the absolute best lives that they can, is dealing with this past trauma necessary for you to stop committing crimes? For long periods of time, maybe not. But if we want you to stop committing crimes and live the best life that you can as a fully healthy and happy human being, then I would argue that then it becomes a more necessary part of the process. Gotcha. Yeah.

JoAnn Lee [00:52:08] Okay, so I think that's super interesting findings and so many interesting ideas. So do you want to talk a little bit about some practical implications of your research for the social work practitioners out there who might want to know, well, what do I do with this knowledge?

CJ Appleton [00:52:28] Yeah, so I think that there's a couple ways. I think one of the things like dealing with adults, I think building in processes which ask people to give people the knowledge that there could be something in your past. And it doesn't have to be childhood trauma, but there could more things behind you that are kind of holding you back. And if we would open up the door to examining some of those things, then you may find a relief from things that you've maybe convinced yourself you're okay with, right? You may have convinced yourself you've passed this. You may convince yourself that this is not an issue, but there's a lot of evidence out there that there are things that we're carrying with us that are pain us down. And so I think that opening that up as a part of the change process for people is important. And while that may not be necessary for everybody, I think you may identify somebody who that could really work for, for people who we all know that we work with individuals. It seems like everything is in place. It seems they're doing really good and all of a sudden the self-sabotage. You know they throw everything away or you know they they run back and they destroy their lives really quick Just so they can be in a place that's more comfortable like that might be the individual vigil especially who who they may have something else there that is really plaguing them, that's causing them to want to get back into a place where they clearly still see themselves as a bit of that kind of wrecked person, that that person who's rebuilding and they're having a hard time distancing themselves from from that kind of identity. I think that that could be something that or the type of pattern that could identify somebody as especially needing that. I think it

should be kind of just a universal practice across individuals. I think also what my work really points to is the fact that we, I think we need to take strides in seeing all types of individuals, justice involved individuals as sympathetic figures, not just people who used to commit, not people who are substance users. And so, like we know, like if this person was a heroin addict and we take the heroin away, they'll probably not be doing the things they were doing on heroin. But, you know, heroin is not the only thing that's plaguing people, that's causing them or playing a role in their negative behavior. There's other things as well. And I think that we have the model there. I think there's a lot of potential in taking a 360 holistic approach to helping all of the types of individuals that come around us change. And so I think that that is a practical application of this as well, because right now there's a systematic advantage for substance users versus people who are not substance users because of the way that our institutions have developed the support structures that exist within them. You know, I think of when you go to substance use treatment, you go to parenting classes, you get cognitive behavioral classes, DBT, you go yoga, you do all this stuff and those. But if you just rob people you just go to cognitive behavioral therapy you think about thinking errors you might get a social worker who's going to dig into some things but it's very very light on the type of treatment that you get and so I think that that is something that's really important as well. I do think as far as the young people Having a more robust conceptualization of childhood adversity and a better understanding of how these things link together and how they feed into different parts, I think is important. I think that we've made some strides in school, but even in school. I'm doing a project right now on school adversity. There is no school ACE score. There's no. Even in schools, we oftentimes think of trauma as like, how do we help this person who has experienced trauma in other places come into this space and be a better student or be a part of our community? We have a far less comprehension and understanding of how do experiences within school that align with adversity that we understand so well, how is this actually having a unique effect on people's lives? And so I'm actually doing a project on that right now to try to see if developing an ACE score. For schools is helpful and fits the models better than just individualized experiences. So I do think that that is important to understand that kind of triangulation that happens with adversity across contexts for young people. And then understanding that will help people like social I've developed strategic plans for overcoming those things. And... And so I those are kind of maybe three I could go on and on, but those are probably three of the things that that I think come to mind.

JoAnn Lee [00:57:31] Yeah, and it seems like if we had a better understanding of childhood trauma, if we could better address it, it may disrupt a lot of these patterns of long-term criminal behaviors that just kind of come out because we don't understand it well enough to disrupt it early or to treat it or to help people heal. As you were talking about emptying the backpack, the image that came in my mind and I'm sure I'm dating myself. Was the Forrest Gump movie, you know, the character Lieutenant Dan, when he has that moment when he's on the shrimp boat with Forrest and he just, you can just see, like no words are necessary, but you could just, the imagery of him letting those rocks go or letting that anchor go. That's the imagery I see.

CJ Appleton [00:58:22] And I think the interesting part about it, just to just a really quick follow up, I think that interesting part about that in this whole conversation is like this idea that we're supposed to just get through it or suck it up. And like, okay, it would be great if you found this relief, but that's not realistic. And I that we also have to get rid of that as well. And understanding that, no, that is realistic and it is necessary, and it's probably necessary for a whole lot more of us than just the people who have maladaptive coping mechanisms as a result of their behavior. Many of us are anchored down by things from our past that are affecting us, and I think that once we as a society better understand that

we all need to heal, then we're not gonna be as. Uh, uh, anti feeling that people who are in our justice system also need healing. Because I think some of this, in order for it to really be rolled out, there needs to be, um, uh a palatability from the, from the public that people in these, in these spaces need and deserve support. And, um it's hard for people who were like, well, why should they get that when I'm not even getting that? Um, I think there's a lot of that energy that often exists. And so my, my response to that is you should get it too. And so it's not an either or. We should all be getting it a little bit more. And we all need it, I think, in order to just be a little happier and a little more fulfilled with our lives. So that's my thought.

JoAnn Lee [00:59:52] Absolutely. Do you want to share a little bit more about what's next for you? You talked about aces in schools.

CJ Appleton [00:59:57] Oh my god, so much, we don't even have enough time, JoAnn. So I'm working on a project now that is trying to do that mapping for the cycles of adversity across context. So I found it in the coding that I was able to do for my dissertation, but now I'm going back and we're doing a more complex coding process trying to capture the causal sequences that are attached to the different adversities and seeing where there's overlap to where one adversity is actually causal in the next adversity, causal in the next diversity. And then we're going to do maps to map out how they are related to each other. And so I'm really excited about that, because hoping that within the narratives, we can identify some of these potential mechanisms that we can then do follow up empirical, you know, larger quantitative examinations of, right? So I'm really excited about kind of this mapping of the cycles of adversity. We also have some quantitative studies that are using a middle grade, a middle school data set, as well as a high school data to see if. You know, capturing experiences while in school are, can exist as like a separate ACE scale. Do they have a unique effect? When we include household ACEs, if we include school experiences at the same time, is there a unique effect of school experiences and is it helpful to think of school experience as a scale in the same way that we think of these household experiences as a skill? And so I'm testing that with that same question with a national representative middle school dataset as well as a high school dataset to see that question. So I think that's really interesting. I think there's a question of clustering. And so geographic clustering of ACEs. And so I have some data that can be linked, I'm hoping to census data so we can understand not just where these things are happening, but where geographically they're clustered and is there anything that we can, is there that those findings can tell us about that process? I'm really excited about that. I have this concept of an anchor identity that I think is really, really important to desistance research because often in desistance, research, we're really interested in how does the criminal become the pro social person? How does the deviant become the good person? And my pushback is we want to take a life course approach to this. Deviance is not the only thing in person's past that they need to make good from. I said people in order to move fully move on with their lives. They need to make good from all the negative things that have been attached to their sense of self. And so I'm going to start doing some research that's going to present a theoretical argument that. Uh, in order to fully desist, especially sustained desistance long-term, we need to, uh, release many of these negative things that are tied to our sense of self and maybe not all of them at the beginning, maybe we don't need to do all of them to initially desist. But in order, to maintain the systems over 10, 15, 20 years, we need to let go of those negative self perceptions. Uh, and, and so trying to map those different anchors that are holding people I think is there's also a very fascinating kind of question. So I will stop there and and just know I have like ten more uh that I'm very excited about as well so one of my biggest issues this last year has been saying no to things in my own mind not even to opportunities other people have brought me but opportunities I bring

myself at 11 a.m on like a Wednesday morning uh and then trying to say how much can I do right now and what capacity do I have so really excited about those projects that I'm working on right now.

JoAnn Lee [01:03:54] Then I will share with you a life philosophy one of my friends brought to me, which is instead of thinking about life as being short, we should think about life as being long. So life is long. You have plenty of time to explore many of those possibilities. I just want to say a couple of the things that I really love about your research and the work that you're doing is your emphasis on the whole person, thinking more holistically about the person. And the ways that you're moving past sort of the checklist, right, the risk factor checklist kind of approach, but really thinking more dynamically, thinking about mechanisms, helping us understand those mechanisms. Those, that's just two, like I could probably go on and on, but I will stop there. But the last thing I just wanted to end with is if I could borrow the method that you mentioned, the chapter titles, Fast forward 50 years or so, I don't know, a hundred years or, so like, what do you want your epilog to say, or in other words, what do hope your intellectual legacy will be?

CJ Appleton [01:05:00] So I think first and foremost, I would like my legacy to begin with like the fact that I'm a good person. And I'd like tried my entire career to pour into other scholars and other people, like not just my colleagues, but young scholars and also just communities as much as I could. And understanding like that is the- reason why I'm doing this. That's one of the incredible benefits of being a professor. A lot of people think that you're just teaching your students. No, like being a Professor and doing research, you have the ability to impact so many different people's lives. And I think that first and foremost, I would like there to be a smile and a warm feeling that people have thinking about like the fact that CJ really was just a good person who tried to help as many people as he could. So that's number one. Number two, I think, that if I could be remembered for. The ways that I try to build out our understanding of the importance of identity and the self in the criminal justice system and expand our understanding of the self and the importance the self to be more than just the deviant self, but to be the whole self, then I really think that if I'm able to to have that impact and to start a or build off of and continue a legacy of building that into desistance research. I think that that is important and not just how the childhood self impacts the adult self but then how does the self continue to evolve even within the desistance process. Oftentimes we think desisters we don't need to worry about them anymore but people relapse back into old behavior all the time and we haven't even really gotten into that. Very much. And so I really would like that to be my legacy. And I would also hope that I would be able to build off the incredible feminist scholars, the incredible critical scholars, to begin to take those works and build theory to better understand how race, how gender plays a role in this process of desistance. There's a lot of work out there that I think that could be brought together and brought to bear in answering this question. And I really hope that I do that justice, and I give guidance to the next generation of scholars and my colleagues to say, hey, there's this thing out there, we all know it's a question, we know it hasn't been answered, let's begin to work on this stuff. And so I think if I could do those three things, I can rest happy as I fade into the distance that I did a little bit of a good job while I was here.

JoAnn Lee [01:07:50] I well, you're definitely well on your way. So it has been such a pleasure. Thank you for sharing a little bit about your work. Thank you again to Dr. CJ Appleton for being my very first guest on the in social work podcast. So what did you guys think? For me, he gave me a lot to chew on. I hope you agree that what he said resonates for social work. Perhaps there may be some new future collaborations between CJ and social workers out there. If I may share a little of my origin story, I started my social work

career right out of undergrad and boy was it a privileged and sheltered undergrad. Then I started working with adolescents who had gotten in trouble with the law in Eastside San Jose. Shout out to the place and the Ars family. I'm going to date myself, but this was during the dot com boom. So the juxtaposition of the privilege of Silicon Valley to the struggling families I was working with in the East side of San Jose really left an impression on the younger version of me. I was struck by the amazing young people I worked with who were becoming in an environment of lack. Now don't get me wrong, I do think accountability and taking responsibility is important. But at the same time, there was no question to me. That we had a responsibility to support these young people on their journey of becoming, so that they could become productive, maybe even thriving adults. Fast forward in my career. And I remember explaining that I was choosing to focus on youth because they weren't fully formed. And so it was easy to make the case that we have an ongoing responsibility to support them and help them become the best version of themselves. For me. It was easy to think of these youth as sympathetic figures. But once they become adults, that case was much more difficult to be made, even though the line between youth and adult is somewhat arbitrary and fuzzy and gray. And if they don't get what they need as youth, how will they magically have what they mean as adults? So when I learned that CJ had pivoted to focus on childhood trauma, it resonated with me even more. I am deeply appreciative that CJ is brave enough to make a case for why we need to support these people, why we help them heal, and why we see them as sympathetic figures. I admire that. And I'm grateful for the ways that CJ has helped us to reframe people involved with the legal system. They are whole people, and they cannot just be reduced to the worst things they've done in their life. And isn't that the heart of social work? I would love to hear what you guys think, and what, in particular, resonates with you. Thank you for bearing with me as I am becoming in this roll of post. Until next time.