

## **Lived desistance: understanding how women experience giving up offending**

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# Lived Desistance: Understanding how Women Experience Giving Up Offending

## <1>Introduction

Given the proportion of women in the criminal justice system, and particularly those in prison, it is perhaps understandable that the overwhelming focus in desistance research has been on men. Many important studies either neglect to include women, or ignore the differences in experience between genders (for example, Sampson & Laub, 1993; Maruna, 2001; Bottoms et al., 2004). In many ways desistance is experienced similarly despite gender, and this can be a wholly acceptable reason for a lack of research interest. However, research indicates that there are some common features of women's desistance that are markedly different to (or significantly more pronounced than) men's researched experiences (for example, Giordano et al., 2002, Leverentz, 2006). In addition, while many researchers talk of desistance as a process rather than an event, it is still rare to encounter a qualitative research design which attempts to take this position seriously in the *investigation* of desistance. With some exceptions, the desire to identify 'successful' desisters understandably proves more pressing than the possibility of examining the process of desistance as it unfolds. Yet this need not be the case.

Through the use of a micro-longitudinal, relational interviewing approach (Soyer, 2014, Leverentz, 2014), I followed a number of women through some months in their lives where they had experience of desisting from crime to some extent. This approach offers unprecedented access to the daily experience of women as they face the challenge of desisting, and lessens problems of retrospective interviewing after many months or years of offending-free behaviour. Yet this intensive qualitative approach raises questions of whether my findings are specific to women, or whether men would report similar experiences if they were interviewed in comparable circumstances.

In this chapter, I first look at understandings of lived desistance, introducing existing research on female desisters, particularly the role of identity in their experiences. Next, I introduce my own study and the methods used. Turning to explaining my findings, I examine why identity change may be important to female desisters and explore the impact of participants' lack of confidence in themselves on their understanding of their own identities. In contrast to some other desistance literature (Maruna, 2001) which discusses people exerting an identity which they had not previously embodied, I show that many of my participants reclaimed a previous identity rather than creating a brand new identity in their desistance. This re-discovery of a lost 'self' was particularly evident in women who had lived many years in controlling and abusive relationships. The most common identity to be (re-) claimed among the participants was that of a mother or carer, which raised questions about the social availability of various alternative identities to the participants. However, a 'caring' identity also provided opportunities for strengthening desistance through providing a cognitive blueprint (Giordano et al., 2002) and generative potential (Maruna, 2001) - although these opportunities were not always realised.

When it came to experiencing desistance as a process, the most obvious impacts of a (re-) establishment of a prosocial identity were the accompanying increases in confidence. Whether directly or indirectly, questions of identity did have an appreciable effect on women's experiences of desistance, and throughout this chapter I consider the extent to which discussions of identity were shaped by the research methods themselves.

### <1>Lived Desistance?

Before outlining the details of the study which form the basis of this chapter, it is beneficial to spend some time explaining what I mean by the use of the term 'lived desistance'. Studies in the area have long agreed that desistance is best understood as a process and not an identifiable point in time (Weitekamp and Kerner, 1994, Bushway et al., 2001, Laub and Sampson, 2001, Barry, 2006, Kazemian, 2007, Weaver and McNeill, 2007). This process is not linear and straightforward but almost inevitably includes periods of backsliding, relapse and uncertainty (Glaser, 1969, Maruna, 2001). By following participants through the desistance process, insights are gathered into their experiences (both positive and negative) *as they live them*. To examine this process-in-situ, there is therefore no inherent need to require potential research participants to be crime-free for any period of time before the start of the study (Mulvey, 2004). Moreover, given the relapse-filled nature of the desistance process, further criminal behaviour during the course of the research need not invalidate a participant's continued involvement. While some research requires self-reported intentions to desist to be supported both by the absence of further criminal convictions and a corroborating opinion from a professional (Maruna, 2001), others solely rely on a self-definition of being a desister (McNeill and Weaver, 2010).

In the current study, I take a mixed approach, which is primarily based on participants' stated intentions and desires to desist, but requires some corroboration in the form of an assertion from a professional that they have seen some (unspecified) signs of participants' sincerity in desistance. Other studies have used a wide range of measures to determine whether participants' previous criminality was serious enough to allow for the possibility of desistance. While many different choices could be justified, it seems that, at the very least, participants should have committed more than one crime (even if not officially recorded) before they can be said to be able to desist. This is therefore the approach I take - although admittedly the limited previous criminal involvement I required was partly influenced by concerns over recruiting sufficient numbers of participants. In summary, to investigate 'lived desistance' means following participants who can be viewed as desisting from some level of repeated criminal behaviour, over time, to see what their experiences are (both successful and otherwise) of giving up offending.

Perhaps at this point it is necessary to justify discussing 'desistance' and not 'recovery' when so many female offenders are convicted of crimes inherently linked to alcohol and drug addictions (Caddle and Crisp, 1997, Malloch, 2004, Morash, 2010, Leverentz, 2014). Indeed, 12 of the 15 participants in my study referred in interview to struggles with substance abuse. In addition to being common practice in

criminological studies to look at the desistance of addicted offenders (Maruna, 2001, Bottoms and Shapland, 2011, Leverentz, 2014), drug use is technically offending behaviour whenever the substances in question are illegal (Malloch, 2004). Similarly strong associations exist among those previously convicted of crimes between alcohol abuse and offending to access funds for the purchase of that alcohol (Malloch, 2004, Morash, 2010). Not all offenders have addiction problems, but constraining my discussion of desistance only to those unaffected by substance abuse would only address a small number of offenders in the criminal justice system. Furthermore, questions of identity, in particular, appear to be similar across experiences of both desistance and recovery. Colman and Vander Laenen (2012) found that desisters viewed previous identities as 'criminals' as subordinate to previous identities as 'addicts' when they retrospectively interviewed those desisting and recovering from serious offending and addiction. However, this might be an artefact of their recruitment strategy, which relied on treatment and social care services. Yet identities as recovering addicts were not always prominent in the current study, even where participants were recovering from severe addictions or in treatment. Both those with substance abuse struggles and those without frequently referred to a range of previous identities (naturally including that of 'addict'), and these identities shared similar effects on participants as they tried to desist. For example, both addicted and offending women face stigma from society which labels them as both uncaring and unfeminine (Worrall, 1990, Smart, 1992, Zaplin, 1998, Carlen, 2002, Malloch, 2004), necessitating a change in how they see themselves to achieve successful desistance. The difficulties of adverse circumstances, damaged relationships and bruised self-confidence affect both groups of women as they renegotiate their own identities. Undoubtedly, recovery and desistance are not fully interchangeable terms, but the connections and similarities between the two are striking. Importantly, recovery and desistance are not experienced as separate processes by those women in the present study where both are subsumed into the overall process of (re-)creating a prosocial identity and lifestyle. With this in mind, I discuss desistance from crime here even where it is inextricably bound up with recovery from addiction.

### **<1>Female Desisters**

Female offenders face many challenges in desisting from crime. Many are exposed to poverty (Loucks, 2004, National Offender Management Service and National Probation Service, 2006, McIvor, 2007, Morash, 2010) and have few workplace skills (Loucks, 2004, NOMS & NPS, 2006). In addition, many are mothers (although some no longer have care of their children) (Loucks, 2004; Corston, 2007). They often face fractured family and personal relationships (Morash, 2010), and experience of abuse (either as children and/or as partners) is common (Loucks, 2004, National Offender Management Service and National Probation Service, 2006, McIvor, 2007, Morash, 2010). Indeed in the current study, 10 out of 15 participants disclosed experiences of abuse. In addition to widespread misuse of alcohol and drugs (Loucks, 2004, National Offender Management Service and National Probation Service, 2006, McIvor, 2007), physical and mental health problems are

common (Loucks, 2004, Mclvor, 2007, Debidin, 2009, Morash, 2010), and around a third of women in contact with probation services in England and Wales have admitted self-harm or attempted suicide (Debidin, 2009). Yet despite all this, and in common with male offenders, there are several accounts of female offenders leaving crime behind them (e.g. Eaton, 1993, Leibrich, 1993, Giordano et al., 2002).

Nevertheless, research into the experiences of female desisters remains relatively scarce. Many of the largest and most influential studies in the area either focus exclusively on men (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Bottoms et al., 2004) or fail to analyse their mixed (but male-heavy) samples by gender (Maruna, 2001; Farrall et al., 2014). Yet some important contributions do exist. Of particular note is Giordano and colleagues' (2002) study and their theory of cognitive transformation. Based on a mixed methods study with over a hundred initially incarcerated boys and girls over many years, such a robust approach to studying female desistance is yet to be matched. However, due to the impressive size of the sample, the study can only provide a few snapshots into desisters' experiences, and is hampered by gaps of many years - risking greater use of reconstruction, improvisation and speculation in participants' accounts (Graham and Bowling, 1995). On the other hand, and providing a detailed exploration of female desisters' lived experiences through the process of desistance, Leverentz's (2014) qualitative study of female ex-prisoners in Chicago is based on interviews with 49 women every three to four months over the course of a year. Naturally, several other useful studies into women's desistance exist (e.g. Sommers et al., 1994, Mclvor et al., 2009, Sharpe, 2011), and they provide further insight into women's experiences of giving up crime.

Within both gender-aware studies and desistance research in general, the necessity of a change in identity is often viewed as central to long-term success (Baskin and Sommers, 1998, Giordano et al., 2002, Bottoms et al., 2004, Sanders, 2007, Byrne and Trew, 2008, Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Some writers assert that such a change is necessary for both male and female desisters in order to shed the problematic and shame/stigma-inducing identity of 'offender' and to provide a satisfactory 'replacement self' (Giordano et al., 2002). Giordano and colleagues (2002) expand this concept, explaining that replacement selves which provide more detailed 'cognitive blueprints' - in other words, guides to behaviour in those roles - are particularly helpful to a desister as they attempt to claim a new identity. Others focus on the gendered aspects of the desisters' identity, claiming that being at once 'female' and an 'offender' is inherently problematic to women because of the assumed maleness of offenders (Byrne and Trew, 2008). Rungay (2004) suggests that this strained understanding of identity is precisely what prompts female offenders' experiences of intense shame and powerlessness. Therefore, a change in identity is necessary to reconcile these conflicting views of the self and in order to provide a foundation for successful female desistance. Yet some other studies claim that identity change is not necessarily crucial for desistance at all (Bottoms et al., 2004, Farrall et al., 2014). With such conflicting viewpoints, it can be difficult to conclude whether an identity change is truly necessary to desistance and if so, for what reason - and especially whether this is inherently tied to gender. In the current study, it is particularly interesting to consider these questions in the context of

investigating lived desistance. It may be that issues of identity are not particularly relevant to desisters in their everyday lives and are instead later superimposed onto experiences or recognised only with the benefit of hindsight. I now turn to providing more details of my approach to the study.

## **<1>Methods**

Over the course of a year, I was a regular volunteer at Together Women Sheffield - a community 'one-stop-shop' (Corston, 2007) which caters to women either involved, or at risk of becoming involved, in the criminal justice system. Many of their service users come to the centre via court, receiving either a tailored Specified Activity Requirement on their community order mandating sessions at Together Women, or through attending Probation appointments with officers who are, in effect, seconded to the centre. From this attendance at Together Women, I was able to meet many women with recent offending histories who were trying to desist. I interviewed 15 of them between one and seven times - a total of 44 interviews - and also conducted a focus group with most of the staff members.

The repeated nature of interviewing within such a short time-frame led me to characterise the study as 'micro-longitudinal'<sup>1</sup> - a type of Qualitative Longitudinal Research (Thomson, 2007). Before, after, and in-between formal interviews, I often had interactions with participants - which were not recorded as formal data but which instead informed and fed into our discussions at interview (as well as contributing to continued rapport). As such, I considered this study to be relational qualitative research, with the development of good relationships with participants comprised not only of time together in interview as a core aim. All participants had recent histories of more than one instance of criminal activity, and many had extensive previous involvement in crime. These crimes were not always officially recorded, and ranged from minor public disorder, shoplifting and drug possession offences to violence, drug dealing, drug production and fraud. First interviews often occurred within a few months of the most recent instance of criminal behaviour. As such, I was able to see the early emergence of desistance in participants' lives as they were experiencing it.

I first analysed the interview and focus group data by transcribing recordings and creating pen portraits of each participant's experiences. I then iteratively coded all the transcripts using NVivo, initially using around 30 themes that had emerged during fieldwork, transcription and creating the pen portraits. Data from interviews are presented with the participant's pseudonym and the interview number, thus data from Beth's fourth interview is tagged as (Beth, 4). As the focus was on female offenders, there is no direct gender comparison available within the study and there has not yet been a fully comparable micro-longitudinal study conducted elsewhere with male desisters in the community (although see King (2013a) for the closest attempt to date). In the discussion that follows, I examine the various aspects of identity that were discussed by women in my research and suggest the extent to

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Stephen Farrall for the suggestion of this term.

which these novel insights can be viewed as either gendered and/or generated by a closer methodological focus on the process of desistance.

### **<1>Previous problematic identities**

In some cases, the reasons for needing a new desisting identity were evident in interviews. Previous offending could be so tightly bound up with how a participant saw one of their core identities that a 'replacement self' (Giordano et al., 2002) seemed crucial for the desister's progress. Megan, who had a history of drug-related minor offending and was living in residential rehabilitation at the time of the interviews, demonstrated this in her description of her partner compared with herself: "But he was a drinker and I'm a, I was heroin" (Megan 1). Here, Megan showed that her recent addiction to heroin was central to her understanding of her identity when she compared herself to her partner. Interestingly, she does not describe herself as an addict but refers merely to the drug itself. Even though this seemed to be a speech shortcut rather than an explanation that she viewed herself as fundamentally subsumed to the drug, it is indicative of the importance heroin played in her life. Supporting existing findings that problematic offending identities are prolific among offenders, regardless of gender (Giordano et al., 2002, Baskin and Sommers, 1998), the implication of Megan's words was that she could not desist without shedding her drug-using identity, echoing findings on the primary importance of recovery to desisters elsewhere (Colman and Vander Laenen, 2012).

Yet it was not just among drug-users that an identity which was fundamentally problematic for desistance was evident. In interview, Nicole discussed a number of incidents where she had violently offended against both people and property as a result of neighbourhood disagreements. When asked whether she was more serious or excitable as a person, Nicole replied that she could be either very excitable or very serious- but both to extremes:

'There's nothing, I've always described myself like there's no middle, like, me anger. I'm either the softest, stupidest, daftest person ever, like where people walk all over me, or I'm losing the plot and I'm smashing someone's car up on front, there's no in-between and I get het [worked] up, oh, to the point where I can't control myself, that's a big part of my problem.' (Nicole 1)

As a person that was either letting herself be taken advantage of, or whose anger was out of control, Nicole realised that her character of extremes would not be helpful in her desistance. Both the soft and the explosive sides of her fed into her identity, but she thought that both needed to be modified if she was to succeed in maintaining a prosocial life. The problems that Nicole saw in these aspects of her identity would presumably be relevant to any desister, whether male or female, and require a similar 'replacement identity' for those, like Megan, whose identities as substance abusers were prominent. Yet, other parts of Nicole's identity that she valued - specifically her role as a leader among her peers - did not, in her mind, necessitate a change in identity, despite their significant contribution to her past offending. In the past, her desire to lead others had led her to make rash and dangerous decisions rather than taking time to listen to other viewpoints and suggestions - a tendency that had led to some of her offending when a local feud

became unmanageable. In desistance, Nicole instead re-defined what it meant for her to be 'a leader', and incorporated taking advice from others as an important aspect of that role. In this way, Nicole dealt with a previous problematic identity without the need for a 'replacement self' (Giordano et al., 2002). Instead, she could be seen as re-writing the detail of the 'cognitive blueprint' of her existing identity. Nevertheless, in both these approaches - looking to shed or re-define a problematic identity, the link between identity work and desistance is straightforward. Perhaps due to the repeated interviewing method, such stark discussion about previous identities and desistance was uncommon beyond the first interview. It seemed that either participants did not think much about their identities in their everyday lives, their perspectives on identity did not much effect their daily experiences, or the relevance of identity was complexly connected to a number of other topics which were easier to express. Once such topic was participants' confidence, and I turn next to discuss its interaction with concerns of identity in desistance.

### **<1>Lack of confidence and precarious identities**

(Self-)Confidence can be understood as the knowledge of oneself as a person and the valuing of one's skills and character (2014).<sup>2</sup> Many studies on desistance make use of the concept of confidence, suggesting that a new identity (or indeed, any lesser changes) cannot happen without the presence of self-confidence in desisters (Shover, 1996; O'Brien, 2001; Burnett, 2010; Myers, 2013). Such claims are supported by the wider psychological literature which asserts that behavioural change is enabled by confidence (Bandura, 1977). While some suggest that confidence is an emotional aspect of desistance (Farrall and Calverley, 2006), I argue more specifically that a lack of confidence can inhibit the development and maintenance of a stable, prosocial, desisting identity. It is necessary here to point out the gender differences previously detected in levels of confidence among offenders. Some studies on male offenders have found no perceptible lack of self-esteem (Burnett, 1992), but female offenders have been found to exhibit especially low levels of confidence in themselves (Worrall, 1990; Davidson, 2011). It may be that some of this difference is attributable to differing research methods and the likely self-presentation of people from each gender. However whether these findings mask lower confidence in male offenders or higher confidence in female offenders (or both) is unclear. Questions of data reliability elsewhere notwithstanding, many participants in this study shared feelings of extremely low self-confidence, often with credible stories explaining the causes for those beliefs. It was evident that this lack of confidence profoundly affected their lives as they desisted, particularly through its interaction with their identities.

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<sup>2</sup> Although I liken it here to self-esteem, it is not my intention to similarly equate it to broader concepts such as self-efficacy or agency. However, confidence appears to be a crucial part of these concepts (Stajkovic, 2006) and therefore academic work on both self-efficacy and agency is relevant to the discussion.



I return to discussion of Nicole for a clear example of the effect of low confidence on identity. Her lack of confidence was particularly apparent when I asked her how she would describe herself to someone who had never met her before:

'Em, see this is where I do go wrong, I doubt meself before I've even, I don't know. I've sorta like, it depends who I meet, depends who it is, if it's someone really important I'll just, I don't know, I'll not let them in too much...' (Nicole 1)

Nicole's doubts as to how to describe herself, and her uncertainty of what to say depending on who she was talking to, suggested that she was unsure of who she really was. Her low confidence and lack of a clear identity appeared to feed into each other. As a result, Nicole maintained a distance with those who were 'really important'- presumably those who had some power over her, such as probation officers. Despite her discussing various specific aspects of her identity in interview (as mentioned earlier), my sense of her not really knowing who she was persisted. If a strong identity, or identity change, is truly necessary for successful desistance, Nicole had some way to go in asserting such an identity.

Yet for some, it was not a case of low confidence and vague identities being concurrent, but instead a previous clear identity was damaged by attacks on their confidence. This was particularly true of participants who talked at length about their experiences of domestic abuse. Ten of the fifteen women in the study disclosed historical or ongoing domestic abuse, with a couple of older-than-average offenders (in their 50s and 60s) having recently ended seriously controlling and abusive relationships of many years' standing. Beth was one of those women, and had not considered herself to be a victim of domestic violence until she was sent to prison for workplace theft and heard other prisoners discuss their experiences. Despite presenting a chronic lack of confidence in herself, she described the reasons for this powerfully:

'But I didn't ever think I were very strong, because of what he'd manipulated me and everything, but I've told everybody now what he's done and that and, so suppose I'm starting to be me again, I don't know.' (Beth 1)

In telling a personal history of being a capable and confident young woman, Beth explained that her identity had been damaged by her abusive partner. His constant criticisms and manipulations had made her question herself to the extent that she became unsure of herself and lost her previous identity. Her tentative recognition that her old identity was coming back (reflecting part of Maruna's (2001) redemption scripts) was accompanied by a recovery of some confidence. This recovery was, in turn, triggered by the recognition that speaking about her victimisation was a strong and brave thing to do, and echoed the experiences of female desisters elsewhere (Rumgay, 2004) who gained confidence as a result of establishing their identity. In the quote above, it is apparent that Beth considered her 'starting to be me again' as a process, rather than an event - she was 'starting', she had not yet achieved success. Beth described this whole process as something which followed her resolve never to offend again, but as she gradually grew in confidence and understanding of herself, her position as a free and prosocial member of society likewise stabilised and strengthened.

However, this process of gaining self-confidence was a long and difficult one, and was certainly not linear. In a later interview, Beth shared that she continued to struggle with seeing herself as a strong and capable woman:

'Me daughter said to me the other day, "I think you've done really well, you've not had no major blow-outs or owt like that" and I don't see myself like that, I see meself...pathetic, really.' (Beth 2)

As she continued with the difficult job of rebuilding her life without her husband, it could be hard for Beth to see an attractive identity emerging for herself. She faced struggles in finding suitable accommodation in a new area (living by herself for the first time in many years), grieving for the breakdown of her abusive relationship (with a husband that she nevertheless loved) negotiating with the Department for Work and Pensions for financial support, re-establishing relationships with her adult children and her grandchildren, avoiding the shame of old friendships, navigating a new church and the people involved there, and filling her time on a daily basis. Little wonder that it could be hard for her to see who she was becoming or how she could value herself in the midst of these difficulties. As the difficulties Beth faced in forming and maintaining a prosocial identity seem particularly testing because of her experiences of domestic abuse, it may well be that any desister who faced recovery from abuse-based trauma would encounter similar struggles.

### **<1>Increased confidence and identity change**

Yet when participants had experienced some success in accessing a desisting identity, they exhibited increased self-confidence. It seemed unlikely that identity change solely promoted self-confidence, or that self-confidence only enabled identity change. Instead, it seemed that both interacted in a virtuous circle, with increased self-confidence and identity change both contributing to the other's development. Twenty-two year-old Rachel (whose self-belief had been seriously damaged through a long-term abusive relationship with a much older man while she was a teenager) talked of the difference her desistance had made to how she felt about herself and how she wanted former friends to see her:

'I can look myself in the mirror without cringing, you know what I mean, I'm not ashamed of who I am, I'm happy to be me.' (Rachel 3)

'What they've gotta remember, I'm not the person I was when I come here, that fragile person that had been in a domestic violence relationship for 7 years, I'm stronger and better than that now.' (Rachel 3)

Both Rachel's new identity and her new confidence in herself had benefits in many other areas of her life as she desisted. The first benefit, as shown in her first quote, is the removal of shame. An attribute of feeling one's identity to be degrading (Goffman, 1963; Bartky, 1990), the shame that Rachel had previously felt had disappeared once she could claim a new, desisting identity. Despite some limited evidence of reintegrative shaming aiding desistance (Leibrich, 1996), Rachel experienced the removal of shame as beneficial to her view of herself. In addition, the strength and belief in herself demonstrated in the second quote gave Rachel the ability to stand up to her former friends and refuse to take drugs from them. The confidence she had gained had a direct effect on her ability to

persevere in her desistance even when her existing relationships made that difficult for her.

Rachel was not the only participant to experience multiple advantages from a changed identity and a related increase in confidence. Steph was in her 40s, and desisting from alcohol-related shoplifting which she had begun to commit as an adult. A large part of her daily experience revolved around being 'prosocial' enough to once again take care of her primary-school-aged daughter (who was living by mutual agreement with Steph's parents). When she had progressed enough to have frequent visits and care of her daughter, Steph exhibited more self-confidence and became more certain of who she was. As a result, she appreciated being seen as trustworthy and trusted, and reported being more at ease with her life and the process of desisting: "But yeh I feel like I'm more coming back to me and that responsibility's there again with [daughter] and the trust, em, I'm more, I'm just more comfortable" (Steph 7). Steph was evidently pleased with the effects of returning 'back to me'. In reclaiming her previous identity, she was able to again inhabit roles that she used to have as a responsible and trusted mother and which had been denied her during her offending. It was also evident that Steph's relationships with her parents and her daughter improved as she resumed her role as a mother. Given the importance of social relationships in desistance (Eaton, 1993; Baskin & Sommers, 1998; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Holland, 2003; Rugmay, 2004; Burnett, Batchelor, & McNeill, 2005; Farrall, 2005; Barry, 2010; Goodwin, 2014; Leverentz, 2014), this impact of a new identity could be significant in Steph's continued desistance. While Steph experienced these advantages as she reclaimed who she used to be, Rachel was very clear that she had become a new person in her desistance - finding a replacement self (Giordano et al., 2002). I now turn to examine this difference in experience in more detail.

### **<1>A new identity or the return of an old self?**

Those, like Rachel, who spoke of a new identity had, without exception, recent histories of serious substance abuse and had been exposed to many recovery narratives through a variety of services. Yet others with similar histories, like Steph, talked of rediscovering who they used to be. It was, however, rare for participants from any background to talk about being able finally to be who they truly were, as though they had never before presented their real self. As such, there were some points of connection with the desistance narratives in Maruna's (2001) study, but the desisters did not perfectly echo the sentiment of being liberated to be their true selves. This again perhaps reflects the prominence of domestic victimisation in the sample as opposed to Maruna's sample. I now examine the differences in experiences of those who had re-asserted a lost identity and those who had created a brand new self.

As already seen, Beth mentioned several times that she was aiming to be more like how she was before her abusive marriage:

'And I'm trying to be me again, which I think I got lost before, so I'm trying to, yeh, trying to get myself in a nice place.' (Beth 1)

'I think I were always held back, always walking on eggshells and I suppose I lost my identity a bit really, didn't say owt [anything] in case it were the wrong thing and, I loved him...I have always been the one that dealt with everything, and then I suddenly met him and I've gone down to this, bit of a no mark, really that didn't do owt, didn't say owt, so I think I'm getting back now to maybe what I were before.'

(Beth 2)

Her love for her husband meant that she had subsumed her identity into her efforts not to say 'the wrong thing'. His influence drained Beth's identity (and worth) away until she was unable to do or say anything for herself. Beth was always very clear that she wanted to be the same person that she was many years ago. She did not need to find a new identity, as her old identity was prosocial and a 'nice place'. While her offending did occur at a time when she considered herself to be acting out of character (like the scripts in Maruna's (2001 study), she had previous experience of being her true self (unlike Maruna's (2001) desisters). Desistance thus became a process of reclaiming that identity for herself.

While Beth's experiences in re-asserting her previous identity were echoed by some participants, others were clear that their desistance required them to be a new person. Rachel had started to take heroin as a 14-year-old who was trying to self-medicate for mental health problems. Her drug-taking had led to a long-term abusive relationship with an older man and a variety of offending. Eight years later, she was in residential rehabilitation for addiction to a number of drugs and alcohol. As seen earlier, her aim was to keep the new identity that she had formed there in the rehab: "Yeh I know I've changed and I know how much this place has done for me, I know that I'm not going back to that, no shape or form" (Rachel 3). Perhaps because of her comparatively young age (at 22, Rachel was the youngest participant in the study) and her long lasting addictions, Rachel did not feel that she had a suitable previous prosocial identity to which to return. She talked at other points of not knowing who she was before she started to take drugs, and this is hardly surprising given her young age. Thus, Rachel fitted the standard 'replacement self' model of desistance (Giordano et al., 2002) much more closely than anyone else in the study. For her, the person she had become while at the rehabilitation facility was a new self. Her continued desistance depended on not returning to her previous self. While Rachel's new primary identity was described here as being a sober, contributing member of society, she talked elsewhere of being a 'good mum'. Indeed, the primacy of a specific identity as a carer - usually as a mother or grandmother - was evident in the majority of participants' accounts.

### **<1>"I know I'm a caring person": a gendered identity?**

Several studies have commented on the frequency of female offenders both defining themselves primarily as caregivers (Katz, 2000) and being primarily defined by others as caregivers (Leverentz, 2014). However, before examining the data from the current study which supports these findings, it is important to note that not all participants focused on a caring identity. Megan was one of only three participants who did not have any children. She was ending her time at a residential rehabilitation centre at the time of the first interview, and reflected on the identity she could now present to potential future employers: "At least it's just me, with the qualifications,

rather than Megan the drug addict, but I'm a recovering addict now anyway, so [laughs]" (Megan 1). There was some indication that Megan's assertion that she was a *recovering addict* was a learned script from the rehabilitation centre, as she caught herself halfway through her description of herself as a drug addict and corrected her own perspective. Nevertheless, her view of herself as a person with qualifications centred not on caring responsibilities but rather her educational achievements. While both men and women have been found elsewhere to base a desisting identity on being a worker (Farrall, 2002; Giordano et al., 2002; Byrne & Trew, 2008, King, 2013b), Megan was the closest in this study, through the central role of her qualifications, to base her new self on being a worker (although perhaps, more accurately, a potential worker). This discrepancy in findings may be due to the recent and fragile nature of desistance for the participants - although similar studies of early desistance in men have found that employment remains crucial (King, 2013b). Eleven of the fifteen women in the study were in receipt of Employment Support Allowance for health problems. For many, these health problems (or at least their acute nature) were short-term and caused by recent addictions. However, for all, this benefit was granted because they were not (yet) well enough to undertake employment. As their desistance progressed, one or two participants proceeded to gain work, but this was not the case for most of them. With employment at best a distant hope for most at this early stage in their desistance, it was unsurprising that it did not feature as a basis for a desisting identity. Yet even when participants were in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance, and so judged by the state to be fit for work, talk of seeing themselves as a worker was rare. Despite the stigma attracted from society and the media by being on benefits (Valentine and Harris, 2014), participants did not see the possibility of work as something that could shape their identities. This was also true for the few that did various jobs in the grey economy. It is possible that this was, in part, due to the lack of suitable work that allowed them to also care for their children (Fawcett Society, 2012). In addition, most participants were from working-class backgrounds, where mothers are encouraged to stay at home to care for children (Leverentz, 2014). In light of all these factors, it may be that participants' focus on being primarily a caregiver was a fair reflection of their experiences, expectations and opportunities - at least in the early stages of desistance.

In addition to relational and micro-longitudinal interviews with desisters themselves, I also conducted a focus group with members of staff at Together Women. The staff provided deep insight into the relevance of identity to desisters' lives, gleaned from years of observation and listening to service users. The danger of the focus group was that too much importance was extrapolated about influences which were peripheral to the actual experience of desistance and, indeed, I did find that the staff discussed identity much more frequently and explicitly than the participants. Alternatively, it may have been that the importance of existential factors could only be fully recognised in hindsight. Nevertheless, staff were aware of the potential problems that a desister could have in asserting a primarily caring identity:

'Like you say they feel like they take, maybe, and that becomes their identity, and that becomes, they kind of, can accidentally embody that and that's who they are, and then become too dependent.' (Staff Focus Group)

Here staff raised an interesting paradox: by thinking of themselves primarily as mothers (they said), desisters became too dependent on other people and therefore less capable of directing their own lives. I remain unsure of why this should be the case- if the very nature of care is providing for others' needs, how can it engender a habit of dependence? However, perhaps this linked to assumptions that those who do not earn an income have a dependent nature because they are financially dependent on the state. Dependence could then be seen as primarily financial rather than the absence of a more general capability.

Nevertheless, it was not only staff who identified difficulties with a caregiving identity. At our first interview, Rachel (introduced earlier) immediately claimed a caring identity and then proceeded to highlight the tensions that that view of herself was causing in her desistance:

'I struggle to find out about myself and, I know I'm a caring person and I'm a bit, I am a bit soft, you know what I mean. And I like to take care of people and make sure everyone's alright and stuff, but I'm struggling to do that at the minute because I'm not caring for myself so how can I care for other people?' (Rachel 1)

Rachel's core identity here is firmly described about caring for others. However, she identifies that she is incapable of properly caring for others because of the early stage of her desistance. Therefore, although she still has concern for others (attentiveness), she shows that she cannot fulfil a core part of caring because she currently lacks the competence to provide for their needs (Sevenhuijsen, 2003). This temporary inability to fulfil her identity provided Rachel with additional motivation to succeed in desistance.

There was the potential for a caregiving identity to be of even greater worth in desistance, but this was a challenging prospect given existing cultural beliefs. Maruna (2001) found that 'generativity'- the desire to give something back - was important in desisters' stories. Participants in the current research also echoed desires to give something back to the community as an acknowledgement of the harm they had caused. It seemed to me that a valuable and natural way of doing this was through the conscientious fulfilment of the caring roles that participants occupied, but this was not recognised by the participants themselves. Staff explained why they thought this was the case:

'Oh and that's all that they've ever known if they've come from a family who had just had children young and they've had children young, and you know, and you get a lot of these big families, that's all they know a woman to be, so they don't see it as anything, as an achievement, it's just life, "that's who I am, I'm just mum".'  
(Staff Focus Group)

In being a mother, the potential to contribute to society through raising children was nonetheless taken for granted. In caregiving, there was a ready-made identity with a detailed cognitive blueprint, easily able to support desistance (Giordano et al., 2002, Rumgay, 2004), but the generative possibilities of such an identity were unrecognised by desisters and society. While employment was perhaps an ambitious goal for these female desisters (see earlier), being a good mother could be adopted as a generative action as well as a core identity - if it would only be accepted and valued as such.

## <1>Conclusion: "[The] best thing is me, knowing what I want, wanting my life back"

As Steph showed in the above quote, understanding her identity was a crucial part of her desistance. It provided her with a positive aim in desistance - she wanted more than to 'not offend' - and a clear view of what that might look like. Similarly for many of the participants, the person they saw themselves to be did have a significant influence on their desistance experiences. Looking at their experiences as they lived them highlighted a number of complexities as yet unexplored in the research on identity and desistance. Previous problematic identities had to be discarded or more creatively re-imagined. Low self-confidence and uncertain identities conspired against successful desistance while increased self-belief and certain identities provided further perceived benefits to desisters. Some shaped a new identity for themselves, but it was particularly common for women with experience of domestic abuse victimisation to re-discover a previous self. In both cases, being or becoming a caregiver was prominent in participants' accounts. While this aspect of desisting identity did appear to be closely tied to gender, it brought its own potential pitfalls. Nevertheless, there remains the possibility of applying the research on generativity in desistance to female desisters' caregiving identities in a way that further supports them as they attempt to give up offending. Some of the insights gathered here on the development of identity during the desistance process may have been gained through the unique methods used and could be equally relevant to male and female desisters. For example, there is evidence to suggest that such trauma is particularly common among female offenders (Bloom et al., 2003), but there is also a subset of male offenders who exhibit comparable rates of victimisation (Prison Reform Trust, 1991). Therefore, the constraining role of low self-confidence on the assertion of identity could conceivably be experienced by desisters of both genders with histories of abuse victimisation. Nevertheless, my study supports previous findings that suggest the desistance experience is generally different for women than for the typical male desister.

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