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Article

'Keeping busy' as agency in early desistance

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Abstract
Agency in desistance research has often been understood as deliberate action undertaken in pursuit of a desisting identity. Through a micro-longitudinal approach, this research focuses on the early desistance experiences of a number of mainly White British female participants. Agency was exhibited not with a new identity in mind, but instead through 'keeping busy'. The surprising lack of identity concerns may be due to the early stages of the participants' desistance experiences, with new identities emerging later in the process. Alternatively, it may indicate a fundamental difference to the classic desistance narrative, linked to the differences between this sample and the frequently researched, Western, male, high-frequency offender. Finally, important aspects of the cultures surrounding desistance research may have shaped the narratives of desisters and the biases of researchers towards finding a concern for identity when this is not necessarily experienced in the everyday lives of desisters.

Keywords
Agency, cultural narratives, female desistance, identity

Introduction

It is frequently understood within desistance research that agency is properly demonstrated when people act to orientate themselves towards a desired future self. In this article, I use my research of women's early desistance experiences to challenge the idea that agentic action is intrinsically tied up with a desister's identity. The use of retrospective narratives, however, complicates the study of agency in the everyday lives of desisters, especially in the early stages. To mitigate this, I employed a

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micro-longitudinal approach to study the experiences of female desisters as they live through the early stages of moving on from crime. In doing so, the idea of 'keeping busy' emerged as an important aspect of agentic behaviour. I explain a variety of theoretical perspectives through which this idea can be understood. A desister 'keeping busy' can rightly be seen as intentional action in a number of ways, albeit often divorced from conceptions of who the desister is or is becoming. It may well be subsequently built upon to form a coherent identity, but this possibility may not be considered in the day-to-day experiences of the desister. Finally, I consider the important socio-cultural context which helps to explain why we, as desistance researchers, struggle to separate agency from identity.

Agency

Agency, or acting like an agent, can prove straightforward to identify but more difficult to explain and a precise definition is contested. On a basic level, people exhibit agency when they deliberately act in accordance with their intentions. They are not just instinctively reacting to circumstances, but they are guided by a particular aim. Behaviour is not accidental or random, but intended and focused on some sort of end point. Agentic action is therefore purposeful. Desistance theorists have come to place great importance on the individual's agentic role in promoting desistance (Barry, 2006; Baskin and Sommers, 1998; Giordano et al., 2002; Graham and Bowling, 1995; McNeill, 2012; Murray, 2009), and desisters themselves often have a strong belief that personal agentic action – acting with the aim of desistance in mind – is crucial to the success of their journey (Burnett, 1992; Haigh, 2009). While agentic language frequently appears when people retrospectively tell their stories of desistance (Maruna, 2001), there is only a small amount of prospective research that links agency and desistance. For example, definite intentions to desist have been found to predict lower subsequent self-reported offending (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011), and agency has been linked to more favourable life outcomes (Paternoster and Pogarsky, 2009).

Some criticism has been levelled at desistance theory for talking about agency while not truly integrating it, thus creating overly causational theories (Paternoster, 2017). Such an oversight seems to be traceable to the lack of accepted definitions of the concept of agency. Yet in recent years, there has been much work done in attempting to define and operationalise the term (Carlsson, 2016; Healy, 2013, 2016; King, 2014). Drawing on both cognitive work on the nature of choices and change (Giordano et al., 2002; Prochaska et al., 1992; Vaughan, 2007; Wikström, 2010), and explanations of different types of specific agentic action (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), desistance theorists have now begun to move towards a shared blueprint for understanding agency. Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) influential taxonomy divides agency into three temporally distinct types. Iterational agency looks to rely on habits established in the past to guide the choice of present action. Practical evaluative agency is grounded in the present, weighing up factors in the moment to make a decision. Projective agency looks to the future, with an agent acting on the basis of who they aim to become. Building on the third of Emirbayer and Mische's agentic types, one core aspect of the shared understanding within desistance work specifically is that agentic actions are closely linked to the pursuit of a

desisting identity (Healy, 2013; King, 2013b), and it is that identity that provides consistency between decisions and actions over time (Paternoster, 2017).

A further consensus has largely been reached in the acceptance of interactionist theories, which emphasise that agency and structure are not separate concepts, working independently, but that instead, they find their meaning in how they relate – to each other and to other concepts (Emirbayer, 1997; Farrall and Bowling, 1999). Agency can therefore be understood as shaped by the structure by which an individual is surrounded and as a means by which that structure can potentially be altered (Farrall and Bowling, 1999). As a result, there is an interplay between structure and agency, where structures shape available choices, and choices shape relevant structures (Farrall et al., 2011). Insights from feminist research are particularly helpful in illustrating some of the effects of this interplay. They emphasise the separation between individual agency, understood as the individual feeling that change is possible, and political agency, which are the structurally bounded opportunities for change to occur (Pollack, 2000). While people may express themselves agentically (with individual agency), structural barriers may deny them the political agency to pursue desistance in their chosen way (McDermott, 2012; McNeill and Weaver, 2010; Opsal, 2012; Rumgay, 2004). If an actor's chosen way of changing is not available to them, structural constraints may deny them the opportunity for exercising projective agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; King, 2012). Nevertheless, some individually agentic action is still possible even if the actor is oppressed and constrained by structures in some way (Pollack, 2000). For example, it may be that the only available form of agentic action in an oppressive situation is iterational – with the actor forced to rely on past habits to guide their present action (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Alternatively, actors may still be able to employ practical evaluative agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998) in situations where they face structural barriers, choosing among the reduced options available to them in a particular moment.

When considering the experience of people in the early stages of desistance specifically, there are some particular ways in which agency has been shown to be crucial to desistance attempts. Hunter and Farrall (2018) note that when desistance does not feel good to the desister – perhaps because of loneliness or boredom – their portraying agency by remaining determined to desist is particularly important to their successful journey away from crime. Agentic action in those circumstances, in taking intentional steps with the aim of desistance in mind, is significant in combatting negative emotions that might otherwise derail their progress. Indeed, agency may be critical in successfully coping with difficult emotions caused by the structural barriers which face desisters (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Agency is also more important generally in the experiences of desisters with low social capital (Healy, 2010). With fewer social resources to hand, it is more important for them that they keep acting deliberately with desistance as their goal. For them, 'desistance by default' (Laub and Sampson, 2003) is unlikely to occur because the social context in which they are in does not encourage someone to move on from crime – instead it is likely to trap those who are ambivalent about the danger of reoffending. Strong determination enables a desister to overcome the social disadvantage that they might have as they pursue a non-offending life.

Yet despite these insights, there are also several indications that agency is not critical throughout a desister's journey. Some show that people who are forced to comply with

desistance-focused measures may later develop motivation and agency in their compliance (Rowe and Soppitt, 2014), even though their engagement is initially mandated rather than coming out of a determination to desist. This ambivalence towards the goal of desistance is echoed, especially in the initial stages of desisters' journeys, in a number of studies. King (2013b) is among a handful of researchers who found that early-stage desisters presented themselves as acting less agentically unless and until they had achieved some measure of success in their desistance (Healy and O'Donnell, 2008; Hunter and Farrall, 2018). Another explanation of the delayed appearance of agency in desistance is that it is only evident once a desister has gained an increase in their self-control (King, 2013a). Yet it is easy to forget in the technical discussion over the place of agency in desistance that persisters can also act agentically in their continued offending (Carlsson, 2016; Hart and Healy, 2018). It seems, therefore, that agentic action may be disconnected from at least the early stages of desistance altogether. If the understanding of agency as the deliberate pursuit of a new identity is accepted, this disconnection may be particularly true for relatively low-frequency offenders. For those whose offending is occasional or low-rate, even if they have histories of repeated offences, their core identities are likely to be distinguishable from their criminal behaviour and it therefore makes little sense to be searching for agentic action in pursuit of an identity change as part of their desistance.

A final warning against privileging the search for agency in desistance accounts comes from the current neo-liberal political and cultural climate in the United Kingdom (and elsewhere). In the prevailing era of late modernity, individuals are cast as highly responsible and hyper-agentic (Giddens, 1998), thus deserving of praise and (often) censure according to what they experience. It is assumed that they are able to change their circumstances and any lack of change is attributed to a deliberate choice not to change. The critical role of cultural contexts in shaping the stories available to desisters (and others) as they recount their life experiences has been highlighted elsewhere (McAdams, 1993, 2015; Maruna, 2001). However, this observation must be translated into more than just a side-note explaining why a particular study is grounded in a particular society. Despite often being part of the same culture as participants, researchers have the opportunity to interrogate to what extent narrative themes are dependent on socio-cultural context, and whether they reflect lived experience or provide a script with which to interpret it. The neo-liberal late modern Western context in which most desistance research has thus far taken place should put desistance researchers on our guard, as those of us who come from this same cultural background, whether participant or researcher, are likely to be unwittingly swept along with this cultural narrative of seeing agency as permeating all action. We may, therefore, find ourselves over-estimating the occurrence or importance of agency in desistance experiences.

Keeping busy

Allusions to desisters attempting to keep themselves busy can be found in several recent studies which look at early experiences of desistance (Farrall et al., 2014; Healy, 2016; King, 2012; Soyer, 2014). First, keeping busy can be used by desisters as a strategy to keep themselves feeling positive and so cope with the emotional turbulence that

desistance can bring (Healy, 2016). Second, desisters can keep themselves busy in an effort to modify their habits (King, 2012). With successful desisters forming new routines and being in new places (Farrall et al., 2014), these habits are an important factor in journeys to desistance. They can be even seen as a foundation for 'iterational agency' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Yet despite the suggestions of the importance of keeping busy to desistance attempts, Soyer (2014) asserts that intentionally keeping busy occurs before any changes in, or aspirations to, new identities. There thus remains some tension between the emerging understanding of agency as intentional action in the pursuit of identity, and the findings suggesting intentional busyness occurs separately to identity changes. With these competing views of the understanding and place of agency through 'keeping busy' in mind, my research was well-placed to look at how and why women in the early stages of desistance acted to keep themselves busy.

Methods

This article is based on a qualitative micro-longitudinal study into women's early desistance experiences in 2012 and 2013. Through being a regular volunteer at Together Women Sheffield,[1] I met many women with recent offending histories who were trying to desist. Identifying participants who are desisting is often difficult in research (Bersani and Doherty, 2018), and particularly so when a prospective approach is desired. I therefore invited participation in the research to those who described themselves as trying to 'go straight', or who were observed by staff or peers as making some progress in moving on from crime. It was important, given the early desistance experiences I was aiming to follow, that my criteria for inclusion were not too strict, thus excluding those at the very start of zig-zag desistance journeys(Glaser, 1969). Some participants did commit further offences during the course of the study (although this was rare), but remained part of the research. The nature of desistance as a process, and the lack of theoretical agreement over when that process starts (Bushway et al., 2001; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Maruna, 2001), meant that these relapses were still relevant to the research. However, the vast majority of participants made noticeable progress in moving on from crime over the study (and in the months that followed) so I present their collective experiences as examples of early desistance.

Over 1 year, I interviewed 15 women between one and seven times – a total of 44 semi-structured interviews, exploring participants' recent experiences and themes that emerged over the interview process. All were living in Sheffield at the time of the fieldwork, and the majority were also brought up in the South Yorkshire area. Most had a working-class White British background, a couple were middle-class White British, one was working class Black British of Caribbean heritage and one was working-class White British Traveller. They ranged in age from 22 to 65, and many suffered from mental health problems and histories of abuse. A small number had physical health problems and more than half were addicted or in recovery from addiction to alcohol, drugs or gambling. I also conducted a focus group with a number of staff at the centre towards the end of the fieldwork period. 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). This frequency of contact with participants provided unusual access to the everyday realities of these women's lives.

Many of the service users came to the centre via court order, receiving either a tailored Specified Activity Requirement mandating sessions at Together Women, or through attending Probation appointments with officers who were, in effect, seconded to the centre. 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. However, most participants had no recent history of high-rate offending. 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 aimed to conduct subsequent interviews monthly with participants, but the everyday reality of their lives meant that a wide range of gaps between interviews emerged. Nevertheless, the result was that the study followed people closely through the early stages of desistance, rather than asking for recollections of their experiences exclusively retrospectively. Such an approach reduced the dangers of reconstruction, improvisation and speculation found elsewhere in retrospective interviews with participants and as such provides an example of qualitative innovation commended specifically to examine the role of agency in desistance (Carlsson, 2016; Graham and Bowling, 1995). While the repeated interviews did follow participants through a number of changes in their lives, it did not produce expected insights to how their journeys unfolded. It is likely that this is due to following participants over weeks and months, rather than years. As a result, the women were often dealing with a succession of crises, rather than experiencing – and reflecting on – big changes over large periods of their lives. It is interesting that noticeable changes in participants' experiences and approaches over repeated interviews did not often emerge. This suggested that any change that did happen in that time was gentle and that progress in desistance took a long time.

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. The small sample in the study, and exclusive focus on women, meant that I aimed to specifically explore *theoretical* generalisations (Lewis and Ritchie, 2003) from my findings. As such, I draw out some data here which speaks to the wider debate in desistance theory about the place and shape of agency in early desistance experiences. Data from interviews are presented below with the participant's pseudonym and the interview number; thus, data from Beth's fourth interview are tagged as (Beth, 4).

Understanding busyness

While women in this study did not usually discuss acting agentically in relation to a desired identity, most did spend some time talking about intentionally keeping themselves busy. I therefore discuss here how 'keeping busy' can be best theoretically understood as agentic action, based on their accounts. After outlining what busyness looks

like, four particular theoretical lenses are useful here. First, how keeping busy enabled women to cope with difficult emotions. Second, women kept busy to prevent themselves from becoming bored and thus from being faced with situations which tempted them to commit further offences. Third, busyness could be used to build up new habits and cognitive blueprints for living in a new way. Finally, some women were busy because they thought it was a good and virtuous way to live.

What does keeping busy look like?

Before considering these theoretical perspectives in detail, it is first worth outlining what participants meant when they discussed keeping themselves busy:

> I suppose the whole sort of keeping it busy, having a plan to the week, plan for the day. (Steph, 2)

One meaning of the term, as described by Steph, was to fill her time with activities and things to do so that she had a plan. Even the process of booking in activities was itself a way to keep busy. Her aim was to fill her diary with appointments and arrangements and so map out what she could expect of her days. Others, though, did not have such a strong emphasis on 'things', as Emily described:

> Because coming here I got, it occupies my mind. (Emily, 4)

For Emily, it was not so much things to do that she sought, but things to think. Her aim was to fill her mind through her busyness, rather than fill her time through her diary. Still others took a more relational approach to keeping busy, speaking in terms of filling their time with other people. Clara talked about the value she placed on keeping busy through helping to care for her grandchildren:

> I'm doing things wi them to like, occupy their mind an that. (Clara, 1)

Clara's focus was keeping her grandchildren busy – which also naturally kept her busy too. The aim that she had in keeping busy was not in scheduling activities, nor filling her own mind, but benefitting her grandchildren. Keeping busy could therefore be achieved through seeking activities to do, thoughts to dwell on, or people to be with, although these categories were not mutually exclusive.

Emotional coping

Having outlined what the participants aimed to do in keeping busy, I now turn to examine how their actions should be theoretically understood in light of desistance research. Although some of the benefits that participants experienced were not consciously sought, it was nevertheless clear that the women deliberately acted in order to keep themselves busy in these early stages of their desistance. One such example was Beth. An older woman, and recently released from prison following repeated fraud convictions, Beth

wanted to attend a number of groups at the Together Women Centre as a means of keeping herself busy. While she did not do so with the aim of dealing with the intense shame she was feeling over her convictions, she was clear in noting that this was one of the benefits to her:

> I know people say there's always somebody worse off but it doesn't always make you feel any better, does it, so, but at least I've got things to focus on now. (Beth, 3)

Although Beth's previous offending was not of the same high frequency as those studied by Nugent and Schinkel (2016), Beth also experienced isolation in her desistance as her time in prison also resulted in her divorce from an abusive and controlling husband. Newly single, and with lots of time on her hands, she found that she struggled to stop thinking about her offending and its consequences. This meant that she had a strong feeling of shame over her actions and often felt down. She also echoed the desisters studied by Nugent and Schinkel (2016) in feeling the pains of her desistance less when she was occupied with the Together Women project. For Beth therefore, keeping busy was a way of coping with the difficult emotions she experienced. Beth was aware that her attendance at the centre had given her things that she could choose to focus on, rather than dwelling on how bad she felt, and therefore acted to continue her attendance to continue the emotional benefits of having something else to focus on. Healy (2014, 2016) tracks a similar use of keeping busy in the early experiences of desisters in her study. She notes that the emotional coping produced by keeping busy was a key manifestation of agency, with desisters choosing to fill their time because they were aware that it would help them cope with their emotions, thus suggesting that the positive association between coping and increased agency found elsewhere (Giordano et al., 2007) is actually the measuring of two dimensions of the same phenomenon. As Pollack (2000) suggests, this further disputes the idea in Western liberal thought that a victim cannot act agentically, but emphasises that in coping with their experiences, victims (whether of circumstance, others, or their own previous offending and its consequences) are instead showing an important aspect of deliberate action. Carlsson (2016) takes this idea further, suggesting that the very core of agency is the capacity to act and cope in difficult situations.

Preventing boredom and avoiding temptation

In addition to helping desisters cope with the emotional difficulties of early desistance, keeping busy could be a way of deliberately tackling boredom and avoiding testing situations. The dangers of boredom in desistance, in providing opportunities to fall back on old criminogenic habits, have often been recognised (Bottoms and Shapland, 2016; Soyer, 2014), and women in my study were keenly aware of these risks. Emily, whose past offending was linked to time spent in city centre spaces, using drugs and shoplifting, deliberately kept herself busy so that she was not bored and therefore tempted to return to old places and associates:

> Because I have nothing to do and I get bored, so I get back into crime . . . coming here and doing courses, occupies my mind. (Emily, 4)

In choosing to occupy her mind, Emily was exhibiting what Bottoms and Shapland (2016) term 'diachronic self-control', where someone structures their life in order to avoid situations which tempt them to behave in a way which they do not wish to act. They are aware that they may not have the self-control to turn down invitations or opportunities for (in this instance, criminal) behaviour in a particular situation and so act to avoid coming across the situation in the first place. Such behaviour clearly shows intentional and deliberate action, and so should also be understood as a form of agentic behaviour. Such diachronic self-control could also be seen where desisters had taken a number of steps back from risky situations. Gillian's repeated offending was always connected to her being drunk, and she used alcohol to self-medicate for her mental health issues, which were connected to previous trauma. Diachronic self-control for her, then, was much more complicated:

> I keep myself busy, it's the only way to stay sober and it's the only way I stay out of trouble, is when I'm sober . . . if I don't take my meds then I end up on the drink and if I take the drink I end up off my meds, you know what I mean, basically it's all about keeping busy . . . I just bury my head in the sand, I'm quite like, studious, know what I mean, like, if I've got summat to bury my head in, I'm alright. (Gillian, 1)

Gillian maintained this approach in a later interview, emphasising how important it was for her to be busy and how settled she was in her belief that busyness was key to her well-being. The second time she discussed it, she was able to reflect more on the benefit of her busyness:

> That's the only way I've survived, you know what I mean, is, it's distraction innit, but I've distracted myself with learning something. (Gillian 2)

Gillian was explicit about the link she could see between keeping busy, staying on her medication, staying sober, and staying out of trouble. Her choices to do various courses were intended to keep her from the problematic situation of drinking and dropping her medication, with the consequent danger of offending that would bring. In a sense, her agency here was a form of 'quadrichronic' self-control, where studying at Time 1 kept her on her medication at Time 2, which stopped her drinking at Time 3, and so avoiding drunken criminal behaviour at Time 4. While undoubtedly an example of employing self-control over a number of time periods, the danger of micro-analysing Gillian's behaviour this way is that it quickly sounds much more complex than necessary. Instead, it is more useful to understand her use of diachronic self-control as an important strategy for coping with boredom, and therefore avoiding criminogenic situations, which is key for success in desistance (Healy, 2010). It is more clearly seen as another intentional strategy for coping with circumstances, which should be understood as agentic action (Carlsson, 2016; Healy, 2014).

Creating new habits and forming cognitive blueprints

Gillian's experiences of undertaking a number of courses hints further at how she changed the way in which she organised her day, so altering previous habits. One of

Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) three key manifestations of agency, iterational agency involves choosing to rely on past habits for current action. Activities that modify someone's everyday habits therefore open up opportunities for different expressions of iterational agency (King, 2012). Some of the women in the study were aware of the possibilities of building new habits through keeping themselves busy. Steph also had a history of drink-related offending, but was keen to go down a positive 'route' in building new routines with new people:

> filling my time with other things, em, not to, you know, stop me from thinking about drink, but being around the right people and not falling back in with the wrong crowd again, and going down that route. (Steph 2)

For Steph, there was an indication that she was not just keeping busy to avoid risky situations ('thinking about drink . . . wrong crowd') but that also she wanted to be around the 'right people'. While she was not seeking to establish a specific new identity (and so engaging in projective agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998)), Steph was deliberately seeking new social connections so that she did not end up falling back again on old negative habits. She recognised the danger that some of King's (2012) participants succumbed to that where their opportunities for change where constrained by structural forces, they then relied on old habits and therefore risked offending again. Instead, Steph was aware of her lack of opportunities (e.g. to work or to change accommodation) at her early stage of desistance and so was attempting to intentionally change who she socialised with in order to modify her habits.

Another strategy that Steph used in her early desistance was to use her busyness as a substitute blueprint (Giordano et al., 2002) for a stable way of non-offending living. In her circumstances, Steph was not yet able to attain a job and so was denied the opportunity to become a reliable 'worker'. However, she kept herself busy with various courses and volunteering:

> it's good, I just feel like, oh, I'm actually doing something, and treating it like a job . . . so that gives it a bit more purpose for the day . . . filling the day. (Steph, 2)

Like the liminal desisters in Healy's (2014) study, the new working identity that Steph sought was not possible in her current circumstances, but she had created a short-term plan of treating her busyness like a job so that she could feel like she was already working. In doing so, she demonstrated the emotional engagement in her routines that desisters have shown elsewhere (Farrall et al., 2014) and discussed how good this approach made her feel. It must be noted that even here Steph does not talk of wanting to become a working person. The value she places on filling the day is on doing something and acting as though she is working – and the emotional benefits that brings – rather than being like a worker.

Doing life 'right'

While the majority of discussion around keeping busy was indicative of agentic action, there was another way in which participants' keeping busy could encourage their

desistance. Bottoms and Shapland (2016) suggest that desistance should be understood as the process of acquiring virtue – that is, the process that enables living in a better way. For one or two participants – often those who filled up their time with people rather than things or thoughts – keeping busy was seen as a way of life in itself that was virtuous. Zoe's plans for soon returning to her home town centred on filling her time by caring for her much-loved dog:

> Yes, she's gonna take up all my time, I'm gonna make sure of it, I'm gonna do it properly this time, proud. (Zoe 1)

Zoe was clear that she regretted not caring better for her dog in the past and intended to keep busy by looking after her when she returned. She intended to be proud of filling all her time in focusing on her dog. When I later visited her once she had indeed returned to her home town, she was in fact spending the majority of her day in a way that prioritised her dog's routine. While it might be suggested that Zoe was pursuing a caring identity and therefore pursuing a new 'self' as understood in desistance theories (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001), her words focused not on who she understood herself to be, but on the time that she would invest in caring and doing it 'properly'. She saw the shape of this intended life as being valuable and worth being proud of. Keeping busy with her dog was therefore the way that Zoe had picked through which to acquire more non-criminal ways of living.

Discussion

The early desistance experiences of 'keeping busy' among my participants can be understood as agentic in a number of ways. However, the link between their actions and the pursuit of a new identity is conspicuously absent in the data. Given some influential academic voices find that agency in desistance is usually linked to a change in identity (Healy, 2016; King, 2014; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Rumgay, 2004), it is therefore important that we examine the absence of such a link here. There are several possibilities for this mismatch between theory and these findings. It may be identity was not a pertinent theme because of the early stages of the women's desistances. Alternatively, identity change may not be a necessary component of these women's experiences at all. This might be because their differences from the usually researched male desister with a history of high-frequency offending were significant. It is also possible that we may have over-estimated the importance of identity to desisters generally.

First, I consider whether a lack of identity change is implicated in the women's agentic actions precisely because they were at an early stage of their desistance. Others have found lower levels of identity-focused agency in the early stages of desistance (Healy and O'Donnell, 2008; Soyer, 2014), although this is not a universal finding (King, 2013b). The type of agency exemplified through 'keeping busy' has specifically been found to occur before people undergo significant identity changes or display aspirations to do so (Soyer, 2014). Yet Soyer (2014) suggests that in 'keeping busy', desisters are preparing themselves for later identity changes by creating new routines. Those new routines can later be included as the desister re-narrates their journey to make sense of a

new desisting identity. While this study could not verify this claim without many more re-interviews, there was some suggestion in the stories – notably of Steph and Zoe – that their current busyness might lead to a later identity change. It is possible that Steph could later explain her busyness as part of her pursuit of becoming a worker, and Zoe could show how she was en route to becoming an attentive dog owner. It is therefore possible that new identities would emerge later in the desistance process for some, or all, of the women in the study and so their experiences of keeping busy would later be seen as a central part of the continuous restructuring of their life narratives – a reconstruction process that is normal in the development of personal identity (McAdams, 1993).

Yet the lack of identity links might be more fundamental than simply being linked to the early stage of desistance. For many of the women, despite histories of repeated offences, they had never been in a position where their everyday life was shaped by criminal behaviour. Only one or two had been involved in the sort of high-frequency street crime that often dominates desistance studies (e.g. Maruna, 2001). Others with past addictions to illegal drugs did not define themselves by the criminal aspect of that part of their lives. As a result, they often did not see themselves as having an identity as an offender. Therefore, it is hardly surprising if they were not looking to change identities as part of their desistance. The way they defined their existing selves – as mothers, workers, stylish dressers, gym goers, dancers, daughters and sisters – were more than adequate blueprints for desisting lives. It was only those who had been in residential rehabilitation for addictions who talked easily about creating a new self. This suggests that this way of talking may have been a learned 'script' from the rehab, or alternatively that identity change is more important to those who are desisting while simultaneously in recovery from addictions.

It may be that desired identities were not achievable for the participants and so they were not seeking them. Nugent and Schinkel (2016) found that desisters could maintain 'act-desistance' – that is, that they could refrain from offending – for long periods, without claiming a new desisting identity. For those desisters, they were not in a position from which they could establish that new identity and so could not claim 'identity-desistance'. The structural constraints that they faced meant that, although they could stay away from crime, they did not find a new identity through which to understand their desistance journey. Other studies have also found desistance occurring without a corresponding identity change among their participants (Bottoms and Shapland, 2011). While the result in not establishing a new identity is similar here, it may be that the structural constraints facing women in this study take a different shape to the (mainly men) in these other studies (Bottoms and Shapland, 2011; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). For example, the caring responsibilities that many undertook meant that they could not also undertake full-time employment. Although this type of desistance is different to the classic 'identity-desistance', participants are still avoiding criminal behaviour and so can be understood as true desisters.

If identity change was not central to these women's expressions of agentic behaviour, there is a further question over why research is so keen to involve aspects of identity in our understanding of agency. A key reason might be found in neo-liberal Western culture. The importance of the individual has interacted with culture to produce a valuing of 'expressive individualism' (Bellah et al., 2008). People are encouraged to decide who they want to be and then find ways to maximise their expression of this ideal self

(McAdams, 2015). Those with the means to do so can, in this context, feel free to inhabit whatever identities they desire and pursue whichever experiences they like (Bellah et al., 2008). Those without the monetary means or structural opportunities to freely pick their identity may be disenchanted with this narrative and so not feel the need to pursue a coherent identity. Those, on the other hand, who have experienced some level of 'success' in the culture, may want to re-narrate their personal histories to align with this cultural narrative. Life history narrative research, which has proven so useful to understanding dynamics of desistance, is particularly at risk of encouraging the production of such socially acceptable narratives (Carlsson, 2016). With the focus on identity so pervasive in this culture, it is unsurprising that we feel the pull of it in our explanations for behaviour – and perhaps in our behaviour itself. Yet just because chosen personal identities are so highly valued in cultural discourse, it does not mean that they will necessarily be a true reflection of our everyday experiences, or that they will be relevant to every aspect of our theories. We need, therefore, to be alert to our cultural bias in expecting identity to be crucial to behaviour.

Conclusion

This article shows how the everyday concept of 'keeping busy' should be understood as a manifestation of agency in the early stages of desistance and is therefore more important to theory than we have thus far understood it to be. The women in the study chose to keep busy by filling their lives with activities, thoughts and people. Such an approach produced a number of benefits to their desistance and could be understood through several theoretical lenses. First, keeping busy could be used as a strategy to cope with difficult emotions (Healy, 2016). Second, it was an antidote to boredom and was employed as an example of diachronic self-control (Bottoms and Shapland, 2016), keeping desisters away from situations which might otherwise tempt them to re-offend. Third, by keeping busy, desisters created new habits and routines, opening up opportunities to engage in new types of iterational agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; King, 2012). These habits could combine to produce a blueprint (Giordano et al., 2002) for a non-offending way of living. Finally, sometimes keeping busy was a way in which desisters aimed to acquire and demonstrate virtue (Bottoms and Shapland, 2016). Through all these explanations, the desisters' experiences of acting agentically were not aimed at establishing any particular new identity. Considering the research on agency which has begun to highlight the importance of identity in much agentic action (Healy, 2016; King, 2014), this is a surprising and significant finding. Identity concerns may be absent from their agentic action because participants were still at an early stage of desistance (Healy and O'Donnell, 2008; Soyer, 2014). Alternatively, they may not be seeking a new identity – either because they do not need to create a new identity to make sense of their desistance or because they desire identities that they are structurally unable to access (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Finally, it is possible that researchers have been seduced by the neo-liberal Western culture of expressive individualism (Bellah et al., 2008) and so we look for identity even in areas where it is irrelevant. My use of a qualitative micro-longitudinal approach in the early stages of desistance was crucial in uncovering desisters' experiences as they experienced them. Such an approach can help prevent the subsequent re-narration of stories by participants to bring them in line with a pervasive cultural

narrative that nevertheless does not reflect their lived experiences. We must be careful in future research to employ methods that better access current experiences of participants and not assume that issues of identity permeate all important aspects of desistance.

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Note

1. A community 'one-stop-shop' (Corston, 2007) which caters to women either involved or at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system.

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