'Without the right support network I'd probably be either dead or in the prison system': The role of support in helping offenders on their journey to desistance.

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Introduction

Shifts in the rehabilitation of offenders have been permeating UK policy over the last decade. Recent thinking suggests enabling offenders to see themselves as different people, with potential and abilities (Ward and Maruna, 2007; McNeill et al, 2012; Buck, 2017), rather than associating themselves with a negative label. Transforming Rehabilitation: A Strategy for Reform 2013 (Ministry of Justice, 2013) recognises that offenders face "broad life management issues" (Ministry of Justice, 2013: 6) requiring personalised holistic support. Despite statutory services providing support, there is evidence to suggest that offenders view statutory services such as the Work Programme and benefit services, as a hindrance to their transformation rather than assisting it (Author, 2018).

Policy agenda suggesting innovation and asset or strengths based approaches is set within a wider context of increased conditional welfare benefits reform with the expectation of rational behaviour to avoid financial penalty. Assumed policy rationality is often unmanageable for offenders and they are more likely to fail these rational requirements and face sanctions due to their complex circumstances and vulnerabilities (Fletcher, 2014). If we take Brown's description of vulnerability, suggesting weakness, a lack of rationality, limited agency or capacity (Brown, 2014) we can see that offenders often display a number of these characteristics. Limited agency in particular, reduces the ability of offenders to help themselves and bounds their capacity to conform to societal norms (Brown, 2014).

Given offenders' vulnerabilities and precarious circumstances, support via homeless organisations, hostels and voluntary sector services, provide encouragement and guidance, tailored to offenders' unique experiences and challenges, as well as support with crisis management, helping offenders towards a degree of stabilisation. The creation of a new pro-social identity by capitalising on offenders' strengths and assets rather than focussing on negative labelling can be assisted and nurtured through support mechanisms (Maruna, 2001; Healy, 2014; Buck, 2017). For the purposes of this paper, support organisations are defined as organisations providing assistance to clients attending on a voluntary basis and without financial penalties associated with adhering to welfare benefit conditions.

Research findings have suggested the notion of desisting from crime and creating a pro social identity as a journey and not an event, (Maguire and Raynor, 2006; McNeill and Weaver, 2010) but there is little empirical evidence capturing the nuanced micro changes experienced by offenders on their journey towards this transformation. Using longitudinal empirical evidence, this paper explores the experiences of offenders accessing support and highlights the importance of long term engagement in building positive well-being to help bring about change. The paper also adds weight to the existing theories of identity transformation (Maruna, 2001; Healy, 2014) and suggests that creating a 'new self' is not just a matter of an individual's willingness to change but rather, the provision of support, and more importantly opportunity. This mixture of elements is important given the increasing punitive welfare benefit regime within which offenders are living. Analysis of the 'journeys' taken by offenders in this study suggest

that while the desire to change may be overwhelming within an individual's psyche, without the tools to progress this wish, offenders often struggle to disengage from criminal behaviour, remain vulnerable and continue to be negatively labelled, disengaged from positive support networks and marginalised in contemporary society.

This paper focusses on the role of long term support in helping offenders to work towards desistance and change their behaviour. It highlights the precariousness of offender journeys, their complex circumstances and the often destabilising effects of welfare conditionality.

The paper begins by looking at the evolution of desistance within the existing literature to explain notions of transformation. The paper then goes on to outline the welfare conditionality policy context followed by the methodology used in the research. Exploring the lived realities of offenders who are engaging with support organisations provides the focus of the findings section. The paper concludes with a discussion outlining the importance of support in helping offenders on their journey to behaviour change.

Context and Literature

Research shows that desistance and behaviour change is an individual and often long-term process encompassing the interaction of micro and macro level forces with varying starting points and life courses. Addressing underlying mental ill health and alcohol and other drug problems through support has been shown to be key in

supporting desistance from crime. Recovery research also raises the importance of the temporal dimension of desistance; recovery may take time with several relapses in the process (Best and Lubman, 2012).

Despite a plethora of literature exploring desistance, little credence has been given to other significant behaviour changes experienced by offenders on their journey to desistance. Maguire and Raynor (2006: 24) note that, 'Desistance is a difficult and often lengthy process, not an "event", and reversals and relapses are common'. McNeill adds to this "Therefore: [I]f desistance is an inherently individualised and subjective process, then we need to make sure that offender management processes can accommodate and exploit issues of identity and diversity. One-size-fits-all processes and interventions will not work" (McNeill, 2009: 28).

Ontogenic theories concerning maturation were the first to develop in the desistance debate and suggest the 'age crime curve' whereby desistance is linked to the physical, mental and biological changes that accompany aging (Weaver and McNeill, 2010). Goring's (1919) and Glueck and Glueck's (1937) early work concerning maturation has been criticised however, by Sampson and Laub, (1992) as too simplistic and they suggest that age consists of range of factors (biological changes, social transitions and life experiences) that mediate behaviour. Taking this further, theorists such as Clark and Cornish (1985) began looking at desistance from the point of view of volition or choice and this was developed further by Cusson and Pinsonneault (1986) who drew evidence from a study to view desistance as a decision

based process linked to a crisis or shock. Similar findings have been reported by other researchers such as Leibrich (1993: 56-7) and Cromwell et al (1991: 83), who have all identified the importance of a 'decision' to give up crime. Shover (1983:) suggests a change in goals, and tiredness of a criminal lifestyle, can all cause individual reflection, contributing to a desire to change and move away from criminal behaviour.

Another influential perspective in explaining desistance is sociogenic theory based on social bonds. Sampson and Laub (1993) developed the idea of a bond between an individual and society such as relationships with peers or family and marriage, and suggest reoffending is more likely when this bond is broken. A considerable body of research suggests that desistance from crime can be associated with finding employment (Sampson and Laub, 1993), completing education (Farrington, 1986; Rand, 1987), marriage (Rand, 1987; Farrington and West, 1993; Mischkowitz, 1994) and becoming a parent (Leibrich, 1993).

However, these ideas are not without reservations and Weaver and McNeill, (2010) aim to qualify these assertions and suggest desistance cannot be attributed solely to the existence of social attachments but that it is the importance attached to these ties by individuals and how they are interpreted that is important.

Evidence put forward by Maruna (2001) builds on these ideas and suggests notions of identity transformation. Based on the analysis of life stories, Maruna concluded that the narrative accounts of desisters; 'the redemption script' suggested they had high levels of self-efficacy, saw themselves in control of their future and had a

clear sense of purpose and meaning. Maruna identified that ‘to desist from crime, ex-offenders need to develop an inner narrative, a coherent, pro-social identity for themselves’ (2001: 7).

Evidence highlighted by Giordano et al, (2002) suggests individuals who desisted from crime outlined a theory of ‘cognitive transformation’ suggesting the desistance process involves a number of stages. The initial stage involves an awareness and willingness that change is desirable and needed: a common feature being reflection and reassessment (Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986; Farrall and Bowling, 1999). Secondly, exposure and reaction to turning points or hooks for change are also important parts of the process. This of course relies on exposure to opportunities offering a potential ‘way out’ and being able to act upon it (Giordano et al, 2002; Farrall, 2002). Other studies highlight the interplay between structural and individual forces (Farrall and Bowling, 1999). Bottoms and Shapland's (2011) study of the early stages of desistance highlighted the importance of external trigger factors as well as an internal 'wish to change'. These factors enable the development of an alternative, coherent, pro-social identity whereby the individual sees themselves in a new role involved in new things and maintaining their desistance from crime (Ward and Maruna, 2007).This leads to transformation in the way offenders view deviant behaviour with old behaviours no longer viewed as desirable or relevant. Giordano et al, (2002) argue that ‘the actor creatively and selectively draws upon elements of the environment in order to affect significant life changes’ (2002: 1003): the relationship between individual agency and social structures is important (Farrall and Bowling, 1999; Maruna and Farrall,

2004). Thus an offender's future offending will be influenced by their thinking as well as their circumstances.

The transformation of the 'self 'is crucial in bringing about behaviour change through a number of stages of development. This paper suggests that the role of support is crucial in helping offenders positively navigate these stages, build their social capital and become contributing members of society.

Policy context

Having explored the notion of desistance and the importance of identity transformation, it is crucial to explain some of the policy that may be working in contrast to the notions of identity transformation, and holding back offenders in their endeavours to change. Offenders are subject to the same conditions as other welfare benefit claimants and as such are disproportionately affected by the new punitive regime, particularly given their vulnerabilities and precarious circumstances. Welfare conditionality has been a key element of reform in many countries since the mid-1990s. In the UK it links eligibility for welfare benefits and services to responsibilities or particular patterns of behaviour, under threat of sanction for non-compliance. Benefits including Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and Universal Credit can be stopped or reduced if claimants do not fulfil conditions stated in their claimant commitment or if they miss appointments. Shifting welfare responsibilities back onto citizens (Dwyer & Wright, 2014: 35) places greater pressure on offenders to behave rationally and change their behaviour to adhere to welfare

conditions. Due to their circumstances, many offenders are unable to do so and are disproportionality affected by welfare conditionality (Fletcher, 2014), through sanctioning, which leaves offenders in difficult circumstances such as homelessness, turning to survival crime and often returning to custody. Additional statutory support has been provided to offenders e.g. the Work Programme;[1] employment support being available from 'day one' of release. However, these apparently rehabilitative measures expose offenders to greater sanctioning and may reinforce the revolving door of prison, breach and recall back into custody. (Fletcher, 2014: 1).

Set against this policy backdrop Transforming Rehabilitation: A Strategy for Reform (Ministry of Justice, 2013), contains a clear recognition that offenders face 'broad life management issues' such as homelessness (Edgar et al., 2012), mental ill health, unemployment (Hlavka et al., 2015) and substance misuse (McSweeny, 2010), that have a significant impact on their ability to change their behaviour (Ministry of Justice, 2013). Moreover, offenders face other less tangible issues such as lack of confidence and self- esteem, negative labelling, prejudice and isolation leading to a complicated life web that is difficult to manage.

Support organisations assisting offenders, recognise these challenges and vulnerabilities and adopt flexible ways of working embracing asset based thinking focussing on offenders' gifts, skills and resources first, as well as supporting their needs, in an effort to help to build confidence and self-belief. Offender's connectedness to their family and community is also a crucial part of their ability to make and sustain

life changes (Sampson and Laub, 1993). Holistic perspectives focussing on the individual within their environment, has been developed by joining up desistance studies with research on recovery from drug and /or alcohol misuse, in the context of experiences such as abuse and mental health problems. A key concept here is the idea of 'recovery capital' which means ‘the breadth and depth of internal and external resources that can be drawn upon to initiate and sustain recovery’ (White and Cloud, 2008: 1); these include social networks, physical, human, cultural and community issues. Recovery capital differs from individual to individual, and may change over time (White and Cloud, 2008; Best et al., 2012).

Design and methods

The evidence presented in this paper was collected as part of a wider ESRC-funded study on the efficacy and ethicality of welfare conditionality in England and Scotland which involved interviews with welfare recipients in ten case study cities and towns in England and Scotland. Three waves of repeat longitudinal interviews were undertaken at approximately nine months and one year intervals between 2013 and 2017 with one thousand and eighty two welfare recipients drawn from nine welfare users groups who were subject to conditionality: unemployed people, lone parents, disabled people, Universal Credit claimants, individuals/families subject to anti-social behaviour orders/family intervention projects, homeless people, social tenants, offenders and migrants.

Other research activities included literature reviews, interviews with a range of national stakeholders and focus groups with frontline welfare practitioners (see www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk for further information).

The analysis presented in this paper focuses specifically on the experiences of one user group: offenders. Semi-structured interviews with welfare recipients explored their housing, health, family and employment histories, their experiences of welfare conditionality (including both support and sanctions) and its outcomes, and their experiences of access to, and use of, specific support services offered by agencies and voluntary sector organisations. Research participants were recruited through the agencies and voluntary organisations providing support to welfare recipients and using a purposive sampling approach to identify individuals who were available and willing to participate in the research and able to provide rich data relevant to the research questions. Criteria for participation were that the individual was possession of a criminal record and was resident in a geographical case study area at the time of selection. It is important to acknowledge that there is the potential for bias in the sample therefore, in that participants were self-selected, living only in defined areas and the sample includes only those engaged with support agencies.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed and the transcripts of the interviews were analysed using Nvivo software. All names have been changed.

This paper is based on the analysis of data from interviews with 57 individuals carried out across all three waves of the participant interviews. A total of 117 interviews were

undertaken with offenders: 57 interviews in wave one, 35 in wave two and 25 in wave three. Twenty two offenders participated in all three waves of the study; three did not participate in wave two but were interviewed again in wave three. The relatively high rate of attrition across the three waves of interviews is expected given the vulnerable and chaotic lives of this particular cohort. It was difficult to maintain contact with many of them over the three years of the study: some had returned to prison, others had become homeless or left the area with no mobile contact and one had died. The cases lost were from no particular key group within the sample.

The sample was virtually all white British and predominantly male (45, 27 and 19 male participants and 12, eight and six females in waves one, two and three respectively). Most were in 25-49 age group throughout all three waves. Those who had offended were mainly claiming Employment Support Allowance (Support) and Job Seekers Allowance. Most were ex-prisoners.

Findings

Offenders face multiple challenges and difficulties and there is considerable overlap in populations involved in desistance and those in recovery from alcohol and other drug treatment (Best and Lubman, 2012). Indeed, offenders in the sample were no exception, with many trying to cope with mental ill health, substance use and homelessness, as well as disconnection from family and friends. Offender testimonies revealed that offenders were often released from custodial sentences into homelessness. Hostels remained the only alternative for many offenders who reported

this environment was not conducive to their recovery or desistance. A dominant narrative in many of offender accounts highlighted long periods in financial difficulty waiting for benefit payments. Others reported struggling to meet the welfare conditions attached to claiming Job Seekers Allowance, such as completing the required number of job searches, thus facing a threat of sanction. Offenders in the sample were disproportionately affected by sanctioning, having had their welfare benefit payments stopped for periods of up to 4 weeks: in Wave A, 17 offenders had experienced one sanction, 12 had experienced between 2 and 5 sanctions and 3 more than 3 sanctions.

Engagement

Offender testimonies revealed negative experiences of mandatory engagement with conditional support organisations which acted as a disincentive to their future engagement.

> *'I haven't really had any [support] from benefits actually, because the more you go in, the more they're going to review your case and then if there's something wrong they're going to kick you off the fucking sick as well'* (Male, SH-DR-003C).

Moreover, offenders viewed the 'personalised services' provided by the statutory sector, such as the Work Programme, as inadequate and ill-suited their needs.

> *'whether it be probation or the Jobcentre or whomever it be, need to be more creative in what they're actually trying to offer'* (Male, LO-LS-007c).
>
> *'I just think the way it's set up could be a lot more facilitating towards people like myself'* (Male, SH-DR-003C).

Given these negative experiences of statutory support services it is no surprise that offenders' reported frequent use of support organisations. Views held by those who had offended were overwhelmingly positive in relation to the support they received and the difference it had made to them.

> *'Yes, they've* [support organisation] *basically done everything for me. Helped me with benefit claims, helped me with accommodation, helped me with food, got me onto the X Training'* (Male, PE-LS-002a).

Often offenders were facing multiple crises; homelessness, debt, financial hardship, substance misuse and mental ill health and support was able to address some of these pressing issues in order to bring about a period of stabilisation, therefore providing time for offenders to undertake reflective practices and review their situation.

> *'I think it's just amazing how much they [support organisation] help you. Like I said, if it wasn't for these guys* [support organisation] *I would probably be homeless and shit like right now'* (Male, PE-LS-002b).

Lack of access to benefits was commonplace amongst offenders and was the main catalyst in prompting them to access support from other organisations to help them cope with the initial period after release from prison.

> *'You're struggling, waiting for the money to come through and that, they'll [support organisation] pick you up, if you've got a problem you can just ring them [support organisation] up and talk to them'* (Male, PE-LS 001a).

Re-affirming the work of Farrall (2002) and Maguire et al. (2000) practical support such as help with phone calls, completing forms, finding accommodation, budgeting and dealing with benefit claims provided a vital step towards financial security and stability.

> *'They* [support organisation] *were even there while I made the phone call to change it to Employment Support Allowance (ESA) and helped me fill out the different forms'* (Female, LO-KJ-036c).

Advocacy (McGuire et al, 2000) with relevant agencies was also very important to offenders who lacked confidence and often had limited understanding of the processes and systems they needed to navigate within the welfare system and other statutory mechanisms. It was common for key workers to accompany offenders to independent assistance, assessments and court hearings.

> *'These guys* [support organisation] *hooked me up with Citizen's Advice, they [support organisation] came to court with me, they* [support organisation] *picked me up, took me to court. Absolute God send'.* (Male, PE-LS-001a).

A crucial element of the support package was the trusting relationship between worker and offender (Parr, 2015), perhaps initially fostered by the practical support provided in the first instance and subsequently strengthened by a supportive and constructive approach. Testimonies revealed the importance of having someone who was non-judgmental, to 'just listen' (Appleton, 2010; Shapland et al, 2011) in times of crisis and this was particularly important in helping offenders to move away from past behaviours.

> *'if I'm having problems with my mental health I know I've always got somebody to come and talk to [at the support organisation]'* (Female, LO-KJ-036c).

The provision of pastoral care such as emotional support, listening and, just 'being there' were important aspects of support, particularly in developing offenders self-worth and confidence. Indeed, Appleton's (2010) work highlights the importance of listening and talking, and therapeutic relationships were considered important by Burnett and

McNeill, (2005) in building strong supportive relationships, particularly with probation officers. *" 'Being listened to' and able to discuss personal and social problems were identified by discretionary lifers as some of the most useful aspects of probation supervision"* (Appleton, 2010:212). Offenders' testimonies revealed they were able to forge and nurture strong relationships with workers, (similar to the 'working alliance' discussed by Healy, 2010) these relationships being continued through all phases of the offender journey either while making progress or relapsing. Moreover, the empathy of support workers mattered to offenders who explained key workers seemed to "really care" and "listen" to their issues.

> *'It's the way she talks to me and that. Because she talks to me like I'm - like a friend or a daughter. She doesn't talk to me like I'm anybody off the street. She talks to me like I'm somebody she knows, so I listen to her'* (Female, PE-LS-006b).

Progressing personal development

The trusting relationship between offender and key worker opened up an avenue to engage the offender in personal development activities. This was promoted through a range of supported activities, where offenders were able to display ingenuity and resourcefulness. Moreover, focussing on strength based approaches such as identifying positive attributes, complimenting these with the provision of knowledge and skills, offered a bespoke personalised service which enabled offenders to work towards their aspirations and goals. Encouraging offenders to participate in meaningful activities helped offenders gain a sense of legitimacy and a realisation of their skills, while building on their existing strengths.

> *'I've got good communication skills. They [support staff] see something in me. I'm good with the staff here. So yes there are things that have been said to me by my managers and things like, 'You know what X, yes you'd be good at things. You can use that criminality for a positive'* (Male, LO-KJ-037c).

Group activities, courses and volunteering opportunities typically included; involvement in committees and user groups, planning and organising events, working on radio, presenting at events, facilitation at workshops, fund-raising, outreach work and admin and reception duties. One participant had spoken at the Houses of Parliament giving them a sense of reward and achievement (Calverley and Farrall, 2011)

Rhoda's engagement with a support organisation typifies the experiences of other offenders on their journey to desistance.

Rhoda was forty five years old. She had experienced several episodes of ill health and had also relapsed numerous times into criminal activity but had managed to maintain her link with the support organisation, be that infrequent and spasmodic, receiving emotional support and help with financial management and paying bills. At the second interview, Rhoda had made significant progress. She reported improved financial management capability, had a positive peer group with whom she volunteered and planned activities. Her mental health had stabilised and she had started to build self-confidence and self-esteem through involvement in activities. During the third interview, Rhoda revealed she had suffered a period of mental ill health and had agreed to be a guarantor for a friend, leaving her with substantial debts. Throughout

this crisis however, she managed stay in contact with the support organisation and to eventually reveal her difficulty and seek help.

> *'I wasn't really thinking straight but at the same point, I knew I had the support… I don't know, it's hard to discuss. I can't put into words what they did'.*

Rhoda also reported being better able to deal with the crisis situation, was more reflective and considered, instead of returning to crime; her normal reaction.

> *'Instead of just doing what I would normally do, I would have gone and got myself arrested but I didn't actually get myself arrested and get myself into trouble. So, that's a big positive but actually that's a big change for me'*

Despite her relapse, she found additional strength in continuing her engagement with the support organisation and increased her volunteering activities. On arranging a sponsored event with her peers and staff she reflected on the number of skills she had gained.

> *'Oh, the amount of skills that we've had to learn like we do a lot of work on the computers, had to email different companies, do posters… there's a lot of health and safety, make appointments, set up meetings… you're learning a new skill'*.

Echoing Rhoda's volunteering experience, offenders reported volunteering provided an opportunity to reinforce and strengthen behaviour change and identity transformation by providing a daily routine, peer support, motivation and opportunities to develop social skills (Author, 2018).

> *'I think volunteering, if you're not working, is a great thing, because that develops your confidence'* (Male, ED-SJ-006c).

Volunteering was also used by some offenders as a coping mechanism, helping them to focus their energies into positive behaviour

> *'One of my biggest coping mechanisms has always been using music. So I volunteer on a radio station'* (Male, LO-LS-007c).

Volunteering also provided opportunities for offenders to learn valuable work related skills and accreditations.

> *'I'm what they call a peer facilitator which is an accredited thing. I took the exam here [support organisation]. I'm a [support organisation] volunteer generally'* (Male, LO-KJ-006b).

As the above discussion has demonstrated, the provision of crisis management and practical support is crucial in helping offenders to stabilise their situation; something that for many offenders has never been experienced. This type of support helps to foster a sense of trust between offenders and key workers reinforcing the sense that someone actually 'cares' about them. This is a critical part of the offender journey and in the early stages of engagement support organisations place emphasis on the softer side of support such as talking and listening (Buck, 2012) and giving offenders' time for reflective practices. Offenders commented on the benefits associated with bespoke programmes of support, such as recovery groups, placement opportunities, (one offender had the opportunity to work in graphic design) listening and talking, emotional well-being and mental health which responded to their needs and priorities, and more importantly took into account their complex lives. These positive engagements and the opportunities for volunteering, enable offenders to move along their journey to

desistance and create a new self. The next section looks at the lived realities of offenders in trying to progress their personal journey.

Working towards a new self

Many offenders had experienced a positive trajectory on their journey pathway and had made significant progress towards desistance but not all had totally disengaged from criminal activity altogether.

Frank was fifty years old and had a long history of homelessness, drug use, mental ill health and custodial and community sentences. Frank was living in a hostel and on a methadone programme at the time of our first interview but was struggling to refrain from shoplifting to fund his drug habit. He had been receiving support to deal with housing, benefits and his mental health for a number of years. At the second interview, Frank had served numerous short prison sentences and his mental health had deteriorated culminating in a suicide attempt while in prison. On his release, he was fast tracked back into accommodation in a hostel. Although offered support, Frank was reluctant to engage and felt accepting support would place him under pressure, something he was not able to cope with.

> *'I think where I'd been like in and out of prison all my life and in care and all that, and sometimes she'd* [support worker] *turn up at a time when I wasn't ready for it sort of thing and I just wasn't ready for it'* (BR-EB-009b).

At the third interview, although wanting to change, Frank was struggling to move away from past behaviours, driven mainly by living up to his reputation, and this had tempted him back into crime.

> *'I'm known as X the shoplifter extraordinaire and that's sort of like who I am and that's my identity' (BR-EB-009c).*

Despite this Frank had made some progress.

> *'I'm not going thieving as often as I used to. Like I said, I'm trying to retire'* (BR-EB-009c).

Frank had found a new 'way of being' (Farrall, 2002) and was comfortable with his choice. Frank was clearly conflicted however; his reputation, together with long periods of institutionalisation and additional temptation from others were feeding his internal offender identity, and despite wanting to change these pressures were too much for him to move forward. Frank was not alone and many offenders were experiencing similar dilemmas.

For offenders who had made progress, they reported it had involved inordinate amounts of personal resolve and emotional strength to address the numerous challenges they faced. Engaging with support over long periods had enabled them to secure some constancy in their lives, which for some, was a new experience. Involvement with support services was just the beginning of offender journeys. The opportunity to engage with and move through different social settings enabled those who have offended to view themselves through a different lens and see a new persona

develop with new found skills and capabilities contributed to further progress (Farrall, 2005).

Exploring offenders' narratives in more detail revealed the importance of self-identity and how this motivated their desire to change. Offenders highlighted personal desires to move away from criminal behaviour and embark on a new life path.

> *'my behaviour has changed because I've wanted it to change'* (Male, BR-EB-003b).
>
> *'My whole life's changed. I used to be a horrible scumbag thief, who all cared about was drugs. Now I'm not like that. I came out of prison this time with the intention of staying out of prison for good'* (Male, PE-LS-008a).

Universal amongst offender testimonies was recognition that they could not have made progress alone; support was essential.

> *'without the right support network I'd probably be either dead or in the prison system still doing the same old thing, my mental health in a mess'* (Female, LO-KJ-036c).
>
> *'the amount of support I've had has been able to make me keep things together'* (Male, PE-LS-008a).

A number of other influential factors helped maintain momentum and engagement with support. A main driver of change was a weariness of the criminal lifestyle and custodial sentences with offenders describing growing out of crime.

> *'Getting old, getting tired, that's about it I think. Old, tired, fed up with it all'* (Male, BR-EB-009b).
>
> *'I think I've been in and out of the prison system for so long, I needed to do something to actually change this, so it was me that actually says, 'Right, no, this is enough, enough'* (Female, LO-KJ-036c).

Securing accommodation appeared to be a turning point, where offenders began to think reflectively about their future and begin to change their behaviour (Giordano et al., 2002), with many offenders reporting being fearful of undermining their stabilisation and losing something they valued and had worked hard to secure (Farrall, 2002).

> *'Like now I don't want to lose this [hostel accommodation], I'll be homeless and go through all that again'* (Male, BR-EB-009b).
>
> *'When I first moved into the flat, it was very strange it was quite scary. Took me a long time to get that, so I never want to do anything to put that at risk again, no, no way. So, that is a big thing'* (Female, LO-KJ-036c).

Securing accommodation, the 'turning point', constituted a change in the life course of offenders (Sampson and Laub, 2005), but should not be seen in isolation from the surrounding social context. As Carlsson argues 'turning points' can begin the process of change towards desistance but this process is not linear and offenders can drift in and out of offending along the way; what Farrall and Calverley (2006) refer to as *'lulls'*, depending on other social factors. Nevertheless, turning points should be considered important factors in bringing about behaviour change as it is the way changes, under certain circumstances, can bring about other changes, which are central in assisting the desistance process (Carlsson, 2011).

The facilitation and creation of new social bonds and the building up of social capital, was an important aspect of support packages that provided links with people from different social hierarchies enabling the possibility to create wider social links (McNeill, 2006). Offenders valued the opportunities they were given, particularly the trust placed

in them by their new found peer group and key workers, recognising their ability to move away from offending, and consolidating their 'identity desistance' (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Growing together and seeing each other develop encouraged offenders to get involved in other activities and through time become role models for others.

> *'my lovely support network and my good friends, the ones I call my family because I don't have any connections to my family, so I class [the organisation] as my family…which is why we all look out for each other'* (Female, LO-KJ-036c).

Mutual aid or co-desistance has been successful, and 'by believing in and supporting each other, desisters might play a valuable role in helping each other towards a new identity' (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016:581).

Precariousness of behaviour change

Interviewing offenders three times in two years highlighted the precariousness of their progression. Interviews revealed some offenders had experienced fluctuations in their fortunes. Short prison sentences were common, as were periods of homelessness, these being invariably punctuated with periods of stabilisation. Despite the role of support and a strong personal motivation to change however, it was reported by a number of offenders that crises were common and their life was far from settled. Wesley's Story epitomises offenders' experiences, when facing a crisis, returning to crime becoming a coping mechanism.

Wesley was 38 years old had a long history of depression, drug use, criminal activity and incarceration. When we first spoke to him, he had been involved with a support organisation for about a year receiving both emotional and practical support, as well as undertaking training courses. At the second interview, Wesley had continued to engage, add to his skills and had become a volunteer and give something back (generativity) (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). At our third interview, Wesley had made significant progress in accruing further skills, building his self confidence and self-esteem, his mental health had improved immeasurably and he was beginning to think about the future.

> *'I was actually opening myself up, changing my way, found out about myself, found out about who I am, not who I am when I'm drugged up or a criminal, who I am as a person'.*

His progress was seriously undermined however, when he received a sanction for missing an appointment with a work coach resulting in financial hardship (Bottoms and Shapland, 2011) and deteriorating mental health. To address his financial burdens Wesley revealed he felt he had no alternative but to return to crime in order to survive his thirteen week sanction, even though if caught he would return to prison.

> *'I had to go and do things I didn't want to do, because 13 weeks with no money … I had to go and do things with people that I didn't really want to get involved with again'.*

Wesley revealed he had not returned to crime on a regular basis, for him it was an isolated act of survival. He had not wanted to destabilise his new life path and

maintained his position with the support organisation as volunteer, fundraiser and motivational speaker.

Wesley's experience is not unique and highlights the destabilising effect a crisis can have on offender's lives. The' rational' decision to return to crime enabled offenders like Wesley to 'survive' a sanction period but with associated risks of returning to prison if caught. This survival strategy was widespread amongst the sample, in many cases leading to further short periods of incarceration.

Sanctions appear to have the ability to seriously undermine the progress of offenders and can derail the work undertaken by support organisations. This raises an interesting point, it is clear that sanctions within the current welfare conditionality regime can be detrimental to the goals of policy and support approaches for desistance. During crisis' offenders testimonies were clear that their circumstances could have been a lot worse had they not received continuous assistance from support organisations.

Discussion and conclusion

Looking at the evidence through the lens of cognitive transformation and sociogenic theories (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Giordano et al, 2002), it is clear that long term support provides a mechanism for offenders to begin to change their behaviour and build social bonds. This is in contrast to conditional welfare support such as the Work Programme, which fails to understand the complexities and vulnerabilities of offenders

resulting in inappropriate service provision and often incurs financial penalties (Author, 2018).

Little has been captured documenting the contribution made by long term support in facilitating and valuing the small and nuanced transformation of offenders' lived realities and it is to this which the paper now turns.

Patterns of offender engagement were irregular with the support being offered, either refused or taken as needed or when ready.

> *'in life sometimes people are ready for something, they're not ready for it at other times'* (Male, BR-EB-009b).

Offender journeys were punctuated with periods of incarceration, stress, reflection, slippage and uncertainty. Sometimes progress plateaued, reversed and progressed again. Moreover, behaviour change was successful in some areas but not in others. Some offenders had made considerable progress experiencing positive behaviour change for example; maintaining tenancies, increased self-worth, confidence and self-esteem and perhaps beginning and sustaining recovery from substance misuse. This they attributed to their own desire to change and more importantly to the support and help they had received from workers, which they immediately recognised as being important. Similar attributions were reported by Farrall et al, (2014), but recognition of the role of support was only retrospectively highlighted.

A significant feature of support was recognising offenders lived realities and the need for, and importance of trusting relationships. Strong, often long term, relationships between offender and organisation / key worker were vital at the engagement stage particularly when offenders are trying to maintain 'act desistance' which can lead to the pain of isolation (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Moreover, these relationships remained crucial throughout the support enabling offenders' progress to be maintained, continued or begin again. Having an acute understanding that desistance and behaviour change can take time, support from organisations is offered over an extended time course helping offenders to gain a sense of optimism and stability.

Cognitive transformation however was a difficult process where significant changes occurred, both in the emotional state of offenders and their aspirations. Understanding these complex and often traumatic changes was a key feature of support organisations that were able to respond constructively. Rather than applying conditions, or withdrawing engagement when things destabilised, support organisations continued their assistance, helping to build competencies and opportunities to develop a positive internal narrative (Appleton, 2010). Testimonies of those who had offended described that they had relapsed more than once and welcomed the fact that they were encouraged and assisted to remain engaged.

Being trusted and believed in gave those who had offended the confidence to have faith in their own capabilities and see themselves in a new role and continue their transformation (Ward and Maruna, 2007). As Ward and Maruna suggest 'An important

component of living an offense-free life appears to be viewing oneself as a different person with the capabilities and opportunities to achieve personally endorsed goals' (Ward and Maruna, 2007: 22-3). The 'offender centric' suite of support, tailored to individual's needs, was characterised by support workers, who Nugent refers to as *'meso brokers',* recognising and positively reinforcing very small behaviour changes. 'Moving on' opportunities, often highlighted by 'meso brokers', helped to make offender hopes realisable therefore extending their growing portfolio (Nugent, 2017).

Behaviour change however, is dependent on a range of other connected factors. Building on ontogenic theories and the age crime curve, (Weaver and McNeill, 2010) maturation, not only in age but also in life experiences, was a key aspect in offenders internal narratives. Moreover, it was evident in the testimonies of offenders that they had made an active choice to change, driven mainly by internal reflection and re-evaluation, growing tired of custodial sentences, and aging.

> *'it hits you when you get to a certain age. What have I got to show for 40?'* (Male, Wave C)

Other external influences such as volunteering, involvement in positive peer groups, joint learning and exposure to opportunities (Farrall and Bowling, 1999; Giordano et al, 2002; Bottoms and Shapland, 2011) were clear mechanisms to create re-evaluation. Through just 'being together' and encouraging each other's progress ((Nugent and Schinkel, 2016) social bonds were created and cemented (Sampson and Laub, 1993). These mechanisms were contributory factors in creating a new positive 'internal

narrative' (Maruna, 2001) enabling offenders to have a clear sense of purpose and meaning.

Bringing together offenders' new found agency, long term support and the provision of opportunity, at the right time, is critical in assisting and sustaining behaviour change (Farrall and Bowling, 1999; Maruna and Farrall, 2004). Given the context of increased punitive welfare conditionality, where behaviour change can be fragile and easily destabilised, this model of tripartite delivery is crucial. Despite setbacks, offenders often want, and are encouraged, to continue participating in support mechanisms and opportunities and their progress is valued and nurtured by both worker and offender. Emotional support often in the form of talking and listening (Appleton, 2010) is underpinned by practical support (Farrall, 2002) to help those who have offended to work towards an alternative future.

Volunteering opportunities, developing supportive social networks and dedicated recovery groups, facilitate individual journeys, while providing environmental conditions that enable and support a 'social contagion' of recovery (Best and Lubman, 2012). Encouraging the personal formulation of a new pro social identity rather than applying an offender label (Maruna, 2011) also adds credence to offenders behaviour change helping them to recognise and build upon their own personal positive attributes, while developing a range of personal and vocational skills for the future.

Limited agency is gradually transformed into creative agency. Offenders believe in and build on positive changes in their own agency, choose to do things differently, and

grow their capacity to create a new self. Creative agency enables offenders to bring together both internal and external influences to 'slowly evolve a sense of inner self' (Douglas, 1984:69) and maintain a meaningful identity. Those facing crisis, reaching stability or wishing to make changes, need time to build depleted emotional resources and transform. Having supportive structures, what could be termed 'emotional and physical scaffolding' in place at all stages of transformation is critical in helping offenders to move forward. Cognitive transformation demonstrated by offenders in this paper is both overlaid and underpinned by sociogenic ideas. As offenders are assisted to progress their journey, social bonds are developed and strengthened and transformation continues; these are mutually reinforcing relationships. Providing both an immediate and long term 'scaffold', support organisations help those who have offended rediscover agency, help them to exercise choice and decisions making and support the nurturing of new pro-social identities where offenders can build their social capital, create a clear sense of purpose and become invested in society.

Given the emerging evidence suggesting welfare conditionality is largely ineffective and in some cases pushes people into poverty and crime (http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/2018/05/welfare-conditionality-is-ineffective-research-team-finds/), perhaps behavioural conditionality for those with multiple and complex needs such as offenders, may hinder rather than help their journey to desistance. If we are to understand and help offenders address their 'broad life management' issues and become invested in society rather than marginalising them further, we need to recognise the important role played by long term support. It is

acknowledged however, that whilst long term support can be effective it can be expensive.

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Notes

[1] The Work Programme was a UK government welfare-to-work programme introduced in Great Britain in June 2011. Under the Work Programme the task of getting the long-term unemployed into work was outsourced to a range of public sector, private sector and third sector organisations.

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