Abstract

This article emerges from a study of female offenders' participation in police-facilitated restorative justice in one county in England. The qualitative study, presented here, is based on life history interviews with twelve women and focuses on three morality tales that emerged through narrative analysis: 'offending as play,' 'the strong woman' and 'work and a normal life.' The women used these tales to protect self-worth and justify 'bad' behavior in order to counter professional responses which they viewed as stigmatising. The paper concludes with implications for practice with girls and women who offend, which may benefit police, probation and social workers.

Key words: female offender narratives, moral identity, self-worth, desistance, restorative justice.

1. Introduction

Women and girls who offend are in frequent contact with professionals including the police, youth offending or probation officers, and social workers. The majority of female offenders have experienced abuse or violence and, as adolescents or adults, carry this legacy in the form of mental health difficulties, alcohol and substance abuse, or antisocial behavior (Corston, 2007). There is increasing recognition that in order to hold women accountable for their offences, professionals need to address underlying needs that contribute to their offending, including through alternatives to the traditional criminal justice system (CJS) such as restorative justice (Gaarder and Presser, 2006; Corston, 2007; Verrecchia, 2009). To date, however, restorative justice for girls and women has been met with professional resistance and practical challenges (Daly, 2008; Miles, 2013; Osterman and Masson, 2016).

This paper reports findings from narrative research with women who experienced restorative justice through the police in one county in the UK. The women interviewed had had a range of contact with the criminal justice system prior to restorative justice. While some were first-time offenders, others had previous arrests and convictions. The three morality tales offer insight into how women made sense of their offending, alongside other identities and experiences.

2. Literature review

The psychologist McAdams (1993) has pioneered the concept of narrative identity by building on theories by Erikson (1963, 1968) and highlighting the importance of storytelling during the life course. McAdams proposes that by adolescence a person's every day narratives begin to form into a lifelong 'personal myth', accompanied by a cast of recurring characters and dominant themes and imagery (McAdams, 1993:5). We may, for example, see ourselves as heroes in possession of agency or as victims in an unfair world (McAdams, 1993).

Narrative research has increasingly gained the attention of criminologists who apply the methods to the study of criminal behavior, particularly in terms of how offenders understand their own offending and how they reflect on offending as part of their identity (Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2004, 2009). Presser (2009:185), for example, cites Katz (1988) in noting that offenders' narratives are often 'playing out a moral tale of some sort, one that posits its protagonist as a particular sort of person.' Offenders have particularly been noted to use narratives to maintain a positive sense of self-worth and moral identity, regardless of the type and frequency of their offending (Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2004; Miller, Carbone-Lopez and Gunderman, 2015). While problematic for the criminal justice system (CJS) and victims, Maruna (2001) shows that this tendency to maintain a narrative of the self as 'good' is also associated with long-term desistance. By narrating the self as positive, resourceful and capable, narrators 'talk' these selves into being, simultaneously avoiding the negative consequences of shame (Maruna, 2001) which may include anger, defiance and self-loathing (Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher and Gramzow, 1992; Rodogno, 2008).

Research involving the narratives of female offenders demonstrates that women are particularly eager to narrate a positive moral identity because offending is seen as both illegal and unfeminine (Fleetwood, 2015; Miller et al, 2015). Female offenders sometimes tackle the stigma by highlighting caring or victim identities within offending narratives (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Fleetwood, 2015). Similarly, female desisters often provide 'evidence' of their desistance by describing new (and traditionally feminine) identities such as 'wife' or 'mother' (Giordano et al, 2002).

Restorative justice is a well-established alternative to traditional CJS practice with the concept of 'earned redemption' at its centre (Bazemore, 1999). The definition of restorative justice most frequently used is Marshall's (1996: 37): 'a process whereby parties with a particular stake in an offence collectively resolve how to deal with the aftermath of the offence and its implications for the future.' The theory behind this process has been described as being about supporting self-worth and belonging despite offending, often with the assistance of family members who can demonstrate that they care about the offenders as a person (Braithwaite, 1989).

In order to support self-worth while tackling offending behavior, restorative justice aims to avoid shaming offenders (Rodogno, 2008), by focusing on the inappropriateness of the behavior rather than the person (Sherman, Strang and Newbury-Birch, 2008). The processes further try to encourage moments of empathy and understanding between victims and offenders through 'storytelling' where individuals share their experiences and points of view (Umbreit, 1998; Gaarder and Presser, 2006). In recognition of the literature on offender narratives, restorative

justice addresses the tendencies of offenders to minimise their offending, often at their victim's expense, by training facilitators to 'confront' offender justifications (Bradshaw, 1998:66).

This is, of course, a pure model of restorative justice. Restorative justice associated with the CJS in the UK, for example, faces a number of challenges beginning with, at times, a lack of adequate training for facilitators (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2012; Larsson et al, 2018). Recent research has described a lack of referral for female offenders because of concerns over their behavioural and emotional difficulties (Miles, 2013); a lack of personal support for female offenders while in restorative justice (Miles, 2013; Osterman and Masson, 2016; Larsson et al, 2018); and finally problematic behaviours in restorative justice by female offenders such as victim blaming (Larsson et al, 2018; see also Daly, 2008).

The aim of this research was to create further understanding about female offenders' experiences in order to situate restorative justice and offending in the larger context of women's lives. The author was interested in the stories of women's experiences of restorative justice as offenders, women's narrative identities (offending and otherwise), as well as how women's sense of their own self-worth and desistance would be depicted within their life stories and link to their moral identity. The study also raised questions about help seeking and accepting behaviours among women whom professionals may find harder to reach.

3. Methods

The data reported here was part of a mixed-methods study on police-facilitated restorative justice in one county in the UK from 2007 through 2012. In the county, police mainly used restorative justice as a disposal for offenders who engaged in low-level offending and antisocial behavior. Restorative justice could be the only disposal or could be used alongside more traditional criminal justice system responses. Two forms of restorative justice were used: conferences, which involved meetings between victims and offenders, facilitated by a police officer, and street restorative justice, a conversation between a police officer and persons involved in an offence, shortly after it had occurred and at the scene of the offence. Street restorative justice could involve offenders and victims or only offenders.

The study received ethical approval from the School of Social Work at the University of East Anglia, and went through a separate research governance application through the constabulary. The study consisted of 1) secondary analysis of anonymised administrative police data on restorative justice containing 17,486 individuals, including 2,588 female offenders, and 2) narrative interviews with twelve female offenders who experienced police-led restorative justice in this county, sampled from the database. The narrative data is the focus of this paper.

As the police database contained sensitive information such as date of birth of offenders, the agreement made between the constabulary and the university made clear that the anonymised database would be accessed by the author on a security encrypted police laptop. The database was used in two ways: for quantitative analysis on how, and for whom, police were using restorative justice in the county, the results of which are reported in Larsson et al. (2018), and as a way of identifying eligible

participants for qualitative interviews. In order to gather a range of experiences, female offenders between the ages of 18 and 30 who participated in any type of restorative justice for any offence type were considered eligible. As the individuals in the database were not aware that their contact details would now be used to approach them for participation in research, it was decided that the police should make the initial contact. The author provided an administrator working for the police with ID numbers of individuals fitting this criteria. The administrator then contacted these eligible women through a phone call or letter to describe the research. At the end of the phone call, the administrator sought the women's permission to have the author contact them. The letters sent to the women clarified that the researcher was interested in women's views on their offending and participation in restorative justice, the police and the criminal justice system more generally, and their life experiences. The letters supplied the eligible participants with the author's university contact details, permitting them to contact her directly. 168 women were contacted by either phone or letter. Sixteen women communicated directly with the author, and twelve were interviewed.

Limitations of the qualitative study, therefore, include a smaller sample size than anticipated although the size of the sample is still consistent with in-depth narrative research. Five years since restorative justice was a significant enough time for contact details to have changed. Women may also have found it difficult to be contacted by the police about the interview, particularly if they felt stigma or shame about having offended, or if they were concerned about details of their offence being shared with someone outside the police. In initial conversations with the author, two of the women, for example, expressed concern that the police may have shared their whole

records with the author. In these instances, the author clarified that she and the research project were separate from the police and that she only knew that they had offended and participated in restorative justice.

The decision was made to use narrative interviews, as restorative justice is a 'narrative' process (Umbreit, 1998; Gaarder and Presser, 2006) and because the author, out of feminist concerns, wanted to provide women the opportunity to present their whole lives, rather than singling out one, potentially shameful, aspect (Crossley, 2000).

There are several different types of narrative interviews, from those which provide no input by the researcher beyond an opening question (Wengraf, 2001) to those which are structured around one or a series of topics and which contain prompts for the participants (Riessman, 1993). The interview schedule began with a variation of the following general opening question, 'Could you tell me about your life?' (as per Wengraf, 2001) and then contained general questions dealing with family, friends, and getting into trouble (as per Reissman, 1993) such as 'What did you do with your friends?' The author encouraged the topics of discussion to be participant-led, and the women chose the location of the interview, which included their homes, the university or coffee shops.

Once completed, the interviews were transcribed verbatim by the author and analysed. The qualitative analysis consisted of both 'big' (Freeman, 2006) and 'small' story (Bamberg, 2006) approaches. 'Big' story approaches attempted to capture how the participants viewed their identity and situated themselves in the world by analysing

plots, turning points, narrative tone and character (McAdams, 1993; Freeman, 2006). 'Small' story, or discursive approaches focused on close reading excerpts of interest to the author's research questions, such as those related to offending, through analysing linguistic and literary devices (Bamberg, 2006). This paper synthesises both approaches through a focus on the moral lens through which female offenders presented their offending.

The first morality tale, 'offending as play' explores women's descriptions of their first offence as children or adolescents. The second, 'the strong woman,' focuses on morality tales told by women for whom violence was a strategic decision (see also Batchelor et al, 2001; Henriksen and Miller, 2012). The third and final morality tale, 'work and a normal life' visits narratives of both one-time and frequent offenders who use work as proof of their prosocial character. Women often told more than one morality tale and sometimes linked tales.

4. Findings

4.1 Sample characteristics

The majority of the twelve women interviewed identified as White British, with one woman identifying as White British-Black Caribbean, and one identifying as White-Eastern European. Their educational backgrounds ranged from leaving school at 15 without qualifications to having completed apprenticeships. Three were mothers, with eight children between them. Nine women were employed, two were job seekers, and

one was long-term unemployed. Their average age was 22, with a range from 19 to 28.

The qualitative sample differed slightly from the average female offender in the administrative database. Quantitative analysis demonstrated that female offenders who experienced restorative justice in this county had an average age of 19.49, and that the most common offence type they committed was shoplifting. The most common restorative justice type for all offenders, male and female, was street RJ. In contrast, women in the qualitative sample were slightly older, had committed shoplifting, harassment, fraud, criminal damage, and assault offences (ranging from grievous bodily harm to common assault). Seven women in the interview sample attended conferences, four street restorative justice, and one could not recall what she attended.

The majority of the women interviewed had experienced trauma or abuse in their childhood and adolescence, including witnessing domestic violence, experiencing neglect, physical and/or sexual abuse, or severe bullying from peers. Despite this background, none had involvement with social workers in their childhood. Some had contact with the police as victims of sexual assault or intimate partner violence but not for other experiences of victimisation. All had contact with the police and/or youth offending workers for their offending. Six offended once. The other six offended at least twice, with one woman estimating she had been arrested 100 times. Two had previous convictions for assault.

4.2 Morality tale one: offending as play

'Offending as play,' was the most frequently told morality tale, both by women whose first antisocial activities carried on to regular offending as well as those who offended once. It was particularly common in narratives of adolescent offending involving peers and alcohol. The women's descriptions of their 'offences' were that of harmless antics, which were unluckily reported to the police. The police in these tales were depicted as taking on an unwelcome parental role, or as being misinformed because they were out of touch with youth culture. Such normalising narratives, including formulating offending as 'a mischievous adventure' (Presser, 2004: 89), have been closely documented in literature concerning both young and adult offenders (Maruna, 2001, Murray, 2009).

Surprisingly, being female was not part of the narrative. International literature on young women's offending continues to put a spotlight on the issue of net-widening for girls into the criminal justice system for minor offending, particularly if it resembles 'unfeminine' behavior such as fighting (Chesney-Lind, 1989; Alder, 2000; Sharpe, 2012). Many of the arrests described by this morality tale could have been portrayed by the women as being due to playing like a 'boy' (see Miller, 2002), however peer groups were not identified as mixed or single gender; play—public intoxication, harassment or criminal damage—was repeatedly described as genderless 'fun'; and women remained mystified as to why they were singled out.

Maria was a woman in her late twenties referred to restorative justice for harassing a neighbor. She self-identified as a frequent offender and had been arrested for shoplifting, harassment and assault since childhood. She described her first offence,

which earned her a conviction for harassment, at age 12, as play. Maria grew up in a large family where the children experienced physical abuse and neglect in the home and peer rejection outside of it due to being 'smelly…unclean.' Descriptions of her childhood often included the use of a plural pronoun, as she and her siblings, 'always stuck together'. This sense of acting and living in the collective is echoed in the description of her first offence which describes a group of local children racially harassing a Chinese neighbor on a predominantly white council estate:

> *We used to find it funny to upset a man on our road….he used to chase after us and we found that great. We thought that was so much fun and so we used to call him names and he was a Chinese man and he used to run after us and then I got caught by the police and they put me in the paper.*

Years after committing the offence, Maria highlights the childish pleasure experienced at the turn-taking nature of 'upset-chase.' This narrative, focused on play, not only serves to remind the listener of her young age at the time of the offence, but also connects to dominant themes from Maria's childhood narratives, which concern themselves with the lack of interested adults in her life, her increasing isolation and her futile attempts to counter rejection, no matter the consequence. Nearly every offence Maria commits as a young adult leads to arrest and to a 'beating' at the hands of her father after he picks her up at the police station. Looking back, Maria says, 'I think any attention was better than no attention whether that was being beaten or arrested and being held in custody by the police.'

Her narrative transitions suddenly from first person plural to first person singular, signaling the shock of being held accountable for the group's actions.

> *They seemed to think I was the one who was getting all these people together to upset this man but little did they know that half the people who upset this man I didn't get along with anyway. I was never a ringleader. Not saying I wasn't trouble myself because I was.*

Claiming peer membership in offending is common, as is describing one's behavior favorably compared to offending peers (Sykes and Matza, 1957; Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2004). Strikingly, however, Maria, and the other narrators of the morality tale of play, do not claim to be better than their peers; they claim to be normal and, therefore, just as culpable as their peers. Despite experiencing serious victimisation during her years of offending, Maria also does not downplay her offending by highlighting victim discourses as other narratives of female offenders do (see Fleetwood, 2015). Maria instead highlights her agency (see Giordano et al, 2002; Miller et al, 2015) and concludes an otherwise normalising morality tale by defining herself as 'trouble.' This element of 'honesty' is something which reoccurred throughout the life stories of frequent offenders such as Maria and was something they identified as crucial and significant about themselves, thus a location of a 'true self' (Maruna, 2001: 88; Presser, 2004). First time offenders similarly found it easy to be 'honest' about their offending in this morality tale because 'harmless' 'fun' taken too far under the influence of alcohol was defined as an 'honest' mistake.

4.3 Morality tale two: the strong woman

While in the first morality tale gender was noticeable absent, gender became the focus for women who had committed violent offences. This morality tale directly tackled the shame of being a female offender by reframing violence as being necessarily 'strong' given their own experiences of victimisation and, in particular, witnessing their mothers' abuse by men (see also Henriksen and Miller, 2012).

At the heart of the tale was a moral about what happened to soft women. Violence at home was introduced matter-of-factly, 'Obviously like my mum used to get hit and everything.' Mothers offered the only affection in the home, and yet it was precisely this 'softness' which put them in harm's way and made them easily taken advantage of, 'My mum is very soft. People do walk all over her.'

Narrators of this morality tale identified that there had been something about them—such as being the youngest or quietest—which protected them from the brunt of the violence in their childhood home. The role of mainly witnessing violence, in turn, made them adopt a type of protective role towards others in the household, even though this role was limited at the time due to their gender and age:

> *Our stepdad was very, very violent and he was always more violent*
> *towards her [sister] because she was older and had a bigger mouth so I*
> *spent a lot of time comforting her and making sure she was alright.*

Narrators in this position often felt trapped by the violence in their lives, until a turning point or trigger where they became victims. Some experienced a sexual

assault by a family member or trusted friend. Others became teenagers and were in the process of proving themselves as 'strong' in their neighborhoods. Tanya, for example, who, as described above, spent her childhood comforting her sister after her step-father's violence, described a pivotal moment in her adolescence where she transformed from a quiet bystander to a protector who used her step-father's instrument of violence against him:

> *I caught him [step-dad] trying to hit her [mother] one night. I grabbed a marble rolling pin from the side and smashed him straight over the head and cut his head open.*

The women who told this type of morality tale regularly began to fight back after experiencing such turning points, and this then progressed into preempting any anticipated violence by hitting first. According to their narratives, violence was often experienced as a meaningful language they adopted. By being physically violent when necessary, they signaled to their social circles that they were not the kind of women to be taken advantage of.

> *You have to start being like the top people. You have to start hitting people because it makes everybody else scared of you and they won't give you shit.*

As a result of this new strategy, they found themselves finally escaping victimisation in a meaningful way. Ironically, this is precisely when they began to get in trouble with the police and in some cases earning convictions for violence. Being officially

'known' as a violent woman did not sit easily with the participants. Simultaneously as the women argued for the need to signal strength through violence, they judged violence as 'not nice' because 'women should be soft.' Mothers especially feared their children might be removed if they continued to be arrested.

Women in this position, therefore, presented a further and linked moral identity—that of the honest woman—to distance themselves from the stigma of violent offending. Because they engaged in physical violence out of the moral conviction that what they had done was just, or justified, they were honest about their behavior to CJS officials. For some women this meant going to the police station to inform on themselves after participating in a fight. For others it meant refusing to be represented by a solicitor in court. This kind of honesty was evidence to the 'strong' woman that she had moral strength and stood up for her convictions, even if it resulted in her punishment. As one participant said, 'I'd rather just tell the truth.'

Not having a solicitor meant having to navigate the CJS on their own, but as the 'strong' women were used to a lack of support, they did not question that they would have to do this in their interactions with the police and the CJS. This meant that some rarely 'escaped' arrest, except through restorative justice. Thus this honesty, crucial to their own self-image as a person of positive self-worth and moral integrity again came with the price of drawing them further into the CJS.

4.4 Morality tale three: work and the normal life

The last morality tale was told by both one-time and frequent offenders and involved desistance, encouraged through joining the world of work. Opsal's (2012) research with previously incarcerated women has added the identity of the 'worker' to previously documented feminised 'reformed' identities (i.e. 'mother' or 'wife') (Giordano et al, 2002). This research suggests that a 'worker' identity may be even more significant for women who have committed relatively low-level offending as a pathway towards a 'normal' life. The identity of the 'worker' was so prominent that it was often the first one to be mentioned after the opening question of, 'Could you tell me about your life?'

> *Now, my life is good and mainly just work really. I work about ten hours a day, six days a week so I don't have much time for anything really.*

Some of the women were still employed by their first employer at the time of the interview. One woman was approaching her tenth anniversary with her employer, a job she had held when her offence occurred. The morality tale of work was for the most part gender neutral and provided coherence for positive (or 'normal') aspects of their identities that they had maintained despite offending.

The frequently voiced hope of eventually landing a 'decent job' also represented a future which would be drastically different from their family of origin (see also Opsal, 2012). The women, especially those with troubled backgrounds or lengthier histories of offending, repeated that they aspired to be 'normal.' What was 'normal' differed from woman to woman. For some it meant differentiating themselves from the life their mothers had experienced—teenage pregnancy, single motherhoods, violent

partners, poverty, and, crucially for many of the women, reliance on benefits. Other times, being 'normal' meant having it 'all':

> *I just want a good career, a really good career, where I earn myself lots of money and a nice house, nice family. Just a family environment. Somewhere nice to live. Nice people. Have a car. Just normal things that normal people want like house, car, and I want to be able to pay for it all by myself. I don't want to like get pregnant, be on benefits and just be a single mum. I want it all. Do you know what I mean?*

By diverting women from the CJS in their adolescence or early adulthood, through the referral to restorative justice, most of the women had been able to avoid a first (or further) caution or conviction. Maintaining a relatively 'clean' criminal record allowed them to seek employment upon leaving school or allowed them to remain in employment and thus continue on their 'expected' path (i.e. Presser's (2004) 'stability narratives').

While the world of work exposed the women to new opportunities, independence and their own money, the type of jobs they held were most frequently unskilled work such as cleaning, bar, retail and factory work (as Opsal, 2012 also notes). Aspirational jobs included positions with more 'meaning' (Laub and Sampson, 1993:317; Maruna, 2001) such as teaching assistants and support workers. What these positions, both held and aspirational, had in common were that they were traditionally 'female' positions, low paid, and with little mobility. Women who were adamant about getting by without support or benefits worked twelve-hour days with little time off work

presenting a high risk of burning out. Further problems arose when the women's personal lives demanded they be given a bit of flexibility such as when they were dealing with depression or when they became mothers. Sympathetic employers were rare, leading women to leave the work force and ending up on benefits, despite working hard to avoid this. This cycle demonstrates the limitations gender, class and lack of education imposed on these women.

5. Discussion

This study sought to examine female offenders' narratives about offending and their sense of moral 'goodness' (Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2004) some years after participating in restorative justice. Findings demonstrated that women, on the whole, presented positive narratives about themselves, even during their periods of offending (as per Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2004) and that this self-belief, mediated through agency, seems to have allowed them to desist, as has been previously suggested (Maruna, 2001). The study also provided insights into young women's sources of self-esteem and positive self worth—away from previously identified feminised identities found in samples of older women with longer offending histories (i.e Giordano et al, 2002; Fleetwood, 2015; Miller et al, 2015). Identities highlighted here included the 'normal' playful young person, the 'strong' woman and the 'worker.' By focusing on self-worth, agency and desistance, this paper concludes with implications for practice for female offenders in restorative justice and beyond.

Self-worth and agency

The women in this sample told three narratives about offending which demonstrated positive self-worth regardless of involvement in the CJS. Narratives of play were instrumental in suggesting that women were *no worse* than their community of peers or that youthful 'fun' did not detract from a positive self (Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2004).

'Strong' women survived abuse and neglect and were proud of keeping further victimisation at bay by being physically strong. They were also proud of their honesty, particularly when there were obvious contradictions between what they thought women should be ('soft' and 'normal') and their own behavior. Finally, women who presented as workers used this identity to demonstrate that they occupied a prosocial place in the community.

For many of the women, self-worth was tied to agency. First-time offenders essentially 'returned' to the lives they were already living (Presser, 2004), often by receiving assistance from supportive family members and educators who, at the time of the interview, sometimes continued to manage their transition from adolescence into adulthood. Other women, however, had to work hard to overcome multiple layers of gendered, class, educational and financial adversity in order to compose a life story where, as in the words of one participant, they had 'done wrong' but ultimately were good people (as per Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2004). Their hard work was seldom described as assisted by others. They left school with few qualifications, had extensive histories of victimisation, offended at least once and were involved in peer groups who actively offended. Most of these women searched and found employment, removed themselves from antisocial friendship circles, and cut ties with unsupportive

families/partners. They spoke about doing it on their own by cobbling together the resources they had until they were living a better life, utilising the agency that has been documented as crucial in feminist criminological literature (Batchelor et al, 2001; Giordano et al, 2002; Henriksen and Miller, 2012).

Desistance

While the literature on female offenders' participation in restorative justice is still emerging (see Daly, 2008), a few studies have suggested that restorative justice encourages desistance more effectively for women than men (Hayes, 2005; Rodriguez, 2007). The twelve women interviewed presented evidence that they had desisted for between one and five years. While the sample contained a number of one-time offenders, it also consisted of women who had offended in various ways since their adolescence, including in ways that were unknown to the police. Desistance literature involving adolescents has also shown that desisiting from offending may involve more work than previously thought and thus is an important concept for even low-level offenders (Murray, 2009).

Women's narratives suggested the following: if you played, you outgrew this type of behavior naturally; if you were a 'strong' woman you could draw on this strength to transform yourself into a prosocial person; if you were a worker, you were less likely to offend because you developed a different peer group, you had less disposable time and you had more to lose.

The more gender neutral identity of the 'normal' young person who spent time with friends and made 'silly' adolescent mistakes and *then* grew up to become a 'worker' was presented as evidence of both 'respectability' and 'normalcy.'

Restorative justice

What then do these 'normality' as well as morality tales teach us about working with female offenders in restorative justice? Firstly, their 'honesty' bodes well for restorative justice. The women interviewed readily admitted to their wrongdoing both in the interview setting with the author and, earlier, to the police, possibly explaining their eligibility for restorative justice. Their readiness to admit to their offence, however, did not mean that their participation in restorative justice was always successful. Indeed, despite their 'honesty' many of the women interviewed described restorative justice as stigmatising and shameful, as in previous research (see Maxwell et al, 2004), especially when their side of the story was not listened to (see Larsson et al, 2018).

Restorative justice, including participation in conferences with victims, did not seem to have shifted these women's tendencies to make excuses for their offences or to engage in victim blaming. Women who felt they had 'played,' for example, questioned whether their participation in restorative justice had been necessary. When restorative justice was done in the presence of victims of 'play,' women reported confronting the victims' experience directly. Similarly, 'strong' women, described becoming strategically defiant when faced with multiple condemnation from victims and the police. While some of the 'workers' who met police officers in street

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restorative justice (without victim interaction) credited restorative justice and the police with helping them, narratives of being misunderstood and/or judged unfairly often outweighed narratives of the helpfulness of restorative justice.

This study, therefore, suggests that the narratives of female offenders in restorative justice may contain all the right elements for women to positively participate and to desist but that at the moment restorative justice facilitated by the police may not be sufficiently sensitive to women's perspectives/experiences to capitalise on restorative justice's potential in their lives. It may, for example, be necessary to honor some aspect of women's stories/experiences, even if they do not neatly fit into restorative justice's theoretical expectations (see Dandurand and Griffith, 2006), by allowing female offenders to object to their behaviors being classified as offending or to present their own victim narratives (Alder, 2000; Gaarder and Presser, 2006). If this takes place prior to official restorative justice, this would allow facilitators to screen out cases inappropriate for restorative justice and to make female offenders feel heard and understood, which in turn might facilitate their positive participation in the process and/or allow them to seek further assistance with interpersonal challenges (Larsson et al, 2018).

It may also be necessary to revisit whether, and how, restorative justice facilitators 'challenge' (Bradshaw, 1998: 66) offender narratives in respectful ways that benefit both victims and offenders. While female offenders' 'honesty' is promising, facilitators should not assume this will mean a lack of minimising narratives or victim blaming, particularly if elements of restorative justice are experienced as unfair through, for example, unequal support. As a range of recent studies on female

offenders in restorative justice, including this one, has identified, female offenders frequently attend restorative justice by themselves (Miles, 2013; Osterman and Masson, 2016; Larsson et al, 2018). Ensuring that all participants have support may decrease some of the self-protective attitudes in restorative justice which are detrimental to the process. This research suggests that discourses of honesty are closely linked with other narratives experienced as more meaningful to female offenders. There needs to be clear communication with female offenders about the expectations for their participation, as well as what the alternatives to restorative justice are. There similarly should be honest communication with victims about what female offenders are willing to acknowledge so that victims can make informed decisions about whether or not to participate.

6. Conclusion

These morality tales are based on a small qualitative sample of working class women from a rural county in the UK. The women committed predominately low-level offences and, for the most part, had short criminal 'careers' which they described ceasing themselves without professional support. While the main purpose of these morality tales was to depict themselves as 'good' people despite their offending, which fits with previously documented offenders' moral identities (Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2009), these women did not rely on traditional feminine identities to do so (i.e. Giordano et al, 2002). It is possible that such identities were absent because of the women's ages (the average in the sample was 22); because they were on the whole low-level and occasional offenders (thus perhaps eliminating the need for drastic redemption); or because of cultural differences (U.K. sample versus U.S. literature). Finally, as previously mentioned, the qualitative sample were different from the

average female offender identified in the administrative police database. They were slightly older, had committed a wider range of offences from shoplifting to assault with grievous bodily harm, and more had participated in a conference rather than street restorative justice. It is possible that this group of women, being identified as 'different' enough to be eligible for restorative justice, were not typical female offenders, and it is possible that the women interviewed here were different enough from other female offenders in the database that their narratives about identity, offending and desistance are not representative of the average female offender who has experienced restorative justice.

On the other hand, low-level female offenders such as the women in this study with backgrounds of victimisation may be interacting with a wide range of professionals and for reasons beyond offending. For example, four of the women interviewed were victims of sexual assault or intimate partner violence and had interactions with the police, mental health workers and community organisations as victims. This means that the messages in these morality tales, including aspects of their identities identified as 'good' may be helpful for the police, probation and social workers working with vulnerable women.

This paper concludes with three key messages for such professionals. First, eliciting individual young women's understanding of the context of their offending should be a vital component of work with them, including planning interventions. The first morality tale shows that girls who offend belong to peer groups where antisocial behaviour *is* 'normal'. They may not have access to safe and healthy forms of 'fun'

that is not antisocial play, and they likely have co-offenders who are equally culpable. Feeling 'singled out' from such a peer group results in anger and defiance. For others, victim and offending identities and experiences may be closely entwined, meaning that work on one without the other is difficult. Despite having years of experiences of victimisation, these women's first interactions with professionals were often with the police as offenders, encouraging feelings of being let down by the 'system.'

Secondly, the women in this study demonstrated a sophisticated awareness that their behaviour was not acceptable, and they were not proud of their actions; however, when they felt they experienced lack of validation of their 'normal' and 'victim' identities by professionals, they put this awareness aside in order to self-protect. This is where the key message from restorative justice of focusing on 'confronting' inappropriate behaviours while valuing and upholding the self-worth of the person (Braithwaite, 1989; Bradshaw, 1998) may be helpful to professionals. Validating young women's experiences and 'good' aspects of their identity is important.

Finally, the common thread in these women's narratives of desistance and their last 'normality' tale was the importance of a job where they earned money, developed new social networks and an identity of a 'normal' and self-sufficient adult. Initially any job seemed to be beneficial, but over time, places of work which promoted them, recognised their length of service or commitment, and/or offered mentoring opportunities seemed to have the most impact in women's lives. Professionals working with vulnerable young women at risk of (or already) offending should

therefore be encouraged to think of employment as a transformative and

underappreciated pathway in young women's desistance.

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