A qualitative exploration of the role of employment in desistance and subsequent identity change; ex-prisoners' lived experiences

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TITLE: A qualitative exploration of the role of employment in desistance and subsequent identity change; ex-prisoners' lived experiences

ABSTRACT:

In the context of desistance, employment has been described as a contributing factor in the formation of a non-offending identity. The present study examined the lived experiences of adult male ex-offenders who had served a custodial sentence in the United Kingdom (UK), to explore the potential influence of employment as a desistance-promoting factor in the construction of a new, non-offending identity.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was applied to eight semi-structured interview transcripts, up to twelve months after release from prison, from which five themes emerged.

Findings showed that lawful income through employment is associated with a shift in the values and goals of former prisoners, but only after transformation from an offending identity into a pro-desistance identity had taken place. The early days of prison, soon after induction, were reported as critical to catalyzing identity reconstruction. Once committed to a non-offending identity, desistance was then consolidated by employment and external support.

CUST_RESEARCH_LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS__(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

External support soon after arrival at prison may be useful in helping offenders to develop a non-offending identity. Professionals within the prison service could initiate identity reconstruction strategies in the days immediately following arrival at prison. This was shown to have potential as a key phase of reflection for offenders, which could result in life-changing identity reconstruction.

CUST_SOCIAL_IMPLICATIONS_(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

The findings challenge previous research which suggests that identity change occurs on release from prison, or after sourcing regular employment. The application of identity reconstruction strategies, immediately following arrival at prison, might provide a useful approach when supporting the development of a non-offending identity among adult men serving a custodial sentence.

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A qualitative exploration of the role of employment in desistance and subsequent identity change; ex-prisoners' lived experiences

Table 1: Demographic, offending, and personal characteristics of the sample

Table 2. Superordinate and subordinate themes

Abstract

Purpose

In the context of desistance, employment has been described as a contributing factor in the formation of a non-offending identity. The present study examined the lived experiences of adult male ex-offenders who had served a custodial sentence in the United Kingdom (UK), to explore the potential influence of employment as a desistance-promoting factor in the construction of a new, non-offending identity.

Design

Interpretative phenomenological analysis was applied to eight semi-structured interview transcripts, up to twelve months after release from prison, from which five themes emerged.

Findings

Findings showed that lawful income through employment is associated with a shift in the values and goals of former prisoners, but only after transformation from an offending identity into a pro-desistance identity had taken place. The early days of prison, soon after induction, were reported as critical to catalyzing identity reconstruction. Once committed to a non-offending identity, desistance was then consolidated by employment and external support.

Practical implications

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External support soon after arrival at prison may be useful in helping

offenders to develop a non-offending identity. Professionals within the prison service

could initiate identity reconstruction strategies in the days immediately following

arrival at prison. This was shown to be a potentially key phase of reflection for

offenders, which could result in life-changing identity reconstruction.

Originality

The findings challenge previous research which suggests that identity change

occurs on release from prison, or after sourcing regular employment. The application

of identity reconstruction strategies, immediately following arrival at prison, might

provide a useful approach when supporting the development of a non-offending

identity among adult men serving a custodial sentence.

Keywords

Employment, desistance, identity change, ex-prisoners, recidivism, rehabilitation, ex-
offender,

Introduction

An aim of correctional services is to reduce risk of reoffending and increase

the likelihood of crime desistance. However, in England and Wales, 30% of offenders

released from prison, cautioned, or given a non-custodial conviction in 2017 went on

to be re-convicted of an offence within one year (Ministry of Justice, 2019a); the true

figure of re-offending (not limited to convictions) would be higher than 30%. The

reasons for re-offending rates are complex and a lack of staff resource for supervision,

intervention and monitoring, in a climate of austerity, is just one factor of relevance

(Institute for Government, 2019). Another factor is the custodial environment itself,

with high levels of violence, illicit drug use, self-harm, and suicide in prisons in

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England and Wales (Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, 2019a; Ministry of Justice, 2019b; Pope, 2018).

Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), the agency with oversight of prisons across England and Wales, promotes a culture of rehabilitation to drive risk reduction. A key feature is the advocacy of identity reconstruction among persons held in custody, through the "internalization of a non-offending identity" (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; p.570), support with preparation for a non-criminal lifestyle, and modeling of non-criminal values (HMPPS, 2019b).

In their commentary on frameworks for explaining desistance, Sampson and Laub (2001) assert that criminal behavior is influenced by a sequence of events which tend to occur as part of the life-course. Their longitudinal study of male offenders showed that significant life events, such as securing stable employment and embarking on long-term relationships, impose structure and stability onto lives previously characterized by impulsivity. The concept of 'knifing off' (Caspi & Moffi, 1993; Maruna & Roy, 2007) - separating oneself from delinquent social influences - suggests that a change of environment and peer group might allow an individual to construct a new, non-offending identity in the absence of pro-offending social influences.

The Good Lives Model (GLM; Ward & Brown, 2004) suggests that opportunities for financial gain through criminal offences are likely to be declined by ex-offenders who possess a new, subjective sense of prospects for earning money in ways that are lawful and personally gratifying. Among ex-offenders, reluctance to offend as a means of achieving financial goals could indicate a shift in appraisal of methods for goal attainment. The GLM assumes that this perspective change is a key part of the rehabilitative process.

In the context of desistance, employment has been described as a contributing factor to identity change, specifically through the forming of social bonds contributing to a non-offending identity (Maruna, 2001), and most likely at the point of release from prison (Grommon & Rydberg, 2018). This article seeks to build on the findings of Maruna (2001), Maruna et al. (2004), and Grommon and Rydberg (2018) by providing an in-depth understanding of the function of employment as a structural desistance-promoting factor, which influences non-offending identity construction in former prisoners in England and Wales.

The aims of the present study follow Grommon and Rydberg's (2018) recommendations for future research to explore the effect of perceived successes and failures in the domain of employment on the process of identity change during community re-integration.

There is some support for an approach that targets employment provision as an effective means to reduce recidivism. For instance, Ogbonnaya-Ogburu, Toyama & Dillahunt (2019) found that enhanced social connections and financial independence were key advantages of employment, and Felson and Staff (2017) suggested that persons with a lawful means of income would be less likely to commit crimes for monetary gain, when compared to those lacking legitimate employment. However, criminal record disclosure requirements and gaps in employment history were experienced as barriers to gainful, legitimate employment opportunities (Ogbonnaya-Ogburu et al., 2019).

Given this context, the current study aimed to explore ex-offenders' lived experiences of desistance, employment, and identity change.

Method

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Design

In order to explore the lived experience of the role of employment in
desistance and identity change, a semi-structured interview design facilitated
participant-led data gathering.

Sampling, Participants, and Ethical Permissions

Ethical approval was granted by Royal Holloway, University of London.
Through purposive sampling, potential participants were identified via the client
database of Bounce Back, a training and employment charity based in prisons and the
community. The lead author worked at Bounce Back at the time of conducting this
research and was aware that concurrent roles as lead author of the present research
study and Bounce Back employee would frame the interpretations of the data. This
was managed through discussion of findings with the second author. Role conflict
(i.e., researcher-employee) was minimised by grounding the interviews in the
meaning making process which centred on participants' experiences. The lead
researcher had built a professional relationship with the management team at Bounce
Back prior to the commencement of this research, which enabled access to the
charity's database of service users who met the inclusion criteria. Verbal permission
was obtained from the senior management team at Bounce Back prior to
commencement of research. The database was scanned for participants who met the
inclusion criteria: employed full-time (defined as working at least 16 hours per week);
receiving pay at, or above, the national minimum wage; male; over 18; with a contact
mobile/cell 'phone number in service. Furthermore, people with a history of sexual
offences were not invited to participate in this research due to the additional barriers –
such as social stigma and enhanced monitoring - to desistance for this group. For
example, Kras (2018) noted that persons convicted of sexual offences may be

required to report to probation offices more often than non-sexual offenders as a condition of their release, which may affect their attendance at a place of employment.

Those who met the criteria were sent a text message with information about the study and an invitation to participate. In total, 37 individuals were invited to participate, with eight choosing to take part in the study, amounting to a response rate of 21.6%. Two additional people initially expressed an interest in participating but subsequently chose not to take part. All eligible participants were invited to take part, to enhance the representativeness of the sample, as well as to ensure the opportunity to participate was advertised as widely as possible. In addition, this approach was implemented to accommodate the needs of participants through offering times and dates that would suit the availability of people in employment. Pickett et al. (2018) claim that, reflecting an overall decline in survey response rates across a variety of formats within criminal justice research, the anticipated response rate for telephone surveys is below 10%. Considering the similarities between a telephone survey approach and the present study, in which details about the study were sent by text message and interviews took place via telephone call, the response rate of 21.6% can be regarded as exceeding the rate expected for comparable research studies.

All those who responded to the text message with interest were sent a high resolution, PNG image of the information and informed consent forms, by text message. Those who responded to confirm that they had read, and agreed with, both the information and informed consent forms were contacted by mobile/cell 'phone to discuss the research project and to provide an opportunity for them to ask questions about the study. Participants were given full information about the research prior to interview. All who took part requested to be interviewed by mobile/cell 'phone call.

Participant demographic, offending, and personal characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Pseudonyms have been applied to protect the identity of the participants.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Participants are representative of the two largest ethnic groups held in Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) custodial settings: white British and black British individuals (Institute of Race Relations, 2019; Lammy, 2017). None of the participants had received convictions for sexual offences.

Of note, three participants reported active involvement in gangs before or during their most recent prison sentence; this was identified as a factor that might influence narratives of identity reconstruction. Common outcomes of gang membership, such as participation in retaliatory acts of violence, may be processes through which strong identification with a gang may confound attempts to construct a new, non-offending identity (Charette & Papachristos, 2017; Leverso & Matsueda, 2019). However, at the time of interview, these three participants had reportedly cut social ties with former gang associates, renounced their gang membership and chosen to reside in a location outside of their former gang territory.

All participants had been in contact with staff at Bounce Back for up to one year prior to the commencement of field research.

Procedure and Materials

A search of contemporary desistance literature was conducted. This search generated initial topics for further investigation and helped to guide the development of questions used within a semi-structured interview schedule. Some examples of interview questions include:

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- How would you describe yourself to a stranger? In what way, if any, has this changed since you've been employed?

- What was helpful in your efforts to stay employed? In what way did this differ from previous attempts?

- Were there any obstacles or barriers that made it difficult to stay in employment?

- What do you think has led you to offend in the past? What is different now?

Telephone interviews were between 25- and 70-minutes duration, conducted by the first author, and audio recorded. A double hermeneutic technique was applied, when necessary, during interviews. This involved the interviewer repeatedly questioning the participant, to check that their interpretation of responses aligned with participants' reflections. The interviewer promoted the well-being of participants well-being following the interview, by sending a high resolution, PNG image of the debrief information form by text message. The lead researcher also signposted participants to appropriate therapeutic services such as *MIND* and *Samaritans*. Contact telephone numbers for both charities were included in the debrief information form.

Analytic Approach

Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2015), so as to explore personal experiences of the phenomena of desistance, employment and identity change. Understanding the process of sense making and the attribution of meaning to life-course events is possible through IPA as this method involves repeated collaboration between the participant and researcher during data collection to ensure interpretation of participant experience is accurate. The use of the double hermeneutic process is

integral to IPA and acts as a restraint on researcher bias. IPA also involves immersive exploration of the data through repeated reading and organization of shared experiences into themes. Thus, IPA can reveal the richness and diversity of individual experiences related to the phenomena under investigation (Smith & Flowers, 2009).

Yardley's (2000) criteria for quality research can be met through use of IPA methodology. These are: sensitivity to context; rigor and commitment; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance.

Transcripts were read several times and iterative annotations made by the first author, with emerging themes identified from elements of common experience between participants. Connections between initial themes were identified and sub-themes were grouped accordingly into superordinate themes. Transcripts and themes were discussed with the second author and themes reviewed by the third. The italics included in participants' quotes are used to denote the emphasis spoken by each interviewee.

Results

The five superordinate and related subordinate themes are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2 - ABOUT HERE

Identity transformation

This superordinate theme identified individual turning points in participants' accounts of their decision to desist from crime, find employment and construct a new, non-offending identity. The perspectives of these men on methods of diverting others away from offending are also discussed.

Turning points

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Participants described moments of clarity in which their intentions to find

work and desist from crime were crystallized. Freddie recounted his individual

turning point and explained the two divergent pathways that were available to him at

the point of his sentencing. These options were conceptualized as either making a

commitment to improve the sophistication of future criminal endeavors, or

committing to lawful employment and desistance:

>That day, once you've been sentenced and you go back to your cell, it's like,
>
>you start *rethinking* what you're gonna do next … that's when most people
>
>will either rethink how they're gonna do road [involvement in illicit, informal
>
>enterprises] properly, or how they're gonna do work properly so that's like the
>
>key moment. (Freddie)

Likewise, Ben explained how his reflection on the discrepancy between the

imagined, advantageous outcome of selling cocaine and the reality of residing in a

prison cell triggered his personal turning point: "Well I realized it was getting me

nowhere [laughter]… Sitting there in the cell thinking… this ain't where I wanted to

be… I think I've took a wrong turn here."

The above reflections suggest a gradual, internal change, prompted by

receiving a custodial sentence and first impression of a prison cell.

Promoting desistance

Participants reflected on how to promote desistance in others, with two

differing approaches suggested. The first combined emphasis of self-agency in

criminal acts and endorsed punitive consequences for repeat offending, as outlined by

Matt:

>There's only so much words can do … all you can do is give 'em that one talk
>
>and then, leave it up to them. If they decide not to listen and go back to their

old ways then so be it. I'd say to the courts, yeah, throw them back in jail,

simple as. (Matt)

However, the second approach, advocated by Ben, involved persistent

encouragement to inspire desistance from crime:

I think if you just keep telling someone over a period of time … throughout

three, four months *eventually* it will sink in. And then they will start to think,

oh maybe they are right, whereas at first they'll still be like, no I don't wanna

listen to him, he don't know what he's talking about … I think if you keep

persisting with people they will eventually… change. (Ben)

Proposed approaches to realizing desistance among the prisoner population

differed across the sample. Matt expressed a reluctance to support others who might

struggle to desist from crime and go on to reoffend in future, despite his own

experience of reconviction for a second criminal offence. Matt's line of reasoning

suggests that identity change towards pro-desistance should require limited external

support beyond the initial prompt to desist. In contrast, Ben's opposing perspective

suggests that repeated dialogue regarding desistance is crucial. This view on identity

change suggests that external encouragement, closely following the initial wish to

desist, may be important. This external support should continue, regardless of

prisoners' apparent reluctance to engage with support during the early stages of this

process.

Monetary influence

The focus of this second superordinate theme is the participants' sense making

of past and current financial situations, how this was affected by legitimate

employment and the influence of identity on participant-generated solutions for

acquiring money.

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Legitimate employment

The participants experienced a growing awareness of the importance of non-criminal work as part of their rehabilitation process. For Samuel, the concept of rehabilitation was inseparable from providing for himself through legitimate means: "Rehabilitated? That means gettin' back on your feet. Making a living in a way that's accepted." He went on to add that through-the-gate charities, such as *Bounce Back*, had improved his awareness about the various forms of employment that were achievable. Samuel commented that his improved awareness of legal employment opportunities, as viable, alternative options for deriving an income following a prison sentence, enable employment to function as an agent of desistance for him: "They've made me see certain options. That are open to me. That I may not have been aware of beforehand … basically more ways of … escaping." Similarly, Gareth described how access to a career that made financial gain possible was crucial in helping others to stop offending: "… not everyone wants to work. But like if you showed them that they could start a business doing this … Can get the same amount of *money*, maybe … they might wanna change".

Gareth's statement shows the importance of gaining access to financial rewards through employment, comparable to those obtained through crime, in the process of desistance. Oscar also confirmed that his legitimate earnings had removed the need for criminal endeavors to provide income: "My offending behaviors have just stopped, like … I'm in a good job that can pay good money, nah I don't need to offend".

However, while increasing awareness of legitimate employment as a viable source of income may be powerful for some, this theme must be considered in light of

the experience of participants who were earning money through employment prior to their most recent criminal offence:

Before I went prison I was a sales assistant ... At one of those vape shops. I worked in there for like eight months or something … yeah, I mean that was pretty much the only legal job I had [laughter] before I went away. (Ben)

This comment indicates that it cannot be assumed that offenders have not previously experienced legitimate employment prior to incarceration. Therefore, a shift in the significance placed on lawful employment may be relevant for the construction of a new, non-offending identity.

Experience of monetary need

Participants spoke about immediacy of need to access money, with illegal means offering greater flexibility than lawful employment. For example, participants commonly cited a desire to escape from poverty as a central influence on their offending behavior. There were many examples of a perceived need to acquire money through crime. For instance, Aaron's involvement in the sale of cocaine was motivated by financial hardship: "Poverty … what led me to do what I did, was poverty. I had nuffink (sic) so I had to provide for myself."

Additionally, crime was considered a common-sense solution to lack of money. Oscar proposed that the cost of living within a major city necessitated the supplementing of income through illegal means:

No one ever wants to offend in the first place, but you have to offend because … if you ain't got money you know money makes the world go 'round […] Living's expensive right now. Especially in London … You need money to do everything. So listen, if you ain't got it, sometimes you might have to do criminal activity to like, get it. (Oscar)

Oscar conceptualized money as a crucial part of life in modern society and described offending as a permissible method of accumulating the sums of money required to maintain his present lifestyle. Participants' narratives also reveal that their experience of monetary need did not cease when they desisted from crime, but rather, their opinion of criminally generated income had changed. This thought process is explored further below.

Criminally generated income

As might be expected, the change in identity from pro-offending to pro-desistance was associated with a negative appraisal of criminally generated income. Resorting to knowledge of criminal enterprise in times of financial hardship was described by Paul as "falling for a trap". Paul expressed that he felt overwhelmed by financial difficulties and spoke of being tempted by an illegal quick fix:

> We had the bailiffs 'round 'ere yesterday […] I've had to pay £75 and I can't afford it and my partner can't afford it … I was sittin' 'ere yesterday thinkin' to meself (sic), how am I gonna get this money? And I know *how* I can get it … but I don't wanna fall back into that trap … instead of going out there and committin' crime, nah it's not me no more. (Paul)

Despite Paul's awareness that the option of generating money through offending remained a constant possibility, his acknowledgment of a shift in his identity was incompatible with criminal behavior. He suggests a clear sense of self-agency in his ongoing desistance, an idea that is discussed in the following section.

The role of agency

The third superordinate theme highlights participants' subjective understanding of agency in the process of desistance.

The 'self' as the driving force of change

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For all participants, agentic decision-making, self-motivation and self-engineered tactics were expressed as being key to securing gainful employment and achieving identity transformation. Participants reported that external influences, such as support provided by probation services, employers and charities, as well as the sense of punishment inherent in their prison sentences, were of little consequence in their decision to stop offending. For example, Matt expressed this belief plainly:

It's always up to the person. The state can't say, you know, you *have* to do this. The state can't force anyone to do anything they don't want to do … It's all up to the person. And if they really want to change their life. (Matt)

Similarly, Paul described his desistance as a personal choice and likened the decision to getting sober after a period of substance dependency:

I kick me shoes off and said right, that's it. I've 'ad enough … It's like a drug. The only person who can do it is yourself. It's like, taking cocaine or crack or anyfink (sic) like that. The only person who can get you off that, is, that person who's takin' it. That's the way I look at it. (Paul)

The role of participants in obtaining suitable work was commonly emphasized. For instance, Aaron described his experience of this process as being internally driven:

It was something I found. And I built it from the ground up … There's a million and one opportunities out there and if you're not willing to change then you'll never change. You gotta be willing yourself. (Aaron)

Perception of the self as instrumental in change appears to be linked to a need to be regarded by others in their social environment as self-sufficient. This desire to solidify perceptions of the self as autonomous in the eyes of others, regarding their employment and identity re-construction, will be explored next.

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Self-presentation of independence

Participant's narratives indicated that most were keen to be perceived as the central figure in their drive to find employment and avoid reoffending. Independence, as a facet of agency, appeared to be highly valued by these men. It was observed that participants often reported instances of refusing offers of employment through friends and relatives. This seemed to ensure that the self remained at the center of the transformative process. Paul illustrated the thought process underlying his decision to turn down work with a relative's company in favor of a more effortful process of sourcing employment:

> My brother went, well you can work with me. But I didn't want him to think
>
> that, ah, *I* got him that job … I wanna get this job by myself. Not by you … At
>
> least I know I've worked me nuts off to get that job. (Paul)

Some participants appeared to perceive themselves as having greater agency and self-reliance than others seeking to avoid reoffending. For instance, referring to his involvement with through-the-gate charities, Oscar stated: "When I need their help I'll call them. They've started me off and I don't think I need as much help as everybody else." Ben was able to reflect on his reluctance to accept help from significant others during his search for employment. He explained how his desire to appear self-sufficient might have hindered his efforts to find work:

> There was a lot of times where I was quite … I dunno, call it pride maybe? I
>
> didn't want to ask. So like, I should be able to do this on my own, blah blah
>
> blah blah, when I could have actually used some help. (Ben)

Each of these narratives demonstrates a connection between motivation to find employment and the desire to be seen by others as self-sufficient.

Explicit goal orientation

This superordinate theme draws attention to cognitive processes related to goal orientation, reported by participants to influence employment, offending and identity construction.

Pursuing a dream lifestyle

All participants expressed a strong, lasting ambition to attain an idealized lifestyle, conceptualized in different ways. For instance, as being part of a picture-perfect family as Matt explained: "*Everyone* wants to live that perfect lifestyle, have the nice car, have the house, have a family, have the little dog on the side." Whereas, Ben saw this dream lifestyle as consisting of partying and hedonism: "I was just like out every night … goin' to parties, all sorts, pubs […] clothes, booze, whatever, all sorts of stuff really. But it's just a lifestyle for me that's what I sort of fell in love with."

However, Samuel saw his dream lifestyle as being stress-free: "I'm just trying to live a comfortable lifestyle and not be worrying about this that and the other." The participants' narratives suggested that this aim of 'living the dream' had not altered as a result of securing employment or identity reconstruction, rather the means of achieving this aim were now legitimate, rather than criminal: "At the end of the day, certain circumstances brings you into a position where you may end up doing something wrong but … that dream never changes." (Matt).

The following section demonstrates how these men shifted from pursuing a dream lifestyle through impulsive, criminal means to a pro-social, goal-oriented outlook.

Lack of focus and impulsivity replaced with goal orientation

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All participants reported a reduction in impulsive behavior and improvement in focus and associated both factors with desistance. These changes were described in terms of self-improvement and identity transformation. For instance, when Paul recounted his prior criminal behavior related to multiple motor vehicle thefts and dangerous driving offences, he equated the process of bettering himself with reduced impulsivity:

> Thinkin' before acting. Instead of jumpin' to things. Know what I mean I'm one of these people if someone offered me a car, I'd take it … As long as I've got me car there, I didn't care about anythin' else … where I was before, kinda like, just drivin' off from the police … and take 'em for a nice little journey 'round the town … I got seven years for that … and it did learn me then. And … I been out o' trouble all that time. (Paul)

When asked to reflect on changes in their thinking, some participants noted that they had experienced a sense of wandering and feeling lost while engaging in regular criminal activity. Ben explained how his new identity involved greater levels of ambition and focus:

> I'm definitely not the same person, so, I think I'm doin' better now, to be fair […] Like instead of just wandering around lost takin' day in day out, I'm actually applyin' myself to things whereas before, I actually wasn't so … my attitude was I didn't care before, but now … I do. (Ben)

Similarly, Oscar remarked on a sense of aimless drifting that he experienced during his prison sentence and his resolve not to repeat the experience of incarceration in future: "Sitting in a jail … just wasting my time, wasting my life I'm not … willing to do that again." Paul also conceptualized his time spent in prison as wasteful: "I'd

say I spent about … twenty-seven years? In jail? Out of my life. And I'm only 54 so, I

spent, half my life in jail … it's a waste of time."

Further to this, Gareth shared that prior to his latest custodial sentence: "I

didn't really have any goal back then." In stark contrast to this, since finding

employment and desisting from crime, Gareth changed his behavior in accordance

with his goals for progression: "I know … where I wanna go. What I wanna be.

Having goals, basically." As well as reporting goal orientation to a greater extent than

previously experienced, participants also provided further detail on the specific format

of their new, non-criminal goals, as discussed in the following subordinate theme.

Setting explicit and lawful goals

In addition to experiencing a greater proclivity for goal orientation, participant

narratives included explicit goals that were not related to offending and, rather, were

achievable through employment. Examples included: Samuel's wish of "setting up

my own thing in properties"; Freddie seeking to "opening up my own business in the

trade I'm tryna (sic) get into"; and Ben stating "I wanna go to Malta [laughter]. Open

up a club […] that's my plan for the future like five, ten years anyway". Aaron also

shared his goals for his current entrepreneurial enterprise, indicating that these

explicit goals were subject to timelines and were also part of a greater plan for

success:

> I've got a few things in the pipeline but, at the end of the year, they should be
>
> flourishing, hopefully. That's what I'm aiming towards … when that stuff
>
> starts hitting its actual goals and targets and what not, then, I'll look to push it
>
> even further. (Aaron)

The setting of explicit and lawful goals meant that financial stability remained

a priority for participants in their desistance and non-offending identity. The

following section will draw attention to social influences on offending, employment and identity change.

Forms of social influence

In the final superordinate theme, participants described navigating a range of challenges in their social world after returning to the community. At times, these men derived encouragement from family and friends in their quest for identity change. They also found their resolve to stop offending weakened by associations with offending peers.

Influence of family and significant others

Participants described the influence of their relatives, partners and children as crucial in maintaining desistance. For Matt, his partner's intervention was pivotal in managing his anger and was described as being more effective than any punitive response from the criminal justice system:

> I'm not really scared of consequence when it comes to like law enforcement
> … Nothing's going to stop me from doing what I really want to do. If that
> means I wanna hurt someone then I will … *However,* my partner knows what
> I'm like … when I'm in a pissed off mood … and I've already gone to that
> point where … I can't bring myself back from it, she will be that person to
> snap me out of it. All I have to do is hear her voice and then … everything will
> click back into place again. (Matt)

Oscar illustrated his understanding of his parental duty to protect his son from involvement in gang violence and knife crime. He commented that this was dependent on his own desistance from crime and continued presence in his son's social world:

> I'm his role model so, it'd be stupid of me getting myself in trouble any more
> ... There's kids killin' theirselves [sic] out 'ere so, I don't want that for my son

… It only takes a couple of years of the father being away, distant like, and it

can all go pear-shaped. (Oscar)

Moreover, Paul's reflection on his father's death, and his association of this

event with the inception of his repeat offending in his youth, illuminates the impact of

paternal guidance on offending behavior: "My dad, was, my *idol* … always wanted to

be like my dad … But, after my father passed away, I just went downhill… I was

gettin' in trouble after trouble after trouble."

The comments above demonstrate the perceived importance of relatives,

partners and children in ensuring that participants remained crime free, acting as

external motivators for change. In contrast, responses revealed that the influence of

friendship groups was mostly felonious.

Distancing from criminal associates

Peer groups that promoted involvement in criminal activity were often

described as distractions, capable of corrupting an individual who had previously

been working towards legitimate, non-criminal goals. The experience of offending

behavior increasing as a result of peer influence was described by Freddie: "They

kinda, side-tracked me from what I need to do … I got side-tracked by people … that

was around me and then, things just kinda escalated from there."

A commonly cited solution to the pro-offending influence of peers was to

distance oneself by leaving the area associated with previous criminal behavior and

rejecting former peer groups altogether. For example, Matt suggested that prisoners

aiming to stop offending should dissociate from disinge nuous peer groups and avoid

being drawn into illicit activity while in custody:

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If I was to see other prisoners that are inside, I would say to them … don't

worry about their so-called friends that are in custody, and what they're doing

… we all come into this world on our own and we all got a sentence on our

own … Their friends will just leave them if need be. (Matt)

Oscar also illustrated his ability to desist from crime after distancing himself

from his former gang associates and relocating to a different London borough: "I've

always known what's wrong. It's just … when I'm away from all the riff raff, I can do

it … just a different area, different space different people to be around. Yeah and then

good things can happen."

Discussion

This qualitative exploration of the role of employment in desistance and

subsequent identity change found that participants embarked on change during the

initial days of their prison sentence and, therefore, prior to engaging in employment.

This in contrast to previous research (Grommon & Rydberg, 2018) which suggested

that identity reconstruction started at the point of release from prison. The

development of a non-offending identity was influenced by intrapersonal and external

factors and, once participants committed to this identity, employment supported their

new, remodeled values and goals. Consistent with work by Paternoster et al. (2016),

employment appeared to function as an important factor in maintaining the process of

identity change, subsequent to the decision to desist.

The five themes of perspectives on identity transformation, forms of monetary

influence, the role of self-agency, explicit goal-orientation, and forms of social

influence reflect the identity reconstruction process among participants. Reception

into prison emerged through the data to be a potentially key phase of reflection for

participants, and one during which life-changing identity reconstruction might be

initiated; this warrants further research and consideration of the most opportune moments to encourage and support desistance. Support to enhance problem-solving skills and advice for setting and achieving personal goals soon after arrival at prison might be useful in guiding offenders to identify and alter criminal behaviors and thought processes, rather than being left to 'stumble' upon this line of reasoning by chance, ahead of their impending release. Therefore, it might be useful for professionals within the prison service to consider what activities might best engage offenders at reception in initiating identity reconstruction strategies , rather than in the months immediately preceding release.

Monetary remuneration for paid employment might not be sufficient to explain identity reconstruction in the absence of other factors. For instance, some participants were engaged in paid employment prior to their most recent conviction, and the expected monetary gain from criminal activity was directly associated with the desire to alleviate subjective poverty; to achieve a 'dream life'. In accordance with the GLM (Ward & Brown, 2004), the participants' accounts demonstrated that, when identifying as an offender, crime was regarded as an effective and permissible method of sourcing income. However, in the context of desistance, criminally generated income was perceived as a trap; an ever-present option for earning money, but adverse consequences outweighing any potential benefits. Furthermore, the ideal lifestyle was more modest than that suggested by Maruna (2001), here embodied by conventional 'picture perfect' family life, such as a house, car and a dog, or dreaming of a sense of comfort, perceived normality and a less stressful way of life.

Similar to the concept of 'knifing off' (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993; Maruna & Roy, 2007), participants employed a tactic of avoiding criminal associates, perceived as unhelpful for maintaining desistance. In addition, the current study partly supports

Grommon & Rydberg's (2018) research, with participants describing non-offending identity reconstruction as being partially reliant on cognitive skills development, such as learning to weigh consequences before acting.

The concept of "aging out" (Grommon & Rydberg, 2018) of offending did not appear to be a driving factor for desistance among participants. Furthermore, the concept that employment imposed social control over behavior, as postulated by Sampson & Laub (2001) was not evident. Participants did not reflect on routine and responsibility found in full-time employment as influencing the construction of a new, non-offending identity.

The enhanced sense of agency and reduced impulsivity felt by participants mirrors the findings of Liem & Richardson (2014), who identified similar changes among the former prisoners within their sample who did not go on to reoffend. Participants presented the maintenance of identity change and desistance as an inherently internal process that did not draw from external sources of support, even though external support was recognized as a facilitator once internal motivation had been attained. This relates to Self-Determination theory and the importance of intrinsic motivation (the highest level of motivation); founded on autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Therefore, it is likely that readiness to accept external sources of support was not as salient as agency in the minds of participants, as they were contemplating the process of desistance. External support at the point of reception to prison could focus on promoting agency among prisoners in the decision to stop offending and seek employment. The conceptualizations of desistance presented in this study may result from experiences in the early stage of desistance and, as such, the sense of commitment to the individual responsibility that participants feel; that this is a process that they need to engage with and take

responsibility for alone. The context of desistance narratives over time, exploring

individualized and systemic themes, warrants further research.

These research findings are based on the experiences of ex-offenders in

England who had lived in the community for up to 12 months and offer insight into

the process of desistance and the role of employment. However, the participants were

engaged with the Bounce Back charity and also volunteered participation in this

research, so might not reflect the experiences of prison leavers who are not so actively

engaged with the process of desistance. Nonetheless, the findings might be useful for

practitioners working with adult, male ex-offenders in England and beyond.

Limitations

Despite limitations, richly descriptive data were obtained. Limitations

included that the sample of adult, male ex-offenders in London was obtained through

one employment charity and interviews were conducted on the telephone. A larger

group drawn from across the UK, from a range of community services, and using

face-to-face or Skype interviews might yield additional data relevant to the research

question. A response rate of 21.6% lies below the expected response rate for face-to-

face surveys (around 70%, Pickett et al., 2018) in the field of criminal justice, but is

above the response rate for telephone surveys, which is reported by Pickett et al.

(2018) to be less than 10%.

Conclusion

This study aimed to understand the experiences of male ex-offenders who

gained employment after serving a custodial sentence in England and Wales and the

potential influence of employment as a desistance-promoting factor in their

construction of a new, non-offending identity.

The findings suggest that the main approach for identity reconstruction for ex-offender participants related to internal readiness to stop offending, but support for ex-offenders who are considering identity change is likely important for producing desistance. While practitioners employed within the prison service may already be doing more than ever to support prisoners by working in partnership with organizations such as *Bounce Back*, future research should also consider how to assist prisoners in the initial days following their prison induction to promote self-reflection around desistance.

Five themes reflected the process of identity change and desistance, including the roles of external support, encouragement and agency needed to avoid re-offending. Together, the themes highlight the importance of autonomous choice in identity transformation, intrinsic motivation, and the complementary role of employment as external scaffolding to maintain commitment to desistance once this has been internalized as a viable option to secure goods and a good life.

Implications for forensic practice

1. Practitioners might consider the application of appropriate support services to encourage reflection during the early days of a prison sentence. External support soon after arrival at prison might be useful in helping offenders to develop a non-offending identity.

2. Prison service staff could initiate reconstruction strategies in the days immediately following arrival at prison, a potentially key time of personal reflection and possibilities for life-changing identity reconstruction.

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Table 1: Demographic, offending, and personal characteristics of the sample

Pseudonym	Freddie	Matt	Oscar	Paul	Samuel	Gareth	Ben	Aaron
Age (years)	22	30	31	54	27	28	21	21
Index offence; previous	Drugs; none	Firearms; firearms	Drugs; violence, acquisitive, breach of order	Driving; acquisitive, driving, violence	Robbery; robbery	Violence; weapon	Drugs; none	Drugs; none
Sentence length	3 years	6 years	3 years	7 years*	3 years	5 years	2 years	2 years
Ethnicity	White British	Black British	Black British	White British	Black British	Black British	White British	Black British
Accommodation	Living with family	Hostel	Living with family	Local council property	Living with family	Hostel	Living with family	Living with family
Time since prison release	6 months	10 months	7 months	12 months	7 months	12 months	6 months	7 months
Dependents	None	None	Child < 16 years of age	Child < 16 years of age	None	Child < 16 years of age	None	None

* sentence length reflects a prolific offending history

Table 2. Superordinate and subordinate themes

Perspectives on identity transformation
- Individual turning points
- Reflections on promoting desistance

Forms of monetary influence
- Legitimate employment as a variable monetary source
- Experience of monetary need
- Criminally generated income as entrapment

The role of agency
- The self as the driving force of change
- Self-presentation of independence

Explicit goal orientation
- Pursuing a dream lifestyle
- Lack of focus and impulsivity replaced with goal orientation
- Setting explicit and lawful goals

Forms of social influence
- Influence of family and significant others
- Distancing oneself from criminal associates