

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Narratives of normality : Finnish prisoners envisioning their future

Villman, Emma

2023

Villman , E 2023 , ' Narratives of normality : Finnish prisoners envisioning their future ' ,
Punishment & Society , vol. 25 , no. 1 , 14624745211007192 , pp. 80-98 . <https://doi.org/10.1177/14624745211007192>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/355606>

<https://doi.org/10.1177/14624745211007192>

cc_by

publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

Narratives of normality: Finnish prisoners envisioning their future

Punishment & Society
2023, Vol. 25(1) 80–98
© The Author(s) 2021



DOI: 10.1177/14624745211007192
journals.sagepub.com/home/pun



Emma Villman 

University of Helsinki, Finland

Abstract

The ambition of living ‘a normal life’ appears to be common among prisoners prior to release. Besides portraying for the life desired upon release, the notion of a normal life can say something about what the persons aspiring to it thinks of their present life, what they want their life to be like in future, and what they consider attainable. This article explores the subjective and social considerations of prisoners’ desires for normality. Qualitative interviews with prisoners at low-security open prisons in Finland ($N = 45$) revealed three narratives of normality: (1) nostalgic normality, balancing the disruption caused by imprisonment; (2) imagined normality, envisioning a future life script; (3) challenging views of normality, which is still desired, but whose legal and conventional norms are contested. While prison authorities and prisoners generally idealize normality in terms of conduct, prisoners’ stories reveal that they utilize the notion for a number of reasons. The personal narratives of normality can function as genuine and strategic expressions of conformity or resistance. In their narratives, the prisoners disclose the obstacles to normality that they anticipate, showing the uncertainty behind their simple wish to “just live a normal life.”

Keywords

imprisonment, narrative criminology, normality, normalization, open prison, prison

Corresponding author:

Emma Villman, Institute of Criminology and Legal Policy, University of Helsinki, P.O. Box 24, FI-00014, Helsinki, Finland.

Email: emma.villman@helsinki.fi

Introduction

The desire for a normal life appears to be common among prisoners prior to release. Prisoners aspiring to a life without crime tend to formulate their reintegration ambitions in terms of conventional aspirations and norms (Doekhie and Van Ginneken, 2020; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011; van Ginneken, 2015). The conventional aspirations typically focus on being crime-free, drug-free, and having a conventional family life with a partner, a house, and children (Doekhie and Van Ginneken, 2020; Salovaara, 2019). Aspirations to normality are prevalent among other socially vulnerable groups, including migrants (Lopez Rodriguez, 2010; Manolova, 2019; Stella et al., 2018), people with serious health problems (Higham et al., 2013; Stein and Wemmerus, 2001), and people recovering from substance use (Frank et al., 2015; Knuuti, 2007; Nettleton et al., 2013; Radcliffe and Stevens, 2008). Thus far, little scholarly attention has been paid to the notion of normality within prison studies. Prisoners' aspirations for a normal life are worth studying as they are ubiquitous, vividly illustrating "the struggle to remain human, all too human, despite marginalizing and alienating characterizations" (Arrigo, in Presser, 2008: xi).

In much of criminological theory, crime and conformity are understood as polar opposites. In this view, the movement from a criminal to a conventional or normal life becomes equivalent with desisting from crime. This understanding, however, not always correspond to the reality. While both desisting and persisting offenders aspire to and hold values of a conventional life (Doekhie and Van Ginneken, 2020; Liem and Richardson, 2014; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011), the reason for aspiring to normality may differ. Doekhie and Van Ginneken (2020) found that persistent offenders engaged in crime to fulfil their conventional aspirations concerning masculinity and economic responsibility for one's family. In line with this, Bottoms et al. (2004) propose envisioning offenders' move towards conformity as a oscillation on a continuum between criminality and conformity. These scholars question the idea of conformity as a single common end point, and advocate for an understanding of normality as several, different conformities. In today's diverse societies, there are likely to be several models for successful adulthood.

This study of prisoners' views on normality highlights the normalizing objective pursued by the prison institution. Normalization is a core value of imprisonment in Europe today. The principle of normalization is stipulated in the European Prison Rules: "Life in prison shall approximate as closely as possible the positive aspects of life in the community" (Council of Europe, 2006: rule 5). This principle is first and foremost rights-driven, but historically it has also been argued that normal conditions in prison will help prisoners to reintegrate upon release (Fransen, 2017). How this principle is implemented, and how prisoners experience it, has scarcely been researched, in Finland or elsewhere.

Finland, along with the other Nordic countries, has a strong tradition of endorsing normalization of prison conditions. The principle of normalization stated in the European Prison Rules is incorporated into Finnish law in the

Imprisonment Act. How normalization is to be accomplished is not outlined, except that “enforcement of imprisonment may not restrict the rights or circumstances of a prisoner in any other manner than that provided in the law or necessary due to the punishment itself” (Imprisonment Act, 2005: 1 §3). The normalization of prison conditions has since the early 1970s been an important objective in Finnish prison policy alongside rehabilitation, security, and crime prevention. Humane, normalized, and re-integrative prison conditions have remained central features of the prison system, also in times of increasing punitive attitudes (Pratt and Eriksson, 2011).

Normalization of prison conditions has been genuinely attempted in the context studied here: low-security open prisons in Finland. These are small institutions, housing between 40 and 100 prisoners in campus-style facilities, often without any separate perimeter security. Prisoners in closed institutions may apply for transfer to an open prison towards the end of their sentence, and prisoners with sentences shorter than two years can serve it entirely in an open prison (Imprisonment Act, 2005: 4 §8). Prisoners are allowed to move within their unit, workplace, and other activity spaces without immediate supervision (Imprisonment Act, 2005: 4 §1). Prisoners can work or study inside or outside the prison ground during daytime, they have access to a mobile phone, and they can apply for overnight visits from family. Inmates can be granted prison leave, lasting from a couple of hours to three days, depending on their conduct and time served. The lower security level itself makes the institution more comparable to life outside prison, and the principle of normalization is easier to implement than in a high-security closed prison. Despite this, many prisoners experience open prisons as distant from normalcy, as they still are deprived of liberty and autonomy (Reiter et al., 2018).

When prisoners talk about the notion of a normal life, they appeal to a repertoire they believe will make sense to their listeners. The stories we tell can simultaneously function as a representation of ourselves and a construction of our self-identity (Riessman, 2008). Besides portraying the life one wishes to live, a narrative of normality can be constructed in accordance with prevailing societal norms, and is a product of the narrator’s past and lived reality. This article explores the narratives of normality that prisoners adopt to describe their (hopes for) life upon release, examining how these narratives mirror both internalization and resistance of societal and institutional norms. The analysis builds on qualitative interviews with 45 prisoners serving at low-security open prisons in Finland. First, the focus is on the content of the narratives, before presenting the three narratives of normality adopted by the prisoners in the study, showing the uncertainty in play when prisoners express the desire to “just live a normal life.”

Normality as a shared cultural narrative

Narratives can reveal much about human action and help us to understand both individual and social change. The narrative turn has inspired researchers, also in criminology, to explore how stories explain and shape deviance and social control.

Narrative criminology specifically examines “how stories motivate, sustain, or prevent harmful action” (Fleetwood et al., 2019: 17) and “are used to make sense of harm” (Presser and Sandberg, 2015: 1). Within criminology, narrative analysis has focused strongly on desistance from crime, starting with Maruna’s (2001) groundbreaking work in *Making Good*. Today narrative criminology covers a diverse field of themes (see Fleetwood et al., 2019), and with an increasing focus on how narratives not only are representations of behaviour, but rather have a productive function in motivating and shaping future action (Presser, 2009). This study contributes to narrative criminology by furthering the discussion on personal and cultural narratives in institutional settings, analysing how the notion of normality might function both as motivation for and as resistance to conventional and institutional norms.

Narratives are composed of events that the storyteller finds important, selected and organized so that the story becomes meaningful to the audience (Riessman, 2008). Telling stories becomes a way of constructing one’s identity, as well as making meaning of specific events (Sandberg, 2016). By using recognizable narratives – such as the narrative of normality in this study – narrators can make meaning of their experiences to both themselves and people sharing the same cultural and social context. The narrative of normality stand out as a master narrative, characterized by common cultural perceptions, and functions as a shared resource (Loseke, 2007; Thommesen, 2010). By giving accounts that are acceptable to the audience, a person might improve their social status (Presser, 2008). For example, offenders might have used crime to realize one particular life story (Presser, 2009), but might utilize a narrative of normality to help them realize another life story, possibly one of desistance.

Making narratives the centre of analysis does not imply that material or structural factors are unimportant or unnoticed. Even if a narrative explicitly does not mention these outside factors, analysis can. Narrative analysis can illustrate the interplay between narratives and material factors (Presser, 2009) and clarify how stories are used to “advance, uphold or contest power relations and inequalities” (Fleetwood et al., 2019: 14). Disentangling various expressions of power is important, not least when doing research in closed institutions like prisons. Prisons have an inherent power of requesting prisoners to adapt to the institutionally accepted narratives (Warr, 2020). Narratives can still reveal a lot about how prisoners embody power structures and disciplinary traditions (Zhang and Dong, 2019). Institutions obviously legitimize some narratives, but narrative analysis also needs to explore the creation, development, advancement, and rejection of narratives in institutional settings.

Normality as state and norm

The notion of normality is inherently relative and ambiguous. What an individual sees as normal is both subjectively and contextually bound. From a sociological perspective, normality is understood as “the perception of the regularities of events

and people's behaviour" (Misztal, 2001: 314). Here normality can refer to both a factual and a desirable state. While the factual state of normality represents a present reality, the desirable state functions as an inspiration and aspiration for the future (Goffman, 1974; Misztal, 2001). As illustrated by Rabikowska (2010: 288); "normality is always a state to come, a state projected to the future, but it is also immersed in the present from which desires and ambitions originate." This double function of normality can be observed in prisoners' aspirations to a normal life. While describing hopes for the future, the same accounts of normality reflect prevailing cultural and social norms among prisoners, which are probably influenced by both the institutional setting and the surrounding societies.

The ubiquity of aspirations to normality among prisoners, and their confidence in achieving it, at first hand might appear contradictory. How can sentenced norm-breakers so decidedly want to adjust to social norms? Following Misztal (2001), hopes for normality in prison could be understood as a consequence of the disruption caused by imprisonment: "[w]hile in stable times, we question the 'normality' of daily life as demanding too much conformism and consensus, when such times are disrupted we seem to miss the appearance of normality and worry about the uncertain shape of the future." (Misztal, 2001: 313). This search for normality can be considered as an attempt to regain order in life after a time of disorder (Rabikowska, 2010).

Normality always refers to a context; it is only normal in comparison to something. Despite the contextual nature of the concept, the regulative power of what makes up the normal within a given group of people is strong. The notion of normality can be understood not only sociologically, but normatively, as a description of how things ought to be. Both separately and together, these two understandings make the notion of normality a powerful ideological tool when implemented (Misztal, 2001).

Normalization of prison life

Prisons are normalizing institutions, designed to foster normality and conventional norms among prisoners. Through direct control and everyday practice, the prison intentionally communicates conventional norms. Modern punishment "acts in the depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations" (Foucault, 1977: 16). The prison governs prisoners both through direct control and everyday life practices, trying to enforce its general aim of rehabilitating offenders (Foucault, 1977).

The Finnish prison explicitly raises normalization as a guiding aim of both prison policy and practice. The normalization of prison conditions is not to understand primarily as a disciplinary tool, but as a normative principle concerning prison rights (Feest, 1999). The principle of normalization emanates from the idea that deprivation of liberty is sufficient punishment in itself, and that prisoners' rights and conditions during imprisonment must reflect the outside society. Conditions of imprisonment must hence be considered in relation to the general

standard of living of a country (Jewkes, 2014), and the substantial meaning and implications of normalizing prison conditions remain ambiguous.

The intention behind normalizing prison life has been twofold. Firstly, to secure prisoners the same fundamental rights inside as outside prison, and secondly, to promote prisoner reintegration upon release by organizing conditions inside prison to resemble life outside as closely as possible (Engbo, 2017; Fransen, 2017). The principle of normalization is not intended to be moralistic paternalism or a pressure on the prisoner to conform to a specific norm. Ideally, it should “facilitate the individual inmate’s endeavours to achieve (his or her own) normality while in prison” (Engbo, 2017: 342), as long as this normality entails a lawful way of living and is feasible alongside the need of order and security in prison. In practice, it is often impossible to execute the normalization principle fully for all individuals within the institutional context (Engbo, 2017). Herein lies the normative aspect; when different aspects of normality are not provided for, a mainstream norm is favoured and indirectly promoted.

Critique of the principle of normalization has concerned whether prison conditions can be normalized at all. As Reiter et al. (2018: 108) state, “re-creating an otherwise normal environment in an institutional setting defined by a boundary between itself and the outside world does not achieve normalization, but mere facsimile.” Prisons are foremost institutions for punishment. In a prison with many competing goals, normalization might mask the pain inflicted by the penal system (Christie, 1981; Reiter et al., 2017, 2018).

Methods

This examination of prisoners’ narratives of normality relies on 45 qualitative semi-structured interviews with prisoners at low-security open prisons in Finland. The main theme of the interviews were prisoners’ feelings and expectations concerning release and life after release. The study was reviewed and granted a research approval by the Finnish Criminal Sanctions Agency and participation was based on informed consent. The interviewing was the first part of a longitudinal study examining release from prison and desistance from crime.

Participants were recruited from five open prisons. The inclusion criteria were that the interviewee had less than three months to release, had a history of repeat offending, and was to be reintegrated in Finland. The interviews took place at the open prison, without any presence of prison officers. The interviewees were serving sentences for a broad range of crimes, with sentence lengths varying from 2 months to 13 years. The most common reasons for imprisonment were offences against property, offences against life and health, traffic offences, and drug offences. Even if participants had a history of repeated offending, some of these were serving their first prison sentence. They were between 22 and 51 years old, and four of them were women. The low proportion of women (about 9% of interviewees) is due to

the fact that only one of the research sites held women. It is, however, very close to the share of women in Finnish prisons (Criminal Sanctions Agency, 2020). All but two interviews were recorded, and the interviews had an average length of 45 minutes. The author conducted and transcribed all interviews. Quotes used in this article are translated to English by the author, and all names mentioned are pseudonyms.

The desire for a “normal” life upon release was a theme brought up by the participants themselves in the interviews, without any question from the interviewer. Of the 45 prisoners interviewed, 30 explicitly talked about wanting to lead a normal life. These narrative segments concerning normality was the focal point for analysis, examining their contents and usage. After an initial analysis of the narrative segments, the whole material was reread several times, looking for explicit and implicit narratives of normality and for how these were thematically and structurally connected to the interviews as a whole (Riessman, 2001, 2005). Several repertoires of normality were recognized, and these different repertoires were merged into three separate narratives: the nostalgic, the imagined, and the challenging of normality.

Interviewing is as an active process, where both the interviewer and the participant are constructing meaning. The empirical data are studied as a product of the interview, co-authored by the interviewer and the participant (see Presser, 2008). This view builds on the understanding that “the respondent both construes and calls on what is considered relevant in relation to the matters under consideration in the interview, assembling the information so that it makes sense as a response, that it coalesces into a circumstantially sensible and relevant story” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The context and theme of the interview, as well as the personality and gender of the interviewer, might have influenced the fact that interviewees so often gave accounts of normality. The interviews in this study were characterized by a substantial level of researcher involvement, with the interviewer probing for further information and asking questions. The prison setting also affected the interview. Institutional settings empower some participants, but silence others (Fleetwood et al., 2019). The low-security open prison is a coercive institution whose key aim is to promote reintegration. Despite attempts to naturalize the interview situation and stress the independence of the researcher, the institutional setting was inevitably present.

Findings

A large majority of the prisoners interviewed expressed conventional hopes and plans for their release, in line with earlier research (Doekhie and Van Ginneken, 2020; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011). When talking about a normal life, the interviewees generally meant two things. Firstly, they discussed what they considered to be the opposite of a normal life: crime, imprisonment, and drugs. Secondly, they

discussed the essential aspects of a normal life: having a workplace, close relationships to partner and family, daily routines, good health, and healthy finances. Often these narratives indicated modesty and contentedness, as with Jaakko, who had no “deeper wishes” than living a “normal person’s life”:

Interviewer: What are your future hopes?

Jaakko: Well, of course that I get things put in order and get to live a normal life. Committing crimes is no picnic. At least one doesn’t bother doing it for the sake of excitement anymore.

Interviewer: And what do you mean by getting things put in order?

Jaakko: Just normal life, like to get a work, being able to live on the salary and so on. Not any deeper wishes, just a normal person’s life.

Even if the conceptions of normality were rather consistent, the way the participants talked about it varied. Interviewees could use a specific narrative of normality to position themselves (Riessman, 2001), shaping a personal narrative out of the shared cultural narrative. Many prisoners had been closely integrated into society prior to imprisonment and – despite their criminal activity – a strong connection to conventional norms. To them, imprisonment disrupted their normal life; upon release normal life was still their obvious expectation, which they were nostalgic about and looked forward to. Prisoners less integrated into mainstream society portrayed normality as an aim, an imagined normality. Other prisoners presented narrative constructions of a normality that broke with conventional conceptions, depicting equivocal attitudes to a normal life. While the first two narratives of nostalgic and imagined normality were largely distinct, the narrative challenging normality overlapped with the first two. Next, we focus on these three narratives in turn.

Nostalgic normality

The first narrative, nostalgic normality, was used by the prisoners to describe both the life they had lived prior to imprisonment and the life that awaited them upon release. To these prisoners, this narrative of normality was what Presser (2008: 71) describes as a “stability narrative,” a narrative of a steady moral character, in which criminal offending is of short duration or defined as moral. The plot of the nostalgic normality was simultaneously an account of the life lived before which the interviewee expected to continue living upon release. This was the case for Harri, who was very much looking forward to returning to his life as a full-time employee and father of two:

Harri: Luckily this was a short sentence, so I’m able to continue with my work as normal when I get out of here.

Interviewer: So you have a job waiting?

Harri: Yeah, I can go back right away. And then there's the kids' hobbies where I'm needed and all this. Like, a very normal everyday life.

Like Harri, the majority of the prisoners using this narrative had partners, families, or steady employment that effectively attached them to society; imprisonment signified a discontinuance in their otherwise normal life. In their narratives, they used their past life to justify their aspirations to normality on release. The central verb in this narrative was therefore return – to what they described as a normal life. For example, Antti built his future plans on the assumption that his relationships would be the same when he got back from prison:

Like I said, I have a really good and supportive network and very close relations to my sister and aunt, and granny, and dad, and mum, and all of them. Like, really good family relations, like, some of them come and visit me every week. I have after all lived a normal life for the most of my life, and like, I don't believe that any of that will change when I get back.

A nostalgic view does not imply dreamy or unrealistic ambitions. Several of the prisoners using this narrative, were realistically aware of the challenges they might face when returning to their normal life. Challenges they envisaged concerned monotony, living by routines, a drug-free life, and the absence of the excitement connected with criminality. To Antti, adapting to a lower income posed the greatest challenge:

I've gotten used to a very good economic situation during this time. It had to be fancy motor cycles, new cars, fancy apartments, and all. I might spend 1,000 [euros] a day just for living. So, it'll be difficult to adjust to a normal income and a normal life, that the money just isn't there, having to take care of bills and live poorly and humbly and such.

In addition to lower income, several prisoners mentioned the risk of normal life becoming boring. Nettleton et al. (2013) report the same finding among people recovering from heroin addiction; while aspiring to and desiring normality, they still saw it as boring. This ambivalence did not mean the interviewees valued the aim of returning to a normal life less, but rather that they were realistic about the emotional strain entailed by a conventional lifestyle.

The prisoners using the narrative of a nostalgic normality seldom mentioned the attempts to normalize prison as problematic. Rather, the normalizing aspects were appreciated. The normalization offered in an open low-security prison, like having access to a mobile phone, a workplace, and going grocery shopping, made life in prison relatively similar to regular life outside. As Mikael notes, comparing open and closed prison:

...it's sad to be locked-up in a cell, really, bitter. Compared to something like this, where you still have some kind of, quite close to normal actually, if you wish. You can

go to work outside prison in the morning, do your stuff, come back, work out, eat healthy, and you get to have your phone and maintain contacts.

As most of the prisoners using the nostalgic narrative already had embodied part of a mainstream lifestyle prior to imprisonment, they did not find the normalizing aspects of prison paternalistic. This aside, they criticized some aspects of prison life as out of date. Lack of access to the internet, computers, and smartphones were areas where prison conditions did not match the normality of outside society. “The prison is like dragging 20 years behind all the time,” Heikki mentioned, when discussing access to the internet. Another contested area of normality in prison concerned the regulation of alcohol during prison leave. This theme is discussed within the last narrative, as the interviewees challenged this aspect of normality in prison.

Imagined normality

In the second narrative, normality was imagined to depict a dream life in the future. The prisoners using this narrative had had differing levels of commitment to mainstream society in their past, but all had a vision of normal life guiding their future plans. Allusions to normality were used to create a believable story for their future, to regain order in life after a time of disorder (Rabikowska, 2010). Nettleton et al. (2013: 184) define this discourse as imaginary; imagined normality works as an interpretative frame to compare one’s life to. In one illustration of this, Oskari pictures an ideal of a normal life, reflecting a typical Finnish image of leisure time at a summer cottage by a lake:

For the future I of course hope for health and peace. And that I would get my children back home and could be a father to them. I can see myself in 5–10 years time, having a house by the lake, casting the line, the children are there, we’re renovating a cottage, chopping wood, heating the sauna, going to work. Living a normal life. That’s the kind of life I’d like to have.

The hope for a normal life was structural and social, and more than solely pragmatic. Oskari, who had a long history of offending, described his desire for a normal life as including a subjective change in how he saw himself and what is meaningful.

Oskari: . . . of course, when you get released you have to learn to love the everyday life, like to enjoy also the smaller moments. To build up everyday life, that is important. After all, one has to structure daily life in a way that is meaningful to oneself.

Interviewer: I see. And how does one do that?

Oskari: It’s about the daily routines, and friends. About being oneself at home and outside of home. And a regularity, a regularity that one has to establish oneself. When

in prison, other define your daily routines [. . .]. Still one has to learn to stand on one's own feet in everyday life. Because, that's life, the everyday.

For Oskari, the normality offered in prison is not an adequate basis for building a future – he shares this view with several prisoners using the narrative of imagined normality. The routines and normality presented in prison are governed and defined by prison standards, but outside prison, one has to build tenable routines oneself. While the individual might have incorporated some of the normalizing practices of prison, this does not mean that all these practices are desirable or directly applicable to a life upon release.

Another striking feature of this narrative was the modest tone of the aspirations, how normal life had become attractive in a new way. Being in prison had affected the prisoners' aspirations for their future, scaling down their expectations of life. This change may be a consequence of being in a new environment, but also an illustration of the subtle ways in which prison practices govern prisoners. Aarne was one of the prisoners who had adjusted his ambitions:

But surely these [years in prison] teach one to be satisfied with poorer conditions as well. When you start realizing that life isn't a small thing, it's quite okay. [. . .] this somehow opens your eyes to see things differently. At least for a moment it does. You appreciate life's small things in a different manner, their importance become more obvious here. For example, going to the sauna or something like, something very ordinary that outside is an everyday event. It's not until here that you realize, "hey, this is really quite a nice thing."

As Pasi put it, simple things like oatmeal and coffee set the desired level of normal:

I am quite satisfied when I get to wake up in the morning, prepare my oatmeal porridge and coffee, and don't need to wake up feeling cold. My life is quite fine like this, so no, it doesn't attract. It's only a moment of exultation when you do drugs and steal. It's nice for a couple of days, but the rest of the time it's just horrible.

When the prisoners expressed different versions of the notion "I just want a normal life," they often did so without any far-reaching intentions. They explicitly said that they did not have the grand ambitions for a career or fancy lifestyle that many others in society have today, but wanted to be content with the small things in life.

Several of the prisoners hoping for a conventional life further framed their aspirations as an experimental undertaking, as a life and a "positive possible self" (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009) they would try. The imagined normality was both a hope and an aim, but described was an aspect of hesitance. This was especially distinct among the prisoners who had a long history of offending and were living on the margins of society. The reservations toward one's own ability to pursue a conventional life could be either because of prior failures in achieving desistance and conformity, or because of the magnitude of the change needed to

achieve conformity. Tuomo, who had been involved in organized crime for most of his adult life, expressed hesitance about pursuing conformity:

Tuomo: I found a good woman, and I'm about to turn 50, so I thought about trying some life outside prison, while I've still got the brains.

Interviewer: Right. And what is it that you want to try out in life?

Tuomo: The so-called normal life, what it's like to live without crime and to live on the money that so-called normal people get. Obviously there's positive things with the criminal life as well, but I don't know, does it make up for these prison years? It's a kinda two-sided coin.

Even if a couple of prisoners, like Tuomo, showed a slight hesitation, most of the interviewees perceived normality as something positive; a future dreamingly anticipated.

Challenging normality

Even if the content of normality was rather consistent, some prisoners challenged the notion of normality. Interviewees who used this third narrative often combined it with one of the other two, moving in and out of each narrative. This finding illustrates how narratives that express a longing for normality can oppose the status quo of that same normality (Becker, 1997). While planning and hoping for a transition to a conventional lifestyle, the prisoners using this narrative simultaneously assumed that they would still be involved in deviant behaviour or criminal activity of some sort.

One of the prisoners challenging normality was Olli. He was in his mid-twenties, and a father expecting his second child. He described his life prior to imprisonment as "relatively normal. I went to work, took care of my child and lived my life." His narrative of life upon release was clearly nostalgic; he was returning to the normal life he had lived and longed for, spending time with his family again. Olli mentioned having used drugs since his early teens. When discussing this, he revealed a somewhat more critical view of conventions. Olli saw Finnish drug norms and legislation as unacceptable, especially concerning cannabis. Using drugs had become more problematic for him after becoming a father because the child protection service demanded that he stop using if he wanted to keep his children. The stigmatization of drug use that Olli reports is in line with previous research on substance users in Finland, which found that negative stereotypes were continually reinforced (Kainulainen et al., 2017; Partanen, 2002). Because of the pressure from social workers, Olli considered moving abroad with his family. He thought of the move as a strategy for "getting away from the so-called Finnish norms. And also to get a new start [...] So that the children wouldn't have to go through the things I have gone through." Olli is clearly presenting a challenging view of normality. Olli

sees his behaviour as normal, but also as contradicting the prevailing norms of society.

To the prisoners challenging normality, the normality imposed by prison did not personally affect them. They rejected the possibilities for achieving normality within the institution, criticized the hypocrisy of the “normality” offered, or just had other dreams. Many of them mentioned the regulation of alcohol during prison leave. Since alcohol consumption is legal, and according to the prisoners a fundamental part of normal Finnish social life, the alcohol prohibition during prison leave was regarded as patronizing, for example by Heikki:

...these terms regulating permission to leave, they don't make any sense. 'Cause the reason why people get permission to leave, should be to get a chance to live normally. But the notice you get when leaving lists all the things you cannot do when going on leave, like completely legal stuff that is legal in society, things you cannot do while on leave. It for example says that the use of alcohol is forbidden during leave. Why? Why isn't smoking forbidden? Why isn't promiscuity forbidden?

There were also interviewees who challenged the notion of normality, but chose to adjust to it as a way of playing the game and strategically promoting their own interests. Similar strategic narration has been found among prisoners in drug treatment (Frank et al., 2015). Different identities enjoy different benefits, and narrative performance is a practice that individuals utilize to obtain the desired outcome. At least in the therapeutic field, usage of the right kind of talk is often recognized as the primary sign of progress (Carr, 2011). Correspondingly, aims of a normal life might be conceived as a sign of rehabilitation within the correctional system.

Strategic use of a dominant narrative can function as a performance for some, while others deliberately adapt the narrative (Crewe, 2009). The latter was the case with Olli, who strove to adjust his drug use to the normality required by society upon release from prison as he did not want to risk losing the custody of his children. The normality in his case was not defined by the prison, but required by social workers outside. His case illustrates how adjustments to dominant narratives can be both a strategic and an unavoidable manoeuvre. According to Warr (2020) imprisonment requires narrative labour from prisoners, to adapt their identity to the institutionally accepted selves as a way of performing within prison. The narrative labour is a utility, but also a burden for prisoners not able or interested in changing their narratives.

What the interviewees meant by having a normal life was based on their contextual standpoint and personal judgement, and not necessarily on whether the behaviour was regulated by criminal law. For instance, one interviewee planned to stop selling drugs but continue to use them himself; another assured the interviewer that he planned not to commit any more violent offences, even if he would still continue doing illegal work and committing tax fraud. Desistance from crime should not be understood only as the cessation of offending, but more generally as the process where offending is of lesser gravity and decreases in number and pace (Kazemian,

2007). The accounts indicate that the prisoners might have a limit for *how* conventional they wanted to become. This was the case for Sakari, who wanted to desist from crime; “to become a completely normal bloke, that’s still my goal.” Somewhat later he still mentioned that: “I don’t wanna become a teetotaller or anything like that. I just wanna be a normal person.” He was serious about aiming for normality, but it was important to him that he did not have to become normal in any specific or predetermined way. This especially concerned the use of intoxicants.

Positive crime-free lives can come in different conventional modes, and what constitutes conventional is value-laden and contextual (Doekhie and Van Ginneken, 2020). Bottoms et al. (2004) therefore argue the case for discussing several or different conformities. In the interviews analysed here, conventional aspirations were combined with life choices that are not always considered conventional. The reasons for continuing with deviant behaviour were personal, social, and structural. Some prisoners did not want, or were not able, to withdraw from their previous lifestyle. Debts were one common practical reason for not being able to fully conform to societal norms.

Discussion

Prisoners at open low-security prisons in Finland adopt narratives of normality when describing their hopes for life upon release. In many ways, these aspirations are socially conventional, like having a partner and family, a workplace, healthy finances, and good health. The article identifies three narratives of normality: (1) nostalgic normality, balancing the disruption imprisonment has caused, (2) imagined normality, envisioning a future life script, and (3) challenging views of normality, where normality is desired but its legal and conventional norms are contested. While the references to normality in the first narrative functioned to maintain one’s identity as “normal,” the same references to normality are used in the second narrative to justify change. Challenging views of normality were used interchangeably with the nostalgic and imagined normalities.

The ubiquity of the conventional aspirations reported in this article contrasts with much of the criminological research, which records lofty aspirations among persistent offenders; living life as a party, hedonistic and money-oriented (Junninen, 2006; Kivivuori, 1992; Shover, 1996). The context of this research, the low-security open prison, is likely to have affected the results, due to the sentences prisoners were serving and what aspirations that are imaginable for them. The findings nevertheless add to the broader discussion on prisoners’ aspirations and criminal careers. The idea that persistent offenders have high aspirations while the aspirations of desisting offenders have become more conventional might hold true in some cases, but is simplistic. Conventional aspirations and desistance aspiration should not be understood as reciprocal (Doekhie and Van Ginneken, 2020). This study demonstrates more complexity and ambiguity. Even if desistance from crime was an integral part of the desire for a normal life expressed by the majority of interviewees, complete conformity was not necessarily their only

way of, or goal for, normal life. The inconsistency in their narratives of normality shows that pursuing normality is not a one-directional process. This highlights the need of a more diverse vocabulary when discussing desistance, conformity and community (re-)integration.

The prisoners in this study widely considered prison to be the opposite of normal – no matter the conditions. Even if open prison was characterized as closer to normal than closed prisons, the so-called normality of prison life was distinct from what the prisoners themselves considered normal. The prisoners did not seem noticeably affected by attempts to normalize prison conditions; normality in prison did not appear as a dominant narrative that prisoners felt obliged to follow. Even if both prison authorities and prisoners generally seem to talk about normality as an idealized norm of conduct, prisoners' stories of normality reveal that they utilize the notion for a number of other reasons. They used their narratives of to diminish the criminal activity, justify future plans, and oppose the idealized norms. Their personal narratives of normality functioned as both genuine and strategic action to achieve either conformity or resistance.

The principle of normalization, as formulated in the European Prison Rules, is a normative principle concerning prison rights. In Finland, this principle is a fundamental tenet of the prison system and used as a justification for prisoner rehabilitation. Even if the results from this study cannot be used for estimating the impact of normalized prison conditions, the findings uncover a tension between institutional and subjective views of normality. This tension exposes how diversely prisoners understand and incorporate normality and normalization in their stories of change. Prisoners who previously had been closely integrated into society saw the normalized prison conditions as unproblematic. Prisoners with less experience of normal living conditions but aspiring for such, considered the normalized prison conditions to be inessential for their reform ambitions; tenable routines one had to build oneself. To prisoners with challenging views of normality, the normality imposed by prison was seen as either irrelevant or hypocritical. The diversity in the views of normality indicates that the concept of normality provides a weak basis for rehabilitation and reform in prison. This again demonstrates the precariousness connected to the usage of the concept in prison policy.

The aspirations to normality portrayed in this article are unfinished projects, at constant risk of disruption by each prisoner's future actions and circumstances. The participants in this study recognized several structural and social obstacles to achieving the normal life they desired. These obstacles complicate their picture of normality. Personal debts, low income, stigmatization, lack of self-confidence, monotony, and the allure of drugs were some of the obstacles mentioned. As pointed out by Becker (1997: 17), "the tensions that surround efforts to restore normalcy enables us to understand better how resistance develops." These obstacles demonstrate the uncertainty in play when prisoners express the simple desire to "just live a normal life."

This study was based on semi-structured interviews with a sample of prisoners at Finnish open prisons and the findings may not be generalized to any other prison context. The insights are nonetheless helpful in understanding how normalized

prison conditions influence prisoners, particularly in a context where normalization is genuinely attempted. Even if the principle of normalization is a common legal standard for prison policy in Europe, its implementation varies. In the Nordics, the interpretation of the principle of normalization has been far-reaching and practical. The principle of ‘less eligibility’, implying that prisoners’ living conditions should not be improved above the standards available to the poorest among the working poor, has had limited influence on prison policy in the Nordic countries (Pratt and Eriksson, 2011). Prisons are rather understood as integrated parts of the ambitious welfare state (Ugelvik, 2016). These historical and societal factors illustrate the contextual conditions for the extensive implementation of normalization in the Nordic prisons. In societies lacking these cultural prerequisites, normalization and the impact of normalization will unfold differently.

The notion of normality used in this article requires critical attention. Even if trying to approach the material and notion non-normatively, the generalization of 45 individual views into three narrative categories unfortunately reinforces norms. It could also be questioned whether it makes sense to compare a legal norm (normalization) with individual desires for normality (Feest, 1999). As long as the wording of the notions correspond and no conflicting meaning is expressed, it is expected that the two notions must be comparable – despite their subjective nature.

Conclusions

Prisoners’ aspirations to normality upon release did not seem to be noticeably affected by the attempt to normalize open prison conditions in Finland. Although interviewees expressed how normalizing aspects – like real workplaces, prison leave, and access to a mobile phone – made imprisonment less painful, this normalization did not influence their own conceptions of normality to any noticeable degree. Their lived experience or ideas of normality drawn from elsewhere were more important. Even if normalization of prison conditions matters, the thought that it could convert individuals to a more conventional lifestyle seem naïve. The results from this study can contribute to a better understanding of the interplay between conformity, resistance, and desistance, mainly in showing the obstacles to normality that prisoners disclose. The prisoners’ attempts to achieve their aim of normality in practice were threatened by personal debts, low income, stigmatization, and lack of self-confidence. If prisons wish to prepare prisoners for a life without crime, and aim to do so by fostering a “normal life,” these aspects need to be addressed.

ORCID iD

Emma Villman  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0834-9675>

References

- Becker G (1997) *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

- Bottoms A, Shapland J, Costello A, et al. (2004) Towards desistance: Theoretical underpinnings for an empirical study. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 43(4): 368–389.
- Carr ES (2011) *Scripting addiction: The politics of therapeutic talk and American sobriety*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Christie N (1981) *Limits to Pain: The Role of Punishment in Penal Policy*. Oslo, Norway: Universitetsforlaget.
- Council of Europe (2006). *Recommendation Rec (2006)2 of the Committee of Ministers to Member States on the European Prison Rules*. Strasbourg, France: Committee of Ministers.
- Crewe B (2009) *The prisoner society: Power, adaptation and social life in an English prison*. Oxford: OUP, Clarendon.
- Criminal Sanctions Agency (2020). *Statistical Yearbook 2019*. Helsinki, Finland: Criminal Sanctions Agency.
- Doekhie J and Van Ginneken E (2020) House, bells and bliss? A longitudinal analysis of conventional aspirations and the process of desistance. *European Journal of Criminology* 17(6): 744–763.
- Engbo HJ (2017) Normalization in nordic Prisons – From a prison governor’s perspective. In: Smith PS and Ugelvik E (eds) *Scandinavian Penal History, Culture and Prison Practice*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.327–352.
- Feest J (1999) Imprisonment and prisoners’ work: Normalization or less eligibility? *Punishment & Society* 1(1): 99–107.
- Fleetwood J, Presser L, Sandberg S, et al. (2019). Introduction. In: Fleetwood J, Presser L, Sandberg S, et al. (eds) *The Emerald Handbook of Narrative Criminology*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Foucault M (1977) *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*. London, UK: Penguin Books.
- Frank VA, Dahl HV, Holm KE, et al. (2015) Inmates’ perspectives on prison drug treatment: A qualitative study from three prisons in Denmark. *Probation Journal* 62(2): 156–171.
- Fransen P (2017) The rise of the open prisons and the breakthrough of the principle of normalisation from the 1930s until today. In: Smith PS and Ugelvik E (eds) *Scandinavian Penal History, Culture and Prison Practice*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.81–102.
- Goffman E (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organisation of Experience*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Higham L, Shenaz A and Mushtaq A (2013) Hoping to live a “normal” life whilst living with unpredictable health and fear of death: Impact of cystic fibrosis on young adults. *Journal of Genetic Counseling* 22(3): 374–383.
- Holstein JA and Gubrium JF (1995) *The Active Interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Imprisonment Act (2005) *Imprisonment Act (Finland)*, 767/2005.
- Jewkes Y (2014) Afterword: Abolishing the architecture and alphabet of fear. In: Mathiesen T (ed) *The Politics of Abolition Revisited*. London, UK: Routledge, pp.339–346.
- Junninen M (2006) *Adventurers and Risk-Takers: Finnish Professional Criminals and Their Organisations in the 1990s Cross-Border Criminality*. Helsinki, Finland: United Nations European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control (HEUNI).

- Kainulainen H, Savonen J and Rönkö S (2017) *Vanha Liitto: kovien Huumeiden Käyttäjät 1960-1970-Lukujen Helsingistä*. Helsinki, Finland: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.
- Kazemian L (2007) Desistance from crime: Theoretical, empirical, methodological, and policy considerations. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 23(1): 5–27.
- Kivivuori J (1992) *Varas Varkaana. Tutkimus. varkaan itseyemmärryksen kulttuurisista ehdoista*. Helsinki, Finland: Oikeuspoliittinen tutkimuslaitos.
- Knuuti U (2007) *Matkalla Marginaalista Valtavirtaan?* Helsinki, Finland: Helsinki University Press.
- Liem M and Richardson N (2014) The role of transformation narratives in desistance among released lifers. *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 41(6): 692–712.
- Lopez Rodriguez M (2010) Migration and a quest for ‘normalcy’. Polish migrant mothers and the capitalization of meritocratic opportunities in the UK. *Social Identities* 16(3): 339–358.
- Loseke DR (2007) The study of identity as cultural, institutional, organizational, and personal narratives: Theoretical and empirical integrations. *The Sociological Quarterly* 48(4): 661–688.
- Manolova P (2019) Going to the west is my last chance to get a normal life’: Bulgarian would-be migrants’ imaginings of life in the UK. *Central Eastern European Migration Review* 8: 61–83.
- Maruna S (2001) Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives. *How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. 1 ed. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Misztal BA (2001) Normality and trust in Goffman’s theory of interaction order. *Sociological Theory* 19(3): 312–324.
- Nettleton S, Neale J and Pickering L (2013) I just want to be normal’: An analysis of discourses of normality among recovering heroin users. *Health (London, England : 1997)* 17(2): 174–190.
- Partanen J (2002) Huumeet maailmalla ja suomessa. In: Kaukonen O and Hakkarainen P (eds) *Huumeiden Käyttäjä Hyvinvointivaltiossa*. Helsinki, Finland: Gaudeamus.
- Paternoster R and Bushway S (2009) “Desistance and the feared self”: Toward an identity theory of criminal desistance. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 99: 1103–1156.
- Pratt J and Eriksson A (2011) Mr. Larsson is walking out again’. The origins and development of Scandinavian prison systems. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 44(1): 7–23.
- Presser L (2008) *Been a Heavy Life: Stories of Violent Men*. Urbana, IL and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Presser L (2009) The narratives of offenders. *Theoretical Criminology* 13(2): 177–200.
- Presser L and Sandberg S (2015) *Narrative Criminology: Understanding Stories of Crime*. New York, NY and London, UK: NYU Press.
- Rabikowska M (2010) Negotiation of normality and identity among migrants from Eastern Europe to the United Kingdom after 2004. *Social Identities* 16(3): 285–296.
- Radcliffe P and Stevens A (2008) Are drug treatment services only for ‘thieving junkie scumbags’? Drug users and the management of stigmatised identities. *Social Science & Medicine* (1982) 67(7): 1065–1073.

- Reiter K, Sexton L and Sumner J (2017) Negotiating imperfect humanity in the Danish penal system. In: Smith PS and Ugelvik T (eds) *Scandinavian Penal History, Culture and Prison Practice: Embraced by the Welfare State?* London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp.481–508.
- Reiter K, Sexton L and Sumner J (2018) Theoretical and empirical limits of Scandinavian exceptionalism: Isolation and normalization in Danish prisons. *Punishment & Society* 20(1): 92–112.
- Riessman CK (2001) Analysis of personal narratives. In: Gubrium JF and Holstein JA (eds) *Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Riessman CK (2005) Narrative analysis. In: Kelly N, Horrocks C, Milnes K., (eds) *Narrative, Memory and Everyday Life*. Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield.
- Riessman CK (2008) *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences.*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Salovaara U (2019) *Rikoksista Tuomitut Naiset – Yhteiskunnasta Erottaminen ja Takaisinliittymisen Mahdollisuudet*. Vantaa, Finland: Rikosseuraamusalan koulutuskeskus.
- Sandberg S (2016) The importance of stories untold: Life-story, event-story and trope. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal* 12(2): 153–171.
- Shapland J and Bottoms A (2011) Reflections on social values, offending and desistance among young adult recidivists. *Punishment & Society* 13(3): 256–282.
- Shover N (1996) *Great Pretenders: Pursuits and Careers of Persistent Thieves*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Stein CH and Wemmerus V (2001) Searching for a normal life: Personal accounts of adults with schizophrenia, their parents and well-siblings. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 29(5): 725–746.
- Stella F, Flynn M and Gawlewicz A (2018) Unpacking the meanings of a ‘normal life’ among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Eastern European migrants in Scotland. *Central Eastern European Migration Review* 17: 55–72.
- Thommesen H (2010) Master narratives and narratives as told by people with mental health and drug problems. *Journal of Comparative Social Work* 5(1): 5–20.
- Ugelvik T (2016) Prisons as welfare institutions? Punishment and the Nordic model. In: Jewkes Y, Crewe B and Bennett J (eds) *Handbook on Prisons*. 2 ed. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, pp.388–402.
- van Ginneken E (2015) The role of hope in preparation for release from prison. *Prison Service Journal* 220: 10–15.
- Warr J (2020) Always gotta be two mans’: Lifers, risk, rehabilitation, and narrative labour. *Punishment & Society* 22(1): 28–47.
- Zhang X and Dong X. (2019) The archived criminal: Mandatory prisoner autobiography in China. In: Fleetwood J, Presser L, Sandberg S (eds) *The Emerald Handbook of Narrative Criminology*. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited.

Emma Villman is a doctoral student at the Institute of Criminology and Legal Policy at the University of Helsinki, Finland. Her doctoral project is a qualitative longitudinal study on prisoner release and desistance from crime.