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| School of Law  University of Sheffield |
| “Trying to pull it round again”: |
| Exploring Women’s Experiences of Desisting from Crime |
| **Submitted for the PhD degree** |
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**"Trying to Pull it Round Again":**

**Exploring Women's Experiences of Desisting from Crime**

**Sarah Goodwin**

The lives of women who are trying to put offending histories behind them remain rare in research. This thesis follows fifteen women, all near the start of their journeys to cease their criminal behaviour, over a number of months. Their experiences, struggles and triumphs underline the challenge they faced in trying to 'pull their lives round again'. The micro-longitudinal design of the research allowed for interviews to be conducted in a sensitive, trusting and relaxed manner, producing rich data on the process of desistance as it was experienced. Although a number of important influences on the participants' journeys can be identified, it is the interconnections between these influences that really show the complexity of the participants' tasks. Few influences are found to be exclusively beneficial, and some influences that have previously been assumed to be negative are shown to be more nuanced. Specific findings on the role of agency, identity, confidence and social relationships were identified. First, the importance of agentic action in desistance is shown to be (sometimes heavily) tempered by external circumstances. Second, participants often experienced a change of identity- either in gaining a new 'self', or returning to a previous 'self', as part of their desistance. Third, much importance was placed by participants (and their workers) on gaining confidence and escaping stigma, but the methods used to do this varied considerably in their effectiveness. Finally, social support which showed true care of the desister made desistance much easier, but the negative influences of some others were serious barriers to participants' success. The thesis concludes by commenting on the impact these findings make on existing desistance research and the implications it could, and should, have on future policy, practice and research.

There, but for the grace of God, go I.

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**Chapter 1: Introduction**

**"Trying to Pull it Round Again"**

When her father left her family, the security and order of Rachel's childhood crumbled. Intense feelings of rejection compounded existing psychiatric problems, and with many siblings vying for her remaining parent's attention, she was unable to get medical help for her psychosis and paranoia. These problems were particularly severe at night, so as a twelve-year-old, Rachel began wandering the streets to alleviate her insomnia. However, the people she met there introduced her to drugs. Through them, and older students at school, Rachel met older men who sexually abused her as a young teenager. She became addicted to heroin, alcohol, crack cocaine, methadone and diazepam. At 15, Rachel met Gary, who quickly became her partner despite being more than 20 years older than her. He was severely abusive towards her, and also encouraged her in a variety of criminal activities (including robbery and burglary) - although he also made sure that she did not gain any criminal convictions by taking the official blame for her activities. Rachel and Gary had a son when Rachel was 18, but Social Services placed him in Rachel's mother's care after Rachel went wandering the streets at night to cope with her psychiatric symptoms.

Rachel was hospitalised at 21, and doctors told her that she only had five years to live unless she stopped abusing drugs and alcohol. Therefore, she reluctantly entered residential rehabilitation treatment. Despite incurring a fine for criminal behaviour in an effort to be sent home again, money problems meant that Rachel was kept at the rehab for several months before she had a realistic opportunity to leave. In that time, she began to change and became committed to the aims of the rehabilitation centre, identifying her relationship with Gary as her biggest addiction. Now, at the age of 22, she has progressed through the rehabilitation programme and is thinking about where she goes next. She has destroyed the contact details of all her previous associates, and has gained new friends at the residential facility who are in similar situations to her. Rachel is concerned about leaving the rehab and losing her routine, but under the guidance of rehab centre staff is conscientiously working on improving her self-respect and confidence. Frightened by her medical prospects, she is deeply determined to stay clear of drugs and alcohol, and has had some success in refusing to use them. Nevertheless, her mental health remains fragile. Her best friend at the residential facility is about to move out, and Rachel is being recognised as a trusted member of the rehab in being given heavy responsibilities for its everyday running.

Linda had a comfortable childhood, but rebelled as a teenager, becoming pregnant at 17. Her older sister adopted the child as her own, although the child remained unaware that her adopted aunt was actually her mother. Linda was free to marry and have another two children, and generally enjoyed a career in healthcare. She remained close to her extended family (including her first biological child). When her first marriage broke down, she quickly met and married Mark, who became controlling and abusive, isolating her from her family and maintaining total control over the family finances. When the couple encountered debt, Linda began to steal from her employers to avoid confronting her abusive husband about the situation. Between 1999 and 2007, Linda accrued four separate convictions for theft from her employer and fraud. Meanwhile, her first biological daughter learned the truth about her parentage and severed all contact with Linda.

Linda's most recent offence (again for theft from employer) was not just characterised by wanting to avoid abuse from Mark. She had just been told of her unexpected redundancy from a job she enjoyed when her estranged daughter gave birth to her first child. The very same day, Linda stole money from her employer. Although unsure how these life events influenced the offence, Linda was angry and upset at the time. In court, Linda did not ask for bail, but instead went straight to prison in an effort to escape from Mark - without his knowledge. During her three year prison sentence, Linda successfully divorced Mark - although he disposed of most of her belongings and refused to give her any money or property in the divorce settlement. She was also reconciled to her estranged daughter.

On release, aged 54, Linda was accommodated in a pleasant area of the city, and placed on Home Detention Curfew from 6.45pm to 6.45am every night. She avoided telling people that she met in her new area about both her electronic tag and her being on physical health-related benefits as she was ashamed of both. Linda attended a local church, but most of her social contact was with her extended family and one or two long-standing friends, who were very supportive. She kept herself busy with a wide selection of activities, but wondered about whether she would begin to feel lonely living by herself.

As a child, Gillian was frequently relocated around the country by her mother in an effort to escape from successive abusive partners. Gillian herself witnessed much of this abuse, and was more occasionally a direct victim of physical attacks. She rebelled as a teenager (frequently taking a number of "party drugs") and concealed a pregnancy from her family for eight months when aged 15. She cared for her new-born son - and a baby sister - with little help from others for a significant period of time while her mother was in hospital following delivery of the babies. Before she could continue her education, a boyfriend intentionally caused her serious injury and Gillian underwent several rounds of reconstructive surgery. Nonetheless, she wanted to gain employment, but could not cope with the combined stresses of recovery, childcare and full-time work. Gillian became a psychiatric outpatient, but her mental health deteriorated, and she experienced crippling anxiety and sleep problems. Her son went to live with her mother, and Gillian was sectioned under the Mental Health Act.

On release from hospital, she began to self-medicate with alcohol and became, in her own words, a "suicidal drunk", who binge-drank until hospitalised, arrested or sectioned. Between 2000 and 2012, Gillian accrued nine convictions for being drunk and disorderly, assaulting a PC, failure to surrender to custody, shoplifting, affray and making off without payment, all whilst drunk. She also had a series of violent partners, who abused alcohol with her. Following her convictions, Gillian was able to access a wide range of support, but did not feel that this was available to her when she was not part of the criminal justice system. In her sober periods, Gillian keeps herself very busy with educational courses, but her anxiety has always prevented her from following one of these courses through to employment.

Currently sober, and enrolled on various courses, 31-year-old Gillian is questioning whether her problems fundamentally stem from a lack of self-esteem or a personality disorder. She has an abusive partner who drinks with her but also spends time with her dog and a long-standing friend, who lives nearby. Her son continues to live with her mother, and Gillian is proud of his progress at school - which he is about to finish. She is aware of her own tendency to relapse into binge drinking when faced with an emotional upset, and has thought of some ways to combat this. Gillian is awaiting repairs to her council house, but is unclear about how she will move her belongings out when the time comes.

I met the women detailed above at these respective points in their life stories. All three desperately wanted to live without contact with the criminal justice system, but the challenges that faced each of them were substantial. They were, as Rachel's friend Megan - who I will introduce later - described, "trying to pull it round again" in (re-)creating their own law-abiding lives. While their individual stories are unique, their experiences are not uncommon, and between them they represent aspects of the journeys of all of the women in this study. Beyond the present study, their experiences are echoed in the lives of thousands of women across England and Wales (and further afield) trying to escape from offending behaviour, or 'desist' from crime. But what do we know about how this can be achieved? Theirs are not the stories told in films and books, or even newspapers and blogs. Unlike her male counterpart, the female *ex*-criminal is conspicuously absent from public imagination, and rare even in research. This study, therefore, follows Gillian, Linda and Rachel - and others who find themselves in similar situations - through the experiences of trying to cease their criminal behaviour. The insight achieved is more than an exploration of their lives, but also usefully informs us about how women can be encouraged and supported through the precarious process of desisting from crime.

**Characteristics of Female Desisters**

Although looking at the characteristics of women trying to desist from crime is problematic (not least because defining those who are 'desisting' is hard- see below), something can be said about the characteristics of women with criminal convictions. Of course, this will not take into account all who break the law - one of my own participants had no criminal convictions at all despite an extensive offending history - it does give an idea of the people who might be desisting or who might desist in the future. In this section, I try to avoid describing research which only deals with women in custody, as many others receive non-custodial sentences, although the paucity of information available sometimes prevents this. I also try to focus, where possible, on British research, as the characteristics (such as ethnicity and living conditions) of populations (whether offending or not) vary wildly from country to country. Therefore, I make much use here of information provided for me by Together Women Sheffield - a community service for women involved, or at risk of being involved, in the criminal justice system in the Sheffield area.[[1]](#footnote-1) Their records are informed by information given by service users on their first visit to the organisation. Here, I am able to use the data from Together Women for February 2013 - a month in the middle of my own fieldwork at the organisation. This data represents 102 women in total, 74% of whom were currently in the criminal justice system (comprised of 61% on community orders, 8% on license and 4% on bail), with the remainder (26% of the total) judged to be 'at risk' of offending ([Docherty, 2014](#_ENREF_61)). Many of those not involved in the criminal justice system nevertheless had past offences or current criminal activity for which they were not (yet) being prosecuted, and so this seems a reasonable reflection of women in the community in Sheffield who have offended and may be desisting from crime.

Ethnicity is a demographic category which is particularly location dependent. Sheffield is a city in the North of England with large Pakistani, Somali, Caribbean and Kurdish populations, as well as a large white working class population. The British media has also highlighted the Slovak Roma population in some parts of the city ([Thomas, 2013](#_ENREF_268)) and there are many ethnicities represented overall. Together Women Sheffield show that 73% of women were of white British ethnicity, with a further seven percent identifying as Caribbean or Mixed Caribbean. This compares to the wider picture of Sheffield where 80.8% of the city self-identified as white British, and 2% as Caribbean or Mixed Caribbean ([Office of National Office for National Statistics, 2012](#_ENREF_213)). One or two percent of service users identified as Asian, African, Mixed African, Irish, Pakistani, European, Mixed or Other ([Docherty, 2014](#_ENREF_61)), and compared to the 2011 census data, all but the ‘Irish’ category were under-represented at Together Women ([Office of National Office for National Statistics, 2012](#_ENREF_213)).

In terms of criminal history, national data is hard to come by, but a quarter of women engaged in the criminal justice system through Together Women in Sheffield in February 2013 had received just one conviction. 45% were on their second or third conviction, 16% had four to ten convictions, and 13% had more than ten convictions ([Docherty, 2014](#_ENREF_61)). While age-crime curves throughout the Western world point to a drop-off of female offending around age 15 ([Carrington, 1999](#_ENREF_44); [Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112); [Walklate, 2004](#_ENREF_278)), crimes are committed by women of a wide range of ages ([Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_199)). There is some evidence from the USA that violent crime and offences committed while under the influence of a partner are more commonly committed by women under 25, while those whose offences are linked to substance abuse tend to be 25 or older ([Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_199)). In Sheffield in February 2013, 24% of women engaged with Together Women were aged 18-25, 37% (the highest proportion) were aged 25-34, 17% were 35-44 and a further 16% were over 44, with one percent of them aged over 55 ([Docherty, 2014](#_ENREF_61)).

Female offenders have frequently been identified by researchers as having a range of social needs (sometimes identified as criminogenic). Many struggle with poverty ([Loucks, 2004](#_ENREF_163); [McIvor, 2007](#_ENREF_178); [Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_199); [NOMS/NPS, 2006](#_ENREF_207)) which is exacerbated by low levels of education and training ([Loucks, 2004](#_ENREF_163); [NOMS/NPS, 2006](#_ENREF_207)). Together Women in Sheffield found that 79% of their service users identified a "high money related need"[[2]](#footnote-2) ([Docherty, 2014](#_ENREF_61)). When these women care for children, these needs can be particularly acute, and while parental status information is not routinely collected by NOMS ([Robinson, 2013](#_ENREF_233)), many are mothers with care of their children ([Loucks, 2004](#_ENREF_163)), although some no longer have custody. Almost half (44%) of Together Women service users identified a high parenting need, though many more were parents who did not require assistance with their parenting ([Docherty, 2014](#_ENREF_61)). Family and personal relationships are often broken and strained ([Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_199)), with a high incidence of historical and current abuses- both as children and as partners ([Loucks, 2004](#_ENREF_163); [McIvor, 2007](#_ENREF_178); [Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_199); [NOMS/NPS, 2006](#_ENREF_207)). More than half (56%) of Together Women's service users identified a high personal safety need, which often related to domestic abuse or vulnerabilities through substance abuse or prostitution ([Docherty, 2014](#_ENREF_61)).

In addition to these social needs, female offenders are faced with a number of health problems. Some - particularly those with histories of substance abuse - have significant physical health problems ([Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_199)), and almost a quarter (24%) of Together Women service users considered that they had a high physical health need ([Docherty, 2014](#_ENREF_61)). Given the social context in which these women are living, it is unsurprising that mental health problems and psychological distress are also common ([Loucks, 2004](#_ENREF_163); [McIvor, 2007](#_ENREF_178); [Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_199)). Research undertaken across the entire Offender Assessment System (OASys) used by NOMS in England and Wales identified that 56% of women on the system had some, or significant, psychological problems, with 22% experiencing some, or significant, psychiatric problems ([Debidin, 2009](#_ENREF_58)). In total, 26% had been prescribed medication for these, but 32% had self-harmed or attempted suicide ([Debidin, 2009](#_ENREF_58)). Together Women in Sheffield found that 64% of their users had a high mental health need. Addiction and substance misuse are a further feature of female offenders' lives. Both are widespread ([Loucks, 2004](#_ENREF_163); [McIvor, 2007](#_ENREF_178); [NOMS/NPS, 2006](#_ENREF_207)), with one American study based in the community finding that only 21.2% of female offenders were not using, or recovering from, drug or alcohol misuse ([Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_199)). While British estimates tend to put these numbers lower (for example NOMS found one third had misused drugs and one quarter misused alcohol (Debidin, 2009)), Together Women found that 58% of their service users had a high alcohol need and 34% a high drug need ([Docherty, 2014](#_ENREF_61)).

**Operationalising Desistance**

Although there is some disagreement about exactly how to define and operationalise desistance, there is a consensus that it refers to a process of stopping offending rather than a discrete end point ([Barry, 2006](#_ENREF_7); [Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, & Mazerolle, 2001](#_ENREF_34); [Kazemian, 2007](#_ENREF_140); [Weaver & McNeill, 2007a](#_ENREF_283); [Weitekamp & Kerner, 1994](#_ENREF_286)). Indeed, Laub and Sampson explain desistance as the “*causal process that supports the termination of offending”* ([2001: 11](#_ENREF_148)) and it is broadly this process that I investigate in this study*.* Yet some more specificity is necessary to clarify what this process might look like to a researcher. [LeBlanc and Loeber (1998)](#_ENREF_151) note that changes in offending patterns such as deceleration (committing crimes less frequently), specialization (committing a smaller range of crimes), de-escalation (committing less serious crimes) and, more controversially, non-escalation (not committing more serious crimes)[[3]](#footnote-3) could all be viewed as desistance. In considering whether these definitions are useful, it is worth referring to Maruna’s ([2001](#_ENREF_168)) helpful analogy of giving up smoking. Desistance, he says, is like the process of *giving up* smoking. The eventual aim may be complete termination of smoking, but the journey there may involve cutting down, changing to different forms of nicotine, and relapses. This conception of desistance therefore takes account of Glaser’s ([1969](#_ENREF_106)) famous observation that desistance has a zigzag nature, where relapses are to be expected. It also draws parallels with studies of other addictive behaviours which find that blips and backsliding are a normal part of the recovery process ([Bromwell, Marlatt, Lichtenstein, & Wilson, 1986](#_ENREF_27)).

Of course, for someone to desist from crime, they first need to have committed at least some crime. Different studies have used different measurements of previous levels of criminality, from one conviction ([Leibrich, 1993](#_ENREF_152)), to weekly offending over a course of two years ([Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)). Some focus on a particular number of official convictions ([Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112)), while others accept self-defined ‘habitual’ offenders ([Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)) or other self-report measures ([Horney, 2011](#_ENREF_129); [Knight & West, 1975](#_ENREF_145); [Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998](#_ENREF_275)). A focus is sometimes on a specific group of offenders (e.g. ‘career criminals’ ([Mischkowitz, 1994](#_ENREF_197)) or ‘non-professional property offenders; ([Meisenhelder, 1977](#_ENREF_189))) and elsewhere there is a broader conception of ‘delinquency’ ([Laub & Sampson, 2001](#_ENREF_148)) or a comparatively high frequency and seriousness of crime ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)). Still others, for mainly practical purposes in recruiting participants, focus on past court disposals such as probation ([Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20); [Leibrich, 1993](#_ENREF_152)) or prison ([Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20); [Burnett, 1992](#_ENREF_31); [Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995](#_ENREF_130); [LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008](#_ENREF_150); [Shover, 1996](#_ENREF_254); [Zamble & Quinsey, 1997](#_ENREF_296)).

The second element of defining desisters is to identify what level of current criminal involvement is acceptable to differentiate those who are persisting while acknowledging the reality of a relapse-filled desistance *process* (see above). As Mulvey ([2004](#_ENREF_202)) asserts, if one is studying the process of *desistance* (rather than the history of those who have successfully *desisted*), there is no need to wait for a long time between the last offence and interview if frequent assessments are made of the desister. Instead, the focus can be on the complete timeframe of the experience of turning offending into non-offending. Indeed if this process is to be studied, there is no need to wait for any period at all after recent offending before commencing research, as this may miss important early data on initial triggers of desistance and will certainly exclude insights on relapses (as any relapse would necessarily exclude participants from the study until they had again desisted for the pre-defined period).[[4]](#footnote-4) Nevertheless, there is still some clarification needed as to how desisters can be identified at the start of such a study. While Maruna ([2001](#_ENREF_168)) required a self-report of no crime in the last year in addition to an assertion of having stopped offending and a corresponding second opinion, others argue that a self-definition of having stopped offending is sufficient in itself to identify desisters ([McNeill & Weaver, 2010](#_ENREF_186)). Sometimes this self-definition is used even when minor crimes are disclosed, thus highlighting the participants’ understanding of ‘going straight’ as meaning becoming generally honest ([Leibrich, 1996](#_ENREF_154)). The difficulty of using self-definition is particularly shown in studies where those deemed by the researchers to be 'persisters' are nevertheless keen to portray themselves as desisting or attempting desistance - which may be even more common among females ([Jamieson, McIvor, & Murray, 1999](#_ENREF_133)). In addition, it is arguable whether reoffending needs to reach a certain level of seriousness before it should ‘count against’ a desister ([Kazemian, 2007](#_ENREF_140)) and some research has not allowed less serious reoffending to jeopardise a desister’s categorization ([Leibrich, 1993](#_ENREF_152)). Others go further in advocating tracking any changes in offending rates as part of desistance research ([Bushway et al., 2001](#_ENREF_34); [Bushway, Thornberry, & Krohn, 2003](#_ENREF_35)).

**Is this a *Desistance* study?**

With this processual approach to operationalising desistance, it is perhaps not surprising that I conceptualise this study as a desistance study, rather than one that follows some of the general life-course of the participants.[[5]](#footnote-5) Rather like others ([Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20); [Healy, 2010](#_ENREF_119); [King, 2013](#_ENREF_143)), my aim is to capture some of that early process of desistance, and therefore the mixed 'success' rates of participants (see Postscript) is to be expected in the context of many relapse-filled processes (see above). Even despite this, following participants for the duration of a few months at a particular point in their lives can hardly be described as looking at their life-course. It is therefore more apt to focus on their early experiences of desistance, while using the life history information that they shared in interview as a context for their present experiences. Indeed, my research questions focused on how participants experienced desistance in their present, everyday lives.

While my methods (see Chapter 4) meant that I used one particular service- Together Women Sheffield - as a research site, this study is explicitly not designed to examine the specific role of that service in participants' lives. Indeed, ethically I thought it would be problematic to maintain such close ties with the staff at the organisation (necessary for access- again, see Chapter 4) while also asking participants specifically about their experience of the project, and for that reason I avoided direct inquiries about their experiences there. I did not want to pressure participants to talk well of the staff, or to convey an assumption that my use of the service as a research site meant that I necessarily supported (or expected the support in others of) all that the organisation encapsulated, so I left it to the initiative of participants as to whether we discussed that aspect of their lives or not. Nevertheless, most participants did talk about the impact of Together Women, but it was by no means currently seen as the central influence in their lives as they experienced something of desistance. [[6]](#footnote-6) Therefore, while all were service users (to varying degrees), this was a practical restriction of recruiting participants rather than the factor I was interested in examining - and had I chosen a different research site, all participants could have equally been supervisees (common in English and Welsh desistance studies, for example [Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20); [Farrall, 2002](#_ENREF_71); [Rex, 1999](#_ENREF_229)) without the study orienting itself around that particular aspect of their desistance. Yet some of the characteristics of the participants also speak to the wider debate of whether desistance should be discussed when individuals are also experiencing recovery, so I explore this tension in more detail next.

**Desistance or Recovery?**

With large proportions of female offenders convicted of crimes where alcohol and drug addiction played a central role as a motivation for offending or a basis of the offence itself ([Caddle & Crisp, 1997](#_ENREF_37); [Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157); [Malloch, 2004](#_ENREF_166); [Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_199)), it is legitimate to ask whether talking about women’s *desistance* is sufficiently accurate when dealing with substance-addicted participants. Surely it would be better to discuss *recovery* where crimes are contingent on addiction? Yet the overlap between addiction and criminalisation is complex, even if only a small number of female drug users are part of the criminal justice system ([Malloch 2004](#_ENREF_166)). For example, it is easy to find addiction studies which use criminal justice measures (such as arrest) as indicators of relapse in substance abuse recovery ([McKay, Franklin, Patapis, & Lynch, 2006](#_ENREF_182)). On the other hand, criminological studies frequently use ‘desistance’, even when a large proportion of their sample has ongoing substance addictions ([Bottoms & Shapland, 2011](#_ENREF_19); [Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157); [Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)). However, this is not a universal approach to terminology among criminologists. Malloch and Loucks ([2007](#_ENREF_167)) use “rehabilitation/recovery” to indicate that desistance (“rehabilitation”) and recovery from substance abuse are so intrinsically linked that they should be considered as two sides of the same process. Morash ([2010](#_ENREF_199)) takes the opposite approach in separating the concepts, identifying those who were neither desisting nor in recovery as ‘failing’, those who had not reoffended but who continued to use drugs as ‘using but not failing’ and those who were succeeding in both areas as making ‘positive changes’.

However, there are many reasons for considering the *desistance from offending*, even if this examines recovery from substance abuse as a critical part of the process. Firstly, and most obviously, where the substances in question are illegal, continued use is de facto offending ([Malloch, 2004](#_ENREF_166)). Even where it is a legal substance being abused, such as alcohol, offending is often strongly associated with finding sources of income to purchase the substance in question (Malloch, [2004](#_ENREF_166); [Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_199)) and recovery from addiction almost automatically brings with it desistance because those funds are no longer needed. Why call this process recovery instead of desistance when both are implicated? In fact, with the criminal justice system in England and Wales currently being interested in desistance from offending ([Ministry of Justice, 2013b](#_ENREF_196)), rather than recovery, it makes sense to speak in terms which makes research obviously relevant to policy. This is especially true when such a high proportion of offenders have addiction problems, for if their *desistance* was not discussed, we could only talk about the desistance of a small number of offenders. Finally, the two processes have to deal with similar situations and so may be very similar in nature to each other anyway. For example, the stigma facing female substance abusers in labelling them as uncaring and unfeminine ([Malloch, 2004](#_ENREF_166)) appears almost identical to that facing female offenders ([Carlen, 2002](#_ENREF_41)). Both groups have to negotiate broken relationships, difficult circumstances, questions of agency and identity, and damaged self-confidence, among other problems. The interconnection between desistance and recovery is complex and deep-rooted, but it is *desistance* that is currently in vogue in the public policy domain. Therefore, I do not hesitate to discuss desistance from crime, even when it involves, or is contingent on, recovery from addiction. Yet when these processes seem intrinsically intertwined in participants’ lives, I also talk about recovery and desistance interchangeably.

**Dissertation Overview**

I introduce this study through an evaluation of what is known about how people desist from crime in Chapter 2. I then turn to consider what is known about women's desistance, and what might sensibly be surmised as influential to their desistance based on research from other disciplines and topics. A thorough critique of desistance theories is next presented in Chapter 3. I trace the development of desistance theories through time, before exploring four of the most significant theories to date in more detail. I then critique the methods used in these, and other desistance studies, showing that my own study introduces a methodological advancement that is crucial for the substantive development of desistance theory. My methods are further explained in the rest of Chapter 4, where the aims, bases and practicalities of the study are considered. The thesis then turns to the study findings, with the next four chapters each examining an important component of the participants’ desistance experiences. I first look at how agency is involved in participants’ lives over time in Chapter 5. In addition to looking at the interaction between agency and structure, this requires discussion of concepts such as ‘readiness’, ‘keeping busy’ and ‘hope’. I show how each of these concepts reflects a particular understanding of an aspect of agency (or a lack of agency). Next, Chapter 6 explores how participants saw themselves, why they wanted to desist, and how they wanted to ‘give back’ to society as part of that desistance. I use ‘motherhood’ as an illustrative theme, showing how identity, motivation, and generativity interact in a specific part of many female desisters’ lives. Chapter 7 provides a critique of the role of ‘confidence’ in desistance journeys, looking at whether it matters, and how it is gained and lost. Issues of shame and stigma are pertinent here, as are experiences of finding (physical or metaphorical) sanctuary. Beth’s story elaborates these themes, demonstrating how they can interact to affect desistance. The final empirical findings chapter, Chapter 8, investigates the roles of social relationships in supporting or jeopardising desistance, and how these can be managed by a desister. I identify both positive and negative influences, and offer an insight into the relationships available to female desisters and how they are expected to relate to others in relationships. Again, I use a case study to illustrate how relationships shaped Steph’s desistance experiences. I draw these substantive themes together in Chapter 9, examining their impact on theory, both in explaining women's experiences and desistance in general. I then offer some suggestions as to how those who work with desisters can incorporate them into their daily practice, and how policy can best support desistance. I reflect on the methods used, and how they enriched the data collected, along with the study’s limitations. Finally, I suggest substantive and methodological foci for future research in the area. First, however, I turn to examine what is currently known about desistance in general, and the desistance of women in particular.

**Chapter 2: Desistance Literature**

In this chapter, I explore the empirical evidence about desistance amongst women. As people with different biology, psychology, social roles and expectations from society to the typical male offender, it is only logical that the possibility of gender-based difference in desistance is studied - and yet thorough examination of women's desistance remains lacking. To begin, I look at the significant correlates and associates of desistance generally. Next, I examine the findings of (mainly) gender-comparative desistance research as it relates to these influences, to see whether differences have been empirically established when men and women's desistance are directly compared. I then consider how gender may further impact upon these factors, based on wider research in criminology, sociology and psychology. In all these sections, I study these factors under seven broad headings, consistently identified as key areas in the field of desistance research. These sub-sections are: interaction with the criminal justice system; experiencing shame and facing stigma; changing identities; becoming more mature; significant relationships and domestic influences; exhaustion and hitting 'rock bottom'; and employment. Many of these categories have been more extensively examined in interaction with each other, and are evidently interrelated, but I look at these theoretical models and arguments in more detail in Chapter 3.

**General Factors Associated with Desistance**

First, I consider what has been found to influence desistance in general. Many studies have been conducted to examine the correlates, motivations, and potential causes of desistance from crime. While some of these studies look at the experiences and behaviour of both men and women (for example, [Farrall, Hunter, Sharpe, and Calverley (2014)](#_ENREF_76)), the majority are focused on only male offenders (e.g. [Farrington & Hawkins, 1991](#_ENREF_78); [Glueck & Glueck, 1950](#_ENREF_108))), and a very small minority look only at female desistance (e.g. [Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Eaton, 1993](#_ENREF_63); [Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)). Some take an even tighter focus, exclusively looking at desistance from specific crime types (e.g. white-collar offenders ([Hunter, 2015](#_ENREF_132))) or specific characteristics of the desisters (e.g. young desisters ([Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112))).However, I aim here to give an overview of the broad outline of desistance research as a whole.

**Interaction with the Criminal Justice System**

I start with this factor for two reasons. First, it is perhaps the factor about which the research is most ambivalent in terms of supporting desistance. Second, it is a factor that comprises some easily identifiable and objective differences when the experiences of men and women are compared in the following sections and as such, it is a good starting point from which to develop my arguments in more complex and subjective areas. Some areas of the criminal justice system are generally accepted to hinder desistance, such as prisons ([Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Farrall & Calverley, 2006](#_ENREF_75); [Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76); [Shover, 1983](#_ENREF_252)),[[7]](#footnote-7) even if incarceration can provide offenders with space to reconsider their past lives ([Arditti & Few, 2008](#_ENREF_2); [Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Bui & Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_30)). Recent research has found that while some prisoners attribute their desistance to the space to think they received in prison, this is at least partly a retrospective narrative strategy employed to create a 'turning point' where no specifically identifiable point exists ([Schinkel, 2015](#_ENREF_244)). Further, incarceration is seen as a precarious hook for change ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)) as it cannot provide a replacement identity or cognitive blueprint for future life ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Schinkel, 2015](#_ENREF_244)). The specific challenges of resettlement from prison have been widely documented, especially in the American context (e.g. [Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157); [S. C. Richards & Jones, 2004](#_ENREF_230)), and although these studies have aided our understanding of desistance in highlighting structural barriers such as housing availability and re-establishing family contact ([Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)), it is important to remember that not all desisters need to counter the particular adversities of leaving prison as many offenders do not receive custodial sentences. Yet even interventions short of imprisonment have been found to encourage young offenders away from desistance ([McAra & McVie, 2011](#_ENREF_172)). However, research on the impact of probation has been relatively more encouraging. While probationers do not always think that being under community supervision aids desistance whilst they are being supervised, Farrall and colleagues ([2014](#_ENREF_76)) found that advice given in such contexts was helpful, long-term, to probationers in their desistance. Nevertheless, a fundamental problem with the criminal justice system in terms of aiding desistance is its current focus on risk ([Weaver & McNeill, 2007b](#_ENREF_284)). Using such a model as the orienting concept in assessment and intervention has been found to increase stigma towards desisters - who are necessarily found to be risky to some degree - and therefore hamper their efforts to desist ([Weaver & McNeill, 2007b](#_ENREF_284)).

**Experiencing Shame and Facing Stigma**

Whatever the source of stigma, it is unsurprising that societal reaction to the desister- and the desister's internal experiences of this (feelings of shame)[[8]](#footnote-8) can have an impact on their desistance. However, while these factors are recognised as significant ([Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)), the evidence is mixed as to whether stigma and shame encourage or discourage desistance. Some highlight the importance- and perhaps centrality- of feeling personal remorse for previous offending in maintaining desistance ([Leibrich, 1996](#_ENREF_154)). Others, most notably Braithwaite ([1989](#_ENREF_24)), emphasise the need for a particular experience of shame to promote desistance through 'reintegrative shaming', where society condemns the offence but shows acceptance of the offender. Conversely, others have focused on the desister's need to defend themselves from feelings of shame ([Gadd, 2006](#_ENREF_88)), and the narrative tools that they may use to achieve this ([Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168); [Maruna & Copes, 2005](#_ENREF_169)), in order for them to move on with their desistance. Interestingly, longitudinal work suggests that feelings of shame subside as desisters become more stable in their desistance ([Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76)).

**Changing Identities**

One way in which desisters could deal with feelings of shame is through re-biographing or changing their identities ([Gadd & Farrall, 2004](#_ENREF_89); [Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)). Either a true shift in self-understanding and self-presentation, or a new explanation of how the desister became the person they now are, could assist a desister in maintaining prosocial behaviour. However, shifts in identities (or presentation of identities) are not always explicitly linked to concerns over shame. Nevertheless, investing in a new identity is widely found to be crucial to stable desistance ([Eaton, 1993](#_ENREF_63); [Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168); [Paternoster & Bushway, 2009](#_ENREF_218); [Sommers, Baskin, & Fagan, 1994](#_ENREF_262)) - although some make the point that it is not always necessary for desistance ([Farrall, 2005](#_ENREF_72)). These shifts are not necessarily tied to particular events ([Giordano, Schroeder, & Cernkovich, 2007](#_ENREF_104)), and are not even necessarily consciously chosen ([Gadd, 2006](#_ENREF_88); [Gadd & Farrall, 2004](#_ENREF_89)). However, for identity change to have the largest possible impact, it seems that the change should be acknowledged (and perhaps applauded) by others ([Eaton, 1993](#_ENREF_63); [Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168); [Meisenhelder, 1977](#_ENREF_189); [Vaughan, 2007](#_ENREF_277)).

**Becoming 'More Mature'**

Sometimes an opportunity to claim a new identity appears through entering a new social role (such as 'fatherhood' or 'worker'). While much work focuses on the varying constructions of identity, other studies look at the underlying process- that of growing older and maturing ([Glueck & Glueck, 1950](#_ENREF_108); [Shover, 1985](#_ENREF_253)). While it can be difficult to disentangle the concept of 'maturity' from chronological age and life stages, desisters themselves cite 'growing up' - being less foolish but instead more responsible and considerate of others - as a reason for desisting from offending behaviour ([Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112); [Murray, 2009](#_ENREF_204)). While the concept has recently been out of fashion in the desistance literature, extensive discussion of various cognitive changes ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Healy, 2014](#_ENREF_121); [Vaughan, 2007](#_ENREF_277)) indicates that it could be of value if properly developed as encompassing specific aspects of cognitive development.

**Significant Relationships and Domestic Influences**

The impact of relationships has been widely explored in the desistance literature, with relationships tending to be categorised into three sub-categories: partners, children, and friends. Turning first to partners, it has long been established that a stable relationship with a woman is significant in the desistance of male offenders ([Farrington & West, 1995](#_ENREF_79); [Laub & Sampson, 2003](#_ENREF_149); [Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168); [Sampson & Laub, 1993](#_ENREF_241); [Shover, 1983](#_ENREF_252); [West, 1982](#_ENREF_287)). This also seems to be true on a micro-level, where relationships with partners correlate with reduced offending ([Horney et al., 1995](#_ENREF_130)). However, it is not just a stable partnership or marriage that is needed, but one of 'good' quality ([Laub, Nagin, & Sampson, 1998](#_ENREF_147)). In such a relationship, the male offenders could find a source of informal social control, providing them with both attachment and support, and therefore encouraging them that desistance was in their own interests. In addition, the effects of a good marriage appear to strengthen desistance over time, with greater effects the longer the marriage has lasted - rather like paying into a pension pot, where the benefits are cumulative in a non-linear fashion ([Laub et al., 1998](#_ENREF_147)). Although Sampson and Laub ([1993](#_ENREF_241)) are quick to show that there is at least some element of chance in someone marrying or not (depending, for example, on the chances of finding a suitable partner who is also willing to get married), a direct link between marriage and desistance has been doubted, with Gottfredson and Hirschi ([1990](#_ENREF_111)) highlighting the self-selecting factors that affect whether someone marries or not. These factors, the authors argue, mean that marriage cannot be claimed to cause desistance in any straightforward way.

Secondly, children - and more specifically becoming a parent - have also been found to influence desistance in a positive way ([Leibrich, 1993](#_ENREF_152); [Sampson & Laub, 1993](#_ENREF_241); [Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998](#_ENREF_275)). In a similar way to partners, children can provide informal social control to offenders ([Sampson & Laub, 1993](#_ENREF_241)). Alternatively, becoming a 'father' or a 'mother' can provide a powerful replacement identity and can contribute to a maturing process (see above). This assumption of responsibility also appears to have positive associations with desistance when the desister re-establishes previous bonds (both with children and others) ([Farrall, 2002](#_ENREF_71); [Farrall & Calverley, 2006](#_ENREF_75)). Therefore, the fact of having a child appears to be significantly different to the desister taking on the role of "a parent".

Thirdly, friends are somewhat more unusual as a social relationship which is more often associated as having a negative influence on desistance. For example, Warr ([1998](#_ENREF_280)) found that correlations between marriage and desistance could in fact be traced back to less time being spent with delinquent peers. The concurrence of desistance and losing friendships has been highlighted ([Knight & West, 1975](#_ENREF_145)), and perhaps especially so when this relationship breaking has occurred as a result of the desister moving home location ([Sampson & Laub, 1993](#_ENREF_241)).Such a finding is supported by work looking at recidivism of ex-prisoners in Louisiana, where a return to a previous neighbourhood in 2005 was made less likely due to the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina ([Kirk, 2009](#_ENREF_144)). The influence of the Hurricane means that the study is unusual in largely avoiding the selection bias inherent in other resettlement studies where ex-prisoners have something of a choice to move location (subject to legal and practical constraints). For those who did move location on release from prison, recidivism was reduced, irrespective of previous criminal history ([Kirk, 2009](#_ENREF_144)). Kirk suggested that this effect was due to a break with former social contacts and a change in routine activities. However, Osborn ([1980](#_ENREF_216)) found that a significant correlation between moving out of London and reduced offending (irrespective of previous delinquency) could be attributed to reduced opportunity and incentive to commit crime more generally, rather than a change in friendships specifically. Yet as he did not specifically look at the nature of social relationships beyond parenting styles, it is unclear whether new peers may have provided the context for reduced opportunities and incentives to offend.

**Exhaustion and 'Hitting Rock Bottom'**

Some desisters experience a particularly negative period, making them feel that things could not get any worse, when they are brought into contact with the criminal justice system or are sent to prison ([Arditti & Few, 2008](#_ENREF_2); [Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Cusson & Pinsonneault, 1986](#_ENREF_55); [Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Shover, 1983](#_ENREF_252)), but the feeling of being 'burnt out' can arise from a more complex interaction of factors, or from influences entirely external to the criminal justice system. For example, offenders can consider that the emotional and physical toll of official punishment is no longer worth the benefits of offending, and particularly so as they get older and have more responsibilities ([Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Bui & Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_30); [Burnett, 1992](#_ENREF_31); [Byrne & Trew, 2008](#_ENREF_36); [Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112); [Meisenhelder, 1977](#_ENREF_189)). Others report being shocked into desistance because of a bereavement or injury connected with offending, leading them to reappraise their direction in life ([Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Cusson & Pinsonneault, 1986](#_ENREF_55); [Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112)).

These disjunctive experiences can feed into offenders making a decision to desist with some level of rationality, where the expected benefits of crime are outweighed by the expected benefits of desisting ([Cusson & Pinsonneault, 1986](#_ENREF_55); [Shover & Thompson, 1992](#_ENREF_255)). In addition to unpleasant experiences 'tipping the balance' towards the benefits of desisting, offenders also extrapolate their current lifestyle into the future, and can make a decision to desist in order that they do not become the person that their current criminality would lead to- in order to avoid becoming their 'feared self' ([Paternoster & Bushway, 2009](#_ENREF_218)). This appears to be particularly true when offenders come to realise that time is finite, they are getting older, and that they must act quickly to avoid becoming that 'feared self' ([Shover, 1983](#_ENREF_252), [1985](#_ENREF_253)).

**Employment**

Explanations for employment as a factor which supports desistance are varied. Some argue that workers have less leisure time, and therefore fewer opportunities to engage in offending ([Mischkowitz, 1994](#_ENREF_197); [Shover, 1983](#_ENREF_252)). Others focus on the sense of worth and social resources that employment can bring ([Meisenhelder, 1977](#_ENREF_189); [Shover, 1985](#_ENREF_253)). A financial perspective suggests that a well-paid job can eliminate monetary need and therefore can trigger desistance in cases where offending is driven by need ([Byrne & Trew, 2008](#_ENREF_36)) - although there seems to be some scepticism among some offenders that this monetary need could truly be satisfactorily eliminated ([Mullins & Wright, 2003](#_ENREF_201)). Yet while the lack of rewarding employment seems to impede desistance ([D. Glaser, 1969](#_ENREF_106); [Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998](#_ENREF_275)), others have found the opposite to be true- that a job can actually be associated with recidivism ([Horney, 2011](#_ENREF_129); [Horney et al., 1995](#_ENREF_130)), or at the very least, can be unrelated to desistance ([Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112)). There is some argument that the effects of employment are age-graded, with those under 25 years old valuing spare money from their wages as a resource with which to buy drugs, while those over 25 spent spare money on their families ([Uggen, 2000](#_ENREF_274)). If this is the case, the influences of employment potentially interact with both 'Becoming More Mature' and 'Changing Identities' (above).

**What Do We Know Specifically about Women's Desistance?**

As Sampson and Laub note (2001), factors (such as gender and ethnicity) which affect the transition to adulthood and structural contexts of individuals - should be expected to vary the experience of desistance through their interaction with individual differences. As such, it is important to examine how these interactions impact desistance by looking at these 'types' of desisters. While there are many theoretical reasons for women's desistance to be experienced differently than that of men - based on gendered pathways and influences on offending, and wider considerations, there is little empirical evidence examining whether such differences have been found in practice. Some studies comparing men and women's experiences provide limited support for some theoretical differences, and other research comparing women's experiences to the general desistance literature (largely based on men) suggests foundations for other differences mentioned in the previous sections. In this section, I use both types of literature- gender-comparative studies and empirical studies of women's desistance - to assess the limited existing evidence into whether desistance experiences are gendered.

**Interaction with the Criminal Justice System**

Perhaps due to the relatively small numbers of women in the criminal justice system (see below), there is little evidence on the impact of the system per se on women's desistance. Nevertheless, Giordano and colleagues ([2002](#_ENREF_102)) conducted a follow-up life history study on 97 women and 83 men, 13 years after an initial study during their incarceration as juvenile delinquents in Ohio, US, which provides some data on this topic. Giordano and colleagues found that while 26% of men at least partially attributed their desistance to their prison experience, only 13% of women did the same. More interestingly, the benefit of good probation workers in assisting women's desistance has been identified in one American study in the 1990s, looking at the experiences of 18 ex-prisoners, as being specifically because of their assistance in improving existing relationships and helping probationers to resume the care of their children where they had been removed by social services ([O'Brien, 2001](#_ENREF_210)). Naturally, because of the much larger numbers of female offenders with primary care of children, this is an impact likely to be felt more strongly by female desisters than male desisters.

**Experiencing Shame and Facing Stigma**

In a rare study that looked at experiences of persisters and desisters of both genders, it has been found as especially important to female persisters that they are seen as desisters ([McIvor, Murray, & Jamieson, 2004](#_ENREF_181)), reflecting the importance that they place on others' opinions and acceptance of them ([as Eaton (1993) found in the early 90s, through interviews with 34 female ex-prisoners](#_ENREF_63) ). Others have found that the reputations of female desisters were more easily damaged than those of male desisters when quantitatively comparing their experiences through a Canadian work project ([Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998](#_ENREF_275)), and that they were especially concerned about how their offending affected their loved ones, as Barry ([2010](#_ENREF_8)) found when comparing 20 previously persistent male offenders with 20 female counterparts in Scotland. However, this may be more connected to the fear of losing relationships as children are removed from their care (seen by many of the 19 young mothers in Sharpe's recent (2015) study as the worst possible outcome for their lives, and linking to issues of identity, see below). Interestingly, Mullins and Wright (2003) found that although their small sample of female residential burglars from Missouri in the 1990s were more worried than the men in the larger comparative group about potential damage to their reputation through others hearing about their crimes, this potential shame was nonetheless insufficient in catalysing desistance itself. Nevertheless, Barry (2010) found that female desisters reported that their own perceptions of their reputations were improved compared to female persisters.

**Changing Identities**

The necessity for a desisting identity has been highlighted in many studies on men and many of the fewer available studies on women (see above), but Byrne and Trew ([2008](#_ENREF_36)), in a study of 9 female and 9 male probationers in Northern Ireland, suggest that this is particularly true of women who need to reconcile their identity as a female with the traditionally masculine identity of offender. While identities such as 'recovered addict' appear common and important to both genders (as Baskin and Sommers ([1998](#_ENREF_10)) found in New York among their sample of 30 women who had desisted for two years), there is evidence that there is a specific, caring identity that is available to (and even expected of) desisting women in particular. For example, having children allowed female desisters to present themselves as a traditionally respectable wife and mother ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)), a 'care-giver' (among 49 (largely) African-American residents of a halfway house in Chicago ([2014](#_ENREF_157))) and a 'responsible adult' (among a small sample of young adults of both genders with moderate offending histories ([Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112))). In particular, Sanders ([2007](#_ENREF_243)) found that the identity of a 'good mother' was much more accessible to the 30 women she interviewed desisting from sex work than other potential new identities such as 'professional ex' - linking to the feelings of shame experienced by female desisters (see above). Sharpe ([2015](#_ENREF_249)) extended this argument in her work with young mothers who had been previously criminalised as girls, showing that being a 'mother' was the only achievable identity for criminalised girls that was still able to give them a sense of meaning in their lives. Yet it was not only the desisting women themselves who sought after care-giving identities. Leverentz (2014) found that the families of African-American women heavily expected them to provide care to others - although how far this is impacted by culture and ethnicity is unclear.

**Becoming More Mature**

There is some support in desistance literature for the contention that women mature earlier than men, experiencing several cognitive changes at a younger age, and therefore desist earlier than men ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112)). In terms of the quality of that maturity, the few gender-comparative studies available have found women to be less instrumental than men, and instead more interested in the moral aspects of maturity ([Benda, 2005](#_ENREF_15); [McIvor et al., 2004](#_ENREF_181)). In addition, as women mature, Mullins and Wright ([2003](#_ENREF_201)) found that they were socialised to pay more attention to maintaining good relationships with others, suggesting that Gilligan (1982) and Miller's (1984) theses of women maturing to privilege care and interaction with others (see below) had some support in desisting women's experiences.

**Significant Relationships and Domestic Influences**

Many of the connections to significant relationships can also be explained with reference to shame, identity and maturity, but nevertheless much of the limited literature looking at gendered aspects of desistance focuses on this aspect. First, looking at intimate partners, the evidence is decidedly mixed. Benda ([2005](#_ENREF_15)) found in a large scale quantitative survival analysis of male and female boot-camp graduates in the US that when females formed a family with a caring partner, desistance was catalysed- an effect that increased where children were also part of the new family. On the other hand, separating from partners - and especially where these were co-offenders ([Mullins & Wright, 2003](#_ENREF_201)) - was important for female desisters to feel in control of their lives and therefore to desist ([Eaton, 1993](#_ENREF_63)). Taking a mixed approach, desisters in Leverentz's ([2014](#_ENREF_157)) study found that the same relationship - which was usually with another ex-offender - could both encourage and discourage desistance, thus highlighting the complex nature of relationships, which had not been seen in such great detail in the general desistance literature. While female desisters therefore found that avoidance of relationships was sometimes necessary, they also worked at re-defining relationships - a strategy that was used in relation to partners, family and friends ([Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)).

When it comes to children, women undertook greater parental responsibilities ([McIvor et al., 2004](#_ENREF_181)) and so experienced a larger effect on their lifestyles than their male partners ([Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112)), thus seeing a greater positive effect of parenthood on desistance than fathers ([Rodermond, Kruttschnitt, Slotboom, & Bijleveld, 2016](#_ENREF_236)). Female desisters also benefitted from renewed relationships with their children (in a further analysis of Baskin and Sommers' data, above ([Sommers et al., 1994](#_ENREF_262))). The link between parenting and desistance in women could be explained by wider availability of relational support (through, for example, other parents) ([O'Brien, 2001](#_ENREF_210)), reduced influence of previous friends ([Giordano, Cernkovich, & Holland, 2003](#_ENREF_101)), or a feeling of usefulness ([O'Brien, 2001](#_ENREF_210)). However, Giordano and colleagues (2002) found that both children and marriage were weak factors in influences on desistance, unless they offered the opportunity to change friendship circles.

Moving on, then, to consider friends, female desisters appear to value good friendships with non-offenders more than male desisters ([Benda, 2005](#_ENREF_15); [Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157); [McIvor et al., 2004](#_ENREF_181); [Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998](#_ENREF_275)). They also take more steps to break from negative friendships than men ([Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157); [McIvor et al., 2004](#_ENREF_181)), and were less likely to be hampered in their desistance by having criminal friends ([Rodermond et al., 2016](#_ENREF_236)). It seems significant that the impact of other relational changes are experienced through the change that they make to friendships (see above), but this does not just apply to women ([Warr, 1998](#_ENREF_280)).

**Exhaustion and 'Hitting Rock Bottom'**

In terms of actually reaching a lowest point, there is some suggestion that having a child removed by social services can trigger desistance in women ([Sanders, 2007](#_ENREF_243)), while this had not been suggested as a potential burn-out catalyst in men in the general literature. When it comes to coping strategies, Benda (2005) found that desistance did not occur in women who had experienced abuse, were taking drugs, had a criminal partner and had negative feelings, pointing towards the importance of these factors in preventing desistance. It could even be suggested that the employment of these coping mechanisms (drug use and having a criminal partner) prevented women from reaching 'rock bottom' and so did not produce a catalyst for desistance.

**Employment**

A couple of studies have specifically highlighted that education and employment are not important for female desisters, even when they feature strongly in male desisters' experiences ([Benda, 2005](#_ENREF_15); [Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)). Benda ([2005](#_ENREF_15)) found that this difference was due to male desisters gaining job satisfaction, which then led them to having more commitment to continuing their job and to wider desistance, whereas females did not show the same link between job satisfaction and commitment to desistance. Eaton ([1993](#_ENREF_63)) suggests that the lack of importance of employment for women is due to the significant structural blocks (such as a lack of appropriate jobs, education and childcare) that female desisters face. However, the limited evidence available is not unequivocal, with other studies finding that educational and vocational schemes could be important influences on desistance among women as well as men ([Sommers et al., 1994](#_ENREF_262)). A recent review of desistance literature suggested that this discrepancy amongst findings is due to women largely being employed in low-level jobs which do not provide the satisfaction required to produce a noticeable impact on desistance success ([Rodermond et al., 2016](#_ENREF_236)).

**Why Might Gender Have an Impact on Desistance?**

Considering these seven areas in turn, I now consider the evidence which points to a likely impact of gender on desistance. By considering various studies across the whole discipline of criminology, as well as relevant psychological and sociological research, it becomes clear that there is good reason to suspect that women may - at least hypothetically- experience desistance in a different way to men. As yet, there is no suggestion from the desistance research that there are any truly unique desistance processes exclusively affecting women. However, there is plenty of evidence that processes are generally experienced by women in different proportions and in different ways to men. While some of these differences have already been identified in the empirical research presented in the previous section, I explore the extensive evidence which suggests the likelihood of further differences in desistance as yet unidentified in desistance research.

**Interaction with the Criminal Justice System: Fewer Women but More Harshly Treated**

At the most basic level, given the difference in quantity of male and female offenders, it is unsurprising that women interact with the criminal justice system in a different way to men. The peak age of offending among women in 15 years old, as opposed to 18 for men ([Walklate, 2004](#_ENREF_278)). Females typically have shorter criminal careers and lower re-offending rates than males (Gelsthorpe, Sharpe, & Roberts, 2007). In every category of major crime, there are more male than female offenders ([Gelsthorpe, Sharpe, & Roberts, 2007](#_ENREF_96)), although the imbalance declines with age ([Walklate, 2004](#_ENREF_278)). Men account for four fifths of known offenders ([Gelsthorpe et al., 2007](#_ENREF_96)) and 95% of the prison population ([C. Robinson, 2013](#_ENREF_233)), despite the fact that more women are sent to prison for a first offence or for property offences than men ([Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50)), and are therefore highly represented among short-term prisoners ([Carlen & Worrall, 2004](#_ENREF_42); [Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2008](#_ENREF_95)). They also receive disproportionately fewer fines than their male counterparts ([Carlen & Worrall, 2004](#_ENREF_42)). It is therefore hardly unexpected that the criminal justice system is designed for men ([Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50); [Fawcett's Commission on Women and the Criminal Justice System, 2009](#_ENREF_80)). Despite some recognition that women should not be treated in the same way as men in such a system ([Ministry of Justice, 2013a](#_ENREF_195)), the criminal justice system nevertheless faces criticism for failing to address the causes of offending in women ([Fawcett's Commission on Women and the Criminal Justice System, 2009](#_ENREF_80)) and exposing female offenders to harsher punishments. For example, prison is recognised as being particularly painful for women as opposed to men, in part because of the increased disruption to family life ([Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50); [Gelsthorpe et al., 2007](#_ENREF_96)). This is particularly true due to the relative number of women's prisons, which means that they are generally further from prisoners' homes, making continued contact with family (and housing providers) difficult ([Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50); [Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2008](#_ENREF_95)). Additionally, because more female prisoners are not in intimate relationships compared to their male counterparts, fewer have partners able to maintain their accommodation or look after their children on their behalf during their incarceration ([Carlen & Worrall, 2004](#_ENREF_42); [Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50); [Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2008](#_ENREF_95)). Therefore, being imprisoned disproportionately more accommodation problems for women, and especially so if they have children needing temporary care from the state or family members. Such women face the impossible situation that they cannot have their children returned until they secure appropriate accommodation, but that they cannot apply for suitable family accommodation without their children being back in their care ([Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2008](#_ENREF_95)). If women are experiencing the criminal justice system in a different way to men because of these discrepancies, it seems logical that the impact of interaction with the criminal justice system on desistance in general may be different in females.

**Experiencing Shame and Facing Stigma: Gendered Oppression**

Some feminist scholars assert that women experience more shame in everyday life than men because they are made to feel that shame in the important social sites of life ([Bartky, 1990](#_ENREF_9)). Others suggest that shame is elicited in women when their ability to form and maintain relationships is questioned or hampered ([J. B. Miller, 1986](#_ENREF_194)) - a reaction that is much less common, or pronounced, in men due to how the different genders mature (see below for more on this). This potential link between gender and shame also has some specific applications to particular aspects of female offending. For example, if girls are made to feel more shame than their male counterparts, and parents try to shield them from experiencing that shame by imposing more exacting standards on them (and particularly in regards to their sexual behaviour), then girls may be more likely to be referred to the police for running away or other connected behaviour than their brothers, and so explanations of male crime do not necessarily hold for them ([Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45)). Similarly, whether patriarchy is the cause ([Bartky, 1990](#_ENREF_9)) or the result ([J. B. Miller, 1986](#_ENREF_194)) of gender differences in shame, women do arguably have to negotiate violence and family problems through the lens of gender oppression ([Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45)). When these women are seen as weak and dependent, the risk of further abuse increases ([Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45)) (see below on the gendered aspects of abuse victimisation). Likewise, the criminal justice system can misrepresent crimes that women commit in the context of abusive and oppressive relationships ([Pollack, 2007](#_ENREF_223)) - both in how they are prosecuted and in how they are addressed through self-esteem programmes. Pollack ([2007](#_ENREF_223)) argues that self-esteem interventions are likely to fail to prevent re-offending in women who have previously committed crime in the process of resisting abuse, as it is logical for someone with high self-esteem to defend themselves from abuse. This importance of power relationships is starkly illustrated in another context by theories of gang crime missing the gendered dimension, where the girls are seen as gang 'property' while the boys are members, thus leaving the girls' involvement as under-explained ([Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45)). In the face of this evidence and arguments about the source and impact of shame in the link to gender oppression in a patriarchal society, it may well be that shame is experienced quite differently among men and women. Given its importance in desistance, it should therefore be expected that the gender differences in facing shame and stigma will have a direct impact on desisters' experiences.

**Changing Identities: The Importance of Care-Giving**

While both genders often seem to experience identity change in desistance (see above), there are reasons to expect a difference in the type of new identity generally claimed by women during that process. On a biological level, the possibility of pregnancy and giving birth means that a 'mother' role is available to women in a different way to that of a 'father' for men ([Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50)). There is also a suggestion that the neurological difference between the genders – that there is more connection between the two hemispheres of the brain in woman – means that women are, in general, more other-oriented than men ([Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2003](#_ENREF_17)). When the actual characteristics of women within the criminal justice system are examined, it is clear that women (and especially female prisoners) are more likely to be the primary carers of young children than their male counterparts ([Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50); [Gelsthorpe et al., 2007](#_ENREF_96); [Wright, Van Voorhis, Salisbury, & Bauman, 2012](#_ENREF_294)). As a result of all these factors, the female custodial estate has been encouraged to prioritise proximity to family for female prisoners ([C. Robinson, 2013](#_ENREF_233)). More fundamentally, there is a deep importance for women in the criminal justice system in building and maintaining an identity that is based on care-giving ([Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157); [Sharpe, 2015](#_ENREF_249)). In fact, this caring role has been found to been important even in the course of offending itself, with women committing crime in an effort to take care of others – and particularly so where they are also experiencing extreme poverty ([Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45); [Sharpe, 2015](#_ENREF_249)). As a consequence of this, relationships have been found to be a larger risk factor for women's offending than for men ([Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50); [Covington, 1985](#_ENREF_52); [Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2015](#_ENREF_209)). The centrality of a care-giving role for women has been linked to female identity development, with women defining themselves not only by the types of relationships that they have, but by the quality of those relationships ([Gilligan, 1982](#_ENREF_99); [J. B. Miller, 1986](#_ENREF_194)). The next section looks at this argument in more detail, in the context of maturity and developmental psychology.

**Becoming More Mature: A Feminist Developmental Psychology**

In terms of maturity, there is some suggestion that the default model of developmental psychology – or how people mature – is based on men and is therefore not automatically applicable to women ([Gilligan, 1982](#_ENREF_99)). When considering how girls mature, Gilligan (1982) found that a key stage was not gaining independence from others (the capstone of maturity for boys), but learning how to consider one's own needs in addition to the needs of others. As such, the connection and relationship with other people is crucial to women's development in a more profound way than for men ([J. B. Miller, 1986](#_ENREF_194)). If this is the case, it is hardly surprising that experiences of abuse (see below) have such a deeply traumatic effect on women, and raises the possibility that the abuse has differing effects on victims according to gender. The argument is therefore that while men develop to form moral judgment based on ideas of justice, women instead develop to form judgments based on care ([Gilligan, 1982](#_ENREF_99)). If women's moral compasses revolve around care, it is also unsurprising that their identities are so closely entwined with being care-givers (see above). It also suggests that the biological process of becoming a mother and being required to be a care-giver may have important effects on their development (or maturity). Therefore (and particularly for desistance research with a life course perspective- see Chapter 3), the nature of maturity in women is likely to significantly alter the findings of the existing, (largely) male-based research on desistance.

**Significant Relationships and Domestic Influences: Abuse and Survival**

While the importance of good relationships to both desistance and women's identities and maturity has already been discussed, there is a particular gendered problem with the nature of significant relationships: that of the prevalence of abuse. It seems that sexual abuse is an amplified problem for girls ([Belknap & Holsinger, 2006](#_ENREF_13); [Bloom et al., 2003](#_ENREF_17)), with females forming 70% of childhood sexual abuse victims ([Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45)). In addition to a higher prevalence, the sexual abuse of girls appears to extend over a longer period of time, causing more trauma and severe effects in later life ([Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45)). As well as childhood abuse, adult domestic violence victimisation is common among female offenders when compared to male offenders ([Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2015](#_ENREF_209)). Such abuses have been recognised to lead to offending in a number of ways and are frequently identified as a specifically gendered pathway to offending ([Bloom et al., 2003](#_ENREF_17); [Brennan, Breitenbach, Dieterich, Salisbury, & Van Voorhis, 2012](#_ENREF_25); [Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45); [Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50); [Daly, 1994](#_ENREF_56); [Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009](#_ENREF_240)). The offending can occur through the various maladaptive coping strategies employed to deal with trauma (see section below on coping mechanisms) and through more direct links. For example, female offending is often driven by relationships with (usually) male co-offenders ([Mullins & Wright, 2003](#_ENREF_201)). This might be due to direct manipulation or coercion, or financial offending because a partner retains full control over household money ([Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2015](#_ENREF_209)). As a result of these gendered patterns and impact of abuse, a key component in preventing female offending is thought to be encouraging healthy relationships with partners ([Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009](#_ENREF_240)). Similar suggestions may also therefore be relevant in preventing female re-offending and so encouraging desistance.

**Exhaustion and 'Hitting Rock Bottom': Coping Mechanisms**

While there is no particular evidence to suggest that women experience or react to exhaustion or burn-out in a different way to men, it seems that there are some differences in how they cope with difficulties in the first place. These difficulties range from issues such as abuse and poverty, to relationship and offending-related stresses, and may or may not be exacerbated by gender (for more on these potential difficulties, see the other sub-sections in this chapter). Although problems with alcohol and drugs are common maladaptive strategies among women and men ([Bloom et al., 2003](#_ENREF_17); [Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50); [Daly, 1994](#_ENREF_56)), there is some suggestion that help with dealing with substance abuse is especially important to women ([Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50)). On the other hand, emotional and psychological issues in response to trauma, and the self-medication that occurs with these problems, do appear more in research with female offenders than male offenders ([Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45); [Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50); [Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009](#_ENREF_240)) – although this could plausibly be an artefact of differing research methods with different genders. On the pro-social side, women do not offend as a way of fulfilling their gendered identity in the same way as men, so do not engage in offending as a way of coping with doubts about their masculinities ([Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45); [Daly, 1994](#_ENREF_56)) – (although they may well financially offend in an effort to fulfil their gendered care-giving roles ([Byrne & Trew, 2008](#_ENREF_36); [Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45))). Unless reasons to offend are completely separate from reasons to refrain from reoffending, the existence of gendered coping mechanisms are therefore relevant to the experiences of desisters.

**Employment: Financial Strains**

It is widely accepted that poverty and unemployment are common pathways to offending ([Bloom et al., 2003](#_ENREF_17); [Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50); [Nuytiens & Christiaens, 2015](#_ENREF_209); [Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009](#_ENREF_240)). While some men offend for financial gain, it is common among women ([McIvor & Barry, 1998](#_ENREF_179)), and there is some suggestion that financial pressure is felt more acutely among women. For example, there is still a gendered inequality in pay in the UK (exacerbated by recent austerity measures), with a 14.9% pay gap between men and women in full-time work ([Fawcett Society, 2012](#_ENREF_81)). This inequality is likely to be felt disproportionately among women, who report difficulty in providing for dependent children ([Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009](#_ENREF_240)) and who make up 92% of lone parents, who are statistically more likely to be living in poverty ([Fawcett Society, 2012](#_ENREF_81)). While improvements in quality and availability of employment may alleviate these strains, parents face specific barriers to gaining employment such as finding and paying for appropriate childcare ([Fawcett Society, 2012](#_ENREF_81)). While in prison, women have a range of employment options largely limited to kitchen, laundry or sewing work ([Carlen & Worrall, 2004](#_ENREF_42)). Possibly as a result of this, fewer female prisoners are looking for employment on their release from prison than male prisoners ([Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50)), and Those that do find work on release tend to do so through their family and friend networks rather than official channels ([Carlen & Worrall, 2004](#_ENREF_42)). There are suggestions that wider solutions than just making employment available are particularly necessary for women ([Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009](#_ENREF_240)). Instead, Salisbury and Van Voorhis ([2009](#_ENREF_240)) contend that the provision of welfare would ameliorate women's financial difficulties given the barriers to their gaining worthwhile employment. In a similar vein, instead of focusing on work-related training, the Corston Report ([2007](#_ENREF_50)) recommended life-skills courses for women, in addition to some specific work streams for women in resettlement programmes. These gendered discrepancies in the nature and availability of work, and the likelihood of financial strain have already been found to influence female experiences of desistance ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)) and are likely to have further consequences as yet unexplored in the research.

**Conclusion**

All of the sub-sections explored in this chapter - interaction with the criminal justice system; experiencing shame and facing stigma; changing identities; becoming more mature; significant relationships and domestic influences; exhaustion and hitting 'rock bottom'; and employment - represent significant influences on desistance experiences in general. They are frequently identified and examined in much of the literature on desistance as crucial elements for 'success', and their interaction with each other is explored further in the next chapter, where I consider how theory has attempted to make sense of the desistance process as a whole. The limited evidence specifically on women's experiences suggests that these influences are also important to women, but often in a different way or to a different degree - for example women are more likely to invest in a caring identity in their desistance and appear to be more strongly shamed by society. Yet there is substantial evidence from outside the immediate field of desistance that these influences are experienced and shaped in a heavily gendered way to an extent which is not yet replicated in the available desistance research on women.

Despite the evidence explored above, there have been a couple of other studies that found no major differences between the experiences of men and women in desistance ([Lanctot, Cernkovich, & Giordano, 2007](#_ENREF_146)). Still others suggest that the only difference of significance is in the timing of experiences, with the earlier age of maturity in women (see above) meaning that they begin the process before their male counterparts ([Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112)). The influence of criminal 'career', too, should not be forgotten, with men and women who commit similar offences showing marked similarities in their desistance experiences (for example, see [Sommers et al. (1994)](#_ENREF_262) and [Shover (1983)](#_ENREF_252)). Yet these similarities are not fully replicated ([Mullins & Wright, 2003](#_ENREF_201)) and the different offence profiles of male and female offenders (see above) question whether it is helpful to dismiss apparently gendered differences in desistance as purely due to offence type. Instead, the significant biological, psychological, social and structural differences recognised between the genders, and as examined in other research strongly suggests that gender is a valid and important variable to investigate in relation to desistance. As there is ample research into the experiences of male desisters, a focus is therefore needed on female desisters to examine whether these gender differences are indeed played out to a significant level. My research questions for the current study therefore focus on the experience of female desisters. I also look in a more detailed way at some of the sub-sections highlighted as important in this chapter, based both on those concepts that became prominent in interviews and, in the case of relational influences, because of the extensive reference to social influences in desistance research (seen in this chapter in a number of sub-themes) which seem to be under-explained. Before I begin such an investigation, I first turn to outline how influences (such as the ones explored in depth above) have been understood to interact in the experience of an individual - although with the caveat that these theories are (once again) largely based on the experiences of male individuals.

**Chapter 3: A Review of Desistance Theories**

**The Historical Development of the Field**

The inception of desistance research can be traced back to the work of Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck in the first part of the 20th century (e.g. [Glueck & Glueck, 1940](#_ENREF_107), [1950](#_ENREF_108)). Their longitudinal study of 1000 American boys (500 delinquent and 500 non-delinquent) was the first to attempt to capture the entirety of male criminal careers, and therefore the first to look at how such careers ended. According to the Gluecks, desistance is fuelled by the effects of ‘maturation’, although later work using this body of research highlights the importance of informal social controls through work, marriage and military service ([Sampson & Laub, 1993, see below](#_ENREF_241)). Despite this important empirical contribution to desistance theory, the topic was largely ignored for the next few decades. However, as an aside in his evaluation of the criminal justice system in the USA, Glaser ([1969](#_ENREF_106)) observed that the desistance process often has a ‘zig-zag’ character, with relapses common in desisters’ accounts.

The first study specifically focusing on desistance came almost a decade after Glaser’s ([1969](#_ENREF_106)) small but significant contribution to the field. Meisenhelder’s ([1977](#_ENREF_189)) exploratory study on ‘exiting’ from criminal careers interviewed 20 non-professional male property offenders (whilst they were in prison) on their hopes and expectations for release. He found that prison was presented as a strong deterrent to future criminal activity, but also that a desire to ‘settle down’ with a family was evident in the sample. Such a finding strongly foreshadows the work of Sampson and Laub ([1993](#_ENREF_241)) in their discussion of informal social controls. A further qualitative input came from Neal Shover ([1985](#_ENREF_253)), who focused on a sample of male thieves, conducting an ethnographic study into their lives as a whole. Intentionally framed as a response to the idea of desistance as a choice (despite some other work to the contrary ([Shover & Thompson, 1992](#_ENREF_255))), Shover emphasised the constraints placed on the options (and contingent choices) available to those in the lower classes. He therefore highlighted the social and interactional nature of the desistance process. In addition, Shover expanded on the maturational explanation for desistance, indicating a number of specific ways in which getting older affected offenders' outlooks and lifestyles, such as being less audacious and recognising the pointlessness of time wasted in prison. Desisting thieves recalled advice dismissed by them many years later, and looked to pass on advice of their own to younger men in prison. Shover added a sombre thought in conclusion by noting that those in his sample that did desist were living basic, empty lives, and often died early due to effects of substance abuse or suicide. This nascent debate on the nature of desistance was augmented by a rational choice perspective from Cusson and Pinsonneault ([1986](#_ENREF_55)), who prioritised the role of agency and personal decision rather than that of social bonds by investigating ex-robbers’ reasons for deciding to give up crime rather than their changing social circumstances. From their interviews with 17 ex-armed robbers (and a number of autobiographies) they found that robbers made a voluntary decision never to return to prison. The process of making this decision involved experiencing a trigger (either shock or delayed deterrence from criminal justice sanctions), which then led to a time of crisis during which the robber reflected on their life and re-evaluated their goals. Cusson and Pinsonneault also identified the experience of 'backsliding' within their sample, where money problems or boredom triggered a return to offending. Similarly to Cusson and Pinsonneault's application of rational choice theory to desistance, other general theories of crime began to also draw out implications for desistance. Gottfredson and Hirschi ([1990](#_ENREF_111)), for example, argued that lack of self-control was the basis of all criminality. They claimed that self-control was a stable construct, which was deliberately built up in childhood and then remained constant throughout the life course, and that therefore desistance did not fit at all with their theory. While they acknowledged that levels of crime committed by a person could fall despite their lack of self-control persisting, their overriding implication was that crime could only be prevented by early intervention, and not by offenders desisting.

While these insights emerged, Farrington and colleagues ([1991](#_ENREF_78)) had already (several decades earlier) started the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development in order to fill the gap for a detailed, quantitative and longitudinal study of the male criminal life course in England (which nevertheless refrained from focusing on desistance in any significant way). Meanwhile, Terrie Moffit ([1993](#_ENREF_198)) was questioning the fundamental assumptions of criminal career research, suggesting that research so far was in fact trying to explain two distinct types of criminal. Instead, she argued, adolescent-limited offenders would stop offending by early adulthood, and life-course persistent offenders would continue to offend as adults. This differentiation explained why most adolescent offenders did not continue offending but most adult offenders had committed crime as teenagers. The life course theory (see below) had specific consequences for desistance research: adolescent-limited offenders would desist when their social maturity 'caught up' with their biological maturity, and by social learning. In contrast, life-course persistent offenders would not be able to desist because they became trapped by the consequences of crime and by their failure to appropriate prosocial alternatives to offending. However, later research disputed Moffitt's theory - in particular her claims of there being only two types of criminal (instead finding six distinct groups) and her predictions of those groups' persistence in crime (which was found to be less pronounced than anticipated) ([Ezell & Cohen, 2005](#_ENREF_68)). Yet despite the failure to validate her theory in full, Ezell and Cohen's testing (2005) did support the identification of a group in which offending was limited to adolescence.

Meanwhile, efforts to study criminal careers – including those of women – in a more qualitative way were beginning to appear. Mary Eaton ([1993](#_ENREF_63)) gathered and analysed the life stories of 34 women who had been previously been convicted and imprisoned for at least one offence. She found that a number of social structures impeded women’s desistance, such as housing, employment markets, educational provision, social services, and health. However, Eaton also found that experiences of redirection, recognition and reciprocal relationships aided desistance. In New Zealand, Julie Leibrich ([1993](#_ENREF_152)) embarked on a study with similar aims through her interviewing of a random sample of male and female probationers. Unfortunately, her examination of both male and female desistance initially added little to theory beyond a general assertion that some factors encouraged people away from crime and some encouraged them towards a pro-social life. She later argued that ‘reintegrative shaming’ (along the lines of Braithwaite ([1989](#_ENREF_24))) could play an important role in promoting desistance ([Leibrich, 1996](#_ENREF_154)) but did not develop her findings much further or relate them to the gender of her participants.

**Life Course Models**

Throughout the initial development of desistance theory, the explicit use of life course models varied. These models look more broadly at the lives of individual offenders, and focus on the changes in criminal behaviour that are linked to developmental processes and stages ([Belknap & Holsinger, 2006](#_ENREF_13); [McAra & McVie, 2012](#_ENREF_173); [Smith, 2007](#_ENREF_260)), rather than focusing tightly on the desistance process per se. As such, they take a longitudinal approach, following participants through many years of their lives ([McAra & McVie, 2012](#_ENREF_173); [Smith, 2007](#_ENREF_260)) and concentrate on the nature and position of life events within the life course, and how they particularly affect social development ([Sampson & Laub, 1993](#_ENREF_241)) - although some take a bio-psycho-approach more broadly ([McAra & McVie, 2012](#_ENREF_173)). While such a model naturally includes discussion of desistance from crime, it is not clear that it is necessary to take such an approach in order to specifically examine that part of the life course that encapsulates the desistance process.

Different authors in the field take different approaches as to whether a life course perspective is appropriate or necessary in the study of desistance. For the early theorists in the field, the question of whether their desistance study took a life course approach was not even considered as relevant to their research ([Meisenhelder, 1977](#_ENREF_189); [Shover, 1985](#_ENREF_253)). Later, some explicitly rejected a life course approach, claiming instead that underlying influences on desistance were stable in time ([such as self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990](#_ENREF_111))), that desistance was centred upon rational decisions that did not require investigation of developmental transitions ([Cusson & Pinsonneault, 1986](#_ENREF_55)) or that the cognitive shifts necessary for desistance were not tied to age or life stages and that the causes of desistance should be looked at separately from the causes of offending ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)). However, once Sampson and Laub (1993) embraced this approach (using vast volumes of longitudinal data to examine the whole life course of offenders and not just the period of time that encompassed desistance), the debate became more visible. Yet much of the more recent research in the field (see below) offers no strong argument either way, viewing life course perspectives as useful, but not the only way of investigating aspects of desistance ([Farrall, 2005](#_ENREF_72); [Gadd & Farrall, 2004](#_ENREF_89); [Paternoster & Bushway, 2009](#_ENREF_218)). Still others are prevented from taking a life course approach by the nature of their data, when long term longitudinal studies are not attempted ([for example, Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20)) or participants are recruited after too many developmental stages have already passed ([for example Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)). Overall, my approach has been equivocal, using both life course studies and non-life course studies where their contributions prove helpful to the understanding of desistance, and my identification of the most significant theories to the field in the next section reflects this openness, including research from both perspectives.

**Theoretical Development**

While early studies provided some insight into the experience of desistance, the theorizing of desistance only really gathered momentum towards the end of the century. Academic discourse then began to suggest how desistance may unfold as a process in someone’s life, instead of merely identifying discrete (though important) factors. I contend that the studies which follow encompass the most detailed, rigorous and important additions to desistance theory, as it now stands. Of course, there are other studies which make important additions to the understanding of desistance (e.g. [Barry, 2006](#_ENREF_7); [Farrall, 2000](#_ENREF_70); [Healy, 2013](#_ENREF_120); [Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)), but they do not impact *theory* in the same significant way as those explored in detail below. I therefore consider four theories that have the most to contribute in understanding the data at hand. In doing so I cover research that relies on studies of the whole life course ([Sampson & Laub, 1993](#_ENREF_241)), research that does not consider the specific relevance of life course research as a category to desistance ([Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)), research that explicitly rejects the need to track developmental stages in order to understand desistance ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)), and research that relies on data which necessarily excludes a life course perspective ([Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20)). Further, these four studies make significant headway in creating an integrated theory which includes both structural and personal factors, considering both social and psychological influences on the desister and how their own agency impacts on their experiences. Importantly, they all show deep appreciation of desistance as a flexible process (see Chapter 1) rather than a static end-point. It is these theories that build the foundation and framework for many of the more recent emerging developments which I consider at the end of the chapter.

**Sampson and Laub, Crime in the Making (**[**1993**](#_ENREF_241)**) and Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives (**[**2003**](#_ENREF_149)**)**

Sampson and Laub’s life course theory is based on the empirical data of Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck ([1950](#_ENREF_108)), which followed a huge cohort of 1000 American boys from age 14 to age 32 (age 45 in some cases) during the first half of the 20th century – one half of whom started the study as ‘delinquent boys’. The authors also follow up many of these men themselves to age 70 in their second work ([Laub & Sampson, 2003](#_ENREF_149)). From these two studies, Sampson and Laub have gathered an exceptional amount of quantitative and qualitative data, and the longitudinal base of their work is hitherto unmatched in desistance research. They base their analysis on trajectories (long-term paths), transitions (shorter periods containing important life events) and turning points (a transition that causes a trajectory change). While not originally their intention, the authors recognise in later works ([Sampson & Laub, 2005](#_ENREF_242)) that their theory tends to discuss 'turning points' as discrete events rather than a collection of processes. In addition, they have been criticised for downplaying the importance of context in the workings of specific processes, and for biasing respondents to talk in terms of 'turning points' by asking specifically about them where respondents would not naturally pinpoint such discrete moments in time ([Carlsson, 2012](#_ENREF_43)). It has also been suggested that their idea of 'turning points' is due to the use of data with long gaps between interviews, rather than a true reflection of the desistance process ([Gadd & Farrall, 2004](#_ENREF_89)). Nevertheless, they claim to be sensitive to the impact of social structures and social history, and look at the impact of large-scale societal events, such as the Great Depression and the Second World War. While social structures are examined and explicitly included in the theory, unfortunately the aim of examining the impact of social history is largely swamped by a focus on meso-level social factors (such as family formation and employment), with little mention of macro-level events in the analysis and discussion.

Family factors

Crime in Adulthood

Employment factors

Structural variables

Family factors

Crime in Adolescence

School factors

Informal social control features:

**Figure 3.1:**

**Sampson and Laub’s Theory**

Sampson and Laub’s analysis is grounded in informal social control theory, which attributes the cause of criminal activity to when actors’ bonds to society are weak or have been broken.[[9]](#footnote-9) It is then, the theory claims, that a social group cannot effectively regulate itself to avoid crime and ‘social control’ fails. Therefore, the research focuses on the role of informal social relations as the source of social capital (Figure 3.1). The authors describe the amount of social capital available within a particular relationship as being dependent on the extent to which interdependence is present within that relationship, with more interdependence indicating a stronger and therefore more important relationship. As the importance of particular relations varies according to certain qualities (such as the strength and felt benefits of those relations), it is therefore a natural consequence that bonds to society vary over the life course, affected by both the informal social relations that one experiences at different periods, and the qualities of those relations.

In the teenage years, the authors claim, it is primarily familial and school factors that mediate the effect of other structural variables and so produce offending youth where background factors would predict no offending, or non-offending youth where other background factors predict a high likelihood of offending. In contrast, structural factors only have an indirect effect, through the influence they have on family and school variables. Of particular salience among these variables appear to be levels of family socialisation, school attachment, and the influence of delinquent siblings and friends. As adults, Sampson and Laub claim that the important factors in social control become family and employment variables, and especially the quality, strength and interdependence of those links rather than their timing or discrete events (such as gaining a job or getting married). This is an important point to highlight, as most events are not completely removed from a surrounding social and personal context. At the very least, gaining a job requires having some skill or experience, and being able to be successfully interviewed or socially interact with a prospective boss, with some anticipation of gaining a benefit from the job, while getting married depends on meeting a suitable partner, having some resources, and intending to support each other for the foreseeable future – neither of which can be described as discrete events. In summing up their theory, the authors note that many causal influences are actually interactional. This insight is further built upon in their 2003 work, which explains that personal agency is important in desistance, although the details of these interactions are left relatively unexamined.

Generally, it seems that by focusing on social capital, Sampson and Laub necessarily ignore the potential role of other capitals – such as financial or human capital – in the desistance process. In addition, the theory rests on a further assumption – that criminal ‘propensity’ remains stable throughout the life course. The obvious issue with this statement is the ambiguous use of ‘propensity’, which is left undefined and asserted as though it is a particular innate characteristic without further explanation. While Sampson and Laub tentatively link this to ‘self-control’, this does not much aid the definition of propensity, as it is still unclear from their own theory how one gains their particular level of self-control. It is further unclear whether this is a particular form of self-control which is pertinent only to offending or whether it refers to general willpower. There seems to be no place in the theory for an unbridled desire to break the law where the offender exhibits self-control in other situations. More fundamentally, the assumption that there is any underlying characteristic, predisposing the commission of criminal behaviour, that remains at the same level throughout one’s whole life, seems completely unwarranted (for example, this assumption is not even tested in the study) and borders on a form of biological determinism.

Having only studied men, it may be that desistance occurs differently for women in a number of areas of Sampson and Laub’s theory, and there is some evidence that the theory does not explain women’s desistance as adequately as that as of men ([Katz, 2000](#_ENREF_139)). For example, women, with their traditionally greater role in caring for children and others, might experience more relationships where the other is dependent on them. Therefore, it might be that those carer relationships are equally effective in promoting desistance without providing social capital in the same way as through interdependence, through for example changing motivations or reducing physical opportunity for offending. It is likely that a mother-child relationship could be very strong and important to the mother despite the child being completely dependent on her. Whether social capital can be perceived by only one party to a relationship is therefore a question remaining unexamined. In addition, Sampson and Laub do not provide a model for desistance from crime where a destruction of harmful social bonds is needed for success, such as where a woman needs to break ties with an abusive partner before she is able to desist from her own offending behaviour. It is unknown whether the breaking of that bond would be sufficient or whether other, pro-social relations must also be fostered. Similarly, the authors do not consider the effects of strong, interdependent bonds to delinquent peers. Later research has found that strong bonds to such individuals increases criminal behaviour, and does not reduce it ([Warr, 1993](#_ENREF_279)).

The identification of particularly pertinent social factors in the offending of the men in Sampson and Laub’s sample raises the question of whether these variables mask a more fundamental variable or process at work (such as internal feelings of belonging, confidence, or agency). Similarly, the authors again fail to consider the internal effect of the social ties, such as impact on confidence or identity, and thus risk missing identifying relevant internal processes. Of particular relevance at this point is McCord’s ([1994](#_ENREF_174)) criticism that the authors seem to forget that social variables are partly due to some of the participants’ characteristics and choices – that they are not purely products of chance. This oversight weakens their conclusion that it is social control, and not individual characteristics and choices, which promotes desistance. The theory as a whole could have benefitted much from a deeper investigation into this interaction between social variables and other processes. In particular, it is regrettable that they do not further explore the complications that come with alcohol misuse, despite their acknowledging that it seems to encourage poor marriages and employment instability. The use of the data to explore this particular aspect of offending may have offered some valuable insights into interactions present in the case of alcohol misuse, and hinted towards interactions in offending and desistance more generally. It is likely that some of these effects are transferable to the more modern problem of drug misuse, although this issue is not present in the data. Sampson and Laub also suggest that their participants’ reactions to crime varied depending on their age. It would be interesting to know what sort of reactions this refers to (emotional, moral?) and whether age is here a proxy for another concept such as maturity or stage of desistance.

Unfortunately the use of the Gluecks’ data prevented the authors from considering what happens in the transition period between adolescence and adulthood (which generally occurs at a younger age for women). However, it is recognised by Sampson and Laub that the transition is important to investigate, since most children who behave anti-socially in their study do not become deviant adults, although few deviant adults have not got a history of childhood anti-social behaviour. This is indeed a useful observation which highlights the importance of prospective longitudinal work.

Sampson and Laub’s theory was pioneering in highlighting the importance of social variables in offending and desistance. Its use of data only on men, however, questions its relevance to women. Also, the theory is unquestionably hampered by its failure to consider the interactions between variables themselves (for example, how employment impacts on the quality of family relationships), and also by its shallow examination of internal factors such as personal agency. The lack of depth in some areas of the theory can perhaps be attributed to its presentation as a ‘life course’ theory, and therefore not one which focuses exclusively on desistance, but instead one that looks for unifying variables to explain both onset of, and desistance from, offending. Finally, the extent of the relevance of the study’s findings to contemporary culture is unclear (despite the authors’ claims to the contrary), since the nature of institutions such as work and (particularly) marriage have significantly changed since the original collection of data ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)).

**Maruna, Making Good (**[**2001**](#_ENREF_168)**)**

In a study based on ex-offenders’ accounts of their desistance, Maruna makes an important contribution in identifying the various components of desisters’ stories. While providing a detailed and thorough analysis of the narratives he collected, he is consistently aware of the limitations of his work, thus producing a robust and convincing contribution to desistance research. Maruna’s theory of redemption scripts is strictly concerned more with how desisters describe their desistance than precisely how that desistance occurs. Nevertheless, it is sometimes mistakenly assumed to be a general theory of desistance. Since it is based on retrospective narratives, from interviews conducted only once with each participant, Maruna is unfortunately unable to consider how a former offender shifts from giving a narrative consistent with a ‘persister’ to one consistent with a ‘desister’. He is clear that the two narratives differ in some important ways (see below), but is prevented from examining how the process of desistance in itself changes how the narratives are presented. Nevertheless, his study of narratives holds some key implications for how desisters formulate and present their stories.

Maruna argues that desisters present logical, coherent desistance narratives in order to justify the change that they have experienced. In recognising this presentation, he makes the important point that someone’s narrative is not the full truth of their story. In a review of Making Good, Gadd ([2003](#_ENREF_87)) notes how this is a crucial awareness in criminology, recognising the work of reinterpretation and reworking of accounts. Maruna explains that the narratives consist of a number of small, internally logical changes in attitude and behaviour, so that the eventual desistance is seen as a natural consequence of the story. Such ‘narrative logic’, it is argued, is needed to preserve the desister’s sense of a continuing identity throughout the process of desistance. However, due to his methods, Maruna is unable to identify how much of this narrative coherency is present as a post-hoc rationalisation, and how much is representative of the actual desistance process. It is also necessarily unclear to what extent this presentation is a conscious effort to explain past experiences as consistent. Maruna does mention that membership of particular organisations (for example Narcotics Anonymous) seems to lead to a shared ‘script’, where members describe their experience in similar ways, but he does not consider whether the very participation in the criminal justice system has similar effects. Therefore, the reader cannot be sure how much conscious work a desister has completed in producing their narrative, and so is left ignorant of how desistance actually happens and is experienced in the present.

The narratives of desisters, described as ‘redemption scripts’, are described by Maruna as having five main aspects (Figure 3.2). The first is an effort to prove the desister’s essential ‘good’ or ‘normal’ character. Linked to this aspect is the presentation of past offending as a trap for the desister – something they were stuck in through little fault of their own. This is done by reference to feelings, impulses, attributes or identities, which point to a fundamentally non-criminal nature, that the desister had while still offending. The narrator can therefore foreshadow their eventual redemption throughout their offending. It is unclear whether this device is employed for narrative purposes, whether it is a true reflection of reality, or whether it serves other functions. Gadd ([2003](#_ENREF_87)) questions whether this core self is as coherent and complete as it is presented in accounts, showing that the self is in need of more thorough conceptualisation. Maruna suggests that the reference to a ‘good’ innate self prevents the desister being disabled by shame and guilt. Such a conclusion is supported by narratives that refer to the group nature of earlier offending (‘everyone was doing it’) and widespread denial of being a ‘common criminal’ (‘but others are much worse than me’).[[10]](#footnote-10) These assertions do seem to reject guilt and deflect shame, but perhaps female offenders and others with a shorter criminal record would achieve this by offering more offence-based excuses and justifications (with a shorter record, they may be able to offer exculpatory reasons for each offence, whereas Maruna’s sample had extensive offending histories). Conversely, Sharpe ([2011](#_ENREF_248)) found that most of the girls she interviewed in fact presented similar accounts to Maruna's desisters. While Maruna thinks that some of this discourse is part of the desisters wanting to make a good impression, he fails to consider in detail exactly why the desister wants to present themselves to others as being basically ‘good’. It is also possible that this representation is a true account of how the desister felt while offending rather than merely a presented account. However, this cannot be reliably tested without asking offenders how they are currently feeling and thinking, and then following them through their lives until they stop offending. It may be that female desisters feel that they were ‘trapped’ in offending more specifically by the relationships that they had (social, familial or intimate) rather than the behaviour itself (see Chapter 8).

**Figure 3.2:**

**Maruna’s Theory**

Being liberated to be true (essentially good) self

Outside force believing in offender

Generativity

Proving essential goodness of character

Past offending as a trap

Narrative logic

Desistance rituals

The next two aspects of a redemption script are similarly linked. The intervention of some outside ‘force’ who has faith in the desister is presented as a necessary preliminary for the desister to be ‘freed’ from the trap of offending and able to take control of their own life, being who they ‘always were inside’. In this account, it is hard to see the place of continued interpersonal support, and female offenders may therefore experience this aspect more as a repeating cycle of affirmation, increased self-confidence and taking a little more control over their lives. In fact, Maruna found his desisters tended to have an inflated view over how much control they really have over their lives, and presented themselves as over-achievers in whichever new path they were taking. The apparent importance of agency in qualitative accounts has led some researchers to conclude that a belief in personal agency is a necessary component of desistance, allowing desisters to take presented opportunities with a belief in success or producing perseverance despite hardship ([Healy, 2013](#_ENREF_120); [LeBel et al., 2008](#_ENREF_150)). It may be that this focus on control is a product of the criminal justice contacts that desisters have with police, judges, prison officers and probation. Such contact, because of the nature of the legal focus behind these interactions, may focus on the culpability that offenders have for their crimes, thus inducing a ‘script’ that is based on personal agency and responsibility. Given the low self-esteem of many female offenders ([Davidson, 2011](#_ENREF_57); [Worrall, 1990](#_ENREF_292)), it is questionable whether some ever experience such apparently high levels of control over their lives. However, desisters may later impose more purpose and meaning to their first attempts at desistance than they were aware of at the time. Rumgay ([2004](#_ENREF_238)) suggests that an increase in personal agency follows a successful claim to a new identity, and therefore does not appear until later in the desistance process. The description of previous hardship and suffering as necessary for desisters’ own benefit or character development certainly suggests such post-hoc rationalisation. However, it cannot be denied that small achievements would provoke more positive feelings when nothing had previously been achieved than to a generally successful person, or that difficult circumstances can grow character traits such as understanding and patience. Therefore such accounts of the positives of suffering cannot be totally dismissed as fabricated or as rationalisation because an optimistic person may genuinely foresee such benefits.

The final part of Maruna’s redemption script is a desire to ‘give something back’ by engaging in some sort of generativity – creating or producing something – and especially something which benefits the next generation. While portrayed as flowing from gratitude, it seems that the satisfaction function of being productive in some way is the key feature. Desisters link this aspect to gaining fulfilment from a particular role or activity, and with women especially this may well manifest itself in family commitments and becoming a good mother or carer. The tendency recorded by Maruna of desisters portraying their desisting selves as ‘hyper-moral’ could hypothetically be mirrored by desisting women with children being extra-vigilant about their children’s behaviour and morality. It is more questionable whether the noted satisfaction in learning the value of money is transferable to desisters who did not commit acquisitive crimes or who are unable to find employment or are otherwise reliant on benefits. It might be that learning the value of money is only satisfying when that money is honestly earned in a new job. A further outlet for generativity is in the role of ‘professional ex-‘, where the desister works or volunteers with offenders or those at risk of offending in an effort to mentor them away from crime. Maruna notes that sometimes this is through dissatisfaction at how the criminal justice system previously treated the desister, which in turn fosters a desire to improve that system. With other desisters, this activity is more based on a desire to help others to improve their lives. It remains to be seen how common this aspect is for desisting women, especially given the prominent role in caring for families and housekeeping that they may have, which could reduce the amount of time they have available for such activities. The presence of children in some desisting women’s lives might focus their generative efforts on their own children rather than others less involved in their everyday lives.

A part of Maruna’s theory which is not explicitly placed within the chronology of a script is the idea of desistance rituals, where desisters present an unanticipated, deserved (in their eyes), formal acceptance of the authenticity of their desistance as proof that they have changed. This idea is frequently echoed elsewhere in the literature, with Eaton ([1993](#_ENREF_63)), Baskin and Sommers ([1998](#_ENREF_10)) Rumgay ([2004](#_ENREF_238)) and Gadd ([2006](#_ENREF_88)) all highlighting the importance to desisters of gaining recognition from others that their reformed behaviour is now acceptable, though there is no agreement to whether this must be ‘formal’ or not. A method of recognising the genuine change that the desister has experienced, it is unclear where these rituals fit within the desistance process. Baskin and Sommers ([1998](#_ENREF_10)) place their equivalent concept of ‘discontinuance’ after an initial catalyst to desist but before the start of the maintenance process, but it seems that these concepts do not make sense if strictly sequential. It might be that a recognition forms the ‘outside force’ that initiates an internal ability to desist (see above), but if so, it is unclear what is being recognised. Alternatively, if such a ritual comes during the generativity phase, it is not clear what purpose it serves for the desister. Consequently, Maruna does not explain what such a ritual achieves in the desistance process. However, whether such an event really was significant for the desister or their efforts to desist, or whether it is just used to prove their credentials as a desister in a research study, is unknown.

In conclusion, while Maruna importantly never claims to be studying the actual process of desistance, using retrospective narratives – while useful and interesting in its own right – significantly limits what can be learnt about actually experiencing that process. Questions of rationalisation and presentation naturally undermine the accounts as a true picture of what was really experienced by desisters. Gadd ([2003](#_ENREF_87)) picks up on this point by arguing that a focus on one individual’s narrative would valuably illuminate the nature of subjectivity in desisters’ accounts. Such an examination, he argues, would be better able to explore the latent meanings of the narrative, and not just the obvious meanings as given by the narrator. He also advocates this approach as a way of exploring the interface between unique individual stories and the importance of common social narratives. Yet such an approach would not totally remove questions over rationalisation and presentation, and this is perhaps a problem that can never be completely overcome in desistance research. However, until further work which makes an attempt at minimising these problems appears, readers are ultimately challenged to restrict Maruna’s analysis to the narratives of desisters themselves, and not to the underlying process of desistance. In addition, despite including women in his sample, Maruna does not analyse his findings in relation to gender and so it remains to be seen to what extent (if any) his redemption scripts are gendered. Nevertheless, the processes and explanations first described by Maruna in this significant work provide excellent foundations for later desistance research.

**Giordano et al., Theory of cognitive transformation (**[**2002**](#_ENREF_102)**)**

Giordano and colleagues have published extensively over the last decade on various aspects of their cognitive transformation theory. The overview and basis of that theory is found in their 2002 article. Therefore, unless otherwise referenced, this is the article discussed below. The theory is split into four rough stages (openness to change, hooks for change, replacement self, redefinition of deviance) which are interrelated but nevertheless the authors generally expect the desister to progress through each one in turn. They do mention that the second stage (the presence of a hook for change) may foster the first (an openness to change), but fail to consider how the stages might occur ‘out of order’ in any detail. Overall, theirs is a robust and impressive theory, based on a solid evidence base (over a hundred incarcerated girls and boys over a significant number of years, using both qualitative and quantitative measures). It is easy to see how their stages of cognitive transformation can apply to a variety of experiences, and so the theory remains flexible enough to account for the diversity of human life without sacrificing the generality which makes it theoretically helpful. The theory is additionally regularly explored in more detail, as the authors publish on related aspects of desistance (such as friends (2003) or emotions (2007)). Therefore, while I focus here on the shortcomings of the theory, the value of Giordano and colleagues' work to desistance theory is very great, and it is certainly the most helpful account of *women's* desistance experiences available to date given both the extensive sample and the gendered analysis of the data.

Replacement Self

Redefinition of Deviance

Openness to Change

Hooks for Change:

* Prison/treatment
* Religion
* Children
* Spouse
* Employment?

Particular potential for cognitive blueprints and social control

**Figure 3.3:**

**Giordano et al.’s Theory**

The first stage (Figure 3.3) is a state of ‘openness to change’. The desister is, or has become, willing to consider changing their lifestyle to one which does not involve offending. For such a seemingly important stage, this appears under-theorised. Despite admitting in later work ([Giordano et al., 2007](#_ENREF_104)) that openness can be fostered by the presence of a potential ‘hook’ (see below), and that this mechanism is dependent on how the individual desister perceives such a hook, it is rather unclear where such openness comes from. Giordano and colleagues give little thought to the impact of underlying personality, and thus it seems that some offenders will be in a perpetual state of being open to change due to their easy-going personalities. Others who are more closed-minded in general may need a serious and significant event before they are willing to consider change. Further, it is not clear precisely how ‘open’ one must be in order to fulfil this stage. Does it require a settled, conscious dissatisfaction, or would occasional doubts about an offending lifestyle suffice? Would persuasion by a friend that change was possible and desirable be enough, even if their argument was allowed to succeed purely through respect for them and did not actually convince the listener? Therefore, the actual content of an ‘openness to change’ appears under-investigated by Giordano and colleagues. In contrast, Rumgay ([2004](#_ENREF_238)) suggests that the content of what she calls a ‘readiness’ to change comes from a change in identity. She posits that having a criminal identity becomes disagreeable to the offender (through the risks, stresses or penal consequences attached to that identity), and the offender re-evaluates the benefits of a conventional lifestyle. It is added that this conflict in identity can produce strong feelings of shame in the offender. Therefore, it appears that an openness to change may encompass both cognitive and emotional aspects.

The second stage, on the other hand, is originally presented much more fully. ‘Hooks’ are explained by Giordano and colleagues as being a shorthand way of describing the processes around a particular factor that has the potential of being a prosocial force in an offender’s life, such as religion or children. They are used by desisters themselves in their own narratives as a linguistic shorthand and therefore used in a similar way by the researchers. The idea is that the many interactive processes involved in these ‘hooks’ are too complicated (and sometimes unknown to the desister in any case) to describe in full when used as part of the overall theory. While accepting that such a characterisation masks any agentic aspects of the involved processes, it seems that Giordano and colleagues, by using their shorthand, risk missing similarities and differences in processes at work under different hooks, and so may be missing fundamental and underlying ingredients of desistance. Nevertheless, the elements of some hooks (such as treatment and children) are examined in more detail. It may be that there are other hooks that could be used as a shorthand in addition to those specifically identified in the theory. Perhaps because the theory is largely based on women’s experiences, employment is briefly mentioned as a hook but not seen as particularly important and therefore not elaborated on. However, experiences of prison or ‘treatment’ (meant to encompass programmes that address criminogenic needs in general and not just purely medical or addiction problems) are examined in more detail for salient processes. Giordano and colleagues are clear that prison in itself has a limited effect as an effective hook for change, an impact they attribute to the focus prison has on the past. The implication is that experiences that dwell on past mistakes or regrets are often insufficient to provide enough impetus to change to an offender. It would be interesting to know which, if any, additional circumstances and processes are needed to make prison effective as a hook. Treatment, in contrast, appears to be more effective, despite being focused on remedying a past problem. This seems to be partly because of the provision, through courses, of new associations and friends – although exactly how this helps is not explicit. The other benefit specifically mentioned is the provision of a ‘cognitive blueprint’ – a guide about how to think and behave based on people or principles in the programme. Despite Rumgay’s ([2004](#_ENREF_238)) claim that the concept of ‘scripts’ is under-recognised within desistance theory, it seems that they are indistinguishable from Giordano and colleagues’ cognitive blueprints and that therefore her criticism is somewhat misplaced. Cognitive blueprints are apparently particularly prominent in organisations such as Narcotics Anonymous, where past addicts have a particular role in supporting and encouraging new desisters. Not dissimilarly, the hook of ‘religion’ is presented as providing prosocial friends, but again the benefit of this is left assumed and unexplained. In addition, the possibility of religion enabling positive emotions and better emotional coping is given as an explanation for its effectiveness. It is encouraging that the effects of both religion and emotions are separately investigated in more depth in other works by Giordano and colleagues ([2008](#_ENREF_103); [2007](#_ENREF_104)). [[11]](#footnote-11) The existence of a spouse/partner and children are also examined as hooks for change. Taken together, having both a spouse and children constituted what the authors described as a ‘gendered respectability package’. This can serve as proof to the outside world (and to the desister themselves) that the desister is a respectable, decent and ordinary person. In addition, the role of a parent or spouse has clear potential to provide a ‘cognitive blueprint’ of how to act and think. Yet the processes surrounding these hooks remain underexplored by the researchers. It is unclear how self-esteem fits with both respectability and cognitive blueprint aspects, and the potential importance of emotional support from partners, children, and the associations that form through these relations (other parents, partners’ friends and family etc.) are hardly mentioned. Further, little thought is given to the practical constraints of having a child or spouse, and whether these can be used in themselves as an excuse for a dissatisfied offender to stop offending – as offered to themselves or offending associates. Finally, it is interesting to consider why the presence of some openness to change and a hook such as a new baby may not be sufficient to initiate desistance, as a way of investigating what factors may have been ignored as essential for desistance under this theory.

The third stage of the cognitive transformation theory is the idea of a ‘replacement self’, a new person that the desister aims to become. Not confined to just a ‘cognitive blueprint’ (see above), a replacement self encompasses the desister’s very identity and not just their behaviour. While the cognitive blueprint outlines appropriate attitudes and actions, the replacement self sees the desister become a new, coherent, person. That new identity then gives some rationality to the new prosocial behaviours that the desister engages in, and allows them to make decisions in line with who the new person ‘is’. In Rumgay’s ([2004](#_ENREF_238)) account of desistance, she also prioritises potential replacement selves as a major source of an ‘opportunity’ to desist. It is unclear how much of this stage is due to a conscious decision to become a new person (or to return to a former incarnation of the desister themselves as, for example, a good daughter), and how much happens as an indirect result of a hook (e.g. a new baby requires the desister to be a good mother). It is also unclear how specific the new replacement self is: does it just involve being a general ‘good wife’, for example, or does it need to be referenced to a real person (e.g. a ‘good wife like Jenny’)? Under this line of inquiry, Rumgay ([2004](#_ENREF_238)) suggests that ‘global, skeleton’ identities are appropriated (such as ‘good mother’), but that the desister requires extra skill in creatively designing the details of those identities for a successful claim to that replacement self. While Giordano and colleagues stress the intrapersonal, reflective nature of this stage, it may be that the influence of others is important in forming and maintaining this replacement self. In particular, concerns of maintaining a new reputation amongst prosocial friends and family may prevent the abandonment of new identities when life becomes more challenging. In a later work focusing on the impact of friends, Giordano and colleagues ([2003](#_ENREF_101)) do note that friends can play an important reinforcing role at this stage, but whether this is through encouragement or the implied threat of shame from the potential loss of reputation is unknown. Baskin and Sommers ([1998](#_ENREF_10)) suggest that the maintenance of desistance is supported by both a success in claiming a new identity and the support of pro-social others. These factors may be more closely related: Rumgay ([2004](#_ENREF_238)) suggests that a pro-social support network and personal resilience are mutually re-enforcing, providing a desister with more resources to cope when their cognitive blueprint is challenged. However, neither Giordano nor Rumgay places the same importance on supportive relationships as Mary Eaton ([1993](#_ENREF_63)). Eaton includes the establishment of ‘reciprocal relationships’ as one of three main aspects of desistance, emphasising the equality newly experienced in such relationships. Yet while the extent of the impact of reciprocal relationships needs further investigation, Giordano and colleagues come by far the closest to recognising the potential importance of social relationships out of the major desistance theorists.

The fourth and final stage is the redefinition of deviance by the desister. Described as the “capstone” of desistance ([Giordano et al., 2002: 1002](#_ENREF_102)), this is where the desister comes to believe that offending is not a positive, viable or relevant possibility for them. They have therefore shifted their normative perspective of offending so that they will not voluntarily choose to offend under any foreseeable circumstance, and social control becomes irrelevant. The main problem with this stage is how it applies to those who offended while also believing it to be wrong and harmful – like those who are locked into a hated drug habit. It may be that, for a minority of ex-offenders, a redefinition of deviance is not needed because they originally offended due to circumstances largely outwith their control. It is questionable whether a redefinition of offending to ‘irrelevant’ (the circumstances prompting offending no longer exist) is on the same scale as one which redefines it to ‘harmful’. Similarly, experiencing desistance as gaining freedom (from drugs, or negative associations etc.) may not easily fit within this concept of redefinition.

While Giordano and colleagues assert that social structure is also important to the desistance process, they do not explain how it fits into their cognitive theory. The only hint to integration is their mention that the achievement of any stage is dependent on the opportunities and constraints that a particular desister faces, which is presumably partially dependent on how social structure affects them. Other challenges to a coherent theory come from later work, such as research on emotions ([Giordano et al., 2007](#_ENREF_104)), which describes the emotional aspect of the self as separate from cognitive and identity aspects. In this work, the authors explain how desistance is also linked to reduced negative emotions that had been connected with crime (such as anger), increased positive emotions, and greater skill in managing emotions. However, these themes are not applied to the cognitive transformation theory where they might be useful. For example, the creation of an artistic replacement self might provide an outlet for angry emotions and help the desister manage their negative emotions. Therefore, there is much potential for further work in linking the theory of cognitive transformation with discrete themes that Giordano and colleagues have explored in yet more detail.

**Bottoms et al., Towards Desistance (**[**2004**](#_ENREF_20)**)**

The theory developed by Bottoms and colleagues is based on the Sheffield Pathways Out Of Crime Study, which is a prospective longitudinal study looking at the desistance process in male recidivists aged 20. The study includes any significant lull (not explicitly defined in the 2004 work) in criminal behaviour as a valid time in which to study desistance for a number of reasons. First, the authors believe that it accords with the regular meaning of the word ‘desistance’, as defined in a dictionary. Secondly, they refer to other academics who assert the value of looking at such gaps in the study of desistance ([Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)). Finally, they disagree with some who differentiate between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ desistance on the basis that only ‘secondary’ desistance involves a change in identity. Bottoms and colleagues argue that such an identity change is not necessary for successful desistance, and may in fact lead to successful desisters being discounted from desistance studies due to their lack of identity change. This may be especially true in offenders who view their offending as an unfortunate consequence of their circumstances, and not as part of their identity as a person.

Five separate concepts make up Bottoms et al.’s theory (Figure 3.4), although some are partially examined together by the authors. These concepts are viewed as individually important influences in desistance from or persistence in offending. The first, ‘programmed potential’, is concerned with individual traits and characteristics that form traditional ‘risk factors’ for offending, such as those contained in an OGRS score.[[12]](#footnote-12) It is not claimed that these are individually the most important factors, but rather that since the power of these elements in predicting group offending has been proven to be reliable, they provide clues to the likelihood of individuals desisting.

Culture and habitus

Agency

Social Context

(Especially being at participants’ stage of life (~20 yrs old))

Desistance

Programmed potential

Social structures

Situational contexts

**Figure 3.4:**

**Bottoms et al.’s Theory**

Secondly, structures are highlighted as important in the desistance process. The authors concentrate on employment in this section, presumably due to the exclusively young male sample, and explain how employment can provide both opportunities and disadvantages to a desister. It would be interesting to see how they explain a structure that is equally, or especially, pertinent to women in desistance (given their frequent responsibilities as family carers and lower overall involvement in the job market). Thirdly, both ‘culture’ and ‘habitus’ are presented as two sides of the same influential aspect. Culture refers to the social world surrounding the desister, where the group nature of the environment encourages the sharing of certain assumptions, beliefs and behaviour. Habitus, on the other hand, refers to how culture affects the individual, where beliefs and assumptions picked up from the culture become internalised, long-standing dispositions, such as the beliefs about appropriate demonstrations of masculinity in the Sheffield study. Perhaps of particular pertinence to this concept is the authors’ discussion of communities. They explain that the different types of community as explained in Willmott ([1987](#_ENREF_289)) – territorial, interest and attachment (feeling a sense of belonging) are better described as ‘dimensions’ of a particular community, and are not mutually exclusive terms. It is also noted that it may be of interest to explore the social cohesion of particular communities to which potential desisters belong, as an extra attribute of those communities. I would add that the social cohesion must be examined from the perspective of the desister in addition to generally, in order to see whether a group is very close-knit and inclusive or very close-knit while leaving the desister feeling like an outsider. The fourth relevant concept is that of ‘situational contexts’, where the immediate circumstances of individual situations can affect whether or not offending occurs.

These three concepts are grouped together by the authors as the social context within which the offender finds themselves. Bottoms and colleagues spend some time in explaining the pertinent elements of the social context in which their participants find themselves, such as their lack of travelling experience but few tangible links to their current area. Such a description recommends itself as highlighting the shared social experiences of the sample, helping the reader to gain a fuller picture of the desisters’ world than simple interviews would enable. The authors are particularly keen to emphasise the social impact of being at their participants’ stage of life (20 years old). They note that the age-crime curve hints at the importance of the transition into adulthood, and stress that this encompasses structural and social aspects which deserve attention, and not just biological changes. In particular, they highlight that many of the structural aspects have undergone significant change within the last fifty years which might affect the shape of the desistance process.

The fifth and final concept explored by the authors is that of agency. They stress the importance of using appropriate methods when investigating desistance so as to take account of the potential influence of agency. Having emphasised that, they remind readers that actors do not possess the whole truth of their experiences, being constrained by a lack of self-awareness and limited awareness of their context and external influences. Yet Bottoms and colleagues are convinced that a study of agency is salient in research into desistance: they note that it is a crucial factor in determining guilt under much of the criminal law. They attempt to improve criminology’s efforts to define agency by noting the influence of concepts such as habitus on conscious choice, thus holding to a concept similar to Wikström’s description of the process of choice through a perceptual filter ([2010](#_ENREF_288)), where real choice is employed within the constraints of the agent’s morality, self-control and exposure to their environment. By combining the concept of habitus with that of agency, the authors address criticism levelled at Bourdieu for understating the importance of agency in his initial conception of habitus ([Farrall, Bottoms, & Shapland, 2010](#_ENREF_73)).

The inclusion of all five aspects in Bottoms and colleagues’ theory without an explanation of how they interact in time avoids the problems of sequencing subjective and structural factors chronologically. Instead, it allows the theory to hint at the dynamic and interactive processes that may shape the result of a combination of these influences ([Farrall & Bowling, 1999](#_ENREF_74); [LeBel et al., 2008](#_ENREF_150)). The authors are undertaking further empirical assessments of this theory, and their results will be awaited with interest.

Bottoms and colleagues conclude their theory by promoting concentration on three particular topics: conformity and the interplay between social attachments and agency. The first, a focus on conformity (as opposed to a focus on offending), they claim is needed because most people abide by the law for most of their lives. While this is undoubtedly true, the social good of protecting future generations from committing crime, and the negative consequences which follow – surely allows some investigation into the causes of offending so that they can be avoided. Similarly, an aim of helping those who have become ‘criminals’ become a prosocial part of society requires a study of the process from offending to desisting in a broader sense than just how one begins to comply with the law. Nevertheless, the issue of compliance is no doubt relevant in desistance. The second topic advocated by the authors is a deeper examination of the relationship between social attachments and agency. They explain that cognitive processes could precede or (even subconsciously) accompany behavioural changes in this context, or both, but that more research is needed to see which is the case in desisters. Finally, they suggest more use of network analyses, to see how changes in one relationship affect others. I would add that the opinions of friends and family about how the desistance process is happening in the desister may be of some use, as they may be able to provide some of the contextual awareness that the desister lacks (see above).

The final aspect of the theory that the authors highlight is the oscillation apparent in many desistance stories, and the idea that, because people value different activities and roles differently, there will be different ‘end points’ to different desisters’ processes. In elaboration, they question whether there is one, shared, conformity that desisters are aiming for (an ‘English Dream’), or whether there are a multiplicity of conformities that would form the end of the desistance process for different people. It remains to be seen whether such a large variation in aspiration exists for women, given their often traditional hope of becoming a ‘good mother’ (Katz, [2000](#_ENREF_139); [Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)).

**Emerging Insights into Internal Processes**

Since the publication of these influential theories, there have been a few notable additions to desistance research which deserve some more focused attention. These have been, in general, provoked as a reaction to Sampson and Laub's (2003) theory (focusing on structure) and instead build upon both Maurna (2001) and Giordano and colleagues' (2002) work (both focusing on individual experiences and narratives). Four of particular note are the work of Gadd ([2006](#_ENREF_88); [Gadd & Farrall, 2004](#_ENREF_89)), Vaughan ([2007](#_ENREF_277)), Paternoster and Bushway ([2009](#_ENREF_218)), and Farrall and colleagues ([2014](#_ENREF_76); [2011](#_ENREF_77)).

Gadd (2006; Gadd & Farrall, 2004) bases his work on psychoanalytic readings of individuals’ desistance narratives, so taking into account both conscious and unconscious processes. He aims to have a psychosocial approach, where he looks at both the internal thoughts of the individual and the role that wider social institutions have, as the individual sees them. Thus far, he has focused on a number of men’s narratives, allowing him to explore more deeply how desistance and the performance of masculinities interact. As such, he argues that some men’s desistance is heavily influenced by their gender, where they find it necessary to identify means by which they can still present themselves as ‘real men’ without their previous offending behaviour. For this to happen, Gadd explains the idea of ‘identification’, a process of being encouraged (perhaps unconsciously) to invest in a new identity (or aspect of identity). This investment protects men from experiencing shame and doubt linked to their precarious position in the social world. Yet Gadd emphasises that these investments can only be temporary, based as they are on other people’s reactions to the desister, and so they are also affected by wider social changes. The careful positioning of these inner dynamics of identification against broad social influences such as masculinities, combined with a serious consideration of the effects of gender on desisters, challenges research to take the intricacies of individual desistance narratives seriously without losing track of important structural influences.

Vaughan's central premise is that agency is more important to desistance than Laub and Sampson ([2003](#_ENREF_149)) suggested, and is in fact necessary to explain both the occurrence of turning points and endurance of trajectories. He suggests that an internal conversational narrative is needed for someone to explain the difference between their offending past and ideal future self. Within this narrative, the desister explains three stages: discernment, deliberation and dedication. Discernment covers roughly the same ground as Giordano et al.'s (2002) first two stages (openness to change and hook for change), and involves the desister reconsidering the choices that are available to them in comparison with the concerns they personally have (note this is explicitly not a broad cost-benefit analysis, but once specific to the desister's own concerns in their particular context). Deliberation is the comparison between who the desister is and who they wish to be, reflecting upon the advantages and disadvantages of change. The final stage, dedication, is where the desister has made a commitment to change and therefore reorders their concerns to allow for that change. With this suggested structure, Vaughan highlights the need for more qualitative longitudinal research, focusing on desisters' narratives themselves.

Paternoster and Bushway (2009) likewise focus on individual aspects of desistance, also partly as a response to Laub and Sampson's work. However, they focus on the role of identity in desistance - and specifically the contrasting roles of the current working identity in comparison to the possible positive or ‘feared’ self. Possible future selves are not purely works of imagination, but are instead moulded by the agent's environment and context. They contend that desistance does involve some intentional decision to change, but that a changing one's identity is a much slower process. While there is commitment to one's current working identity (as long as there is a net benefit), Paternoster and Bushway argue that dissatisfactions linked to that identity build up and are projected into a future, feared self. When these dissatisfactions build up, an identifiable event commonly acts as the final straw, triggering a decision to desist. Once that decision has been made, a (gradual) change in identity changes the desister's preferences, and it is particularly important at this stage that they strengthen their prosocial relationships. Overall, Paternoster and Bushway claim that negative, feared selves, are more likely to motivate change initially but cannot maintain desistance unless supplemented by positive resources.

In an attempt to synthesise some of these (and earlier) theories, Farrall and colleagues (2014, 2011) present an integrated theory of their own. In a complex and multi-layered model (2011: 226), they claim that macro-level structures, meso-level influences and individual agency can be combined to produce a more comprehensive picture of desistance. In neither relying too heavily on structural explanations, nor exclusively focusing in on individual-level processes, they avoid the over-simplification of some earlier theories. Instead, their model shows how influences as wide ranging as experiences of the criminal justice system, macro-level shocks (such as the recent economic recession) and ethnic background can affect someone’s desistance journey. In order to achieve this synthesis, Farrall and colleagues rely heavily on Mouzelis’ ([2008](#_ENREF_200)) work, which critiques and combines aspects of Bourdieu's ([1977](#_ENREF_21)) 'habitus' and Giddens’ ([1984](#_ENREF_98)) concept of the 'duality of structure'. The result is a theory of desistance which appreciates the importance of agentic actions of actors – actions which position the desister according to their perception of the structures around them, and which may, in turn, amend those perceptions. Therefore the theory goes some way in particularly examining the nature of agency in desistance, but also incorporates a wide variety of other influences that have shown to be significant in desistance.

**Desistance Theories in Summary**

From a slow beginning, kick-started by the Glueck's insights into the importance of maturational processes, desistance theory was initially based largely on small-scale qualitative studies. These began to consider the tension between choice and constraints in the complex process of desistance. As the life-course perspective grew in popularity, large amounts of quantitative and longitudinal data began to emerge, identifying (with varying success) different criminal career typologies and how they interacted with developmental processes. At this point in desistance theory development, four particularly influential theories, from various perspectives, made noteworthy progress in integrating personal and structural factors in their explanation of the process of desistance. Relying on a variety of methods, it is these studies that provided the foundation for the significant theoretical insights that have emerged since. [Laub and Sampson (2003)](#_ENREF_149) highlight the importance of quality informal social bonds to society and their interactions, but raise difficult questions about criminal propensity and the relative importance of internal factors such as agency. The role of narrative logic in the accounts of desisters is examined by Maruna (2001), highlighting the participant's need to preserve a sense of identity when recounting their life story. Yet how these narratives are constructed in the process of desistance, whether they are true reflections of experiencing desistance, and the role of other people in that experience could not be addressed in his study. Giordano and colleagues ([2002](#_ENREF_102)) are unusual in seriously considering the impact of gender and other people in desistance, and provide a useful outline of how change is experienced cognitively in desistance. However, there is space for a fuller consideration of how social structure influences that experience. Finally, Bottoms and colleagues ([2004](#_ENREF_20)) take a prospective approach, recognising the processual and oscillating nature of desistance in a group of young men. They highlight the need to examine the interplay between social attachments and agency more seriously.

More recent work has emphasised the need to look at both individual narratives and social influences on desistance ([Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76); [Gadd, 2006](#_ENREF_88)). To do this, Gadd (2006) takes a psychosocial approach, aiming to illuminate both conscious and unconscious processes. Vaughan ([2007](#_ENREF_277)), on the other hand, focuses on the role of the conscious through the identification of agency in internal narratives. The place of identity in desistance is elaborated on by Paternoster and Bushway ([2009](#_ENREF_218)), who contrast the motivating value of a possible positive self with that of a feared self, while also highlighting that positive resources are needed in addition to motivation for desistance to succeed. Lastly, Farrall and colleagues (2014) make significant progress in combining insights into agency (and other individual factors) with structural influences, especially by building on Bottoms and colleagues' ([2004](#_ENREF_20)) use of Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus.

Given these useful insights, it is clear that, despite recent progress, there is much work still to do in producing a comprehensive, understandable theory of desistance - and especially one that applies to women as much as to men. Yet before I turn to applying and critiquing these theories in my own research, there is a need to design more methodologically useful studies. I look at this consideration in the next chapter before introducing my own approach.

**Chapter 4: Methodology**

**Methodological Critiques**

Despite some important progress being made in qualitative desistance research over the last few decades, there is still much work outstanding. In particular, research methods in this area of desistance could be improved in three specific ways. First, interviews must be conducted nearer to the time during which the participants are experiencing desistance. Researchers need to concern themselves less about whether or not their participants are ‘true’ desisters and instead focus on capturing the process of desistance as it unfolds, in order to better prevent lapses and reconstructions of memory while participants share their past experiences. Second, an examination of the process of desistance necessitates wider use of follow-up interviews throughout that process. Gaps between such interviews should be reduced for similar memory-aiding reasons to above. Finally, interview questions and topics need to be more widely published to enable other researchers to examine exactly what has been asked and in what order. Such a practice would allow better identification of potential limitations of the resulting data. The efforts of researchers in achieving this quality in both the major empirically-derived desistance theories and qualitative work on women’s desistance are examined in the following section.

It is remarkably common for qualitative work to take place with desisters a relatively long time after they have experienced a desistance process. For example, participants in Taylor’s ([2008](#_ENREF_267)) and Sanders’ ([2007](#_ENREF_243)) studies had not been re-incarcerated for up to seven years, while other scholars interviewed ex-prisoners who had been in the community for a staggering twelve years ([O'Brien, 2001](#_ENREF_210)). Even those who interview much more recently after desistance (two years since last offence in Baskin and Sommer’s ([1998](#_ENREF_10)) study) seem to aim at capturing participants’ perceptions of the process a significant time after experiencing it ([Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10)). The research has therefore been preoccupied with guaranteeing that the participants have really desisted, leading to desistance being examined almost exclusively retrospectively. While this is understandable (especially when desistance studies admit that many of their participants are still committing (minor) crime, encouraging the reader to question whether they are truly desisting ([Haigh, 2009](#_ENREF_113))) it does leave desistance findings at risk of being modified by flaws in participants’ memory. As Graham and Bowling ([1995](#_ENREF_112)) highlight, interviews about a long past process are even more prone to reconstruction, improvisation and speculation in participants’ accounts. Of course, such modification is possible even if accounts are given during a process, but at least some can be minimised by reducing gaps between experience and accounts. Therefore, if researchers are truly concerned with understanding desistance as a process, future research must look at the experiences of those who are currently going through desistance. Inevitably this will mean that more participants re-offend during the course of desistance research, but given the well-recognised zigzag nature of desistance ([Glaser, 1969](#_ENREF_106)), where backsliding is relatively common, this need not invalidate the research itself.

For an area of criminology which claims to be a process, it is almost unbelievable that so few repeat interviews and longitudinal studies look at the process of desistance (but no doubt due to a lack of available resources). The Gluecks’ famous longitudinal study ([Glueck & Glueck, 1950](#_ENREF_108)), and Sampson and Laub’s analysis and expansion of that work ([Laub & Sampson, 2003](#_ENREF_149); [Sampson & Laub, 1993](#_ENREF_241)), which exclusively follow men, was for a long time the only longitudinal study available. However, there has been a recent surge in longitudinal desistance work (for example, see [Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20); [Burnett, 1992](#_ENREF_31); [Farrall, 2000](#_ENREF_70); [Farrall & Calverley, 2006](#_ENREF_75); [Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76); [Farrall et al., 2011](#_ENREF_77)). In terms of longitudinal studies of female desistance, research is rare, but the Ohio Lifecourse Study ([Giordano et al., 2003](#_ENREF_101); [Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Giordano et al., 2008](#_ENREF_103); [Giordano et al., 2007](#_ENREF_104)) and Leverentz ([2006](#_ENREF_155), [2011](#_ENREF_156), [2014](#_ENREF_157)) are particularly impressive examples of diligent and repeated follow-ups of female participants for further interviews while also considering the impact of their gender on desistance.[[13]](#footnote-13) While Giordano and colleagues are to be praised for their commitment to longitudinal data, and all the rich data that they collected, their repeat interviews are at intervals of 13, nine, and five years- not ideal for investigating the progress of the desistance process as it happens. Andrea Leverentz, on the other hand, conducts between one and four interviews over the course of a year with her 49 American participants, giving her a much better idea of how desistance develops in their lives. However, gaps of between three and four months could still be reduced further in future research to investigate the desistance process even closer to the present experiences of participants.

Understandably, the limitations on space in the publication of academic work have led to many authors excluding any detailed information on the content of the interviews they have conducted. Within these constraints, the better research briefly details the topics covered at interview (e.g. [Arditti & Few, 2008](#_ENREF_2); [Farrall, 2000](#_ENREF_70); [Sanders, 2007](#_ENREF_243)), or refers to using ‘life histories’ (e.g. [Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Sampson & Laub, 1993](#_ENREF_241)). Unfortunately, a combination of this lack of information and the nature of semi- or un-structured interviews makes it naturally difficult for the reader to identify how the order and content of the questions might have affected the responses given. For example, when Sampson and Laub ([1993](#_ENREF_241)) ask a specific question in their interviews about experiences of ‘turning points’, it is hardly surprising that those ‘turning points’ emerge as an important aspect of their theory - and indeed others have found that when desisters are not specifically asked about 'turning points', they do not use the concept in their narratives ([Carlsson, 2012](#_ENREF_43)). Leading questions like this are not always avoidable, but it would be better for researchers to be transparent about when they are used in order to alert the reader to potential limitations of the data caused by interview questions. Potential limiting of data is also possible more indirectly when mixed method approaches are used, with earlier quantitative survey questions possibly jeopardising the validity of later qualitative enquiries by pre-preparing participants to discuss or ignore certain topics ([see, for example, Taylor, 2008](#_ENREF_267)). Of course such potential influence on data cannot simply be removed by conducting qualitative work before quantitative, as the potential for previous questions to affect later responses will just be moved so that what is talked about in interview unduly affects survey responses. Nevertheless, it would be useful to know what information is conveyed to the participants through the researchers’ questions so that reader is at least aware of the potential limitations of the data and so can evaluate the research accordingly.

In summary, there is a great need for desistance research that follows participants through the process of desistance as it happens. This approach will reduce the time between desistance occurring and the research of desistance, and will also allow the investigation of desistance experiences as they unfold over time. In doing this type of longitudinal research into desistance, care is needed in presenting methodologies with clarity to allow for proper academic scrutiny. With these methodological requirements in mind, I now present my own methodology for this project.

**Aims of the Study**

My central aim in this study is to examine how women experience life as they desist from crime. Chapter 2 showed the potential for a better understanding of women's desistance, in contrast to desistance in general, and so I endeavour to identify the important aspects of the process of desistance for women and to understand how they function and interact. Within this broad aim, I have twin foci: looking at women’s desistance in general, and looking at desistance as it is experienced. These aims enable me to investigate some particular themes within desistance in detail. In particular, I am able to elaborate concepts of social support, identity and agency. These themes were selected because of their relevance in the literature as examined in Chapters 2 and 3, and because they were themes that became prominent throughout early interviews (see below).

Despite progress in understanding the complexity of desistance processes in the last couple of decades, many of the most important contributions either exclude women from their sample ([Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20); [Sampson & Laub, 1993](#_ENREF_241); [Shover, 1996](#_ENREF_254)) or refrain from analysing desistance by gender ([Farrall, 2002](#_ENREF_71); [Leibrich, 1993](#_ENREF_152); [Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)). Therefore I focus exclusively on women, to ensure I gain an understanding of what desistance is like for women, and do not cloud their experiences by virtue of a corresponding, larger, male sample. Moreover, a study of women seemed to be a good opportunity for elaborating on research identifying the importance of social support ([Arditti & Few, 2008](#_ENREF_2); [Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Cobbina, 2010](#_ENREF_47); [Eaton, 1993](#_ENREF_63); [Leverentz, 2011](#_ENREF_156), [2014](#_ENREF_157)), due to women’s many social connections and frequent status as both the provider and receiver of social support.

In addition to offering a desistance study of women, I aim to remedy a neglect of the cross-sectional study of the process of desistance in the present. It is most common for qualitative studies to interview participants at least one year after their last conviction, missing out many important months of experiencing desistance (see Chapter 4). This leaves accounts at the mercy of memory flaws, and unintentional reconstruction and speculation ([Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112); [Leibrich, 1994](#_ENREF_153)), which could be greatly reduced by interviewing participants during this period. It is my intention that looking at desistance as it is experienced will minimise assumptions about the nature of a desistance experience (see further the section on Sampson and Laub in Chapter 3). Instead, I will be able to trace the construction and development of processes potentially related to desistance - such as identity formation - as they occur ([Soyer, 2014](#_ENREF_264)). The only qualitative study of women’s desistance which manages to re-interview its participants during the desistance process itself ([Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)) is limited by fairly long gaps of 3-4 months between interviews and its sample which is heavily Chicagoan African-American and therefore potentially of limited relevance to other women, and those outside that ethnic and regional category (just as my study is of limited relevance to those who are not white and from the north of England). Interviewing women at gaps of only a few weeks will give a better idea of how the process (and specifically the early stages) unfolds in day-to-day life, and what is important in the present in encouraging desistance. There are also some specific ideas within desistance theory that can be better investigated through looking at women’s everyday experiences. Existential aspects of the desistance process, such as notions of identity, highlighted in Chapter 2 as important to desistance in general, are often explored by research that interviews desisters after they have experienced a long period of desistance ([Farrall, 2005](#_ENREF_72); [Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)). However, this poses the question of whether desisters are aware of these aspects as they experience desistance, or whether they only become apparent after the fact. Additionally, retrospective accounts may find it difficult to explain how existential themes interact with other parts of experience, such as interventions, in the everyday. Alternatively, these interplays may only become evident after some time for reflection. In either case, concepts of agency and how they may be related to desistance ([e.g. Bottoms, 2006](#_ENREF_18)) can be illuminated through focusing on current experiences.

Bearing all these aspects in mind, my research questions are:

- How do women experience desistance from crime?

- What positively and negatively influences continued desistance from crime in women?

- How do different influences interact in participants’ lives? Specifically, how do existential aspects such as identity interact with external opportunities and situations?

- How agentic is the process of desistance in women’s lives as experienced in the present?

- What are the precise impacts of interpersonal support given to desisters? What types of support have particular significance and why?

**Epistemological and Theoretical Framework**

In general, I have assumed that what I was told by participants approximated to reality as they experienced it and was reasonably trustworthy. Where this is questioned by other data from themselves or others I have also questioned the trustworthiness of the data and aim to communicate that questioning in my writing. I have also tried to remain aware of society-level influences that might have purchase on my participants but of which they remain unaware ([Calverley, 2013](#_ENREF_39); [Farrall & Bowling, 1999](#_ENREF_74); [Sampson & Laub, 1993](#_ENREF_241)). In addition, I am interested in the meanings and values that participants place on things, whether consciously or not, so have analysed their words (and the limited behaviour that was available to me to observe) with the assumption that some such meanings and values do exist for them and can be communicated through their data ([J. Miller & Glassner, 2004](#_ENREF_193)). I have been influenced by Devault’s ([1990](#_ENREF_59)) work on language and women’s standpoints, which highlights the differences and tensions between women’s experiences and the language used in research (and elsewhere). I have therefore attempted to be aware of any ‘translation’ work, where participants lack the vocabulary to make sense of their experiences. Consequently, I have preserved the ‘messiness’ of talk in quotations (with conventions similar to Devault’s own, although developed independently) and have attempted to retain impressions of particularly strong emotion (e.g. [laughter]) in an effort to indicate to the reader where ‘translation’ work may be happening.

**A Feminist Project?**

From the very beginning of this study I have been hesitant to label myself, or my research, ‘feminist’. I suspect that some of this unwillingness is due to the current ‘post-feminist’ society, which does seem to attack feminists for, among other things, an assumed lack of femininity – a characteristic that I, along with many other young women, enjoy and celebrate ([McRobbie, 2009](#_ENREF_187)). However, it is also undoubtedly due to a distaste of associating myself with the media stereotype of the aggressive man-hating feminist who berates any young woman for not believing as she does, or the ditsy glamour model who is mocked for her claims to feminism without appearing to understand it as an ideology. Further, I feel that labelling my work ‘feminist’ implies that it is only relevant to those sympathetic to the feminist cause, whereas it should be seen as a furtherance of, and a challenge to, general desistance theory, relevant to all in the field. Yet while I feel no obligation to defend my work as essentially feminist, with all the implications and allusions that would bring to other academics and readers, I accept that it may be seen as feminist writing - and in some ways, this may be unavoidable (see below). I have little problem with others imposing their own judgments of what ‘type’ of criminology I am pursuing, but feel an obligation to argue that its similarities to some feminist thought does not make it reducible to 'only' a feminist work.

Indeed, there are many different types of feminist theory ([Heidensohn & Gelsthorpe, 2007](#_ENREF_124)), and the essential nature of these is widely disputed ([Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002](#_ENREF_228)), so the characteristics of a feminist work are hard to define. However, feminist writers seem to agree that feminism necessitates some element of theorising the relationship between power, knowledge and gender ([Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2005](#_ENREF_94); [Oakley, 2000](#_ENREF_212); [Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002](#_ENREF_228)). In looking to examine women’s experiences, from their viewpoints, to see how desistance takes its course in their lives, I necessarily had to consider this relationship. Indeed, I spent much time during the research in reflecting upon how I might reduce power discrepancies between myself and others in the field, as discussed later. However, I did not take this approach because of a pre-existing commitment to feminist thought. Instead, I acted in this way in order to make my participants as comfortable as possible in the research process, and to avoid gaining their consent to participate through duress or social pressure (which could conceivably come about through large power differentials between participant and researcher). I was eager that their participation was undertaken as voluntarily as it could be in our context, and so attended to the power relationships involved in the research.

Another aspect of feminist theory considers the specific experiences of women in the world. It is true that criminology has tended to treat men as the norm ([Naffine, 1997](#_ENREF_206)), and yet this is neither surprising nor unforgivable given the gender gap in offending. I do not, unlike others ([Naffine, 1997](#_ENREF_206)) condemn criminology for assuming the offender is male, but instead hope that the discipline will continue to look more at how offenders' gender (and other characteristics) shape their experiences. As such, I find I have an affinity with feminist empiricism: a desire to ensure women are not overlooked or stereotyped in the study of desistance, and a commitment to ensure their experiences with the criminal justice system and third sector providers are not tainted by bias against them caused by the attributes of their gender ([Harding, 1987b](#_ENREF_117); [Heidensohn & Gelsthorpe, 2007](#_ENREF_124)). Yet I do not believe, as some feminists do, that women are inherently better at seeing the bigger picture of the social world through their experiences of subjugation by men ([Harding, 1987a](#_ENREF_116)),or that their experiences are inherently more interesting to study because they are socially subjugated ([Heidensohn & Gelsthorpe, 2007](#_ENREF_124)). I am not interested in female desistance purely because it involves women, but more that I wonder how I would cope trying to desist, and am eager to ensure other women are not overlooked in efforts of assistance simply because there are fewer of them to study. Also, I find it perfectly understandable that women may be more willing to be talked with by female researchers, as I would feel more comfortable in such a situation myself. Therefore it makes sense for me, as a female researcher, to do such research, rather than hope that someone else gets round to it.

From this perspective I wholeheartedly agree with Gelsthorpe ([1990](#_ENREF_91)): people are gendered, just as I am not simply a person, but also a woman. I am also acutely aware that different women can be vastly different to each other, and yet they can be very similar to men ([Cain, 1990](#_ENREF_38)), just as I am also a human being, with my own personal and cultural attributes. Such an awareness should lead (and indeed has led me) to the type of personal reflexivity as a researcher mentioned by a number of feminist writers as being indicative of feminist research ([Gelsthorpe, 1990](#_ENREF_91); [Harding, 1987b](#_ENREF_117); [Heidensohn & Gelsthorpe, 2007](#_ENREF_124)). Yet these observations raise the issue of how far it is possible to address diversity within a research sample. Although I have tried to remain aware of differences (particularly those relating to age and class), it has proved challenging to always be attuned to diversity while trying to identify commonalities in experiences across a small sample.

Although qualitative research and feminism have been historically linked ([Finch, 2004](#_ENREF_83); [Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2005](#_ENREF_94)), there seems to be a current agreement that this need not be the case ([Finch, 2004](#_ENREF_83); [Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2005](#_ENREF_94); [Harding, 1987b](#_ENREF_117); [Heidensohn & Gelsthorpe, 2007](#_ENREF_124); [Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002](#_ENREF_228)). Indeed, it seems that feminist criminologists have come to assert that no one method is inherently feminist at all ([Harding, 1987b](#_ENREF_117)). However, there are many research situations where such methods are to be preferred, and the benefits of qualitative work are helpfully discussed by feminist writers. For example, interviewees remain people in their own right, not just objects of research ([Gelsthorpe, 1990](#_ENREF_91)), and so need to be treated as such. I differ from Gelsthorpe in that I believe that the dignity of participants means that the research need not necessarily be treated as a joint enterprise with participants. Practically, researchers cannot expect participants to have the requisite time, interest and understanding of the academic context to help shape the research. Ethically, I think it is unfair to ask participants to help with the hard work of directing the research when they do not receive the monetary benefit of a researcher’s salary (especially when research resources - like mine - do not stretch to paying participants at all). While some participants may act as joint-researchers (and indeed I was pleased to find one or two women in my study who did), it is too onerous to expect participants to desire or fill such a role. Instead, I think that respect and consideration, along with a genuine interest in the whole of participants’ lives, is essential. Such an approach engenders sensitivity ([Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2005](#_ENREF_94); [Heidensohn & Gelsthorpe, 2007](#_ENREF_124)) on the part of the researcher, and gives participants the dignity of being thought and written about as people, not merely objects. Therefore I find myself in agreement with Ann Oakley ([1981](#_ENREF_211)) in advocating personal involvement in interviews. Whether such reciprocity is necessarily feminist, or whether her representation of interview paradigms shows a masculine method seems tangential to the question of what is now good practice in interviewing ([Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2005](#_ENREF_94)). From a personal perspective, if I were to be a participant in a study, I know that I would be far less hesitant to honestly share my thoughts and opinions if a researcher was putting time and effort into truly understanding me as a person during the process, based on a genuine interest in my life. Therefore, if I am aiming to explore what is really going on in my participants’ lives, it seems counter-productive to approach my own research with any other methodology in mind.

In conclusion, I find myself almost accidentally in the feminist camp through my chosen subject of interest rather than through a pre-existing ideology. Likewise, my choice of qualitative methodology flows from my need to examine whole life stories in order to understand desistance, and not from a conviction that qualitative research is the only valid research. In a similar way, my belief in the need for sensitivity, reflexivity and personal involvement during research (one often espoused as a particularly feminist way of doing qualitative research) comes from an underlying belief about treating humans with dignity and consideration rather than a conviction that this is a peculiarly feminist approach. As such, I am happy to agree with those criminologists who have come to treat such an approach as an example of good practice, rather than as a specifically feminist method ([Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2005](#_ENREF_94)). However, as any study into women’s desistance will provide illuminating insights into women’s experiences, the present study must be seen to be “politically for women” ([Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002:16](#_ENREF_228)), and therefore, in some sense, a feminist study. Nonetheless, I am eager that this characterisation does not detract from it primarily being valuable as a *desistance* study.

**The Research Process**

**Qualitative (Micro-) Longitudinal Research**

My approach in re-interviewing participants over time means that this study can be seen as an example of Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR). However, because the fieldwork phase of the research lasted just over a year, and because gaps between interviews were usually limited to a month or two, it seems more appropriate to characterise it as micro-longitudinal.[[14]](#footnote-14) Nevertheless, there are some significant similarities between this study and more traditional QLR studies where participants are typically followed over many years rather than months ([e.g. Thomson, 2007](#_ENREF_269)). One of the core strengths of QLR is its ability to illuminate the nature and causes of transitions - and particularly the relationship between agency and structure ([Healy, 2013](#_ENREF_120); [Millar, 2007](#_ENREF_192); [Neale & Flowerdew, 2003](#_ENREF_208); [Thomson, 2009](#_ENREF_270); [Thomson & Holland, 2003](#_ENREF_271)). This, of course, makes it ideal for the study of desistance - a process of change - and particularly so given the debates in the field surrounding the interaction between agency and structure (see Chapter 5). In addition, repeated interviews, particularly in the relational, ethnographic way I approached this study (see below), create an opportunity for gathering especially rich data. The researcher can gain a deeper understanding of the individuals involved ([Thomson & Holland, 2003](#_ENREF_271)), and participants can gain a chance to reflect and revise their explanations, thus demonstrating how they understand themselves differently over the course of the study ([Hollway & Jefferson., 2000](#_ENREF_128); [Maruna & Matravers, 2007](#_ENREF_170); [Soyer, 2014](#_ENREF_264)). However, the data produced from QLR is complex and can make analysis difficult and intimidating ([Millar, 2007](#_ENREF_192); [Thomson & Holland, 2003](#_ENREF_271)). All these advantages and disadvantages apply (to some degree) to this study, so in this section I examine how I approached and conducted each of the different stages of the research, looking at both QLR and wider considerations. First, however, an introduction to the context of my research - the Together Women Project, where my fieldwork was based - is necessary.

**The Together Women Project**

Originally a government demonstration project ([Together Women Yorkshire and Humberside, 2009](#_ENREF_273)), with centres opening in late 2006 and early 2007 ([Hedderman, Palmer, & Hollin, 2008](#_ENREF_123)) the Together Women Projects were highly praised in Baroness Corston’s review of women in the justice system ([Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50)). She particularly commended the centres for their holistic approach to the provision of services, where women are directed to various community interventions across a range of issues. Together Women Yorkshire and Humberside (TWP) has since effectively broken links with Together Women Project North West (originally operating in Liverpool and Salford) and developed into a network of five community one-stop shops ([Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50)), with an additional four smaller outreach centres. [[15]](#footnote-15) Their aim is to “tackle the causes of crime and re-offending among women offenders and women at risk of offending, and reduce the need for custody” ([Simpson, 2007: 3](#_ENREF_258)). They do this through four main foci: supporting vulnerable women to tackle their own offending behaviour triggers, diverting women from custody if appropriate, helping to prevent family fragmentation, and supporting women to turn their own lives around ([Together Women Project, 2012](#_ENREF_272); [Together Women Yorkshire and Humberside, 2009](#_ENREF_273)).

In each centre, a team of staff key-workers offers one-to-one support to each woman who comes to the centre, through assessing their needs and signposting them to appropriate services ([Simpson, 2007](#_ENREF_258)), as well as emotional and practical support throughout their engagement with the project ([Together Women Project, 2012](#_ENREF_272)). At the Sheffield TWP centre, interventions and assistance are available surrounding accommodation, education, training, employment, health, drugs, alcohol, finance, benefit, debt, children, families, emotional issues and self-esteem ([Together Women Yorkshire and Humberside, 2009](#_ENREF_273)). Key workers are overseen by a management team, who often have responsibility for securing funding and facilitating partnerships with other agencies alongside a reduced caseload. Each centre is aided in its work by a Local Implementation and Advisory Group, consisting of service users and partner agency representatives, which meets monthly ([Together Women Yorkshire and Humberside, 2009](#_ENREF_273)).

Women can become involved with TWP through referrals at many stages of the criminal justice system ([Together Women Yorkshire and Humberside, 2009](#_ENREF_273)) or other statutory agencies such as Social Services ([Together Women Project, 2012](#_ENREF_272)). In particular, TWP has developed a Specified Activity Requirement which can be incorporated into community sentencing and requires women to attend the centre for a specific number of days or hours ([South Yorkshire Probation Trust, 2011](#_ENREF_263)). In addition, the Sheffield centre offers an Intensive Alternative to Custody sentencing option, where more serious offenders must attend TWP very frequently (perhaps daily) instead of being incarcerated. Sheffield TWP was developed through funding from Sheffield City Council, South Yorkshire Probation Trust, South Yorkshire Police and the Corston Coalition ([South Yorkshire Probation Trust, 2011](#_ENREF_263)). The centre has successfully maintained this localised funding as well as attracting further funding from the National Offender Management Service and several other grants and trusts.

**Access**

For me, the journey to gaining access to appropriate participants was remarkably straightforward. I was aware that a women’s centre existed in Sheffield, and therefore found the email address of the manager on its website. After a brief email outlining my proposal, she agreed to meet one of my supervisors and myself to discuss my study. In our meeting, I received a very positive response to my intended desistance study, perhaps aided by the manager’s own research background and my supervisor’s reputation. It emerged that the vast majority of research requests that the centre received are centred around women’s experiences of prison, and that a topic that was more in line with the centre’s aim of helping women move on from offending was much more attractive. Although unwilling to bombard service users with endless research opportunities based on their past experiences, the manager was keen to promote research which looked to the service users’ futures. In fact, the entire staff team appeared to appreciate the importance of such desistance research for academic and practice purposes, and I was frequently surprised by their individual enthusiasm for my study. Initially, the manager encouraged me to conduct some research in some of the nearby outreach centres also, given that most research requests came to the city centre project, but as relationships developed in Sheffield that idea seemed to be forgotten. We agreed at this meeting that I would provide a summary of my conclusions to the centre at the end of my research.

Once I had gained ethical approval from the School of Law for my plans in the centre (which were developed mostly by myself but with some input from the centre manager), I was able to start volunteering there. Initially I came to the centre once or twice a week to sit in with on-going classes, get to know some of the attending women, and to spend some time with staff, both in the staff office and at staff training. For a month and a half over the summer (which was quieter at the centre, with fewer courses running) I concentrated on getting to know service users, other volunteers, and staff, helping out practically with the running of the centre where possible. By the end of this time, most people that I had spent time with were aware that I was a researcher looking at ‘how women move on from offending’. I was thus able to personally recruit those who showed some interest individually, and staff members were very forthcoming in suggesting others who would be ‘good’ for my research. Sometimes staff would suggest women who I had very recently asked myself, and sometimes they would suggest others who I had naively dismissed as being ‘too far along’ the process of desistance – who I had assumed to be crime-free for months and years – whilst relaying some of that woman’s story which invariably highlighted their appropriateness for my study. I expected some confusion among service users and participants about my role in the centre, but did not in fact experience any identifiable examples of this happening. My explanation of being a volunteer and a researcher was straightforward and quick to share with new people who wondered who I was. It seems that people with a number of different roles frequently spent time at the centre, and service users were comfortable and unperturbed with this arrangement, accepting me as just another volunteer with a mixed role.

**Participant Recruitment**

My sample requirements were intentionally simple and open to a certain amount of interpretation by those who helped me recruit participants. Given the relative reliability of self-reports and the underestimation of official convictions ([Merrington & Stanley, 2007](#_ENREF_190)), I included participants without official convictions, provided that they self-reported a criminal history (and many in fact disclosed extensive criminal histories). I did, however, exclude those with a single instance of criminal behaviour, as they could hardly be characterised as ‘giving up’ offending if they had only offended once – to return to Maruna’s ([2001](#_ENREF_168)) analogy, someone who has only smoked one cigarette cannot later be described as quitting smoking. Nevertheless, I did not hold out for ‘career criminals’ as Maruna did for a number of reasons (although several of my participants could be counted as such). First, the practicalities of recruiting a number of female career criminals who had recently embarked on their desistance journeys were complicated, and did not match with the relational, repeated interviews that I felt were necessary to look at the process of desistance. Second, such women are relatively rare in the criminal justice system, and yet there are many with repeat convictions whose offending nevertheless could not be described as ‘habitual’ offenders.

As my focus was learning about the process of desistance, it was necessary for me to have an appropriately low recruitment bar, to ensure that I would include different journeys of desistance from the very start of the process. Consequently, I required potential participants to assert that they wanted to ‘move on’ from offending, an indication from staff at the Together Women Centre that this was indeed their perception of the individual, and that they had seen some (unspecified) signs of this starting to happen. There were definite variations in how different people who helped with recruitment (see below) interpreted these, but I think these variations ensured I did not only interview those who were many months into their desistance, but also those who had just started and whose ex-offender status was still particularly precarious. As a result, my participants were, and are, at a variety of stages in their desistance, so I have resisted the temptation to classify them as one of two binary outcomes - 'desister' or 'persister'. Instead, I refer to them throughout as desisters - those experiencing something of the process of giving up offending.

As I was looking for how desistance was experienced over time by participants, I needed to focus on a small number of participants ([Yates, 2003](#_ENREF_295)) and therefore did not have the luxury to recruit all women that attended the centre, whether desisting or not, as I would have risked missing a reasonable number of desisters. In consequence, I probably missed some useful cases. On the other hand, my recruitment strategy meant that some participants were regularly reoffending at the end of the study, with little indication of desistance. Like Soyer ([2014](#_ENREF_264)), my attention to the process of desistance meant that I was unable to conclusively identify desisters at the start of the study. Instead, I had to:

…trade the discovery of identity construction and motives for desistance as they are developing for the ability to establish the definitive direction the [participants] will be taking in the future. ([Soyer, 2014: 3](#_ENREF_264))

The gain of following participants through the process of desistance meant that data were less at the mercy of memory loss, framing and selective participation ([Soyer, 2014](#_ENREF_264)), and therefore much more useful – particularly when considering ideas of identity and agency. However, like Soyer, it remains unclear to me whether my participants can definitively be identified as desisters (for an update on the progress of the participants, see the Postscript).

Although based at Together Women Sheffield, I had several strategies to recruit participants within the centre. Firstly, and my preferred method, was to meet women through groups and tea breaks, get to know them a little, and then check with staff (if necessary) to ensure they had committed more than one offence, before approaching them personally to discuss my research. Usually they were aware of my general status as a volunteer and researcher before I specifically presented my study to them. We would have a brief discussion and if there were any signs of interest I would give them an information sheet to take home and promise to arrange an interview, if they wanted to be involved, the next time they came to the centre. The next time they were in, I would check if they were interested and we either had an interview that day (if they had time) or scheduled one to suit their diary (largely the next time they were due in). I preferred this approach as it allowed me to understand a little of their character (to help with conducting the interview) and for them to get to know me a little, and judge whether I was generally trustworthy and interesting enough to conduct a whole interview with. In groups especially, it allowed potential participants to see me in a position of less power than I would inevitably be in interview, such as when my relative lack of artistic or beauty skills became obvious. I think this made potential participants more comfortable with me, as I could not remain the distant professional, but was forced to be Sarah-from-nails-group-who-was-clearly-struggling-with-nail-art-last-week. Comfortable, friendly relationships seemed the best approach to take (by presenting an unthreatening persona to participants) when I knew we would be discussing difficult experiences and potentially stigmatising crimes.

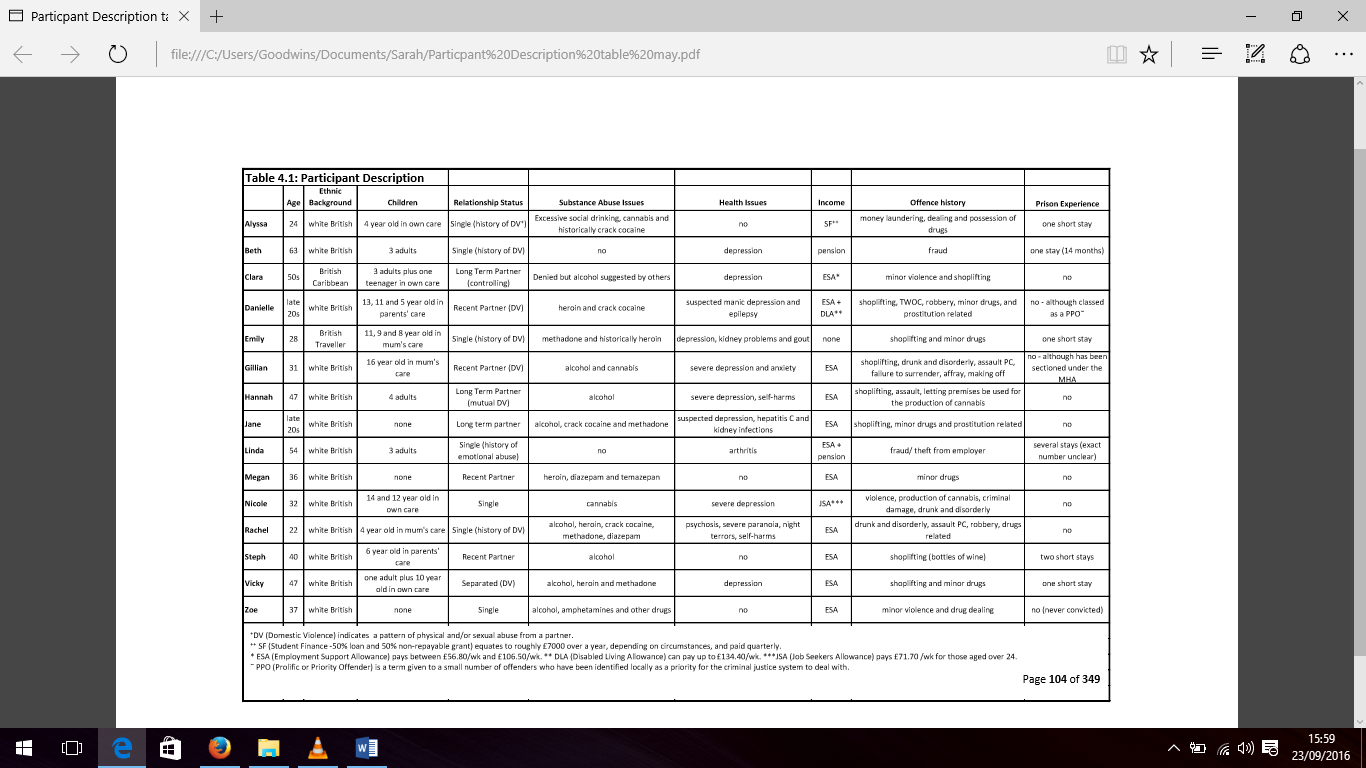
Secondly, I would ask staff for suggestions of people who might be interested and suitable to participate. I would either then introduce myself directly to the suggested women or allow staff to explain a little of my study to gauge interest in my absence. If they were interested, I would be introduced by the staff member and explained my proposal, giving an information sheet. I found it particularly necessary in these cases to book a future date for an interview so that any pressure or influence from the staff worker could be minimised. Undoubtedly my insistence on women returning for interview meant that a few interested women did not participate, but for reasons of reducing unfair influence from staff on potential participants and ensuring sufficient interest for repeat interviews, I am convinced that it was the best decision overall.

Thirdly, I was allowed to advertise my research in some groups. I made a quick announcement, explaining that I was interested in people’s stories of moving on from offending, and then I would place myself in an obvious, but slightly removed, position during tea breaks to allow interested women to volunteer in a private but easy way. We then discussed the research as above.

Lastly, some participants advertised my research with others at the centre informally and unasked. They would then tell me if someone was interested and I would ask them to introduce me and we would continue as above. I was most nervous with this method as it gave ample opportunity to participants to misrepresent the research and threatened the need both for participants to have more than one offence in their criminal histories, and for them to be currently desisting at some level. If the snowballed sample members did not meet these requirements, it was particularly difficult to navigate these issues. In fact, Clara (see below) was recruited in this way, and I suspect her reluctance to talk about her offending and her apparent lack of committed desistance was due to misrepresentation or misunderstanding when another participant suggested my research to her.

At the end of every first interview with a participant I ensured I had their phone number and that they were happy for me to re-contact them in about a month’s time for another interview. Often participants would be around the TWP centre anyway and we could make an appointment when I saw them there. Otherwise, I generally texted participants to tell them that it was time for our next interview and that I’d phone in the next day or two to arrange a time with them. I repeated texts and calls until I felt that to continue to try and contact the participant was unwanted contact – usually after a few weeks of a couple attempts per week. Sometimes I would check with staff at the centre if the participant had been in or had made an appointment, or if they knew of circumstances which made it insensitive to keep pushing for contact. Occasionally staff said that someone was having a particularly hard time and to wait for a few weeks before re-contacting them, and I think this was valuable to assure participants (and staff) that I wasn’t interested in hassling them, but that I understood their lives took priority over my research. When people repeatedly didn’t show for a scheduled interview, and sometimes even with apologies for missed meetings (although always after the fact and prompted), I took that to mean that they were no longer interested in continuing the study. I am confident that, in all the cases where I took the disappointing decision to stop arranging interviews, the lack of attendance was in fact a communication of withdrawn consent to future interviews, with participants feeling unable to verbally refuse interviews in person but always able to physically show refusal by being absent.

I wanted to visit participants in their own homes, where both they and I were comfortable in doing so, to get a better feel of their personality and to make them more relaxed and comfortable in telling their story. In the few cases where this was possible (where both they and I felt comfortable about it), I presented a home interview as an option, an alternative to coming to the centre, and something that I would like to do if they were happy with it. Three times I obtained a positive response, and I visited both Steph and Linda in their homes, and Zoe in her home town (including her mother’s house). Often participants did not really want someone else to enter their own space, and did not often have anyone else, let alone a researcher, visit them socially at home. I felt it would have been too intrusive, and given the relaxed nature of the TWP centre somewhat unnecessary, to try to convince these participants further.



**Participant Description**

Although not perfectly typical of women desisters in England and Wales more generally (see Demographics of Female Desisters, Chapter 1), my participants came from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences (see Table 4.1). I summarise their characteristics here to give an overview of the sample - but not one that can be used to generalize my findings to all desisting women. Instead, the differences and similarities evident in what follows show that the participants are good candidates for extending the understanding and development of desistance theory through illustration.

*Age, ethnicity and cultural background*

The participants in the study ranged from 22 to 63 years old, with a median age of 36. Due to the wide spread of ages across participants, it was impossible to adequately detangle influences, processes and effects that were closely linked to age, and those that applied specifically to certain individuals despite their age. I have therefore been prevented from analysing the data in relation to the age of my participants,[[16]](#footnote-16) but would suggest that future research looks at generation (through more focused sampling) as a potentially useful lens on desistance. All but one woman was white and the final participant was British-Caribbean. Eleven were of a working class background (one of whom had traveller heritage). A further four were from a lower-middle, or middle class background.[[17]](#footnote-17)

*Family and accommodation*

Three women had no children, three had only adult children, five had children under 18 who stayed with a grandmother or grandparents (usually through a voluntary arrangement rather than a court order), and the final four had children in their own care (two also had adult children). All except two rented their own properties, with one technically homeless (living with her mother) and one who owned her own property. Two of those renting were being temporarily housed by the council in emergency accommodation (due to homelessness caused by chaotic substance abuse), one was living in shared hostel accommodation, and three were at a residential rehabilitation facility. Seven were single, five had been in a relationship for less than a year, and three had long-term partners of several years. Ten had experiences of at least one abusive partner (and sometimes many), either through violence or control (or both), and these relationships had frequently lasted many years, or had been followed by other abusive relationships. Only one participant noted that the violence in the home was mutual. Seven participants had few meaningful relationships outside workers in services or residents at the rehab. Those with adult children all had at least some supportive children, and a total of eight participants reported good contact with supportive families. Six also had close friendship relationships, usually with only one or two others.

*Health, benefits and finance*

My sample overall had poor health, with many substance abuse and mental health problems. This meant that most received health-related benefits, and none were in regular employment. Only three participants said they had no problems with alcohol or drugs (although I had cause to believe, from my presence at the TWP Centre, that one of those did indeed struggle with alcohol). Both of those with recent fraud convictions had no substance abuse issues. Nine reported alcohol addiction or issues with alcohol that resulted in offending. Four regularly took cannabis. Three had recent (before entry to residential rehab) or current addictions to crack cocaine, and another one had a history of addiction to the drug. Six had heroin or methadone addictions, two reported recent diazepam addictions, one had a recent temazepam addiction, and one had a recent addiction to amphetamines. In total, nine participants had multiple substance abuse issues. Nine suffered from depression, three seriously, and another participant suffered from psychosis and other severe mental health issues. At least four had attempted suicide in the past or over the course of the research. Four participants had significant physical health problems. Twelve participants received health-related benefits. One was on Jobseeker’s Allowance, one had a student loan and one received a pension. None was in regular employment, although one was a full-time student, and one did some cash-in-hand cleaning in addition to her benefits. Only one was currently engaged in prostitution to boost her income.

*Offending histories*

Six of the participants’ most recent convictions were for shoplifting. Two were for fraud and one for money laundering. There were two drunk and disorderly convictions (one of which was concurrent with an assault and criminal damage conviction), and one for assaulting a PC. Two were low-level drug convictions (supply and letting premises be used for the production of cannabis). The final participant had no official convictions but a history of dealing drugs as a business and admitted to some minor violent offences as well. Historically, most of the participants’ offences were shoplifting, minor drugs offences and assault charges. However, there were also convictions for fraud, robbery, taking vehicles without consent, affray, making off without payment, failure to surrender to arrest, and production of cannabis. Participants admitted to further similar offences, as well as some surrounding prostitution and many related to drug addiction (possession, supply, dealing, theft, robbery, violence). Eight had received only fines and community penalties, three had received a short prison sentence and three had received longer prison sentences (of more than 3 months). Only two participants had been to prison on more than one occasion.

**Interviews**

Originally I was drawn to conducting repeat interviews through a desire of obtaining data of the best quality and depth, an aim which I thought most likely to be achieved through really getting to know my participants over time ([Lofland & Lofland, 1995](#_ENREF_162)). I was aware of benefits such as increased rapport, having time for reflection, and the ability to clarify points in later interviews ([Earthy & Cronin, 2008](#_ENREF_62)). As I developed my plans for interviewing women experiencing the process of desistance, I found myself echoing an existentialist position of wanting to investigate the everyday lives of my participants and understanding them as whole people, rather than looking at certain topics in isolation to the rest of their lives ([Farrall, 2005](#_ENREF_72)). In tandem, I was ethically drawn to the idea of ethnographic interviewing, where continuing relationships provide the setting, and foundation, for repeated interviewing ([Sherman Heyl, 2001](#_ENREF_251)). Originally derived from a feminist conception of care-based ethics, the aim is to have an empathetic and egalitarian conversation, where emotions are valued and mutual respect encouraged ([Sherman Heyl, 2001](#_ENREF_251)). In such an interview, the interviewer must be prepared to constantly adapt throughout ([Bachman & Schutt, 2003](#_ENREF_3)) to produce a conversation rather than an interrogation.

In interviews, therefore, I aimed to have a relaxed, interested manner ([Fielding & Thomas, 2008](#_ENREF_82)), to encourage participants to engage with me and discuss their lives. I was unafraid to become the ‘acceptable incompetent’ researcher ([Lofland & Lofland, 1995](#_ENREF_162)) where this was necessary to gain their approval and willingness to have the sort of conversation I was aiming for. As others have noted ([Lofland & Lofland, 1995](#_ENREF_162)), this approach could be stressful and hard work, where ethical concerns about acting a part in interview mixed with personal discomfort with being viewed as naïve and inexperienced and the practical need to obtain good quality data. I think this discomfort was heightened by the age difference with my participants – at 23 I was younger than all but one of them, and frequently assumed to be even younger, and at an earlier stage of university than I was. I was eager not to advance any wrongly assumed claims to superiority (which sometimes arose when participants realised I was married, perhaps because none of them were themselves), and keenly aware of my comparative life experience (it was obvious to me, and perhaps to participants, that I had experienced a relatively easy and sheltered life). I was also uneasy about being dismissed as incompetent (because of my lack of ‘life experience’) or pitied for being naïve by others during my fieldwork. Additionally, some participants were unafraid of finding and exerting grounds for superiority over me (usually in a non-serious manner - but with some underlying suggestion that they were serious in their attempts to make me feel inferior), which added to my sense of awkwardness. Others commented on the life experiences that I shared with them with a sense of awe which I found intensely uncomfortable. However, issues of presenting myself in a certain way, or feelings of uneasiness generally receded once my participants and I got to know each other better (in interview or out). Feelings of discomfort were further minimised through mutual use of ‘northern humour’, where sarcasm, self-depreciation and directness are used for amusement.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Silverman ([2014](#_ENREF_256)) encourages qualitative researchers to use pilot interviews as a way of improving interview schedules and increasing the reliability of the research. However, others warn against piloting to prevent overwhelming interviews with social science concepts instead of listening to what is actually being said by participants ([Miller & Glassner, 2004](#_ENREF_193)). With this warning in mind, I nevertheless intended to conduct some pilot interviews with some 'experts'- women who had already experienced many months of successful desistance. However, after I had completed one interview intended as a pilot, a number of practicalities conspired against this plan. I found that my pilot participant was, in fact, much nearer the beginning of her desistance journey than I had anticipated and would therefore have been appropriate for the main study. Two further intended pilot participants relapsed and dropped out of contact. Meanwhile, a small but growing number of participants (eager to be involved over a number of months) became available and keen to start the interviewing and re-interviewing process with me. I therefore began interviewing these women, expecting to perhaps need to use them as pilots - and indeed I did make some minor amendments to the first interview schedules after my times with them. However, in common with Calverley ([2013](#_ENREF_39)), I was relieved to find that these interviews were successful and did not highlight any major necessary adjustments. I therefore included these first interviews as part of the central body of data and analysed them with the other interview data. I suspect that this success in early interviews was partly due to the benefit of my presence at the Together Women Project over several months before I started looking for pilot interviews. Not only did this allow familiarity with the context and the experiences (in a general way) of service users (promoted as good for research by [Miles and Huberman (1994)](#_ENREF_191) and Miller and Glassner ([2004](#_ENREF_193))), but it enabled me to build rapport with those first interviewees to the extent that it was fairly easy to re-frame and clarify questions within interviews (where necessary) in an informal way. The repeated nature of interviews also meant that any important questions that were highlighted after the completion of a previous interview could be covered in later interviews. Nevertheless, as the research progressed and I began to complete repeated interviews with a number of participants, I was careful to note down any amendments to later interview schedules that seemed necessary after each interview.

Initial interviews, and most subsequent interviews, occurred with participants in one of the one-to-one rooms at the Together Women Sheffield premises. There we were ensured privacy, and if an interruption from staff was necessary they always knocked on the door first. Occasionally room shortages meant that we had to use communal areas, but the Centre was quiet and I was able to remain vigilant to the possibility of overhearing, moving or indicating the presence of another person as appropriate. When interviews were conducted away from the premises, they were always in a private area, either at the residential rehabilitation centre or in a participant’s home. I found the use of a voice recorder invaluable, and thankfully all my participants were happy for their words to be recorded. I found it particularly helpful to explain this practice both as a way of ensuring I could give them my full attention in interview and guaranteeing that I did not misremember their words in my notes. Like others have found, most participants talked freely with the recorder on, either forgetting about it or paying no attention to it ([Bachman & Schutt, 2003](#_ENREF_3)).

Before starting the substantive part of the interview, I explained some ethical considerations to my participants. I tried to explain my study briefly (to prevent boredom and disengagement) and in a way that the individual understood so that any consent was truly informed. I reassured them of my intention to make them anonymous, but warned that those close to them perhaps could recognise their stories despite my efforts. None of my participants found this problematic, and some assured me that they were eager for their real names to be used. After some explanation of unforeseen risks with this approach to ensure such consent was properly informed, all eventually preferred to remain anonymous. I then assured them of confidentiality, especially with regard to staff at the Together Women Centre and Probation Officers, while advising them that I would be required to break this agreement if they indicated that they were going to harm themselves or others. Participants were encouraged to ask any of their own questions, although few did. Sometimes there was a question about what I wanted to do with my “project” in the first or second interview, but usually not in subsequent interviews, even when we had got to know each other well (perhaps because as the relationship became more comfortable, I found it more awkward to highlight their ‘rights’ in a formal way, but instead relied on our good rapport as implicitly welcoming questions). I also reminded them of their right to withdraw from the interview at any point or to ‘pass’ on uncomfortable questions. Consent forms were not used in order to minimise unhelpful associations with participants' experiences with formal police interviews, but instead verbal consent was captured on voice recorder. In subsequent interviews, I reminded participants of confidentiality “just like last time”, which seemed to be sufficient reassurance. In an effort to ensure I represented participants' experiences fairly and that they could see the results of the research, I told participants that if they wanted a copy of the study, or a summary of the findings, or a copy of their interview transcript, I could provide one if they asked. At time of writing (a year after the end of interviews), I have not received any requests for the research findings, although I will again make those who are still in contact with me aware of their continued right to receive these at the end of the writing process. One participant received a copy of her first interview transcript, at her request, but had no comments or queries about it and made no further requests.

During the interview I remained ready to explore themes which participants found difficult to articulate, sometimes marked by hesitation or an increased use of expressions aiming to gauge shared understanding (e.g. “ you know what I mean”) ([Devault, 1990](#_ENREF_59)). I found this particularly pertinent when discussing ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ activities, where the division did not seem to suit the women’s experiences, perhaps reflecting gender (and perhaps class) norms ([Devault, 1990](#_ENREF_59)) or the shape of days not defined by paid employment. I occasionally had the impression that our continuing relationship actually hindered disclosure, for example when Emily refrained from discussing recent police contact with me and I heard that she had told staff that she was embarrassed about it. She may have felt no need to be embarrassed if she was not going to see me again, so this gave some support to the suggestion that participants may find it easier to confide in a stranger ([Fielding & Thomas, 2008](#_ENREF_82)). I had not anticipated this, but overall felt that despite those occasions I was granted access to a fuller version of my participants’ stories by being someone known to them. In addition, I think the relationships fostered allowed me to be both bolder and more sensitive in probing for extra information from participants.

My interview schedules for all interviews (Appendix One) were used loosely, and were based on my initial research questions surrounding the experience of a process of desistance and what I considered to be an obvious and large gap in the desistance research in the area of relational influences, based on the literature in Chapters 2 and 3 (which was refined to form the final research question). As initial interviews started, frequent mention of concepts that I had previously read about in the literature meant that I expanded my research questions to explicitly cover issues of agency and identity too. However the nature of these concepts (and particularly that of agency) meant that I did not directly amend the interview schedules to incorporate these concepts as that could have unnecessarily biased the findings. Instead I made small notes to myself to be aware of these (and a few other) themes where mentioned spontaneously by participants and to probe accordingly. Although I did have a different schedule according to how many interviews I had already conducted with each participant, I preferred to discuss issues on the initiative of participants. I rarely stuck to the exact wording of questions, instead altering them for the particular participant currently in interview. However, I raised topics which participants had not previously mentioned, and some participants needed prompting almost every sentence (either due to the effects of substance abuse, the effects of domestic abuse or a generally quiet character). Therefore, the schedules for some interviews are quite detailed to ensure that we covered important topics and that unexpected reticence did not prevent me from pursuing a conversation with participants. For those who needed little prompting, and especially in later interviews, we did not stick to the schedules carefully, instead focusing on pertinent issues raised by participants. In contrast, final interviews were closed with the structured questions indicated on the schedule in order to obtain an impression of how the participant experienced the interviews themselves.

Interview duration is shown in Table 4.2. As indicated, the average length of interview was 39 minutes, although this typically included some preliminary chat. A particular advantage of my approach to interviewing was that, because of my previous contact with participants through the Centre, I had usually already done much work on establishing rapport before the interview started, which may have led to interviews being shorter than often reported (for example, participants in Graham and Bowling’s study ([1995](#_ENREF_112)) were interviewed for between 45 and 90 minutes). However, it must be noted that different people had very different conversation styles, with some sticking very tightly to the point of my study, talking in detail for long periods, and some unable to concentrate for more than a few minutes. In fact, some of the most interesting and enlightening interviews lasted only about half an hour, whereas longer interviews tended to frequently wander off on tangents. It must be highlighted that some women had remarkably short attention spans (perhaps linked to a lack of educational attainment or histories of substance abuse) and could barely concentrate for 10 minutes, even if they found the discussion interesting ([McLeod, 2003](#_ENREF_183)). This generally resulted in short, highly focused interviews – but sometimes interviews that lacked much insight or personal interrogation by participants. Nevertheless, I had the advantage of planning repeated interviews, which gave me the freedom to delay discussion on particular topics to another day if I sensed a participant was losing interest. Therefore, the figures on interview length and number do not determine the quality of the data.

**Table 4.2: Interview contacts**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Participant | Total number of interviews | Total duration of (recorded) interviews | Average length of interviews (minutes) | Time between first and last interview | Contact after last interview? |
| Alyssa | 4 | 217 minutes | 54.25 | 8 months | No |
| Beth | 4 | 182 minutes | 45.5 | 3 months | Yes |
| Clara | 1 | 22 minutes | 22 | n/a | No |
| Danielle | 1 | 34 minutes | 34 | n/a | Yes |
| Emily | 6 | 174 minutes | 29 | 8 months | Yes |
| Gillian | 4 | 166 minutes | 41.5 | 5 month | Yes |
| Hannah | 1 | 38 minutes | 38 | n/a | No |
| Jane | 2 | 41 minutes\* | 20.5\* | 2 weeks | No |
| Linda | 4 | 261 minutes | 65.25 | 5 months | Yes |
| Megan | 3 | 135 minutes | 45 | 2 months | Yes |
| Nicole | 1 | 50 minutes | 50 | n/a | No |
| Rachel | 3 | 122 minutes | 40.67 | 3 months | Yes |
| Steph | 7 | 401 minutes | 57.29 | 6 months | Yes |
| Vicky | 1 | 19 minutes | 19 | n/a | No |
| Zoe | 2 | 89 minutes | 44.5 | 2 months | Yes |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | Total = 44 interviews | Total recorded= 32 hours 31 minutes | Average length of interview = 39 minutes | Average time followed = 2.8 months | Further contact with 9 of 15 participants |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| \* Jane fell asleep due to drug consumption seven minutes into our second interview | | |  |  |  |

Interviewing women in the community meant that participants had occasionally taken substances before interview. Two women disclosed to me in interview that they had taken drugs before our interview, but appeared to be functioning normally so I judged it more respectful to continue the interview while remaining attentive to their wellbeing. Both remained in contact after the interview so I was confident that if they had reconsidered their consent to the interview already conducted, they would have informed me. Interviews could be more problematic, however, when participants did not disclose their recent substance intake to me. Jane had already completed one interview with me, when she arrived for our second interview. Her manner seemed no different from usual (she was also a frequent visitor to the Together Women Centre) and she was willing to start talking to me again. After a few minutes, she started falling asleep both while talking and listening. I tried to convince her to end the interview but she insisted on continuing. Within a short time, she fell into a deep sleep in the middle of a sentence. With my recording equipment running and a sleeping interviewee, I was unsure of my next steps, but a false cough roused her enough to make her realise that she needed to find a more suitable place to sleep. She apologised for her tiredness, hinted that it was due to drugs (which was in line with suspicions of staff members), and found a more comfortable space in the Centre to nap. I did not see Jane again (or reach her by phone) to suggest another interview, and while it might be suspected that this was because she was embarrassed over this incident; she showed none at the time. In reality, a move to hostel accommodation may have been the main trigger for Jane reducing her attendance at the centre and feeling that she no longer had the time or interest to continue with the study.

In general, participants told me that they had enjoyed the process of being interviewed (and re-interviewed), viewing it as an opportunity to be listened to and as somewhat cathartic. Like others ([Thomson & Holland, 2003](#_ENREF_271)) this meant that I had to be careful not to view the research as some sort of therapy, as I did not use the same clinical boundaries that other counsellors and keyworkers use. Nevertheless, because I was based at the Together Women Centre, I was able to suggest to participants that they discuss what we had talked about in interview with other workers there, and access the support they needed - in a setting where those professional boundaries were observed.

**Observations**

In addition to using the life stories gained in interview as a check on the trustworthiness of other data from interviews ([Plummer, 2001](#_ENREF_221)), my recruitment strategy enabled me to use some observation in addition to interviews for a similar purpose. I spent several days every week at the Together Women Sheffield centre over a period of around a year as a volunteer. Initially I came in over the summer period for a day or two a week, mainly to attend some groups and get to know staff and service users. After a couple of months I started recruiting for interviews and increased my attendance, both to facilitate interviews and to meet more potential participants. At the height of my fieldwork (around February 2013) I would be at the centre four or five days a week, for the busiest parts of the day (usually roughly 10am-3pm, and when groups ran). As my interviews began to come to an end (around May 2013), my attendance at the centre dropped significantly as I was no longer recruiting new participants. I only came in when I had either an interview scheduled or when I knew or suspected a participant would be in attendance. After I had stopped pursuing interviews (August 2013) I occasionally (initially about once a month, but soon reduced to once every few months) attended the centre in an effort to maintain relationships with staff and service users, and I continue to visit from time to time even a year after the end of interviews (and intend to keep doing so if possible). Over the year, I spent much time in the staff office, particularly when service user attendance was low, and assisted with some administrative tasks. I made many cups of tea and coffee, assisted service users with computers and visits to other services, and attended various groups (employment, assertiveness, cooking, nails and beauty). For many months I also had responsibility for running the arts and crafts group.

In a comparable way to Maruna ([2001](#_ENREF_168)), my sustained presence at Together Women Sheffield enabled me to see the everyday unfolding of my participants’ lives. This undoubtedly increased rapport in interviews and enabled discussion about interesting issues that participants may not have initially thought relevant. Due to ethical concerns about enabling participants to give informed consent for all of my research, I did not analyse observations in isolation. Instead, I preferred to discuss observed behaviour or incidents with relevant participants in our next interview. When this could not happen, I used observation as a way of verifying or questioning what I had been told in interview. This choice meant that I could honestly reassure non-participating service users that, although I was a researcher in addition to a volunteer, they need not worry as I was not actually researching them at the time. Of course, general observations that I picked up about, for example, how the centre worked, were useful to the research but this distinction was too tricky to explain quickly to service users who had just met me. As I did not analyse their particular individual behaviour in any way, I was comfortable that my reassurance that I was not researching them really was representative of the reality of the situation.

I am convinced that the time I was able to spend ‘hanging around’ the centre, doing nothing in particular, greatly increased the quality of the research. It enabled me to increase my credibility with both staff and service users, gave me an opportunity to understand the atmosphere of the centre, and helped me modify my behaviour and language as necessary to facilitate my acceptance by participants. The insight into participants’ daily lives granted through this type of observation could not be adequately replicated through interviews alone. The relationships fostered with participants outside of interview helped me create a caring, egalitarian and respectful setting within interviews. Indeed, it was this consequence of conducting observation – enabling me to fulfil my own ethical standards – that I view as the most valuable part of my ethnographic work, and I feel that I would have struggled much more to conduct interviews appropriate to (and therefore respectful of) each individual without my previous interaction with both them and the staff members who knew them. It must be said that, despite the potential for confusion and conflict of interest given my double role of volunteer and researcher (and especially given the emphasis I placed on getting to know participants outside of the interview setting) I was not aware of any situations where such confusion or conflict occurred which could not be quickly resolved through clear explanation.

**Focus Group**

In addition to interviewing desisters, I also held a focus group for staff and volunteers at the Together Women Project. I wanted to reassure staff that I also valued their insight into the desistance process, and also wanted second opinions on what some of the participants had discussed from those who had witnessed their desistance. While not aiming to fully triangulate any data - in my view, a somewhat naïve assumption that truth could be guaranteed in research ([Silverman, 2014](#_ENREF_256)) - the focus group was designed in order to gain a different perspective on the same processes that the other participants had discussed. In order to gain this outlook, I arranged this in the staff office towards the end of my fieldwork with the women. All staff available at the agreed time were happy to participate. Over lunch, three staff members and one volunteer shared their views on desistance based on their experiences, and their opinions on the desistance experiences of the specific women in my sample.[[19]](#footnote-19) The focus group schedule (Appendix One) was created from initial analyses and the research questions, much like the interview schedules (see above). The schedule was generally followed, and two participants dominated discussion (although the others tended to agree with what was said). Two participants had significant histories of working with female offenders in different contexts, one had good experience and an academic background in criminology, and the last had little personal experience but some academic knowledge. The centre manager was present in the office at the time but was unable to participate. Participants were promised confidentiality and anonymity out with the focus group, and also asked to keep what others had said confidential. They were reminded that others who came into the office could hear what they said and would not necessarily be under the same requirement. The focus group lasted for an hour and a quarter, but was unfortunately cut short by pressure on staff diaries. I analysed the focus group data similarly to the other interview data- but necessarily without the first stage of creating a pen portrait (see below).

**Situated Ethics**

While I initially created my research design as a whole in a way that promoted good ethical practice with participants, there were a few areas of the fieldwork which can be discussed here more specifically in terms of the ethical challenges they presented. I therefore deal with ideas of power, confidentiality and emotions. Issues of power presented themselves to me in two separate areas during my fieldwork – the power relationships between the staff at the centre and myself, and the power relationships between the participants (and other service users) and myself. In reality, I found the first of these areas much more difficult to navigate than the second. This was perhaps due to previous expectations that I would have to be particularly careful with the power I exerted towards service users, or because I was the one in a position of weak power in my relationship with staff. The main tension with staff was that I was almost completely reliant on them for my recruitment (through allowing me to attend courses or suggesting interviewees) but they had extremely busy workloads. I was a general volunteer at the centre, but was not reliant on them for filling my time. In many ways, I was treated as staff, spending time in the office and attending training, but in the main I was not accountable to the other keyworkers. I could not be an insider on the staff, as I was neither willing to share information on my interviewees, nor appear to service users that I was part of the organisation (although it was inevitable that I was seen as being so by some service users), but I spent the majority of my time sharing the same space as the staff and taking part in their conversations. I occupied the volunteer desk in the office, but this meant I shared the manager’s side of the office and was separated from the other keyworkers. This role blurring was perhaps particularly tricky in such a small and friendly organisation as Together Women, and especially given the obvious workload pressure staff encountered as they tried to juggle funding requirements, staff shortages, and women in crises. Nevertheless, it was essential that I tried to maintain a good rapport with staff, and so I joined in with office discussions wherever possible, tried to make myself generally useful, and made many cups of tea. Despite my attempts at this, it was emotionally tiring to deal with the undercurrent that sometimes existed that suggested I was making things more difficult for staff. However, it was clear to me that staff – at least some of the time – appreciated the importance of my research and went to some lengths to help me interview and re-interview participants.

Ultimately, it was for the benefit of this relationship that I decided to carry a key fob around the centre. These key fobs controlled access to interview and group rooms, and the staff office, and were carried by all staff and established volunteers. Initially, I worried that carrying the key fob would link me too closely to the organisation and hence damage my independent status in the eyes of potential participants. In practice, because I was already taking on a volunteer role in the centre, it was difficult to fulfil this role without the free movement that the key fob allowed, and I sensed some frustration among staff when they had to keep letting me in to different rooms. Happily, service users did not seem to mind when I began to use the key fob because so many different people already had access – some of whom were other volunteers or other services. I tried to remedy the potential feelings of power imbalance by not personally welcoming women to their appointments, but instead doing other tasks in order to make it clear that I was not a keyworker. I also consciously wore casual clothes, which did distinguish me from probation staff and management, but as keyworkers also tended to dress casually, did not fully highlight my independence from the organisation. In the end, because I did not analyse observations separately from interviews, and because I took pains to explain in interview that I was not part of the staff and had no power over their reports, I am satisfied that participants understood that I had no formal institutional power over them. Yet institutional power and relational power are not the same thing, and I had to ensure, as far as possible, that my behaviour minimised those other power differences that naturally existed between participants and myself. In general, I worked on a friendly, gentle demeanour, and tried to share little parts of my life with service users where possible and appropriate to reassure them that, although I had clearly had different life experiences to them (as my middle-class Glaswegian accent inevitably betrayed), I also faced struggles and difficulties with my life. I viewed this attention to detail in managing my behaviour as the primary way to minimise power differentials but was also able to do so through my approach to compensation for interviews.

I offered no payment for interviews (admittedly primarily through budget constraints), but typically offered to take participants out for coffee or lunch in later interviews (an offer which was rarely taken up). There was some reluctance to accept any generosity from me (possibly as participants were unable to reciprocate), but when I framed it as a ‘thank you” for taking part in interview, the women seemed more comfortable about it. Also, I got the impression that some participants thought that we would be conspicuous if going for a drink or lunch together – possibly exacerbated by being located in Sheffield, where many of their friends and family could see us together and potentially ask questions (when I did in fact go out with a couple of participants, they knew many of those we met on the street, although no questions were asked about me to my knowledge). When I visited participants in their homes, I brought some small token of appreciation, such as flowers or a home-made craft. I made an effort to keep the gift small and cheerful. I did not suggest to participants in advance that I would offer them anything so as to ensure the gifts were truly tokens of gratitude and not bribes in any sense. I felt that this gesture was socially necessary in me ‘invading’ their private space as giving their permission for me to visit was itself a great show of trust in me and required some acknowledgement. Overall, this approach – where payment was not given but some sort of symbolic gratitude offered instead – highlighted that I was not a professional or making some sort of business deal, but bound by some sort of social debt for their involvement. This ‘debt’ allowed participants to be reassured that their contribution was valuable to me.

In terms of confidentiality, my location in the staff office generally caused no problems to my ethical commitments. Staff had an agreement of ‘shared confidentiality’ with service users, where they were free to discuss anything that was said with other staff, and although I sometimes heard interesting information this way, I never felt pressured to share interview data in this context. However, a few months into my fieldwork, I was asked by a staff member, straight after an interview with one participant, how a participant was doing. I was always happy to give general comments in response to these queries (usually gleaned from general impressions e.g. “oh, she seems to be doing quite well”, or “I think she’s having a tough time”) but on this instance my answer was followed up by a query as to whether my participant was going out with a certain man. Being the first time I had experienced a request for more information than I was willing to give, I spluttered, blushed, and said something like “you’ll really have to ask her”. Unfortunately, I think my behaviour made it perfectly clear that the couple was indeed together – something that we had spent some time discussing in interview. While I could guard my spoken language in order to protect confidentiality, I had no control in this situation over my embarrassment at the unexpected question and so was not able to protect information from interview as well as I had hoped. Happily, I only encountered situations like this a couple of times throughout my fieldwork. Yet this situation showed me the importance of considering, and managing, my emotional responses to others during my research.

Emotional responses in, and to, fieldwork are often ignored. Yet if we reject the idea of an objective researcher, there is no reason to hide the responses we feel from scrutiny. Indeed, explaining these responses is the best way of making readers aware of our subjectivities. I think there are two different emotional issues at work here. First, the emotional responses we have to our research- to people, stories, situations – which can be obvious at fieldwork or analysis stages. Secondly, whether we externalise (or fail to contain, depending on our characters) these emotions during fieldwork – for example, are we prepared to cry in interview should a participant’s story move us to the extent to which we would normally cry? The first issue is one of which the research community is becoming more aware. Analyses of personal responses to fieldwork and appreciation of emotions in their role of helping a researcher understand a participant’s experience are accepted in major journals. I find Liebling and Stanko’s ([2001](#_ENREF_158)) suggestion that emotional involvement, as long as we can see that involvement, is essential to understand subjective experience, very apt. If we are researching human beings, then it is logical to understand our participants as other humans do- through emotional interaction. In daily life we can sometimes recognise when outrage has blurred our perceptions of situations, or when we are too distressed to think straight- and it is this insight that is needed of ourselves when we are collecting and analysing our data. Hiding or ignoring emotional reactions can only skew our own data, leaving it to be uncritically at the mercy of our daily emotions. Of course, not everyone will feel strong emotions during their research, but I suggest that everyone whose work involves face-to-face contact with people will encounter some emotion that affects how they collect, perceive, or analyse data. In fact, these emotions can be more actively useful too- feelings of distrust can lead us to ask clarifying and probing questions, upsetting interviews can make us more prepared to be gentle over certain topics, and feeling disgusted can make us question how other people relate to our participants.

The second, and less explored, issue relates to whether we share emotions that we experience during our fieldwork. I suggest here that the key is both ready self-control and the principle of non-harm. My responsibility is to the participant, not my own emotional expression, so I should always be ready to restrain tears if something indicates that it is harmful for my participant. What is harmful will, of course, depend on the participant, and this is why it is necessary for researchers to try to get to know their participants as well as they can before diving into potentially emotional topics. Obviously some methods are not suited to this, and there are undoubtedly benefits in participants talking to a stranger who they will never see again, but the benefits of understanding personalities in the context of being aware of emotional impact should at least be considered.

**Analysis**

As others have noted, analysing qualitative data does not require adherence to a set of established and rigid conventions ([Bachman & Schutt, 2007](#_ENREF_4); [John Lofland & Lofland, 1995](#_ENREF_162); [Robson, 2011](#_ENREF_235)). While some approaches have been helpfully described (see, for example, [Calverley (2013)](#_ENREF_39)), Robson aptly characterises these as "codified common sense" ([Robson, 2011: 411](#_ENREF_235)). As such, it is not difficult to portray qualitative data analysis as a dance ([Janesick, 1994](#_ENREF_134)), or form of art ([Bachman & Schutt, 2007](#_ENREF_4)), where simple everyday movements combine to create a work with power to communicate to others on a deeper level than the original steps might suggest. With this in mind, I explain here my 'choreography' through the various steps of analysis.

As I thought about collating and analysing my data, it was evidently important to be familiar with the data produced throughout the research ([Dey, 1993](#_ENREF_60); [Robson, 2011](#_ENREF_235)), and I was certainly engaged in a level of analysis throughout the fieldwork by collating and trying to understand observations and interviews. This was especially so with my repeated interviewing design, where continued rapport was essential for deepening what was shared and where under-explored areas were to be picked up again in future interviews. Therefore, while interviews were still being conducted, I either (if I had time) transcribed participants' previous interviews in full before subsequent interviews, or listened again to the recording. I also checked my fieldwork diary for any observations about the participant that I wanted to raise with them. This allowed me to review my previous encounters with participants and keep track of different people's experiences. I made notes of any pertinent issues on the interview schedule for the next interview with that participant. After the period of fieldwork was over, I finished personally transcribing all the interviews verbatim into Microsoft Word, using a transcription pedal (which enabled easy pausing and rewinding of the recording) but without voice recognition software. While adding to the reliability of the interview data ([Silverman, 2014](#_ENREF_256)), transcribing the recordings myself also gave me an opportunity to become very familiar with both what was said and how it was said. I then benefitted from an intensive focus on analysing the data, where I repeatedly re-read transcripts to start getting an idea for important issues, striking statements and possible codes ([Bachman & Schutt, 2007](#_ENREF_4); [Calverley, 2013](#_ENREF_39)).

In anticipation of the more focused process of analysis which started with the transcription of interviews, I faced the common challenge of benefitting from previous research in a deeper understanding of my own data while not assuming that others' findings would necessarily be replicated ([Dey, 1993](#_ENREF_60)). In tandem, I felt the pull of 'branded' approaches to analysis, which do seem to benefit from a certain status within academia ([Robson, 2011](#_ENREF_235)). Unsurprisingly, these concerns led to some confusion as to how to analyse my data. The general approach of constant comparison, cited by some as the core of a grounded theory analysis ([Glaser & Strauss, 1967](#_ENREF_105)) seemed to me a very sensible way of uncovering the fundamental ideas presented by participants. Yet other aspects of "pure" grounded theory would require an ignorance of the wider literature in the field - a requirement that both denies the orienting value of similar studies and which would prove almost impossible in the context of PhD studies (and, indeed, most funded research) due to organisational requirements such as research proposals and first year reviews. I therefore employed a type of thematic analysis using what Dey (1993) calls 'grounded codes', where analytical codes are derived both from pre-existing literature (in general and as used to formulate research questions) and inductively from the data itself. As such, I employed many similar principles to those of grounded theory in an effort to discover the ideas presented by my data but, like Calverley ([2013](#_ENREF_39)), undertook a number of activities that run contrary to a "pure" grounded theory approach.

However, being aware of the danger that thematic coding runs in artificially splitting data, breaking up narratives and ignoring context ([Dey, 1993](#_ENREF_60); [Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168); [Richards & Richards, 1994](#_ENREF_231)), the first step I took was to focus not on themes and concepts but on the stories of each participant in turn. Therefore, once I had transcribed interviews verbatim, I wrote comprehensive pen portraits of every participant, describing their character, life histories, relationships, and desistance experiences. These were based on the interview transcripts and a small book of field notes that I had made on interview experiences and general encounters with participants.[[20]](#footnote-20) I, like others, considered this stage to be especially important in preventing my over-simplifying the data and allowing me to remain aware of the overall context of the findings ([Hollway & Jefferson., 2000](#_ENREF_128); [Thomson, 2007](#_ENREF_269)). It was also a good opportunity to see how participants experienced change over the duration of the interviews. It is worth noting here that the participants' life stories - especially when collated together at this stage of analysis - were frequently deeply sad and sometimes almost overwhelming. The cumulative trauma, hurt and injustice that they had experienced was great, and I was not always able to convey this when I started to analyse their stories thematically. It is partly for this reason that I include fuller accounts of five women's desistance in this dissertation, [[21]](#footnote-21) although even so, some of the emotional power of their stories has inevitably been lost through writing style and concerns of confidentiality.

The next step, as alluded to above, was to embark on a thematic coding of the interview data, analysing both deductively and inductively. This approach allowed me to both examine what the data said about the more open research questions on the experience of desistance and to focus in on the narrower questions drawn from the literature on issues of identity, agency and support. As such, I first wrote a tentative list of concepts to use in thematic coding, based on insights from the pen portraits, transcription, and likely themes suggested in the literature. At this stage, I was open to major revisions, additions and refinement in my list of codes depending on the data (as widely recommended elsewhere ([Dey, 1993](#_ENREF_60); [Huberman & Miles, 1994](#_ENREF_131); [Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157))). I used NVivo for ease of formatting ([Huberman & Miles, 1994](#_ENREF_131)) and for retrieving data already coded ([Bachman & Schutt, 2007](#_ENREF_4); [Richards & Richards, 1994](#_ENREF_231)) but did not use any of its auto-coding or analytical functions. In a sense, it was an electronic method to simplify the highlighting and filing of data related to various codes. Most codes would have been recognised by study participants, but others would have been unfamiliar to them[[22]](#footnote-22) yet were nonetheless suggested by the data ([Dey, 1993](#_ENREF_60)). Further themes emerged through discussions with various professionals at the Together Women Project, academic supervisors and peers, and my writing up of early findings for several conference and journal papers. These various platforms provided numerous opportunities for 'interim summaries' of the research which allowed frequent auditing of the analysis process ([Miles & Huberman, 1994](#_ENREF_191)) in the absence of any co-researcher to provide inter-rater reliability checks. The process of checking and refining codes was iterative ([Dey, 1993](#_ENREF_60)), and when new codes emerged I revisited interviews already coded to check them again. The question of whether the coding ever reached saturation I view to be somewhat misplaced, instead agreeing with Miles and Huberman ([1994](#_ENREF_191)) that there are always more levels of analysis to be explored and that it can be a difficult experience to stop coding. Nonetheless, I am confident that my initial coding was extensive, and identified a large amount of interesting and important data - as exemplified in the rest of this thesis. No doubt, however, there remain data that have been missed or mis-assigned due to my human error.

Once I had initially coded every interview, I grouped themes in NVivo with others similar to them ([Robson, 2011](#_ENREF_235)) – as informed by the interview data, pen portraits, and wider literature. Naturally, many of the initial codes were first-order concepts, looking at the explicit words of the participants, while the second-order groupings often reflected more abstract themes. Sub-themes in each group were then compared within the group, refined, and loosely structured. The refined list of data relating to each group was printed out, and I annotated each quote with comments analysing them and adding the context of each participant at the time from which the quote was taken. I again structured the data in the group, modifying sub-themes as appropriate, and streamlining the data to be used according to the relevance of each quote (but maintaining quotes from a variety of participants where possible). Quotes were chosen for their illustrative quality - either of the theme itself or as contradictory evidence, thus enhancing the validity of the findings by showing a range of both supporting and undermining evidence ([Dey, 1993](#_ENREF_60); [Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157); [Robson, 2011](#_ENREF_235); [Silverman, 2014](#_ENREF_256)). I use a relatively large number of quotes in the findings chapters that follow, partially as a way of showing the reliability of my conclusions ([Silverman, 2014](#_ENREF_256)) but mainly as the best way of telling the story of the data ([Janesick, 1994](#_ENREF_134)). In writing each chapter, I began by expounding each quote without reference to the literature (in an attempt to prevent my pre-conceived ideas from the literature over-influencing my analysis). Finally, I compared findings to notes and recollections of existing literature (again providing corroborating evidence for their validity ([Dey, 1993](#_ENREF_60))), including comments and comparisons where appropriate, and again re-considered the structure of each sub-theme and group. This method of building analysis and explanation on to interview data, then drawing links between quotes and with literature is helpfully used elsewhere in qualitative longitudinal research ([Thomson, 2009](#_ENREF_270)), allowing for the comparison of themes across cases and time. While there are one or two examples of comparisons over time in the thematic parts of the findings chapters, mainly the benefits of a (micro-) longitudinal study in this case are seen in the case studies and the richness of the data gathered. I attempted to mix case-oriented (focused on individual participants) and variable-oriented analysis (focused on themes), which I did find to be possible to an extent[[23]](#footnote-23), although undoubtedly challenging, echoing Miles and Huberman ([1994](#_ENREF_191)) and Calverley (2013). I was nevertheless disappointed not to find more data relating to the process of change within individual participants as expected. Despite following suggested approaches ([Miles & Huberman, 1994](#_ENREF_191)) of moving from individual synopses to themes to a condensation of those themes and then back to how that condensation applied to particular cases (see for example, the case studies in Chapter 7 and 8), several of the themes found did not lend themselves to a detailed examination of how they were exemplified in a particular participant's experiences over time. Whether this was due to my data collection, analysis, the time boundaries of the research, or the experience of change itself, remains somewhat unclear to me. However, the findings that do account for change within individual lives - exemplified in the case studies in Chapters 7 and 8 - do provide a starting point for comparison for future studies looking at the experience of change in desisters.

**Presentation**

A word here is needed on why I chose to finish some chapters with a case study of one particular participant (Chapters 7 and 8) – or indeed one particular theme (Chapter 6). Here, the case studies are used illustratively, and as additions to the data presented elsewhere in the chapters. They are examples of how influences can interact in the life of one person, or within the same topic ([Gadd & Jefferson, 2007](#_ENREF_90); [Yates, 2003](#_ENREF_295)). While these do not make them generalizable in any real sense, they communicate a version of an experience that is found more widely, both in my sample and undoubtedly beyond ([Gelsthorpe, 2007](#_ENREF_92)), and so are useful and relevant to other people’s lives too. From an ethical perspective, case studies can bring a level of humanity and engagement that can be lacking when interviews are only analysed across a sample ([Dey, 1993](#_ENREF_60)). The women who agreed to talk to me are not just useful sources of data or interesting quotes, but real people with stories that cannot be presented in full here. It is my hope that by presenting some of their experiences in more detail, their lives (and those of the others in the research) can be understood better with both respect and compassion.

**Assisted Desistance**

Given my method of finding participants, it is perhaps surprising that I do not devote any specific attention to the value of assistance given by such organisations to desisters. This is emphatically not because such help was absent. Indeed, unlike desisters in other studies ([Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76)), participants were forthcoming, even at the start of their desistance experiences, in attributing much of their success to the help received from a variety of sources. However, two primary reasons for not specifically exploring this aspect exist. The first is a methodological concern. As most interviews were conducted on the Together Women premises, and because I was known to be spending much time there, I was eager in interview not to lead participants to think I was only interested in their experiences of the Centre. I did not want to be seen as someone who was directly evaluating the work there, or someone who just wanted to hear positive stories of the staff. I therefore refrained from asking too many questions specific to participants' experiences of Together Women. Despite this, I was often party to participants' sharing how wonderful their experiences of Together Women were. Nevertheless, I remained vigilant to the possibility that I was only being told what participants assumed I wanted to hear and used such data with care.

The second concern is more fundamental. When participants moved beyond general praise of the Centre, the things that they appreciated were broadly the same as beneficial influences from other sources. As will be seen throughout this thesis (see in particular Chapter 8), specific aspects of assistance that were beneficial were not confined to professional help, but could equally be received from friends or family members. While there was some help that more commonly came from professionals (for example, techniques to boost daily achievements - see section on 'Gaining Confidence' in Chapter 7) there was nothing intrinsic to that help that meant it could not be received from others. It seems therefore false to identify 'assisted desistance' as a term referring solely to professionals when the effective assistance could be found from other relationships. Indeed, the potential and actual assistance of other people in providing opportunity, support and encouragement for change ([Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76); [McNeill & Weaver, 2010](#_ENREF_186)), was evident in all the major findings in the study. It is my hope that the (sometimes considerable) influence of other people - whether professionals or not - on participants' desistance will be evident throughout the themes that I explore in the forthcoming chapters.

**A Note on Notation**

When using quotes from participants in this thesis, I use their pseudonym followed by a number designating the relevant interview (e.g. Beth 3 indicates that the quote is from Beth’s third interview with me). While I cannot share the precise dates and timings of interviews for reasons of confidentiality, the number of interviews, and the period over which I conducted interviews with each participant, is recorded in the interview description table (Table 3.1). I aimed to repeat interviews with every participant once a month, but practicalities of the complex and busy nature of participants’ lives meant that this was rare in practice. Therefore it should not be assumed that interviews were equally spaced throughout the research period with each participant.

Throughout this thesis, where I refer to something as 'rare', this indicates something that is experienced by fewer than five participants. When I discuss ‘some’ or ‘several’ participants, I use these as general terms to discuss the experiences of three to seven participants. ‘A few’ suggests two to four participants, and ‘many’ refers to more than seven participants. ‘Most’ indicates that ten or more participants (out of fifteen) share the same experience or opinion. In quotes from interviews, I have used ellipses where minor edits have been made, or to indicate long pauses in speech. I have inserted words in square brackets to show words that were not said in interview but that are helpful for clarifying the meaning of speech or which replace identifiable information.

**Chapter 5: Agency and Hope - Present and Future Desistance Intentions**

By interviewing women - and seeing their progress with my own eyes- as they experienced the first few months (and in some cases days and weeks) of desistance, I gained unparalleled access in this study to what it was like to be living through desistance attempts. Without being constrained by gaps of years (and the problems of recall that would entail), daily experiences were much fresher in participants’ minds, and the struggles and successes of life were much closer – both temporally and emotionally – to our discussions in interviews. This contemporaneity – while not invulnerable to post-hoc rationalisation ([Farrall & Bowling, 1999](#_ENREF_74)) and reconstruction – illuminated some processes thus far under-explored in desistance research. In particular, the longitudinal design of the research enabled a fuller picture of the role of agency at different stages of desistance journeys (as predicted by Vaughan, 2007). In this chapter, I explore the everyday lives of participants as they desisted from crime, where they explained their understanding and experience of the relative prominence of agency as opposed to other factors such as internal desires and external circumstances. Next, I look at the prominence of agency at the beginning of desistance attempts and how it was discussed by participants through the use of the concept of ‘readiness’. Following the progression of desistance temporally beyond its initial stages, I then examine the understandings of agency as they were tested and questioned in the emotionally taxing daily lives of participants. Here, situations produced reactive and emotional – rather than primarily agentic – reactions in desisters. However, I subsequently consider one way in which agency could be demonstrated, even in the turbulence of everyday, which was by ‘keeping busy’, thus exercising a form of diachronic self-control[[24]](#footnote-24) in ensuring distraction ([Calverley, 2013](#_ENREF_39)). Finally, most desisters demonstrated agentic inclinations in thinking about and planning for the future. Sometimes this constituted hope, as recognised by psychological literature ([Snyder et al., 1991](#_ENREF_261)), and sometimes it was better characterised as desire. The form and content of these future plans affected participants’ daily lives, and ultimately their success in desistance.

**Agency**

Desistance studies often make much of the individual’s agentic role in promoting desistance ([Barry, 2006](#_ENREF_7); [Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112); [McNeill, 2012](#_ENREF_184); [Murray, 2009](#_ENREF_204)), and desisters themselves often have a strong belief in the importance of personal agency ([Burnett, 1992](#_ENREF_31); [Haigh, 2009](#_ENREF_113)). There is some evidence that definite intentions to desist predict lower subsequent self-reported offending ([Shapland & Bottoms, 2011](#_ENREF_247)) and that agency is linked to more favourable life outcomes ([Paternoster & Pogarsky, 2009](#_ENREF_219)). Yet there is little agreement within criminology as to defining the concept of agency ([Healy, 2013](#_ENREF_120)). Some understand it as the process of choice within a social context, thus taking account of Bourdieu’s ([1990](#_ENREF_22)) concept of habitus ([Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20); [Vaughan, 2007](#_ENREF_277)). Others view it as a compound of self-mastery, status/victory, achievement/responsibility, and empowerment ([McAdams, 2001](#_ENREF_171)). Healy ([2013](#_ENREF_120)) links it to concepts as diverse as social capital, internal locus of control and empathy, among others, and has since described it as a response to the creation of a meaningful and credible 'cognitive blueprint' ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)) or imagined self ([Healy, 2014](#_ENREF_121)).

In particular, the commonalities between agency and internal locus of control deserve some discussion. The idea of internal and external loci of control was first introduced by Rotter ([1966](#_ENREF_237)). His scale indicated whether a subject believed stable personal characteristics (internal locus of control) or forces external to the subject (external locus of control) where determinative of future action. In so doing, Rotter linked locus of control to other concepts such as mastery, confidence and autonomy. Yet this dichotomous internal-external concept provided a rather narrow understanding of human action, forcing subjects into one of two positions- having either an internal or external locus of control. The concept still holds this implication, leaving it difficult to describe a perspective which depends on individual capability within certain external circumstances. In contrast, the concept of agency allows for a greater range of approaches- as will be seen in the data below. Nevertheless, later glosses created some elaboration on the concept of locus of control, for example splitting a subject's understanding of past events and future action ([Brickman et al., 1982](#_ENREF_26)). [Maruna (2001)](#_ENREF_168) makes use of this particular improvement on the concept, noting that desisters who presented a redemption script adopted a 'compensatory model', where they had an external locus of control viewpoint of past problems but an internal locus of control perspective for future solutions. As such, they assumed no blame for past events but saw themselves as personally responsible for ensuring future success. Yet in his discussion, Maruna does not exclusively use the concept of 'internal locus of control', also utilising concepts such as subjectivity, control and agency apparently interchangeably. In fact, it is now common for 'internal locus of control' to be used interchangeably with comparable concepts such as agency ([Farmer, Beech, & Ward, 2012](#_ENREF_69); [Ryon & Gleason, 2014](#_ENREF_239)), or for a conception of agency to include internal locus of control as a component ([Cote, 1997](#_ENREF_51); [Healy, 2013](#_ENREF_120)). Therefore, due to the present usage of the concept as comparable to agency and the danger of unhelpfully dichotomising various subjective approaches, I tend away from using the term 'locus of control' and instead consider here the (potentially) overarching and more flexible concept of agency.

Recently, the sociological explanation of agency as involving the ‘chordal triad’ of iteration, projectivity and practical evaluation ([Emirbayer & Mische, 1998](#_ENREF_66)) has found some favour within criminology ([King, 2012](#_ENREF_142)). However, King is right to highlight the potential conflation between this concept and the creation of a future self (see Chapter 6 for more on the role of identity), and this criticism is also relevant to Healy’s formulation. Nevertheless, King ([2012](#_ENREF_142)) suggests that the creation of new identities is, in itself, a form of projective agency – with agency being defined as intentional self-change. However, participants in the current study did not always link agency tightly to their imagined future identities, and I am therefore hesitant to insist on a link between agentic action and envisioning identity. [Vaughan (2007)](#_ENREF_277) avoids including aspects of identity, but instead envisions agency to include discernment, deliberation and dedication. This seems more like King’s (2012) idea of ‘strategizing’ – a fundamental way to intentionally change behaviour – and it is this conception of agency that appears to fit the experiences of the participants in the current study best.

Whatever definition is used, it seems important to recognise that agency and structure are not separate concepts, working independently, but that instead, they find their meaning in how they relate (to each other and to other concepts ([Emirbayer, 1997](#_ENREF_65); [Farrall & Bowling, 1999](#_ENREF_74))). Structure can therefore be understood as shaping both the way in which an individual exercises agency, and as the result of that agency ([Farrall & Bowling, 1999](#_ENREF_74)). As a result, there is an interplay between structure and agency, where structures shape available choices, and choices shape relevant structures ([Farrall et al., 2011](#_ENREF_77)). For example, Rumgay ([2004](#_ENREF_238)) highlights the need for those who chose to pursue new identities to have access to opportunities through which they can fulfil these identities. From a feminist viewpoint, Pollack ([2000](#_ENREF_222)) emphasises that agency can occur even if the actor is oppressed in some way, differentiating the subjective agency of *feeling* in control with the political agency of having the *opportunity* for change.[[25]](#footnote-25) Even if the link between agency and imagining a future identity is doubted, it is hard to imagine a situation where there is completely unfettered agency, and the experiences of the participants in this study provide a good illustration of this. Given the difficult lives that the women experienced – with significant struggles around issues such as addiction, health, accommodation, relationships and benefits – it seems false to cast them as totally free actors. Yet they often exhibited some sense of personal agency, and all who recognised their offending behaviour as criminal (all except Clara) shared their desire to desist with me and others. More appropriate is to introduce them as people who were (sometimes seriously) constrained by circumstances and internal restrictions, but who nevertheless had the opportunity to act in an agentic way, with some real ability to direct their actions – in other words, with bounded agency. I therefore use this as my working definition of agency: "participants direct their own action with some measure of success, despite constraints (which may or may not be appreciated by participants, such as external influences and emotional reactions over which participants have limited control)". Such a definition does not necessitate any link to ideas of identity, but nevertheless allows for action that is directed towards the future. Here I look at the circumstances in which desisting women did, and did not, act on a sense of control over their own lives, and the effects which that seemed to have in their lives.

Despite experiences of good luck and beneficial circumstances, some women held firmly to the belief that sufficient determination on their part would determine their success in desistance. Steph, aged 40, was trying to desist from a pattern of shoplifting alcohol while drunk. She had identified her alcohol misuse as the root of her offending problem, and explained that she had never asked for prescription drugs to help her deal with her alcohol abuse, as she did not think they were necessary:

I’ve always sorta believed that if, if you’re gonna stop, you’re gonna stop, no drugs that are gonna stop you, if you’re gonna drink, you’re gonna drink… ultimately, it might be, depends, I suppose it sort of depends on your personality. (Steph 4)

Steph believed that internal disposition that she would stop was the only thing – and indeed a necessary thing – to ensure recovery. In her mind, drugs were ineffective and ultimately unnecessary for someone trying to overcome addiction. They would not help someone who was going to recover, as she saw external influences as irrelevant to the recovery process. Success was linked to one’s personality, rather than circumstances and medical assistance. While her words sit uncomfortably between advocating determination and believing in the rule of destiny, never quite excluding one possibility, other participants were less ambivalent in their belief that personal agency was sufficient to bring about desistance.

Zoe lived in a residential drug treatment centre, where she was recovering from addictions to alcohol, amphetamines and gambling. She certainly believed that her success was, and would be, because of her own agency. When asked how she would describe herself to someone she had never met before, Zoe said:

Em…just really driven, really determined to get this done cos I need to fix myself and I’m doing a good job if I say that myself. (Zoe 1)

Her efforts to overcome addictions (and the crime that came with it - she had dealt drugs for a number of years) had taken over her identity, and she was consumed with trying to ‘fix’ herself. There was no doubt in Zoe’s mind that it was she who was responsible for her success so far, and she who was responsible for finishing the job, echoing the overinflated view of self-control that Maruna’s ([2001](#_ENREF_168)) desisters had. Whether or not this ‘script’ came from the rehab (with organisational endorsement of the need for personal agency common in materials used by desistance-promoting programmes reviewed by [Kellett and Willging (2011)](#_ENREF_141)), Zoe seemed to truly believe it, insisting that she had the potential to achieve her desistance solely through her own efforts. Such a single-minded belief in agency placed Zoe in danger of feeling overwhelmed with guilt and blame if she relapsed ([Kellett & Willging, 2011](#_ENREF_141)). Indeed when I visited her after such a relapse, a few months after the end of our interviews, she did exhibit large amounts of self-blame about her lack of desistance success – although she remained optimistic overall.

Emily, however, explained her belief in her own agency by denying the existence of possible difficulties. Emily’s long history of shoplifting was to fund a heroin addiction. Despite many sentences, she had only recently managed to successfully complete one through her attendance at Together Women. A few months after her last conviction, and shortly after this success, she was adamant that she had not even encountered difficulties in staying clean from drugs because her determination to recover from addiction was so strong:

When I get something in my head that I wanna do then I stick to it because I had no problems thinking about drugs because to me, at the minute, drugs ain’t a problem because one, I wanna give clean tests for myself but two I wanna keep giving clean tests so that the [child protection] social worker can get in contact and she can see that I’m not using any drugs and I want it to stay like that. (Emily 6)

As Emily saw it, there was no possibility of her relapsing because her resolve to succeed was so strong. As she described it, her motivation to give clean tests was so compelling that she hardly thought about drugs. However, it is worth noting that Emily was strongly suspected of drug use by both her peers and project workers around the time of this interview so may have been compensating for any lapses through the use of particularly unequivocal language.

Whether or not participants recognised the role of outside circumstances in their execution of agency, or wider desistance success, some exercised caution in their determination to reform their behaviour. Despite Steph’s assurance (above) that personality and internal convictions determined success in abstinence from alcohol (which she was aiming for), she was hesitant to present herself as someone with those convictions:

Because I’ve said it so many times, I mean, you know, if people say to me, "I’m not gonna have a drink again", I say, "don’t ever say never, cos you can’t, you don’t know", I mean I’ve made that many promises, this time I’m not promising anything. (Steph 3)

A history of repeated relapses, sometimes after months of success, led Steph to be cautious in claiming the importance of personal agency. While she saw her own choices to be crucial in her desistance, past disappointment despite intense determination meant that she did not want to present insecure hopes to people that her current attitude alone guaranteed success. This lack of agentic language was also found in those in the early stages of desistance by [Healy and O'Donnell (2008)](#_ENREF_122), prompting the question of when in the desistance process language changes to become more explicitly agentic.

Linda had also experienced strong feelings of personal agency in the past which did not lead to desistance. Her history of work-place fraud interacted with an enduring relationship with her controlling husband. After her second to last prison sentence (the exact number of prison sentences remained unclear to me), she had felt particularly certain of her future law-abiding life, compared to previous convictions. Looking back four years, she recounted her feelings at the time:

I mean I never ever came out and thought, "I’m gonna do this again", do you know what I’m... it’s difficult, I don’t know, but I just thought, "I am never ever ever", I mean I’d said this before, but I don’t know what it was, there were just something, I’d been 50 that year and I just thought, "no".

(Linda 2)

Even though Linda felt that she was fully exercising her personal agency to desist at the time, she still reoffended. Yet this did not prevent her from presenting this time of her life as a re-awakening of her ability to exercise agency, despite the continuing existence of a controlling husband. She insisted that her actions after this particular release from prison were much more directed by her, almost oblivious to the apparent contradiction that her most recent conviction for fraud presented to that fact.

For those whose illegal behaviour was something that they enjoyed (true of the majority of the participants to some extent), it sometimes seemed that they were constrained from acting agentically by their own desires. Danielle, who was in her late 20s, had a lengthy criminal record for a variety of crimes and was classed as a Prolific and Priority Offender, so was well known by local police. She knew that her continued cannabis use put her at risk of further convictions, but was unwilling to end her consumption, saying "It’s just hard to stop if you like it" (Danielle 1). Even if agentic action could have a significant effect on Danielle’s giving up cannabis, she was unable to initiate it because she liked using the drug so much. In a sense, she was constrained from action by her own preferences – preferences formed through a mixture of experience, personality and circumstances. These preferences hindered Danielle’s capacity to act- but at the ‘dedication’ stage of change, not at the earlier ‘discernment’ or ‘deliberation’ stages, as she knew what she thought was best, but did not want to commit to it (Vaughan 2007).

Conversely, others found that their own desires aided their desistance without much need for personal agency on their part. Emily (aged 28) had a significant history of shoplifting to pay for a drug addiction, and had spent significant time living homeless on the streets of Sheffield. Consequently, she was still in loose contact with those people that she used to co-offend with - those who continued to frequent the Sheffield streets - but explained that she just didn’t want to participate anymore:

I’ve been round, like a few people that wanna go shoplifting but I’m not in, I just don’t want to do it anymore, like, it don’t interest me anymore, but before, I would have done it but I just don’t want to do it anymore.

(Emily 5)

Emily did not present her change of heart as a *decision* to stop shoplifting, or some kind of intentional action, but as a lack of desire to act. She did not want to suggest that she refused to participate, but preferred to suggest that she had little control over her reasoning, and that what she wanted had just changed. Admittedly, she no longer had a drug habit to pay for, which might have made shoplifting less of a necessity for survival, but she continued to experience welfare benefit problems and was apparently not receiving any government assistance at the time of the interview (a situation which had endured for many months).

For others, it was not internal desires that removed the need for strong personal agency, but outside circumstances. When the exterior world was set up in a way which made it easy for women to desist, they did not need to act so intentionally. Halfway through our interviews, Steph relapsed (drinking alcohol) and reoffended (theft of alcohol and possession of drugs– though she was not arrested). Once she had again sobered up, she did not struggle with filling her time or keeping herself busy (see above), as she was able to continue her attendance at courses and volunteering:

They’ve started up really quickly, I think cos all the stuff was in place anyway, I’ve just sort of fallen back in to it. (Steph 6)

Due to the understanding of course tutors and volunteer managers, Steph was allowed to get involved again the very week that she stopped drinking. Consequently, she did not face the difficulties of trying to craft a weekly schedule for herself that kept her interested and happy enough to stay away from alcohol. Instead of discussing agentic action or intentions, Steph was able just to ‘fall back’ into the life that she was building before her relapse. Admittedly, previous agency on Steph’s part had meant that these parts of her life already existed – she had self-selected into these situations, similar to (but on a smaller scale from) the life transitions that desisters experienced in Laub and Sampson’s ([2003](#_ENREF_149)) study ([Vaughan, 2007](#_ENREF_277)).

Similarly, Linda found that circumstances removed the need for agency on her part. On release from prison, and after a split from her controlling husband, Linda was expecting to take the first council property made available to her. Due to the general location of council housing in deprived areas ([Murie, 2014](#_ENREF_203)), she expected to be placed in a poor, undesirable part of the city, but instead was given a spacious flat in a pleasant area, where she had friendly neighbours:

‘Cos it’s a council property that I live in, I was very very lucky, cos I’ve never lived in a council property before. (Linda 1)

A fortunate housing placement meant that Linda did not have to spend effort on coping with a new and difficult neighbourhood, or on ongoing negotiations with the council to obtain better accommodation. She was able to overcome structural barriers surrounding the provision and location of housing by no effort of her own, and so did not need to exhibit any sort of agency. The luck that she enjoyed in this area made her everyday life less difficult overall.

Although agency was widely understood to be important, there remains a serious definitional confusion which surrounds the concept. From the participants in the study, it seems that agency need not be tied to identity, but instead matched more with Vaughan's stages of discernment, deliberation and dedication. There was a strong belief in the importance of determination among participants, and yet a few exercised caution in laying claim to sufficient determination to guarantee their own desistance. Given examples of choices being constrained by desires and other circumstances, leaving agency irrelevant, such caution in asserting agency was perhaps wise. In contrast, the idea of an interplay between agency and structure, where a feeling of control is needed in addition to an opportunity for change, appeared more apt. I turn next to examine that interplay.

**Agency in Conversation**

For others, determination combined with outside circumstances in a way which allowed the execution of personal agency. It would not be accurate to say that either agency, or circumstances, was determinate (or even most important) to success in desistance in such situations. Instead, agency was important as part of the package that allowed desistance to occur. Nicole struggled with severe depression (for which she self-medicated with cannabis) but was on Job Seekers' Allowance. She thought that working for herself would improve her mental health and therefore put her in less danger of reconviction because she would not be using cannabis any more. She discussed reviving her plans to start her own business creating personalised crafts, but noted that it was only because she felt more confident than before that she was resolved to do it again:

I’ve always had it in me had that I’ll have had me own thing, eh and I’m that determined, I will do it [laughs] see I wouldn’t have said that few month ago, I’d have been doubting myself but I’ve, I think different, em.

(Nicole 1)

While her belief in her intentions made her feel sure that she would re-start her business, Nicole acknowledged that her sense of agency changed over months, and was affected by the confidence she had in herself.[[26]](#footnote-26) With the obstacle of self-doubt removed, she had complete certainty that her determination would be enough to ensure she reached her goal. While some literature explicitly recognises that structural barriers need to be overcome in addition to agency ([McDermott, 2012](#_ENREF_175)), it is unclear whether references to desisters not necessarily being free to make their own choices ([Hannah-Moffat, 2004](#_ENREF_115); [Rumgay, 2004](#_ENREF_238)) relate to structural barriers, or whether a lack of freedom also encompasses internal barriers, such as those which Nicole had faced.

Hannah, aged 47, also found that favourable external circumstances could combine with personal responsibility in a way which did not deny her personal agency. Hannah’s offending history consisted of various crimes relating to her long-term alcoholism and mutually abusive relationship. She found that a recent offer of alcohol detoxification changed how she felt about her chances of recovery:

Just knowing that I have that option to go in detox and, and it’s down to me to make it work or not, and I ain’t had that option before. (Hannah 1)

Hannah combined the provision of detox services with the need for herself to ‘make it work’ to produce a hopeful future. She now felt that she had a chance to recover and desist, where she had not felt so before. Once the opportunity of detox had been presented to her, she believed that she had all the resources to recover, if she so chose. Similarly, [Myers (2013)](#_ENREF_205) highlights the importance of appropriate services being available in addition to agency for successful desistance.

Gillian also viewed external services as a resource. A 31-year-old binge-drinker with serious mental health issues, she had been sober for some months when a relationship breakdown triggered a relapse. Yet she was determined not to stay in her drunken state:

Then it was just like, get yoursen[[27]](#footnote-27) back together, paint your nails, wash your hair, fucking, and I think I came down to [Together Women] and asked [member of staff] to be my keyworker. (Gillian 3)

Mixing personal efforts to come out of the relapse and to look presentable with an appeal for help from services, Gillian showed that she thought the actions of others (keyworkers) were important to her desistance, but that she herself was ultimately in control of her own actions. It was evidently her actions in getting to the Together Women Centre and asking for help that she considered most important.

Most participants’ experiences of personal agency were ultimately mixed. Women talked about their own determination and voluntary action in the same breath as their reliance on luck and others. This confusion in the words they used to explain their experiences was also evident in the speech of Together Women keyworkers. They mixed their approaches to assisting offenders by simultaneously holding to their roles as aspiration raisers and a ‘person-centred’ philosophy:

And to access something they don’t even know they want, because you, you might say to them, you could have a life that’s, I dunno, drug free or alcohol free and it could be great but they don’t know it and they don’t know what that feels like…but I think also, it’s gotta be dictated by the person you’re working with, so no-one is gonna move on from offending without them dictating they want to, no-one is gonna access their debt issue if you tell them they’ve gotta do it, they have to dictate themself and then you signpost appropriately, em, it’s gotta be person-centred, that’s what I mean. (Keyworker 2, Focus Group)

While staff asserted they had great respect for women’s personal agency, they also felt the need to persuade some women of the benefits of a different life. In their experience, some women needed to be encouraged to try a different way of living before they fully took agentic control of their own desistance. This apparent contradiction was described vividly by Rachel, who was initially very reluctant to remain in a residential rehabilitation facility (where she had been placed for recovery from poly-drug and alcohol addictions), but eventually became enthusiastic about her own (and others’) recovery:

But I stayed a week, then I stayed another week, it got to a month, nearly left, I had to wait for money to be backdated to get home and I just stuck it out, I stayed…I just couldn’t cope with it [being addicted], I don’t know, maybe subconsciously or consciously or whatever, I really did want to get clean. (Rachel 1)

There’s no point in pushing someone into it, and I know it must be really really hard to just sit and watch someone destroy their life, but unless they want to, they won’t do it…but if you can get 'em here and get 'em to stay here it will work, if they want it to, it definitely will. (Rachel 3)

Not being able to afford to go home conspired against Rachel’s initial desire to leave, and on reflection she suggested that she had a subconscious desire to conquer her drug problems. Yet there was no doubt in her mind that, at least on the surface, she had hated being at the rehab – she even got herself arrested (despite an official record of only one offence at the time) in an effort to leave – and that her staying there was against her desires, denying her the exercise of her personal agency. Despite this experience, Rachel became very supportive of the rehab and fully participated in the programme, finally becoming one of its most vocal informal ambassadors. She was convinced by her experience that agency was not necessary for recovery – all that was necessary was to convince a resident to remain in the facility, exemplifying a kind of accidental desistance ([Shover, 1996](#_ENREF_254)). She still, however, suspected that there was a part of her that wanted to stay, suggesting that if she had been fully determined against the programme and its goals, she would have found a way to leave.

Although there was no evidence of participants feeling that an outside force had taken control of their life ([Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)), participants did not describe being in complete control of themselves or their futures. Desistance was not solely contingent on a decision ([Bracken, Deane, & Morrissette, 2009](#_ENREF_23)) or on positive thinking ([Myers, 2013](#_ENREF_205)). This rounded view of agency meant that desisters and staff were less likely to forget about the important impact of marginalisation and poverty ([Becker, 2005](#_ENREF_12)), structural barriers ([McDermott, 2012](#_ENREF_175)) and service provision ([Myers, 2013](#_ENREF_205)).

**Initial Readiness**

With this important caveat in mind - that agency was important though its interaction with other influences - I now turn to look at some specific ways in which agency was present at different stages throughout the desistance journeys of participants. First, I examine the initial stages, and how the concept of ‘readiness’ reflected ideas of agency among participants and professionals. Then I consider the apparent absence of agentic action in the everyday maintenance of desistance before looking at how the idea of ‘keeping busy’ might have been used as a type of diachronic agency in participants’ lives. Finally I discuss the interaction between agency and hope, as participants look to the future in their desistance.

There was some suggestion among participants that desistance could only happen when an offender was ‘ready’ enough – a concept rarely studied in criminological research ([Rumgay, 2004](#_ENREF_238)), although there is some suggestion that readiness is a complex and temporally negotiated state ([Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76)).[[28]](#footnote-28) At first instance, ‘readiness’ sounds like a complete denial of agency, necessitating ideal external circumstances and internal disposition. However, from descriptions of what participants meant by 'readiness', it seems that desisters’ agency could also be an important feature of ‘readiness’. In practice, it seemed that ‘readiness’ could be used to describe the appropriate circumstances and internal disposition that would allow offenders to act agentically in initiating their desistance journeys. Alternatively, it could merely indicate the existence of emotional coping skills in an offender. Gillian suggested that she only felt ‘ready’ to desist towards the end of our study. She had continued to struggle with relapses of binge-drinking throughout our interviews together, which frequently resulted in criminal behaviour or medical emergencies. Yet she became more hopeful of success after her relationship with an abusive partner (who also had alcohol issues) collapsed:

Then on the other hand I think ‘God loves a trier’, one day it’s gonna happen, it’s just gotta be the right time, know what I mean, and like I say I’ve never really been single and in a position to do it on my own and, and like, take on board what they’re saying and that, it’s always kinda been like half-heartedly or not half-heartedly I’ve wanted to do it for my family, I’ve wanted to do it for myself but knowing full well there’s a can of beer in the fridge when I get home after this counselling session if I want it. (Gillian 4)

While trusting that one day she was bound to overcome her mental health and substance abuse issues, and that things would arrange themselves to create the “right time” for her desistance, Gillian also hinted at her previous imperfect motivation as a reason for her lack of success so far. She felt that her new single status would allow her to fully engage in groups, without the presence of alcohol at home (from a partner who was holding her back). Gillian expected enabling circumstances to interact with her own choices to allow her eventual success- neither making herself a completely free agent, nor a passive victim of her situation.

There was little agreement among participants about what constituted 'readiness', other than it being a necessary pre-requisite for successful desistance. Staff used the term to mean the time when women were best suited to move on from crime:

You have to get people to be moving on in that transition period when they’re absolutely fully ready because they will, they’re more likely to struggle, I think. (Keyworker 1, Focus Group)

There was no clear interpretation given as to what “fully ready” meant in practice, or how it could be identified. Instead, it was used as a synonym for not struggling too much in the process of desistance. It may be that ‘readiness’ was a synonym for the pre-contemplation and contemplation stages in Proschaska and colleagues’ ([1992](#_ENREF_225)) cycle of change model- that is, the stages before any preparation or active change occurs. There was certainly no suggestion that it encompassed the changes in personal identity, opportunity and scripts suggested by Rumgay ([2004](#_ENREF_238)) (although see Chapter 6 for a fuller discussion of identity). In addition, there was no appreciation of the finding recently examined by Farrall and colleagues ([2014](#_ENREF_76)) that help and advice provided to an offender who had no current desire to change could still be useful to them when they later showed a desire to desist - a finding which suggests 'readiness' may not be an identifiable stage in desistance. Later in the staff focus group, the subject of readiness reappeared, but this time staff focused on emotional aspects of coping:

Keyworker 4: If that person’s ready to tackle those things…

Keyworker 2: I was gonna say, they’ve got to be emotionally ready as well.

Keyworker 1: Mmm [agreement].

Keyworker 4: In that mind or in that place where they’re able to deal with

it. (Focus Group)

Here, tackling whatever issues the desister had was seen as a difficult thing, which would require some coping or resilience[[29]](#footnote-29) on their part. Being “ready” meant having the mental resources (possibly including the strong desire) to deal with the process of tackling their problems in a good way – and possibly after having dealt with various emotional issues which clouded their thinking.

Thinking of readiness as equivalent to having the ability to cope generally was not so evident in participants’ own accounts. Instead, they tended to link being ‘ready’ to specific issues that they wanted to deal with before moving on. For example, twenty-two year-old Rachel’s mental health problems and night terrors had led her, in the past, to seek company on the streets at unsociable hours. While she wanted to move out of the residential rehab (having done very well on the programme) she recognised that she would not be ready to move into her own flat because she still had problems surrounding being alone at night:

I’m scared of being on my own you see so, I mean I was going in [for] my own flat but if I can’t sleep in a room in here on my own I’m not ready for a flat, am I? (Rachel 1)

For Rachel, being ready to take the next step in her desistance was closely tied with learning to deal with her fear at night, rather than a general ability to cope. It was this area of her life that prevented her moving on further – although she had already made good progress overall.

The lack of clarity surrounding readiness made some interactions difficult. Emily had been addicted to heroin for many years and now aimed to reduce her dependency on her prescribed heroin substitute. She desperately wanted to start reducing her large methadone script as quickly as possible, but her doctor was doubtful that she was ‘ready’ enough:

My doctor keeps saying to me, she don’t think I’m ready, and it’s making me think to myself, but, I said to her ‘I am, I know when my body’s ready’…but she keeps saying she doesn’t think I’m ready and it keeps putting in my mind, ‘am I ready’, and I keep questioning myself, so I don’t know what to do about that…but I said, ‘when I feel ready I need to do it because otherwise I’m never gonna get it done’. (Emily 7)

Without a shared understanding of what it meant to be ready, Emily and her doctor were doomed to be forever disagreeing about starting to reduce medication. Emily understood it to be some sort of internal feeling which enabled her to act, but her doctor appeared to believe, like the Together Women Staff, that it needed some sort of emotional stability and coping resources. If they could not agree what each meant by ‘readiness’ (even for good reasons), Emily’s resolve and self-confidence would constantly be under attack by the doubt introduced by her doctor, potentially producing further problems (see Chapter 7).

Overall, discussions of readiness were prevalent among staff and service users at Together Women. These discussions tended to focus on emotional coping, rather than available opportunities, suggesting that this was a particular emotional state, rather than the existence of desistance-enabling circumstances. However, leading research on the issue of women’s readiness suggests that it involves appreciating realistic opportunities, or ‘hooks for change’ (and particularly those which offer new identities) ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Rumgay, 2004](#_ENREF_238)). Yet this idea links much more closely to the concept of hope ([Snyder et al., 1991](#_ENREF_261)), which was discussed in interviews separately from readiness (see below). Nevertheless, being ‘ready’ was not the only thing that mattered in the everyday business of desistance.

**Everyday Emotional Coping**

Many participants found that daily life was full of difficult emotions, which were not always easy to cope with. When these emotions were particularly difficult to navigate, it was hard for participants to act in an agentic way as they were instead occupied with dealing their emotions. Social security and housing systems were a particular source of stress, anger, and resentment. Further, where participants were denied the opportunity to make decisions about their own lives, they could become deeply frustrated. It was frequently hard work to learn to deal with such emotions, but when participants found useful, prosocial strategies it made their everyday experiences easier and better enabled their desistance. Interviewing participants *as they were experiencing* desistance provided valuable insights into what it was like for them to deal with issues surrounding their offending behaviour day after day.

Beth lived on her own on her release from prison (for work-place fraud), after her controlling husband unexpectedly divorced her. For her, a large part of moving on from her offences was dealing with her new living situation in a new flat and new area of the city, lack of employment and status as an older (she was 63) single woman. She found daily life difficult and unpredictable, made worse by her continuing feelings for her abusive ex-husband.

So but it is, it’s all up and down, you just think you’re on a level and, but life I suppose is like that. (Beth 3)

The variety of emotions that Beth experienced unsettled her. She did not know what to do about them except accept that they were normal and that she would have to deal with them. Nevertheless, the constant changes that Beth experienced in her mood meant that she found daily life difficult and generally disheartening, not knowing what the next day would be like. It is possible that these feelings limited Beth’s capability to act agentically (see below), as Giordano and colleagues ([2007](#_ENREF_104)) found when they focused on emotional aspects of desistance.

While some difficulties in daily life came from participants’ personal lives, others were caused by systems and organisations. Clara, whose criminal history consisted of minor violent offences, quickly identified the benefit system as a frequent cause of stress, distress and anger for her. When there were problems with payment – which did not seem uncommon – Clara’s daily activities and thoughts were preoccupied with trying to sort out the difficulty:

Why should I get deeper into debt for the sake of them? You get angry, don’t you, with waiting, and then having to ring them every minute and it’s not one or two minutes, you’re having to put in money when you’re on hold ‘til somebody comes through. (Clara 1)

The bureaucracy and delay that Clara encountered whenever she had to phone the benefits office made her angry - a feeling shared by many women towards systems which administer benefits over the years ([Carlen, 1988](#_ENREF_40)). Some efforts from the benefits office to ameliorate her situation – by offering an emergency loan, which she would have to pay back with interest – instead highlighted to her the injustice of a system which did not value her time or understand her situation. It was little wonder that the anger and frustration that Clara held towards the benefits system impacted her general mood. Consequently, her assertions that she would never again be violent to police officers were hard to believe, as she had a (perhaps reasonable) tangible simmering resentment towards the ‘system’ which treated her badly and often made her daily life difficult.

Although Clara’s experience of ‘the system’ was of inconsiderate treatment, Emily found her interactions with the system (in this case through council housing) to have a significant impact on her daily life for another reason. When I first met her, Emily was housed in temporary accommodation and had an obligation to move into the first council property available to her. The house that Emily was given was significantly further from the city centre, in an area with which she was not familiar, and the impending move – although recognised by Emily as largely fair treatment of her by the housing office – was a source of intense distress to Emily. A few months after the move was first mentioned, when she finally reached moving day, Emily appeared to be dealing with everyday life in a less stressed way, and I asked in interview if she truly felt that way:

No, I just, Sarah can I just, I might have seemed less nervous but I’m not, I’m very nervous actually. I’m still a bit worried about traffic- about having to get there and back, so I am very nervous. I might not show it today because I’ve got tonight to go, but tomorrow I’ll be very, very nervous. And I’m not happy about going there, to be truthful with you, em, I’m not happy at all about going there, em, but if I don’t go there then I go on the streets, and I’ve been on the streets a lot, enough time, I don’t wanna go back there, so, the only case that I want to go there, is cos I’ve got to go, so. (Emily 4)

Although she recognised that moving was her only viable option if she did not want to be homeless, Emily’s concerns about the location of her new house made her extremely nervous. She worried about her safety, and being able to continue to come into town for her various appointments and courses. Her anxiety made her much more defensive than she had been in initial interviews, and for a number of months surrounding her move, she talked of little else but her concerns. Emily also disliked that she had been deprived of choice in this matter – she was obliged to move, even though she didn’t want to. Although she submitted to the housing authority’s decision in the end, being told what she must do made Emily visibly hostile and defiant for a period of months, and particularly towards her housing worker.

Steph also experienced problems when others treated her in a particular way without giving her (behavioural) choices. Her six-year-old daughter was living permanently with Steph’s parents, but they found it very tiring to look after a young child full-time. They had consequently begun to explore the option of her living with her father if Steph could not recover from her alcohol abuse. However, Steph had a particularly low opinion of her ex-husband's parenting skills, and he lived elsewhere in the country. Yet Steph’s parents had not initially discussed this with her, for fear of triggering a relapse:

But then nobody’s mentioned it to me, and they pussyfoot around me with the fact of ‘oh, we can’t tell her because she might go off and have a drink’. But it has the reverse effect because the fact that they don’t tell me makes me wanna go and have a drink. If I know what I’m facing, I can deal with it better, but if they just drop something in, that’s already been discussed by them, it’s like, ‘well why, where do I fit into this picture?’

(Steph 3)

Steph felt angry that her parents had assumed she had so little control over her actions and that her only way of coping with such upsetting news would be to drink. What was undoubtedly an effort to protect Steph from distress instead made her feel ignored and unimportant. Her parents showed, by their actions, that they didn’t really understand Steph’s reactions to them, and the importance that she placed on being included in decisions about her daughter. The lack of choices available to Steph in this situation – where being denied information prevented her from even voicing an opinion – made her feel unvalued and frustrated. Those feelings, in turn, made her want to drink – an action that, given her history of stealing alcohol while drunk, would almost inevitably lead to reoffending.

Yet others had found more positive ways of dealing with the difficulties that they faced in everyday life. Nicole (age 32) had suffered with severe depression over many years, and had recently begun to work through her low mood instead of letting it incapacitate her. Nevertheless, trying to deal with her illness, alongside other issues in her life, was extremely difficult:

So now I’ve started to go out more and, I don’t know, not see me depression as end of the world. If I’m a bit depressed, so what? Everyone gets depressed, I’m not gonna just lock meself in and hide away. It’s not the answer, so I’ve learnt how to get up and go, even if I am depressed, and that sorta brings me out of it I suppose. Em, it’s hard, it is hard.

(Nicole 1)

Nicole had been through a process of "learning" to go out, even when her depression was particularly bad, as she recognised that it was more helpful than staying at home. She found that it helped her deal with her depression, but was clear that it was not an easy option. It was hard to fight her instincts to stay in, and difficult to accept depression as a common feature of life that needed to be worked around. This meant that small daily tasks could be real battles for Nicole, although she did appreciate the benefit of her hard work to overcome them once she was out of the house. It appeared that her desistance was indeed accompanying an increased ability to deal with her emotions in pro-social ways, although the causal interaction between desistance and emotional coping remains unclear ([Giordano et al., 2007](#_ENREF_104)).

Zoe, aged 37, had a different coping strategy to deal with difficult days. She was recovering from a long-standing poly-drug and gambling addiction through a period of residential rehabilitation. The philosophy of the rehab had a large effect on Zoe, who was coping with the stresses of life by clinging to the advice of rehab staff:

Being in here, taking it every day as it comes, taking 20 minutes at a time, if I have to, instead of a day, instead of a week. (Zoe 1)

Daily life in the residential rehab was busy, stressful and emotional. Enforced living arrangements with a number of other recovering addicts, a strict timetable, and frequent group sessions where honesty and humility were strongly encouraged meant that residents told me they found their stays difficult (although also rewarding). Zoe’s approach was to split her time into small periods, only thinking about one period at once, so that she was not overwhelmed by all that she faced. By demarking her time thus, Zoe would feel achievement at the end of each time period, which then increased her confidence in dealing with the next small section of time. She also tried to accept what her days held, without resentment or anger, so that her emotions did not get out of her control. Zoe showed signs of dealing with everyday life in an agentic way, where how she thought about her time affected the nature of her days. She echoed findings that emotional coping during desistance is linked to increased agency ([Giordano et al., 2007](#_ENREF_104); [Rumgay, 2004](#_ENREF_238)).

**Keeping Busy**

Although not explicitly presented as such, the aim of participants to keep themselves busy in their everyday lives might be understood as a kind of agentic action. Earlier agentic decisions to fill their time meant that coping with emotional turbulence in everyday life was easier – an idea with clear echoes of Shapland and Bottoms’ ([2011](#_ENREF_247)) idea of diachronic self-control. Instead of participants choosing not to be in certain places where they suspected the temptation to offend would be too strong, participants in this study chose to fill their time to keep their minds busy so that they would be better able to control their emotional responses to everyday difficulties. I do not agree with Liem and Richardson's ([2014](#_ENREF_159)) suggestion that keeping busy is a passive activity, as participants needed to be fairly proactive to fill their time, and used busyness as a kind of pre-emptive coping mechanism for emotional turbulence - suggesting a much more active usage. When discussing various service users, staff at the Together Women Centre were particularly impressed with those who seemed proactive in keeping their diaries and minds occupied. In our focus group, staff were quick to link one woman’s success in desistance to her filling her time:

Yeh she’s got a focus, something to do, she’s got like something about her, something that’s other than 'an offender'. (Focus Group)

For them, keeping busy was linked to the desister’s identity – when they had a particular thing to be doing, they became not just an offender, but someone with a particular focus. What they were doing became part of who they were as a person, and a potential ‘hook’ for moving on in their desistance ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)).[[30]](#footnote-30) Yet desisters themselves seemed to focus more on the practical, present benefits of being busy, and rarely indicated that what they did affected how they thought about their own identities. For example, Rachel was convinced that her friend’s failure to complete residential rehabilitation with her by relapsing was due to a lack of busyness, and somewhat inevitable:

She didn’t have no commitments [rehabilitation slang for courses and volunteering which the ex-addict voluntarily attends] set up, she wasn’t going to any groups, she’s been going, she got took out of that house of 36 people, put in a place with 10 people that she nev, she never sees, on her own. (Rachel 2)

'Commitments' were encouraged by rehab staff as a way of introducing those in recovery to new social worlds, activities to fill their time, and the responsibility necessary to sustainably shape their own daily lives. Those with established 'commitments', and who conscientiously attended them, were considered by both staff and rehab peers as doing well in their recovery. 'Commitments' were therefore viewed within the rehab as a necessary aid to successful independent living. As such, they were part of the cognitive blueprint ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)) of a recovered addict promoted by the rehabilitation facility, and may have therefore supported the creation and maintenance of a 'recovered' identity among rehab residents. Rachel was under the impression that her friend (who did not have any commitments) had too much time to herself and was bound to get bored and lonely – and so put herself in danger of again using drugs. Rachel was unable to explain the likely mechanisms between feeling lonely or bored and taking drugs, but did not give the impression that drug use was simply something to fill the time, instead suggesting that deeper processes were at work than merely a search for a ‘thrill’ ([Katz, 1988](#_ENREF_138)). It is possible that keeping occupied was a way of emotional coping which replaced the use of drugs as a coping strategy for those in recovery ([Wolfer, 2000](#_ENREF_290)).

For Hannah (whose persistent alcohol abuse threatened her desistance from a variety of offending) it was time with her granddaughter that was primarily valuable to her because it kept her occupied.

So we just, I just do something, you know when I’ve got her, it’s when I haven’t got her, that’s when I just sit and fester [laughs]. (Hannah 1)

In looking after her granddaughter, Hannah could fill her time and thoughts in a way that did not let her “fester”. The very act of keeping busy meant that negative and destructive thoughts did not overwhelm her and so Hannah did not feel that she needed to drink as a way of coping with those thoughts. In contrast to staff’s ideas about the worth of keeping busy, here Hannah was not aware of any impact that keeping occupied had on her identity – she did not dwell on being a care-giver or grandmother – but instead appreciated filling her time on a simple level, because it stopped her thinking too much about negative things.

Thirty-one-year-old Gillian took a similar approach to Hannah in occupying her time. She very consciously kept herself busy with educational courses as a way to manage her mental health and substance abuse issues – both of which triggered her offending behaviour.

SG: You’ve done, like I’ve seen your CV, you’ve got loads of courses and stuff…

Gillian: That’s the only way I’ve survived, you know what I mean, is, it’s distraction innit, but I’ve distracted myself with learning something.

(Gillian 2)

At this point in our interview, I expected Gillian to start talking about why she liked learning or why she thought education was important. Instead, she focused on how doing courses kept her occupied. The variety of (both traditional and online) courses kept her mind busy and allowed her to forget about her multiple issues for a time. [Österman (2013)](#_ENREF_217) found that women in her study of female desistance in England and Sweden also placed a lot of importance on keeping busy, without linking this to their perceptions of their own identities, and that boredom was a risk factor for re-offending. Perhaps because of the shortened gap in my study between desistance and interview when compared to previous desistance studies, there is little exploration in the wider desistance literature of ‘keeping busy’ as an important component of successful desistance when it is not obviously linked to identities. Healy ([2014](#_ENREF_121)) also found desisters who focused on keeping busy in a way which did not relate to their identity, and in fact which may have instead impeded their developing a new 'future self'. Thus the manner in which they filled their time prevented them from imagining a fully formed idea of what they could become in the future.[[31]](#footnote-31) Nevertheless, keeping themselves occupied was a way in which participants chose to act in an attempt to maintain desistance. It was therefore not a passive response, but instead a strategy to keep their thoughts busy which required much continued effort.

**Hope and the Future**

When looking to the future, participants sometimes demonstrated detailed intentions in a way that indicated agentic action, but sometimes just described vague desires for change. While the concept of ‘hope’ does not fully overlap with ‘agency’, there are obvious parallels in the psychological description of hope that make it sensible to examine them together. Hope is described as having both the desire to change, and being able to see a way in which this change can practically come about ([Snyder et al., 1991](#_ENREF_261)). Other research has seen that ‘high hopes’ can be widely beneficial to those trying to successfully overcome setbacks ([Burnett, 2010](#_ENREF_32)), and specifically for those trying to desist from crime ([Bahr, Harris, Fisher, & Harker Armstrong, 2010](#_ENREF_5)). This can take effect through motivating action, initiating a re-evaluation of goals as the desister's life circumstances change, or - importantly - by preventing certain actions that are incompatible with what is hoped for ([Farrall & Calverley, 2006](#_ENREF_75); [Simpson, 2004](#_ENREF_257)). Some even identify hope, in conjunction with agency, as one major subjective theme in desistance, suggesting that hope in one’s ability to desist is a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for success ([LeBel et al., 2008](#_ENREF_150)). It was therefore unsurprising that thoughts about the future were common in many participants’ everyday lives. Some wanted to spend more time thinking about the future than the present, and others found that ideas about the future made an appreciable difference to their daily experience. Beth’s release from prison for a fraud conviction coincided with an upsetting divorce and her living alone for the first time in many years (she was now aged 63). Unsurprisingly, she found settling into a new pattern of daily life difficult to cope with emotionally. For her, thoughts about the future were a way of reducing sadness about the past and present:

But em I’m trying focus more on the future I suppose. (Beth 4)

While she did not seem to truly believe that the future would be any better, imagining and planning times to come gave her a distraction. She reflected the vague hopes of Farrall and Calverley’s ([2006](#_ENREF_75)) first phase desisters (those who had not yet been desisting for long). Beth thought that focusing on the future would make life easier to deal with – perhaps just by occupying her mind, or perhaps by giving her a sense of hope.

Others appeared to experience hope more strongly than Beth did. Nicole, who had recently been feeling better after many years of serious depression, explained the hope she felt as a “light”:

Fact that I’ve come out of this, em, and I can see, like I said to [keyworker] the other week, I can see a light, I can see a light, I’ve not seen that light for years and years and years, there were no light, it were just living, eh, I can see a light now, so that’s what makes me feel good, I will be alright, I will be OK [emphasised]. (Nicole 1)

In Nicole’s experience, hope did not primarily come from thinking about the future, but from a reflection on her current situation compared to her previous situation. Knowing that there was some hope because of the difference she felt now assured her that she would be ‘OK’ and lifted her current mood. Throughout our interview, she voiced high aspirations for her future life, and was optimistic that she could achieve them, similar to the initial feelings of female ex-prisoners in Opsal’s ([2012](#_ENREF_215)) study of release from prison and identity formation.

In her recovery from alcohol abuse, Steph often struggled with boredom and feeling down. However, she felt similar to Nicole when she could identify possible activities to keep her busy:

But yeh having, having something to look forward to...helps, cos you know that it’s not gonna be [a] long miserable winter, and there’s things to do, there’s things that I can do. (Steph 2)

For Steph, being aware of activities that she could take part in gave her hope that, despite the poor weather and darkness of winter, she would be able to stay busy and therefore would not resort to drinking. She could be assured that failure in recovery was not inevitable. Her hope was attached to something much more definite that Nicole’s, but produced a similar result. Steph’s words come closer than Nicole’s or Beth’s in reflecting the current psychological understanding of hope ([Snyder et al., 1991](#_ENREF_261)), which combines motivation and commitment to goals with a belief in the availability of the means by which to reach those goals. She wanted to keep herself busy over winter, and had ideas of things she could do to achieve that.

In contrast, Gillian was very aware of her lack of future plans and hopes. An enduring battle with alcohol issues, depression and severe anxiety (which had gained her a handful of convictions for offences under the influence of alcohol) left her with few employment prospects, so she kept her aims for the next few months small:

Gillian: Just gain confidence I think with this, um, this EPP[[32]](#footnote-32) course, cos you can go on to like be, train it after, and if I was, if I could gain confidence to do that then, I don’t know, get some self-worth, basically.

SG: OK, and do you have any bigger dreams or ambitions?

Gillian: No, I ain’t got no focus, lack of guidance. (Gillian 1)

Gillian’s plans stopped short of Snyder et al.’s ([1991](#_ENREF_261)) conception of hope: she thought she might be able to gain some “self-worth” through learning to deliver the EPP course, but did not seem particularly optimistic about it, or envision any further opportunities. She had no ideas of where her life was heading, or what she would ultimately like to aim for, again reflecting Farrall and Calverley’s ([2006](#_ENREF_75)) first phase desisters. It is not clear where those who lack well defined goals fall within Snyder et al.’s ([1991](#_ENREF_261)) theory: are they automatically excluded because they cannot envision specific aims and are therefore prevented from identifying ways to fulfil those aims? Alternatively, poorly-defined goals, where the subject perceives a selection of possible means by which to achieve something connected to those goals, could still produce recognisable hope. However, here her lack of definite goals meant that Gillian drifted from course to course, gaining a wide variety of skills but never employing them beyond educational training. She also found it hard to maintain motivation to manage her health and addiction issues, leaving her at risk of committing further offences under the influence of alcohol. It also seemed that Burnett’s ([2010](#_ENREF_32)) criticisms of hope theories[[33]](#footnote-33) were particularly pertinent to Gillian, where hope is less relevant when the means for change is lacking. Gillian found that her dual diagnosis of alcohol and mental health problems meant that she was frequently passed from organisation to organisation, with none willing to deal with all her issues at once. She therefore lacked the appropriate healthcare to effectively cope with her problems, and her lack of specific goals may have merely been a realistic appraisal of her situation until her health issues resolved.

It was common for participants to look towards their futures, even if (as was most common) they had no firm plans or ideas of what might happen. Some, like Steph, identified specific plans or ideas of what they wanted to do. Conversely, some like Gillian, struggled to even imagine their future - although this could be hardly surprising, for example given Gillian's long history of failing to get the help she sought from various organisations. Yet most presented some hopes for the future, even if they were vague. These centred on hopes of employment, hopes of recovering from substance abuse, and hopes of caring well for children, and I take these in turn next.

**Hopes of Employment**

Among those whose health issues did not prevent it, future hope and plans of employment were common (although not in isolation from other concerns). For some, like Steph, those plans could be quite detailed, comprising a number of steps. I asked her what she was hoping for in the next six months:

Moving out, getting more family contact, seeing [daughter] more often, carrying on volunteering, staying off drink, staying out of trouble, making more friends, eh, gaining more education, or more training, em...get back to work. [SG: What kind of work?] Into this kinda line, into whether it be counselling, whether it be mentoring, something along those, those lines, em. If it means volunteering for the next 5 years, then I’ll volunteer for the next 5 years and get all the qualifications I need and try and get, try and get a foot in the door. (Steph 2)

Steph seemed very aware of the long process it could be for her to gain a job in an organisation like the Together Women Project, and despite only desisting for a few months, her detailed hopes reflected much more those who had been desisting for three or more years in Farrall and Calverley’s study ([2006](#_ENREF_75)). She knew that she may have to volunteer for a long time, and complete various qualifications, before she was able to obtain a post. Her hopes also prevented her from drinking alcohol again, as such behaviour would be incompatible with her plans to be in meaningful employment ([Simpson, 2004](#_ENREF_257)). Yet she was hopeful that it was an achievable aim for herself, and that belief drove her motivation to keep volunteering and staying out of trouble in the short term, mirroring the optimistic attitude of ‘sustainers’ in Opsal’s ([2012](#_ENREF_215)) study, who continued to hope that work would be basis for their identity post-release.

However, others mentioned ideas of work in a more mundane manner which did not convey any real hope. Zoe had spent her working life (she was now 37) dealing in and taking a variety of drugs. After some time in residential rehabilitation, she came to believe that lawful employment was a desirable thing, and mentioned it as a hope, but did not really treat the idea as likely:

Gonna try and get in to voluntary work or something, cos I really need to, I haven’t worked for like 19 years or something. It’s a long time, isn’t it?

(Zoe 1)

Zoe knew that she should work, and showed some indication of wanting to sort out some volunteering, but because she did not seem to believe it was possible for her to get employment, did not invest much time or energy into the necessary preliminary steps. She suggested it was her plan to *aim* for work, but lacked the appreciation of possible pathways towards employment that would convert her vague desire into true psychological hope.

Nicole was the only participant to be in receipt of Job Seekers’ Allowance at the time of interview despite her long history of serious depression. She neatly summarized her attitude towards future work:

I’ve said I’m willing to work, but I want something with some potential, else what’s point? I’m gonna get depressed. I’m not gonna want to go to work on a Monday morning, I’ll wanna slit my wrist. No, can’t do that, so I need something with some potential in it, I can’t keep just getting these dead-end jobs, it’s crap. (Nicole 1)

For her, the type of employment was integral to her motivation to work. If it presented the opportunity for progression or development, she would feel hopeful about her future and motivated to work hard. On the other hand, if she was given a “dead-end job”, the lack of future potential would mean that she would feel depressed – potentially leading to drastic action to avoid going to work. Nicole was less worried about the poor pay of the jobs she was likely to get, but was unnerved by the structural reality of employment with no opportunity for advancement. This made her more similar to ‘questioners’ in Opsal’s ([2012](#_ENREF_215)) study, whose experiences of the unpleasant realities of the job market meant their desistance became more precarious.

These three examples cover the range of perspectives on future work present in the study. There were one or two participants who had a desire to work and a detailed understanding of the various necessary steps to get that work. There were a few more who liked the idea of having a job but remained vague about how that could be made a reality. Finally, there were a couple of participants who had a realistic understanding of the types of employment available to them - generally from personal experience - and, while they still intended to work, they were apprehensive about the future that such work would give them. Their hopes for employment in those cases were mingled with worry and as such did not particularly aid their desistance.

**Hopes of Recovery from Substance Abuse**

Hopes over conquering addiction were also common among participants. Often, they were stated very starkly, highlighting the focus that ex-addicts (and especially those who were living in residential rehabilitation) had on dealing with their drug issues. Rachel, who had used heroin for ten years - since she was twelve - and was preparing to leave rehab, was a particularly clear example of this:

SG: What would you say is the best thing about your life right now?

Rachel: I’m clean.

SG: And what are your hopes for the next 6 months?

Rachel: Stay clean. (Rachel 1)

For Rachel, her hopes initially extended no further than staying in control of her addictions. It was her only immediate aim, and she did not imagine or plan beyond it, again similar to first phase desisters ([Farrall & Calverley, 2006](#_ENREF_75)). Even for those who expected their recovery journey to take longer, hopes which extended beyond dealing with addiction were rare.

Hannah had made slow but steady progress towards sobriety despite many years of issues with alcohol. Now aged 47, her ultimate aim was to stop drinking completely:

SG: And do you have any big fears?

Hannah: Em…no not really cos I’m a bit optimistic about getting off the drink, I’m ready for it now, I weren’t, I haven’t been ready for it before, cos I’ve not gived a shit, but now, I’ve gone through these two years with not getting into trouble because I’ve been able to think before I’ve done summat stupid, I’m just, gaining little steps really. (Hannah 1)

The indications of progress that she had already made in desistance– she had managed to refrain from re-offending for the entirety of her two year suspended sentence – gave Hannah hope that she could also deal with her addiction. She had noticed her increased ability to think before she acted, and took this as evidence that she would be able to achieve sobriety. Her optimism was based on her recent success, which showed that she already had the means to achieve her goal.

Even after relapse, hopes for recovery were often mentioned, and sometimes in greater detail than before relapse, mirroring some participants in Farrall's study ([2005](#_ENREF_72)). This also supports Prochaska and DiClemente’s theory of behaviour change in addictive behaviours ([1992](#_ENREF_225)), where each relapse triggers another ‘pre-contemplation’ stage, and moves the addict further along an upward spiral to eventual recovery. Megan had relapsed while living at a halfway house which was part of her residential rehab programme. She was again taking heroin, but had detailed ideas of how she could stop doing so:

But I’m not having [heroin] to like get off my head, you know, I’m not having it to be chuffing zonked. I’m just having it to feel normal, you know, to take the stomach cramps away, so. But I just wanna get, get a course of DFs [[34]](#footnote-34), and they’ll, at [addiction treatment centre] they used to do, like say, 5 for 2 days, then 5 and 4 and 4 and 4 for 3 days, and then 4 and 3, then 3 and 3, and do it like that, then, gradually get to 1,1 and then half of one, and then nowt. I’m hoping that they’ll do that, let me go back on methadone. (Megan 3)

Megan’s immediate hopes were for a course of treatment that she thought would help her withdraw from heroin again. She knew what she wanted that course to look like, and her hopes centred on getting medical permission to attempt it. These concrete ideas of recovery supported her assertion that she was only on as much heroin as she needed to remove unpleasant medical consequences of the addiction, and enabled her to continue to think of herself as a recovering addict. Her plans for the future did not extend beyond the time necessary to achieve this part of recovery.

Those heavily addicted, or recently recovering from substance abuse, focused their hopes directly on maintaining their recovery. In a couple of cases, these hopes were so stark that it initially seemed that they were the ultimate and final hope of participants, with no ideas of other possibilities. However, most did also talk about other hopes, but in comparison, their hopes of recovery generally remained remarkably detailed and thoroughly planned. It is perhaps unsurprising that these hopes were so detailed and firm given that some who presented the strongest hopes in this area were currently in a residential rehabilitation centre and so were constantly exposed to a strong institutional focus on recovery.

**Hopes of Caring Well for Children**

Nine of the participants had children under the age of 18 (only four had care of those children at first interview and another one lost custody over the course of the study), and hopes of personally providing them with good quality care appeared in all of those nine participants’ accounts.[[35]](#footnote-35) Rachel was one of those who did not have custody of her child – her four-year-old lived with her mother by court order. While she lived in a residential rehabilitation centre, she had made detailed plans to regain custody in the future:

But what I’ve gotta do, I’ve made a plan, it will be 9 months I’ve done here, when I leave, so 9 months here, 6 months re-entry, 6 months clean, out there, prove myself in the community, and I can go for my little lad back.

(Rachel 3)

With the assistance (and encouragement) of staff at the rehab, Rachel had identified aims and dates that would give her a reasonable opportunity to ‘prove herself’ to the courts so that she could again care for her son. She was very aware that her success in gaining custody was almost entirely dependent on her success in staying clean from drugs and avoiding offending. Like Megan (see above), her hopes were supported by the formulation of a realistic plan. It is possible that both participants’ experiences of rehab philosophy and practices influenced the creation of those plans. Here, only two months since our first interview where Rachel’s hopes presented her as a first stage desister, her elaborated plans meant she seemed much more similar to those desisting for three or more years ([Farrall & Calverley, 2006](#_ENREF_75)). This possibly reflected the intensive support that she received in her recovery and desistance from the residential rehabilitation facility.

It is important to note that, while hopes and plans were common in participants’ accounts, and that they seemed to have positive effects on everyday motivation, not all participants were looking forward to particular things. Linda was 54 and with a combined history of workplace fraud and severe arthritis was not looking to go back to work. Her children had grown up and she had left her abusive husband when she most recently went to prison. She had obtained a small but pleasant council flat in a desirable area of the city. Consequently, the most common hopes of other participants were not very relevant to her life. She found little else to hope for, at least in the short term:

S: Where do you see yourself in 6 months’ time?

L: I think it’ll just be the same as it is now really, might possibly be going out a little bit more, eh, who knows, I think it’ll be more or less the same, to be honest. (Linda 2)

Despite this lack of plans or specific hope, Linda was happy to get on with her everyday life, and seemed to enjoy both frequent time with her family and her hobbies. Therefore, failure to envision the future differently may not necessarily hamper desistance efforts – although this may vary depending on the desister’s age and life stage. This questions even LeBel and colleagues’ ([2008](#_ENREF_150)) concession that while hope was necessary for desistance, it was not sufficient. Linda’s experience instead suggested that hope was not even necessary for her desistance.

All the mothers in the study discussed hopes of being able to care well, or better, for their children. While these were often vague hopes, it was not unusual for participants to have some idea of the steps necessary to fulfil this hope. In particular, those receiving intensive support from residential rehabilitation or other services were familiar with the long process of desistance and recovery *in order to* better care for their children. However, despite the common appearance of hope as important to participants, one or two participants who appeared to be doing well in their desistance could not identify any specific hopes at all, suggesting that hope may not be necessary for desistance.

**Conclusion**

Although there is some disagreement about how to define agency, there remained a strong belief in the importance of agency in desistance among participants. Sometimes this belief was tempered with some hesitancy about discounting other influences on desistance, particularly when past agentic action had not led to desistance from offending. Agentic action could be constrained by participants’ desires or outside circumstances, and indeed it appeared more realistically in conversation with these other influences rather than as an individual factor. Ideas of readiness conveyed some concept of agency in conversation but were ultimately left poorly defined by desisters and workers - which, given recent research (Farrall et al 2014), may ultimately be beneficial in preventing those assisting desistance from relying on the existence of 'readiness' in offenders' lives before offering them help. Alternatively, the practice of ‘Motivational Interviewing’ may provide those who work with offenders the tools to encourage agency and desistance without first assuming a state of readiness ([McNeill, Batchelor, Burnett, & Knox, 2005](#_ENREF_185)). Nevertheless, participants’ daily lives betrayed stressful and difficult situations that led to emotional, rather than agentic, reactions. Sometimes these were caused by personal or social factors, but structural influences, such as housing allocation and benefits, also contributed. However, when participants were not given choices in these everyday situations – and therefore, on some level, no opportunity to act agentically – they became very frustrated.

Despite this everyday reality, desisters did exercise a sort of agency in how they kept themselves occupied. By filling their time and minds, they aimed to control their future emotional responses to their stressful lives, thus indicating diachronic self-control. Agency could also be identified in conceptions of the future, where participants indicated hope as described in the psychological literature as requiring motivation to reach goals with the belief that they were attainable. While some, who had vague plans for the future, did not exhibit agency but instead talked about their desires for the future, others had detailed plans and ideas of how they could achieve their goals. Generally, these goals were very conventional, centring on living a normal life with their children (echoing those in Barry's ([2006](#_ENREF_7)) study). Detailed plans for the future were particularly prominent in areas of fighting addiction and regaining child custody, where participants were able to identify the numerous different steps that they would need to take to be successful. Yet conversely the lack of agentic hope did not necessarily hamper desistance efforts. If agency was not determinative of desistance, the question of what did cause women to desist is raised. In the next chapter I explore the various motivations that were given by participants for their desistance efforts.

**Chapter 6: Identity and Motivations for Desistance**

In the desistance literature, much is often made of offenders’ initial reasons to desist from crime (e.g. [Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Eaton, 1993](#_ENREF_63); [Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112); [Jamieson et al., 1999](#_ENREF_133); [Leibrich, 1993](#_ENREF_152)). Yet in practice, these ‘reasons’ seem to be more long-lasting than the word implies, persisting into the future. They are not usually presented as the mental commitment made to a course of action as a result of a one-time cost-benefit analysis, and so charactising them as 'reasons' seems rather shallow. Instead, they may be linked to desisters’ views of themselves, and they may persist as motivation throughout the ‘maintenance’ stage of desistance. Some of these grounds for desistance show a strong inclination in desisters to engage in generativity. Many of these concepts were particularly noticeable when participants discussed certain aspects of their lives. In this chapter I first explore participants’ perceptions of their own identities. These identities could be closely tied to offending behaviour, or could assist in desistance efforts. Next, I examine the variety of motivations to desist presented by participants, and discuss the relative effectiveness of these motives with particular reference to Giordano and colleagues’ ([2002](#_ENREF_102)) ‘theory of cognitive transformation’. I then spend some time elucidating participants’ desires to be generative – to give back to society ([Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)). Finally, the theme of ‘motherhood’ is taken as an illustration of how the concepts of identity, motivation, and generativity interact in practice, and also serves as an introduction to the interaction between identity and self-confidence.[[36]](#footnote-36)

**Identity**

Many writers are in agreement that desistance either requires, or results in, an identity change ([Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Bottoms & Shapland, 2011](#_ENREF_19); [Byrne & Trew, 2008](#_ENREF_36); [Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Sanders, 2007](#_ENREF_243)).[[37]](#footnote-37) However, their reasoning for, and temporal ordering of this varies. Byrne and Trew ([2008](#_ENREF_36)) link the need for identity modification amongst female offenders to the confusion of being, at once, both ‘female’ and (the traditionally masculine) ‘offender’. They therefore assert that identity change is required before desistance can be successful. Yet Giordano and colleagues ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)) found that embracing a replacement self was important for both male and female desisters. Indeed, if ‘offender’ is a problematic identity in any way – either because it clashes with a feminine conception of the self or because it simply causes shame – it seems logical for an identity change to be necessary. In the current study, aspects of identity were often discussed, and helped elucidate their necessity in desistance. Sometimes participants made reference to more than one way in which their identity had affected their offending or desistance. Firstly, offending behaviour was usually intimately tied to previous or current identities, or aspects of those identities, necessitating an identity change. This was discussed as being (at least partially) the case for 8 participants. In such cases, desistance would require a change in identity (or a different outworking of an aspect of their identity) to allow the participant to continue to present themselves coherently without that old behaviour. Two participants explicitly discussed experiences of reworking existing identities, with a few others sharing information that suggested they had done similarly. Four participants explicitly discussed how their progression in desistance made them feel closer to who they understood themselves to be – with a clear understanding of themselves being beneficial to how they handled daily life. For these participants (and especially those who had recently exited an abusive relationship), desistance was seen as a process of more fully embodying their real selves. A couple of participants found that the process of desistance involved them discovering who they really were, or wanted to be, showing echoes of Maruna’s ([2001](#_ENREF_168)) desisters, who emphasised their core selves as being essentially good. When participants reported feeling comfortable with their identity, it appeared to aid their desistance by providing stability.

For most participants, how they saw themselves was deeply intertwined with their offending behaviour. This was perhaps most stark when substance abuse had been a significant part of their lives for many years. In interviews, I often started discussion with an invitation to participants to tell me a bit about themselves. Both Jane and Hannah immediately answered this with reference to long-standing addictions:

I’m a drinker, yeh I drink every day, so… (Jane 1)

I’m an alcoholic, I’ve been in prison 3 times for theft and assault, always fuelled by alcohol, em…what else do you need to know? (Hannah 1)

For both these women, their identities as addicts often seemed all-encompassing and certainly represented the core of how they had come to see themselves. No doubt, identities that centred on problematic substance use, and that frequently led to offending behaviour, would need to undergo substantial change during a process of desistance. Yet it was not only identifying as an addict that linked participants’ characters to crime. Other personality traits were expanded by some participants to constitute an identity and to help explain their offending. Gillian, aged 31, had struggled for many years with binge drinking and mental illness, which often led to alcohol-related offending. She explained her depressive and anxious mind-set not as something that was separate to her real self, but as a central part of her identity:

I’m a catastrophic thinker. (Gillian 1)

In Gillian’s mind, her identity as a person who always thinks the worst will happen defined at least part of who she was. She understood her life to revolve around the consequences of her pervasively pessimistic thinking. It also provided some explanation for her offending. Unless she could find new identities – or expand some of her existing identities – as she attempted to change her thinking and desist from crime, she would be left with an existential gap in her understanding of who she was.

For a couple of others, ‘neutral’ personality traits – those which were not necessarily criminogenic – formed an important part of the participants’ identities but also led to offending. Nicole found herself committing violent crime and supplying cannabis as a result of a feud on her estate. She linked her responses to the problems on the estate directly to her identity as a leader:

[I]think that’s just type of person I am, I think, I’m a leader, and when my friends are trying to lead me I don’t take it that well, it’s like, I know what I’m doing, so if I’ve learnt anything, that’s to listen to me friends more an’, I don’t know, take, take everybody’s advice, the more advice, the better.

(Nicole 1)

Nicole’s identity as a leader had meant, in the past, that she was unwilling to take advice – leading to unwise decisions about how to handle the feud and, ultimately, her criminal convictions. However, she was later able to modify her behaviour (listening more to her friends) while still retaining her identity as a leader, thus not necessitating an identity change for her desistance.

In contrast, one or two participants explained their offending as being out of character, and not reflective of their true identity. Gillian had a history of alcohol-related public order offences, but considered one conviction for shop theft – where she had drunkenly eaten a stolen bag of crisps while still in the shop - to be totally alien to her real self:

I mean that, nicking crisps, I’m not a thief, you know, I don’t know what planet I were on, you know what I mean, I’ve never been done for owt like that, I’ve never, I don’t even nick, maybe something out of pick and mix, but eh… (Gillian 1)

Despite admitting to occasional minor instances of theft, Gillian still did not consider herself as a thief and seemed completely mystified as to why she had stolen the crisps. She could not understand her behaviour, and indeed the blasé manner in which she had shoplifted did seem to jar with her more frequent public order convictions. Normally, she would be arrested for being loud, drunk and disorderly, but in this instance she had calmly picked up a packet of crisps and started to quietly eat them while still in the shop. While Gillian specified one particular offence which did not fit into her idea of herself (although which interestingly matched her self-reported history of occasionally picking up something small to eat while shopping), others considered all their offending to have reflected an aspect of themselves which was not truly ‘them’, mirroring the desisters in Maruna’s ([2001](#_ENREF_168)) study who described their desistance as something that allowed them to become their ‘true’ self again.

This was particularly true of Beth, an older woman at 63, whose only criminal convictions were several instances of theft from her employer, all prosecuted at the same trial. Her offences followed a long, abusive, marriage, and were explained by Beth as an attempt to regain some control over her life – which she felt had been removed from her by her controlling husband. She described her offending behaviour as foreign to her own identity, thus ‘neutralising’ her behaviour by denying true responsibility for her acts ([Sykes & Matza, 1957](#_ENREF_266)):

No, no, I think now, I just weren’t in my right mind, it’s totally out of character, I suppose a lot of people say that, but it were, so I’ll never ever, I can categorically say, ever get into trouble again. (Beth 1)

When reflecting on her offences, Beth considered there to be absolutely no chance of reoffending because such behaviour did not correspond with her true identity – an identity that she felt (now she was divorced from her controlling husband) she was finally able to embody. She was aware that many offenders claimed a similar feeling, but insisted that it was how she really felt. Indeed, given the story she gave of her life, where she was generally an upstanding and conventional citizen (but who also suffered from domestic violence), it was difficult to dismiss her claims as purely a device to ensure narrative logic in her story.

Several participants also discussed feeling more like their ‘true’ selves as they progressed in their desistance, similar to those in Maruna's (2001) study. When discussing her experiences since conviction, Beth had noticed a growth in her own confidence, which helped her take small steps towards what she was like before she married her ex-husband (who had divorced her while in prison, leaving her to live on her own):

I didn’t ever think I were very strong, because of what he’d manipulated me and everything, but I’ve told everybody now what he’s done and that and, so suppose I’m starting to be me again, I don’t know. (Beth 1)

Although still not certain that she was regaining her identity, Beth’s experiences of disclosing the abuse (both emotional and physical) which she had suffered from her ex-husband had demonstrated to her that she was stronger than she had thought. This realisation had been linked in her mind to her previous personality, where she was the strong and capable female who managed to hold a young family together despite an absent husband and her first divorce. She therefore felt more comfortable with her situation and behaviour as it was closer to how she used to be.

Steph also felt that progress in desistance had triggered the recurrence of former personality traits, such as assertiveness, making her more comfortable with her own identity. After a couple of years of serious alcohol abuse and associated shoplifting, littered with short periods of sobriety and relapse, she had succeeded in maintaining sobriety and desistance for a number of months. As a result, she had been able to move out of a shared housing association property into her own flat, and regained significant contact with her young daughter. She had found the new shape of her life familiar:

I’m feeling more back to me, and comfortable with me, now, than, I suppose with [housing association] I mean it’s been pointed out so many times from staff down there and other people that lived there that I didn’t really fit in, em, and I suppose I didn’t, it was just a place to live, really, em, that I stayed to long, but yeh I feel like I’m more coming back to me and that responsibility’s there again with [daughter] and the trust, em, I’m more, I’m just more comfortable. (Steph 7)

By staying at the housing association, Steph was unable to reduce the discomfort she felt from the mismatch between her environment and who she felt she really was. Even staff recognised that when Steph was sober, she seemed like a completely different person to when she was drunk – and a person who did not fit in with the housing association environment due to her (sober) reliability, responsibility, pro-activeness and middle-class attitudes. Once she was given the opportunity to move, Steph felt more comfortable in her situation. She was able to again pick up responsibilities that were removed from her at the housing association, and return to the roles (mother) and social situation (capable, trusted woman) that made her feel like the person she was before her convictions. By desisting from alcohol and crime, and moving from an uncomfortable situation, she felt the freedom to again enjoy her ‘true’ identity.

In addition to re-establishing a previous identity, occasionally participants described their efforts to form a pro-social life as part of forming their identity. This was particularly true of those participants who had started to offend before they became an adult. Rachel, who had started taking heroin (and committing associated offences) when she was twelve, felt that she did not really have an identity as an adult because it had not developed when she was younger. Now aged 22, her desistance journey consequently included her beginning to understand who she was as a person:

I’m still kind of a thirteen year old kid basically cos that’s what I’m picking up from where I left off, you know what I mean and I’ve missed my childhood…I’m, I’m, I’m basically a person that’s wanting someone to love her and kind of take care of her I suppose, but I can’t have that at the minute, I’ve gotta take care of myself and, everywhere I look for love is all in the wrong places and I just get tret [treated] like shit, so… (Rachel 1)

In her case, Rachel’s desistance efforts did not centre on a replacement identity, but on the recognition and development of her first adult identity. She noticed little difference between her view of herself at thirteen and her current view of herself. She had also become aware of the problems of her current view of herself – in that she was desperate for affection and therefore vulnerable – and was beginning to learn to cope with that aspect of her identity.

When participants did feel comfortable with their own identity, it seemed to aid them in their daily experience of desistance. Thirty-seven-year-old Zoe felt that her confidence in who she was had made her stay in residential rehabilitation (at this point, several months for a long-standing amphetamine and gambling addiction) more straightforward than that of the younger members of the rehab:

And I believe I’m finding, I can’t say it cos I don’t want to talk too soon, a little bit easier, and a bit more downhill, a bit more of a breeze, cos I’ve been in there for that long now and I seem to know my way a bit more, and I know what I want, I know who I am a bit, a lot more. (Zoe 1)

A combination of comfortableness with the rehab environment and security in her own identity (possibly linked to her being older than most other rehab residents) meant that Zoe could identify her own life goals with relative ease, and understand how to achieve them. It seemed that Zoe was able to live out her identity as a recovered addict and pro-social member of society ([Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10)). A strong identity gave her stability in her daily experience, enabling her to confidently deal with the challenges of desistance.

**Motivation**

While much desistance did seem to be linked with changes or rediscovering of identity, there were sources of motivation for participants trying to desist other than fulfilling a particular identity. A common theme was that desisters wanted to avoid the difficulties and stress of being incarcerated or involved with the police. Unlike previous research ([Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10)), these desires were not presented as a ‘turning point’ in desisters’ lives, initiating desistance, but instead as enduring motivations during the experience of trying to desist. Nevertheless, these motivations appeared to share some similarities with experiences that led to turning points in Baskin and Sommers’ ([1998](#_ENREF_10)) study. For those who had experienced prison, and other punishments, they shared that their sentences sometimes acted as ‘delayed deterrence’, motivating them away from reoffending. As a result of her first criminal conviction (for four counts of fraud), Beth had spent several months in prison. As an older-than-average offender (aged 63), and without previous contact with the criminal justice system, she found the experience very distressing and oppressive. She often referred to a very strong desire to avoid prison in the future as motivation to desist from crime:

…But for me, prison, I would never go back, I can categorically say that, people that say it isn’t a deterrent, it is for me. (Beth 1)

Although aware of societal attitudes towards prison, viewing it as too soft and lenient, Beth made it very clear that her experience of incarceration was powerfully punitive. Her attitude conveyed a real terror of returning to prison, and she was convinced that she would do everything within her power to avoid reoffending because of it. While it might be assumed that her fear was linked to her older age, she reflected the experiences of offenders aged 18-24 in Haigh’s ([2009](#_ENREF_113)) study of young people and desistance. Compared to these young people, Beth’s fear could not be explained by greater numbers of prison sentences as it was her first. Instead, it seemed to be the reality of life inside prison that scared and unnerved Beth, and so made her eager to avoid future incarceration.

Hannah (another older than average offender at 47) was also motivated by the threat of prison, but not through fear. Instead she did not welcome the stress of being incarcerated. She discussed how a suspended sentence had made the threat of prison real to her and bolstered her motivation to desist from alcohol abuse and related offending:

I think that suspended sentence has helped a lot, because it makes me think twice about, before I go and do something silly…I think probably because, before I were just impulsive, and I’d go out and think, oh, let’s do it, I’m just gonna go out and nick a drink or whatever, but now I just think, well do you know, it’s not worth the stress, it’s not worth the hassle, I don’t wanna go back to prison, so… (Hannah 1)

Hannah found that the likelihood of a prison sentence if she breached her suspended sentence meant that she had the motivation to monitor her daily behaviour more closely. The risk of encountering stress and hassle meant that she was willing to regulate her impulses more that she used to. The threat to Hannah of a prison sentence affected her in a more rational (as opposed to emotional) way to Beth. She understood that incarceration would be costly to her and was therefore willing to change her behaviour in the present to avoid it – like those who find that the hassle of prison is no longer a cost they are willing to pay ([Burnett, 1992](#_ENREF_31); [Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112)).

Yet for those who had never before been to prison, the threat of prison was not often cited as motivation for desistance. An exception was Danielle, a very prolific offender (with convictions for a number of street, drug and prostitution-related offences) who had somehow never been given a prison sentence at the start of the research. During the staff focus group, her fear of incarceration was specifically discussed with reference to her continued offending:

Staff member 1: Yeh if you think about Danielle, she, em, she’s terrified of going to prison and she’s got thousands of offences.

SG: But she’s also, that’s not motivating her enough to change…

Staff member 1: No, no.

Staff member 4: I think she says it but she’s only wishing and hoping that it never happens, that’s like denial type of thing, I don’t wanna go, but…

Staff member 1: I think it’s part of her reason to wanna move on, but she’s not moving on yet. (Focus Group)

Danielle exhibited fear of the difficulties she would experience in prison ([Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10)), which might have led to delayed deterrence through a rational choice to avoid the personal cost of incarceration – an experience seemingly common in the literature ([Arditti & Few, 2008](#_ENREF_2); [Barry, 2010](#_ENREF_8); [Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112)). Without denying that her fear could contribute to her desistance, staff were aware that Danielle’s worries about prison were not sufficient to change her behaviour. This gave credence to the claim fear of prison does not provide an inherent cognitive blueprint of how to live as a desister, and so is an inferior ‘hook’ for change ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)) (although perhaps it is sufficient for some older women - see Beth, above). During the course of the research, Danielle’s offending continued to escalate until she was eventually given a prison sentence. Unfortunately the length of the sentence meant that she was not entitled to any post-release support[[38]](#footnote-38) and so she did not reappear at Together Women Sheffield during my time there and she proved impossible to re-contact. It would have been interesting to see whether her opinions of prison had been changed by first-hand experience.

Other participants shared a desire to be freed from interference by the police as a motivation to stop offending, as found in other research ([Barry, 2010](#_ENREF_8)) - possibly fearing becoming someone who is always known to the police ([Paternoster & Bushway, 2009](#_ENREF_218)). Emily spent several years accruing many convictions for shoplifting while on the streets (to feed a heroin addiction). As a result, she was well known to the police. Yet she hoped for a time when she could live the life she wanted to live without police intrusion:

Cos I don’t wanna, I don’t wanna be in trouble with the law any more, I wanna get on with my life. (Emily 5)

However, while Emily mentioned this reason for her desistance, her fear of being involved with the police and courts did not seem nearly as strong as Beth’s (above) and it was not clear whether she had completely stopped offending. Nevertheless, the desire for independence was evident in Emily and it did seem to contribute to the significant reduction in her drug taking and shoplifting.

The desire for a better life without offending was common among participants. Zoe’s long history of drug dealing and drug use meant that she was used to carrying drugs in public. Possibly because she had never been convicted, the fear of police involvement was not as strong for her as for Emily. Instead, Zoe did not want to feel guilty for carrying drugs. That guilt had laid heavily on her (perhaps particularly due to her being a Catholic) and she felt that she could not have lived with it much longer:

I was gonna end up killing myself, cos I want a normal life, I want to breathe, and just walk down the street without the conscience of having, carrying drugs. (Zoe 1)

Zoe’s desire to be a 'regular' person- one who did not have to feel guilty for possessing drugs – was what encouraged her to enter residential rehabilitation. She wanted a conventional life ([Byrne & Trew, 2008](#_ENREF_36)) and did not want the pressure of feeling culpable all the time, because she felt it having a seriously negative effect on her well-being. In addition to these identifiable benefits of desistance, she seemed to have a deeper disillusionment with her offending lifestyle ([Barry, 2010](#_ENREF_8)), and was not content with her life as it was.

Participants who envisioned positive lifestyle changes did not just focus on the immediate effects of offending behaviour. The secondary effects of having criminal convictions, such as the negative social consequences, were also discussed as something that it was desirable to avoid. Nicole’s convictions for cannabis production and violence had damaged her image of herself as a leader, and someone to be emulated, at the forefront of new experiences for her peer group. The status that she had previously enjoyed in her estate was removed from her, and regaining that respect motivated her desistance attempts:

And for me as well, I don’t wanna be, I don’t wanna live like this, I don’t wanna be a bad ‘un, I don’t wanna be looked at like that, I want people to look up for me, to me, like they used to. (Nicole 1)

Nicole’s concern was for her reputation. She found it uncomfortable to be seen as “bad” and instead wanted to be seen as a role model, like she used to be. This, of course, jars with the common male offender experience of a masculinity which upholds and celebrates a reputation for toughness and violence. While Barry ([2010](#_ENREF_8)) found that desisters’ perceptions of their own good reputation increased as they progressed in their desistance (in that their reputation and desistance strengthened concurrently over time), Nicole cited an improved reputation as a motivation for her to persist in her desistance attempts (where the motivation to increase reputation preceded and encouraged desistance success).

Health benefits of fighting drug and alcohol addiction were sometimes substantial for participants, as commonly found in the literature ([Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112); [Sanders, 2007](#_ENREF_243)). Motivation to regain good health, or to prevent premature death, was especially common among those in residential rehabilitation. Megan first looked into accessing treatment for her heroin addiction in her early 30s after becoming disenchanted with the effect the drug was having on her health:

I’d already looked into going to treatment cos I was sick to death of it. I was basically having heroin to feel normal, em, and it, it just got where I, I used to dread going to sleep. I’d go to bed at stupid o’clock cos I used to dread, knowing that I’d wake up rattling [withdrawing from the drug], and it was like Groundhog Day, you know where your days just repeat. Cos I used to like, not wanna go to sleep cos I knew as soon as I opened me eyes that I’d be rough as hell, em, and there was just no, there was just no life, no fun. (Megan 2)

Megan’s experience was that heroin had removed the enjoyment from her life and made her scared of how ill she would constantly feel. Although these feelings did not immediately result in her going to rehab – it took the death of her long-term partner because of a drug overdose for her to actually go – they did lead to her completing some necessary preparatory steps, such as suggesting the possibility to her social worker, thus showing that shocks can help to initiate desistance ([Cusson & Pinsonneault, 1986](#_ENREF_55)). As such, when she felt an acute desire to enter treatment, her health concerns meant that she already knew what to expect and could immediately join the waiting list.

More directly critical to desistance was Rachel’s poly-drug and alcohol addiction, which had led to serious fits and health concerns – to the extent that she was told (aged 22) that she only had a few years to live. Not wanting to die, but at the time not intending to stop all her drug use, Rachel agreed to go to residential rehabilitation:

I only come here to prove to my mum that I’ve gin [given] it a go in general, and get off the drink and diazzies [diazepam] like I say cos I couldn’t cope with the rattle off them. (Rachel 1)

Concerns for her life meant that Rachel was prepared to undergo treatment, but she was not seeking a drug-free life – only a longer life. The stark reality of facing death made her take action about her addictions. Interestingly, after a few months at the rehab, Rachel’s attitude changed and she became committed to a full recovery and a law-abiding life (as discussed in Chapter 5).

Once treatment had started, sometimes the motivation to regain a healthy life was insufficient for the desister to persist with treatment. Jane wanted to receive treatment for her Hepatitis C, but was required to detox from alcohol first. She found that she was unable to succeed in maintaining her detox, despite wanting to be healthy again:

But I can’t have me treatment until I stop drinking, but I did do a detox, cos I were really heavy on drink last year, I did do a detox in, over Christmas and New Year, went in hospital to do it, but I messed up recently, cos I wanted to do it, so you know I could have me treatment for it. (Jane 1)

Jane suggested that she would not even have detoxed without the need for further treatment, but the promise of treatment was still not enough motivation to persevere with sobriety. She was left with only a vague idea that it would be good to recover from Hepatitis C. Perhaps the insufficiency of this motivation was also due (like those who cited prison as a motivation) to its failure to provide an accompanying cognitive blueprint to Jane ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)). As a result, it could not provide her with a picture of what her life would look like once she was healthy.

Once the desistance process had started, some participants increased their motivation by reminding themselves of how much progress they had made in their desistance so far. Residential rehabilitation facilities seemed to promote this strategy for strengthening motivation, as both Megan and Rachel (friends from the rehab) discussed:

I just said that when I fancied it [taking drugs] I had to remind myself of what I’ve been through to get clean, because it’s so easy to, because it’s so many months on. (Megan 2)

But I’ve got a picture beside my bed and I look at it every day, and I look at mysen [myself] and it just reminds me of what I’m not going back to, so…

(Rachel 2)

When cravings hit, or when thinking about the coming day, both friends thought about their efforts and success so far. They reminded themselves of the problems they used to face, and how much better their lives already were. For Rachel, the visual reminder of a photo (where she looked ill and dishevelled) helped her see her past self as something left behind – and something worth leaving behind.

Steph found the reminder of her progress as coming from an outside source. Instead of frequently remembering her improvement as a deliberate strategy to increase her motivation, she found her determination to recover from alcohol abuse (and desistance from shoplifting alcohol) strengthened by seeing other drinkers at her shared accommodation:

Sometimes when you see the aftermath of people that have had a drink, then...it’s good in a way, cos you see how...what alcohol does to people and how it changes personalities...some people can deal with it, some people can’t, eh, and it, you know, to see someone in a state that they do get when they’re hammered it’s just like, do I really want to go back to being like that? So though it’s hard to be around them, it’s also quite good, bit of a, bit of a shove, bit of a reminder of what it could be, what I could be doing, what I could be losing. (Steph 2)

Although Steph did not always appreciate the temptations of being around drunk people as a recovering alcoholic, she recognised the benefit of soberly seeing the negative effects of inebriation. The realisation of what she used to be like, and what she risked if she relapsed, bolstered her impetus to remain sober (see also Baskin and Sommers ([1998](#_ENREF_10)) and Farrall ([2005](#_ENREF_72))). Experiences of using evidence of progress as motivation for desistance suggest that accepted changes in identity – or at the very least, behaviour – can help desisters maintain their determination to desist.

Other participants found that other people, and relationships with them, provided an initial impetus to desist from crime. Some of these influences appear generative in character (see below) but were usually presented as borne out of love for the other, rather than being purely reparative in repaying the other out of a sense of duty. Although she had discussed fear of prison as motivation to desist, Beth’s gratitude to her adult daughter for letting her stay with her (in addition to her daughter’s two teenagers) for the duration of her Home Detention Curfew was her primary stated reason for staying away from future offending:

So I think for them to do that all for me then, I would never ever let them down again, ever. (Beth 1)

Beth explained that she had a sense of debt towards her daughter for the disruption she caused, and that she was therefore determined not to increase that debt, agreeing with [Cid and Marti (2012)](#_ENREF_46), who found that desistance was partly pursued as a form of compensation for supportive families (as well as families enabling desistance by providing social capital and trust to the desister).

Meaningful and influential relationships were not always confined to humans. Zoe, aged 37, enjoyed a close human relationship with her mother but no-one else. She was single and had never had children. However, over the last five years, she had raised a dog. Consequently, her dog meant a lot to her, and she was strongly motivated in her desistance (from drug use and dealing) by a desire to look after her pet. In particular, she felt guilty about previously neglecting her dog because of her drug addiction, and still not being able to look after it because of her stay at residential rehabilitation:

It really hurts me to think that [her dog’s] sat there all on her own, I don’t mind being upset [tears are coming to her eyes], I don’t mind talking about it, it just really hurts me, she’d been the biggest part of my life for 5 years, and she weren’t in a good place before, and she wouldn’t be in a good place if I went home today, there’s no way, I need to make it up to her.

(Zoe 1)

Being able to finally treat her dog well, as an apology for previous neglect, was really important to Zoe. She clearly had deep emotional ties to her pet, and deeply regretted the effects of her past behaviour. Zoe therefore focused on completing rehabilitation successfully so that she would be a good caretaker for her beloved pet. In a sense, this was a generative pursuit – but on an individual, rather than a societal, level.

Yet the motivation from family to desist was not confined to some sort of transaction in honour, making amends for past criminal behaviour. Despite a fairly distant relationship with her family – and a mother who was rather uninterested in her – Rachel felt that she had an obligation to succeed in her recovery and desistance for the good of her relatives. They had experienced a number of traumas over the last year, including an attempted suicide by Rachel’s sister. She explained how she had learned to deal with difficult emotions through her stay at residential rehabilitation:

The only thing I can do is talk about it, there’s nothing…what I have to stick in my head like, when my sister did that, usually I’d have gone and drank or took drugs and isolated myself, not come down, but I thought, like me leaving is just adding a problem to a problem. The only thing, it’s been a bad coupl’a years for me and my family, the only thing really that’s come good in the last coupl’a years is me getting clean, so I’ve gotta stick to it.

(Rachel 1)

After multiple tragedies and difficulties within her family, Rachel had a sense that it was her responsibility to prove the positive side of life to her relations. Her success in recovery would highlight the possibility of hope in life, and improve the mood of the family.

An even clearer example of familial influence that was not based in making amends for previous offending came through Beth’s relationship with her four-year-old grandson, with whom she was very close. Aged 63 and retired, she frequently helped her daughter to take care of him, and he lived nearby. Her affection for him influenced how she dealt with the difficult process of living out the changed lifestyle of desistance:

He, he’s helped me a lot, I think, having to try and be stronger for him than, the older ones have their own thing, don’t they, but he’s, he notices everything, you know. (Beth 1)

Here it was a concern for her grandson’s wellbeing that prompted Beth to be “stronger” through her everyday struggles. Her love for him meant that she placed his need for protection from the full knowledge of her difficulties over her own desire to express her pain. While I cannot claim that creating strong and healthy relationships was the most important thing in Beth’s life they certainly were very valuable to her, and so Beth was willing to act more bravely than she felt for the good of the relationship with her grandson. In acting this way, she made herself face the daily difficulties of desistance even when she would have preferred to avoid dealing with them.

Motivation to avoid future police contact or prison sentences was not presented by participants as triggers to their desistance, but part of their ongoing motivation to maintain desistance. In particular, one or two who had experienced prison sentences pointed to a strong delayed deterrence effect of those experiences. Most participants explicitly wanted to desist in order to obtain a better life - whether that was by becoming 'normal', by avoiding negative social consequences, or by improving their health. Yet health concerns were sometimes insufficient to maintain motivation throughout desistance. On the other hand, those who actively reminded themselves of their progress in desistance - whether by comparing themselves to a past self, or comparing themselves to others who relapsed - found this useful in maintaining motivation during the desistance process. Similarly, wanting to show gratitude or love to family could be a strong motivator. This last aspect links to the idea of generativity as a motivation and a result of desistance, which I now turn to consider in more detail.

**Generativity**

The concept of generativity – that desisters want to give back to society in return for the harm that they caused through offending – is much discussed by Maruna ([2001](#_ENREF_168)). In many of his desisters’ narratives, a generative stage was the final, and logical, stage of their desistance journeys. He found that this desire came from a sense of gratitude that society had accepted them, but also that desisters looked for the contingent sense of satisfaction that generative activities brought them. In my study, participants who had a desire to repay society for the harm they caused in their offending usually expressed this desire with reference to work with offenders. Whether through volunteering or paid employment, desisters viewed helping offenders as a direct way of making reparation for their crimes - possibly through the practice of Together Women, and other similar organisations, of sometimes employing ex-offenders. In addition to helping others, and compensating society, there were potential personal benefits to generative pursuits. Megan had struggled with long-term drug abuse and related offending. She expected volunteering to have a positive impact on how she saw herself:

And I think if I can give something back I won’t feel like I’ve wasted all ‘em years, I won’t feel like such a failure. (Megan 2)

By helping others with volunteering, Megan felt that something good came out of her many years of drug addiction. If that “wasted” time could be put to good use, then it would feel like it contributed to something successful and good. Any shame that she felt about her previous behaviour could be remedied by engaging with generative activities, echoing other desisters who employ generativity in order to deal with shame ([Liem & Richardson, 2014](#_ENREF_159)). As a result, Megan would not need to feel like her life had been a failure.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Although not intending to find paid employment due to her pension, Beth was very attracted to volunteering in her free time. She was particularly drawn to organisations which allowed her to share her experience with younger women who were at risk of offending:

[I] just think in my experience maybe I could give a bit back to somebody who could be in same situation, know what I mean, stop them getting into that situation. (Beth 1)

Beth experienced a lot of guilt over her offending, and viewed volunteering as a way of paying her moral debt to society and assuaging her feelings of guilt. Over the course of the study, she participated in a number of volunteering activities and greatly enjoyed the experience. Her overt aim was to improve the lives of others who otherwise could end up having the same traumatic experiences of the criminal justice system that she had. In this way, she reflected the motivation of desisters in Maruna’s ([2001](#_ENREF_168)) study who wanted to become a ‘professional ex’ – those who pursued employment based on the skills and experiences that they gained from going through the criminal justice system and associated services.

It was not just efforts to repay society that featured in generative desires. For Steph - recovering from alcohol misuse and associated shoplifting - she wanted to provide help to others like the good help she had experienced and appreciated during her offending and desistance:

I suppose cos, I, I wanna do the volunteering cos I’ve had the help, and it’s that whole giving summat back, and making a difference, trying to make a difference to somebody, for someone. (Steph 5)

Steph had the same idea of giving back, but was particularly keen to provide a positive change for someone. She had experienced both good and bad assistance, and knew what difference both could make to someone’s life. She thought that she could provide useful help, and so wanted to increase the availability of good help in criminal justice adjacent organisations (such as alcohol and housing services). As such, she reflected those in Maruna’s ([2001](#_ENREF_168)) study who wanted to become a ‘professional ex’ ([Brown, 1991](#_ENREF_28)) in order that they could improve the criminal justice system with which they were so dissatisfied.

In practice, participants found a wider variety of ways to give back to the community than just criminal justice related volunteering. Zoe, aged 37, gained some voluntary work sorting clothes donations at a charity shop, and definitely saw it as a generative pursuit:

It’s good, it’s good to give summat back to the community cos I’ve taken a lot out, you know, it feels good. (Zoe 2)

The charity work felt to Zoe like a contribution to the community, and it was irrelevant to her that her offences occurred in a different geographical community than that of the charity shop. Instead, she felt good in freely giving her time for others – and viewed it as a small way to repay society for the harm she had caused as a long-term drug dealer. In addition, her acceptance at the charity shop served as a public acknowledgement that she really was desisting from her drug dealing. Voluntary employment therefore served as a desistance ritual ([Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)) for Zoe, and through her work she received recognition of her desistance efforts (see also [Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10); [Eaton, 1993](#_ENREF_63); [Gadd, 2006](#_ENREF_88); [Rumgay, 2004](#_ENREF_238)).

There were also more relational ways to demonstrate generativity during participants’ desistance. During her time at the Together Women Centre, Beth (aged 63) befriended a younger woman who was also involved in offending. Over time, the younger woman became noticeably less defensive and defiant. I asked Beth about this friendship in interview:

I think [friend]’s never been taught any social skills, has she, and if she sees me sort of, well she said, I look up to you, and I don’t know why, but if I can teach her some things then that’s good, innit, if it stops her swearing and getting into trouble, like, that’s good. (Beth 4)

While Beth enjoyed some mutual support from the relationship, she essentially took a ‘mother’ role in the friendship, and spent time modelling and explaining good social behaviour to her friend. Beth viewed this social investment as worthwhile and valuable, both for her friend and the wider society. It may be that this relationally-based generativity is more common among women, which is why it seems slightly unusual when compared to the classic idea of generativity as giving back to *society,* rather than helping an individual.

A less obvious, but no less significant, example of generativity was demonstrated through Linda’s attitude to business. A talented craft maker, Linda was seriously considering encouragement from her friends to start her own business by taking commissions. She was at pains to make me understand that any price she charged would be completely fair, unlike the current market rates for work similar to hers:

I’ve even had some quotes from people and some people want an awful lot of money, well I won’t, it’d be fair, it’d be very fair, what I charged, yeh. (Linda 3)

I had the impression that Linda’s attitude to pricing was in response to her repeated convictions for theft from employer. She was trying to earn only what she deserved from her work, and no more, in order to make amends for the money she had previously stolen from employers. In this way, her honesty in business was in an effort to atone for previous dishonesty, proving to society that she was aware of her moral debt. As such, she was an example of the hyper-morality that Maruna ([2001](#_ENREF_168)) found among desisters in his study.

Desires to engage in generative activities were very common among participants. As well as wanting to help others, participants wanted to ameliorate feelings of guilt and shame surrounding their offending, and to make a useful contribution to society. While most talked of giving back specifically through helping offenders and ex-offenders, in reality some were already involved in generativity through other types of volunteering, helpful and friendly attitudes towards others, and approaches to business practise. These instances of generativity were obvious to me as a researcher, but not always recognised as 'valid' generative pursuits by participants themselves. This incongruity was particularly apparent when participants discussed their caring responsibilities as mothers, as will be seen in the next section.

**Motherhood: An Illustrative Theme**

Twelve of the fifteen participants in this study were mothers, five of whom had adult children. Out of the nine with children under 18 (two had both adult and younger children), only four had custody of their children at the time of interview (and one of those lost custody over the course of the study), although most had spent significant time at some point as the main carer of their children. All but one had plans and dreams to resume responsibility for the care of their children as integral to, or the end point of, their desistance journeys. It is therefore hardly surprising that children were regularly cited as reasons to desist from crime. In fact, motherhood provides a useful thematic illustration within which the concepts explored thus far in this chapter can be seen in conversation with each other. I therefore look here at how ideas of motherhood interact with identity, motivation, and generativity in participants’ experiences of desistance.

When discussing how they saw themselves, participants with children frequently based their identity around their role as a mother. A common central identity for some women in other research ([Katz, 2000](#_ENREF_139)), being defined primarily as a caregiver was expected both by the women themselves and by others that they knew- if not by society as a whole ([Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)). Despite the push in Britain (initiated during Tony Blair’s term as Prime Minister) for single mothers to also enter the job market ([Hill & Walker, 2014](#_ENREF_126)), it does not seem that the women in the present study were from backgrounds that also placed this importance on mothers working in formal employment. Influenced, perhaps, by the lack of part-time, flexible work and affordable childcare ([Fawcett Society, 2012](#_ENREF_81)), working class-based norms and expectations which emphasise the value of a mother staying at home to look after children, and also the widespread addictions and health problems among the sample, there were significant barriers to participants entering the job market. With the opportunity to define themselves through any rewarding paid occupation all but denied them (and in fact uncommon among even law-abiding peers and family members with children), participants looked to other aspects of their lives on which to centre their identity. Motherhood provided them with an opportunity to be recognised as a caring, responsible member of society ([Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112)) and as such, could potentially be a pro-social force in participants’ lives – a ‘hook for change’ ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)).

As recognised by Giordano and colleagues ([2002](#_ENREF_102)), the ‘hook’ of motherhood also provides a detailed ‘cognitive blueprint’ to participants– a guide as to how to think and behave as a mother. This blueprint can help desisting women to see what a non-offending lifestyle looks like in practice. Even more useful is when the ‘cognitive blueprint’ matures into a full ‘replacement identity’, where the offender ceases to think of themselves as an offender, but instead as a good mother or a valued care-giver ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Leverentz, 2011](#_ENREF_156), [2014](#_ENREF_157)). While the temporal ordering of readiness to desist and replacement identities is contentious (for example [Rumgay (2004)](#_ENREF_238) suggests a new identity precedes readiness, while Giordano and colleagues ([2007](#_ENREF_104)) suggest that an openness to change generally precedes the presence of a hook), it seems that being a mother can certainly provide a desirable pro-social identity to a desister. It is interesting that, despite the potential for motherhood to encourage desistance, Giordano and colleagues ([2002](#_ENREF_102)) did not find much association between motherhood and desistance. Similarly, in my study, only one participant (Alyssa) recounted desisting as a result of becoming a mother, but others did discuss the impact of wanting to be a good mother to existing children, so reflecting the findings of Sharpe ([2015](#_ENREF_249)) who found that motherhood was prominent in desistance scripts as a continuing process and not as a discrete event.

Motherhood was often an aspect of their lives that filled participants with pride – both in their ability as a good mother, and the achievements of their children. Clara was rather reticent in interviews, and unwilling to discuss past offending. She also did not accept previous convictions as justified, so struggled with the idea of ‘moving on’ from offending (although she did seem to be making progress in some areas of her life associated with her offending behaviour). Nevertheless, she was very willing to talk about her (adult) children and grandchildren, discussing them with enthusiasm and at length. When I asked her if she was proud of anything in her life, she responded with a clear focus on her family:

I’m proud to have kids, proud to be a good mum, em, em, proud to make kids happy, cos I respect what [son] wants, proud to have me grandkids at weekend[s] an that, me daughter knows I’m right funny, like, you know if she goes out, rather me keep ‘em than keep ‘em wi friends, not with family, em, and I’ll be proud when I keep out of trouble. (Clara 1)

Being a ‘good mum’, who made her children happy, was important to Clara. She liked to build her life around the needs of her family, and derived gratification by being able to provide childcare for her grandchildren so that they did not have to be looked after by friends outside the family. Her identity as mother and grandmother had a significant impact on the shape of her days and how she saw herself. Yet she suggested that this had always been an important part of her identity, so a change of identity to support desistance ([Rumgay, 2004](#_ENREF_238)) was not applicable to Clara as a mother and grandmother. Indeed, her identity as a mother had directly contributed to her most recent assault conviction, which she considered as gained in the process of protecting her son. While the general cognitive blueprint of ‘good mother’ was available to her, Clara did not demonstrate the necessary skill to elaborate the details of that skeleton identity in a way which avoided further offending ([Rumgay, 2004](#_ENREF_238)).

For Beth, her identity as a good mother gave her a foundation for increased confidence.[[40]](#footnote-40) When she found her self-confidence threatened, she reminded herself of her achievements as a mother:

Mm…well I just keep telling myself I’m worth more, I must be, I’ve got 3 kids, they’re all decent people, they’ve worked, they’ve got houses, do you know what I mean, I think, well if anything, I’ve been a good mother, so that’s a little bit [of confidence]. (Beth 3)

The achievements of her adult children proved to Beth that she had indeed been a good mother – a role that Beth valued as desirable. While Beth did not own the whole ‘respectability package’ of a husband *and* children ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)), the normal achievements of her children still proved to her that she was a respectable member of society. The security of knowing that this part of her identity had been proven gave her the confidence to try new things, such as volunteering, as she desisted from offending.

Yet the impact of a motherhood identity did not necessarily affect all participants in a positive way. Emily found that the caring aspect of her identity – whether specifically as a mother to her three children or just being caring to others around her – was not an option to her. In interview, I asked about why she was always first to offer to make tea for other people at the Together Women Centre:

I’ve always been caring, I’ve always, when I’ve been growing up, I’m the oldest one out of my mum’s children, I’m always helping my mum, always like, like doing things for my mum, doing chores for my mum, I’ve always, I’ve always been like this, but sometimes my mum used to say that I’m too caring sometimes, too, eh, friendly. (Emily 3)

It had always been part of Emily’s character to look after other people, no doubt encouraged by her position as the oldest child in a family of five. This was intensified by her experience of single-handedly managing the household (including all her siblings – one of whom was still a baby) aged thirteen when her mother had a mental breakdown for a number of weeks. She thus saw providing care as an essential part of who she was. Yet this aspect of her identity made her vulnerable to being taken advantage of by associates, where others could prey on her goodwill. Previous offending had been linked by Emily to ‘getting in with the wrong crowd’ and so her caring identity could also make desistance harder for her, if the ‘wrong crowd’ exploited her kindness by constantly asking her for money and assistance that she could not easily spare. Staff at the Together Women Centre also recognised the problems that an all-encompassing caring identity could cause desisting women. They concentrated on the practical demands that being a mother or grandmother could entail, especially if women were unwilling to ask others for assistance:

Their identity from probably the age of 15 has been as a parent, em and then it becomes grandparent so they’re, they have a slight lack of focus on themselves because they are extremely focused on their purpose as a mother and a grandmother, em and that can be quite negative sometimes I think because it overtakes their focus on them to the point, like was said, people can’t go to appointments and things because they’re too busy looking after too many children. (Keyworker 4, Focus Group)

Staff had noticed women who did not prioritise their own desistance because they were unwilling to jeopardise their identity as the good mother or grandmother. It was the opinion of the staff that such women feared that fulfilling their personal responsibilities would make them appear selfish and uncaring – a perception which would threaten their established identity as a good parent or grandparent. Such a fear perhaps reflected the reduced support and understanding offered by families and friends to women with offending problems (as opposed to their male counterparts) in other studies, who were fundamentally expected to be carers and put others’ needs first ([Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)). It seemed that these women could not see the long-term benefit to their families of addressing their personal problems (which had contributed to their offending). However, it must be noted that for some of these women, employment was not a realistic aim and they were likely to spend most of their time in caring for their children and grandchildren, whether or not their offending-related problems had been solved. From this perspective, it was not always unreasonable for them to consider their family obligations as most important in their daily lives (see also section on ‘relating to others’ in Chapter 8).

Others considered the value they placed on their role as mother or grandmother as motivation for continued desistance. Hannah had several adult children and a number of grandchildren, and also experienced long-term struggles with serious alcohol abuse, which had sometimes led to offending. She enjoyed time she spent with her family so much that the threat of the loss of those relationships had helped her to recently complete her two-year suspended sentence:

Do you know like, I’m not, I’m not willing to lose my grandkids and my kids, for a stupid, for doing something stupid again. (Hannah 1)

Hannah did not want to lose her role as mother and grandmother in the family, so worked hard to think about her actions so she would not do “something stupid” and end up in prison. However, it was not clear whether she would feel like her identity had been damaged if she was prevented contact with her family, or whether she would just miss time with them. Nevertheless, receiving a suspended sentence led Hannah to re-assess her situation as an offence-prone alcoholic, who risked losing her family contact, thus creating a potential turning point or state of readiness to desist in her life.

For others, it was not pride in their identity as a mother that was most important, but a realisation that it was necessary for them to change their behaviour and act like a better mother. One of Rachel’s main motivations throughout her attempt to break her poly-drug and alcohol addiction (and desist from associated crime) was to care for her four-year-old son, who was living with her mother:

So I’m now trying to get my life back together ‘cause I’ve got a little boy to take care of. (Rachel 1)

Rachel had no successful parenting experience on which to hang her identity as a mother, but recognised that she had a responsibility to care for her son. She therefore aimed throughout her recovery and desistance to become a ‘good mother’ and not just a 'recovered addict'. The existence of her son meant that once she had started to desist through staying at the residential rehabilitation facility, the replacement identity of being a ‘good mother’ was the most attractive identity available to her. Although in her experience, her son was not the ‘hook’ which initiated her desistance (this was a realisation of her poor health prospects – see section above on ‘Motivation’), Rachel could still use him as the foundation of a new identity.

Alyssa also found that she considered it necessary to her identity to become a good mother. When her new-born son was removed from her by Social Services when she was 20 years old (4 years earlier), it gave her the motivation she needed to engage with services and stop taking (and dealing) crack cocaine:

Well, I had to get him back, I got him took off me at five days old, which was very traumatic, and I had to...that’s when I started engaging. (Alyssa 1)

For Alyssa, becoming a good mother was not optional. When she was told that she was not an adequate mother by Social Services, she immediately responded by trying to reclaim the identity of ‘good mother’ by taking all necessary steps to prove herself, demonstrating research findings that social services involvement can motivate women to desist through fear of permanently losing their child ([Taylor, 2008](#_ENREF_267)). Alyssa served as an example of a case where the presence of a ‘hook’ (the removal of her son and desire to win him back) initiated her openness to change ([Giordano et al., 2007](#_ENREF_104)). Her previous priorities were discarded, and she was willing to undergo the serious discomfort of drug withdrawal and friendship change so that she could become, and be recognised as, the mother she wanted to be.

Perhaps surprisingly, it seemed that participants did not generally view their responsibilities as a mother as generative. It was not that motherhood filled the generative 'gap' left if paid employment was an unrealistic opportunity for desisters (cf. ([Barry, 2006](#_ENREF_7))). Staff at the Together Women Centre thought that it did not occur to mothers that their daily tasks were a way of giving back to their children:

Staff member 1: They don’t think they’re giving back, they’re doing what they’re supposed to do, it’s just expected, you don’t get a pat on the back for being a mother.

Staff member 2: Oh and that’s all that they’ve ever known if they’ve come from a family who had just had children young and they’ve had children young, and you know, and you get a lot of these big families, that’s all they know a woman to be, so they don’t see it as anything, as an achievement, it’s just life, that’s who I am, I’m just mum. (Focus Group)

Mothers who felt this way had little experience of motherhood being valued as a contribution to the family, or to society, and so had never thought of their own work as generative. Despite the space in Maruna’s ([2001](#_ENREF_168)) conception of generativity for caring for children to be a fundamentally generative activity, there was no recognition of this potential of parenthood, even among desisters who communicated a desire to reciprocate something to society as compensation for their offences. This lack of recognition may well be tied to the women’s (and society’s) feelings that being a good mother was just something to be expected from women with children ([Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)), and therefore nothing remarkable. If participants were made aware of the opportunities their daily caring responsibilities gave them to give back to their children (and society challenged to value good motherhood as an achievement rather than an expectation), then perhaps the (sometimes ambitious) goal of generative paid employment would become less important to participants’ understanding of giving back to society.

**Conclusion**

Where participants’ identity was closely tied to their offending, a change in that identity was necessary for desistance. However, not all participants’ identities and offending were linked in this was way, with some characteristics feeding into both offending and desistance (such as Nicole’s experience of being a natural leader). Further, some already viewed their offending as out of character, and not reflective of their true selves. The process of desistance itself could help participants to form their own identities where these had previously been subsumed by addictions. When desisters became comfortable in their identities, this seemed to aid their progress with desistance. Yet a change of identity was not often mentioned as an aim in itself to desist. Instead, motivations spanned a wide range of reasons – with some (which did not provide a replacement self) apparently less effective than others. Avoiding the stress linked to reconviction was mentioned a few times, even when previous offending had not led to prison terms. Wanting to steer clear of interference from the police and the guilt that offending had caused were also discussed. For some, the negative social consequences of offending – losing others’ respect and being subjected to gossip and stigma– mattered more than the purely personal reasons of avoiding hassle. Another popular motivation for those with substance abuse problems was improved health. Sometimes this was initiated through the warnings of medical professionals, and sometimes this came from the desister herself. However, this reason did not always trigger successful desistance, possibly because the replacement self that it offered (a healthy adult) was insufficiently detailed to provide an everyday blueprint of how the desister should act. Relationships with others frequently appeared as a motivation. Desistance would be seen as desirable in order to repay a debt of gratitude incurred in how the other treated the desister during their offending or to atone for past neglect by the desister. Yet it was not always described as an obligation, and desisters discussed being motivated to work for their family’s wellbeing or because of their love and affection for them. Participants had various strategies to maintain their motivations to desist – sometimes by reminding themselves of their progress to date or by noting the problems of others who had relapsed.

A common theme connecting many motivations to desist was that of generativity, mostly expressed as a desire to volunteer or work with other offenders so that desisters’ experiences would not be wasted. There was also an aspiration to repay society for the harm caused by offending and to help create positive changes for others. In reality, opportunities for generative behaviour came from a wider range of activities, such as general volunteering for charity, working at difficult relationships with other service users, and ethical business plans. Surprisingly, although motherhood provided most participants with a valued identity as a caregiver, this was not seen as a generative pursuit. Yet there were some negative effects of this near-universal identity. Concepts of being a good mother could directly allow for future offending (in protecting or providing for children) and could also make participants vulnerable to having a lack of focus on their own desistance. Motherhood also provided a strong motivation for participants to desist so that they could stay with their family, and importantly so that they could win their children back into their own custody from social services. Nevertheless, the pro-social identity of being a good mum increased participants’ confidence when they achieved this standard (however they quantified it). In fact, participants' identities were often tied to ideas of 'confidence', and they often discussed gaining and losing confidence. The next chapter explores this theme in more detail.

**Chapter 7: Confidence and Desistance**

The concept of confidence appears in many desistance theories, with some authors finding that it is necessary for potential desisters to exhibit self-confidence[[41]](#footnote-41) before change can occur ([Burnett, 2010](#_ENREF_32); [Myers, 2013](#_ENREF_205); [O'Brien, 2001](#_ENREF_210); [Shover, 1996](#_ENREF_254)). Given the identification of particularly low levels of self-confidence among female offenders ([Davidson, 2011](#_ENREF_57); [Worrall, 1990](#_ENREF_292)), a focus on confidence in the desistance of *women* is therefore somewhat unsurprising. Yet the specific role of confidence in desistance remains somewhat unclear. It may be merely an emotional aspect of desistance ([Farrall & Calverley, 2006](#_ENREF_75)), or it may have a more active role in enabling behavioural change ([Bandura, 1977](#_ENREF_6)). Others suggest that offenders do not have any particular problems in esteeming themselves (Burnett 1992). Nonetheless, participants in my study spent much time discussing the relative confidence they had in themselves, and viewed it as an important thing to build up, believing that it was necessary for their overall desistance. In this chapter I suggest that the main role of confidence in desistance is through its (sometimes complex) interaction with emergent identities, and that therefore desisters and professionals are largely justified in viewing confidence as a beneficial thing. I then explore how participants experienced their confidence in themselves increasing and how they said that they lost confidence. I argue that the main consequence of experiencing stigma and shame was a loss of confidence. Finally, I examine the particular roles of areas of ‘sanctuary’ for desisters – places (physical or metaphorical) where they felt safe and valued – and the impact these had on participants’ confidence. Throughout, I link specific participants’ experiences and feelings of confidence to their desistance journeys.

**Initial Interactions between Identity and Confidence**

Leading on from the themes discussed in Chapter 6, confidence appears to interact with identity formation/stabilization and motivation for desistance. Participants discussed confidence as something that came with, before and after finding a new identity or re-asserting an old identity. There was some suggestion by staff that a certain amount of confidence was needed to successfully make life changes, suggesting therefore that it was a prerequisite for at least some types of desistance. This assertion found some support in a few participants' accounts of their earlier lives. Others described how confidence aided their continued desistance by feeding into their motivation and understanding of their own identities.

Rachel started to take drugs aged twelve and entered rehabilitation ten years later, shortly before I first interviewed her (during her stay). The building of her confidence through her stay at residential rehabilitation was concurrent with her discovering who she 'was' without drugs:

Cos I was so young when I start taking drugs that I never found myself, I’m only just starting to, slowly, realise what I like, what I’m doing and you know what I mean, who I am, I mean I’ve never, I’ve always hated myself so I’ve only just started, a little bit, to like myself. (Rachel 1)

For Rachel, recognising who she was could not be separated from learning to like herself as a person, and this process of understanding and acceptance boosted her confidence in herself. It may also be that increased confidence allowed Rachel to explore her identity, which showed her that she had likeable aspects to her personality.

When forty-year-old Steph managed to stay sober and away from crime for several months, she was able to present herself as a capable, sophisticated woman – like she was before her alcohol problems escalated. With Steph too, a recovery of her former identity (echoing part of the redemption scripts discussed by Maruna ([2001](#_ENREF_168))) was an influence that gave her confidence:

I’m back to me, I’m back to the me I know, not been sorta trodden down, well it gives you more confidence don’t it. (Steph 6)

Steph placed a great value on being an independent individual, and being able to achieve that enabled her to feel effective in reaching her aims and increased her confidence. She linked her increased confidence to not being “trodden down”, suggesting that it was independence from draining or oppressive others that allowed her to become self-assured. Her experience of being ‘given’ more confidence echoed Rumgay ([2004](#_ENREF_238)), who found that female desisters who had successfully established their new identity experienced an increase in their self-confidence as a consequence.

Danielle had a long history of offending, and was addicted to heroin and crack cocaine. She came across as an engaging, charismatic person and was well-liked by those who knew her and worked with her. However, Danielle’s preoccupation with other people’s opinions meant that she found it hard to be confident in who she was:

Bubbly, outgoing, always up for a laugh, always thinks about what other people think, all the time, em, and I’m always, need reassuring quite a lot, know what I mean, that’s about it really. (Danielle 1)

Despite presenting quite a strong personality, Danielle felt the need to highlight the constant need for assurance that she experienced. She suggested that she needed to be more confident before she could be happy with who she was. Here, then, confidence was required before Danielle’s identity could stabilise.

During the staff focus group, discussions about the relative importance of confidence in desistance led to participants linking the need for confidence with transition periods in their own lives:

I’ve had quite a few (life transitions) and whenever I’ve had them I have had the confidence to re-assess yourself and reinstate yourself as the person you wanna present yourself to be at that transition. And if you don’t have the confidence to present yourself, or even the, like the confidence to know who you wanna be or what you wanna be, that transition period, you just sort of get lost in a limbo. Who am I, where am I going, where am I heading, almost. (Keyworker 1, Focus group)

They suggested that confidence was necessary for a re-asserting of identity. If confidence was lacking, the person undergoing the transition became confused and unsure of who they were. Confidence was therefore a necessary prerequisite for stable identity development.

Sometimes a sense of self-confidence allowed participants to initiate significant life changes. Alyssa’s mother and step-father were both addicted to drugs throughout her childhood. She rebelled from this upbringing in an extreme way when she turned fifteen by running away from home. Now 24, she reflected on that time:

I weren’t, say, I were ambitious when I were fifteen, but I were strong enough to leave home, I’d say I were strong from when I were a kid, in fact, came through what I had to come through with my mum and dad, seeing all that.[[42]](#footnote-42) (Alyssa 2)

Alyssa’s ‘strength’ meant that she was comfortable in taking drastic steps to free herself from unwanted family influence. While she did not describe it as confidence, it seems that the characteristics that she mentioned here certainly did include confidence – she was decisive and sure of herself even when facing great difficulties.

For some, a sense of confidence fostered sustained motivation to desist.[[43]](#footnote-43) Zoe was known for her energy and optimism in the residential rehab centre. Her positivity and determination to succeed in recovery and desistance were closely linked in her description of herself:

A really easy going person, I’d maybe say drug free, smoke free, gambling free, em, a little anxious at times, but not with people, just what’s going on with me at the minute…em, really happy bubbly person when I’m on form and, em…just really driven, really determined to get this done cos I need to fix myself and I’m doing a good job if I say that myself. (Zoe 1)

Her success so far had boosted her confidence and supported her drive to continue doing well. Zoe knew that she needed to modify her identity to “fix” herself, and her confidence in her success in this bolstered her motivation to engage in the hard work necessary to do this. Similarly (but using a different ‘hook’), Opsal ([2012](#_ENREF_215)) found that women parolees who felt good about the employment they had obtained were confident about gaining quality future work and continued to access the identity of ‘good worker’ as a replacement self ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)). Their motivation to desist was maintained by previous success in employment.

**Gaining Confidence**

There were a variety of ways in which participants discussed gaining confidence. The first was through reflecting on their skills, positive attributes, or achievements, which had varying impacts on confidence levels. The second was where participants were repeatedly encouraged that they were able to do certain things. The third was the experience of success in some way, and it seemed that the residential rehabilitation facility had effectively harnessed this method by introducing techniques that encouraged its residents to create numerous minor targets that they could then achieve. A fourth way, which was discussed with particular appreciation, was when others affirmed their trust in the desister and the desisters' value. Finally, participants experienced gaining confidence when they compared themselves favourably to others around them.

With confidence playing such important roles in forming and maintaining identities, it was unsurprising that participants often discussed increasing their confidence levels. Indeed, Haney ([2010](#_ENREF_114)) found that increasing residents’ self-esteem was the overriding goal of a particular therapeutic residential centre for mothers with criminal convictions (although also see her extensive criticisms of this aim), and a similar theory seemed popular – although perhaps not the ultimate goal – with staff at the Together Women Centre. The first way in which confidence could be gained was through reflection on positive attributes, achievements or valued skills. This reflection could be initiated through discussion with workers, spontaneously thought about, or as a reaction to recent events. Sometimes this reflection could be focused on individual abilities, and sometimes it was a general overview of the desister’s successful progress. For Alyssa, a role as a student ambassador at university was particularly valued:

I feel important, it’s nice to say I’m going to work as well, I go on about it too much though I think when I say when I’m going, I’m ‘I’m going to work tomorrow, I’ve got work tomorrow though’ [laughs]. (Alyssa 2)

The pride that Alyssa felt from being able to talk about her work made her feel important and good about herself. She liked to talk about it and to show other people that she had employment.

Others focused on how awareness of their achievements made them feel. Both Emily and Zoe found that keyworkers at the Together Women Project (and elsewhere) had helped them to reflect on their success so far:

[I] think they help me because it makes me think about what I’ve been doing in the past and it makes me feel good about now, I can think from when I started talking to you, to now, I’ve achieved a lot, so, can have a think back and think yeh it’s good. (Emily 7)

[I] feel like I’ve achieved a great, massive amount, it’s not until you sit talking, talking to people like you, or a keyworker, or other staff that I don’t, I normally say hello to and that’s it, that we sit down and we focus on it, that’s when I feel, ahh great, I’ve still got butterflies in my stomach.

(Zoe 2)

Sessions where Emily and Zoe’s progress so far were reviewed with a worker made both women feel very positive about their achievements, and confident about the present. Realisation of past success helped them to believe that their futures could also be successful because they had already proved their capabilities. Like other participants in criminal justice systems, both staff and desisters had a strong belief that positivity was essential for achieving desistance ([Myers, 2013](#_ENREF_205)).

Gillian had suffered from severe depression and anxiety for many years, during which time she had self-medicated with alcohol. By attending a class on meditation and self-esteem, she had become aware of the benefits of thinking about her positive attributes:

Just focusing on feeling positive basically, positive attributes and em…I’ve been doing the self-esteem basically so it’s eh, being kind to yourself basically…well you’re supposed to say, like focus on I’m a star, I am, I am beautiful, rah rah rah, you say all that and then walk around with it in your head all day. (Gillian 4)

Unlike the keywork sessions that Emily and Zoe experienced, Gillian was not focusing on past achievements or particular attributes. Instead, she was supposed to think about her intrinsic value – although her manner in interview (for example, the way she said "rah rah rah" indicated that the words were meaningless to her) suggested this approach felt unnatural and therefore somewhat ineffective. Unfortunately, this reflects findings from the self-esteem literature that repeating self-affirming statements can make people feel worse (rather than better) if they already have low self-esteem ([Wood, Perunovic, & Lee, 2009](#_ENREF_291)). Indeed, given the wider research conclusions thus far which find no evidence that boosting self-esteem has any positive effect on participants’ lives (or indeed that a lack of self-esteem leads to particular problems ([Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003](#_ENREF_11); [Emler, 2001](#_ENREF_67))), it would be prudent for those working with female desisters to be sceptical of self-esteem enhancement programmes - and to pass on their scepticism to the desisters themselves (unless and until more promising research emerges). Instead, they might consider building resilience ([Seligman, 2007](#_ENREF_245)) or encouraging desisters to create goals which encompass other people and not just one's own self-esteem ([Crocker & Park, 2004](#_ENREF_53)).

That is not to say, however, that some sort of basic confidence in one's abilities to accomplish new or habitual tasks would not be beneficial for desisters, and indeed reflection on participants’ value and potential was not always futile in increasing feelings of such confidence. Steph found that encouragement to fulfil her potential eventually did boost her confidence:

SG: What sort of things has it made you question [about] yourself?

Steph:...My worth, my value to myself...I suppose my, the bit...[probation officer] at probation, [keyworker] here [at Together Women], they’ve always said, you could be doing this, you could be doing that, and I’ve never really believed it, never, always, I’ve always undervalued myself but I think more from that I’ve come to kind of say, yeh actually, I can do that, I can do that, and I will do that. (Steph 4)

Constant suggestions that Steph tried activities to which she had felt unequal finally helped her to believe that she had the ability to undertake them, reflecting the ‘verbal persuasion’ method of increasing (what is described as) ‘self-efficacy’ – essentially the belief that one can perform specific behaviours – by Bandura ([1977](#_ENREF_6)). She also reflected the 'skills-confidence' (rather than 'self-confidence') promoted by Ellis' Rational Emotive Therapy ([1989](#_ENREF_64)),[[44]](#footnote-44) by identifying specific things she could do and not generalising this confidence to herself as a whole person. Gradually, Steph’s confidence that she had the capability to succeed turned into determination, and she found herself recognising her own value as someone who could succeed at certain things. This increase in confidence allowed her to understand a later relapse (where she stole alcohol, and abused both alcohol and drugs) as a beneficial influence on her desistance:

I think [the relapse] reinforces [my desistance], yeh, cos you, obviously coming out of prison and being in that situation, your confidence is knocked… you know if you can make it a positive thing all the way through then it’ll, it’ll help me keep sober, keep my confidence up, keep me boosted and hopefully, give me a job. (Steph 5)

Steph was able to view her relapse as a positive influence, increasing her motivation to remain with her counselling course. She thus offers support to Farrall’s ([2002](#_ENREF_71)) and Prochaska and DiClemente’s ([1992](#_ENREF_225)) findings that relapses need not indicate desistance failure, but can instead re-motivate the desister. By viewing things so optimistically, Steph’s achievement on the course further maintained her confidence and assisted her towards her aim of gaining employment.

As well as reflecting on past achievements, experiencing success gave participants a sense of pride in themselves. These two linked aspects together demonstrate what Bandura ([1977](#_ENREF_6)) describes as ‘performance accomplishments’, where an individual’s personal achievement forms the basis for increased self-confidence. On Linda’s release from prison, she was accommodated in an unfurnished flat. She had only managed to salvage a few personal belongings from the home she had shared with her controlling husband (they split up when Linda went to prison). Nevertheless, she was very proud of how she had coped with minimal possessions:

I’m quite happy in my little home, it’s nice, how I’ve got it, you know, I’ve built it up. Sometimes think back to when I’ve, that very first day when I came out of prison, and I’d got a garden chair that my sister brought, and even [probation officer] said to me, ‘well how you going to manage, it’s empty, there’s nothing in there’. I said ‘[probation officer], all I need is a chair to sit in, summat to sleep on, and a kettle to boil water, and a cup to have a drink’, and basically that’s about what I had. (Linda 2)

In defying her probation officer’s expectations, Linda had proved her determination and hardiness, and she was keen to ensure I understood the reality of her initial situation. When she looked around her flat she saw evidence of her achievement in making it a home. This reminder of her success made Linda feel good about herself and positive about future challenges.

Rachel had lost custody of her son when he was a baby due to her mental health and poly-drug misuse. She had recently been allowed to spend some time caring for him by herself. Her achievement in properly caring for her son (then aged four) gave her similar optimism about the future:

I wanted to stay forever [at the residential rehabilitation facility], didn’t I, cos I always wanted to stay in my own little bubble, but on my last home visit I went home and my mum let me take my little lad out, on my own. That’s the first time I’ve took him out when I was by my own, and I got to take him swimming on my own and it’s the first time since he were eighteen months old that I’ve had him on my own, so it, that was enough of a boost. (Rachel 3)

The confidence lift that Rachel experienced by having her son in her care again was enough to motivate her to work towards participating in society outside of rehab. A combination of being reminded of what it was like to look after him and the realisation that she was capable of caring for him convinced Rachel that it was worth struggling through her fears about leaving residential rehabilitation.

For some, the awareness of their success in desistance was very present and felt like a daily achievement. Hannah had struggled with alcohol problems and a mutually abusive relationship for more than a decade, both of which had led to a number of related offences. On her last court appearance (almost two years ago), she was given a two year suspended sentence. She felt that her progress in staying away from alcohol (and alcohol related crime) gave her constant optimism about her continued progress:

SG: And do you have any big fears?

H: Em…no not really cos I’m a bit optimistic about getting off the drink, I’m ready for it now, I weren’t, I haven’t been ready for it before, cos I’ve not gived a shit, but now, I’ve gone through these two years with not getting into trouble because I’ve been able to think before I’ve done summat stupid, I’m just, gaining little steps really. (Hannah 1)

For Hannah, her success in the last two years proved that she was ready to embrace a sober and pro-social life. In managing to think before she acted, Hannah had avoided ‘trouble’ (police contact) and could see her gradual progress towards a drink-free life.[[45]](#footnote-45) She felt that she could continue this progress in the future because she had the evidence of past progress.

Some participants had learnt techniques to encourage daily achievement and the associated feelings of confidence - Bandura's ([1977](#_ENREF_6)) ‘verbal persuasion’ (see above). Rachel described one such technique that she had learnt at residential rehabilitation:

The first one is to em…tell you something positive, tell myself something positive, that you either did the day before or in the morning or whatever, and set yourself a little goal, not big goals, no big goals, and if it is a big goal you’ve gotta give yourself time to do it, give yourself a little goal every day and when you’ve achieved it you feel better. (Rachel 1)

Rachel was encouraged by staff at the rehab to think about small daily achievements, and to create little goals so that she would feel the achievement of often meeting those goals. She described the consequence of reaching her daily targets as ‘feeling better’ – where she was assured of her ability to succeed.

Another way in which participants’ confidence was built up was through others reminding desisters of their potential, affirming their value and demonstrating their trust in them. A key source of this encouragement was workers at Together Women and other organisations. Emily described how her keyworker helped to increase her confidence:

She kept telling me, like when I come in and I was down sometimes, talk, she’d say look, you’ve got all this ahead of you, and she would go through whatever I’ve got, and she’d say I know you can do it. (Emily 4)

The worker would help Emily to think about the future and reaffirm her capability to deal with any problems that she was faced with at the time. For Emily, her worker instilled a sense of hope in her by reminding her that she had the potential to succeed and helping her gain perspective on issues in her life.

Workers could be particularly influential when they communicated their belief in the desister after relapses. After Steph relapsed, she described her confidence as having plummeted (although the temporal ordering of the relapse and loss of confidence remained unclear). However, when she stopped drinking again and returned to services (such as Together Women), she was encouraged by staff reactions:

It’s always daunting when you come back after a relapse, in’t it, services and what have you, and I walked through the door and [keyworker] was there, and she was like, I’m so glad to see you, and it was, I suppose it were then, you know walking through the door and then, from then I contacted --- down at --- about the course and could I still finish it, which I’d thought, I’ve screwed that up I’m gonna have to wait and do the next one, em but no, he was fine with me going back on it. (Steph 6)

Faced with acceptance from staff and affirmation of her as a valued person, and more than the sum of her crimes, Steph regained enough confidence to check whether she could continue to attend her course in alcohol and drugs counselling. When the course leader also demonstrated acceptance of her, Steph was able to see that others still wanted her around and valued her, which challenged her low self-confidence.

When desisters had repeated experiences of others valuing and trusting them, the impact on their confidence could be huge. Zoe provides an extreme example. In discussing what made her feel good, she quickly recalled her reaction to me offering to visit her at home (in a different northern town a few hours’ journey from Sheffield). She could hardly contain her excitement and spoke very quickly:

People make me feel good, when they come up with something or they say something that’s not really expected, or like when you said you’d come and visit me in ---, that was like, woah, it’s things like that give me a big lift and they’re not empty, empty promises like before, like they used to be, cos I just like, oh always expect the worst and it’s a bonus if it doesn’t happen, but now I’ve got a lot more hope and faith and trust in people, I’ve got my trust back and people trust me, which is a good thing.

(Zoe 1)

Zoe’s recent experiences of people fulfilling their promises to her stood in stark contrast to promises made by those she used to know when she dealt drugs. She felt that her new encounters showed that others trusted her and respected her as a person. In consequence, she had learnt to trust others back and be optimistic that promises would be fulfilled. Her confidence in herself, and in dealing with others, had returned. She now believed again that people could treat her well and that broken promises were not inevitable.

A final way in which participants described gaining confidence was through comparing themselves favourably to others. Alyssa explained why she spent time with others on the estate instead of university classmates even though she recognised her neighbours’ excessive drinking as risky:

I’m more confident with them people cos I’m, I don’t know, maybe I feel better than them, I probably do, but at the same time I don’t, I don’t feel better than them, cos I feel that I am one of them, but I’m doing better for myself, and that makes me feel good, when I’m round there. (Alyssa 2)

When with others from the estate, Alyssa gained confidence from knowing that, by being a university student, she was more educated than them. She indicated some discomfort with expressing that she felt “better” than them, but gave the impression that it was a true representation of how she really thought. Her experience of social mobility had led to both confidence and hints of anxiety.

Rachel demonstrated a similar source of confidence when discussing leaving the residential rehabilitation, based on her achievements within the rehab, but refrained from comparing herself so directly to others:

I’m full of anxiety, but I think that’s natural, but I’m happy. (Rachel 3)

By understanding the anxiety she felt as a “natural”, normal emotion to feel, Rachel assured herself that she was not different to other people, but instead was a regular person. Knowledge of that fact enabled her to be comfortable with her anxiety and so remain confident as she faced her transition into the community.

**Losing Confidence**

One way in which a lack of confidence occurred was when participants questioned themselves or their plans. Gillian had previously been doing well on a programme designed to allow her to become a worker for an alcohol service (which would lead to employment on satisfactory completion), but found herself unable to finish the course by going to the final interview to get employment:

I stayed sober all the way through it, em, got my interviews, got my certificate, got my interviews, and didn’t go to interview, so it’s just like, putting stoppers on for myself, I don’t know why I do it, I always do it.

(Gillian 1)

Something in Gillian questioned her plan to get a job and prevented her from attending the final interview. It is not clear whether this questioning originated in a lack of confidence, or a fear of failure (or from a questioning about her role in society based on gendered and classed expectations that working class mothers should not get paid work but instead care for their children (see Chapter 6), but it certainly resulted in further low confidence as she then thought of herself as someone who did not manage to complete courses in order to get employment.

For others, questioning of themselves originated from other people. Rachel’s (much older) boyfriend was frequently physically abusive towards her over their seven year relationship (when she was between 15 and 22), which led her to question her own actions:

He just hurt me, and then I turn it round on myself thinking, you know what I mean, I must be doing something wrong and then I start like self-harming and stuff like that so I’ve gotta basically stay away from men and learn to be just on my own and happy with myself. (Rachel 1)

For Rachel, her boyfriend’s abuse triggered her own questioning of herself, lowering her own confidence. It may be that this long-term, abusive relationship had led Rachel to lack 'empathy', or care for herself ([Gilligan, 1990](#_ENREF_100)), thus leading to her extended substance abuse and criminal behaviour (including physically dangerous burglaries) that put her at risk of arrest, illness and physical harm. She recognised that the solution to this was learning to be “happy with myself” – in other words, to have confidence in herself and not to question her own value.

A more tangible way in which participants lost confidence was when they felt their capabilities were diminishing. These capabilities could be basic or complex, physical abilities or personality traits. Linda, who was in her fifties, was confronted with her own ageing and considered herself less able after she slipped and seriously injured her wrist:

And of course one of the biggest things it did were knock my confidence, very much so, very much so, I mean it’s only in the last few weeks that I’ve started coming out and about, really, and when I go out and about, I’m walking a lot slower, because instead of walking with me head up, I’m walking like this, I’m looking where I’m putting my feet. (Linda 2)

A simple accident left Linda with a cumbersome cast and a reduced belief in her ability to stay on her feet. She talked a lot about the damage that she felt the fall had done to her confidence, and it was clear that she was left unsure about her capability to walk as she used to. Yet this did not just affect her confidence in walking, but reduced Linda’s confidence in general. Perhaps the evidence that she was not as able as she thought in one area made her question her abilities in other areas, or perhaps it just made her question herself more generally.

Nicole found that her previous inability to pursue her dream of starting her own business (creating personalised crafts) had a negative effect on her confidence. As she talked about looking at her collection of prototypes, she continued to link her self-confidence with eventually succeeding in her venture:

I’ll be honest with ya, I can’t even open it, because I’m that disappointed with meself that I didn’t do it, it’s just shoved there, but I know one day, when I’m ready and I’ve not got no stress, I will open that back, eh, that book back up and get back on wi it, that’s me dream to do that so, fingers crossed. (Nicole 1)

For Nicole, low stress levels would enable her to pursue her business again, which would remove the disappointment that she had in herself. She did not believe herself able to continue until outside influences had removed the stress that she faced. While this may have been a realistic appraisal of Nicole’s abilities in her circumstances at the time, it certainly suggested that her previous confidence in succeeding had evaporated. Interestingly, although she did not feel able to pursue her business at the time, over the course of the interview she suggested that she was confident that she would succeed in doing so in the future.

In addition to participants losing particular abilities, external influences could combine to disappoint desisters’ hopes in a way which damaged their confidence. Together Women staff pointed towards the hostile job market as a source for such disappointments:

They come out [of prison] thinking, I’ve got this qualification, hair dressing, and then realising I’m not gonna get a job because I have a criminal record, that puts them back exactly where they were. (Focus group)

Training opportunities in prison raised women’s hopes of gaining employment and improved their confidence. However, once women realised that no-one was willing to employ them with criminal records, their hopes were crushed and their confidence returned to pre-training levels. This disappointed hope was particularly true of those who required flexible work and adequate childcare, and who found that this type of employment was even more difficult to come by ([Fawcett Society, 2012](#_ENREF_81)).

Yet gaining a job in itself would not protect participants from being disappointed. Linda had gained employment despite a criminal record of theft from employers, but her confidence was floored when she was faced with redundancy due to budget cuts:

I got a good job, loved it, got made redundant after 12 months, absolutely knocked me duck off [unexpectedly set me back], knocked me duck off, there were 30 of us, it were nothing to do with your performance or, anything like that, really knocked me duck off. (Linda 2)

Despite being assured that her redundancy was not linked to her ability at work, Linda felt that her confidence in herself was destabilised by losing her job. She had hoped for promotion to a permanent position, but instead suddenly found herself unemployed.

Time in residential rehabilitation had instilled optimism in thirty-six-year-old Megan that she could be successful in her recovery from addiction to drugs. When she tried to simultaneously provide emotional support to a friend undergoing an abortion, a family member whose child was to be taken into care, and the rest of her family dealing with social services, she experienced a relapse. Despite the influence of numerous outside factors, and intensely stressful circumstances, her confidence in herself plummeted:

But then I feel shit in meself now, because I’ve used again, em, and I’m feeling a bit crap. (Megan 3)

Not being able to stay away from drugs made Megan question her capability to finally succeed in recovery, and she lost confidence in herself. It may be that her expectations of her own recovery did not allow for relapses, which were common by other accounts of participants and staff. When her experiences did not match with her expectations, Megan felt that she had failed or disappointed herself.

For some, serious past trauma continued to affect their confidence levels. As a teenager, Gillian (now 31) experienced a serious assault by her then boyfriend, and endured many operations over many months before she recovered:

Well I had a massive trauma when I was like 19 I got my face rebuilt, you know what I mean so I never got no confidence or that. (Gillian 2)

Gillian directly linked her low levels of confidence to the harrowing experience of having her face rebuilt 12 years previously. Perhaps this was connected to the pain, and questioning why she had to suffer it, or perhaps it was due to a sense of losing her identity when her appearance changed. She was very aware of her self-esteem problems, and more so after reading a book on the subject, which also linked her issues of confidence to the clinical anxiety that she suffered from:

What I learnt in that book is like, poor, low self-esteem is about fear, right, now I’ve been going to my doctors saying, oh I’m scared of this, I’m treated for an anxiety disorder by the doctor, which is just fear innit, know what I mean, em…so I’ve been on medication for anxiety all along as I’ve said, self-esteem problems. (Gillian 2)

For Gillian, her self-esteem issues were foundational to her persistent mental health problems, and her lack of confidence was traceable to earlier trauma. Her underlying fears in the present (whether or not they were based in her previous trauma) continued to shake her self-confidence, and she found herself diagnosed with anxiety because of them – a condition for which Gillian had attempted to self-medicate with alcohol, and which had often resulted in offending.

Rachel seemed to display similar links between previous experiences and poor levels of self-confidence. She was deeply hurt by her father’s abandonment of her, and then her brother, when he left the family when she was a child:

But I were daddy’s girl, you know what I mean, when he left he kinda just pushed me off for my brother and I got told I’ve got so many girls, go away and… but it hurt me to see him fuck me off for my brother, that when he had another little boy, so to see him fuck my brother off, that hurt me ten times more, it did. To see him abandon my brother, that killed me, it hurt me more than anything has ever hurt me, to see that…I always put myself down, before someone else does, and everybody’s said it, "you’re too hard on yourself.” (Rachel 2)

The hurt that she experienced, while discussed separately from her self-esteem issues, seems to be intrinsically connected to how she viewed herself. Her experience of being abandoned (and seeing the abandonment of her brother) and her tendency to pre-emptively attack her own self-confidence by putting herself down, echo each other. She appeared terrified of being hurt again by someone she loved, and so determined not to expect any good treatment from herself or others. By constantly undermining her own confidence, she ensured that no-one would treat her worse than she thought she deserved.

Zoe had been sexually abused by two different family members as a young teen. She had spent much of her life since addicted to alcohol and amphetamines. She found that learning to understand the abuse that she suffered as a child helped to repair the problems she had with self-confidence:

Yes, and the fact that it’s not my fault, that’s what I’ve got to believe in, you know, I can’t sit here and pretend to be somebody that I’m not, saying oh yeh, my head’s sorted out, I’m not gonna be doing the dealing and that’s it, it’s like my head’s not sorted, there’s no, nobody’s cured when they leave [residential rehab], but I know that it wasn’t my fault. (Zoe 2)

As she was guided by her keyworkers at the residential rehabilitation centre, Zoe began to realise that she was not to blame for being abused, and that some of the guilt and responsibility that she felt for her subsequent substance misuse could legitimately be given to her abuser. When that blame had been removed, Zoe’s confidence returned – not on the basis of how well she was currently doing, but based on her not being fully responsible for the start of her addictions. That confidence allowed her to evaluate how her recovery and desistance were progressing in a measured and realistic way.

Some participants recounted losing confidence when they questioned themselves or their abilities, but more common was for participants to talk of someone else questioning their abilities- usually in the context of an abusive relationship. Some also discussed experiencing a loss of capability (through, for example, previous failure) as diminishing their confidence. It was particularly common for participants to talk about circumstances and outside influences disappointing their hopes and lowering their confidence. Finally, many had histories of serious trauma and abuse. For the few who discussed the impact of this in detail, it was clear that their experiences had a significant long-term impact on keeping their confidence levels low. One particular theme which relates to most of these methods and touched almost all the participants was how encountering shame and stigma negatively affected their own confidence - and therefore, their desistance.

**Shame and Stigma**

For many participants, their offending (and its consequences) caused enduring feelings of guilt and shame, sometimes prompted by encounters with stigma from society, where others (strangers, workers, friends) stereotype them because of their convictions or past behaviour. While Braithwaite ([1989](#_ENREF_24)) suggests that guilt is a reaction to acting against one’s own conscience, and shame is a reaction to others’ criticism, thus presenting guilt as a reaction to an internal influence and shame as a reaction to an external influence, the distinction does not appear to be this straightforward. Instead, I find Bartky’s ([1990](#_ENREF_9)) conception of guilt and shame to be much more convincing. She understands shame to be the psychological distress (or more simply, the emotion, ([Harrison, 2013](#_ENREF_118))) caused when one views oneself as somehow inferior to an (imagined or real) other. In contrast, guilt is connected to specific transgressions, and not one’s concept of the self. As a result, Bartky ([1990](#_ENREF_9)) explains that shame is felt more deeply as it relates to one’s identity and not just one’s behaviour, thus aligning with Goffman's ([1963](#_ENREF_109)) assertion that shame is the viewing of one's own attributes as degrading, so reflecting badly on one's whole identity. Yet Bartky acknowledges that guilt and shame overlap in practice and this reflects the findings from the current study. Although participants did not always actively distinguish ‘guilt’ and ‘shame’ in interview, and often appeared to use the terms as synonymous, it did seem that their use of ‘shame’ was generally more linked to how they perceived others to view them.

Such feelings led participants to lose confidence in themselves, either through questioning themselves (as above) or poor comparisons with others. Some researchers suggest that women are more prone to feeling shame than men in general because in various ways everyday social spheres make them feel more ashamed (even for small things like the shape of their bodies ([Bartky, 1990](#_ENREF_9))). Whether or not this is the case, there does, however, seem to be strong agreement that female offenders are subject to particular stigma from others for having broken both the law of the land and the gender expectations of society ([Carlen, 2002](#_ENREF_41); [Malloch & McIvor, 2011](#_ENREF_164); [McIvor, 2004](#_ENREF_177); [Smart, 1992](#_ENREF_259); [Worrall, 1990](#_ENREF_292); [Zaplin, 1998](#_ENREF_297)). While there is very limited evidence of feelings of shame initiating desistance ([Leibrich, 1993](#_ENREF_152), [1996](#_ENREF_154)), many participants discussed feeling ashamed at various points in their desistance journeys. When those feelings were not addressed, they could have appreciable negative effects on desisters’ self-confidence which, as we have seen (see above), interacts with identity and, ultimately, desistance. Yet the precise source of guilt and shame, and experience of stigma, varied from person to person. Steph was able to articulate the different causes of the guilt and shame that she experienced due to a recent relapse (drinking and shoplifting):

I feel guilt, I do feel ashamed of it, em, and guilt as well, you know, I missed another Christmas with [daughter] and…em, yeh I suppose more guilt attached to her but then more ashamed of how I behaved, for me.

(Steph 7)

Steph’s feelings of guilt related to letting her daughter down again, and especially over Christmas when they had made so many plans together. She therefore felt aware that she had done something morally bad to her daughter, thus producing feelings of guilt. In contrast, she describes feeling ashamed of her own behaviour, suggesting that it was a disgraceful way to behave. Perhaps this shame was particularly pertinent because Steph had broken the social code of behaviour for mothers by not putting her daughter first, so somehow ‘failing’ the test of being female ([Carlen, 2002](#_ENREF_41)).

Alyssa also experienced feelings of lost reputation because of her offending and subsequent punishments. She explained how she felt after a previous conviction and stay in prison:

I would have been too ashamed to go back...I moved to [city]. (Alyssa 1)

For Alyssa, the feelings of shame were so strong that she felt unable to stay in her home town. She preferred to re-start her life, by herself, and in a new location, rather than face others and continue to feel ashamed.

Others were not able to escape their feelings of shame so easily. Linda had previously worked as a nurse, but following her initial conviction for stealing from her employer, she had to attend a disciplinary hearing where she was stripped of her professional registration. The intensity of the shame that she had felt was still tangible at interview, a number of years later:

And I musta been, oh God, the shame, honestly, there musta been 30 people sat round this, oh and little old me has to walk, oh my God, I thought why do I need to do, why, do you know what I mean, why do I need to come here for this, you know what you’re gonna do just do it and send it me in the post and tell me what you’re doing, was horrible, was absolutely horrible. (Linda 2)

Linda felt that it was excessive to require her attendance at the hearing, as she had little hope of retaining her registration after her workplace offence. The humiliation she felt when walking into the room had left a deep impression on her and Linda could still recall the shame she experienced. There was no way (she felt) in which Linda could undo the shame she felt that day.

It was not just offending that caused feelings of guilt: some participants felt guilty about other life circumstances, reflecting Harrison’s ([2013](#_ENREF_118)) observation that guilt can be caused not just by blameworthy behaviour, but also by circumstances and influences which make someone feel like they are failing even though they are not personally at fault. Nicole felt that she was somehow blameworthy for her previous dependence on anti-depressant medication:

I just feel like I’ve let meself down sometimes, and it does depress me a little bit, eh, just the thought that I’m dependent on something, eh, I were on anti-depressants for years, an’ I hated it, I hated the fact that I had to take a tablet every day, an’ I come off them about 6 month ago, em, and I’ve not looked back since, I’ve been, it’s been brilliant, best decision of my life, em, so yeh it’s just the fact that I’m dependent on it, I don’t like it, I don’t feel right, I shouldn’t be dependent on things like that. (Nicole 1)

Unable to accept her medication as a good thing, Nicole instead thought there was something morally wrong with depending on anti-depressants for her mental health (a common cultural belief in (particularly working-class) Britain, that often leads to stigma in the job market, as well as other spheres ([Prior, McGilloway, Herron, & Donnelly, 1998](#_ENREF_224); [Worrall, 1990](#_ENREF_292))). Her feelings of guilt about taking the medication, contrary to what she believed was “right”, made her feel disappointed with herself and lowered her mood. It was only when she changed her behaviour by not taking anti-depressants that she became satisfied with herself. Nicole showed that feelings of guilt can exist even when the desister was not at fault by the wider society’s standards.

Megan also had an experience before becoming addicted to drugs which made her feel ashamed even though she was not at fault. At the time she referred to, her boyfriend dealt drugs, but she had a good job. She was arrested in connection with her boyfriend’s actions and placed in police custody, but was not eventually charged as she could prove that she had been out of the house and at work at the relevant time. While in custody, Megan was strip searched and then insulted by a female police officer, who had assumed she was a heroin addict because of her appearance:

She made me feel about that big, I started crying, and cos I wasn’t on drugs, I felt like she was judging me just because I was thin and because of who I went out with. (Megan 2)

Megan was made to feel that she should be ashamed of herself even though she knew she had done nothing illegal. The humiliation that she experienced from the police officer further damaged her dignity when she was reduced to tears, powerless to take action as a suspect in a police cell. The judgment that she experienced made her feel bad about herself and reduced her confidence.

Gillian was able to change her behaviour as a response to feelings of shame. After many years of struggling with alcohol abuse (and a variety of offences that she committed while drunk), she had recently modified her response to alcohol cravings:

I don’t deny myself something, if I want a pint, I’ll have a pint, whereas I’ve always been worried before about like, oh I can’t have a pint because everybody thinks I’m doing so well, you know what I mean, so then I’ll drink in secret. (Gillian 1)

Previous feelings of shame had led Gillian to drink alone, which she found more risky than the consumption of alcohol in public. She had since learnt to deal with feeling ashamed by remembering the reality of her recovery and reasoning that she would do better to have one pint in public than to drink at home. By caring less about how others viewed her, Gillian felt less ashamed of openly drinking alcohol and (she felt) more likely to succeed in controlling her alcohol problems.

For some, feeling stigmatised by society in general produced feelings of shame. Staff at the Together Women Project were very aware of the stigma which faced the women in their care and indeed experienced it vicariously when they discussed their work in social contexts:

When you sort of get assumptions from people when they find out who you work with, the client base you work with, they’re like ‘oh, oh right, oh’, then you tell them, they’re basically saying, behind their eyes, ‘oh you work with scumbags, you work with scum of the earth’.

(Keyworker 2, Focus Group)

The implication was that others could be quite vitriolic in their attitudes (if not actual words) towards women offenders. It was unclear whether these attitudes were partly fuelled by the perception of the gender ‘betrayal’ of female offenders, which may have led staff’s social contacts to consider female offenders as particularly undeserving of the help given by staff ([Zaplin, 1998](#_ENREF_297)). Nevertheless, it would be surprising if these attitudes were not perceived by offenders themselves and did not affect their views of themselves. Staff identified the root of society’s stigma in their inability to separate offender from offence – a method promoting desistance ([Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)) through allowing reintegrative shaming where the offence is condemned but the individual offender is accepted ([Braithwaite, 1989](#_ENREF_24)):

I think society needs, if someone sees someone who has an offence, or has offended once or twice, they’re not a person, they’re an offender, they are a person who has offended, they need to get that out their head.

(Keyworker 2, Focus Group)

Staff displayed frustration at women with convictions only being seen as offenders by wider society. Reducing the stigma produced by society was the issue identified by staff as the most helpful thing others could do to support desistance. Yet their explanation of people not solely being ‘offenders’ if they had “offended once or twice” suggests that those who have offended more than that could legitimately be labelled as offenders, and left the staff in danger of perpetuating stigma towards repeat offenders.

Megan had been addicted to heroin and other drugs for some time when her long-term partner died. She had been shocked by this event into pursuing rehab, and once she eventually gained a place, made great progress in recovery. She had also gained a new partner from the residential rehab during her time there. She explained how unexpectedly not encountering judgement and stigma from her boyfriend had increased her confidence:

He was an alcoholic and he took coke, whereas mine was heroin so I didn’t, one of the reasons I didn’t think he’d like me was the stigma of being a smackhead, because they class everyone that, I think people class heroin addicts as people that steal, rob off their own, whereas I was addicted to heroin but I didn’t do none of that, and there’s a difference but you know, normal stigma is trainspotting [judging others is a common hobby], do you know what I mean, everyone gets judged the same, so I thought, like, why would he like me when he’s just an alcoholic and I’m a drug addict, but he don’t think like that, so that makes me feel a bit better about myself.

(Megan 2)

Aware of the belief (and sometimes the reality) that heroin addicts were prolific thieves, Megan felt that her substance abuse history left her exposed to judgment from society. When she realised that her boyfriend had not classed her in that way, she was gratified by his respect for her as an individual and did not feel ashamed of her previous addiction in his company. Megan's boyfriend in fact was seen as 'wise' ([Goffman, 1963](#_ENREF_109)) by Megan, as a member of a different, but similarly stigmatised group (alcoholic and coke-user), and so she did not feel the stigma of being a 'smackhead' with him.

In addition to feeling stigma from society, desisters were often nervous of receiving particular responses to their histories or circumstances from others. Linda received health-related benefits for arthritis, but still avoided telling new people of her receipt of social security for fear that others would judge her:

So I tell people that I’m retired, eh, cos I do get a little pension. (Linda 1)

Linda was deeply uncomfortable at having worked for most of her life and then being forced to receive benefits to pay her living costs, undoubtedly influenced by recent[[46]](#footnote-46) societal, media and political discourse about ‘benefit scroungers’ and 'skivers' ([Valentine & Harris, 2014](#_ENREF_276)). Yet Linda’s concern did not centre on her feelings of shame but instead focused on not letting others know about her situation so as to avoid awkward conversations and encountering unpleasant opinions towards her ([Goffman, 1963](#_ENREF_109); [Worrall, 1990](#_ENREF_292)).

In a similar way, feared responses from others communicated societal disapproval to Jane. She engaged in prostitution and theft to feed her addiction to alcohol, did not discuss feeling stigma related to her offences, but rather explained that she feared stigma due to health issues. She was intensely concerned that, if others knew of her health problems, they would avoid her. Jane’s fear of embarrassing responses made her paranoid that others would know about her Hepatitis C status (a consequence of her long term drug use):

I get right, you know, really paranoid and I, I won’t. I couldn’t bear to go up to, cos I like I get on with ---, I couldn’t go up to her and go, ‘oh I’ve got Hep C’. Couldn’t do nowt like that, no matter how, you know, well I get on with somebody, I couldn’t do that, I’m that paranoid. In case they think, ‘oh no, I can’t touch that, she’s too stained’ know what I mean. Cos even when I went to em, when I were going doctors and that, an you know I thought, didn’t feel right cos I thought they’re gonna be thinking stuff like that, do you know what I mean. (Jane 1)

Jane’s worry was that people would avoid her, or think badly if they knew of her infection – a feeling common to those with Hepatitis C ([Crockett & Gifford, 2004](#_ENREF_54)). Her anxiety that she would be treated differently due to disclosure caused frequent apprehension and made her feel “stained”, implying that she would never be free from this fear (even though treatment was available to her if she stopped drinking). Jane talked as though her Hepatitis C made her somehow dirty and infectious, and that others would be afraid of everyday physical contact with her (even though the virus is primarily passed through shared needles).

Linda had a more tangible fear – that others would keep referring to her previous offences and so not allow her to recover from the sense of guilt and shame that she felt anyway:

You don’t need to remind that person cos it’ll never, they remember it every day of their lives but they don’t need to be constantly reminded by somebody else…cos that’s not the way to do it. (Linda 3)

She did not want others to think that she had forgotten her offending, as that would appear as though she took no responsibility for her crimes. Equally, though, Linda thought that others keeping the sense of shame and guilt at the front of her mind would impede her desistance, so made some effort to hide her previous offending from social contacts.

Megan, aged 36, appeared much attuned to the wider consequences of the stigma she experienced as an ex-drug addict and offender. She described how her applications for jobs in the town where she grew up were undermined by her and (especially) her sister’s bad reputation:

So although I had A-levels and accounts and business degrees and everything, I couldn’t see any point in me having them because I wouldn’t. I used to apply for jobs still, but because I didn’t have a car anymore. Everyone in [town],[town]‘s only small, knows everybody, and if they didn’t know me, they’d know my sister, and she’s got a bad criminal record, so they’d tar us both with the same brush and I wouldn’t even get an interview. And half the time I’d apply for jobs that I knew I could do stood on me head, and it was the stigma of drug addict, which I, and I understand but it’s just deflating when you’re the person trying to get the job. (Megan 2)

Megan’s experience was that the stigma of being a drug addict, and having the stigma by association of a sister with a bad criminal record (it was much longer than Megan’s own record), discounted her from the job market where people knew who she was. Encountering this barrier to employment – and particularly skilled employment, which she had appropriate skills and experience for – was deeply disheartening for Megan, and shook her confidence in her own abilities.

Experiences of shame and stigma were widespread, and usually had negative effects on confidence levels (although, interestingly, they sometimes also prompted change), although their source varied. Participants felt ashamed of their offending when they relapsed, disappointed others, or lost a good reputation. Some also reported feeling guilt about life circumstances outwith their direct control, such as health problems and receiving benefits. Experiencing shame could add to the emotional turbulence that participants faced (see Chapter 5), and engage maladaptive coping strategies, and the risk of relapse. Where stigma was unexpectedly absent, a couple of participants reported a rise in their feelings of confidence. However, when participants were aware of the presence of stigma in society, they were nervous of others' responses to them and so concealed information about themselves, preventing social integration with those who could potentially aid their desistance (see Chapter 8). Stigma could also have practical disadvantages for participants such as closing off available employment – a factor that could also have aided desistance by providing financial stability, keeping participants occupied (see further Chapter 5) and pro-social support (see further Chapter 8).

**Sanctuary**

In contrast to experiences of stigma and shame, some participants valued physical and metaphorical places of sanctuary – where they could be physically and emotionally safe. When their personal and emotional security could be guaranteed, they felt valued (which increased their confidence) and were able to think about other aspects of their lives that needed attention. It is unsurprising that a basic level of safety was needed before much progress could be made in desistance, and this is a fact frequently upheld in the therapeutic literature (see, for example, Bloom et al. ([2003](#_ENREF_17)) and Radcliffe & Hunter ([2013](#_ENREF_227))). The Together Women Centre was frequently described as a place of sanctuary, but other locations and relationships could also be sources of safety for desisters. While the geography of desistance has rarely been discussed, this aspect of the findings again highlights the insights that can be gained from a geographical perspective.

Eight participants had at some point experienced violence in intimate relationships. Given such histories, strong reactions against violence were unsurprising. Emily explained how any hints of violent behaviour from other service users would cause her to walk out of organisations and courses:

I don’t like to be around anyone that’s violent, it brings back a lot of memories, so...you know, I just like to move out the way in that situation quick. (Emily 1)

It was essential for Emily to feel unthreatened before she would consider engaging with services on a very basic level. Recalling the serious injury that she received from the father of her children made her feel so vulnerable and scared that an immediate exit from the potentially violent situation was necessary for her. This meant that organisations that dealt with aggressive men, and particularly those where men might be under the influence of substances (such as probation and homeless charities), were of limited use to Emily. Conversely, the atmosphere that she encountered at the Together Women Centre gave her the confidence to engage with staff and programmes as she knew her personal safety was not at risk:

[A] positive thing in my life is here, coming here because coming here, it’s like a safe place for me, it’s like somewhere I can come, I feel safe, I don’t think that I’m gonna be, like, people’s gonna come in here, be loud or whatever, em and I feel like this is just a safe unit, so. (Emily 7)

Safety was a very important concept for Emily (she mentions the word three times in the above quote alone) and she loved the security she felt at the Together Women Centre (also noted as a key feature of other community groups for women ([Radcliffe & Hunter, 2013](#_ENREF_227))) . It enabled her to attend frequently, and she was a regular participant at various groups. Emily had previously failed to complete many community sentences (which required attendance at probation and other mixed-sex groups), but was very clear that she contributed her recent success in completing her last sentence to the safe atmosphere that she experienced at Together Women - which, in turn, allowed her to engage with staff and appreciate the encouragement that they gave her.

Gillian, who was struggling with her binge drinking tendencies and their harmful consequences (both in terms of her health and criminal involvement), also appreciated the capacity of Together Women to provide a safe place, but for her it was less about physical safety:

Well yeh they educate people don’t they, give them that self-confidence and, just a place to hide, well not hide but…it’s a place of safety innit, know what I mean, I know like whatever’s going off in my life on a weekday I can come here, and sometimes it does piss me off on a Saturday like this Saturday, you know what I mean, it’s closed, what else can I do?

(Gillian 4)

Gillian could not quite find a satisfactory way to express what she meant, but ‘hiding’ from the outside world was important. It appears she was referring to the ability of attendees to forget about the problems they were facing outside the Centre – a kind of emotional sanctuary – although she might also have meant physically hiding from abusive partners. It is not clear whether this was linked to the confidence that Gillian thought the Together Women Centre gave its service users, or whether she simply listed the benefits that she saw. Nevertheless, Gillian viewed the Together Women Centre as an essential source of respite from her stressful life.

A sense of safety could also be produced from encountering caring relationships. When participants felt that people or organisations had a genuine concern for them, they felt that others were working to keep them safe. Gillian also encountered this with a GP who was keen to closely monitor her progress with new anti-depressant medication:

Whereas this guy says, look, I see you’re struggling but I see you’re trying, see how you get on with them, I’ll see you in a week, you know what I mean, just makes me feel safe. (Gillian 4)

Her doctor’s attitude to her reassured Gillian that he was looking out for her wellbeing, and encouraged her not to worry about potential adverse effects of the medication as he would be monitoring her progress.

For others, personal security was not such a pressing issue, but the safe and comfortable nature of the Together Women Centre was still appreciated. Linda found the environment at the centre really important as she re-adjusted to life on her own after release from prison and the break-up of her controlling marriage:

You just need somewhere like this that’s nice that you can come and, you know, really feel comfortable in and, and talk to people. (Linda 3)

For Linda, a pleasant, relaxing atmosphere where she could talk to others was necessary as she got used to living on her own. She had not found this at her first visit to Probation, so was glad that her Probation Officer had suggested they meet exclusively at the Together Women Centre. The Centre was a constant for her while other parts of her life settled down and so was a place where Linda could feel protected from uncertainty.

Steph often spent time in the Centre as she tried to recover from alcohol misuse and shoplifting. She also found the environment of the Centre reassuring:

Feels like home, feels like home sometimes, eh, yeh it’s just, I dunno, it’s just quite comfortable, to come to. (Steph 4)

Throughout her problems with alcohol and shoplifting, Steph had been a constant visitor to the Together Women Centre, whereas her accommodation had frequently changed over that time. The comfort that Steph found there was linked to its familiarity to her, and continued presence in her life, but might also connect to a sense of being safe from the outside world- like in one’s home.

Rachel had similar views of her residential rehabilitation facility. At 22, she found the rehab more reassuring than time spent in her home town with her family and friends:

It’s safe, I mean when I go home on my home visits and that it seems strange I mean it’s still safe cos my mum and that won’t let me touch a drink or drugs or owt, but it’s like, it’s not the same as out there where you’re gonna have a lot, as soon as I get a down day, at the end of the day I’ve got people round me all the time to sort that out, I’ll be on my own out there. (Rachel 1)

She differentiated between the safety of home, where she would be protected from using alcohol or drugs, and the safety of the rehab, where people were willing and able to look out for her emotional wellbeing. The support of the residential centre gave Rachel confidence that, even if her day went badly, she would be safe from relapse. This may have made her braver in trying new things, such as courses and volunteering, that she would not have been confident enough to try by herself without the presence of the rehab to keep her safe.

Experiences of sanctuary gave participants the physical and emotional safety to allow them to engage with services. They could find respite from the stress of their lives in a comfortable space which would stay constant for them, even when other parts of their lives were changing. When participants encountered other people who cared for them, it gave them confidence to continue with the changes involved in desistance.

**Beth: "Not this ground down woman that I were"**

In interviews, Beth discussed her experiences of themes in this chapter at length. At 63, she was the oldest participant in the study, and was trying to move on from a recent prison sentence for several counts of workplace theft – for which she felt intense guilt and shame. She had been married to her second husband (an abusive and controlling man who she nevertheless loved deeply) for over a decade, but the couple divorced over the course of the study. Beth was close to her two adult daughters, and especially close to her six-year-old grandson, and was trying to repair a strained relationship with her adult son. On release from prison she was fitted with an electronic tag and lived with one of her daughters, before moving into her own flat with income from her pension. Beth was a Christian, had regularly been involved with the chapel in prison, and had been welcomed into a church in the community in the few months since release. She had no substance abuse or serious medical issues.

Beth’s abusive marriage had a deep impact on how she saw herself. Before she had met her second husband, she had been a confident, independent woman who had capably run her family and home alongside evening work. Yet her second husband had been physically and emotionally abusive, and tried to isolate her from her friends and family. As a result, when he sent her divorce papers, Beth had to try and renegotiate her own identity again:

I’ve managed to sorta start again, sorta thing, eh, I’m sorta finding myself I suppose if that doesn’t sound a bit of a cliché, innit, but yeh I feel, I’m not this ground down woman that I were I don’t think I am and I think if I carry on getting more confidence and you know, I feel like getting up now and doing my hair and I’ve always tried to but a lot of it’s been a cover sometimes. (Beth 4)

In learning to ‘find herself’ again, Beth also thought she was increasing her confidence. She no longer prepared for the day while hiding what she truly thought about herself from others, but instead felt that she was able to be herself without the negative influence from her ex-husband. As discussed in Chapter 6, Beth’s regaining of her identity bolstered her confidence.

There were other ways that Beth felt her confidence increased over the course of the study. Her keyworker at the Together Women Centre was crucial in helping Beth accept and value herself, and it was this assistance that Beth appreciated most:

She tries to make me feel better about meself, I think, cos I don’t like myself very much at the minute, so I need confidence, I think she definitely helps with that. (Beth 1)

By listening to her keyworker’s encouragement, Beth felt more confident in liking herself, despite the crimes she had committed. In a similar way, Beth’s church encouraged her to value herself during the Sunday meetings:

They were saying you should love yourself, if God can love you then you should love yourself and, that’s what I struggle with, not liking myself very much, so on a Sunday I always come out of there somewhere up here [she indicates a level above her head]. (Beth 1)

The emphasis put on God’s love for her made Beth feel that she could also accept herself, and raised her confidence. Just after the meeting, Beth felt confident and happy, but that feeling gradually diminished every week. She tried to remind herself of her value to God by reading her Bible every day, and did feel this had some positive effect on her outlook, but found the group encouragement of the Sunday meeting more effective.

Despite these experiences of having her confidence increased, Beth’s struggle with feeling worthless and negative about herself persisted. When she explained the historical context behind these feelings, it was not difficult to see why they could not be easily fixed. Many of her difficulties could be traced back to the abuse she had suffered from her second husband:

But [second husband] used to say to me, ‘Oh you’re stupid, you can’t even decide what’, you know what I mean, and then I think ‘Well yeh I must be stupid then because I can’t do it’ and then then you start, if somebody tells you long enough then you believe it, don’t you? (Beth 2)

The constant verbal criticism meant that Beth eventually believed what her husband told her, lowering her confidence by thinking of herself as stupid. As well as the negative influence of her husband, Beth found her confidence suffered when she reflected on the losses she had suffered since her conviction:

I’ve lost me home, me husband and to actually have been in prison and got this tag on I can’t, some days I just get up and I’ve just forgot for a minute and then it’s there and I think, oh. (Beth 1)

While this feeling fits a little with others’ experiences of losing capabilities (through the thoughts about the electronic tag as removing her freedom) it mainly links with those who linked their lack of confidence to previous traumatic experiences. As an older woman with no previous experience of the criminal justice system, Beth had found her time in prison very difficult. Remembering her punishment – and the effects of that in her husband divorcing her and keeping the house – made Beth very upset and disappointed in herself. As a result, she found it difficult to have the confidence to again go about her daily life.

In addition to sadness about past and present difficulties, Beth felt intense guilt and shame about her offending, which also contributed to her low self-confidence. She found that this prevented her from being happy in her present life:

And then every so often it hits you, or it hits me anyway and I think, oh God, what have I done, you know, but…it’s almost like I don’t think I should be happy, it’s like a guilt thing all the time, if I’m laughing and joking and sometimes things come to my head and it like stops me from, you know. (Beth 3)

When the realisation of her crimes hit her, the guilt that Beth felt meant that she did not think she deserved to be having a good time anymore. Her previous behaviour was seen by Beth as being so serious that it removed her right to have a normal life. Yet despite the repeated deflation in mood that this realisation caused, Beth also pointed to benefits of feeling guilt and shame so acutely:

I know I wouldn’t have done anything like that ever again because I think the hurt, humiliation to your family and people that know you, as well as yourself, yeh, you get the prison sentence but it’s not very nice for them either, you know what I mean, you feel like you’ve let everybody down.

(Beth 1)

The consequences to her family, and her shame for having hurt them, meant that Beth was adamant that she would never again offend. She appreciated the humiliation that her family had undergone and felt guilty for that as well as the actual offence.

Like others, Beth experienced stigma from society for being a female offender, which induced feelings of shame in her and lowered her confidence in being in public. Yet this stigma was not universal. She found that her new church, who she had first met through links with the prison chapel, had accepted her without imposing any stigma on her:

‘Cos they know at church the situation, yeh cos they know that I’ve come through [the prison chapel] and they keep saying, only 2 more weeks, you get [the electronic tag] off, you know, and it’s so nice for ‘em to not treat me any different to, you know, cos you think you’ve got a stigma, don’t – well *you* don’t know, but you do think that. (Beth 1)

Beth explained that she felt stigma from society, suggesting that it was something that could not be fully understood unless it was personally experienced. Nevertheless, she did not encounter this from people in her new church. Instead, they shared in her anticipation of getting her electronic tag removed and did not treat her any differently from others. Beth found this a welcome relief, and was appreciative of their acceptance of her. She was also very grateful for the acceptance which her daughters showed her after she had committed her offences. Initially, she did not want them to visit her in prison as she was too ashamed to face them, but changed her mind after intervention from the prison chaplain. Beth frequently recounted what they had said to her in that first meeting since her conviction, held in the prison visit room:

Even though they said to me, we don’t condone what you’ve done but you’re our mum and we’re here for ya. (Beth 4)

Here, Beth’s daughters provided a perfect example of reintegrative shaming ([Braithwaite, 1989](#_ENREF_24)), where they condemned the offending acts but accepted the offender (it is worth noting that at this point they were unaware of the abuse that she had suffered). They emphasised the durability of the mother-daughter relationships that they had, and reiterated that they would support their mother despite her offending. This acceptance was a welcome surprise to Beth, but in some ways prolonged her feelings of shame as she felt even more unworthy of her daughters’ attentions because of their accepting attitude. If instead they had hurt Beth in return for the hurt she had caused, she may have felt that she had paid for the pain she had inflicted. Nevertheless, the affirmation of Beth in her role as their mother helped her realise that she still had value despite her crimes and boosted her confidence.

Finally, Beth also had experience of finding a place of safety where she could be accepted for who she was and confident in who she was becoming. Like Linda and Steph (above), Beth found the Together Women Centre to be a comfortable, non-judgmental place:

‘Cos I think to come, you’ve got somewhere to come that’s a bit like a sanctuary I suppose. You know you can come in here and nobody’s gonna judge you and there’s gonna be people that’s, everybody’s in same boat, aren’t they? Some people you click with when you’d never in a million years, you know what I mean, but yeh, everybody’s got a problem and you like sort it together, do you know. (Beth 4)

For her, it was not physical safety that was key, but emotional safety and protection from stigma. Being somewhere which offered acceptance and companionship helped Beth feel that she need not be so ashamed of herself as everyone was experiencing similar situations. She had made some friends from vastly different backgrounds to herself, which had demonstrated to her that people were similar inside and willing to work alongside each other to solve everyone’s problems. The safety from judgment found at the Together Women Centre allowed Beth (and her friends) to work on their difficulties in an environment that supported them and helped them to value themselves despite their offences.

Beth related gaining confidence to her finding out who she was without her husband. While others' encouragement to value herself did seem to have some effect on raising her confidence, her long history of victimization meant that Beth had to build from a very low level of confidence. She was particularly deeply affected among participants by her offending and subsequent prison sentence, and experienced intense guilt and shame over it. However, she was pleased to find an absence of stigma in her new church, and particularly encouraged by her daughters' reintegrative shaming, both of which bolstered her confidence.

**Conclusion**

Aspects of confidence were prominent in desisters’ accounts of their lives, yet some confusion over its importance in desistance remains. The proximity gained to participants’ experiences through relational interviewing problematized, rather than clarified, the temporal ordering of increased confidence and identity stabilisation. It seemed that increased self-confidence and a new or re-discovered identity were both necessary for some desisters to have a clear idea of what they could become without crime, but whether one preceded the other was ambiguous. Instead, a strong identity could feed into increased confidence, and self-confidence could promote a robust identity in a kind of virtuous circle, or positive feedback loop. Confidence was commonly gained by participants through reflection on achievements (particularly those linked to their desistance), and was often triggered by discussion with keyworkers, who used verbal persuasion to boost participants’ confidence. Some had learnt techniques in order to effectively capitalise on this method of building confidence, and so set small goals for themselves everyday so that they would feel the benefit of achieving them. Desisters also learnt to value themselves when others showed that they valued them, either in words or actions. In contrast, those who experienced losing confidence found that this came from their own (or another’s) questioning of themselves, or from losing capabilities. Sometimes outside influences, such as the job market, would interact to disappoint desisters’ hopes which would also disturb their confidence in themselves. Participants who particularly struggled with low self-confidence traced the root of this back to previous trauma and abuse and only began to recognise their own value by dealing with these earlier experiences and escaping from abusive relationships.

A specific way in which women lost confidence was through experiences of shame, guilt and stigma, which often overlapped. Participants felt guilty about their offending and other life circumstances, such as their reliance on medication or past humiliation, even when they were not at fault. There were suggestions of desisters experiencing a heavy stigma from society for being both female and an offender (more so if they were also on benefits or had mental health problems), and so they actively tried to avoid others finding out about these parts of their lives. This stigma could affect the creation of new friendships and employment opportunities, as well as making desisters question their own value and therefore lowering their confidence. Nevertheless, areas of sanctuary provided respite from this stigma and other negative influences that threatened participants’ physical and emotional safety. They provided a comfortable, accepting space, where desisters could have confidence in their safety and thus securely engage with services and assistance. Many participants mentioned the Together Women Centre as an example of such a sanctuary from physical and emotional danger, and particularly so when compared to their experiences of attending Probation offices. Beth’s experiences show how she continued to struggle with low confidence despite gaining confidence from a number of sources. Unusually in the sample, her strong feelings of guilt over her offence had a significant positive impact on her motivation to desist. Of particular note is her encounter with reintegrative shaming from her daughters, where her value as a person was affirmed while not denying her guilty emotions, so building her confidence in herself. Yet while aspects of confidence were frequently affected by encounters with other people, this was not the only area in which relationships affected desistance. The next chapter looks at the various social influences that participants experienced during their desistance journeys.

**Chapter 8: Social Influences**

The overwhelming suggestion of research into women’s reoffending and desistance is that existing relationships (except perhaps with children) are often negative and harmful, and there is a focus on women’s intimate relationships. This is variously supported by evidence of partners initially introducing women to offending behaviour ([Jamieson et al., 1999](#_ENREF_133)), a significant minority of relapses being directly attributed to partners ([Leverentz, 2006](#_ENREF_155), [2014](#_ENREF_157)), or the effects that a substance-addicted partner can have on a woman’s own substance abuse or treatment ([Bloom et al., 2003](#_ENREF_17)). In other studies, offenders’ stories indicate that controlling or otherwise negative relationships have a more direct effect on driving acquisitive crime, both through voluntary co-offending and coercion ([Mullins & Wright, 2003](#_ENREF_201)). [Murray (2009)](#_ENREF_204) found that those who remained ‘on the margins’ of desistance tended to have family or friends who were still offending, and some suggest that this makes it hard for women to desist because their friends and family offer normative support for offending ([Bui & Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_30)). Similarly, [Eaton (1993)](#_ENREF_63) suggests that offending friends are a source of cynicism and demotivation for women trying to desist. In the first half of this chapter, I explore the negative effects of other people on my participants’ desistance efforts, supporting some of the above propositions from other research. In addition, I present fuller explanations of how desisters’ relationships with others can hamper desistance effects more indirectly, and what the women experienced if they tried to break off negative relationships.

Yet despite the tendency of research to focus on the negative, social relationships also have the potential to produce positive influences on desisters, with some studies claiming that it is social networks that are most important to the success of desisters ([Barry, 2010](#_ENREF_8)). I explore these positive effects in the second half of the chapter, broadly dividing them into influences on identity, receiving support, relating to others, and motivation to desist, although most relationships had complex effects. In the second part of this chapter, I first consider the positive effects that relationships can have on identity, both through normalising the desister and through assuring them of their value. Next, I explain what I understand support to mean, and look at some specific facets of the concept as illustrated in my study – others ‘being there’ for the desister, acceptance, forgiveness and understanding. A section on how desisters relate to others follows, examining the relative importance of being ‘selfish’, independent, and having reciprocal relationships. To conclude, I look at the impact of others on participants’ motivation to continue to desist from crime. I examine all these elements thematically, rather than separating the analysis by the

type of relationship, as the themes seem pertinent no matter what type of relationship is considered ([Goodwin, 2014](#_ENREF_110)). For example, the emotional support that desisters appreciated came from family, friends and professionals - a whole range of different 'types' of relationship.

**Negative Influences**

In a very direct way, some participants had offended in the past, or continued to offend, with someone close to them, in a way which did not suggest coercion. For example, Danielle accompanied her boyfriend on his shoplifting trips:

I go so I know what’s happened, do you know what I mean, I don’t wanna be sat at home and then think, oh he’s not coming home and then I’m gonna get a phone call from police, at least I know when I’m with him, what he’s doing and I can watch his back. (Danielle 1)

Her concern and care for her boyfriend led Danielle to her own continued involvement with shoplifting (both as an accomplice and as a principal offender - although she claimed here that she merely helped her boyfriend, at other times she openly admitted that she would shoplift too), with her affection for him overriding any worries about the couple’s law-breaking. In this case, the strength of emotion between the couple (at least on Danielle’s side) seemed to have halted any serious efforts at tackling this element of offending behaviour, despite Danielle showing some uncomfortableness with it in her speech.

Even when actual offending had stopped, the emotional tie to co-offenders was evident in participant accounts. Megan had a long history of drug abuse, which she conducted mainly from her home. She recounted consuming illegal drugs with her sister:

We was like sisters but also like best mates cos she came to my flat every day, we were scoring and that, but you know, just sat, so we was like best mates, don’t get me wrong, we argued, but all in all she was like me best mate. (Megan 1)

Although clean from drugs at first interview after a number of months in residential rehab, and hopeful for her long-term success, there was a palpable sense of sadness that Megan no longer had the same closeness with her sister (who continued to consume drugs), and would no longer be spending time with her in the same way. It seems logical that Megan’s desistance efforts would have to account for this emotional link and provide a justification to continue to desist which outweighed the affectionate pull she had towards her sister. She did not suggest that her sister offered explicit normative support for continued drug use and offending ([Bui & Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_30)), but this may have been an additional subconscious factor.

For at least eight of the participants, substance abuse was a historical prerequisite for re-offending – either through illegal drug use, or an alcohol problem which meant drinking often led to violence or theft. Those eight had no history of offending when not connected to substance abuse. For those women affected, seeing other addicts was trying. Danielle was trying to conquer her addiction to heroin, but also misused alcohol. She explained why she did not like to go to alcohol services:

Just the people, just the people that go, cos it’s just like you’re walking into a trap, you see all the people that you don’t wanna see, they’re drinking outside, an’ you think, oh no, here we go. (Danielle 1)

Without labelling the “trap” that she feared as related either to coercion or peer pressure, something about seeing old associates endangered Danielle’s desistance efforts to a point where she felt out of control of the situation.

Others also experienced this social pull where being with other addicts meant the situation felt out of their own control. Alyssa (aged 24, and a single mother) had struggled to make friends on her university course, and instead preferred to socialise with others from her estate. However, those others spent a lot of time drinking:

It’s them [other drinkers], what make me blank out, drinking with them, because they drink so fast, they drink their drink within an hour, they just down it, you know especially when it’s not their drink. (Alyssa 2)

Alyssa found that she frequently drank more than she was comfortable with, and more quickly than she’d like, when with these particular associates. Her desire to ‘keep up’ with these friends’ drinking, and her indignation at them drinking more of the alcohol that she had personally bought, encouraged her to keep drinking in the moment. This was true even when she knew her alcohol consumption was putting her at risk of frightening black-outs, health problems, and possible violent offending, yet Alyssa found the social pressure to keep drinking overwhelming.

From a different perspective, Megan had spent many months in residential rehabilitation without taking illegal drugs. For her, it was not some kind of peer pressure, but housemates (there were about 30 men and women who also lived in the rehab) making drugs available that was problematic. Here, she describes discovering that housemates had relapsed within the accommodation (but in her absence) at the end of a particularly emotional week for her:

People were using and drinking and, glad I weren’t there, cos the mind-set I’m in, I mean I’m not saying I would use, but I think if it were there in front in me and I was feeling that way I think I’d be very tempted, that’s just being honest, I’d like to say that I’d be able to say no, cos I’m not gonna go looking for it, but if it was there under me nose, I think it would be very hard for me, I’d have had to go lock meself in me room, but I’m just glad that I wasn’t there. (Megan 2)

Megan explained that she was not confident enough in her own resolve to remain clean to guarantee that she would refuse the drugs if they were offered to her in her current mind-set. She had sufficient determination to try to cope with issues without *going to find* drugs, but when the practical difficulty of gaining them had been overcome by someone in her house, she was not so sure that she could maintain her recovery (and therefore, her desistance). The negative social influence here was, therefore, having someone who was willing to make drugs available, even if they placed no pressure on Megan to join them in their consumption.

More indirectly, sometimes offending was (or was feared to be) an instinctive reaction to others’ behaviour. For example, Emily (aged 28) was stuck in temporary council emergency accommodation having been homeless on the streets, and was waiting for a flat of her own. The apartment block had many chaotic and anti-social residents, who were hard to avoid when there was only one stairwell (and a lift that frequently broke down). Emily was having trouble with a neighbour who was harassing and stealing from her and feared a serious argument, as I noted in my research diary:

Emily has been walking about [in town] so that she gets back late to her flat and avoids her [neighbour], then she puts the TV [volume] “right down to three” – really quiet, and keeps the lights off so she doesn’t know she’s there. [She] makes her feel intimidated and she’s staying away from the flat. “That’s it”, she doesn’t like fighting, but appears worried that the girl’s actions will induce her into acting violently and getting into trouble herself. (Emily 2 notes)

Emily was worried that the situation with her neighbour would result in her own violence, and was trying to cope by avoiding the young woman rather than relying on her own self-control should an argument develop. Emily gave no further insight into the effects this neighbour was having on her emotions or thinking (see below), but merely explained that the two possible ways of coping with the situation were to avoid the neighbour or risk an argument and subsequent (perhaps inevitable) violence. Avoiding the neighbour in the apartment block was particularly difficult, but Emily had no other housing options until the council waiting list reduced.

In contrast, however, friendships and associations often had complex negative effects on participants. Sometimes relationships were stressful, or traumatic. Alyssa was preparing to focus on desistance from drug use and alcohol-fuelled anti-social behaviour with renewed motivation when some friendships deteriorated:

I were partying quite a bit out my house before [Christmas] and mixing with wrong people, then I thought just get Christmas out the way then I were gonna like, sort my life out, but then I had, I fell out with some people and I ended up getting chased down the road with a knife.

(Alyssa 3)

An argument with a friend (who she used to party and drink with) escalated to the point where both she and her son were threatened with physical violence on her housing estate. The result of this situation was that Alyssa’s child was taken into care, which she was extremely angry about. She did not think he would have been taken if not for the incident with the knife, and she also suspected those who she fell out with of reporting her to social services. The stress of this experience derailed her efforts to work on her desistance in the short term as she could not maintain motivation to stay away from drugs and provocative situations (although this relapse conversely may have been positive long-term as she later determinedly sought to prove her good character to social services). Nevertheless, the chaos that the stress of the situation caused made everyday life extremely difficult for Alyssa to cope with and certainly negatively affected her desistance plans.

For those struggling with substance addictions, the stress of difficult relationships made staying clean more of an effort. Steph was trying to maintain sobriety from alcohol and was accommodated by a supported housing organisation. She shared a house with others with criminal records, mental health problems, or substance abuse issues:

If…there’s problems in my [shared hostel accommodation] then it, it does just drag you down, it drains you, I don’t really need to be around people like that [substance abusers with negative attitudes], just not good for me, frustrating. (Steph 2)

Steph found the stress of dealing with chaotic housemates to be wearing, sapping her energy and sinking her mood. As her offending occurred when she drank too much, and avoiding drinking was dependent on maintaining a reasonable mood, stress caused by other people could be dangerous to Steph’s desistance efforts.

For both women who had fraud convictions (Beth and Linda - aged 63 and 54 respectively), being in a long-term controlling and exploitative relationship had strong links to their offences. Both Beth and Linda’s marriages ended while they were in prison for their fraud offences – Linda’s by her own choice, and Beth’s by her husband’s choice. Linda discussed the nature and consequences of her relationship with her husband:

[He was a] very controlling man, very very money orientated, used to take all my money off me, this that and the other, it were very very, he’d no need to be worried about money or paying bills or, em, he weren’t nice to me, at all really, he used to put me down a lot and...what happened, I’d be frightened to tell him that I’ve got this debt, so it weren’t- I was basically trying to do it [pay off her debt], without him knowing. (Linda 2)

In addition to the obvious effect of her husband’s control of money leading to Linda having to pay debts from sources other than her salary, he also had a discernible effect on her confidence. His put-downs and bad treatment of Linda knocked her self-belief and consequently meant she felt less able to tell him about money problems or ask for assistance. Despite previous convictions for fraud, Linda was unable to think of or access alternative resources and so she felt almost constrained into offending again. Like the 'battered' women in Richie's ([1996](#_ENREF_232)) study, Linda was trapped into offending by the abusive relationship, and her experiences fit closely with those of Richie's white participants. Instead of being forced to commit financial crime at work by her partner, her offending was rather an attempt to prevent future abuse (by preventing him finding out about the debt). Beth had a similar experience with her husband (Carl), where his control over her life severely affected her confidence and eventually led to her offending - but she was less certain than Linda that her crimes were an attempt to protect herself from future abuse:

And it just continued, and it were almost like, because we didn’t have any family there, once we moved from ---, I were totally on my own then, and then it just gradually got that if I said that were black Carl’s said it were white and if it were wrong then, you know, arguing. Then I got my job, give the shop up [Beth and Carl had jointly managed a corner shop], a Morrison’s opened and we couldn’t run it, worked at home and he didn’t like that. But if I didn’t work, he didn’t like that and I just found that I were just going deeper and deeper into somebody that I don’t recognise now, really. (Beth 2)

Carl’s contrary attitude and abusive control of Beth led her to doubt her own decisions to a point where she felt she was losing her very identity. This confusion gave Beth a feeling of lack of control and she often suggested that she thought her crimes were out of character, as though it was not really her true self acting, so fitting the classic desistance narrative as explained by [Maruna (2001)](#_ENREF_168), where the true 'good' self is trapped by outside forces, leading to offending.

Even when relationships did not have an obvious negative impact on a desister, sometimes they proved to be unhelpfully distracting – where women were unable to focus on actively moving on from offending, and especially when they were intimate relationships. For example, this seemed to be a significant factor with Danielle (in her late 20s), who was obsessively in love with her boyfriend and so spent every minute of her time with him. Consequently, she frequently missed appointments with services designed to help her with her desistance. In a later interview, Steph - aged 40 - reflected on how her previous relationship with her short-term boyfriend had stopped her from leaving a drug and alcohol-fuelled party that she (rightly) suspected would trigger a relapse:

I suppose being there and being with him, cos I did wanna be with him, god knows why when I look back on it, but I do. I wonder sometimes, I mean whether it was the fact that he needed me or not, I don’t know, but I kinda, I suppose, when I started drinking again I realised that he weren’t gonna stop, he weren’t there to help me, so. (Steph 6)

Here Steph showed that, in the moment, her desire to be with her boyfriend was stronger than her desire to stay sober, and consequently desist from crime. Perhaps this distraction was linked to the uneven nature of the relationship, where Steph was “needed” by her boyfriend, but he had no intention to help her. It is possible that more equal relationships, where both rely on the other, would provide less distraction as the desister’s partner would be interested in assisting the desister, and not being a distraction themselves. At the end of her relapse, when the above interview occurred, Steph was able to speculate about her motivation for staying with her boyfriend, indicating that she liked being needed by him, but suggested that she wasn’t aware of it at the time.

Staff at Together Women appeared conscious of the dangers of distraction, and it was the possibility of forming new relationships that fuelled their measured cynicism for residential rehabilitation and shared housing projects:

Although obviously it’s a place where they’re there and they’re getting support, it’s also a place where they get distracted.

(Keyworker 1, Focus Group)

There was a definite mixed opinion from Together Women staff towards these organisations, and it was not uncommon for the Together Women Project to be in contact with a woman who was losing focus on their desistance efforts because of a new partner. However there did not seem to be an obvious solution to this problem, as any sort of group activity in any organisation brought the possibility of participants becoming more interested in each other than their own desistance. Indeed, romantic partners could, and did, affect desisters in any one of the negative ways listed here (and usually in a combination of these ways). The greater intensity of contact often present in these relationships compared to others undoubtedly amplified their negative effects - whether through co-offending, harmful emotional ties, substance abuse, stress, domestic abuse or distraction. As a result, negative relationships with romantic partners were highly visible in the lives of service users at the Together Women Centre, and were often the target for blame over failed desistance attempts by both service users and professionals.

**Breaking Away from Negative Relationships**

One solution that was sometimes suggested (mainly by staff) was that desisters ceased contact with people who were negative influences on their lives. This was especially true of romantic partners, where the intensity and complexity of the negative effects could be particularly damaging. Yet all kinds of relationships were ultimately implicated:

But for a lot of the people we work with I think that they have to cut out certain family members or relationships from their life, they have to change who they spend time with, change their hobbies, change their lifestyle completely to be able to access that change.

(Keyworker 2, Focus Group)

This life-encompassing change necessitated a complete break with people who had previously been important to the desister- family, partners or friends, and is often discussed in desistance literature ([Brown & Ross, 2010](#_ENREF_29); [Jamieson et al., 1999](#_ENREF_133); [Leibrich, 1993](#_ENREF_152); [Leverentz, 2006](#_ENREF_155), [2014](#_ENREF_157)). It could require almost everything in their lives to change, and therefore was a difficult thing to achieve (see section below on Available Relationships). Yet staff were also aware of the complexity of the difficulties for women facing this challenge:

I think we do work with quite a lot of women, this is quite generalised, but a lot of women may have had a crappy time in their life and they’ve met a man that gives them a feeling of confidence and makes them feel loved and then, from that, they also get into some bad ways. And when they’re ready to move on, the man isn’t ready to move with them, and it’s a lot harder to move a couple on than just one person. And I think that, sort of abusive relationships or [sigh] oh just generally a lot of relationships can be quite poisonous, and our women struggle to make that cut away from someone that could be negative for them. (Keyworker 2, Focus Group)

There was an awareness that the ‘negative influence’ may also make the desister feel loved and confident, but the idea that the relationship should therefore somehow be re-negotiated instead of broken (as demonstrated by Leverentz ([2014](#_ENREF_157)) and promoted by Rumgay [2004)](#_ENREF_238)) was not considered by workers or desisters as a realistic or available option. However, feelings of connection and love towards the other in the relationship would undoubtedly make it very hard for desisters to break away.

With all this difficulty in moving away from relationships, it was unsurprising that participants frequently discussed what actually happened. Initially, there was some realisation that breaking away was necessary or desirable. This did not seem to happen instantaneously. Beth began to realise whilst in prison that her husband was a negative influence, but was still comprehending exactly how much of a negative influence during our interview:

I think, when I did what I did and I went to prison, I had a lot of time to think, and I sort of, well you hear things, you hear other people talking, they make you think even more and I just thought I can’t ever, if I’ve got to my age and somebody’s controlled me like that I’m not gonna let that carry on, I’m not. Even though I love him and I still love him, it’s, it’s a weird thing, you know like, when you hear about these people that’s been kidnapped for years and then they’ve got this thing that they love that person, I can well understand that. You depend on them all the time, I couldn’t do anything without asking him, in the end. Then he used to get mad at me saying I never did anything, but I daren’t because it could be the wrong thing, I didn’t realise how bad it were until, like talking to you, now. (Beth 2)

For Beth, it was hearing other people talking about abusive and controlling relationships that most helped her to accept that her husband was a negative influence. As she then talked about it to others (including me), she understood more of the magnitude of the control and abuse she had suffered. During her time in prison, she had the space to re-assess whether the relationship was worth pursuing on release.

Rachel, who at 22 had already experienced ten years of poly-drug addiction, had previously spent much time offending and abusing drugs with friends from her home town. She found that space away from old associates while at residential rehabilitation also allowed her to realise their negative influence:

I mean the people I hung out with, even my ex, I’ve gotta cut them all off, I can’t go back to them because they, I’ve got clean. Before I got clean for 6 months, I mean I’ve been on heroin since I was 12 but I got clean when I was nearly 18 and I was really really ill at some point and I really needed some drugs cos I was physically ill and not one of them [former drug-using associates] would sort me out. So I got myself clean and as soon as they realised I were clean they wanted me, they were giving me drugs again, you know what I mean so. I mean it’s gonna be hard cos it’s all I know, you know what I mean? They’re all the people that I know and care for but what I’ve come to realise is I can’t change them and they will only drag me back down, you know what I mean. So until they change theirselves, if they don’t die first, there’s nothing I can do for them. (Rachel 1)

Here, Rachel noted that old friends did not really care for her as a person, and only wanted someone who would buy their drugs. Despite this, she still had some attachment to them, but her time at the rehab had shown her that unless they also stopped taking drugs, they would only have a destructive influence on her. Her experiences of becoming seriously ill through drug use demonstrated to Rachel both how precarious her situation was, and how dangerous her friends’ situations were. Again, it does not appear to be an immediate realisation, but instead a gradual awareness of what was necessary to safeguard her own recovery and desistance. Despite this awareness, Rachel still found the process of breaking away from these friends painful.

In contrast, sometimes negative relationships were broken before a desister realised how destructive their effects were. Linda left her husband of many years when she last went to prison for fraud:

I don’t think I would have been in there the last time if it hadn’t have been for [ex-husband], I think subconsciously, I did it to get away from him.

(Linda 4)

Here she noted that, although she was not aware of thinking in this way when she committed her last offence, her real motivation was to break away from her husband’s controlling influence.

Once desisters had realised that they needed to break away from negative relationships, the experience of staying away from those associations could be difficult. Emily was not able to relocate away from associates who she previously shoplifted with, and had crafted some techniques for when she met them in the street:

I think who you’re with, if you’re with two people, saying, ‘let’s do this, let’s do that’, an um, you’re with them, then you get jumped into it, but if you’re like, think, right, come on, nudge, get to the art project, you think of the project and then you’ve got that in your head then it’s a lot easier.

(Emily 1)

If there’s a lot of people and they look at me like, it’s hard because I just feel like, I don’t wanna be bullied, so I like to get out a bit quick, so that ‘nah, I’ve got an appointment, nah’, and I might not have an appointment but I just say that to get away from them, so... (Emily 1)

In reminding herself of other places where she liked to be, and using fictional appointments at those various projects, Emily had a ready-made script for avoiding spending time with those who would negatively influence her, so giving an example of diachronic self-control ([Shapland & Bottoms, 2011](#_ENREF_247)) where advance planning to avoid a tempting situation removes the need for exercising self-control within that situation. Yet she had some evident anxiety when discussing these techniques, and found it difficult to use them with confidence.

Even when a successful break had occurred, some women found it difficult to continue to stay away from people who were negative influences. Rachel had moved city to attend residential rehabilitation, so did not experience Emily’s problems of continually meeting old associates. Nevertheless, she struggled with being without friends:

See, with loneliness, I’m scared of being on my own anyway, and with the loneliness, that’s when I, at half ten, eleven o’clock, daft o’clock in the morning, that’s when I’ll go looking for people to be around, and the people that are out at that time are always the wrong people to be around, all the users, all the drinkers, you know what I mean and even if they’re just social drinkers, I’m not, that’s, that’s how I lost my little lad, and he went to live with my mum because of that. (Rachel 2)

Rachel’s mental health problems and night terrors made being by herself particularly frightening, and often prompted her to go looking for company during the night. Yet she was aware of the danger of meeting people on the street at that time, and reminded herself of the previous consequences of that behaviour (having her son taken into care) to prevent herself doing it again. In a later interview, Rachel explained that she had started running at night to keep herself occupied and out of trouble. She had talked about running a little when she was younger at keywork sessions, and Rachel liked the suggestion of her worker at the residential rehabilitation to run as a way of keeping busy at night.

A complete break from negative relationships was sometimes seen as necessary for successful desistance, but this did not make the reality easy. Attachment to others made it very difficult for desisters to end or renegotiate relationships. Often the realisation that it would nevertheless be beneficial to break away happened gradually, through participants spending time away from those relationships. Sometimes, the relationship was broken by the other before the participant realised the necessity of ending the association. In both cases, it could be difficult to stay away from those negative influences. While one or two created techniques for specific situations to aid them when tempted to return, experiences of loneliness were more widespread.

**Available Relationships**

If previous relationships are ended by desisters, there is a danger that they will become lonely and isolated, unable to replace previous relationships ([Barry, 2006](#_ENREF_7); [Wright, DeHart, Koons-Witt, & Crittenden, 2012](#_ENREF_293)). Yet social structure (such as the location of social housing and the availability of employment options) and everyday reality for desisters place constraints on the type of new relationship available to them. For example, social housing provided by local councils or housing associations was, in many cases, the only housing available to participants as they relied on state welfare. This is both because of the cost of private rentals and the discrimination of private landlords, who often insist on deposits or do not accept welfare claimants. Such housing is concentrated in more deprived areas as a result of previous government policies which introduced the ‘Right to Buy’ for council tenants ([Murie, 2014](#_ENREF_203)), and as a result, neighbours were not always prosocial influences on desisters (see below). In addition, although participants did not discuss it in interview, it seems plausible that these areas could add to desisters’ experiences of stigmatisation as they became associated with stereotyped and stigmatised neighbourhoods ([Lister, 2004](#_ENREF_160); [Murie, 2014](#_ENREF_203)). New associates from these neighbourhoods, or elsewhere, could be negative influences, while close relationships with workers and professionals could cause problems of their own when professional practice disallowed social contact. Desisters were therefore left to look to family, other desisters, or (more unusually, possibly because of the undesirability of being friends with a stigmatised female offender) other ‘prosocial’ friends ([c.f. Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)). Such connections could be found in a limited number of places, and usually through the many services desisters accessed, such as housing or drug treatment. There was also the possibility of forming new relationships through churches or educational courses. The paucity of available relationships showed that agentic action of desisters in choosing to break away from old relationships and find new friendships could be seriously undermined where the desister could not access a social context that was favourable towards them forming new relationships.[[47]](#footnote-47) Nevertheless, some significant barriers impeded the development and deepening of friendships even when they were available to desisters.

For those who did not break away from old contacts, there were mixed feelings about those continued relationships. Alyssa found herself unable to socialise with people who were not negative influences on her, despite her attendance at university:

The people that I should mix with I can’t mix with but the people I shouldn’t mix with I can, know what I mean. (Alyssa 2)

Despite some uncomfortableness with the relationships, Alyssa felt powerless to make new friends with pro-social peers. This may have linked to her awareness of her criminal record, or the practical difficulties of being a single mother compared with her undergraduate peers. She did not come from a particularly different class background from her peers, but undoubtedly had a very different life experience to most of them, arriving at university in her early twenties having already been through care, residential drug rehabilitation, courts, social work, and becoming a mother. She talked at other points in interview of feeling morally superior to her friends because of her academic achievement, so perhaps she could not find a comfortable power balance with those who were positive influences. She also felt unable to break away from old contacts, possibly because of a fear of loneliness. Alyssa was a care-leaver, who had run away from drug-abusing parents as a teenager and thereafter remained in foster care. She had some contact with her parents and siblings (who all lived in a southern city), but substance abuse and criminal behaviour was rife among her relatives and they were not supportive. Alyssa spent her teenage years dealing and using drugs, before finding herself pregnant to a “bad” man with whom she had since cut contact. With no supportive family and a young son to care for, Alyssa did not make friends at university but instead socialised with others on her housing estate. Yet she was acutely aware of the influence these relationships had on her, describing them as “frenemies” (Alyssa 1).

Emily was also unable to break away from old friendships, even though she had identified them as dangerous to her desistance. As she had not relocated, she continued to meet people that she used to know from her time on the streets:

They’re like, they’re street drinking, and like they’re into drugs and that and back into crime and trying not to get back into any crime, so...they’re not the sort of people that I want to be hanging about with, if you know what I mean, and I don’t call them friends, I call them associates, cos that’s what they are. (Emily 1)

She gave the impression that she had picked up the term “associates” from services, and sometimes described them as friends in informal conversation. Certainly her behaviour did not always reflect her assertion that she did not want to be “hanging about with” those associates, as she often discussed who she had recently seen when she attended the Together Women Centre. Possibly her naturally friendly disposition made her uncomfortable in shunning those she had previously been close to, or perhaps she worried about being perceived as thinking herself too good for her previous friends. However, Emily did seem not to want any new friends who she would class as “associates”:

It’s a nice flat but the block’s full of people with problems, like alcohol problems, drug problems and that, the police and that, it’s full of noise as well half the time, it’s like always, drama around there…so you can’t really befriend people like that, sort of, would you want to be with them?

(Emily 1)

Her accommodation had given her the opportunity to make some new friends, but Emily had recognised the potential negative influence that such people could have due to their substance issues and anti-social behaviour.

It was not just associates who had substance abuse issues that threatened participants’ desistance. Gillian had been in a string of abusive relationships, where her unhappiness had triggered a descent into alcoholism and alcohol-fuelled crime (theft, public order and violence). She explained how drinking alcohol could escalate her likelihood of offending by making her lonely and likely to meet a controlling man:

Basically when you’re drunk you show your vulnerabilities, the guys love a girl that’s vulnerable, whether they can control them or what and em…drink to me makes me lonely and isolated. (Gillian 2)

Gillian thought that drinking made her feel her singleness more than normal, and therefore more susceptible to advances from men who had seen her vulnerabilities. She had concluded that she would only find men who would negatively influence her desistance if she went out and drank too much. Devoid of any promising alternatives, Gillian seemed contentedly resigned to remain single for a season while she worked on her own well-being.

When neighbours were undesirable contacts, women could be left with a limited selection of people who they could befriend (see above). Some had spent significant time (often at particularly chaotic points of their lives) with keyworkers and professionals, over many years, and so it was unsurprising when participants developed a connection with them. Alyssa spoke with warmth about a particular worker who had helped her in the past:

I’ve got a worker that I’m right attached to, I don’t know why, I think I look at her a bit like my mum, but I right like her, she don’t even work with me no more. (Alyssa 4)

Given the honesty requested from service users and investment from both parties, it is logical that attachments can form between service user and worker. Alyssa evidently had a strong attachment to this particular professional, likening her to her (absent) mother. In reality, working practices meant there was little possibility of this relationship developing beyond the service, which sometimes seemed cruel given the importance Alyssa placed on it. Instead, she suspected that she had a coping mechanism for when professionals retreated:

I’ve got that many professionals on my case. I think I’ve become institutionalised, like you can get institutionalised in prison, I think I’m like that, I do wrong when they’re like moving away from me so they come back. (Alyssa 1)

The desire for a continued relationship with some workers, or the security of knowing that someone was looking after her, perhaps fed into triggering Alyssa’s relapses and risky behaviour. She did not see any possibilities for ongoing support outside of statutory agencies, despite her university attendance. Therefore prolonging her need for professionals' assistance was the only option available to her if she wanted to continue those particular relationships, so maintaining contact did not necessarily support her desistance. More realistic opportunities for enduring relationships could only be found elsewhere, and I explore some of those opportunities in the following sections.

In addition to the difficulty in maintaining friendships, it should not be assumed that family relationships were any easier. Some families were broken and deeply scarred. Jane, who was in her late 20s, provided an extreme example where her relationship with her mother was profoundly affected by her mother’s recent suicide attempt:

I’m kinda dreading speaking to her because I know I’ll get upset, cos she’s eh, she’s tried tak[e], taking an overdose, and that so …yeh, she’s tried something like that before, and it’s gonna be really hard to talk about it, and that, because I’ve gone through it with me dad because me dad committed suicide so, and me nan-nan did, that’s me mum’s mum’s mum.

(Jane 1)

With severely chaotic lives, mental health problems and substance abuse, Jane’s relationship with her mother was barely functional. She also had few other family members left - only one sister. Jane also hinted that she struggled to forgive her mother for not preventing the neglect or abuse which she suffered from as a child. Unsurprisingly, there was little question of family relationships supporting her inclination to desist from crime, but Jane showed no sign of wanting to cut contact with her family or even to redefine their relationship.

For the fortunate few, families already provided strong relationships. Beth had three adult children, some of whom had children of their own. Beth’s adult daughters had accommodated her on release from prison, helped her with many practical issues, and spent a lot of time with her:

I mean I’ve seen me daughters, they’re all around and stuff but I’ve not made any new friends and, you know nobody to go out with I suppose, I mean not now but in the summer I’d probably like to go out, have a drink or… (Beth 2)

Despite having a dedicated and involved family, Beth still had the desire to make new friends. The long winter nights had encouraged her to hope for this on a long term basis, but her loneliness was palpable.

One possible source of new friendships was other service users from organisations that participants were already accessing, and indeed this was the most promising source of new friendships for many participants ([Leverentz, 2006](#_ENREF_155), [2014](#_ENREF_157)). Through her attendance at various Together Women groups, Beth had befriended a younger woman (see further Beth's Case Study in Chapter 7), who was noticeably very hostile in her attitude when she initially attended the centre:

That’s [an] unusual friendship innit really, but yeh she texts me a lot if I’m feeling down and all this she, she’s really kind and you know what I mean, she’s got another side to her, and I think she’s changing, I don’t know, she’s stopped swearing as much, she’s not as aggressive, I don’t know what. (Beth 4)

Beth was pleasantly surprised at the friendship that developed, as the other woman seemed quite different to her- much louder and brasher than Beth. However, she definitely appreciated the relationship, and found it especially uplifting when her mood was low through her friend’s contact and concern through text messages. Another consequence of the relationship was that the friend became less aggressive and gentler under Beth’s influence. While an unexpected and unlikely friendship, it developed into a mutually supportive, positive relationship.

However, friendships with other desisters could also be difficult. Megan and Rachel had been best friends from early in their stay at residential rehabilitation together. Living in a male-dominated house, they both enjoyed having a close female friendship (Rachel for the first time in her life, and Megan the first in many years). Once Megan had left rehab to prepare to join the community again, their friendship became strained:

I think, I realised it but because we got on so well but, I do think the friendship’s more one-sided, like I like her for her, not what she can give me, you know like if I’d lent a tenner off her and said I’d pay her it back, I would make sure I paid it her back. (Megan 2)

The friends’ different circumstances highlighted differences in how they treated each other, and gave Megan the chance to reflect on the true nature of the relationship. She began to resent the imbalance of Rachel not returning loans of money or property in the way which she would like. The resultant tension in the friendship combined with the stresses that both Megan and Rachel faced individually while trying to recover from drug addiction and desist from crime. When Megan relapsed, Rachel was so disappointed in her friend that she stopped contact and the relationship never recovered, to the regret of both. While initially a valued relationship, the failure of the friendship ultimately provided a source of stress to both as they tried to desist.

Some participants had access to social realms that were not mainly filled with offenders or desisters. Education was one of these areas, and it seemed that it was the possibilities of meeting new people, rather than the education itself, that attracted Megan to college:

Suppose it’s just meeting new people innit, new places, I wanna go to college. (Megan 1)

Megan was aware that she needed new friends to maintain her desistance (at the time of the interview, she was still close to Rachel), and her immediate idea to find those new people was to start a college course. In reality, two years into her course, Alyssa (24) continued to struggle to form relationships with those at university with her:

But I don’t feel, I just feel like, I don’t feel like I’ve got any friends… they all go out together, I’ve never been out with them. (Alyssa 2)

For reasons she could not elaborate on, Alyssa had not become friends with her course mates, and felt that she had since lost her opportunity to form meaningful relationships with them. She was socially constrained by her position as a single mother with no childcare options and a relative newcomer to the area who was nevertheless not housed in regular student housing. Due to her needing accommodation for both herself and her son, Alyssa therefore missed out on the friendship that other students enjoyed from sharing housing. Even if she was invited to join her classmates on nights out, her caring responsibilities meant that she was unable to go because she had no friends or family to babysit her young child. She therefore felt the distance between her and her classmates, and as a second year student, thought that it was too late to join their friendship groups and felt isolated at university.

A second area which could provide participants with new friends was church. Both Linda and Beth described themselves as Christians, and found new churches to attend soon after release from prison. Linda chose to stay at her new church because of the friendly atmosphere:

The first time I ever walked in you know there were a lot of people come and spoke to me and you know, got talking to people, and slowly but surely, you know, I’m feeling that I’m becoming eh, you know, people know me. (Linda 1)

Initially, she was hopeful to make some new friends and identified some slow progress with this, although not everyone who welcomed her had initiated friendships. Beth also had good first impressions, but had expected to make more friends than she did:

I like the church, I do, but I thought I’d make more friends but it’s that big that you don’t really, there is a couple of people, but I’d have liked to have got more. (Beth 4)

As Beth appreciated the church for its other aspects, a lack of new friends did not initially make her reluctant to go to Sunday meetings. For both Beth and Linda, their electronic tags[[48]](#footnote-48) seriously impeded their ability to make new friends through church, as they prevented them from attending evening activities such as small groups, Bible studies, or Christmas choirs. As a result, both felt they did not get to know people as quickly as they would like and reduced their involvement in this area of their post-offending lives due to embarrassment. In their cases, electronic tags were a massive hindrance to making good pro-social contacts and therefore restricted Linda and Beth’s progress in desistance. Such tags appeared entirely unsuitable for women in their position whose fraud convictions signalled the end of long-standing abusive relationships and who therefore were in need of new social circles. The tags were not preventative as neither was at any risk of offending after dark – all their previous offences had occurred in a workplace. Electronic tags are therefore a prime example of an aspect of the criminal justice system that was created for men ([Walklate, 2004](#_ENREF_278)) – or at the very least, for street crime offenders, and are patently unfit for dealing with these women’s situations. It may have been (unfortunately) better for their reintegration to keep both Linda and Beth in prison for a few more months and then release them with no tagging requirement, when they could participate fully in their family and social lives again.

Some women faced other barriers to making new friends. The composition of new social worlds could be off-putting. For both Linda and Beth, their newly single status (both after long controlling marriages) made them uncomfortable about the idea of making new friends with those in intimate relationships:

And again, you see, trouble is, you generally find people are all in couples, it’s not easy, it’s not easy at all. (Linda 2)

You know I go to church but most of the people I’m meeting there are married or whatever, you know what I mean, but it’s early days I suppose though, in’t it? (Beth 2)

Perhaps driven by a reluctance to discuss relationships, or a feeling that they had less in common with new contacts, both women were unwilling or uneasy in entering into friendships with those in a markedly different relationship status from themselves. Discomfort about forming new friendships was also a theme in Jane’s interview, where past experience made her wary of trusting people:

I haven’t really got friends, know what I mean, I’ll get on with anybody I talk to, anybody really, but nah, can’t say I haven’t got a friend really, you know, someone who I’ll go and see now and again or I’ll go to town with, or stuff like that, I don’t, I can’t, it’s hard for me to trust anybody, cos I’ve been, you know, shit on in past by friends, so… I’d rather be on me own.

(Jane 1)

Her experiences of betrayal and disappointment (which she did not want to talk about in interview) had led Jane (who was in her late 20s) to protect herself emotionally by not forming close relationships with friends. Yet she was eager to portray herself as someone who was friendly to new people.

For others, it was practical problems that prevented new relationships from developing. Alyssa had recently been offered overnight respite fostering for her son. Some of her initial thoughts about this arrangement were that it might allow her to spend time with friends from university. The very fact of being a single mother, who had no family to support her with childcare, had prevented Alyssa from participating in social events with her class mates. However, she did not think her single mother status in itself would affect the nature of the friendships she was pursuing, despite her class mates being mostly younger than her and having no dependents.

Participants were significantly constrained in their search for replacement relationships. Their first option was not to break away from negative relationships at all, although those who had chosen this option expressed serious discomfort in those associations continuing. For those in the study who were the most disadvantaged, the provision of housing alongside other disadvantaged residents meant that many neighbours also had problems with substance abuse and offending, and so were not seen as suitable new friends. Relationships with professionals were prevented from deepening into friendships by working practices, but that did not stop a couple of participants from viewing these relationships as most important to them. Families could be seriously damaged and so unable to provide prosocial relationships, but those with adult children all found that at least some of their children were positive influences on them. New relationships could be made with other service users, although this could also prove stressful. Few other sources of new relationships existed except through educational course mates and churches. Yet the difficulties of forming new relationships continued even after suitable associations were made. The composition of new social spheres could make it uncomfortable for single women (especially older single women) to make new friends. Electronic tags and childcare constraints seriously impeded socialisation for all relevant women. However, it was still possible for participants to find relationships that had a positive influence on their desistance.

**Positive Influences**

Turning to look at the positive influences of social relationships, their interaction with desisters’ identities is particularly interesting. The idea that desistance is closely linked to a change in identity is central to some of the most influential theories on the topic ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)). Relationships with other people have a variety of roles to play in enabling and maintaining change. For example, [Farrall (2005)](#_ENREF_72) suggests that it is support from others that helps to reinforce the identity that a desister is exploring. Others portray supportive relationships in a more vital light. Burnett and McNeill describe their understanding of the necessity of support while a desister attempts to reconstruct their identity in a particularly emotive and logical way:

…who would risk engaging in such a precarious and threatening venture without the reassurance of sustained and compassionate support?

([Burnett & McNeill, 2005: 236](#_ENREF_33))

If desisters do indeed alter their identity, the support of others does seem like an incontrovertible component for success. Yet the nature of support that assists an identity (re)construction can benefit from further examination. Here I elaborate on the concept of others supporting the formation of identity, looking at two specific effects of other people on the desister’s identity: how others can have a normalising effect, and how they can communicate value.

Echoing Lofland’s ([1969](#_ENREF_161)) concepts of ‘normal-smiths’, some social contacts provided desisters with confirmation that they were able to live normal lives. Vicky remained astounded that her new, ‘normal’ friends had befriended her:

Since I stopped taking heroin, obviously you have to change your circle of friends yeh, and I have got seriously the best friends in the world, honestly, I have got the best, and my friends, honestly, none of them have got any problems in their life, my bestest closest friend has never even had a parking ticket in her life, in fact all my friends are like that, I’m like the black sheep of my friends. (Vicky 1)

Her emphasis on her friends’ law-abiding, problem-free lives, fed Vicky’s disbelief that such people would choose to be her friend. Nevertheless, her appreciation of her friends was palpable. More profoundly, Vicky’s relationship with this group of law-abiding people gave her continuing access to detailed cognitive blueprints ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)) of how to live a crime-free life. Their continued friendship no doubt allowed Vicky’s friends to reinforce her identity as a ‘normal’ person ([Giordano et al., 2003](#_ENREF_101)).

Other relationships also seemed to have a positive effect on desisters’ perceptions of themselves. Beth’s adult daughters had made her feel very included in the family after her release from prison and divorce from an abusive husband. Arrangements for a girls’ day out together had really touched Beth:

Just little things like that, it’s like me you and [other daughter] now, it’s not just, do you want to come, it’s, I’ve done it and it’s for us three.

(Beth 2)

Her inclusion in her daughters’ lives made Beth feel like she was reinstated as the loving mother that her previous controlling marriage had prevented her from embodying. Instead of being left with a ‘criminal’ or ‘former criminal’ identity, her daughters replaced those labels by presenting their mother with an identity of being again an important part of the family. As she had previous experience in this role, the ‘new’ identity came with an accessible cognitive blueprint ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)), and so Beth knew what behaviours and attitudes were appropriate for her to pursue. This may have given Beth a sense of security and confidence. In addition to accessing new (or former) identities, the re-inclusion of Beth in her family made her feel valued:

[My daughter] came round and had a sandwich at mine, you know, things like that, they’ve made me feel that I’m worth something, if you like, which I really didn’t expect, I, I know they’re me kids but I didn’t, I just didn’t expect it. (Beth 1)

The unexpected attention that Beth had experienced through involvement in everyday life communicated to her that her daughters still appreciated her. This may have made her realise that, contrary to how she felt, her crimes had not left her worthless as a person. Burnett and McNeill ([2005](#_ENREF_33)), in the context of probation, suggest that treating the desister in a certain way confirms their trustworthiness and demonstrates the other’s compassion towards them. Here, Beth’s daughters’ actions seem not to be communicating particular compassion, but perhaps do assure Beth that she is still trusted to continue in her ‘mother’ role. Her six-year-old grandson also played a pivotal role in assuring her of her worth and place in the family:

He said to me on Saturday, "nan-nan", I said "what", he said, "you’re the best nan-nan in the world", I said "aw, thank you", "and I love you" he said. (Beth 1)

His frequent unabashed assertions of affection boosted Beth’s confidence and reminded her of her importance in her grandson’s life. Reclaiming her belief in her own value helped her to repair the extensive damage of her marriage on her self-confidence, and left her less vulnerable to abuse and control in any future relationships.

Other desisters also found relationships to boost their sense of self-value. Nicole felt that she had previously disappointed her best friend with her convictions, but was making good progress in her desistance:

She’s right proud of me cos I’ve stuck with everything and she’s seen a big change in me, everybody has, it’s eh, it’s good this time round. (Nicole 1)

Nicole found that her most recent experience of the criminal justice system was “good”, because she had complied with her order and made her friend proud of her. Her behaviour had proven to her best friend that she was indeed a worthwhile friend to have. Nicole was enjoying having the better opinion of friends and family through making progress with her court requirements, thus boosting her confidence and self-belief. [Wright, DeHart, et al. (2012)](#_ENREF_293) suggest that it is simply the love and attachment that exist in close relationships that boosts desisters’ self-esteem, and while this does seem true of Nicole’s friendship in general, her success on probation had definitely given her an extra boost of confidence through making her friend proud of her.

Positive relationships could encourage desisters to realise that they could be 'normal' too. They also communicated that the participant had a role and identity that was valued in that relationship, which advantageously impacted their confidence levels. I examined these influences in Chapters 6 and 7 respectively. There were some further positive influences discussed in a variety of relationships, which I turn to discuss next.

**Support**

Outside the impact that others can have on a desister’s identity and confidence, some desistance research looks at the supportive element of relationships. Pro-social female partners have long been linked to successful desistance in men ([Laub et al., 1998](#_ENREF_147)), but there is some suggestion that the presence of a partner in a desisting woman's life is not so prone to producing positive effects on their desistance ([Leverentz, 2006](#_ENREF_155)). Nevertheless, women desisters report receiving many types of support from others, including emotional, financial, and help with childcare ([Arditti & Few, 2008](#_ENREF_2); [Cobbina, 2010](#_ENREF_47); [Leverentz, 2011](#_ENREF_156), [2014](#_ENREF_157)). Such support does seem to be beneficial to desisters ([Barry, 2006](#_ENREF_7); [Giordano et al., 2003](#_ENREF_101)), and particularly important in the maintenance stages of desistance ([Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10)). However, I found that participants talked about valuing *emotional* support far more than other types, and that practical assistance was usually described as communicating elements of emotional support, rather than just material support. Although such distinctions are rare in desistance research, some studies hint at similar conclusions ([Bui & Morash, 2010](#_ENREF_30); [Burnett & McNeill, 2005](#_ENREF_33)). Therefore I primarily discuss aspects of emotional support, although examples of what could be categorised as ‘practical’ support are sometimes also used as illustrations. I nevertheless find the dichotomy between these major types of support to be largely false, as the provision of practical support (for example the provision of childcare) can also usually be considered as emotional support. I would therefore err away from the conceptual separation of ‘practical’ and ‘emotional’ support, and instead look at the different facets and internal effects of receiving support through relationships. The majority of supportive relationships were with other women (friends and mothers), but there was evidence of positive relationships with men too – although usually as friends, brothers or sons, and not often with partners.

Throughout this section, themes of caring and depending on others are naturally prominent. Ideas of a dichotomy between independence and dependence are helpfully challenged by the 'ethic of care' - a feminist moral theory, based on Gilligan’s work ([1982](#_ENREF_99)), where care is central to (particularly women’s) morality and moral reasoning. Caring for others is proclaimed within it as a necessary and worthwhile activity. The theory's claim is that caring relationships are foundational to people's sense of being an individual, and that unequal interdependence is normal within those relationships ([Robinson, 2011](#_ENREF_234)). Held ([2005](#_ENREF_125)) suggests that it is possible for humans to think they are independent, but in reality others are always affected by our actions through various relationships. Therefore, striving for perfectly equal relationships[[49]](#footnote-49) is both misguided and ineffectual. Instead, 'asymmetric reciprocity' should be valued and promoted. This is the version of unequal interdependence where different amounts of power are held by each party in a relationship. To prevent harmful domination, the more powerful party in the relationship remains willing to care for the other and to see things from their point of view ([Sevenhuijsen, 2003](#_ENREF_246)). Asymmetric reciprocity is further broken down into four stages: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness ([Sevenhuijsen, 2003](#_ENREF_246)). There are many echoes of these stages in the support that participants discussed in interviews (considered in this section), and therefore I discuss the wider theory in more detail in the following section where the focus moves from support in relationships to the nature of those relationships themselves.

Forms of support were common in relationships - and even in those that were not overtly pro-social. Participants valued others being there and available to help them, even if that practical help was not necessary. They also appreciated being listened to, accepted, forgiven and understood. Practical support was valuable when it was based on these forms of emotional support, but was not discussed as a separate type of support by any participant. Instead, it was primarily appreciated as evidence of emotional support.

For some, it was the fact of another person simply ‘being there’ for them that was their most appreciated emotional support. This could be understood as merely proof of acceptance, but was frequently presented as encompassing some other elements too. Alyssa thought that “being there” was the most important, and indeed the only, thing that others could do to support a desister’s efforts:

Alyssa: … Just be there.

SG: Be there for what?

Alyssa: In case anything goes wrong, I think most people have to change themselves…but it’s helpful if there’s more support around. (Alyssa 4)

For her, having someone “there” was a safety net in case things went wrong. The other’s role is to step in to assist when things are difficult, but not to be a constant influence in everyday life. A relationship is not particularly valued in itself, but the other’s presence is reassurance that should something go wrong, they will be there to fix the situation. In contrast to those who craved the acceptance offered by some relationships (see below), Alyssa primarily appeared to want the practical and emotional help when things were difficult, rather than the acceptance that such a relationship can symbolise.

For Linda it was the knowledge of the availability of this assistance rather than the assistance itself that was valuable:

I just felt that I’d got that support, you know, it were just nice to know that if I did need you anytime you were here, and I know when I first came out, I did come an awful lot. (Linda 4)

Talking both about the staff at Together Women, and myself, Linda knew that if she needed practical or emotional assistance, there were people who would be willing to help.[[50]](#footnote-50) That awareness made her a frequent visitor to the centre in the time after her release from prison, as she was comfortable to attend no matter how easy or difficult she was finding life. This may reflect findings by Brown and Ross (2010: 43), whose female prison-leavers felt that the “‘fact’ of being supported…[was] evidence of trust and affirmation of their status as a person”. It seemed that Linda did not see the availability of staff and volunteers as evidence of trust in her, but it may have conveyed to her that she was still a person worthy of respect.

Rachel did not require others even to be able to offer assistance to her as she tried to recover from drug addiction and an abusive partner. Instead she just wanted someone to talk to - something that she emphasised elsewhere that she had not experienced as a child:

Listening, that’s all I need, just someone to listen, sometimes I need some guidance, but listen, without interrupting me, without just talking over me, just listen. (Rachel 2)

Here the value of someone ‘being there’ was purely someone who would listen to what Rachel wanted to say- an aspect of previous probation practice that was particularly valued by probationers ([Healy & O'Donnell, 2008](#_ENREF_122); [McIvor & Barry, 2000](#_ENREF_180); [Worrall, 1990](#_ENREF_292)). She suggested that what she appreciates is not some type of help, but being able to talk about what she wants to say to someone who is willing to listen to her. It is possible, then, that what Rachel wanted was someone to accept her for herself, and who felt no need to disagree with or modify what she wanted to say – someone to be ‘attentive’ to her (the first stage of the ethic of care, see above). Such a desire for someone to take an interest in her and her thoughts echoes Rex ([1999](#_ENREF_229)), who found that probationers were encouraged when officers took an interest in them as people in their own right. It seems that such an interest would be valuable to Rachel regardless of whether it came from social relationships or professional involvement.

In addition to just ‘being there’, other people showed acceptance towards desisters in a variety of ways. Family and friends who included and welcomed desisters despite their history or current problems profoundly impacted the desisters, thus reflecting Eaton’s findings ([1993](#_ENREF_63)) that relationships where acceptance was freely given were positive for desisters. Vicky was pleasantly surprised to be included in a group of law-abiding friends that she met at her gym:

But I don’t know why they’re friends with me cos they probably shouldn’t be, but I’m just really lucky. (Vicky 1)

Vicky’s perception of herself as “really lucky” may have fed into a sense of self-confidence and a positive attitude towards other areas in her life. This confidence-boosting result of a non-judgmental acceptance appears similar to that suggested by Brown and Ross ([2010](#_ENREF_29)), and is presumably enabled through a realisation that others do not hold ill-will towards the desister, so the desister need not continue to feel guilty or deficient as a person. However, although Vicky presented no evidence of her friends’ attitudes towards the friendship, she also suggested that her friends should not have become friends with her, and that their relationship was somehow disadvantageous for them. Nevertheless, overall Vicky’s acceptance by her friends relayed feelings of undeserved good fortune to her.

Beth was also shocked by the acceptance offered to her from her family - particularly her adult daughters - even while she was in prison. She loved to recount this story to convey her surprise and gratitude for their response to her incarceration:

They just said ‘mum, you’re us mum and we love you and you look better now that you have done for a long time’. And I think, ‘god I’m in prison and they’re saying that to me’ and it’s just, they’ve been absolutely fantastic. Straight away me daughter said, you’re not stopping in here, you’re coming to live with me, you know, even though she had kids and at weekends she slept on floor on a mattress and she’s been amazing.

(Beth 1)

Beth’s intense feelings of guilt over her crimes meant that she felt that she did not deserve (and she certainly did not expect) the acceptance that she was shown. When, therefore, her daughters insisted on visiting her in prison to convey their acceptance and love, she was completely overwhelmed. Beth could not understand why these people, who she had hurt through her offending, were willing to continue to love her and support her, even when it was inconvenient for them. Similarly to Vicky, Beth hinted at feeling indebted to her daughters and determined never to let them down again. Yet her strongest reaction to their acceptance was positive, and it made her feel valued and special, increasing her self-confidence. Given the closeness of the existing relationship between Beth and her daughters before her offences, this effect mirrors that found by [Cid and Marti (2012)](#_ENREF_46), where support from close relationships increases self-efficacy and desisters’ confidence in succeeding in desistance.

In contrast to Vicky and Beth, who experienced acceptance and inclusion from those who were not looking for particular responses in return, Nicole and her best friend mutually accepted the other, no matter what they had done.

I can go to me friend for anything, I can tell her anything, even if it’s really bad, but same goes, it’s, we need each other, basically we need each other, it’s not about just bein friends we actually need each other sometimes, em, so yeh, I spend most of the time with her. (Nicole 1)

The shared acceptance that the friends experienced is linked by Nicole to them spending most of their time together. It may be that this unconditional acceptance has made the relationship into a place of safety, where both have the freedom to be themselves without the pressure to change or hide their characters. If so, this relationship would reduce stress on the friends (as they do not need to work at presenting themselves in a particular way) and increase their self-confidence (because they are assured acceptance of their true self).

Some women talked explicitly about forgiveness as important to them as they tried to desist from crime, and others discussed being forgiven by those whom they had previously hurt (although there was little mention of desisters making apologies). Zoe (37), who had a Roman Catholic background, placed particular value on being forgiven for her previous offending, and it was her mother’s forgiveness, rather than practical assistance, that she most appreciated:

Just by, not by money, sending money, she’s really financially struggling at the minute, just by being there and knowing that she’s forgiven me for my ways. (Zoe 1)

It did not matter to Zoe that her mother was unable to help financially. Her forgiveness of Zoe, evidenced by her ‘being there’, made Zoe feel supported and reminded her that she still had value as a person, so increasing her confidence. Zoe’s understanding of forgiveness – where she is forgiven specifically for *“her ways”* rather than as a whole person – has echoes of reintegrative shaming ([Braithwaite, 1989](#_ENREF_24)), where problematic behaviour is condemned but the actor is re-included into the community.

Linda found it surprising that her long-standing friend remained close to her despite her repeated convictions for fraud. However, her experience of forgiveness explained why her friend chose to continue to be her friend:

She says, Linda, I don’t care what you’ve done, you know, there but for the grace of God, we all d-, we’ve all made mistakes and I’m sure there’s a lot of people that have done things that have got away with it and, etcetera etcetera, she said, I know you an, that’s where I want to leave it. (Linda 1)

Linda’s friend based her forgiveness on Linda’s character, the fact that everybody makes mistakes, and the likelihood that other people also commit crimes but do not get caught. Nonetheless, Linda appreciated this assertion of acceptance and solidarity as proof that she would not be abandoned by her friend.

Megan also experienced forgiveness from her family for her drug misuse and associated offending, which proved to her that she had not been abandoned:

And then last month, summat I’d say ‘right dad I’m off’ and he’d go, ‘alright, love you cock’.[[51]](#footnote-51) When he first said it I were like, looking at phone thinking, did he just say he loved me, and honestly I was like...and afterwards I thought, ‘he can’t a done’. So when I spoke to him next night, I said ‘I need to ask you a question,’ I said, ‘did you say you loved me last night’, he went ‘well I do’, I said ‘yeh but dad you hadn’t said it for years’. But he’s not, he’s like 67, so he’s not, you know what I mean, been brought up to say it, cos his dad tret him like shit, his mum died when he were 13, so it’s just different, innit. And he’s always telling me he’s proud of me, when he hadn’t told me he’s proud of me since I did all me A-levels and, uni and everything, so. (Megan 1)

When Megan’s father told her that he loved her, for the first time in many years, Megan took this to mean that he realised she was different to when she was on drugs and that he had forgiven her for the hurt she had caused. His words profoundly impacted Megan, and made her realise that, despite her past, she was deeply loved.

Some people went beyond merely accepting the desister; they showed that they understood them and something of their struggles. Actions based on this understanding were greatly valued by participants, even when they were not desired at the time. At another point in interview, Rachel discussed struggling at the residential rehabilitation with her withdrawal from heroin and her mother’s refusal to take her home:

Cos obviously she won’t come and pick me up, I was stamping me feet like a little kid but I’m very very lucky that she’s not one of them mums that em, cos a lot of mums see their kids ill, heroin withdrawing, and they’ll pay for the drugs, or they’d come and pick them up straight away, I’m lucky my mum isn’t one of them mums. (Rachel 2)

Rachel’s mother proved that she understood her daughter by forcing her to remain at rehab until her withdrawal was complete. Once the physical effects of withdrawal had worn off, Rachel became more willing to try the programme, and after a few months, was convinced of the rehab’s worth and effectiveness. Her mother knew that she needed to try rehab while clean before she could make an informed decision and so stubbornly refused to reduce Rachel’s temporary suffering. Rachel considered herself fortunate, in this situation, to have a mother who was willing to risk Rachel’s resentment by employing ‘tough love’ in order to promote her long-term wellbeing. This may have made her more optimistic about the future, as her mother had already proven that she would support Rachel in her desistance even when it was difficult.

Other examples of understanding did not require such dedication from desisters’ relationships. Beth contrasted her daughters’ misunderstandings about writing to those she lived with in prison with the understanding she encountered at the Together Women Centre:

But me daughters aren’t keen on [my letter writing], they don’t understand, they don’t understand that they were my friends in there, they were my support, you know, so, I’m keeping writing. (Beth 1)

This has just been brilliant, to come here, to be understanded. (Beth 1)

Beth’s appreciation of being around people that understood her, and what prison was like, made her very grateful for the Together Women Centre. She obviously enjoyed being at the Centre with people who knew what she was talking about. Although her relationship with her daughters was overall stronger than her friendships at the Centre, those friendships provided the understanding that she was craving. That understanding made her feel more comfortable in doing things (like writing to friends still in prison) which her daughters misunderstood and so disapproved of.

While much understanding came from relationships with those different to the desister, some particularly valued the empathy that was produced when others with similar backgrounds understood them. This discovery is perhaps an unsurprising one, as probation officers have (especially in the past) placed great value on using empathy in encouraging their charges to thrive ([Burnett & McNeill, 2005](#_ENREF_33)), so it is seems reasonable that empathy in other relationships could be of benefit. Twenty-four-year-old Alyssa explained the nature of a particularly close friendship which displayed this characteristic:

Yeh we have a drink on a weekend, but never had an argument with her or nowt, and it’s like, we’re more, like she understands me more cos she’s kind of similar with, her mum’s an alcoholic and like her parents, she’s had a shit upbringing like me, she’s not wrapped up in cotton wool like ---, do you know what I mean, so, it’s like empathy. (Alyssa 3)

The similarity in background between the friends created a bond between the two, which Alyssa described as “empathy” but may indicate a kind of deep understanding, informed by living through similar experiences. This made the relationship comfortable for Alyssa and somewhere she could be open without fearing judgment or derision.

**Relating to Others**

In addition to others having influences on desisters, a selection of themes arose in analysis that explored how participants related to other people. The interaction, and desirability, of ‘selfishness’, independence and reciprocity in participants’ lives varied widely. Interestingly, the ethic of care (see above) has much to say on helpful (or perhaps normal) ways of interaction between people and goes some way to explain various viewpoints, from both desisters and staff, on the subject.

For some desisters, learning to be assertive about their own plans, and ‘selfish’[[52]](#footnote-52) with their time, was seen to be essential to their success in desistance. During the focus group, staff suggested that learning to be ‘selfish’ was particularly important for desisters who had children at a young age:

Their identity from probably the age of 15 has been as a parent, em and then it becomes grandparent so their, they have a slight lack of focus on themselves because they are extremely focused on their purpose as a mother and a grandmother, em and that can be quite negative sometimes I think because it overtakes their focus on them to the point, like was said, people can’t go to appointments and things because they’re too busy looking after too many children. (Keyworker 4, Focus Group)

For these desisters, an identity of ‘mother’ or ‘grandmother’, usually seen as a pro-social, beneficial identity, prevented them (according to staff) from working on other issues necessary to their desistance. Until they are able to incorporate some focus on themselves into their identity (by, for example, realising that they can best care for their children by solving their offending issues), or access a different identity, they will struggle to act in a way which the staff think is helpful to their desistance. Staff generally accepted the notion of independent citizenship, where each person is viewed as an individual, separated from their important relationships. Conversely, the ethic of care moral theory criticises this norm, claiming that *interdependence* is a good and normal state of being (Robinson, [2011](#_ENREF_234); [Sevenhuijsen, 2003](#_ENREF_246)). Yet there was acceptance by staff that women desisters took much of their sense of self from their caring relationships as mothers and grandmothers, reflecting the idea that it is caring relationships with others that allow us to be individuals ([Sevenhuijsen, 2003](#_ENREF_246)) but that this does not equal independence from others' concerns ([Held, 2005](#_ENREF_125)). The dangers for organisations of blindly promoting independence are shown by Haney ([2010](#_ENREF_114)) in her ethnographic study of two residential facilities for mothers in the criminal justice system. At the first facility, the focus was on promoting women’s self-sufficiency and independence. However, women were hostile to this discourse, instead defiantly investing in their relationship with their children and basing their identities on being a good mother. Haney also explains that the women in her study – with poor education, broken families, and young children – had little chance of being independent from the state and that therefore efforts to instil independence in them were unrealistic. Therefore, services trying to articulate to desisters that they need to care for themselves in addition to their families should be careful in how they promote and describe ‘selfishness’, as it may not be a socially viable option for them, and those who find their caring identity important may find independence a foreign concept and even an attack on their sense of self.

A more indirect effect of learning to be ‘selfish’ is illustrated by Beth. She was happy to look after her new grandchild, but had some apprehension about the extent of her daughter’s expectations:

Well I’ve said to her, I don’t mind helping, it’s not helping out, it’s not a chore for me, but I just don’t want her to get that yeh I can do this because my mum will have him, do you know, I said you need to ask me because I’ve got a bit of a life. (Beth 4)

In this situation, being persuaded to take care of the baby when she did not really want to could jeopardise Beth’s self-confidence and sense of control over her life – both aspects which had been important to her desistance journey. The assertiveness that Beth showed instead allowed her to balance her care-giving with her own self-determination ([Sevenhuijsen, 2003](#_ENREF_246)).

Similarly, women were encouraged by services and wider society to be not merely assertive in the face of requests for assistance with childcare, but also independent from other people. Clara, who was in her 50s, spent much time looking after her daughter’s children. Yet her attitude to caring for her granddaughter reflected this encouragement to be independent:

I don’t always pick her up, whenever I feel like going get her, I get her.

(Clara 1)

Here Clara did not look after her granddaughter every time she was asked, but took the initiative to care for her only when it suits her own mood and plans.[[53]](#footnote-53) Therefore her care was not based on responsibility towards her granddaughter, but on Clara’s individual feelings.

Gillian was optimistic about facing desistance as a newly single woman because she hoped her new independence would enable her to face difficulties with clearer thoughts:

What I’m hoping this time, like, by being on my own, nobody can affect me, nobody can get inside my head and like make me emotional. (Gillian 4)

It seems that Gillian was anticipating emotional independence as an aid to desistance, because she thought that if she could control her thoughts and feelings she would not drink and therefore not offend. Her hope was that isolation would prevent her emotions from becoming difficult to deal with. Yet Gillian failed to acknowledge that her presented understanding of herself reflected primarily her relationships with her son, sister, ex-partners and late grandfather, indicating that she was fundamentally relational as a person ([Held, 2005](#_ENREF_125)), and would therefore likely struggle with isolation – as proved to be the case in later weeks (see Postscript).

For Rachel, isolation was not desirable as she tried to build a life without drugs, offending, and an offending partner, but she did want freedom to choose for herself what to do rather than being told what she must do:

That’s all I’ve needed, well not all, but it’s a lot, do you know, someone to listen, and direct you or advise you but not tell you, ask ya, you know what I mean? (Rachel 3)

Rachel was clear that she did want interaction and input from others, but not in a way which impeded her own autonomy. She was happy to accept advice and even recommendations, but wanted to remain in control of her final actions. Her idea of independence in her own actions was less extreme than Clara or Rachel, and was closest to recognising that other people are inevitably involved in a desister’s life ([Held, 2005](#_ENREF_125)).

Other participants had a very different idea of the best way to relate to other significant people in their lives. Instead of aiming for independence, some looked for mutual dependence and a reciprocal relationship. Sometimes encouragement of independence was taken as evidence of a lack of care, similar to the women in Haney’s ([2010](#_ENREF_114)) study, who found that their facility was unwilling to show care and concern for the residents through practical help for fear of encouraging dependence. As a result, women surmised that they were not cared for and disengaged from the programme. In contrast, Nicole’s friendship with her best friend showed how mutual assistance conveyed deep care for each other and helped both friends in their desistances. Aged 32, Nicole had already supported her friend through desistance and now her friend was supporting her:

I spend a lot of time with my best friend, we lean on each other, em, she’s had some really bad times, eh, but she’s come out of it the other side, and as she’s coming out of it, I’m going into it, so, I held her up, she’s held me up, and I suppose that’s got me through a lot. (Nicole 1)

The interdependence of the friends stands in stark contrast to the isolation and independence desired by some desisters and promoted by many services through the Together Women Centre. Indeed, Nicole presents the mutual caring of the friends as a good and desirable thing, perhaps reflecting an underlying ethic of care. It may be that the friends found that their interdependence had strengthened their own self-respect, as those in Barry's study ([2006](#_ENREF_7)) also found. No doubt such mutual support was taxing and difficult to maintain, but the lasting friendship survived the issues that faced both Nicole and her friend. In fact, Nicole explained that they were trying to find ways to increase their support of one another:

That’s the problem as well, she’s at one end of town and I’m at other, em, but obviously now I’m not living where I was, I’ve come a bit closer, she’s trying to meet in middle as well, eh so she’s trying a move from this end of town to middle so we can be near each other for kids and school and, cos I help her out when she goes to college with kids and she helps me out.

(Nicole 1)

The relationship was important enough that both were willing, and even eager, to move house so that they could benefit further from their mutual support. Although Nicole focused on the practical benefits of easier childcare, her description of the relationship (above) suggests that the increased proximity would be desirable for both friends more broadly.

Despite twenty-two-year-old Rachel’s desire not to be told what to do by others, it seemed that she was also pleased to have a reciprocal friendship where there was some measure of interdependence:

I mean I do rely on her quite a bit and I think she relies on me, but it’s it’s good, end of the day we tell each other straight, I think it’s how a friendship should be, really, we worry about each other, if we think each other are wrong we tell each other, we trust each other, we respect each other. (Rachel 1)

This description seems to fit closely to Eaton’s ([1993](#_ENREF_63)) idea of reciprocal relationships, where people who see themselves as equals form a mutually supportive, respectful, association. In this context (perhaps enabled by the existence of mutual respect), Rachel is happy to be told what she is doing wrong and greatly values the honesty demonstrated within the friendship. However, given the prominence of relationships with family and professionals, it seems that such reciprocal relationships are rare in the lives of female desisters. Indeed, from an ethic of care stance, Robinson ([2011](#_ENREF_234)) suggests that relationships are rarely equal and therefore dependence should be accepted as normal. Nevertheless, if reciprocity is an important prerequisite before desisters can accept honesty and correction, professionals may need to re-assess how they encourage relationships and suggest changes to their clients. They might find some purchase (and indeed familiarity) in the ethics of care idea of ‘asymmetrical reciprocity’, where the party in a position of power is willing to be attentive to the other and see things from their perspective, but does not lose their position of authority over the other ([Sevenhuijsen, 2003](#_ENREF_246)). This would allow a caring relationship to develop where one party unavoidably has more power than the other but nevertheless does not abuse that power to the other's detriment.

**Encouragement to Maintain Desistance**

For the majority of participants, other people had a direct effect on their motivation to desist from crime. Some experienced this as it affected their initial reason to desist, and others experienced it over an extended period of time, as a repeated re-establishment of their priority and determination to desist. Some found that friends could replenish their motivation to achieve tasks necessary to their desistance through more interventionist methods. Gillian struggled with depression, anxiety and alcohol misuse - which often led to offending. Her (male) best friend was not afraid to challenge her about her risky behaviour:

He tells me straight, know what I mean, but this time last year, like I wouldn’t budget my money, I wouldn’t pay my bills, I weren’t bothered if like I spent all my money on drink that day and then I had nowt left to, no just little things like, he gives me lectures really, like, but I an’t got no debt now. (Gillian 2)

When Gillian’s friend saw that she was being reckless with money, he made no excuses for her but instead confronted her and told her what she needed to do. While this seems quite directive, Gillian evidently took his advice and cleared her debt. Perhaps her respect for him allowed her to forgive his bluntness, and his actions further increased her respect as they proved that he really did care what happened to her. Nicole’s best friend - who was her key support in her desistance - was also willing to be candid with her:

She gives me a big boot up me backside that I need, so in that respect brilliant. (Nicole 1)

Like Gillian, the strength of the friends’ relationships allowed forthright discussions and warnings to occur without the desister resenting the advice. Instead, Nicole appreciated the renewals of motivation that her friend gave her, even though she indicates that it may not have been an easy experience to receive those rebukes. Such an exchange appears to be an archetypal example of friends strengthening desisters’ resolve to continue to desist ([Baskin & Sommers, 1998](#_ENREF_10)).

Even when others were not particularly frank or directive towards desisters, they could provide valuable encouragement for continued desistance through their attitudes. Emily explained that the most important thing for family and friends to do was to be reassuring:

Just encourage them to help them on their journey, not be negative to them, and give them, like, if they do something positive, give them feedback, just say well done, carry on doing it, don’t give them anything negative because the negative things, they’ll just think well, if they’re gonna be negative, my family’s gonna do it, then what’s the point, that’s what I’d say. (Emily 6)

Constant positivity, according to Emily, would prevent a desister giving up hope for a new, worthwhile life beyond crime. In contrast, any negativity would suggest to the desister that their family does not accept their efforts and therefore neither would anyone outside the family. It is interesting that this does not agree with Nicole and Gillian’s experiences of helpful friendships, where their shortcomings are challenged by friends, and that Emily did not report having any particularly positive relationships. It may be that her idea of a good relationship does not match what is helpful in reality.

Rachel, who was spending time in residential rehab, found that overall her family were not as supportive as she hoped they would be. She discussed her ideal family’s positive behaviour:

Just phone calls, texts, just phone them telling them how great they are, that’s what you need to do, phone calls just telling them how good they are doing, come and see em and tell em how well they look, come and see em and, and then eventually they’ll want to stand on their own two feet with their family’s support. (Rachel 3)

Again, Rachel did not discuss any positive relationships outwith her residential rehabilitation (where, interestingly, problem behaviour was quickly challenged by both staff and residents). Nevertheless, her difficult relationship with her mother (who showed little understanding or interest in her) convinced her that constant encouragement and affirmation of the desister’s efforts would enable them to have the confidence to continue their recovery. It seems, then, that verbal encouragement was important to desisters’ continued motivations to desist. However, perhaps that encouragement need not always be unrelentingly positive, as honest relationships where the desister’s problematic behaviour was challenged appeared to be deeply valued in practice.

**Steph: "I've affected them… it's me wanting my independence"**

Over the course of our interviews, Steph experienced many of the social influences described in this chapter, and discussed them with insight. It is not necessary to delineate here the different relationships from which these influences came, as it was the characteristics of the relationship, not the type of relationship, which dictated the effects on Steph and her desistance ([Goodwin, 2014](#_ENREF_110)). Instead, I track the different themes, outlined in this chapter, as they appeared in her life and relationships. Steph was in her early 40s, with a six year old daughter who lived (by mutual agreement) with her parents, who were very supportive. She was divorced from her daughter’s father, who lived elsewhere in the country. Her criminal record consisted of a number of recent convictions for stealing alcohol from shops (all while drunk), over a two year period. When I first met her, Steph had been sober and crime-free for a few months, and was living in shared housing provided by a housing association (which catered for ex-prisoners and those with substance abuse or mental health problems). She had not lived in Sheffield before she started offending, so consequently knew few people out of criminal justice social circles and the housing association.

Like others with substance abuse problems, Steph found it difficult to be near addicts – something that she could not avoid due to her shared housing premises. The continual presence of alcohol in the housing association was an unwelcome temptation to her:

It’s all from other people that are in there that have sort of, it’s there, it’s blatant, it’s in front of you, it’s been offered to you, and I don’t think peer pressure is the right thing to use, but when you’re surrounded by it it’s easy to get drawn into it, em, but yeh, I should have moved out a long time ago. (Steph 7)

The social pull of her flatmates drinking, their encouragement to drink and the availability of alcohol in her accommodation threatened Steph’s resolve to stay sober (and therefore not to shoplift wine). The only solution that Steph could see – particularly when the housing association rebuked residents who did not socialise together for not supporting the community – was to move into her own property, but this process took a long time. In fact, after a few interviews with me, Steph relapsed in the company of co-residents from the housing association (although she had in fact just moved into her own property), resulting in her drinking, taking illegal drugs, and shoplifting. She reflected on this in a later interview:

Well obviously I ended up drinking, due to [boyfriend- a co-resident], can’t put the blame on him, but, it kind of, he were the one that bought it, fair enough I were the one that drank it but, you know, everything just went, he got his money in, called me… I was out, said, ‘me money’s in, come back’. (Steph 6)

Steph did not want to deny responsibility for her actions in drinking, but was aware that her boyfriend had a significant influence on her behaviour. This was both through the practical enabling of her relapse by buying alcohol and drugs, and his encouragement that she drink with him and other friends. As a result, when Steph sobered up, she was determined to break away from her previous contacts and so stopped seeing them entirely. She considered what sort of friends that she was looking for now that she had left the housing association:

Hopefully I’ll be a bit more selective, em, and I suppose it might say I’m judgmental or whatever but hopefully I won’t be around people like that in a social capacity if you like, cos it didn’t do anything for me, but yeh, so hopefully yes it will help me make better decisions. (Steph 7)

While again wanting to take responsibility for her actions (and so presenting them as agentic, not coerced), Steph indicated that being with her old associates negatively affected her own decision-making capacity, and so was harmful to her desistance efforts. She was actively looking for new social worlds within which to make friends so that she could protect herself from people like those she had known at the housing association.

Like others who were constrained in making pro-social friends, Steph initially suffered from a lack of available relationships when she tried to make new friends. Her accommodation with the housing association was based in an area with a large transient student population:

[There are] a lot of students in there, so you don’t really get to know them, eh, I mean it can be, it can be quite isolated, really, cos I… wasn’t brought up here, don’t really have friends, other than those in [housing association], which is quite a challenge. (Steph 1)

Without old friends in Sheffield, and living in an area where student neighbours were not looking to build relationships, Steph was left with friends only from the housing association. She found the isolation that she consequently felt challenging. This was intensified through the difficulty of staying in contact with other previous friends who were not in Sheffield:

I’ve not spoken to a lot of my old friends for, for a long time...yeh, partly they never quite know what state I’m gonna be when talking to me on the phone. (Steph 1)

While she continued to struggle with sobriety and desistance, Steph wanted support from her old pro-social friends. Yet until she could prove her long-term sobriety to those friends, she was unable to continue those friendships. She was therefore caught in a Catch-22 situation where the support she craved for success in desistance from alcoholism and offending was not available until she could demonstrate she had already succeeded.

Yet Steph did meet new people and make new friendships over the course of our interviews together. The main way in which she did this was through the counselling courses that she had attended (through which she hoped to eventually gain employment). She greatly enjoyed the freedom from her associates at the housing association that these relationships gave her:

It was nice just to meet up with a few other people, other people with, you know, that similar interest and, you know, not from a, a ex-offender background if you like, a bit of normality, whatever normality is. (Steph 3)

Here, Steph appreciated the encounter with ‘normality’ that her course-mates brought, thus echoing Lofland’s ([1969](#_ENREF_161)) ‘normal-smiths’ (see above). While these new peers typically also had backgrounds of substance abuse, they were ‘normal’ enough to give Steph a relief from the pressures of socialising with current offenders and addicts. They may also have affirmed Steph’s sense of identity as a ‘normal’ (i.e. non-offending and non-addicted) person, even though they did not offer any sort of personal or tangible support directly to her.

Children were often cited as major motivations for desistance among participants – both so mothers could resume care of their children and so that those who already had care of their children could provide them with a good upbringing. Steph’s daughter lived with Steph’s parents by mutual agreement, and due to Steph’s most recent relapse was to stay there until Steph had remained sober and crime-free for several months. If Steph did not succeed in desistance, her daughter would be sent to live with her ex-husband, who lived several hours away, and so Steph knew the threat of losing her daughter to her ex-husband would have a serious impact on her life. She described her hope for the next year as centring on her daughter:

I suppose a year, biggest, biggest thing would be to have [daughter] living with me, that, I mean, that’s gotta be my ultimate goal, she is the, she’s what comes first, em, her and me…I suppose acknowledging the fact that I’ve gotta change, myself [gulping back tears] and it’s, it’s now or never, that sort of close to losing her... (Steph 2)

The presence of Steph’s daughter in her life, and the love that Steph had for her, meant that losing her was unthinkable – and desistance, therefore, imperative. Almost losing her daughter to her ex-partner had made Steph realise what was at stake, when concern for her own health and wellbeing did not. This impact did not depend on anything Steph’s daughter did (and she probably did not yet realise her importance to her mother’s desistance), but was an intrinsic effect of their relationship.

Sometimes particular aspects of relationships had a positive effect on Steph’s desistance, making her feel supported as she struggled to maintain sobriety. In particular, Steph placed a high value on having someone to “be there, listen to [her]”, reflecting others’ experiences. She explained that this was something that she received more from her father than her mother:

He’s actually listening and he’s taking an interest, without telling me what to do, he’s listening and he’s understanding where I am, what I’m doing, what I want to do, what my goals are… when I talk to my mum, she wants to finish my sentences, how she wants them to finish, not how they’re gonna finish, but how she thinks they’re gonna finish. (Steph 3)

Similar to other desisters, the ‘attentiveness’ aspect of the ethic of care ([Sevenhuijsen, 2003](#_ENREF_246)) is what was highlighted by Steph. She desired attention to her individual thoughts and feelings, and the freedom to set her own goals, and got this from her father. In contrast, her mother expected Steph to conform to her own ideas and was not willing to listen to her opinions. It seems that her father’s acceptance communicated to Steph that he valued her ([c.f. Brown & Ross, 2010](#_ENREF_29)), and this bolstered her confidence in herself. Similarly, experiences of being accepted made Steph feel welcomed and valued. After relapsing during the course of our interviews, Steph was struck by the acceptance offered to her again by staff at the Together Women Centre, who uncritically accepted her relapse and focused on helping her get back on track with her desistance:

You know from them, it was just, oh shit it’s happened again and, let’s just get over it. (Steph 4)

The matter-of-fact attitude of the staff meant that Steph did not feel judged but could instead move on from her relapse. She could be assured that even though the relapse was an undesirable thing, her relationship with staff at the centre remained unchanged. Steph was able to pinpoint some of the effects of accepting relationships through a relationship with a particular worker that she had:

I suppose I get kind of confirmation, affirmation if you like from [worker], and plus she’s pointed me in the direction of other things as well. (Steph 4)

When the worker accepted and encouraged Steph in her goals, Steph felt affirmed and valued as a person with good plans. Yet she also appreciated the practical support that she received by being signposted to other organisations. This concurrence of emotional and practical support reflected findings earlier in the chapter that practical assistance rarely appeared separately from emotional support and indeed found much of its value in the symbolic role it played. Practical help communicated messages to the desister beyond fulfilling a felt need.

Similarly, much of the practical help that Steph received was valued because it served as proof that others accepted and understood her. She recounted how her father demonstrated understanding of her situation during her last relapse:

You know my dad ended up bringing me some food down and actually said to me, “do you need some wine bringing down?”, you know, so he understands the fact that you’re not supposed to stop, completely.

(Steph 6)

Although Steph did not actually accept her father’s offer of wine, she appreciated the offer because it was evidence that he had understood the nature of alcohol abuse – and the contingent medical dangers – from her. This incident provided evidence that her father both emotionally cared for her and had paid attention to her practical needs, thus building on his previous attentiveness and fulfilling the second and third stages of the ethic of care, responsibility and competence (Sevenhuijsen, 2003).

Steph’s parents also greatly helped Steph materially by aiding her to furnish her flat, and had offered to pay a bond so that she could move out of her shared housing and into privately rented accommodation. She appreciated their assistance because it proved that her parents understood that if Steph felt unhappy in her accommodation, she would be in danger of relapsing. However, Steph still found it difficult to accept their generosity:

But I was going to prove that I can do something on my own, because they’ve helped me out so much in the last five years, that I just want them to see that I take a responsibility, rather than just relying on them.

(Steph 1)

This offer from her parents threatened Steph’s sense of independence, because she wanted to prove her own capability to sort out her housing situation without relying on her parents’ financial assistance. Here, Steph’s response to her parents’ help clashed with the ethic of care view of dependency as a positive and normal part of everyday life (Robinson, 2011). In contrast, Steph was aware of the dangers to her desistance of wanting too much independence:

It’s about acknowledging what mum and dad have done, how I’ve affected them and how I’ve affected [daughter], and how that’s all me wanting, whatever it is, whether it’s me wanting my independence to go out and get pissed up, em, or what. (Steph 3)

By linking her previous offending to a desire for independence from the responsibilities of motherhood, Steph showed that she considered it part of her desistance to acknowledge the place of her parents and her daughter in her life. She thought that the freedom that she had craved from responsibility had only hurt those she loved and was therefore ready to acknowledge others’ claims on her life. Yet despite this realisation, Steph also showed indications of being encouraged to be ‘selfish’ in her desistance efforts:

So it’s just, it’s knowing when to cut off and, I’m, I’m the consideration here, I’m number 1, and doing that, which is not in my nature, I’ll, I’d normally do anything to help everybody else. (Steph 3)

Although she considered herself to be intrinsically caring for others, Steph was learning not to care too much for other people and to instead be selfish in prioritising her own desistance. This contrasted with her understanding of her impact on her daughter and parents, where Steph felt her striving for independence from them had been harmful. Taking her thoughts on independence together, it seemed that Steph was wary of her own and others’ dependencies, but that she still placed a high value on the interconnectedness of her life with her family. From this perspective, an independence-dependence dichotomy, where one is either completely separate from others' concerns or reliant on another's care seems too stark, resonating with Held’s ([2005](#_ENREF_125)) observation that other people are inevitably involved in one’s life and their proper place should therefore be more carefully examined. Finally, there was no doubt in Steph’s mind of the value of the verbal encouragement she had received from staff at the Together Women Centre:

I think the encouragement that [keyworker]’s given me, I don’t think I would have come across.[[54]](#footnote-54) (Steph 4)

Steph viewed the encouragement as vital to her desistance success. She thought that she would not be in such a promising position (several months sober, with no new convictions, and about to move into her own property) without her keyworker’s reassurance. The verbal encouragement received was thus seen as valuable separately from practical assistance from the Centre.

Despite initial difficulties in dealing with co-residents who were abusing substances around her, Steph eventually managed to circumnavigate the structural constraints that made it difficult for her to move into her own property. Yet she continued to find it hard to locate positive relationships as previous friends were unwilling to contact her. Nevertheless, a counselling course gave her new associations that communicated a sense of 'normality' to her. Steph's relationship with her daughter was a major source of motivation in her desistance, and her father and workers gave her support by listening to her. She also found their acceptance valuable, and appreciated the practical assistance that she received as proof of that care and acceptance. Nevertheless, Steph was aware of the tensions between being dependent and independent, and found them difficult to navigate.

**Conclusion**

Social relationships in desisters’ lives had numerous influences, with both positive and negative outcomes. The relational nature of my study, where I placed a priority on getting to know participants as people both in and outside interviews, combined with open questions to highlight the complicated and dynamic nuances of these relationships. For example, accounts of negative influences showed the complexity of the link between offending and emotional ties to male partners. In addition, the unhelpful combination of the practical availability of substances and the emotional pull towards fellow addicts that occurred through contact with other substance abusers explained some of the negative influences present in rehabilitation services (and elsewhere). Others could also be a source of abuse, pressure, stress or distraction that made it difficult for desisters to cope – turning them to crime. Yet the ‘solution’ of asking desisters to drop contact with those who largely influenced them negatively was emotionally demanding, leaving women socially isolated. Indeed, a number of barriers prevented desisters from forming new pro-social relationships. Close relationships with workers could not be sustained once the desister left services, and some families were chaotic and unsupportive. Other service users could provide new friendships, but these could be difficult where there were different levels of reciprocity and maturity within the relationship. There were few sources of new contacts outwith various offender services, and even when opportunities existed, desisters were held back by feelings of social difference (such as being single in an environment where most are part of a couple), or the practicalities of being a single mother or on an electronic tag. New pro-social relationships could, however, be built, and some participants pointed to the potential of educational courses and churches in providing these initial contacts.

When relationships were largely positive, they could convey a feeling of normality and worth to the desister. In addition, various elements of support were identified by desisters as being particularly helpful to them in their attempts to move on from crime. Importantly, emotional support was appreciated more than practical support – with the latter only really valued when it served as proof of some sort of emotional support such as understanding or acceptance. Participants felt supported when there were others ‘there’, as a practical safety net or as an affirmation of their worth as people. They also relished being listened to, accepted, forgiven and understood by others. Yet even largely positive relationships were not always straightforward, as ideas of independence and dependence clouded desisters’ perspectives on support given. Workers promoted ideas of ‘selfishness’ to encourage women to focus on their own desistance, but this jarred with participants’ views of their own identities as care-givers. However desisters also aspired to assert their own freedom to make choices that benefitted them, while simultaneously looking for strong, interdependent friendships. Nevertheless, the encouragement of others – where family and friends challenged the desister to sort their problems and verbally affirmed their efforts to move on from offending – was important to desisters whether or not they received this sort of support. Steph’s experiences showed how many of these influences came into play in one person’s life, and particularly the intricacy of the effect of her parents’ material support on her desistance, where it simultaneously proved their understanding of her and yet challenged her own ideal of independence.

In the last four chapters, I have explored how agency, identity, motivation, confidence and social influences shaped and impacted desister's experiences. These themes overlapped and interacted in numerous ways, and offer suggestions for how best they can be built on to support desistance from crime. I now turn to the conclusions and implications of those themes.

**Chapter 9: Conclusions**

The previous chapters have outlined the key findings from this research into women's early experiences of desistance. Chapter 5 examined the place of agency and hope. Chapter 6 considered the influence of identities and other motivations to desist. Chapter 7 investigated the impact of confidence and shame. Chapter 8 discussed the many effects of social relationships. These prominent themes were largely based on what emerged as important from the repeated interviews, but also influenced by the desistance literature as explored in Chapters 2 and 3. Some of the themes, such as agency, have previously been explored in detail through desistance research elsewhere, and this study offers important detail in explaining how these issues are experienced in desisters' lives. For other themes, such as confidence, this study adds substantially to existing meagre findings. However, in both cases, there are some significant implications for the understanding and application of existing knowledge about women's early experiences of desistance.

First, there are some implications that affect the current understanding of the differences that gender makes to desistance experiences. As anticipated in Chapter 2, there were some findings that were closely linked to the desisters' experiences as women. The importance of relationships, caring identities, stigma and abuse in participants' stories all have consequences for understanding the desistance of women specifically. Secondly, there are a number of small but important contributions towards advancing desistance theories more generally. In better understanding the place and nature of identity change, relationships and agency, desistance theories in general may need to be modified to more accurately reflect desisters' experiences. Both these sets of implications naturally impact upon the policy and practice surrounding women in the criminal justice system and desisters. Largely based on findings on the nature of agency, stigma and identity, I therefore offer several suggestions as to how women who are trying to desist can be more appropriately treated at both the macro and micro levels in society. I then reflect on how my methodological approach to this study has contributed to these findings, and the limitations of the research. Finally, I make some suggestions as to how future desistance studies can further improve the understanding of the early stages of desistance, both by identifying the most useful substantive foci for future desistance research and through methodological innovation. While desistance research has made much progress in recent years, there is still space for more rigorous and comprehensive studies to better elucidate how women give up offending.

**Theoretical Reflections**

**The Impact of Being Female on Desistance Experiences**

The importance of other people in the lives and desistance experiences of the participants shines clearly out of all four of the substantive chapters. Not one of the themes or sub-themes discussed is independent from the influence of other people, and several are fundamentally tied to the opinions and actions of others. While other researchers have highlighted the importance of others in the desistance of both men and women ([Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157); [Weaver, 2012](#_ENREF_282); [Weaver & McNeill, 2015](#_ENREF_285)), this study emphasises that the impact of other people is critical to the experiences of desisters through their influence on a variety of other processes. Given the work of feminist developmental psychologists in outlining models of female maturity which reflect the importance of relationships, (rather than the male model of maturing to become independent, as discussed in Chapter 2), this crucial role of other people is perhaps to be expected as especially important in women's experiences. However, the extent to which this aspect is truly gendered will depend on the analysis of desisters' experiences with a fuller appreciation of how other people can influence various processes already identified in the research. Nevertheless, some of the effects of this relational importance, as I now explore further, suggest that it does reflect a fundamental gender difference in both social orientation and the degree to which various relationships influence desisters ([as found by Rodermond, Kruttschnitt, Slotboom, & Bijleveld (2016](#_ENREF_236))). This contrasts with other findings, explored in Chapter 2, which suggest that the effects of gender are simply through a variation in the timing of maturity ([Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112)), with men needing longer to mature than women ([Flood-Page, Campbell, Harrington, & Miller, 2000](#_ENREF_85)).

Closely linked to the importance given to relationships is the centrality of a caring identity among participants, and particularly that of being a mother and grandmother, as frequently identified as important by participants in Chapter 6. Even when they were not primary carers of children, they placed great weight on being able to offer support and care to other people in other contexts. Reflecting findings elsewhere ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157); [Sharpe, 2015](#_ENREF_249)), the societal value inherently seen by participants (and the people they came into contact with) in these caring roles meant that there were few other opportunities for participants to realistically lay claim to a fulfilling identity in their desistance. Indeed, the identity of a 'good mother' was one of the few roles available to participants where employment options were limited due to structural constraints ([Fawcett Society, 2012](#_ENREF_81)) and/or health issues (most participants were in receipt of health-related benefits as outlined in Chapter 4). In terms of employment, even if participants were healthy enough to be able to search for work, there was a lack of available childcare, little part-time work and few opportunities to engage in desirable 'caring' professions given their criminal records (not an uncommon finding ([Eaton, 1993](#_ENREF_63); [Fawcett Society, 2012](#_ENREF_81)). Without an opportunity to inhabit a caring role through paid work which explicitly values the wellbeing of others, and being denied the chance to be visibly 'properly' caring for their own families through the structure of that work, being employed could not be widely seen as an attractive option for the sort of person female desisters wanted to be. There was therefore little chance of participants finding work that was satisfying enough to significantly impact upon desistance through influencing how they saw themselves ([also found by Rodermond et al. (2016](#_ENREF_236)). Unsurprisingly, the female desisters in this study therefore rarely discussed employment as being able to offer an appropriate identity to them in the future. Of course, this meant that participants were more vulnerable to poverty, especially when they had the care of young children ([Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009](#_ENREF_240)), and were therefore more at risk of failing to successfully desist through financial pressures ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)).

Although the central role of caring for others did provide opportunities for women to access a pro-social identity, the importance placed on relating to others also had an impact upon the intensity of their experiences of guilt, shame and stigma (discussed in Chapter 7). Participants felt guilt for betraying their own consciences in acting in specific ways ([Bartky, 1990](#_ENREF_9); [Braithwaite, 1989](#_ENREF_24)). They felt shame when they perceived themselves to be inferior to others ([Bartky, 1990](#_ENREF_9)), and sometimes this was a reaction to societal stigma, where others negatively stereotyped them according to their behaviour or histories. As they are arguably judged by society (and themselves) according to their relationships with other people ([Eaton, 1993](#_ENREF_63); [Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998](#_ENREF_275)), women facing others' negative opinions seemed to feel particularly intense shame in their offending and desistance experiences. While such shame could come from others' opinions of their offending, this was not the only source. Where offending could also be characterised as a betrayal of women's feminine caring identities ([J. B. Miller, 1986](#_ENREF_194)) (something that male offenders may not have to face especially when their offending upholds their masculine identities ([Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45))) then women did not only experience guilt over their actions, but a shame connected to the perceived inadequacy of their inner self. This is particularly true, and perhaps also long-lasting, where offending has led to a removal of women's children by social services ([Sharpe, 2015](#_ENREF_249)). In addition, other circumstances which impacted upon their abilities to care, such as being dependent on benefits or suffering poor mental health, could also induce shame for women. It is likely that these increased risks of others knowing about a 'shameful' offending past feeds into the relatively low frequency with which participants in this study discussed basing a new identity on being a 'professional ex-' ([Sanders, 2007](#_ENREF_243)). Already facing the shame of not 'caring' properly (and therefore not inhabiting an 'appropriate' female social role) through offending and other circumstances, making their histories known to a wider circle of people risked increased battles to successfully defend themselves from feelings of shame if they were to keep succeeding in desistance ([Gadd, 2006](#_ENREF_88); [Maruna & Copes, 2005](#_ENREF_169)). With such deep potential impacts, it seems that female desisters carry a heavier burden of shame than their male counterparts, regardless of the increased shame that women likely face in society more generally ([Bartky, 1990](#_ENREF_9); [Chesney-Lind & Pasko, 2004](#_ENREF_45)). Therefore, it is likely that their experiences of shame over time may not mirror those of male offenders because the source of that shame is often not solely tied to offending behaviour, but to their core identity. It remains to be seen whether shame for women therefore indeed subsides as their desistance becomes more established ([as found in a gender-mixed sample by Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76)).

A further impact of the importance placed on relationships by, and for, women, is how this interacts with their experiences of abuse. In common with other studies ([Belknap & Holsinger, 2006](#_ENREF_13); [Bloom et al., 2003](#_ENREF_17)), there was a very high rate of victimisation among participants in the current study, with a whole range of abuse and neglect experienced at numerous stages in their lives. Widely found to be especially common among females when compared to males, as highlighted in Chapter 2, experiencing abuse in the context of relationships can damage a woman's perception of herself as a caring person. How can she claim to truly care if she cannot 'properly' love the perpetrator, or if she precipitates such treatment? This belief that she is not truly caring can then bring about yet more shame. With such extensive sources of shame and deeply felt consequences of abuse, it is not surprising that sanctuaries of physical or emotional safety were widely sought and appreciated (as discussed in Chapter 7) and that participants greatly valued being accepted in relationships, as identified as an aspect of supportive relationships in Chapter 8. When relationships (either socially or with professionals) were secure and positive, desisters did not feel that they were failing in their core identity as a caring woman and so could address other concerns in their desistance with the confidence that they were not innately flawed as a person.

**Implications for General Desistance Theories**

In addition to these findings on the nature of desistance for women, this study also produces some significant insights into the nature of desistance more generally by elaborating on processes widely relied upon in various desistance theories, particularly those outlined in Chapter 3. The first adds detail to what is known about the place of identities, and particularly new identities, in desistance experiences. I consider both the possibility that a brand new identity is not necessary and the factors which influence the availability of particular identities to desisters. Secondly, I show that the current conceptualisations of what is 'helpful' in relationships for desisters are insufficient and would greatly benefit from adopting an ethic of care approach. Such an approach (as introduced in Chapter 8) upholds the value of care in asymmetric relationships, especially when it is characterised by attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsibility ([Sevenhuijsen, 2003](#_ENREF_246)). This approach can provide more accuracy in identifying and characterising the complex role of other people in desisters' experiences. Instead of reducing other people's roles to being 'supportive' or 'negative', the four aspects of care can be used as descriptors of various aspects of relationships as they unfold. Finally, as both previous points show, the nature and role of agency in desistance is not straightforward and requires more caution in its conceptualisation in research. I therefore discuss some of the many findings in this thesis which illuminate the place of agency in the lives of desisters.

Although not universally accepted by key theorists (for example, it is refuted by Bottoms and colleagues ([2004](#_ENREF_20))), the requirement for desisters to adopt a new identity is commonly articulated in the desistance literature ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Paternoster & Bushway, 2009](#_ENREF_218)). Maruna ([2001](#_ENREF_168)) explains that this identity is presented as a reflection of who the desister 'always was inside', and that they talk about being freed to truly be themselves in their desistance. While this did reflect the experiences of some of the women in the research (particularly where their identities were closely implicated in their offending, usually through substance abuse- as seen in Chapter 6), there were nevertheless a significant minority of participants (four out of fifteen) who had a different experience. Instead of becoming someone new or being set free to eventually be their true selves, their desistance incorporated them reverting to a previously lived, pro-social identity. In contrast to the many desistance studies which emphasise the role of identity change in populations with especially extensive offending histories (e.g. [Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102); [Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)), participants had not (often) been so heavily involved in offending over a protracted period of time and so previous findings on identity could not be generalised to them. Usually older desisters, who had experienced a significant period of adult life before their offending started, these participants had no need to craft someone new, imagine a possible positive self ([Paternoster & Bushway, 2009](#_ENREF_218)) or to achieve access to a hook upon which to hang a replacement self ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)). Instead, they had a ready-made cognitive blueprint ([Giordano et al., 2002](#_ENREF_102)), based on their own previous lives, which was sufficiently attractive for them to invest in and which remained accessible. These experiences were also linked to long-term victimisation, where those in an abusive relationship over the course of many years described that abuse as gradually removing their confidence in their own identities. Offending linked to that abuse therefore occurred while participants were being a different person to who they once were. Once the relationship ended, participants reported a gradual increase in confidence as they began to return to their pre-abuse identities. While only a minority of participants recounted such experiences of returning to an old identity, such a small overall sample suggests that this may well be reflected much more widely in desisters, in those who started to offend later in life or in long-term offenders who are also victims of abuse. It is therefore important to recognise that the narratives of desisters who report finding the 'real me' may be, in fact, describing a reality of returning to a previous identity instead of merely using this as a narrative device to present a coherent identity and deflect shame ([as suggested by Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)).

A second observation on the nature of identities in desistance is based on how possible identities are made available to desisters. While I have discussed this in more detail with regards to the expectation (and acceptance of this expectation) specifically made of women to inhabit a caring role in the preceding section, there is a wider implication that is relevant to desisters regardless of gender. This is that the hooks available upon which to base a replacement self (if this is necessary for the desister, see above) are conditioned by culture and society, so not every potential hook is available to every desister ([a point also made by Farrall et al., 2011](#_ENREF_77)). Such conditioning undoubtedly influences the range and content of the '(English) Dreams' that the desisters present (as characterised by Bottoms and colleagues ([2004](#_ENREF_20))). In the current study, the English Dream of a being a caring family woman with the option of generative volunteering or work was remarkably uniform among the small sample. In contrast to the young men in Bottoms and colleagues' sample, from the same geographical and - largely- cultural background as the current participants, there was much less variation in the hopes for a future identity among desisters, despite a much wider age range. In the current study, it seems that culture and society had already determined what 'acceptable' roles were for prosocial women and therefore only hooks that allowed access to these roles were readily available for effective desistance. Not all of the versions of this role were open to all of the participants at the time of the study: for example those currently without children in their care could not fully inhabit the role of a mother. However, as their circumstances changed, such as having a new grandchild or seeing their children more, the availability of socially pre-determined roles changed. As such, they provided examples of 'differential power', where the opportunities for agentic action differ within the same person over time ([Farrall & Bowling, 1999](#_ENREF_74)). While the available options were particularly constrained for the women in the study, it is likely that other groups experience other constraints relating to identities available to them. As such, this provides a clear example of how structure and agency can interact in desistance, with structure (on a macro-level identifying what is generally acceptable and on a micro-level highlighting whether families and neighbourhoods are willing to be flexible in that acceptance) determining the identities open to someone trying to desist at particular points in time.

While I have already discussed the particular importance of relationships to female desisters, relationships have been found to also be very influential in men's desistance ([Bottoms, 2006](#_ENREF_18); [Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20); [Laub & Sampson, 2003](#_ENREF_149)). However, the theoretical conceptualisation of this influence remains (with some notable exceptions, largely from studies on women ([Eaton, 1993](#_ENREF_63); [Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)) and also in the use of the more detailed concept of social capital ([e.g. M. Brown & Ross, 2010](#_ENREF_29))) somewhat lacking, with many studies only identifying one or two ways in which others can influence desistance. For example, others can appear simply as 'informal social control' ([Laub & Sampson, 2003](#_ENREF_149)); opportunities for generativity or sources of recognition ([Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)); or normalising influences ([Giordano et al., 2003](#_ENREF_101)); or factors influencing immediate situational contexts ([Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20)). Following calls for more careful consideration of the nature of social attachments ([Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20)) and recognition of the complex, dynamic nature of relationships ([Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157)), this study presents an orienting perspective of the ethic of care for examining the aspects of relationships as they influence desistance experiences. Instead of falling into lazy habits of characterising relationships as risky ([Pollack, 2007](#_ENREF_223)); good quality ([Laub et al., 1998](#_ENREF_147)); supportive ([Giordano et al., 2003](#_ENREF_101)); or naively looking for equality and reciprocity ([Eaton, 1993](#_ENREF_63)), the ethic of care identifies specific characteristics of everyday, dependent, relationships that are beneficial to the parties in that relationship. As such, relationships can be examined for evidence of asymmetric reciprocity, as characterised by attentiveness; responsibility; competence; and responsiveness ([Sevenhuijsen, 2003](#_ENREF_246)). It can thus be clearer that a particular relationship demonstrates some positive aspects but lacks others at varying points in time, so reflecting reality more closely. A more detailed and realistic conceptualisation such as this can aid a fuller understanding of the roles of relationships in desisters' lives.

Finally, this research highlights again both the relative importance of agency in desistance and the complexities involved in trying to define and identify it, as explored in Chapter 5. Participants did act with some sense of control over their lives, but this control was far from unfettered in a number of ways. Importantly, there was little evidence of intentional action in the everyday in order to further the creation of an imagined self ([Healy, 2013](#_ENREF_120)), and participants rarely even discussed issues of identity when interviews were regular, suggesting that it was not often a conscious consideration for them. It may be that this was because participants required more time to reflect on how their everyday lives fed into questions of identity. Nevertheless, there was little evidence of desisters acting in the present according to how they currently saw their own identities. There was, however, some evidence of strategizing ([King, 2012](#_ENREF_142); [Vaughan, 2007](#_ENREF_277)) such as through the importance of keeping busy, but in the experience of living through desistance, both internal and external factors (which were themselves influenced by other people) constrained the options available to participants. For example, experiences of encountering stigma left participants feeling unable to pursue certain opportunities, such as Megan's experience of feeling excluded from employment in her home town because of the stigma of her sister's addiction and offending, as explored in Chapter 7. Further, attractive new relationships were only available from certain spheres due to historical policy influences, such as determining the location and type of available housing ([Murie, 2014](#_ENREF_203)), and social arrangements, such as the likely exclusion of students with dependents from student friendships, as explored in Chapter 8. As such, there was ample evidence of structure shaping choices in the lives of desisters ([Farrall & Bowling, 1999](#_ENREF_74); [Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76)), thus validating the experiences of those who felt 'trapped' by outside forces from achieving desistance as providing a reflection of lived experience rather than simply a narrative tool ([contra Maruna, 2001](#_ENREF_168)). Yet the importance of structure could also be seen by external forces encouraging accidental desistance (Chapter 5). Therefore, agency may not be such a stark and determinative factor in desistance as some theorists ([Cusson & Pinsonneault, 1986](#_ENREF_55)) and some of the participants in this study viewed it. In particular, the reported experiences of the complexity around acting agentically in everyday life highlights the wisdom of theoretical approaches which do not attempt to explain desistance in a neat temporal order ([Bottoms et al., 2004](#_ENREF_20)).

**Policy and Practice**

These theoretical reflections naturally have a number of implications for how potential desisters, and particularly female desisters, should be treated in policy and practice. In this section, I therefore consider what these findings mean for those who affect desisters' lives through their work as practitioners or policy makers. Echoing the first part of this chapter, I first consider the gender-specific findings, before discussing some that are relevant to all potential desisters. For simplicity, I talk about 'services' as shorthand for criminal justice (and other) institutions, organisations and charities that have regular contact with desisters with the aim of assisting them in their desistance. This includes services such as the National Probation Service, Community Rehabilitation Companies, housing associations, addiction treatment services and women's centres such as Together Women.

Many participants saw themselves, and wanted to be seen, primarily as a caring person, whether as a mother, grandmother, sister or friend. It was important to their sense of self-worth that they could claim such a role and opportunities that denied this possibility (such as full-time work, see below) were largely undesirable to them. As discussed in the previous section, few other roles were presented by society as acceptable for women. Given the importance of a caring identity to many participants, the first implication for services is that they should recognise the value of caring to women's everyday lives and how they see themselves. Common reliance in services on discourses that prioritise independence and empowerment can prove off-putting to women who primarily value their identities as carers ([Gelsthorpe & Hedderman, 2012](#_ENREF_93); [Haney, 2010](#_ENREF_114); [S.-A. McDermott, 2014](#_ENREF_176)). Helpful programmes and initiatives can be couched in terms that emphasise the benefits to participants of becoming better carers, and not just the benefits to the individual participants, as women are likely to respond more readily to a 'pitch' that recognises the reality of their lives in relationships. The hesitancy of staff (seen in Chapter 6) in validating women's desires to prioritise their families (for fear of 'distraction') could instead be challenged to re-frame existing advice and encouragement towards desistance as a valuable way to enable women to better provide the very care they desire for their families. Additionally, while many services already appreciate the importance placed on participating in generative behaviour by desisters, the caring identities of many women provide an ideal opportunity to encourage female desisters that they are already engaging in valuable generativity through the care they provide to others. While this thesis shows that caring (particularly through being a 'good' mother or grandmother) is not yet recognised by desisters as a generative activity, a valuable contribution can undoubtedly be made to society through such activity. Services can therefore promote the generative potential of women fulfilling their existing caring roles well - in addition to any other generativity that they may engage in. Such a perspective could then bolster women's confidence that they already have a worthwhile and recognised identity, with the benefits that increased confidence can bring in maintaining desisters' motivation by reminding them of past success, as experienced by a number of participants in Chapter 7.

A second, but related, implication relates to the structural constraints around the social roles available for women. Most participants, perhaps in common with the social roles adopted by most women as discussed in Chapter 2, were particularly oriented around relationships, but where they did not have family connections, or where they were looking for additional identities to that of a mother, opportunities for them to enact a caring identity through (especially paid) work were limited. The structural barriers to desisting women engaging in meaningful, satisfying paid employment - such as lack of available childcare, and exclusion from many caring professions because of their criminal records meant that there could be little use of employment as a valid hook for desistance and that felt desires to enact valuable caring identities could be unfulfilled. It is particularly worrying that the employment prospects for women in particular have worsened overall during the current period of austerity ([Fawcett Society, 2012](#_ENREF_81)). However, there is some evidence that part-time work among women has increased recently, with 60 000 more women working part-time at the end on 2015 than at the end of 2014 ([Office for National Statistics, 2016](#_ENREF_214)). Yet there are also a high number of temporary and zero-hours contracts ([Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014](#_ENREF_135), [2015](#_ENREF_136)), which do not necessarily provide workers with enough hours or sufficient job satisfaction ([Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2014](#_ENREF_135)) to provide a hook for desistance - and particularly where the jobs are low skilled ([Purcell, Hogarth, & Simm, 1999](#_ENREF_226)). While flexible contracts might be seen as attractive for women with caring responsibilities, the flexibility provided by zero hours contracts does not appear to be suitable for such women. Instead, structured and predictable part-time or flexible employment is necessary to allow women to also fulfil other responsibilities such as caring for children ([Purcell et al., 1999](#_ENREF_226)). This gap in provision of appropriate part-time employment needs to be addressed and in the interim period, appropriate childcare for the entirety of the working year must at least be provided ([McVeigh, 2016](#_ENREF_188)). In terms of promoting satisfying employment, while some professions will undoubtedly remain closed to those with criminal records for safeguarding reasons, other services have histories of employing 'professional exes', whether explicitly or not. With the increased privatisation of public services (through, for example, Community Rehabilitation Companies), there may be more scope for services who provide some type of care to others to be flexible in their recruitment policies to allow desisting women to undertake meaningful employment.

The experiences of desisting women facing especially intense shame and stigma, when compared to men, can be addressed in a number of ways. Considering shame first, where women feel unsure of themselves and unsafe because of their beliefs (and experiences) of others judging them, there is significant research pointing to the value of safe, women-only environments providing valuable sanctuary ([Corston, 2007](#_ENREF_50); [Gelsthorpe et al., 2007](#_ENREF_96); [Gelsthorpe & Wright, 2015](#_ENREF_97)), and participants often cited Together Women Sheffield as a good example of safety from stigma and danger. Yet the current funding arrangements under the Government's Transforming Rehabilitation strategy ([Ministry of Justice, 2013b](#_ENREF_196)) for such environments (in the form of women's community centres) is inherently problematic. The reliance on annual funding, use of Payment by Results and poor data monitoring has created an atmosphere of uncertainty ([M. Malloch, McIvor, & Burgess, 2014](#_ENREF_165); [Plechowicz, 2015](#_ENREF_220)), with staff, service users and partners unsure of the future of the service and suffering from poor morale as a consequence. Such an environment can only undermine the work in providing a safe, accepting space, and so funding arrangements should be reviewed to allow for longer-term security and reduce the vulnerability of these centres under the current agenda ([as suggested by Annison, Brayford, & Deering, 2015](#_ENREF_1)).

Considering the experiences of women encountering stigma more widely, it is not just services which need to respond. Wider, and more accurate, awareness of the lived experiences and personal histories of desisting women would undoubtedly lead to more compassionate and less stigmatising responses from others in society. Therefore, much could be done in promoting public awareness about the realistic challenges of female desistance. Although social and traditional media would necessarily feature in this endeavour, the difficulties of promoting 'reform' causes through the media are daunting and many penal reformers report difficulties in understanding and engaging with news production ([Birkett, 2015](#_ENREF_16)). The traditional press may be more amenable to the use of illustrative individual accounts than more wholesale critiques of policy ([Birkett, 2015](#_ENREF_16)). Nevertheless, such an approach raises ethical questions around exposing women to the inherent problems of maintaining anonymity and subsequent potential exploitation by the media. It may therefore be wise to make more use of organisations like Clean Break which engage the public with women's stories of offending, punishment and desistance through drama.[[55]](#footnote-55) Imaginative engagement like this may make the public think in a deeper way than by reading a newspaper article or tweet, and so funding for similar artistic projects should be encouraged, while considering the valuable wider social impact (not just the financial implications) of the endeavour, which would, of course, be difficult to quantify.

More generally, the findings on the nature and availability of identities showed that some desisters lay claim to a new identity while others return to a previously experienced sense of self. This has implications for services who work with all sorts of potential desisters. While many will experience a shift in identity as they desist, and services will want to support and encourage that change, some care over the use of language is necessary. As this research discovered, a number of desisters who returned to a previous identity in their desistance, discourse in services should not always use the term 'new me' or 'replacement self' in their personal and group work in this area. Instead, discussions about personal development rather than becoming a different person may feel more comfortable for many desisters. Such terminology would be inclusive for both those finding a brand new identity and those returning to a previous self. Also relating to identity, there is a need for continued recognition of the socio-structural constraints that determine the identities available to desisters. Regardless of normative judgments about whether these are appropriate constraints, and subject to connected discussions about dealing with agency and structure through campaigning discussed below, it is over-ambitious for services to aim to unequivocally change existing constraints surrounding available identities to their service users. Instead, an appreciation of the reality of the importance of structural opportunities and others' opinions of 'appropriate' roles, in whatever the desister's context, would be valuable. For example, in Chapter 7, staff at Together Women discussed the disappointment facing ex-prisoners when they discovered their hairdressing qualification was not actually sufficient to secure them a job in the community. Therefore, a realistic appreciation of, for example, the job market's perspective on criminal records, would help prevent the disappointment of hopes and subsequent lack of confidence when desisters face barriers to achieving their desired identities. As well as this theoretical appreciation, there are several practical steps that services can (and sometimes do) take which recognise the constraints determining desisters' everyday lives and identities. For example, for women who are expected to be caring for children, the provision of childcare and child-friendly appointment times, which allow for taking children to and from nursery or school, is crucial to their engagement with services. It would be naïve to expect, in such circumstances, that desisters would be willing to subordinate their socially-approved (and potentially desistance-supporting) roles as carers in order to attend a service which they perceive as for their own individual benefit. Therefore it is for services to ensure that their provision, as far as possible, enables the performance of prosocial identities that desisters are constrained to choose between.

In addressing the importance of relating to others in desistance, the concept of the ethic of care can be operationalised both in how services are run and in how they promote positive relationships through their sessions and programmes. For staff, an explicit foundation for the 'type' of care that the service is aiming to provide, which does not promote either dependence or equality in relationships, but instead looks for 'asymmetric reciprocity' in healthy relationships ([Sevenhuijsen, 2003](#_ENREF_246)), would reduce the unhelpful number of competing discourses around care and dependence, which proved confusing for all involved in Chapter 8, that they must navigate in orienting their own practice. Instead, they could enjoy some freedom in their professional practice in accepting that some dependency is a normal and valuable part of life, and they could also benefit from the ethic of care model in shaping that into a helpful and appropriate kind of dependency. This would recognise the reality of trying to encourage and assist stigmatised and marginalised people as they try to desist while also upholding some professional guidelines to prevent burn-out and inappropriate relationships. Further, the same ethic of care can be incorporated as an orienting concept into existing 'healthy relationships' programmes and keywork sessions, thus providing the detail of a cognitive blueprint (by explaining what the components of such a blueprint might entail in the realities of complex relationships, where needed) as desisters craft desisting identities for themselves. With both a theoretical model based on asymmetric reciprocity while upholding ideals of attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness, and the practical context of seeing staff strive for the same principles in their work, desisters looking to craft a 'caring' replacement identity will be provided with detailed schemata for how to relate to others. Of course, this would require careful handling to ensure the principles are not misunderstood as reasons to passively accept abuse and controlling relationships, but a proper understanding would not promote such lack of reciprocity in a healthy relationship.

Finally, when considering agency, a better understanding of the realities of the complexities and constraints around choices should ensure that services maintain a sensitive and encouraging attitude to those who may not exhibit obvious signs of acting intentionally in their desistance. This may be particularly relevant to Community Rehabilitation Companies, who might be tempted to 'cherry-pick' engaged supervisees for enhanced service provision in order to benefit from the Payment by Results system ([a possibility highlighted by Fox & Albertson, 2012](#_ENREF_86)), hoping that engagement is a proxy for likelihood of 'success'. As desistance is not confined to those who exhibit intentional action in trying to change, such gaming behaviour is likely to disadvantage many potential desisters - and will also likely miss some opportunities for 'results' leading to payment. Yet even a more personalised approach, where desistance is seen as an exercise in co-production, promoting engagement and empowerment ([Weaver, 2011](#_ENREF_281)), may also fall foul of these findings on agency. In contrast to the philosophy of such an approach, a lack of visible motivation may not prevent change in desisters. In addition, the importance of structural influences to desistance means that structural change can have significant impacts on desisters' success or otherwise. Therefore, there are a number of areas where campaigns for change could be encouraged by services in order to better aid their service users' desistance. Yet with overworked services and little political will to establish centralised government oversight in order to promote women's welfare, and desistance, ([Annison et al., 2015](#_ENREF_1)), it is not clear who is able to spearhead such important policy and structural change. One option is to involve desisters themselves in critical education ([Sharpe, 2016](#_ENREF_250)), where political engagement and social action is encouraged among participants as they themselves look to change the structures to which they are subject. However this does raise the question of whether it is just to expect that those who are disadvantaged by certain structures should bear the responsibility of improving their own situations.

**Methodological Reflections**

While the findings and implications above are the most significant contributions to the substantive field of desistance research, they were only enabled through my use of a qualitative micro-longitudinal approach to data collection. Through a mixture of spending significant amounts of time at the women’s centre and repeatedly interviewing desisting women, I experienced a number of benefits to the nature of the data. The short length of time between interviews, and the relational aspect of the research, while similar in some ways to a limited number of other research projects ([Leverentz, 2014](#_ENREF_157); [Soyer, 2014](#_ENREF_264)), combined to produce an original method for investigating desistance. The advantages of this, and some limitations, can be identified in three areas. Firstly, the effects of repeated interviews in what could be termed a ‘micro-longitudinal’ study. Secondly, the effects of getting to know participants well through spending a long time in the TWP centre. Thirdly, the effects of spending much time with staff at the TWP centre, through volunteering, generally being in the building, and a focus group. The benefits of these different parts of the research are primarily the richness of the data gathered, and the ethical process employed to collect the participants’ stories. In modifying and combining existing methods, my research produced findings with both respect and integrity.

The repeated nature of the interviews, as predicted, allowed me to see how the process of desistance unfolded over time ([Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76); [Soyer, 2014](#_ENREF_264)). It meant that I could take the ‘zigzag’ nature of desistance ([Glaser, 1969](#_ENREF_106)) seriously, following participants through their successes and challenges. Aiming for gaps of one month meant that I could capture some of these achievements and relapses within the timing of the study, and the aftermaths that followed. If anything, these interview repetitions were not conducted close enough to each other, and much would be gained from future desistance studies re-interviewing participants weeks, or even days, after previous interviews. This would however potentially constrain the overall number of participants as it would require much more input from participants. Nevertheless, the access gained to the desistance process showed just how complicated the temporal ordering of various influences could be, reflecting the 'messiness' predicted by Farrall and colleagues (2014) in conducting prospective studies. Repeated interviews also reduced the opportunity for memory flaws, post-hoc rationalisation and speculation ([Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76); [Graham & Bowling, 1995](#_ENREF_112)) from participants as they were discussing a process that they were currently experiencing (although they did not, and could not, remove this danger absolutely, as much could still happen, and be reflected on, within a month).

This more contemporaneous perspective was particularly valuable in investigating the place of agency in desistance, highlighting that not all those who appear to succeed in desistance show strong personal agency (and particularly not to the exclusion of other influences) throughout their journey, and thus questions existing assumptions that prioritise the importance of agentic action in desistance. In contrast, my approach did not provide the expected insight into identity development over time ([contra Soyer, 2014](#_ENREF_264)). This may have been due to the time taken to establish enough trust with the participants for them to share this very personal aspect of their lives, or it may have been that the concept of personal identity was not something that participants often thought about, or simply that they were not followed for a long enough time overall to show this development. Nevertheless, this in itself is a valuable nuance of the current understanding of the place of identity in desistance, and similar useful nuances were gathered from the repeated interviewing in many other areas of analysis, such as the nature of relationships or the fragile character of confidence.

Repeated interviews were useful in mediating the detrimental effects of long-term substance abuse on participants' powers of recall, with participants frequently later adding detail and events to discussions from earlier interviews. A micro-longitudinal approach had the practical benefit of enabling shorter interviews where the concentration span of participants demanded it. I was able to leave inquiries to future encounters, and prioritise questions within interviews, without feeling that the interview had been wasted. Of course, sometimes a follow-up interview did not materialise, but the study did achieve an overall follow-up rate of 67%, well above the 50% recommended by Farrall and colleagues (2014) in their comprehensive collation of desiderata in desistance studies (although over a much more compact period of time than they suggest). This relaxed approach was particularly helpful with those participants who were still chaotic or who found it hard to concentrate for prolonged periods of time. It enabled me to respect their preferences in terms of interview length without risking the loss of their input completely by terminating the interview.

By volunteering and spending time in the TWP centre, I was able to get to know many of my participants before interviews started, and in the periods in between interviews. I was a familiar face in the building and at various groups, frequently spending time with participants out of interview over the course of the study. This meant that our relationship was often much 'deeper' that the typical researcher-researched relationship, closer to those held by typical volunteers at the centre: not a professional working relationship, but equally not a friendship either (at least not until towards the end of the study and only with a couple of participants).[[56]](#footnote-56) This approach meant that I could modify the tone of interviews and my presentation of myself in a way that better matched with participants’ personalities. Thus I knew in advance who preferred time to think in interview and who needed fast-paced questions to keep them engaged. I had an idea of what assumptions participants already had about me and what I needed to do or discuss to correct and compensate for those. These endeavours showed that I really cared about the people I was recruiting to the research as more than data sources, and so hopefully communicated a level of respect for my participants, and the other service users, which is not possible if the only time participants see researchers is in interview. In addition to these ethical benefits, getting to know my participants outside of interview produced some remarkably rich data. I suspect that the evidence participants had of my genuine interest in their lives, that they had through the time I spent with them, made them especially comfortable to share more of their stories with me. However, this familiarity also had its drawbacks, with some indications that this meant participants could be embarrassed at sharing information with me. On the whole, I have no doubt that spending time with participants outside of interview increased the depth and detail of my data, and was also highly desirable from an ethical perspective.

There were also benefits from the relationship I fostered with the staff at the TWP centre through the time I spent there and the focus group included as part of the study. In volunteering for the organisation, I provided a useful spare pair of hands, helping with a wide variety of tasks. This gave the staff some sort of practical benefit for the inconvenience of hosting me and my research over the year. It also gave them a chance to understand my motivations for the study and to be reassured that I, too, was interested in assisting female offenders, not in scrutinizing their own efforts with their service users. I was enabled to constantly work towards good rapport with those who were gatekeepers for my research. Although this was emotionally demanding at many times, it was helpful to be available to keep my research visible among the day-to-day priorities of the centre. In running a focus group with this same group of staff members, I could further reassure them that I was not interested in service users’ opinions to the exclusion of their own experience. Indeed, staff offered some valuable insights as to what the process of desistance looks like to those around the desister. They also had more familiarity with pertinent structural issues affecting women’s experience of desistance, even when the participants themselves remained relatively unaware of these wider influences at work in their lives, so providing another valuable source of data about the participants ([Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76)). Therefore, while my primary interest remained how desisters experience desistance, the input of others who regularly witness this process provided some useful context to those accounts.

Finally, my presentation of my methodology in this dissertation in a transparent way allows others to see potential strengths and limitations of my approach and implementation. I include the interview schedules that I used in Appendix 1, although with the caveat that many of the processes I discuss here and in Chapter 4 demanded flexibility as to how these questions were asked, to provide as much transparency as a complicated, sensitive, qualitative study can allow. Therefore the reader is able to judge for themselves whether I avoided getting exactly 'what I asked for' in my interview findings (a result warned against by Carlsson (2011)), or whether the data gathered too closely reflect the ideas and concepts that I specifically asked about.

**Limitations**

Despite the many benefits of my methodological approach, there are several limitations to the study. In addition to those drawbacks already mentioned, such as where the expected insight into identity over time did not materialise, the nature of the study and characteristics of the participants prevented the emergence of other insights into the experience of desistance. The most significant limitations were related to the practicalities of conducting repeated interviews, the non-representative composition of the sample, and the reliance on participant interviews without the benefit of other sources of data.

Firstly, although the study generated a large amount of data, this was based on the experiences of only 15 women, with just 10 of those participating in more than one interview. For those who did repeatedly engage, the number of interviews varied from two to seven, over periods of between two and eight months. As such, the nature of the micro-longitudinal follow-up varied significantly between participants, capturing a variety of timeframes. Those who did complete a number of interviews tended to be older women, from more middle-class backgrounds, and who were more stable in their desistance (although not necessarily those whose previous offending was most distant chronologically). The nature of a PhD study also prevented a long-term follow-up of participants, highly desirable to capture the whole process of desistance over many years ([Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76)), although this may yet be possible in future work.

While the practicalities of access unfortunately did not allow for random sampling , the characteristics of participants as described in Chapter 4 show that there was nevertheless a wide range of desisters in the sample (cited as best practice ([Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76))). However, it may be that the participants recruited, while from a wide range, were actually a rather unusual group, especially in terms of age, with the youngest (at 22 years old) being much older than the peak age of female offending (15 years old ([Walklate, 2004](#_ENREF_278))). Therefore, the experiences discussed in this thesis may be less familiar to young desisters. Also, as all participants were local to Sheffield at the time of the study, any geographical influences on desistance would have been missed, as there was no other location with which to compare the findings.

The focus group conducted with staff, and time spent in the Together Women centre did provide some insight into structural and other influences on participants' experiences of which participants were themselves unaware, but these two other sources of data and could not have covered all relevant influences. Input from family, friends and professionals (such as probation officers or keyworkers) would have produced a more rounded understanding of the desistance experiences of the sample over time, by capturing macro-level changes and relating observed changes in the relationships and demeanours of the participants ([as promoted by Farrall et al., 2014](#_ENREF_76)).

**Future Research**

There are three particular substantive findings from this study that strongly suggest the need for future research, which I discuss below. First, the experiences of some desisters in returning to a previous identity highlights the need for research to look at the experiences of different types of desister, instead of just focusing on those with particularly extensive offending histories. Therefore, research on particular groups of desisters would be valuable. Second, the limited social roles available to the female desisters in the study emphasise the importance of understanding the influence of structural and cultural factors on individual experiences. Such influences shape some of the particularly gendered findings in this study, and would be expected to affect future research findings according to where and when research is conducted. Therefore, this context needs to be examined carefully in desistance research. Finally, and at the other end of the agency-structure scale, more intensive research into the everyday experiences of agency is needed. There is scope here for some creative use of new methodologies in order to gain closer access to the realities of choice and opportunities in desisters’ lives. I look now at these suggestions for future research in more detail.

First, and as discussed above, some desisters in this study did not adopt a brand new identity in their desistance but instead returned to a previously adopted identity instead. This raises the question of whether previous theories of desistance, which prioritise identity change, such as Maruna (2001) and [Giordano et al. (2002)](#_ENREF_102), are generalisable, or whether the extensive offending histories of their participants necessarily mean that they are theories of desistance specifically from persistent offending (a point also raised by Farrall and colleagues (2014)). Therefore, a tighter focus on some identifiable 'types' of desister would be useful. Instead of roughly distinguishing desisters by the type of offence they have committed in the past, a focus on groups that show some marked differences to other offenders could be made. For example, this study indicated that the experiences of older women without substance abuse histories, but with fraud convictions, abusive ex-partners and adult children (Beth and Linda) were different in a number of ways to those younger women caring for children at home. These women possessed largely conventional social networks through children and grandchildren and their age, and status in their families, meant that paid employment did not feature in their future plans. They were able to provide much reflective insight into their own lives and were easy to contact again for further interviews. A bigger study of such women would therefore be worthwhile to gain a more detailed picture of their desistance experiences as it contrasted to more 'mainstream' desistance theories. Given the particular suitability of the micro-longitudinal methodology that I used in this study in exploring these women's experiences, prioritising the building of relationships with participants both in and out of interview, a similar approach with a larger study promises rich data in exploring this 'type' of desisters' experiences.

Second, one of the findings of this research which was most closely linked to the experiences specifically of desisters as women was that of the social roles available to, and desired by, them. Instead of conceptualising this finding as purely linked to unchangeable gender differences, it is necessary to investigate to what extent these roles are moulded by the surrounding cultures and structures. In his study of ethnicity and desistance, Calverley ([2013](#_ENREF_39)) examined similar structural influences on experiences of ethnicity. A similar, contemporary effort could be made in relation to gender. As Jurik ([1983](#_ENREF_137)) found, the sex roles of people on a post-prison economic programme in Texas and Georgia in 1976 meant that females could desist by finding a male partner who would provide for them while the corresponding effect was not found among men. She suggests that this is a good example of the importance of sociological factors in desistance. Indeed, such a gendered finding may well not hold true to such an extent 40 years later or in other locations. In contrast, the modest gender differences found in desistance when reviewing many studies together (see, for example, Rodermond et al. (2016)) may be under-estimating the impact of gender by conflating a number of individual contexts and so missing context-specific sociological influences on how gender is enacted. Future desistance research, then, must take the sociological context of gender, and indeed other influences, such as age or class, seriously, examining how such factors are affected by wider structural and cultural concerns. Paying careful attention to such wider influences would also help to illuminate whether conceptualisations of the ethic of care in relationships is useful either specifically for women or whether it is more generally helpful in characterising relationships of both men and women.

Finally, the findings in this study on agency, showing the complex interaction between agency and structure, and questioning the belief that agentic action is necessary for desistance, could be built on further. With a more careful examination of the workings of agency, as experienced by desisters in their everyday lives, a clearer picture of its nature and influence could be gained. To do this, desisters would need to be followed through the desistance process more closely and for a longer period of time. Of course, any such work is highly labour-intensive, and especially so if a larger number of desisters was sought. Any way of decreasing the labour burden of such a project would necessarily mean that interviews were not so relational, and the benefits that I gained from this aspect of my research would be lost. Nevertheless, perhaps one way of circumventing this resource problem is to ask participants to complete diaries frequently ([Belli, Stafford, & Alwin, 2009](#_ENREF_14)), either in a traditional way on paper, through some sort of private blogging, or through a specialised mobile app. Literacy levels could determine whether these diaries were written or recorded. An automatic reminder by phone could be combined with voice recording or video equipment, thus requiring less travel and monitoring by a research team and consequently allowing the project to run for a longer time. Alternatively, various services could be provided with video call software, webcams and microphones (and a properly secure network), allowing for communication between desisters who were at the service and researchers in their offices over the internet. Nevertheless, it would remain challenging for researchers to maintain participants' engagement and therefore retain them in the study, and particularly if shorter gaps between interviews were desired. In addition, serious thought would be necessary in determining how intensive the follow-ups could be, to avoid creating burdens on participants that were unnecessarily onerous. However, as so many (especially young) people currently document their lives frequently through technology such as Snapchat, Twitter and Instagram, it may be that a more intensive project is not seen as particularly burdensome by the participants themselves. It would therefore be beneficial to involve some desisters in the design of such a project to help determine an acceptable level of intensity.

With some further research in these areas of examining specific types of desisters (and how that might influence identity), structure (particularly how it shapes gender roles) and agency, research could gain a more nuanced view of how people desist from crime. As such, this study’s key findings about desistance theory (specifically the role of identity and agency) and the desistance of women (especially the social roles available to them) could be further built upon to provide a more detailed picture of the everyday experiences of desisters.

**Postscript**

At the time of writing, it has been almost two years since I conducted the last interviews with each participant. For some, their situation has changed significantly, and for others, their life looks very similar to a year ago. Still others have been impossible to trace which suggests that they have not been reconvicted in the Sheffield area (otherwise they would likely have been sent back to the Together Women Centre). Here, I use information from conversations, unplanned meetings on the street, phone calls and texts, newspapers and social media updates – both from the women themselves and from their friends and workers – to give an idea of their progress since I interviewed them.

**Alyssa** finally regained custody of her son, who had flourished in foster care but was glad to be back with his mum. She fully engaged with social services and stopped smoking cannabis in order to win him back. She also returned to her university studies. However, things went downhill again for Alyssa some months after this and her son was again removed from her care.

**Beth** has continued to volunteer and her confidence is still improving. She is enjoying spending more time with her grandson as his parents get used to a new baby, but is also managing to be assertive about requests for babysitting from her daughters. Her failure to make good friends at church is frustrating her, but she continues to read her Bible. Her sense of guilt appears to be lessening. She still loves her ex-husband.

**Danielle’s** shoplifting continued to escalate, and her drug and alcohol use increased. She and her boyfriend experienced serious housing difficulties, and he became violent towards her, but although they broke up, they did not separate for long. After some leniency from the courts, and despite repeatedly breaching her court order and some new offences, Danielle was eventually sent to prison. On release, the intense fear that she used to have of incarceration had disappeared and she continued to offend in a variety of ways. Her boyfriend has received a long prison sentence and she is therefore on her own again and engaging - though sporadically - with services.

**Emily’s** engagement with services such as Together Women drastically reduced, and she began to display deceitful behaviour towards peers, with unconfirmed reports of thefts. She again returned to Together Women after offending and continued to spend time with associates on the streets.

**Gillian** proved un-contactable after interview and I have not heard how she is. However, she received a further conviction for assault (comprising a suspended sentence and a fine) about a year and a half after our last contact.

**Hannah’s** alcohol use again escalated and she stopped engaging with services. She received a fine for shoplifting a year and a half after our last contact.

**Jane** had settled into hostel accommodation and made friends. Unfortunately these friends were also involved in criminal activities and they became co-offenders. It seemed that Jane had an important role in encouraging these activities and causing trouble for other residents. She stopped attending Together Women.

**Linda** is doing well, and spending a lot of time creating beautiful craft gifts for family and friends. She has just started to make this into a small business with the support of her eldest natural daughter- her adopted niece.

**Megan** has at the very least has not significantly increased her drug use. However, I do not know whether she has managed to stop illegal drug use or whether she is still offending. She and Rachel are again in limited contact over social media.

**Rachel** has had a baby with a new, supportive partner. Although unplanned, she thought that the baby had come at an ideal time, as it would help her get to know new people in the neighbourhood she was moving into, through toddler groups. Rachel is still clean from drugs and doing well in the community – with the new baby's arrival allowing her to find accommodation in a nicer area of the city.

**Steph** has continued her recovery without a further relapse, and her daughter has returned to live with her full-time, which both enjoy greatly. She spent some time volunteering and has since gained a job in services for offenders. In addition, she has made new friends in the area where she now lives and in the local community through interest groups and her daughter's school.

**Vicky** remained busy with exercise, work and childcare and was not able to make a follow-up interview. She received a suspended sentence with community requirements for shoplifting just over a year after our last contact.

**Zoe** returned to the town where she used to live, and I visited her there once. She seemed happy and proud of her achievements in rehab, and often talked openly with acquaintances she saw on the street about where she had been. She was very glad to be back with her dog. Zoe confided that she had taken drugs once since she had left rehab, and felt very guilty about it, but assured me that it wouldn’t happen again. I had the impression that she had found moving out of rehab harder than she had expected, and particularly the lack of supportive peers in her old neighbourhood.

**Clara** and **Nicole** proved un-contactable and I have not heard how they are from others who know them.

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**Appendix 1: Interview Schedules**

Comments in [square brackets] are post-hoc commentary, so as to give a better impression of the reality of the interviews. The interview questions were not rigidly stuck to, but were used as a guide.

**First interview**:

Explanation, highlighting the **process** of desistance and wanting to re-interview.

Consent and anonymity, recording, limits of confidentiality

Questions?

------

**1- Introductory-** Tell me how you first came to be involved with TWP (when, why etc) (briefly)

**2- Current Life -** Can you describe your life now to me? (facts and opinions)

Where you live, neighbours Children Parents, brothers/sisters

Partner, history of relationship Friends

Jobs/volunteering/training/courses/ other agencies Benefits/finance

Time at home and interests Physical/mental health

Alcohol/drugs Religious beliefs

[these only referred to specifically if not already discussed under Question 1]

How would you describe yourself to someone who’s never met you before? (e.g. happy/sad, optimistic/pessimistic, outgoing/introvert, excitable/serious, responsible/carefree etc.)

What makes you feel good? When are you happiest?

Can you describe last Wednesday to me? Who would you usually be with? [etc] Last Saturday?

**3- Previous trouble and staying out of it**

Before coming to TWP, had you been in trouble with the police? Were there other occasions when you were involved with something that might have got you in trouble with the police?

Have you been in trouble with the police or your probation officer since you first came to TWP? How did that come about?

(with day planner) Are there any differences between now and what your days looked like around the time you were getting in trouble?

Would you say that you’re trying to stay out of trouble now?

How are you trying to stay out of trouble now? How do you find it? Why are you doing it? Does anything or anyone make it more difficult? Does anything or anyone make it easier? What are the things you like best about staying out of trouble? Have you ever been given helpful advice about moving on from trouble?

**4- Looking forward**

What is the best thing about your life right now? What is the worst?

What are your hopes for the next 6 months?

What would you say are your dreams and ambitions? And fears?

Are you proud of anything in your life?

If someone asked you what you wanted from life, how would you answer them?

Can you imagine yourself in 3 years’ time? What is the same? What is different to now? (link back to various aspects above)

Can you imagine even further in the future?

Are there any questions that you think I should have asked you, but haven’t?

-Would really like to talk again in 3 weeks, contact details.

**Second interview:**

**1- Changes and continuities**

What’s happened with you since we last spoke? How are you finding it?

[Here I picked up on specific things discussed in the first interview]

**2- Relevant life history**

Last time we looked a lot about what’s going on with you now. Can you take me back as far as you can remember in your life and tell me your story from then until now?

Do you think any of those things impact your circumstances now? Do you think they have impacted the person that you are?

-check contact details

**Third Interview**

**1- Changes and continuities**

What’s happened with you since we last spoke? How are you finding it?

[For participants who were interviewed more than four times, Question 1 was also used to open those extra interviews]

**2- Focus on agencies and criminal justice** [only used when participants not forthcoming]

Want to focus a little on the effects that different organisations have had on you. Let’s start with here, together women – what is your impression of it? How did you react to having to come here at the beginning? How do you react now? Do you think coming here has made any difference to you? Have you felt yourself change through coming here or do you feel the same as you did at the beginning? How? Have the people here helped you in any way? Has your time here made anything more difficult for you?

same for other agencies, one at a time plus: is there any difference in how you feel between this organisation and together women?

Police – how would you describe your attitude towards the police now? why? Has it always been like that? Tell me about the last time the police picked you up. Was that the last time you met a police officer? (if no, tell me about the last time). Have the police made any impact on you? Have they made any good or bad differences to who you are? How do they make you feel?

Courts – how would you describe your attitude towards the courts? Why? Has it always been like that? Tell me about the last time you were in court? Did court ever make an impact on you? Did it make any good or bad differences to who you are? How did it make you feel? How does it make you feel now? Did anything a judge ever say to you stick with you?

Probation – have you had much experience of probation? Tell me about the probation officers you have met. What would your probation meetings look like? How would you describe your attitude towards probation? Have you found it useful? Did it have any good or bad impact on you? How did it make you feel? How does it make you feel now? Did anything a probation officer ever say to you stick with you?

Prison- similar

**Last Interview**

**1- Changes and continuities**

What’s happened with you since we last spoke? How are you finding it?

**2- Questions of identity**

Tensions between who you were and who you are now?

Tensions between who others expect you to be based on your history and who you are?

**3- An overall look**

Biggest negative influences/factors on moving on?

Biggest positive influences/factors on moving on?

What message would you like to give to family and friends who want to help people who are starting to move on?

What can organisations do to help those moving on?

**4- The interview experience**

Did you talk about things with me that you had not thought of before?

Did our chats together impact your thoughts or actions? Do you think you thought more about yourself than you would have done without the interview?

How easy or difficult did you find it to be open and honest? Any tips for me to make that easier?

Overall thoughts about being interviewed?

**Focus Group- Staff Questions**

Focus of study, what’s going to happen with what’s said, confidentiality and anonymity, recording

Questions?

**1- Your background**

Brief history of how you became involved in working with women with convictions or at risk of offending

**2- In your experiences and expertise...**

(Answer following qs either with own opinions or with examples from people you’ve worked with)

What can start the journey of someone moving on from offending?

What is it like for women to be someone moving on with their life? What sorts of things do they worry about during that time? How does that affect them?

What keeps them going when it’s hard?

Negative influences/factors on moving on? Most important ones?

Positive influences/factors on moving on? Most important ones?

How do these influences interact? Can any positive factors cancel out negative factors?

Tensions between providing emotional support and preventing dependency?

Tensions between encouraging independence and paternalism?

How important are social structures like benefits and housing?

**3- Specifically about those I’m interviewing**

Specifically with women in my study- (list) – if you’ve come across these people, what do you think has influenced their experiences of trying to move on, for good or for bad?

**4- Rounding up**

What message would you like to give to family and friends who want to help people who are starting to move on?

What can organisations and agencies do to help those moving on?

How could communities and society make it easier for those moving on from offending?

**Appendix 2: Information Sheet**

**Women’s Experiences of Putting Crime Behind Them: Information Sheet**

**What is the Women’s Experiences of Putting Crime Behind Them study?**

This study is looking at women’s experiences of trying to put offending behind them (“desistance”). I want to know what it’s like to be moving on from offending – what daily life is like, and what helps and challenges you – for my Ph.D. research. I am supervised at the University of Sheffield by two experienced researchers, Dr. Gilly Sharpe and Prof Stephen Farrall.

The study will help other people understand how women put crime behind them. It will therefore give help and encouragement to other women in similar situations to you.

**Why have I been asked to be interviewed?**

You have been asked because your involvement with the Together Women Project (TWP) indicates that you want, and are trying, to put crime behind you. Your experiences (however ordinary, uninteresting, or unusual you may think them) of doing this are exactly what I want to find out about.

**Who will interview me?**

I (Sarah Goodwin) will interview you. If you are willing, I would like to talk to you a few times over the coming weeks and months to see how things in your life change over that time.

**Who is funding the research?**

The University of Sheffield’s School of Law funds my work on the study.

**What kinds of questions will the interviewer ask me?**

I will ask you some questions about your life and some of the things you are hoping to do in the future. I would like to know about anything that you think is relevant to how you are finding life now, and how you picture your life in the future. I will ask you about the things that make your life easier and more difficult as you try to put offending behind you.

**How long will the interviews last?**

This varies from person to person, and it depends on how much you have to say. The interview will be tape-recorded, as long as you do not mind (this makes things faster and helps me give you my full attention).

**Who can I contact if I have any further questions about the project?**

My phone number is 07510788618, and my email is [lwp11sjg@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:lwp11sjg@sheffield.ac.uk). I can also be contacted at the School of Law, Sheffield University, Bartolome House, Winter Street, Sheffield, S3 7ND.

If you have serious concerns or questions, you can contact either of my supervisors- Dr Gilly Sharpe (0114 222 6079, [g.h.sharpe@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:g.h.sharpe@sheffield.ac.uk)) or Prof Stephen Farrall (0114 222 6718, [s.farrall@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:s.farrall@sheffield.ac.uk)).

**Confidentiality**

Everything you say in the interview will be kept private and confidential. No-one at the Together Women Project or Probation will be told anything about what you say. Only I will be able to listen to or read what you have said. If anything that you have said is quoted in writing in any reports or articles that I write, you will be given a ‘pretend’ name, and your real name will never be used. The only condition where confidentiality cannot be guaranteed is if you indicate that you are planning to harm someone (either yourself or someone else).

**What will happen to what I say in the interview?**

After the interview, the recording will be written down using a computer by me. The file and the recording will be securely stored on the School of Law’s premises in Sheffield. I will carefully read and analyse what you tell her during the interview. My aim is to try to work out how women manage to put crime behind them, what helps, and what it’s like to be going through that process. I may use extracts from your interview in my final report, or in articles that I write for other researchers and policy makers to read, but your real name will not be used in any written reports.

1. See 'The Together Women Project' in Chapter 4 for more information on the organisation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 'High need' throughout this section is a term used by Together Women that indicates help was required more than once a week. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is generally when the offences are minor, such as Leibrich’s (1993) use of this criterion for cannabis users. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more on the potential benefits and drawbacks of such an approach, see Chapter 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For more on the life-course/desistance debate, see Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Although the importance, or perceived importance, of Together Women may well have increased with time or retrospection, similar to the role of Probation elsewhere (Farrall et al., 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Although those in Shover's (1985) study viewed prison as significant in encouraging their desistance and also see later, 'Exhaustion and 'Hitting Rock Bottom' for some further examples of exceptions. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For more on stigma, shame and guilt - and the differences between these concepts - see Chapter 7: Confidence and Desistance [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. A bond, according to Hirschi ([1969](#_ENREF_127)), which is characterised by four characteristics: an individual's attachment to the aims of society, their belief that society's goals are desirable, their commitment to gaining these goals in an acceptable way, and their involvement in pursuing these goals. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This aspect of Maruna’s theory therefore links to neutralisations ([Sykes & Matza, 1957](#_ENREF_266)), which he explicitly builds on in later work ([Maruna & Copes, 2005](#_ENREF_169)). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For example, the authors link various increases and decreases of emotions with desistance, highlighting the beneficial impact of learned emotional management ([2007](#_ENREF_104)). They also look at the interaction of religion and spirituality with their desistance theory, particularly highlighting the potential for religion to be a prosocial hook (among other benefits and disadvantages ([2008](#_ENREF_103)). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Offender Group Reconviction Score- a tool used by criminal justice institutions to determine a person’s relative risk according to the group of offenders they fall within. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Byrne and Trew (2008) only follow-up 6 of 18 participants, but fail to include any details as to the timing or content of those interviews. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Thanks to Stephen Farrall for suggesting this term. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Currently the five centres are in Leeds, Bradford, Doncaster, Hull and Sheffield, with outreach work in Keighley, Barnsley, Rotherham and HMP New Hall. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The only slight exception to this was related to whether participants had adult children- a fact, of course, not linked solely to their age, but more strongly to their family situation. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I identified class backgrounds from information about parents’ jobs and education, living situations (including where families lived), childhood or family activities (such as holidays and eating out), and educational aspirations and achievement. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It must be noted that, while I am Scottish, the sense of humour that I encountered in Sheffield seemed similar to me as that of Glasgow, and so I did not find this an uncomfortable tool to use. It is also possible that my Scottish accent made me more approachable and helped me seem less privileged (and therefore less distant or uninterested) to participants. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. It was a condition of access that staff would be informed of which women were being interviewed, although obviously not what was said. I had the impression that this was mainly for practical reasons, like room allocation and checking on the welfare of participants. In reality, and due to my recruitment methods, staff usually knew who was participating before I told them. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. As explained above, I did not analyse observations in isolation from interviews for ethical reasons. The only exception I made to this was when observations helped to explain or illustrate character traits that I also noticed during interview. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Three in the introduction, and two as case studies in Chapters 7 and 8. I discuss my choices in presenting findings further below in the section headed 'Presentation'. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. A point driven home in several final interviews with participants where I shared my initial thoughts on several (more abstract) themes as suggested by Silverman (2014), only to be met with bewilderment and a strong sense that they had never even considered such subjects before. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See the case studies on Beth and Steph in Chapters 7 and 8 for examples of the results of case-oriented analyses and the thematic findings elsewhere (on topics such as identity and agency) for examples of the results of variable-oriented analyses. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Where self-control is employed so as to avoid a future situation in which one does not think s/he will be able to employ self-control. See Shapland &Bottoms ([2011](#_ENREF_247)) for a fuller discussion of the concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. However, she thinks it is more helpful to use the term ‘relational autonomy’, thus acknowledging the influence of relationships as a micro-structure. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For a fuller discussion of the nature and role of confidence, see Chapter 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Yorkshire slang for ‘yourself’. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. That is, that assistance from practitioners can be valuable to later desistance even when the offender is not yet ready to desist- although this is often identified retrospectively, and only with the benefit of many years' hindsight. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Here understood as the active use of (all types of) resources in order to withstand adversity ([Fitzpatrick, 2011](#_ENREF_84)). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. For more on identity see Chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For more on identity and future selves, see Chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Expert Patient Programme – which teaches participants to manage their long-term health issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. According to psychologists, hope consists of having the 'will' and the 'ways' to change ([Snyder et al., 1991](#_ENREF_261)). However, being constrained by external factors can make the change impossible, regardless of the desire and so hope is also not possible- and therefore somewhat irrelevant in certain dire circumstances ([Burnett, 2010](#_ENREF_32)). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Dihydrocodeine – an opiate analgesic that helps to remove pains experienced during heroin withdrawal. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. For more on the role of motherhood, see section in Chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Explore this in greater detail in Chapter 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Although some others question this as a universal need in desisters ([Farrall, 2005](#_ENREF_72)). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. An entitlement since introduced in the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014, s.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. For further discussion on ways to improve self-esteem, see Chapter 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. For more on identity and confidence, see Chapter 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. I understand ‘confidence’ to mean being sure of oneself, and assured of one’s abilities and character (an elaboration of the second definition given by the OED (["Confidence, n.," 2014](#_ENREF_48))) . I also use ‘self-confidence’ as an alternative to ‘confidence’, and do not impute it with any negative connotations of arrogance. I feel that the concept has similarity to ‘self-esteem’ and ‘self-worth’, where one appreciates one’s own value as a person. Further, I do not equate ‘confidence’ with ‘self-efficacy’ or ‘agency’ (see Chapter 5), but it seems that self-confidence is an integral requirement to these broader concepts (as well as concepts such as hope, optimism, competence and resilience ([Healy, 2013](#_ENREF_120); [Rotter, 1966](#_ENREF_237); [Stajkovic, 2006](#_ENREF_265))), so I refer to research on these concepts where appropriate, particularly Bandura’s ([1977](#_ENREF_6)) work on self-efficacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Referring to the extensive drug abuse present in her home, and the associated neglect of Alyssa and her siblings. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For more on motivation, see Chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. An alternative to therapy focused on boosting self-esteem, which instead promotes solving emotional and behavioural problems through a type of Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Hannah's experiences also feed into the 'readiness' debate (see Chapter 5). Does readiness, in fact, prove synonymous to having a base level of confidence, which in turn enables emotional coping or agentic action? While other data on 'readiness' does not always have this connotation, the close links between having confidence and acting with agency ([Stajkovic, 2006](#_ENREF_265)) certainly allow for such an interaction being necessary in order to produce a state of 'readiness'- if indeed such a state exists. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. And not so recently, with the language of ‘scroungers’ traceable back to at least the Thatcher government ([Cook, 1987](#_ENREF_49); [Hill & Walker, 2014](#_ENREF_126); [Lister, 2004](#_ENREF_160)). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Yet again highlighting the constraints that some participants faced when employing agency (see Chapter 5). [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Both were on Home Detention Curfew for a couple of months on release from prison, with a curfew of around 7pm every night. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. As encouraged by [Eaton (1993)](#_ENREF_63). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. This may raise questions over my double role as researcher and volunteer, but I did not see evidence of conflict in this particular situation, based on Linda's evident understanding. For Linda, emotional support was more important than practical assistance, and she primarily found our interviews together rewarding as a good opportunity to be listened to (see below). In addition, she knew that I was willing *specifically because of my research* to 'walk alongside' her in a different way to staff ([Thomson, 2009](#_ENREF_270)) as she attempted to desist - but only if she wished me to do so. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. A Yorkshire team of endearment. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. I use inverted commas to show that while ‘selfish’ was the term widely used by staff and participants during fieldwork, I am not convinced of its suitability to accurately describe the attitude desired and perhaps ‘assertiveness’ would be more appropriate. The negative connotations of the word can also make it sound unhelpfully judgmental, especially to those who accept socio-cultural expectations that women should base their identity on being fundamentally caring towards others. Despite these reservations, I retain the term ‘selfishness’ as it is most familiar to those I interviewed. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. However it must be said that Clara presented herself very defensively in interview as a capable and strongly willed woman, and may act more responsively in caring for her granddaughter than she was willing to reveal. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. She did not think she would have succeeded in desistance. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. http://www.cleanbreak.org.uk/ [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Although this may have presented an opportunity for the growth of unhelpful dependencies or unwanted relationships, I was careful about how to frame my continued interest and I did not in fact experience any problems along these lines. I was prepared to be very clear in observing and communicating problems in case they should develop, but in this instance some participants instead became valued contacts and - in one instance - a good friend. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)