

## **Narrating Desistance: Identity Change and the 12-Step Script**

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**Abstract:** Desistance from crime has been identified as a process that often entails the development of a new life ‘script’. This script facilitates an internal change through a narrative-building process that supports a non-offending identity. This paper investigates the intersection between these scripts as described in the criminological literature and the well-known script at the heart of the 12-step recovery literatures. This exploration is based on the findings of qualitative research into the long-term desistance experience of five former persistent and drug-addicted offenders based in Dublin involved in the 12-step Narcotics Anonymous and Cocaine Anonymous groups. Results indicate that narrative development through the 12-step programme parallels many of the features of narrative detailed in the desistance literature.

**Keywords:** Desistance, addiction recovery, life scripts, 12-step recovery, Dublin.

### **Introduction**

In recent years, the study of how and why former offenders desist from criminal behaviour has become a key topic in the criminological literature (see e.g. Maruna, 2001; Farrall and Calverley, 2007; Laub and Sampson, 2003). Central to this literature has been the idea of the role of self-narratives in promoting and sustaining desistance (see e.g. Burnett, 2004; Maruna, 2001, Vaughan, 2011). Maruna (2001, pp. 7–8) writes: ‘To successfully maintain this abstinence from crime, ex-offenders need ... a coherent and credible self-story to explain (to themselves and others) how their checkered pasts could have led to their new, reformed identities’. This new life script provides new values and beliefs that can

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navigate the offender to crime-free living despite the often overwhelming structural obstacles they face.

Questions remain about the construction of narrative and the adoption of a new life script by desisting individuals, however. What is involved in constructing a new script? Is it a solitary or a co-operative process? How does the script account for past misdeeds and simultaneously provide a framework for change?

Interestingly, the well-known 12-step programmes of Alcoholics Anonymous (see Appendix) and Narcotics Anonymous (1993), and similar mutual aid programmes, also focus a great deal on life scripts and provide a narrative template for the addict seeking recovery. At regular fellowship meetings, members in recovery are invited to share their stories and contribute to an atmosphere of recovery. These stories reinforce a sense of bonding and of common ailment between members, and the recovery programme is held up as a common solution for all to participate in. Newcomers are mentored by more established members and encouraged to request a sponsor to act as a guide through the 12-step process.

This paper will interrogate the core elements of the 12-step ‘script’ as internalised by a small sample of Dubliners in long-term recovery from serious addiction problems to explore the possible parallels between this 12-step narrative and the desistance narrative literature as outlined by Maruna (2001) and Vaughan (2007, 2011) in their criminological research. The findings suggest a great deal of overlap between these two literatures in the function that narrative performs in desistance from crime and recovery from addiction.

### **The role of narrative in desistance and recovery**

Narrative has played a key role in the understanding of desistance from crime as well as recovery from addiction. In the review below, I briefly summarise the two literatures.

#### *Narratives of desistance*

Self-narrative (or storytelling) has had a central place in the literature on desistance since at least the arguments in Shadd Maruna’s (2001) *Making Good*. For desisters, narrative is crucial not just for understanding the past; it is also thought to have ‘significant effects in the present and toward the future by eliciting appropriate emotional

responses that condition the agent's current dispositions' (Vaughan, 2007, p. 399). Indeed the likelihood of any offending person attaining and maintaining a crime-free status very much depends on developing a new identity, and new values and beliefs that are not compatible with offending (Burnett, 2004; Maruna, 2001; Vaughan, 2011). Narratives are said to provide a subjective account of meaning for significant life events and turning points. Often at least part myth, self narratives are thought to help people explain their actions and decipher their motivations. The self narrative of the ex-offender holds a version of the truth that is often quite different from historical truth (Maruna, 2001). This revised version of the past imbues an often quite horrific personal history with a sense of meaning and purpose. It is the psychological truth, rather than factual truth, of this narrative that provides the desister with the framework that will determine future behaviour (Maruna, 2001). In a study that focused entirely on religious conversions of incarcerated offenders, Maruna *et al.* (2006) found that the prisoners' self narrative was dramatically changed by their conversion experience. Once again this narrative provides a context for the offender's life, it helps make sense of the past and provides hope for the future, even among those serving very long sentences. A new social identity for the offender was created, as well as a sense of purpose, empowerment and forgiveness.

Barry Vaughan writes that the active offender has a minimal narrative, which 'is sparse and populated by the agent's own concerns whilst the perspective of others rarely intrudes' (Vaughan, 2011, p. 11). For an individual to attain and maintain desistance from crime he or she must engage in a narrative construction process that seeks to explain the past, and connect it to the present through a new life script. This is achieved through working with other people to develop this new self story that situates the person as an agentic actor in both the past and the present, and needs 'some form of moral reflection on past deeds', and 'an acknowledgement of the harm caused to other people through offending as the offender's narrative is opened up to other perspectives' (Vaughan, 2011, p. 4). The realisation of damage caused to others, and the realisation that it was he or she that caused the damage, can result from this intersubjective, and intrasubjective, reflection on life events. This serves to create a sense of ownership of past actions, but also a sense of distance as the actor commits to living according to new values. The emergence of this powerful new self understanding develops a script that considers offending no longer possible. The actor attains a sense of

personal action that takes the welfare of others into consideration, and provides new guidelines for behaviour. Therefore the offending behaviour is not considered as consistent with the new identity of the desisting individual.

In the Liverpool Desistance Study, Maruna (2001) sought to understand how changes in ex-offender identities allow for desistance by analysing the self narratives of two groups of offenders, one persisting and one desisting. The study found that persistent and desisting offenders have similar personality traits. Both groups are less agreeable and less conscientious than the general population. What separated the two groups was the self narratives that were revealed through qualitative research interviews. Active offenders had what Maruna (2001) termed a 'condemnation script'; that is, they saw life as a bleak and hostile experience. They considered themselves to be at the mercy of circumstances outside their control and were repelled by authority. Desisting ex-offenders had a vastly different view of themselves, their past and their present circumstances. They had created a self narrative that not only made offending no longer possible but also painted a very positive outlook for their future. This 'redemption script' is the belief that the individual is essentially good, and the past is a result of social exclusion and disadvantage. The ex-offender viewed himself, or herself, as the victim of both society and circumstance who became caught up in a vicious cycle of crime, addiction and recidivism. Now that they have managed to desist they can truly realise their good qualities and begin to live as they were always meant to live. These desisting ex-offenders believe that they are uniquely equipped with the skills and desire to help the next generation avoid going down the same path as they did. Maruna calls this mindset 'making good': the desister 'rewrites a shameful past into a necessary prelude to a productive and worthy life' (2001, p. 87). Among the LDS sample Maruna found a high degree of generative concern; generativity refers to the rehabilitative effects of work, either voluntary or vocational, and is 'a product of both inner drives and social demands' (Maruna, 2001, p. 118). From this perspective the desisting ex-offender needs to find a way to give back to society. Therefore any employment or voluntary work they may get involved in has to have depth and meaning to ensure continued engagement. The ex-addict who becomes an addiction counsellor, or the ex-offender who goes to work with troubled youth, is a well-known stereotype. This belief leads many ex-offenders to become counsellors or youth workers as they believe that

desisting or recovering people have a high level of wisdom to pass on to young people and active offenders. This moral superiority and refashioning of the life history is an attempt to make up for long stretches of lost life (Maruna, 2001). It also provides the desister with the opportunity to make restitution symbolically for past harms; gives a sense of legitimacy and fulfilment; and often has substantial therapeutic benefits.

#### *Narrative and spirituality in recovery*

Galanter *et al.* (2007) found that a sense of spiritual direction and growth was viewed by recovering people as more important to their lives than either employment or professional addiction treatment. Recovery is very much a subjective experience and these subjective developments may need to occur before structural turning points can aid the construction of a new and prosocial life course (LeBel *et al.*, 2008). Therefore it is likely that the study of spiritual beliefs and spiritual growth in desisters as one path to subjective development and change may be important for furthering our understanding of the desistance process, and, as Galanter *et al.* (2007, p. 263) state, ‘spirituality, however difficult to define in operational terms, likely constitutes an important motivator for recovery for some (perhaps many) substance-dependent people’. Additionally, Best *et al.* (2008), in a study of long-term abstinence from substance addiction, found that formal addiction treatment was not perceived by participants as an important factor in maintaining recovery. In fact, ‘for both achieving, and especially for maintaining, abstinence spiritual factors and “sober” support groups, associated with the 12 steps, were mentioned much more frequently’ (p. 623).

The 12-step programme seeks to diagnose the nature of the addiction in the individual as a spiritual disease or illness, and provide a clear set of recovery directions. The central belief of the programme is that the addict has lost all control over their substance-using behaviours, and efforts to moderate or stop on their own willpower are doomed to failure. Once the addict ingests a substance the phenomenon of craving is triggered and he or she cannot then regulate or stop usage:

We alcoholics are men and women who have lost the ability to control our drinking. We know that no real alcoholic ever recovers control. All of us felt at times that we were regaining control, but such intervals – usually brief – were inevitably followed by still less control, which led

in time to pitiful and incomprehensible demoralisation. (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 2001, p. 30)

The individual suffers from an obsession of the mind that will, when abstinent, lead him or her back to drug use. The addict, according to this belief system, cannot prevent the obsession to use from overpowering their thinking, and cannot control the craving that results from using the first substance. In addition the addict's life has become unmanageable, even if he or she remains abstinent. The addict is without defence against relapse; he or she cannot, of their own volition, prevent an addictive pattern of thought and behaviour from compelling them into further substance use. This is believed to be true even after long periods of chemical-free living; hence the need for spiritual reliance and spiritual regulation.

Addiction, as outlined in the 12-step literature, is a disease of selfishness and concern with self. All the individual's life problems – including criminal justice sanctions, broken relationships and employment problems – stem from this self-focused existence:

Selfishness – self centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. Driven by a hundred forms of fear, self delusion, self seeking, and self pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate. (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 2001, p. 62)

The programme of recovery involves a thorough reflection of their past actions and life circumstances, as well as a commitment to a new set of prosocial values and beliefs. Among the most important of these new values and beliefs are the willingness to make restitution for past harms, a commitment to guide newcomers through the 12-step programme, and an acceptance of spiritual guidance as indicated by the surrender of self-will involved in the first three steps.

While Cashwell *et al.* (2009) point out that this surrender of the first three steps can lead to an externalisation of responsibility for desistance and recovery, and therefore to a place of stagnation and inaction, the 12-step literature cautions against such events. The admission of powerlessness over one's life, and the surrender of will and life in the first three steps, could appear as abdicating responsibility and casting positive human social action to the wayside. Appearances can, however, be deceptive, and engaging with what can seem to the desister as

unorthodox ideas can require a great deal of determination and commitment. Approximately one quarter of the ‘Big Book’<sup>1</sup> is dedicated to explaining the concepts behind the first step, and emphasises the determined action that is needed for recovery to be achieved and maintained. Of this process Maruna (2001, p. 150) states that ‘This apparent contradiction (giving up control in order to be free) should still be seen as agentic in nature – the person freely chooses to give over his or her life to God’. Bruner (1987, p. 31) argues that narratives do not change easily and ‘perhaps a metaphysical change is required to alter the narratives that we have settled upon as “being” our lives’. Acceptance of the quite radical concepts of the first three steps may qualify as such an event.

The identification of the addiction as a spiritual disease or illness, and the belief that it never leaves and always has the potential to re-emerge and manifest in a return to substance use, infers an alternative source of agentic power within the addict. Pertrunik and Shearing (1988), in their investigation of the subjective experience of stuttering, found a similar sense of the otherness of the behaviour, and indeed suggested that the following framework could be used for understanding many other psychological and behavioural abnormalities:

the self is experienced as consisting not only of an ‘I’ and ‘Me’, but as an ‘I’, a ‘Me’ and an ‘It’. This ‘It’ is for them every bit as real as the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’. Like ‘I’ it is a source of action but one which is both independent of and antagonistic towards the ‘I’. (Petrunik and Shearing, 1988, p. 442)

Petrunik and Shearing (1988, p. 441) state that this isn’t a multiple personality type situation; rather it’s an unwanted part of the self experienced as ‘an alien source of agency’ that periodically takes control of the individual’s actions.

White (2001) provides an excellent account of the arguments for and against the 12-step addiction recovery model, some of which are relevant here. Craving and powerlessness have no scientific basis, according to one prominent strand of criticism, and are an illusion of 12-step ideology (White, 2001, p. 6). Addiction, from this perspective, is simply a learned

<sup>1</sup> The fond name for the basic text of the Alcoholics Anonymous fellowship.

behaviour and addicts choose to use chemicals. Therefore the power of choice resides firmly within the limits of the addict's will. Furthermore the incurable sickness, or disease concept, is an excuse for socially deviant and personally destructive behaviour, and the 12-step fellowships replace dependence on chemicals with dependence on like-minded people. Some criticisms have gone so far as to claim that 12-step fellowships are merely cults. The debate that surrounds the 12-step model of addiction recovery is often impassioned and acrimonious, and 'is a debate not just about ideas, but about the future of personal and professional lives as well as institutions and communities' (White, 2001, p. 2).

### **The study**

This paper reflects the findings of a small qualitative investigation into the lived experience of five long-term desisters. The participants, five white Irish males living in Dublin, had maintained desistance from crime for a minimum period of 10 years. Each participant was also addicted to illegal narcotics; that is, they used Class A drugs on an almost daily basis during their offending careers. The interviewees in this study are not representative of desisters as a whole; rather they enable an exploration of the lived experiences of a small group of desisting offenders to whom the researcher had privileged access. Purposive sampling was used because long-term desisting ex-offenders are a specific group and therefore the paper's focus is very clearly defined. The author has worked in the community and voluntary sector in Dublin and was able to access participants through community-based organisations. Indeed, all participants were known to the author for a number of years.

Insider status has been identified as having advantages and potential disadvantages regarding the quality of information collected and the analysis of data. Validity of this research project, therefore, depended on the researcher understanding the impact of insider status, and minimising any potential negative effects. The possible epistemological and ontological criticisms that can be levelled against insider research can be challenged by the postmodernist researcher's rejection of the idea that there is one objective truth waiting to be discovered. This school of thought claims that all research is affected by the historical, cultural and social backgrounds of the researchers regardless of the methods used (Hammersley *et al.*, 1997; cited in Rooney, 2005). Therefore validity is

not a straightforward concept, and, according to Norman Denzin, should be replaced by concepts such as credibility, confirmability and dependability (Denzin *et al.*, 2000; cited in Rooney, 2005). Therefore every effort was made to realise the advantages of insider research, such as accessing rich and authentic data, and the elimination of social distance and obstacles faced by outsiders, while avoiding the potential pitfalls of over-rapport, role confusion, and data analysis tainted by similar social and political backgrounds (Hodkinson, 2005; Rooney, 2005). The successful management of insider research, therefore, depends on being able to step back and 'view the familiar as strange' (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 145).

Each participant was chosen because he met the criteria identified by the author, drawing on the relevant desistance literature, for long-term desistance. Firstly he had to meet the definition of career criminal as set out by Maruna (2001); that is, he had to have a significant number of years of persistent criminal offending in his past. Secondly he had to be in long-term desistance from crime: in this case a 10-year minimum was chosen.

Qualitative research methods were used for this paper, specifically semi-structured interviews. Each participant was interviewed for approximately 90 minutes. Three interviews took place in the homes of the participants and two in the home of the researcher. In four of the interviews a tape recorder was used to record data. The data from the tape-recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher verbatim. The data were then analysed to identify key concepts and recurring themes in the participants' answers. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for comparability between answers when analysing the data.

This project represents only the second desistance study carried out in Dublin to date. Healy (2010) investigated the psychosocial factors associated with primary desistance; that is, the earliest stages of desistance. While the sample for this paper is obviously small, some compensation is provided by the very rich data, as well as by the fact that, as Maruna (2001) indicates, it is very difficult to research long-term and 'pure' desisters at this level because not many exist, and those that do are not readily available to researchers. Likewise, Best *et al.* (2008, p. 624) found that recruiting participants for studies of long-term substance use recovery was 'intrinsically problematic' as people in this group have new lives and new identities, and therefore may not wish to expose their past.

The long history of criminal offending reported by participants, as well as the quality of their desistance, place them in a difficult-to-reach and quite small sample. As Piquero (2004) notes, most ex-offenders may display a genuine desire to change but instead tend to drift in and out of desistance.

## Findings

Participants in this study had developed a new sense of identity consistent with the narrative script they encountered through the 12-step fellowships and literatures. The primary identity claimed by each individual related to addiction recovery, and maintaining desistance from crime was dependent on continued successful recovery from addiction. Acceptance of the diagnostic criteria of addiction as a state of powerlessness, and of the need to examine their past in order to maintain desistance and recovery, was evident. Addiction was viewed as incurable and even in abstinence could manifest in daily attitudinal and behavioural problems. Finally, the need to make restitution for past harms, and to support their own recovery through generative pursuits, was very evident from the data.

### *Addiction as a lack of power*

All the participants claimed that the initial decision to attend a 12-step fellowship came from a sense of desperation engendered by mental and physical collapse:

*I was forced to stop, the decision to stay stopped came later. I was mentally breaking down, crime escalated to a level I couldn't handle and there were moments of truth where I wondered how it had come to this. (Participant 4)*

The experience of attending the fellowship meetings was, for these men, the first step on the road to recovery from addiction. One stated:

*I learned for the first time in my life that there was another way to live, rather than just taking drugs. I didn't know that, I'd never heard that before, so seeing other people do it created my desire to stay clean. (Participant 2)*

Gaining an understanding of the powerlessness and unmanageability as outlined in the 12-step literature highlighted the seriousness of their

predicament. Furthermore, the diagnostic process of the first step instilled a deep belief that having a substance-free and healthy future very much depended on continued participation in 12-step fellowships and programme. This diagnostic process, as outlined in the literature review above, speaks of the perceived incurable nature of addiction and an inexorable descent towards relapse if the principles and actions of the programme are not accepted as the cornerstones of a new life:

*I know I have a great life ahead of me as long as I stay connected to the fellowships and to God. I will always be an addict but the programme means I don't have to live as a junkie. I can live free as long as I remember to work this programme. (Participant 1)*

Step 2 asks the addict to be open to the idea of a power greater than themselves that can aid them in their recovery. Step 3 builds on this spiritual foundation by asking the addict to place their will and their lives, understood as their thoughts and actions, into the care of a loving and compassionate spiritual power. According to participants, this acceptance of a higher power in their life, and the values of honesty, openmindedness and willingness that are emphasised by this step, has a profound effect on their sense of purpose and identity. Through spiritual practice they believe they can access the power to abstain from addictive behaviours and live a productive and crime-free life:

*You can't live with a spiritual mind and use God's power to keep you clean, and still offend and go around smashing people's faces in and robbing houses and cars. It's impossible, so the chance of offending with me is zero. (Participant 5)*

The primary way the individual can demonstrate this decision to commit to a new set of values and behaviours is to pursue immediately the moral inventory involved in Step 4.

#### *Clearing the fog*

The fourth step, inventory, requires the individual to account fearlessly for their past, and especially to seek to understand their own role in the events and circumstances of their lives thus far. Special emphasis is placed on harm caused to others, and on the internal dynamics that drove the actor's behaviour. Resentment and fear are identified in the 12-

step literature as the addict's biggest enemies, and these untamed forces are viewed as the driving forces behind seemingly irrational cycles of behaviour. 'Resentment is the "number one" offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else. From it stem all forms of spiritual disease' (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 2001, p. 65). The data in this study revealed that this understanding of past motivations was critical to participants' ability to navigate through the initial stages of recovery:

*Going through the steps removed the big monster of shame that I had lived with. I understood why I had done the things I done and what made me tick. It was so much about fear, anger, and resentment had driven me all my life. (Participant 3)*

The inventory is a written exercise in which the addict accounts for all current and past relationships, episodes of violence, theft, damage to property, sexual harms, and literally anything that can be placed under the umbrella of 'harm to others or oneself'. This often difficult and time-consuming exercise is designed to allow the addict to see the exact nature of their past life and deeds. This is achieved through Step 5, which is an examination of the inventory with a fellowship mentor or sponsor:

*I now see exactly what I took from people, I see that physically beating someone took something from them, taking someone's dole money every week to buy drink and drugs, making people sell drugs for me, intimidating and bullying people, these things I did really fucked people up. (Participant 3)*

In this step the addict makes an admission that this is their past, and seeks to bare all in an exercise of honesty. The fourth and fifth steps of the process also provide the addict with a previously unimagined level of self-knowledge and self-awareness; indeed participants in this study strongly expressed the personal development they achieved through the stocktaking of their past:

*I was a victim myself, I only acted in a way I was shown how to act. Now that I'm after being shown another way I've no excuse now, now if I act in the wrong fashion it's because I choose to act in the wrong fucking fashion, and I have to suffer the consequences and step up to the mark and ask myself why I done that. (Participant 2)*

Involvement in criminal activity was viewed as inseparable from addiction: the two behaviours overlapped and interacted. Despite all men stating that they had been involved in offending before they became addicted to narcotics, all also stated that the majority of their crimes were to facilitate their continued drug use:

*The crime fed the drugs, the drugs fed the habit, and the habit had to be fed.*  
(Participant 2)

Through this inventory process the negative characteristics of the formerly addicted person, or character defects, are identified and listed. From the 12-step perspective these character defects are regular human instincts and characteristics that have been magnified and warped by spiritual illness. These defects manifest in a series of negative and antisocial attitudes and behaviours that further push the individual into an abnormal social and psychological state. Defects may include, for example, pride, lust, self-centredness, spite, rage and greed. The goal is to see clearly the role that these defects had in constructing the past events of their lives, and to help the individual develop a sense of personal responsibility for past, present and future actions. A commitment to a new set of prosocial values and behaviours is deepened through the monitoring of these defects through the rituals of Steps 6 and 7. Only a higher power can remove these defects according to the 12-step literature, and any attempt to try to control one's future behaviour is doomed to failure; past mistakes will be repeated and the end result will be a return to substance addiction:

*Fear can motivate and that can be dangerous. It's so important to keep my mind straight because circumstances can sometimes dictate and fear can make you do things.* (Participant 1)

Twelve-step literature is deeply infused with values that encourage concern for others. Indeed, the proposed remedy for the illness of selfishness and self-centredness is constant thought of others. This gains momentum in Step 8, where a list of people to whom harm has been caused is drawn up. Step 9 is the action of making amends. Amends can be for a varied range of harms, from financial to sexual, or mental to physical. The men in this sample, under the guidance of the literature and a sponsor, sought to cause no further harm while making these amends and emphasised the necessity of facing up to their past misdeeds:

*Actually going to people and saying sorry, giving back money, trying to make up for being really violent to someone, was really difficult but it made me feel like I was finally growing up to be the kind of person I want to be. (Participant 5)*

This amends process was understood by these men as existing for the benefit of the people harmed, to help restore peace of mind to family, friends, ex-employers, or community members in general.

### *Recovery as maintenance*

*I began to realise that I may never get caught, I became unwilling to take the chance of getting caught and I was willing to do terrible things to people so I would not get caught. I don't wanna go back to that fucking life, and if doing these steps keeps me clean then grand, I will do them. (Participant 1)*

The final three steps are designed to maintain the recovered state of the addict. Step 10 instructions include the taking of a written daily inventory 'to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment, and fear' (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 2001, p. 84). Effectively this is a miniature daily version of Steps 4 through to 9; inventory to be taken, defects to be watched for, amends to be made where necessary. Participants stated that they could avoid the internal build-up of resentments and fear, and could remain free of guilt and shame through righting wrongs. The prayer and reflection through meditation of Step 11 was an additional practice that helped maintain a sense of balance and health in their daily lives. Their personal relationships and general quality of life are enhanced through practice of these rituals:

*My place in society is normal to me now. I pay tax, a mortgage, I do normal things, I take it for granted. But I always feel a bit different; I seem to struggle more than others. It's all about my frame of mind, if I don't have my mental or emotional side looked after I don't feel like a member of any society, I feel like a fucking alien, like I did when I was a kid. (Participant 3)*

The twelfth step demonstrates the importance of helping others that permeates the 12-step philosophy. Sponsorship is the foundation on which the fellowships grow, and the sponsors' purpose is to guide the

newcomer through the steps. Participants in this study took this direction very seriously and expressed a high degree of generative concern for new members. All identified using their experience to work with others whom they feel could benefit as an important part of their lives. All participants carry out this work on a voluntary basis within a 12-step fellowship, and one participant in his paid work as a youth worker. Indeed three participants identified it as the most important aspect of their lives and crucial to their continued development. Giving back was identified as a way to make amends to actual individuals who were damaged or hurt through their criminal activities. It is not possible to make personal amends to victims who are now deceased, or are unknown to participants. One participant stated:

*I will never be able to fix all the harm I have done, or apologise to all the people I have hurt, but I can try to fix it by passing on what I now know about life to a young fella who needs to hear it. Maybe that could stop him creating another fifty victims. (Participant 2)*

All participants stated that they obtain a great sense of value and self-worth from working with other people. A great sense of power and effectiveness deriving from the ability to potentially affect the course of a family's life by steering an individual in the right direction was clear:

*There's nothing greater than seeing someone recover in front of you, who was hopeless for a long time and who was destined to die on the streets or in prison. To see them recover and be free from the living hell that they have lived for years, that's a huge part of my life. (Participant 5)*

This was also experienced as proof of how far they have moved away from their old way of living and provided a marker of change, and could be viewed as part of a process of de-labelling and stigma management:

*When I got clean first I had fuck all to give to anyone, I had three kids and I couldn't sit them on my knee because I thought I was fucking contagious, I was just scum. I was the type didn't care about anyone or anything, I was a bad bastard and it might rub off on them. Now it has got to the stage where I know I have loads to give. (Participant 1)*

Most especially, the emotional and psychological benefits that were obtained by participants from helping others were emphasised strongly

by each individual interviewed. There was a consensus that this work was vital to their continued successful desistance. When they ease up on this work or take a break from it, personal problems mount, coping skills weaken and their desire to remain crime- and drug-free becomes more difficult to sustain. Indeed, participants stated that their very survival depends on continued work with others:

*When I stop practising my programme my life seems to go out the window and I don't have any willingness or desire to live anymore, I lose my passion for life. So helping others is the key to recovery for me, I can't function without it. (Participant 5)*

All stated that this attitude needed to be cultivated and practised throughout their daily life, including in their places of work and family settings. Once again the rationale behind this attitude is to keep their focus off themselves, and therefore to prevent a descent into selfishness:

*I want to be the best I can be and treat people right, because not only do people deserve that but I need to do it to stay clean you know. (Participant 2)*

## **Discussion**

The narrative presented to the desisting offender and substance-free addict through the 12 steps fulfils many of the functions of narrative as outlined in the criminological literature. Vaughan's (2011) argument that the active offender has a minimalist narrative that doesn't include the perspectives of others (see also Maruna, 2001) can be viewed a comparable to the 12-step diagnosis of addiction as a manifestation of selfishness and concern with self. Vaughan (2011) proposes that the solution to this state of being is the expansion of narrative through moral reflection on past deeds. Through this process, undertaken with significant others, the actor realises their role in the past; accepts responsibility for the damage they caused; and possibly for the first time in their lives is able to take account of the perspectives and welfare of other people. Through the engagement of the inventory of the fourth step the men in this sample undertook a moral reflection and personal stocktaking that expanded their narrative, situated them clearly in the events of their lives, and created a tangible sense of remorse and

commitment to new values. Moreover, this opportunity for them to discover the influences on their development and the effect they had on their world provided the critical link between the past and the present that is necessary for narrative construction (Maruna, 2011; Maruna and Roy, 2007; Vaughan, 2007).

In Maruna's 'redemption script' the desisters believed that their past was meant to be, and that it was necessary for their current level of wisdom and generative skills. While none of the participants in this study viewed their past in such positive terms, they were grateful that they were able to refashion and reinterpret their past through the 12-step process. The generative work, as expressed by the sample, carried out in the spirit of the twelfth step met the criteria of the functions of generative pursuits among desisters as outlined by Maruna (2001). All claimed that it was an opportunity to make restitution for past harms; it provided a great sense of self-worth and fulfilment; and indeed was viewed as crucial to their continued desistance and recovery. The desire, or more accurately the need, to reach continually for personal growth was voiced by each interviewee, and growth could be best obtained by helping others. In light of the primacy of helping others identified in the 12-step literature, it is extremely interesting that this work has been identified by criminologists as being one of the crucial ingredients for sustaining long-term desistance from crime.

The five men in this study expressed clearly the experience of addiction as a powerful force that compels them to act against their better judgement. They spoke of using drugs even when they really didn't want to, once again a reflection of the concepts of Step 1. Moreover, this sense of a separate force within their being persisted long after abstinence was achieved, hence the need for the daily practice of all the 12 steps. Emphasis was placed on the need to follow actively the guidelines of the programme to ensure a balanced emotional and psychological state.

The character defects that result from not actively pursuing this sense of balance resonate with Petrunik and Shearing's (1988) concept of an alien source of agency. The emergence of addictive and self-destructive thoughts and behaviours that are beyond the control of the individual was evident in the life stories of these men. Agency and conscious thought focused on self, and self-seeking behaviours, experienced as an unwanted inner drive, appeared. The generative work outlined in Step 12 directly addresses this issue of selfishness, and seems invaluable in keeping the sense of recovery and empowerment alive. In other words,

applying the principles of the programme and taking the suggested action provides relief from the experience of the addiction as an alternative source of agency. Indeed, the entire 12-step programme seeks to identify this agentic drive, referred to as a spiritual illness or disease in step literature, and to provide a thorough understanding of how it has affected the person in the past and present. The inventory process that is a vital component of this represents not only an admission of responsibility for past actions, but also an expression of desire and intent not to repeat the harms of the past.

The daily coping tools of the sixth and seventh steps gave the men in this sample the power to live relatively free of the character defects that they saw as damaging to their lives. The deeper admission of fallibility required in Step 7 is also a deeply personal redemption ritual where the addict sincerely asks for their perceived character defects to be removed. Of course, as the step literature states, the defects are not removed permanently. Instead they are relieved on a daily basis as long as the recovery rituals of the 12 steps are maintained. The eighth and ninth steps bring this sense of personal redemption to a new level, as the study participants often made face-to-face amends to people and institutions they have hurt, deceived, betrayed and robbed. Amends rituals include 'expressions of remorse and repentance by those who are responsible for the harm' (Maruna, 2011, p. 21), and require a huge level of sincere agentic action. For these men the amends process was the beginning of redemption, and followed the ritual of surrender started in the earlier steps. Twelve-step practice is replete with ritual and, as Maruna (2011) points out, ritual is crucial for the reintegration of offenders and the personal redemption of those who had previously shunned society's norms and were ostracised and punished as a result.

In summary, 12-step programmes provide a narrative template to persons entering recovery from addictions; they situate the person within a story that makes sense of an otherwise chaotic and often tragic life course. Nevertheless this narrative should not be considered as a ready-made life script that can be easily adopted by all. Rather the 12-step programme can be viewed as a narrative-building process, with each step providing tools to construct a new life script. Tools by themselves are of no value, so the desire to use these tools must be present, or nurtured, within the individual. This nurturing can be provided by significant others in the individual's life (Vaughan, 2011) or, as Maruna (2001) indicates, a mentor or community of like-minded people. The 12-step

programme embedded within the community of the 12-step fellowships should therefore be understood as one possible avenue for desisting offenders to re-story and rebuild their lives.

### **Appendix: The 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous**

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. We made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. We admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. We humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practise these principles in all our affairs.

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