'Learning the Basics of How to Live': Ex-prisoners' Accounts of Doing Desistance*

Vicky Seaman and Orla Lynch†

Summary: In recent years desistance has come to be understood as a life-course process, and has in some instances been compared to the journey out of addiction: a process of recovery. Importantly, desistance is not conceived of as a definitive point in time whereby an offender becomes a non-offender, but as a series of decisions and associated actions that increasingly move a person further away from a life of crime, with relapses common along the way. This paper is concerned with the idea of *doing* desistance; not in terms of the delineation of the process, but in the *experience* of those voluntarily embarking on a desistance journey. Through the analysis of the accounts of ex-prisoners engaged with the Cork Alliance Centre (CAC), the paper explores the personal and social experiences of clients as they reflect on their engagement with CAC. Through a thematic analysis of interview data, key higher order themes emerged: shame, the notion of a new life, relationship management, identity, mental health, hope, trust and safety. Results of this analysis reveal that intangible issues dominate ex-prisoners' understanding of their desistance journey.

Keywords: Desistance, ex-prisoner, release, resettlement, reintegration, relapse, Probation, prison, shame, identity, mental health, hope, Cork.

Introduction

Glaser laid down a challenge to the emerging discipline of criminology in 1964 by suggesting that the field should shift its focus away from the 'search for the processes that make for persistence in crime to [the] development [of] a theory on the conditions that promote change from crime to noncrime and back again' (cited in Maruna, 2001: 22). Glaser

*The opinions expressed in this paper are the authors' own and may not reflect the views of Cork Alliance Centre (CAC) or their funding bodies.
†Vicky Seaman is a Support Worker with CAC and a PhD candidate in Criminology at University College Cork. Dr Orla Lynch is a Lecturer in Criminology at the Department of Sociology, UCC (email: Orla.lynch@ucc.ie).

was in effect describing what has become known as the study of desistance, an undulating process that documents an individual's often tortuous and intricate move from offending to non-offending (Weaver and McNeill, 2007).

In recent years desistance has come to be understood as a life-course process, and has in some instances been compared to the journey out of addiction: a process of recovery (Maruna, 2001). Importantly, desistance is not conceived of as a definitive point in time whereby an offender becomes a non-offender, but as a series of decisions and associated actions that increasingly move an individual further away from a life of crime, with relapses common along the way (Maruna, 2001; Weaver and McNeill, 2007).

This paper aims to understand the experience of *doing desistance* for clients of a project in Cork, Ireland known as the Cork Alliance Centre (CAC). In addition, it aims to elucidate the role of CAC in supporting the desistance process of its clients. Cork is a region in the south of Ireland with over 500,000 inhabitants (CSO, 2016) served by a small male prison with an occupancy of 210 (Irish Prison Service, 2016). Female prisoners are held in one of two dedicated prisons (or wings) in other areas of the country (Irish Prison Service, 2014).

Funding for the CAC is provided by the Department of Justice and Equality through the Probation Service and the Irish Prison Service. CAC works with former prisoners with a view to reducing the likelihood of reoffending in addition to encouraging and enabling positive participation in family and community life. A primary focus of CAC is to facilitate the person on a journey of personal development, whereby they can explore alternatives to offending behaviours and develop skills to manage their lives more positively. Services available at CAC include, but are not limited to, one-to-one support and motivation work, in-house psychotherapy services, access to education, training and employment opportunities, access to housing support, support with access to addiction treatment services and alternative therapies. There are four full-time staff (CAC, 2014). In 2014, 330 people (87% male and 13% female) accessed services provided at the centre (CAC, 2014).

The clients who use the centre do so voluntarily. An in-reach service to prisons in Cork, Limerick, Portlaoise and Shelton Abbey provides an opportunity to introduce CAC to potential clients returning to the Cork area. Referrals come through the Probation Service, the Irish Prison Service, self-referrals, family members and other professional services. For

this paper, research was conducted with ex-prisoners who were clients of CAC with a view to understanding their evaluation and experience of their desistance journey.

Desistance: An overview

Maguire and Raynor (2006) recognise the complexity of social needs among ex-prisoners, particularly those serving short sentences. They refer to the fact that ex-prisoners struggle continuously to overcome social and structural barriers, a process that seriously undermines a person's motivation for change as well as limiting the options available to them. This analysis accurately reflects the situation of ex-prisoners in the Irish context.

In Ireland, 60% of people serving short sentences have a history of homelessness. Overall, prisoners in Ireland are 25 times more likely to come from, and be released back into, a socio-economically deprived area (Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT), 2016). A 2014 study by the National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol (NACDA) shows that the prevalence of drug use among the Irish prison population is significantly higher than that of the general population, with cannabis use at 86%, benzodiazepines at 68%, cocaine at 74% and heroin at 43% (NACDA, 2014: 53). Education levels are low among the prison population, the majority of whom have not sat a state examination and over half of whom left school before the age of 15 (IPRT, 2016). In Ireland 70% of prisoners are unemployed on committal and do not report having any occupation or trade (IPRT, 2016).

The ex-prisoner faces complex personal and social challenges. While these challenges have been documented in the international literature, desistance is inherently local. Supporting desistance involves a nuanced understanding of the dynamics that sustain and potentially encourage the move away from crime in a local area, as 'choices are always influenced by the structural, situational, and cultural contexts in which they are made as well as the background characteristics of the individuals who make them' (Healy, 2010: 439).

While the personal and social needs of ex-prisoners along with access to local services dictate the *trajectory* of a person's desistance journey, the process of desistance is informed by the significant body of work that exists within the disciplines of sociology and criminology addressing offending and crime (Sampson and Laub, 1999; McCulloch and McNeill, 2008;

Bateman and Pits, 2005; Kazemain, 2007; Piquero *et al.*, 2007). Many theories serve to inform our understanding of offending, from the maturational reform theory, focusing on the physical and cognitive changes that happen as a person ages and contribute to a reduction in the likelihood of criminal behaviour (Glueck and Glueck, 1974, cited in Crank, 2014) to social bonds theory, advocating that normative social processes, such as employment or marriage, encourage 'conformity' (Bushway *et al.*, 2001).

While both these theories offer insights into the emergence of non-offending, they do little to inform us *how* either maturation or the development of appropriate relationships is linked to the choice to desist from crime (Geiger, 2006; IPRT, 2012). Recognising this, other theories focus on the process of change itself. Giordano *et al.*'s (2002) theory of cognitive transformation focuses on openness to change, particularly a person's ability to imagine and construct a new identity.

Narrative theory applied to the study of desistance seeks to understand the personal development journey a person takes when trying to effect change in their lives. Maruna (2001) has examined the *narrative* tools used by people who desist from crime compared with those who persist in offending. He refers to identity development in adulthood, and how it involves 'integrating one's perceived past, present, and anticipated future' (2001: 7) in order to give meaning and purpose to life. Maruna highlights that for ex-offenders to move forward with change, they have to 'develop a coherent, prosocial identity' (2001: 7). They do this by gaining an understanding of why they committed crimes in their past, and reconciling this with the person they are today and want to be in the future (Maruna, 2001).

Learning a new way of living is how a person 'does desistance' (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006; McNeill and Weaver, 2010; McNeill *et al.*, 2012). Desistance from crime is not the only goal for that person, nor can it be separated from all of the other goals that person aspires to (Maguire and Raynor, 2006). The process is complex, dynamic and often unpredictable. Desistance involves developing soft skills including introspection, problem solving, communication skills and relationship building (McNeill and Weaver, 2010; McNeill *et al.*, 2012). It is a process in which some of the most important aspects are intangible and difficult to evaluate (Maruna, 2001; Barry, 2007).

An important element in the desistance process is the understanding of the process of re-entry into society that accompanies release from prison. Increasingly, re-entry and reintegration are receiving attention in

the academic sphere; however, theoretically the area is significantly under-researched (Maruna *et al.*, 2011). Desistance is an invisible process; mainstream society is ignorant of the realities of the journey (Maruna, 2011). Labelling, identity denial, stigma and ostracisation are issues for ex-prisoners and point to the necessary role of mainstream society in supporting those engaged in the process of desistance. Often the inability of ex-prisoners to access and be accepted by local communities is a significant barrier to progression (Healy, 2012).

In an effort to understand the complex process of desistance for clients at CAC, this paper presents the analysis of data drawn from interviews. Based on a thematic analysis of the data, key higher order themes are presented and discussed.

Methodology

The research for this paper was conducted with ex-prisoners who voluntarily engaged with CAC. There were nine participants in total, six male and three female. They ranged in age from 32 to 47 years, and the length of time since release from prison ranged from 12 weeks to 11 years. The participants' most recent prison sentences ranged in duration from three months to five years. Participants had engaged with CAC for a minimum of three months. Sexual offenders were not included in this study as they are not clients at CAC.

The interview data were collected by a staff member of CAC who has a support worker role in the centre. None of the participants were clients of the interviewer. Unstructured interviews were conducted with the participants in a meeting room at CAC.

The study was advertised using a poster displayed in CAC seeking volunteers to take part in research concerning their experience of desistance. Consent was secured in writing and participants were informed that their interview would be anonymised and stored as mandated by University College Cork's Ethics Committee. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants were informed that follow-up support was available through their allocated support worker in CAC and that they could withdraw at any time.

A thematic analysis of the interview data was conducted; the transcripts were coded by hand in a line-by-line process. Particular themes emerged from the coding process and are presented in the results and discussion below.

Ethical approval for this project was given by the Department of Sociology in UCC and CAC. Of ethical significance was the dual role of the researcher as an academic researcher and CAC staff member. As this could impact on the research process, care was taken to ensure that the researcher did not interview any current or former personal clients. In addition, coding was conducted by two people, with an inter-rater reliability measure of over 90%.

There are limitations to the generalisability of the findings of this study. The sample is small, limited to a specific geographic area and is not a representative sample of the ex-prisoner population. The findings are consistent with existing literature and, as such, demonstrate the universality of post-prison needs and also the impact of local experiences and access to services in the process of desistance.

Results and discussion

Desistance, turning points and agency

> *It's like starting over, pressing a reset button and starting all over again in life, learning the basics of how to live.* (Participant A)

As discussed briefly above, desistance is not just about ending criminal behaviour (Maruna, 2001; McNeill *et al.*, 2012); it is a dramatic lifestyle change in which the person has to learn to live in a completely different way, focusing on 'the maintenance of crime free behaviour in the face of life's obstacles and frustrations' (Maruna, 2001: 26). Choosing to end criminal behaviour means making a lot of new, difficult and challenging life choices.

Participants in this study emphasised the process of dealing with the lifestyle changes that accompany their choice to cease offending. As a starting point, the participants spoke about the after-effects of incarceration. They reflected on the impact prison had, not only on their own lives but also on the lives of their families. This impact overshadowed attempts at a *new life* due to the need to manage existing relations with family and friends while coping with the influence of their imprisonment on these relationships.

> *The biggest thing for me emotionally when I came out of prison would have been trying to deal with the impact of being in prison, how it affected my family, the guilt, the shame.* (Participant F)

In addition to the negative experiences associated with incarceration, participants spoke about how, in some cases, imprisonment served to provoke reflection on their problem behaviours. Incarceration was constructed (retrospectively) as a key turning point at which the person sought to initiate personal change.

> *And in a strange way really, going to jail was a blessing in disguise … it was really a wake-up call for me in that like … I realised as well like, this isn't where I'm supposed to be.* (Participant E)

Soyer (2013) points out a discord between academic perspectives on the negative life-course impact of incarceration and the ex-prisoner view of the experience as a turning point. While incarceration can lead to both positive and negative experiences for the people involved, it is worth bearing in mind that the reconstruction of life stories in the aftermath of a process of personal change can often be unrelated to the event as it was experienced at the time. Individuals can reimagine experiences in light of their new post-prison identity and seek to make meaning of past events in a coherent manner. Sampson and Laub (2004: 2) say that 'turning points' such as prison are not enough to explain desistance, and that turning points and opportunities are dependent of the person's capacity for 'purposeful human agency'.

Agency can be defined as 'a dynamic interaction between the person and their social world that is directed towards the achievement of a meaningful and credible new self' (Healy, 2014: 874). Healy (2014) explains that people cannot be categorised as either possessing or lacking agency but rather exist on a continuum of readiness for change, with the potential for personal development and agentic action that is most likely to be activated when the 'imagined [future] self is perceived as both meaningful and credible' (Healy, 2014: 873).

For participants the process of desistance was described as a *maze*, involving many steps and many diversions along the way. Navigating the path of desistance was limited by the options available and the suitability of these options for the individual. Giordano *et al.* (2002) talk about *readiness* for change being concurrent with *hooks* for change in order to encourage sustained behaviour modification. Finding and choosing the *right* hook is key. One participant talked about desistance as a maze of choices, with only some of those choices leading to something tangible:

It's a maze. And I reckon it's a maze with about 10 different parts, and I think five of them are dead ends and five of them there's something maybe there. (Participant C)

In addition to the successes, be they by chance or by choice, the process almost inevitably involves relapse to addiction, reoffending and associated problem behaviours. Perhaps ironically, participants described the possibility of progress as occurring simultaneously with the likelihood of relapse. During what they described as a turbulent time, a key issue was consistency. Many participants spoke of CAC's capacity to provide the very necessary but basic support of consistency, which involved a physical space to visit, a dedicated individual support worker and time to figure out their path.

Participants referred to the *continuity of support* in particular as a positive experience in their engagement with CAC. Having someone to talk to was a key issue. In addition, developing a sense of personal awareness was recalled as a significant benefit for participants, particularly the development of thinking skills, problem-solving skills and the ability to reflect on one's own choices. In effect, they were speaking of the positive impact of psycho-education on their daily lives (Smith *et al.*, 2006).

If you're to change you need to know why you're doing what you do … If I'm not aware of what's … of why I'm doing what I do, I'll never understand why I do what I do. And this is key to why this place works for me. (Participant E)

A participant spoke about the enormous impact that learning how to work through problems had on her day-to-day life.

By the time you leave [the CAC] … there's always, y'know there's a circuit around the problem. You feel a lot more better: I often came in here suicidal and I come out and I'm right, it's not that bad. (Participant I)

Shame, relationships and the post-prison experience
When reflecting on their experience of desistance, shame was a constant feature in the participants' accounts. This sense of shame was linked to their status as an ex-prisoner, the crimes they had committed, their problems with addiction, their inability to get or keep a job, their lack of education and the impact their behaviour had on family members. Shame

as a barrier to progress was a recurring theme, in their unwillingness to *expose* themselves and their personal histories through engagement outside a very small community but also as a fundamental feeling of lack of self-worth. Maruna (2001) reflects on the all-encompassing sense of shame experienced by ex-offenders: 'being ashamed of an isolated act or two is one thing, but it is a quite different thing to be ashamed of one's entire past identity, of who one used to be' (Maruna, 2001: 143).

Participant A described his process of moving beyond shame:

A lot of that was born out of shame and I suppose not taking responsibility and stuff like that. Being able to talk about it and being able to recognise it is very important … that's what Cork Alliance has done to me, it takes away the shame. (Participant A)

Another key theme that emerged was the centrality of relationships in the participant's progress. The ex-prisoners spoke of people they knew as a result of their life in prison or through offending, and separately spoke of new and developing relationships that emerged since they chose to desist from crime.

There was a tension around relationships formed *before* choosing desistance. Many times participants spoke of the *risk* of continuing a relationship with peers whom they met in prison or prior to their imprisonment. For many reasons, existing relationships were expressed as problematic. On one hand, seeing friends relapse into addiction or return to prison was emotionally taxing; on the other, participants recalled incidents where existing friends were instrumental in encouraging them into a support programme such as CAC. Seeing existing friends succeed was a key motivator in attempting to change.

I've seen changes in people like. I've seen people go backwards, now don't get me wrong, and I've seen people going forward and going to college and everything that are coming in here, which is brilliant to see, y'know what I mean. (Participant D)

In addition to the experiences that participants felt they shared with existing friends and how their emotional fates may be intertwined, there was a definite recognition of a need to disengage from those people due to the potentially negative impact they might have on participants' own desistance efforts.

One female participant described how she made friends with people in prison as a means of survival but found it difficult to negotiate separation from this group, who she felt were a negative influence. She described how meeting people from the world she once occupied was a risk to her recovery from addiction as well as her desistance progress.

> *I tend to not to engage with people who I was in prison with or in the hostel with.*
> (Participant F)

> *A girl who is now on the streets and em … y'know … with her addiction … and approached me for money in the shop and I was embarrassed because she looked very dishevelled and y'know the other people in the shop were kind of looking at me then, and I just felt embarrassed and I felt ashamed.*
> (Participant F)

This issue of past relationships is closely tied to the notion of shame: shame about one's personal identity and also shame about one's social identity. Any association with drug users and current offenders, due to the negative perceptions of such people in society, was a problem for a number of participants. Being treated as a social *other* by virtue of one's own personal history or through association with others is a form of identity denial in that ex-prisoners in the process of attempting change are labelled as deviant and othered, and excluded from a range of roles and alternative identities in society (Cheryn and Monin, 2005). Importantly, change at the personal level was something the participants felt they could control. However, societal acceptance of this change was another issue.

For the participants, managing shame and embarrassment was a key element in ensuring progress on their desistance journey. The ability to resolve and incorporate these feelings into a coherent personal identity was a key skill. The newly learned cognitive skills were very relevant in managing this sense of shame.

> *I have been approached on the streets by girls and asked for money and cigarettes and I do find it very difficult, but I just … I talk about it and I know that in time that those situations will dissipate, the longer, the longer I'm around and out of trouble.*
> (Participant F)

Importantly, as well as being in a place where supports were available, even if only a listening ear, participants spoke of being a *part* of CAC: this sense of belonging was a key element in their new social identity (Tajfel, 2010). They spoke of their *involvement* in CAC as a central element of their emerging identity and how it represented a new community to which they could belong. This facilitated the emergence of new relationships.

> *I feel part of it and also I've met y'know people who have been in prison but who have now made the suggested changes and who are now em ... turning their life around and who are back in college studying and that's really inspirational to me.* (Participant F)

The informal community that exists in CAC is an unstructured, spontaneous entity that emerges based on the participants' desire to share positive experiences with like-minded people. Whether over a cup of tea or in the waiting room, the relationships that emerged among participants were highly valued as part of their desistance experience. The formal relationships that the participants developed with their support worker and other staff were an integral part of this sense of community.

> *You're cheering each other up, y'know it's not ... nothing got to do with crime or negative things, it's all like they want to get better.* (Participant I)

The creation of this community of people attempting to achieve personal change is a significant part of the desistance process. Being ostracised from mainstream society and continually vilified for their past behaviour sustains the shame and loneliness often experienced by ex-prisoners.

> *When you come out of prison you can feel alone sometimes, coming out isn't easy I found, and it can be very lonely and things.* (Participant A)

Addiction, mental health and desistance
The majority of participants spoke about their experience with addiction: drugs, alcohol and/or gambling. In addition, the participants spoke about *mental health*. They used the term to refer to all aspects of their emotional wellbeing. Many participants were not diagnosed with a clinical condition; however, they recognised many of the difficulties they experienced as linked to emotional distress, their experience of victimisation, trauma or their circumstances more generally.

The offender–victim overlap is a well-documented phenomenon (Jennings *et al.*, 2012), as is the role of trauma in the lives of offenders, particularly female offenders (Covington and Bloom, 2006; Covington, 2014). Many participants experienced victimisation and multiple traumas, including being the victim of violent assaults, rape and childhood sexual abuse, and witnessing violence towards others. One participant described how trauma and its ongoing effects fuelled her addiction and put her mental health at risk. She also linked her past experiences as central to what she called *acting out* in dangerous ways.

> *I was always dealing with my addictions, never dealing with the trauma part. So there was always that in the back of my head and I just, I knew if I didn't get that sorted I would've had a nervous breakdown, I would have either killed myself or killed someone … If I didn't get that sorted I would have kept taking drugs to block it.*
> (Participant H)

In terms of mental health, many participants mentioned stress, anxiety and depression. A small number mentioned more high-risk mental health issues such as self-harm and suicide. An Irish Penal Reform Trust study highlighted that the rate of mental ill-health is greater in the prison population than in the general population (Martynowicz and Quigley, 2010). One participant who reported self-harming behaviour talked about how having access to a supportive environment and learning to talk about his day-to-day struggles made a significant positive impact on his wellbeing.

> *I haven't self-harmed since I started coming here, and that's a hell of a long time really for me, y'know what I mean.* (Participant D)

While some clients of CAC also attend psychiatric services, many are linked in with the in-house psychotherapy service. Much of the benefit recalled by participants was attributed to their experience of psycho-education (Smith *et al.*, 2006), particularly in developing introspection techniques in addition to simply having someone to talk to.

> *An addict on their own is bad company, d'ya know, em … it's important to me to have support of somebody else y'know.* (Participant E)

Trust and a supportive environment

When the participants reflected on their involvement in CAC, trust emerged as a dominant theme, closely related to the ability to build and manage relationships. Participants spoke about their inability to *trust* other people. This issue of trust was also linked to feelings of shame about their past and the likelihood of being judged. This led to a cycle of isolation that was, at times, paralysing and is recognised in literature as a significant indicator for 'feelings of depression and powerlessness' (LeBel *et al.*, 2008: 137).

> *Just being very careful about who you let into your life, because obviously trust is a big thing and you feel very vulnerable when you come out of prison.* (Participant F)

Learning to trust a support worker was a significant hurdle for the participants given their personal experience of *betrayal* and neglect, particularly by family members. However, participants came to speak of the CAC as *home*: a substitute for a stable family environment.

> *It feels really nice because it just feels like coming home sometimes and em … it helps me to em … connect with people, because sometimes I find it very hard to connect with people 'cause I can isolate.* (Participant F)

Participant A explained how the relationships he formed in CAC were how he imagined a family might be. The acceptance and non-judgemental nature of the professional and social relationships he developed at CAC fulfilled a need for him.

> *It's probably the way families should be … the way I wish family were with me like, accepting.* (Participant A)

Physical and emotional safety

Along with the organised and spontaneous supports available through CAC, participants consistently referred to safety as a central element in their experience of desistance. Physical and emotional safety were issues for all of the ex-prisoners. Physical safety referred to the very low likelihood that they would be exposed to aggressive or violent behaviour at CAC. Emotional safety referred to the relationship with their support

worker as well as the non-judgemental, trusting and confidential atmosphere.

Participants described the process of managing their emotional safety. They spoke of leaving their 'street attitude and behaviours outside the door'. Participants recalled the honesty that emerged in interactions when they were able to act in an unguarded manner. Participant H spoke about the how the 'street' demands that you present yourself in a certain way to survive. Being in a space that removes that need encourages relaxation.

> *Even though there's no guards on the door or security I just knew that even people when they did come in here, like the attitude was gone. Like d'ya know when you're on the streets and stuff like that you're full of like toughness and stuff like that.* (Participant H)

The feelings of safety described by participants extended beyond the physical and emotional protection offered by CAC. A sense of safety, understood as a place of support, was described by Participant A as something that existed even when he was not physically present in the building.

> *I find it a safe place I suppose first of all, em … which is important for me because if I don't feel safe I'm likely to resort to other things to make me feel safe em … like compulsive gambling and drinking and things.* (Participant A)

In addition, the emotional education participants received at CAC through formal and spontaneous interaction was described as ensuring their safety. In effect, the participants were speaking of resilience (Hammersley, 2011) and how their experiences at CAC translated into an ability to deal with life outside.

One female participant talked about her feelings of safety regarding the men she met while attending CAC. She spoke about how the relationships she had built up with males at CAC normalised her expectation of male behaviour, in effect serving as a model of appropriate male/female relationships more generally.

> *Even though I went through a lot of domestic violence and stuff, the group of lads I was in with I felt safe, they never kind of treated me different like, they didn't like, I suppose, disrespect me … Maybe that's why I kept coming back*

… I could actually be friends with a man somewhere without anything else being involved, drugs, sex, violence. (Participant H)

Hope and progress

Participants spoke about their experience of shifting their focus from their immediate environment to the future as a significant element in their desistance. Participants expressed this as a sense of hope for the future, a belief in their ability to enact personal change, and referred to the impact of seeing others succeed as a key motivator. Hope is addressed in the literature on desistance and linked to motivation for change as a key element in achieving successful desistance. McNeill *et al.* (2012: 9) describe the importance of this dynamic whereby 'the development and maintenance not just of motivation but also of hope become key tasks for criminal justice practitioners'. Imagining a future is often a foreign idea for many people *doing* desistance. Rather than a failure of imagination, it is a fact that some people do not know that there is the possibility of another life outside of their current situation.

It can be easy to give in to the fact that when you go to prison that this is your life, this is the way it's meant to be. (Participant A)

Yeah I've seen a different life, there's more to life, there's hope. (Participant B)

Building and sustaining this hope has been shown to be a key issue for desistance-focused services (McNeill *et al.*, 2012), and integral to individuals' development of agency through imagining their possible future self (Healy, 2014). Fostering this hope and the imagined future self needs significant support for the person initially at the personal level and subsequently encouraging and enabling access to education, employment, etc. One female participant described the impact of this process.

It changed my whole thinking on my life … gave me confidence back … made me believe in myself that I wasn't stupid and I wasn't thick and … I just got rid of that label. (Participant H)

Conclusion

This research study was conducted to investigate how people who engaged with CAC, as a desistance supporting service, understood, valued and

evaluated their experience. In unstructured interviews, the participants were free to address all topics that they saw as relevant to their experience.

Similar to findings by Maruna (2001) and McNeill and Weaver (2010), this study demonstrates that desistance is multifaceted and highly individualised, and dependent on the person's agency and self-efficacy (Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2004; McNeill *et al.*, 2012; Healy, 2014; Liem and Richardson, 2014), their social world and external structural forces (Maruna, 2001). Issues of shame, relationships, hope, imagining a future and consistency dominated the views of the participants.

The interrelatedness of these concepts in practice demonstrated the need for a holistic, tailored, stable service. It also reinforces the relevance of the academic literature on desistance to *doing desistance*: displaying the importance of theory for practice. The intangible nature of the key themes that emerged demonstrates the inherent complexity faced in any effort to quantify desistance.

That is not to say that desistance cannot be an evidence-based process. 'Evidence-based' does not imply that there is a definitive *desistance guide* that practitioners can follow as a prescription for intervention; it means that an intervention must emerge as a result of and in response to 'practitioners' reflective engagement and continual dialogue with those individuals with whom they work' (McNeill and Weaver, 2010). This approach places the person at the centre of the process and encourages the emergence of a community of scientist-practitioners who can inform practice through reflection and research.

Key themes that emerged in this study related to the regulation of emotion, cognitive skills, a future-focused outlook and safety. Many of these can be understood as interpersonal issues. These interpersonal issues also extend to shame, judgement, labelling, trust and support. A superordinate theme unifying these issues is that of acceptance back into society or, for those who never felt part of a community, learning to engage with society more generally.

The barriers to inclusion or re-entry are set high, and overcoming these cannot be the task of the ex-prisoners alone. Understanding how ex-prisoners negotiate their new roles and identities in the context of the generalised exclusion of ex-prisoners in society is essential if we are to understand how to facilitate this process.

The number of participants in this study was small and the sample comprised ex-prisoners living in the Cork area only. The findings cannot

be assumed to be generalisable outside this population. As a unique study in an under-researched field, it does highlight the experience of ex-prisoners as they attempt the process of desisting from crime. It identifies key issues and areas for future research, such as the importance of social identity for ex-prisoners, emotional regulation and personal growth.

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