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A Decade of Desistance

An exploratory study in Desistance Theory

A thesis submitted to the Dublin Institute of Technology in part fulfilment of the requirements for award of Masters in Criminology

by

Brendan Marsh

September 2009

Supervisor: Matt Bowden

Department of Social Science and Law, Dublin Institute of Technology.

Declaration

I hereby certify that the material which is submitted in this thesis towards the award of the **Masters in Criminology** is entirely my own work and has not been submitted for any academic assessment other than part-fulfilment of the award named above.

Signature of candidate: … … … … … … … … … … … … …

Date: … … … … … … … … …

Abstract

This research paper is a biographical study of the lived experience of five men who have sustained desistance from crime for over a decade. The aim of the research is to identify the causal process that allows for desistance from crime for such a significant period. Qualitative research methods were employed in this endeavour, with each participant interviewed using a semi-structured format. Furthermore the researchers' status as an 'insider' provided an added dimension to this process. Results confirmed the findings of existing desistance theory research as carried out by prominent criminologists, that is desisting ex-offenders need to find a way to give back to society, or the next generation, to sustain desistance. Accompanying this generative work is a change in the very identity of the desister that makes criminal activity unlikely. Moreover informal social controls enabled structured routine activities, accountability and indirect supervision to impact on these individuals development. The paper concludes by discussing the finding that these men are engaged in the dual process of desistance from crime and recovery from addiction, and the causal process that sustains desistance also sustains recovery from addiction.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Matt Bowden for his patience and guidance throughout the process of preparing this dissertation for submission. Cian O'Melia and Elizabeth Davey, two friends without whom I would have struggled, thank you. A big expression of appreciation is due to the participants who offered their time and life experience for the benefit of this study. A special thanks to Claudia Vaulont for everything you have done, and will do. Most importantly my children, Daniel and Sophie, I dedicate this dissertation to you.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research paper is to explore the lived experience of five ex-offenders who have not offended for a minimum period of ten years. How, and why, these individuals have maintained their crime free status shall be explored in detail in an attempt to understand the causal process that permits successful long term desistance from crime. Furthermore the desisting ex-offenders in this study are also ex-drug addicts. Exactly how criminal offending and drug addiction interacted in the past lives of the people is documented, as is the impossibility of abstaining from one of these behaviours only. This necessitates research into how desistance from crime and recovery from addiction are sustained by these participants.

1.1 Summary

The remainder of chapter one will discuss the context of, and rationale for, this research. The limitations of the study, and the research aims and questions, are provided. A review of the desistance literature is undertaken in chapter two. This sets a working definition of desistance from crime for the purpose of this paper. In addition the main theories of desistance as set out in the criminological literature are examined. Chapter three will explain the choice of qualitative research methods for this paper. In particular an account of the researchers 'insider' status will be given, as will the strategies for dealing with the potential negative effects of insider research. Chapter four presents the main findings that arose from the interview data. Findings are presented within the framework set by the literature review wherever possible. A discussion of the findings is provided in chapter five. The focus of this discussion is on the crucial aspects of the causal process of desistance from crime. Chapter six is a concluding chapter that seeks to highlight the particular aspects of desistance from crime among former drug addicted persistent offenders. Recommendations for further research are also provided.

1.2 Context and Rationale

The study of desistance from crime has gained popularity over the last two decades. Two main theories of desistance have been developed in recent years that deal with desistance from crime. Life Course Theory has been developed by Sampson and Laub based on a longitudinal study of ex-offenders up to age 70 (Sampson and Laub, 2003; 2005a; 2005b). Life Course Theory states that structurally induced turning points are necessary to enter and

sustain desistance from crime. In 2001 Shadd Maruna published the results of the Liverpool Desistance Study, a study of a large sample of desisting offenders in Liverpool, England. Maruna used narrative analysis to develop his 'Making Good' theory that claims that desisting ex-offenders need to find a way to claim desistance by giving back to society (Maruna, 2001). There has been no study of desistance from crime carried out in an Irish context to date. Furthermore research into the causal process that allows for both recovery from addiction and desistance from crime in the same individuals has not been presented in the criminological field. This dissertation will, therefore, seek to fill these gaps in the literature.

Fergus McNeill (2006) writes that unfortunately rehabilitation policy is not based on desistance research. According to McNeill this needs to change because desistance is clearly vital for understanding the process of change, and 'constructions of practice should be embedded in understandings of desistance' (2006:46). Therefore desistance research is justified in the hope that it can begin to inform rehabilitation policy.

1.3 Research Aims

This dissertation will seek to compare the central elements of the main desistance theories to the lived experiences of five individuals in long term desistance. This will be done to understand the causal process that allows for successful desistance from crime. The research will also attempt to clearly portray where the data indicates that the process of desistance from crime, as experienced by this sample of ex-offenders, deviates from that presented in the criminological literature. Particular attention will be paid to how the process of recovery from addiction, as experienced by this sample, and desistance from crime overlap and interact.

1.4 Limitations

This research paper is limited by both word count and by the small size of the participant sample. The fact that all five participants were drug addicts could be viewed as a limitation because it doesn't allow for the exploration of the particularities of the sustaining long term desistance among other groups of ex-offenders. However the researcher believes that a research project of this limited size cannot cater for more than one defined group.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories of desistance, compared to theories of the onset of criminal behaviour, have been much neglected and underdeveloped in the history of criminology (Smith, 2007). The study of desistance has however seen an upsurge in popularity over the last twenty years, most especially with the development of the life course theory by Sampson and Laub. Nevertheless as Piquero (2004:103) points out 'theoretical and methodological problems have plagued sustained research'. Moreover no agreed definition of desistance has been formulated by theorists. This literature review will therefore seek to set a working definition of desistance for this study, and will outline the main theories and facts about desistance to date.

2.1 Definition

Obviously to desist means to cease an activity, however this simple definition is problematic when applied to the study of crime. If an individual who has been engaged in a persistent pattern of criminal offending stretching over a number of years has not committed a crime in three weeks, for example, can he or she claim successful desistance? If not then how long does he or she have to be crime free in order to do so? If future behaviour can best be predicted by looking at past behaviour, and if recidivism and relapse are the rule rather than the exception, then how does a precise definition of desistance be formulated? (LeBel et al, 2004). Indeed Laub and Sampson (2001) claim that it cannot be formulated, and that the definition of desistance used by any researcher will be determined by the research questions in each particular study (cited in Maruna, 2006). Shadd Maruna classifies any significant lull or crime free period in the life of a persistent offender as primary desistance (2001; 2006a). While this phenomenon can produce material for the study of relapse and recidivism, it provides little insight into how offenders achieve long term desistance. Secondary desistance, as outlined by Maruna, on the other hand is the successful orientation towards a permanent crime free lifestyle that necessarily involves a change in the self identity of the individual. The study of secondary desistance is the examination of the process that enables ex-offenders to remain crime free. Desistance is not the event, or non event, of ceasing crime. Instead it is the causal process that permits non-offending to continue. Sampson and Laub (2001) also differentiate between the termination of offending and the continued lifestyle of non-offending. While they point out that theories of desistance are underdeveloped in comparison to theories of offending, it is clear that desistance should be understood as the causal process

that leads up to termination of offending and allows for the continued state of non-offending. It also involves a fundamental change in the desisters self identity and self concept, for as Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) stated 'Some desisters can engage in a variety of acts that are considered deviant or functional equivalents of crime' (cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003: 298). Therefore desistance means how an individual manages to break free from a life of crime and how he or she manages to maintain their deviant free status despite the huge obstacles they face. These obstacles often include social stigma, return to criminogenic environments after release from prison, homelessness, addiction, and limited career and educational opportunities (Richards and Jones, 2004).

The label of career criminal can be used to identify people who have a long history of criminal offending (Maruna, 2001). These individuals, according to Laub and Sampson (2003), should be the target of desistance research rather than low rate offenders. However it is difficult to research pure desisters at this level because very few exist, and those that do exist are not readily available to researchers (Maruna, 2001). Furthermore researchers in the desistance field attest to the difficulty of finding ex-offenders that can be labelled as pure desisters (Maruna, 2001; Burnett, 2004). Most ex-offenders, despite displaying genuine desire to change, drift in and out of desistance (Piquero, 2004).

It is difficult to arrive at a definition of desistance without first considering the impact of addiction on this topic. While it is of course true that not all addicts are criminals and not all criminals are addicts, it must be recognised that there is a huge overlap between the study of desistance and addiction studies. Research has shown that many offenders are also addicts, and drug use can sometimes be the driving force behind a highly irrational cycle of offending and incarceration (Maruna, 2001). In addition the factors that compel entry into criminality and addiction are often very similar. Frisher and Beckett (2006:141) found that 'those with problematic drug use are often involved in criminality and are embedded in criminal groups'. Therefore any definition of desistance must include the maintenance of complete abstinence from both criminal offending and substance misuse (Maruna, 2001). For the purpose of this paper, therefore, desistance is defined as the causal process that permits quality desistance from criminal behaviour, drug use and other deviant behaviours in former career criminals. In this instance quality desistance implies a complete cessation of previous offending patterns, and the absence of new categories of offending and deviance, for at least ten years. This must necessarily be accompanied by a significant change in the identity of the individual.

2.2 Age and Desistance

Many researchers have found that there is a definite connection between age and crime, and that offending rates decrease with age (Smith, 2007; Sampson and Laub, 2003; Gluecks, 1943; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003). In the United Kingdom in the year 2000 the offending rate for 19yr olds was 50 times higher than the offending rate for men aged over 50. Even accounting for factors such as the early deaths of many offenders, incarceration time and strategies to avoid detection, research clearly shows that most criminals offend for short periods of their lives (Maruna, 2006).

Farrington (1990), in a study of the criminal careers of 411 London males, found that crime declined and ceased almost completely with age, but that there was a large variety across offence types (cited in Smith, 2007). For example, burglary offences peaked at age 20 and declined slowly afterwards while drugs and fraud offences didn't peak until age 25, and were still high until age 30. Similarly Laub and Sampson (2003, 2005, 2005b) in their longitudinal study of offending men until age 70, found that even among persistent criminals there was a strong relationship between age and crime. They also found that offence type often determined rate of offending with drug and alcohol related offending peaking in the mid thirties. They concluded that crime declines for most offenders as they age, but that type of offence has a huge impact on peak offending and age at desistance. This age crime curve has no clear explanation although various theories have been put forward. Developmental criminologists claim that the age of desistance, or whether desistance happens at all, depends on causal factors stemming from childhood. (Mulver et al, 1988; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003; Nagin, 2005; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2005a). They divide offenders into two neat categories: adolescent offenders and persistent adult offenders. From this viewpoint adolescent offenders will grow out of crime in their late teens and their offending represents a period of re-negotiating social bonds. Furthermore their higher academic achievements and stronger attachments will facilitate desistance. Adult offenders, conversely, will never stop offending and desistance is not possible. Academic failure, broken relationships and neuropsychological handicaps doom the adult offender to a life of deviancy (Moffitt, 1993; 1994; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003). This theory therefore separates offenders into two distinct groups with very different characteristics determined by childhood factors, and only those who fall into the correct group have any hope of desistance. Sampson and Laub (2003;

2005a; 2005b) have strongly criticised this developmental approach to explaining desistance, and state that 'there is no such thing as a fore-told life course persister' (2003:179). Their research shows that desistance occurs for many types of offenders at many stages of their lives, and that even persistent active offenders show huge variety in offending rates with age. Causal factors stemming from childhood, in their view, is a simplistic attempt to account for the complex process of desistance across varieties of offenders.

Gottfredson and Hirschi (1995; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003) claim that offenders simply stop offending due to the natural aging of the individual. They state that, regardless of social or economic conditions, the organism reaches a state of burnout where offending is simply no longer possible. Therefore desistance is a natural process in the career of an offender. Maruna (2001) however has called this idea into question because he claims that the process of desistance, especially at the beginning, takes a huge amount of emotional, psychological and even physical effort and resources. Similarly the Gluecks (1943) claimed that desistance was the result of a process of maturational reform, that is the individual matures out of crime (cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003). This growing up process usually starts after age 25 when the criminal impulse weakens and offenders settle down. This theory of maturational reform has been criticised as lacking in depth and substance because it doesn't probe into the meaning of age, instead it assumes that the process of aging itself is responsible for desistance (Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2003). While recognising that age does have an impact on the process of desistance, Sampson and Laub (1992) state that maturational reform doesn't satisfactorily explore its significance in relation to social bonds and life turning points (cited in Maruna, 2001).

2.3 Life Course Theory

In the 1930s and 1940s the Gluecks (1943; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003; 2005a; 2005b) conducted a study of 500 men up to the age of 32. In a highly impressive follow up study Sampson and Laub tracked down 52 of these men and analysed their offending patterns up to age 70. Their findings indicate that the factors that lead to desistance from crime are the opposite of those that lead to persistence, namely the development of social controls, structured routine activities and purposeful productive human agency (Sampson and Laub, 2003; 2005a; 2005b; 2006). They found that job stability, military service and marriage all had the potential to significantly alter offending trajectories and support desistance. These

turning points can come as a result of an offender attempting to "knife off" their past by a dramatic change in location or, for example, entering the military. It could also happen simply by drift, that is an offender gaining a job or marriage that they do not want to lose by continued offending. Regardless of the path to desistance, these structurally induced turning points, especially marriage, can lead to

1) a "knifing off" of the past from the present
2) opportunities for investment in new relationships that offer social support, growth, and new social networks
3) forms of direct and indirect supervision and monitoring of behaviour
4) structured routines that centre more on family life and less unstructured time with peers
5) situations that provide an opportunity for identity transformation and that allow for the emergence of a new self or script

They state that these factors can be true regardless of the quality of the marriage or criminality of the spouse because, in general, men marry up and women marry down. Informal social controls, or social bonds, can include cohabiting and parenthood, both of which have been shown to reduce likelihood of offending (Sampson and Laub, 2006; Katz, 1999). People who lack these bonds are the least likely to reduce or stop offending because, put simply, they have nothing to lose. Rebecca Katz (1999:13) states that 'families of procreation may play as large a role in developing desistance as early family of origin process play in the development of self control and delinquency'. Life course theory includes many aspects of social learning theory, which states that less exposure to criminal peers will lead to fewer opportunities for offending, and consequently attitudes and beliefs favourable to conformity will develop (Warr, 1998; cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003). Life Course Theory rejects the determinism of developmental theories of criminal offending and desistance. While they agree that childhood factors are important, Sampson and Laub state that adulthood experiences can be just as, and possibly more, important in determining the life trajectory on an individual prone to offending (2003).

> *Offenders desist as a result of individual actions (choice) in conjunction with situational contexts and structural influences linked to key institutions that help sustain desistance. As such we argued that desistance is a process rather than an event, and that It must be continually renewed. This fundamental theme underscores the need to examine individual motivation and the social context in which individuals are embedded.* (Sampson and Laub, 2003:171)

2.4 Agency

> *The process of recovery isn't easy. It takes great courage and perseverance to continue in recovery day after day. Part of the recovery process is to move forward in spite of whatever may stand in our way.*
>
> (Narcotics Anonymous, 1993:12)

Agency has been identified as being a key element in successful desistance (Burnett, 2004; Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006; Maguire et al, 2006; Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2005 a). Rational choice theory views the desisting offender as a decision maker weighing up the pros and cons of continued offending. However agency is more than rational choice, agency is responsible for developing preferences and following through with determined action. Additionally, considering the often irrational patterns of offending of many criminals, and the many economic and social constraints offenders live under, rational choice theory alone cannot account for decisions to desist (Burnett, 2004; Sampson and Laub, 2005b). In their study of the Glueck men Sampson and Laub (2005a) found that agency was a vital component in successful desistance. Structural support alone would not suffice. Agency in this context was the determination to follow choice with action. Indeed the importance of agency is such that it makes it almost impossible to predict who will and who will not desist from crime. This will to desist, this internationalisation of responsibility for overcoming the many obstacles that desisters face (Maruna, 2001), is very difficult to measure or predict and 'introduces a seemingly random component into life course turning points, making neat prediction inherently a difficult endeavour'(Sampson and Laub, 2005a:177). Nevertheless it is an exceptionally important piece of the puzzle for both the study of desistance and persistence in crime, and has not been researched adequately to date. Of the development of their life course theory of crime, Sampson and Laub claim that 'our effort can be seen as one to reposition human agency as a central element in understanding crime and deviance over the life course' (2003:177).

The concept of 'knifing off' ones past, although there is no agreed definition of the term, has been identified as an important component in successful desistance for some individuals. Voluntary 'knifing off' necessarily involves agency, and it should not be underestimated how difficult it is or how much determination it takes. This process involves leaving past acquaintances, geographical locations, and even sometimes family, behind and cutting all contact. Crucially though Maruna et al (2006a) identified that it could also take the form of

an internal change, or a change in the way the offender views themselves, their past, and their environment. This change in the individuals thinking is vital for the maintenance of long term desistance (Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2003; 2005a; Maguire et al, 2006).

In a study into turning points that lead to desistance in the lives of young male offenders, Margaret Hughes (1998) found that one of the key factors that led to decisions to desist was contemplation time. This opportunity to contemplate their own lives was afforded by geographical changes, residential treatment programmes and imprisonment. For Hughes participants the developing desire to change came as a result of being absent from their usual surroundings, and having time to evaluate their lives.

2.5 Identity

While it is clear from the literature that agency is vitally important for desistance, what is not clear is why some offenders sustain long term desistance and others do not. It has also been identified that the very identity of the individual must change and evolve for long term desistance to be sustained. The chance of an ex-offender remaining crime free very much depends upon developing a new identity, and new values and beliefs that were not compatible with criminal offending (Burnett, 2004). Indeed a significant amount of work done in rehabilitating offenders and addicts, such as 12 Step and cognitive behavioural therapy, targets change in the individuals self perception (Maruna, 2001). Every individual, whether an offender, ex-offender or regular citizen has a self narrative through which they seek to impose order on their lives. These narratives provide a sense of identity to the individual person, and account for their past, present circumstances and future goals. Crucially self narratives provide a subjective account of the meanings that offenders place upon changes and turning points in their lives (McNiell, 2006). Often at least part myth, self narratives help people explain their actions and decipher their motivations. Narratives very often change throughout the life course and understanding narratives 'help us unpack mechanisms that connect salient life events across the life course' (Sampson and Laub, 2005a). In the Liverpool Desistance Study Shadd Maruna sought to understand how these changes in ex-offender identities allow for desistance by analysing the self narratives of two groups of offenders, one persisting and one desisting (Maruna, 2001). As part of the findings, Maruna discovered that both 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 were the self narratives that were revealed through qualitative research interviews. Active offenders had what Maruna termed a 'condemnation script' (2001), that is they saw life as a bleak and hostile experience. They considered themselves to be at the mercy of circumstances outside of 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. It is this self-narrative that may be a pre-requisite to successful desistance. The self narrative of the ex-offender holds a version of the truth that is often quite different from historical truth (Maruna et al, 2007). This revised version of the past imbues an often quite horrific personal history with a sense of meaning and purpose. It is this psychological truth, rather than factual truth, of this narrative that provides the desister with the framework that will determine future behaviour. In a study that focused entirely on religious conversions of incarcerated offenders, Maruna et al found that the prisoners self narrative was dramatically changed by their conversion experience (Maruna et al, 2006b). 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.

A central characteristic of self-narratives of the successful desisting group is what Maruna terms the 'redemption script' (2001). The 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'. Desisting offenders, in contrast to their persisting colleagues, feel extremely positive about their future prospects. Self efficacy and confidence are very strong, as is the perception that offending is no longer an option as it is no longer who they are. The individual essentially re-writes the past and develops a redemptive narrative, often stating that their past life was meant to be as it led them to their current circumstances and mindset. Another feature that is often present is the belief that a

higher power or universal plan has led them to where they are supposed to be. 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 re-fashioning of the life history is an attempt, according to Maruna, to make up for long stretches of lost life.

Stephen Farrall states that 'When people try to stop offending and make amends, some go through quite lengthy periods of rebuilding, remodelling or remaking their own social identities' (2006:85). While on face value this appears to have some merit, it must not be assumed that desisting ex-offenders accept passive responsibility for all of their actions. The idea that reformed criminals accept blame and feel shame for all of their crimes is not supported by research (Maruna, 2007). Admissions of guilt are certainly a characteristic of successful desistance, however accompanying such admissions are often justifications, rationalisations and blame. The strongest trend is for ex-offenders to claim they were sometimes the victim of circumstance, and other times they just made stupid mistakes. The offender was a good person who was caught up in bad behaviours. Another reason for this lack of accepting responsibility for past crimes is the perception that society had greatly wronged them. Such a belief system would not encourage an ex-offender to accept responsibility for breaking laws that they perceived to be based on middle class values, and representative of a society that had neglected and mistreated them (Maruna, 2001).

The Liverpool Desistance Study provided ample evidence that a strong theme of the redemption script is the belief that the desisting ex-offender accepts full responsibility for their future behaviour, and feels quite confident in their ability to lead a crime free life. These ex-offenders do not take full responsibility for their past crimes, as has already been outlined, however they do take full credit for their desistance. An internalisation of full responsibility for their future, including the determination to overcome the many obstacles they will face, seems to be a defining feature of successful desisting ex-offenders. Maruna (2001:88) summarises the themes of the desisting persons narrative as

1) *an establishment of the core beliefs that characterise the persons "true self"*
2) *an optimistic perception (some might say useful "illusion") of personal control over ones destiny*
3) *the desire to be productive and give something back to society, particularly the next generation*

2.6 Generativity

Contrary to Sampson and Laubs Life Course Theory that stresses the primacy of informal social controls for maintaining desistance, Maruna (2001) found that generativity was the most dominant theme. In this context generativity refers to the rehabilitative effects of work, either voluntary or vocational, and Maruna states that generativity is 'a product of both inner drives and social demands (2001:118). 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. Indeed in a recent issue of Theoretical Criminology that made an important contribution to the desistance literature, McEvoy and Shirlow stated that this phenomena has been active in the recent history of Northern Ireland (2009). Paramilitary prisoners released under the Good Friday Agreement were able to use their experience of imprisonment and conflict for the good of their communities. Writing specifically of ex-criminal offenders, Maruna states that this serves four distinct and important purposes:

1) Restitution: The desisting offender gets the opportunity, to some extent, to set right the harms done to society. This can be very important for the desisting offender who is attempting to come to terms with past mistakes.
2) Legitimacy: When the desisting ex-offender successfully becomes a youth worker, or counsellor, for example, they have in a sense proven their change is legitimate and achieve greater degrees of public acceptance.
3) Fulfilment: Meaningful work gives meaning to their existence and helps desisters feel like the past was not a complete waste.
4) Therapy: By far the most important, helping others is helping themselves. This is the core belief of movements like the 12 step fellowships.

Crucially generative work can teach the ex-offenders that they can survive in the straight world and do not need to return to crime. Moreover when the desister becomes part of an organisation or movement, whether its employment or voluntary, this greatly enhances their chances of sustaining desistance (Maruna, 2001).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This chapter will present the methodology used to answer the research question under consideration; that is how long term desisting ex-offenders sustain their crime free status. The researcher in this case is an ex-offender with ten years successful and high quality desistance, as set out in the definition above, and therefore fits the target group for this study. This insider status necessitates a reflexive approach to the research process, and the transition from insider to insider researcher must be managed.

3.1 Insider Research

Insider research is a term used to describe projects where the researcher has a direct involvement or connection with the research setting (Robson, 1993). The researcher will have a pre-existing level of knowledge and insight into the subject of study that an outsider may only acquire after extensive research, if at all. For example a researcher may be a member of the community they are studying, such as the gay community, or, as is the case with this dissertation, desisting ex-offenders. Therefore the researcher shares with participants an 'internalised language and range of experience' (Roseneill, 1993:189; quoted in Hodkinson, 2005:137) that can have serious implications, both positive and negative, for the authenticity of the final product. Insider status can have a profound impact on access and validity.

3.1.1 Access

Negotiating access to participants in qualitative criminological research can be a demanding, delicate and time consuming process (Noaks et al, 2004). Dealing with officials and gatekeepers, and trying to establish rapport with participants, are among the most difficult aspects of research projects. Moreover maintaining access for the duration of the study can present difficulties and re-negotiation is often necessary. When the researcher has insider status a lot of these difficulties do not exist. Insider access can afford almost instant access and rapport (Chavez, 2008; Rooney, 2005; Hodkinson, 2005) equal relationships and legitimacy (Chavez, 2008), and participants can exhibit more willingness to participate (Hodkinson, 2005; Rooney, 2005).

Access to participants for this dissertation held no difficulties. All participants were personal friends of the researcher and viewed their participation as an act of friendship. The researcher's insider status was the key to securing their participation as all stated that they

would not participate if they did not know and trust the researcher. Nevertheless a key concern for the researcher was to maintain these friendships and the high levels of trust they contain. Detailed discussions took place with each participant about the nature of the study and what exactly their participation would mean for them. Agreements on confidentiality and the destruction of data were central to the issue of trust (see Ethics section below). Research subjects often judge those who seek their participation, and this can have implications for both determinations for participation, and the quality of the data they are willing to offer (Hodkinson, 2005).

3.1.2 Validity

Insider status has been identified as having advantages and potential disadvantages regarding the quality of information collected and the analysis of data. Validity of the research project, therefore, depends on the researcher understanding the potential impact of insider status, and minimising any potential negative effects.

Advantages	Disadvantages
• Potential to increase validity due to added richness, honesty, fidelity and authenticity of the interview process and information acquired (Rooney, 2005; Hodkinson, 2005) • Provides knowledge base to understand processes of groups, similar experiences, activities, motivations, affiliations (Hodkinson, 2005) • Eliminates problems of social distance and obstacles often faced by outsiders (Hodkinson, 2005) • Experience can be used to guide research process and verification of data(Hodkinson, 2005; Rooney,2005)	• Overreliance on insider experience to the extent that it shapes findings (Hodkinson, 2005; Rooney 2005) • Over rapport and moral / political / cultural standpoints can cloud critical analysis of data (Hodkinson, 2005; Rooney, 2005) • Danger of leading participants towards particular answers (Hodkinson, 2005) • Role confusion can bring into question authenticity, objectivity and reflexivity (Chavez, 2008)

In a study into Goth culture, of which he was a long term adherent, Paul Hodkinson believes that his insider status was key to obtaining high quality data (Hodkinson, 2005). He claims that as a researcher he was not confined to his personal experiences, but was able to use his experiences selectively to enhance the research. The transition from insider to insider researcher, therefore, depends upon being able to step back and 'view the familiar as strange' (Hodkinson, 2005:145). Hodkinson concludes that to be confined to personal experience is not good for the research process, but to be able to use this experience selectively can greatly enhance the quality of research outcomes (2005).

The practice of insider research is not without controversy. The epistemological and ontological criticisms made by positivist researchers of qualitative research in general are seen by positivists as particularly relevant to insider research (Rooney, 2005). Positivists claim that any pretence toward claims of objectivity are smashed by the insider status of the researcher. Postmodernist researchers, on the contrary, reject 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). If personal perspectives can influence research regardless of either insider or outsider status, then the key to validity is not status but rather good research practice and the transparency of the researchers role.

3.2 Methods

Qualitative research methods were used for this dissertation, specifically semi structured interviews. The importance of qualitative research methods for the study of crime and deviance had been established by the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s (Noaks et al, 2004). Indeed Fonatana and Frey (2000:645) state that 'Interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow human beings'. The subjective meaning that people ascribe to their lives and experiences can be accessed by the researcher using these inductive methods. Therefore this study will take a phenomenological approach and seek to understand the 'underlying structures or rules which guide behaviours' (Newburn, 2007: 211).

One of the strengths of the semi-structured interviewing technique is that it allows for interaction to take place between interviewer and interviewee. The importance of rapport with participants is widely acknowledged in the literature (Bachman et al, 2008; Noaks et al, 2004). However because of the already established relationships, the pre-existing knowledge of the subject and the general insider status of the researcher, the decision was taken to keep interaction to a minimum. This was done to prevent influencing the participants answers, and to encourage participants to give full explanations for the benefit of the research.

3.3 Sampling

For this study purposive sampling was used, that is the researcher selected participants who 1) are knowledgeable about the experience being studied 2) willing to talk 3) and can represent the points of view being studied (Bachman et al, 2008). 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 papers focus is very clearly defined.

3.4 Participants

	Age	Desistance (years)	Married	Cohabiting	Children	Profession	Place of Origin
P1	40	15	No	No	Yes	Artist	Dublin
P2	37	11	No	No	No	Taxi Driver	Dublin South
P3	31	10	No	No	No	Youth Worker	Kildare
P4	42	12	No	Yes	Yes	Construction	Dublin North
P5	31	10	No	No	No	Taxi Driver	Dublin North

Five participants were chosen for this study, all were white Irish males. All of the participants had a criminal career that included multiple arrests and court appearances, however only one participant served a prison sentence of longer than four months. While none of the participants had an extensive prison history they were subject to repeated investigations, arrests and charges resulting from their criminal activities. Offences committed included drug dealing and importation, property theft, fraud, extortion and a variety of violent offences. All participants in this study had been engaged in chronic drug addiction during their criminal

careers, that is they used Class A drugs on a daily basis. Therefore all participants classify themselves as being in addiction recovery.

Each participant was chosen because they met the criteria identified by the author, drawing upon the relevant desistance literature, for long term desistance. Firstly they had to meet the definition of career criminal as set out by Maruna (2001), that is they had to have a significant number of years of persistent criminal offending in their past. Secondly they had to be in long term desistance from crime, in this case a period of minimum of ten years was chosen. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) identified that some ex offenders become involved in alternative forms of deviancy, such as addictions, chronic unemployment and being absent fathers to illegitimate children (cited in Sampson and Laub, 2003). The final criteria was that these patterns of behaviour were not obviously present in the lives of selected participants.

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

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. It was made clear to participants that 1) the tape would be destroyed after transcription 2) they had the right at any time to stop the recording of the interview 3) they had the right to request that certain information not be recorded by tape but instead be written down by hand, and 4) they had the right to terminate the interview at any time.

The fifth participant elected to be interviewed in the absence of the tape recorder. During this interview written notes were taken, mostly of key words and phrases. The interviewer was vigilant about the possible negative side effects of being engaged in writing data down (Noaks et al, 2004), and every effort was made to take note of non-verbal cues.

The data from the tape recorded interviews was transcribed by the researcher verbatim. This increased familiarity with the content and allowed for the process of identification of key themes to develop. The data was 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.

3.6 Ethics

Clifford Christians (2000) identifies four main principles that are included in the codes of ethics of social science scholarly associations;

1) Informed consent: Participants must be fully informed about the purpose of the study and any consequences for them that might arise from the involvement. Furthermore they must agree to take part voluntarily, that is without any form of coercion.

2) Deception: There must be no form of deception in the design or practice of the research, unless it cannot be avoided in the search for knowledge.

3) Confidentiality: Participants should be offered and assured of complete confidentiality where possible, or desirable. The destruction of data, protection of identities and use of pseudonyms should be guaranteed. Exceptions to this rule occur when child protection guidelines have been judged to have been breached, harm to life, or illegal behaviour.

4) Accuracy: Data must be represented with accuracy, and all omissions, fabrications and contrivances are unethical.

Each participant in this study was presented with a formal letter from the researcher requesting their participation (see Appendix A). An outline of the study was provided which included some details of the topic of desistance, requirements for participation, such as time commitment, and consequences for participants. An account of the relevance of desistance research was also included. Participants were assured confidentiality except if information revealing harm to individuals or illegal behaviour was revealed. Procedures for the destruction of data after transcription were provided. Each participant was asked to take the request under consideration and to return the consent form.

4.0 FINDINGS

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for comparison of data obtained from interviews. Using the framework provided by the literature review key themes were identified in the data and are presented in this chapter.

4.1 Generativity

Generativity arose as a strong theme in the data gained from all participants. All identified using their experience to work with others who 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. The functions that this work provides in their lives fit neatly into Marunas classification, as outlined in the literature review:

1) Restitution: For three participants the importance of giving back to society, or making amends for harm they caused, was clear from the data. It was identified as a way to feel worthy to consider oneself part of society, to earn back the right to be part of society. The emphasis was placed upon them feeling that they had a place in society, rather than any need for public acceptance or approval. Furthermore it was also identified as a way to make amends to actual individuals who were damaged or hurt through the criminal activities of the participants as 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 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)

2) Legitimacy: Only one participant expressed concern about achieving public acceptance when he began the journey from offender to ex-offender, and stated that it is an important part of his continued desistance. He stated that he did not want to be viewed as an ex-addict or ex-criminal, and felt that to be viewed as a regular person by society was very important.

3) Fulfilment: All participants stated that they obtain a great sense of value and self worth from working with other people. They also said that it gave them a great sense of power and

effectiveness to be able to potentially affect the course of a family's life by steering an individual in the right direction.

> *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)

Participants also stated that fulfilment came from knowing that they are capable of helping, that they have the ability to help. This was seen as an indication of how far they have come and provided a marker of change, and could be viewed as part of a process of de-labelling;

> *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)

2) Therapy: The therapeutic benefits that are obtained by participants from helping others were emphasised strongly by each individual interviewed. There was a consensus among all participants that this work was vital to their continued successful desistance. Participants expressed the view that selfishness and concern with self was the core of their addictive natures. This view, as each participant acknowledged, is very much in line with the 12 Step model of addiction diagnosis. 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 1)

All participants also stated that this attitude needed to be cultivated and practiced throughout their daily life, including in their places of work and family settings. Once again their 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* (Particpant 2)

4.2 Agency

Each participants desire to remain crime and drug free motivated them to take advantage of available supports, overcome obstacles and temptations, and steer their lives in a positive direction. Understanding what gave rise to this desire and how it has been maintained is necessary for understanding the role of agency in desistance. Agency emerged from the data as essential for sustaining long term desistance from crime.

4.2.1 Contemplation Time

All participants said that contemplation time was a key factor both at the start of their desistance and in sustaining desistance. For three participants this opportunity arose in addiction treatment centres, one in prison and the last in social isolation he experienced at the end of his criminal career. These opportunities allowed for reflection upon what had become of their lives and to see clearly, for most of them for the first time, both the predicament they were in and the damage they were doing to those who mattered to them most. Crucially though for three men their stint in addiction treatment gave them the insight that there was actually another way to live. The fact that crime and drug use was the only way these men knew how to live was very clear in the data. One participant emphasised that he only entered treatment to learn how to use drugs without suffering the severe psychological side effects. Once there however,

> *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)

These opportunities for contemplation were seen as important for sustaining long term desistance from crime also. Continued involvement in 12 Step fellowships provided this contemplative space to participants throughout their period of desistance. To continue to be exposed to the reality of the consequences of a life of drug addiction and criminality was vital for keeping these men on the right track. Twelve Step fellowship service work in prisons, hospitals and detoxification centres was a powerful tool for combating any illusion they may have that they could be successful criminals.

4.2.2 Understanding

Another crucial ingredient for sustaining desistance was gaining and understanding of the past. Supports that helped in this process were addiction counsellors, therapists and therapy groups, and 12 Step groups. Access to these services was gained through a network of addiction services, both within the community and within prison. For example 12 Step groups have regular meetings in most prisons and addiction treatment centres throughout Ireland. Access to treatment centres, therapists and addiction counselling can be gained through a number of community services, such as methadone clinics, needle exchanges, Local Drugs Task Force organisations and local community drug teams. Comprehending what effect family of origin had on their thinking and development allowed for past events to be placed into a new context. Gaining a deeper insight into their past motivation, and how their actions affected themselves and others, was important for sustaining desistance. All participants stated that this is an ongoing process, although it was most important in the first few years of desistance.

> *I was a victim myself, I only acted in a way I was shown how to act. Now that I'm after been shown another way I've no excuse now, now if I act in the wrong fashion it's because I chose 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)

4.2.3 Knifing Off

All participants made the decision to dis-associate themselves from friends and acquaintances with whom they had been criminally involved. None of the men interviewed said that they judged a geographical change necessary to carry out this process. One of the advantages identified of being involved in a 12 Step fellowship was that it provided a new community and a new social network. Past acquaintances were replaced with new friends, as often advised by therapists and mentors. This nurturing of a new life through new associations, activities and behaviours was identified as an important factor in sustaining desistance over the long term. Regardless of how long they have been crime free, none of the interviewees felt that they could safely associate with any of their past acquaintances.

4.2.4 Achievement

All five men identified a sense of achievement as very enjoyable, empowering and necessary for their continued personal development. Small achievements at the beginning of their desistance, such as buying their own clothes or paying rent, were built upon by ever more significant achievements as desistance progressed. This feeling of competency and self worth came from achieving goals in all areas of their lives. These achievements, according to participants, are both results of desistance and provide meaning to their existence that allows for continued desistance.

Vocational

- One man successfully completed third level education, two others are currently in part time third level education
- One participant is a successful artist
- One participant is in a managerial position in a construction company

Social

- Four participants own their own homes
- All participants have hobbies and have achieved in areas such as martial arts, playing music, art, literature, cooking
- Participants maintain long term relationships with friends, family, children

This sense of achievement signifies to participants that they are moving forward and further away from their past, stagnation was viewed as regression.

> *The big things I have are setting goals for myself. Getting my degree, doing exams, bringing my career in a different direction, doing something that I have to work at, that brings joy* (Participant 2)

Each man identifies their own determination as probably the most important factor in everything they have done in their lives since they stopped offending. Each man spoke of the difficulties they experienced while trying to succeed in society. Whether this was learning to sit in a class room or learning that they had to get up and work for a full week to get paid,

each spoke of the specific and numerous adjustments that were required. Developing a work ethic and persevering through these difficulties was a huge part of the learning process.

> *When I was on drugs I thought I was never going to get off them, so I had to concentrate on having drugs all the time and be willing to do absolutely anything to ensure I had drugs. And I did that. So when I got clean I did the exact same thing, I gave it everything. My determination has been one of the most important things in everything I've done since then. I make up my mind to do something and then I do it, without a shadow of a doubt* (Participant 1)

4.2.5 Rational Choice

When asked why they haven't returned to crime one of the notable reasons offered was fear of consequences. Four of the participants said that a return to offending would also mean a return to substance addiction and they greatly feared the consequences of both patterns of behaviour. Consequences such as imprisonment, violent death, diseases, as well as psychological and physical deterioration were identified. To consider swapping the level of contentment and stability each participant had achieved was viewed as highly irrational. Two participants who had been involved in serious crime involving firearms offences, drug importation and armed robberies claimed that crime had escalated to a frightening level before they turned their lives around. As one of these men stated;

> *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* (Participant 1)

The return to that kind of living, according to these two men, was highly undesirable.

4.3 Addiction / Recovery

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

All participants viewed their past criminal behaviour as inseparable from their drug addiction. All stated that their crimes were either acquisitive, that is to pay for drugs, or as a result of actions while under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

> *Selling drugs was so I'd have drugs, then I needed to be violent to get things done quicker so I'd have more time for using drugs.* (Participant 1)

Therefore vital to sustaining desistance from crime has been sustaining recovery from addiction.

For all participants the psychological and physical consequences of using drugs brought them to a place where they could consider changing. All spoke of the torment of chronic drug addiction and the broken state they were left in. Indeed four participants claimed that they didn't have a choice about stopping initially because they were close to death. However while this was sufficient to get them to enter treatment or contemplate changing, it must not be assumed that it was the sole reason they stopped. Participants spoke of having many false starts before they finally could commit to changing the course of their lives.

All five interviewees subscribed to the disease model of addiction as outlined in the 12 step model. This model states that addiction is an illness that can never be cured but can be arrested and recovery depends upon maintenance. Recovery from addiction is the causal process that allows for continued abstinence, similar to the working desistance definition for this study. For participants the return to crime and the return to addiction are one and the same, one feeds the other. Therefore desistance from crime very much depends upon maintenance of recovery from addiction, and vice versa. Maintenance of recovery from addiction involves continued attendance at fellowship meetings and applying the principles of the 12 Step programme to their lives, as outlined above in the generative work required and the combating of selfishness. While participants stated that recovery involves many aspects of personal and social development, the continued cultivation of a selfless attitude and way of living was viewed as a crucial element in continued recovery from all participants. Without a commitment to continue this work four participants believe that a return to crime and addiction are inevitable, regardless of how long they have been in successful desistance.

4.4 Identity

A characteristic of successful desistance is an evolution of the identity of the individual from that of criminal offender and drug addict to desisting ex-offender and recovered addict. This new script emerges from the individuals understanding of their past, how they experience the current lives and their view of their future.

4.4.1 Past

Participants expressed varying degrees of regret and remorse over their past actions. These regrets were expressed for harms caused to family and friends, and to people who participants judged to have caused serious physical or mental harm. There were few expressions of regret

for crimes such as theft from employers or strangers, drug dealing or property crimes. Two participants expressed deep regret and a sense shame for severe mental and physical damage done to people through their criminal activities. At the time of offending both participants said that these offences gave them a sense of power and invincibility, and were the activities through which they derived their sense of status and identity. This perception of their offences has changed considerably:

> *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)

Three of the participants expressed similar emotions in relation to offences committed against members of family or close friends only. They viewed most of the crimes they committed as just a part of the life they were leading. It is worth quoting one participant to illustrate this point:

> *There's probably only two incidents where people got very badly hurt and it wasn't intentional, and like maybe if it hadn't happened it would be better. I just see them as something that happened, I don't really have a whole lot of feelings around them.* (Participant 1)

All participants expressed the view that their entry into crime and drug addiction was unavoidable. They identify the lessons they learned in dysfunctional homes and criminogenic environments as priming them for a life of crime and addiction

> *Crime was bred around me, it was very normal and just part of the process of my life, part of growing up, I never set out to be like that, it wasn't part of the plan. In fact there was no plan, I just rolled with life.* (Participant 4)

For these men the idea of considering themselves a criminal was alien, for them it was a natural progression on their life path. Three participants identified the fear they felt in the families of origin as being a key factor in determining their life course.

> *When you are really young and getting beaten up and screamed at every day you become like a caged animal. When I found drink and drugs I found a way out of it all, to me it was like freedom. So drugs, crime, violence, whatever was just life. I never thought of myself as a criminal, I didn't think about that shit at all.* (Participant 3)

4.4.2 Current Lives

All five men stated that criminal offending was no longer a possibility, at least not in the manner in which they used to offend. They claimed that the understanding they have gained about their past and their success over the last decade in nurturing new morals and a new perspective on life leaves no room for criminality.

> *Robbing off people, hurting people, smashing someone's head in with an iron bar, they're all the things I realised were totally out of order and I wouldn't do them again. The reason I feel so good about myself is because I'm living right today. The chance of offending is zero, it doesn't go with me. It's impossible.* (Participant 2)

Each participant stated that they value being trusted by friends, family and employers. Qualities such as reliability and honesty were priorities, as was the ability to face personal and financial difficulties without resorting to old behaviours.

When asked if there were any circumstances where they could envision criminal offending in the present lives, surprisingly four participants answered that there was. All four said that violence was a possibility but only in response to violence perpetrated against them or a member of their family. This potential for violence was seen as a reaction to the realities of life, and by one participant as a poor substitute for the necessary skills to deal with such a situation should it ever occur:

> *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)

4.4.3 Future

When asked how they view their future all participants responded that they have hope and optimism about their future lives. However all the men stated that the most important aspect of their future was their peace of mind. Material well being and relationships were desirable but depended on continued cultivation of a positive and healthy mindset.

Interestingly only one participant stated that he feels like part of wider society. This man displayed a high degree of self-efficacy and was very confident about his ability to get on in life:

> *I'm the one who stops myself getting on in life, not anyone else, there's no laws, there's no discrimination laws to stop me. I had to realise that all of the boundaries were ones I set myself, the ones I had to mentally challenge.* (Participant 2)

Two participants struggled more with the idea of feeling part of a wider collective, and said it all depends on their state of mind:

> *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)

Of the remaining two participants one seemed entertained at the idea that he would want to be part of society. His life was embedded very much in an artistic subculture and wider society seemed hardly relevant to his life or identity. The last participant, although expressing great hope for his future life, saw society as a highly corrupt and decaying entity. The value and ideals he aspired to were not represented by the accepted norms of society:

> *Aspiring to be anything in society is nothing of great value, I don't feel part of society, I play a game within society because I have to. I won't ever want to be part of society because it represents shite, its insane and values are fucked up. Most people turn a blind eye to suffering and those in power are all about greed.* (Participant 4)

4.5 Informal Social Controls

For three participants support from family was an important factor in helping them maintain desistance. Loyalty felt to family members was at times critical during difficult periods, as was the desire to not repeat the damage done to parents, siblings and children. Interestingly only two of the men were in relationships, none were married and two had children. However no participant claimed that their relationship status, either currently or in the past, had any effect on their sustaining desistance. Three participants expressed the desire to avoid placing their family of origin back into the position they were in. They stated that the thorough understanding they had gained of how their past actions had affected their families was a powerful tool in dissuading them during periods of temptation. Two participants said the desire to be present in their children's lives and to provide a good example was a further motivating factor. For the men in this sample, friends that were also in recovery from addiction, or desistance from crime, provided the most powerful form of informal social

control. These men felt they had a high degree of accountability to their close friends, and spoke of regularly meeting up to provide advice and assistance to each other.

4.6 Age and Desistance

Only one participant stated that his age had any relevance on his decision to desist from crime. Moreover he stated that his age contributed to a growing desire to change, but was one of many factors.

> *The older I got I saw my life was going absolutely nowhere and I actually wanted it to be going somewhere, I had achieved nothing. That desire arrived as I got older, I wanted to be a man, I wanted to hold my own.* (Participant 3)

There is nothing further in the data to indicate that age was a factor in sustaining desistance from crime for these participants.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the lives of five long term long term desisting ex-offenders, and to identify themes that sustain desistance. It is clear from the findings that desistance is a complex topic, and no single cause can be pinpointed as the crucial ingredient. This chapter will discuss the emergent themes and attempt to compare them with the dominant theories of desistance as outlined in the literature review.

5.1 The Past: Clearing the Fog

That every individuals view of their past informs their current identity, at least to some extent, is accepted common sense. That this identity informs morals and values, and thereby actions, is equally true. The change in identity for each of the five participants was clear from the findings. Their view of the past, however, was not in line with Shadd Marunas findings from the Liverpool Desistance Study. Marunas redemption script states that ex-offenders see their past as a necessary prologue to their current lives, and possibly guided by a universal plan or higher power that led them to where they are supposed to be (Maruna, 2001). This element of the redemptive narrative was not evident in this study. Rather the men viewed the past as unavoidable because of their life circumstance, but did not attribute any special meaning to it. Hence their identity is not derived from, or defined by, their past criminal experiences. These individuals have a more recent history, over ten years of crime and drug free living, from which to draw their sense of self. The many achievements, successes and social bonds developed during that time represent a more recent history that informs their sense of self. This was not the case in the Liverpool Desistance Study as participants were relatively new to desistance.

For these men agency was extremely important in their past, whether it was when they were committing crimes or when they were in desistance from crime. All stated that they did what they were determined to do. Human social action was absolutely necessary for leaving a life of crime and drugs behind. The difficulties of initiating and sustaining such change were evident from the interviews, and only a determined approach would suffice. Indeed all participants spoke of friends who had not been able to sustain desistance and many were now dead or in prison. Agency, which these me expressed as desire, determination and action, was arguably the single most important element in their success to date. Understanding exactly how agency develops or takes hold in order to institute positive action in the lives of

offenders is no small task. Pinpointing exactly why they decided to change was a difficult task for interviewees. It was however clear that contemplation time was an important factor, as were rational choice considerations. Fear of consequences such as death or imprisonment came in phases, and there were often times when participants were in great danger and didn't seem to care. Escalating levels of danger and the degenerative effects of chronic drug addiction, combined with contemplation time, opened windows of opportunity for reflection and change. This would not have been sufficient for sustaining desistance from crime if they had not gained an understanding into what exactly was wrong with them. This understanding of their thoughts, emotions and motivations provided a sense of empowerment and hope. Shadd Maruna (2001:10) identifies that this process is key to successful desistance:

> *Creating this sense of order out of disorderly lives may be of particular importance to those who are trying to maintain an important life change such as desisting from crime.*

Furthermore the knowledge that there was another way to live was breaking news. This is potentially a crucial element for study in further explorations of desistance. The idea that some criminals and drug addicts do not know how to live any other way may seem like a justification for offending and deviant behaviour. Nevertheless it came across as a genuine observation from participants in this study.

5.2 The Present: Maintaining Desistance

A recurrent theme that emerged from the data was the importance of 12 Step fellowships in the lives of the participants. It is worth considering how the role that these fellowships play fits the framework of Sampson and Laubs Life Course Theory (2003; 2005a; 2005b). On first analysis it appeared that Life Course Theory was not an applicable framework to explain desistance among this sample. On further analysis of data it became clear that the functions outlined above were provided by the 12 Step fellowships. These alcohol and addiction recovery organisations provided a new start, a 'knifing off' of the past and a new community bound by a common ailment. Participants made new friends, developed a support structure and became accountable to each other. Each participant said that attendance at fellowship meetings and events occurred at least five days per week in the first three years of desistance, and has continued at a reduced rate to date. This provided structured routines and forms of indirect supervision. Finally the fellowships provided a new and powerful narrative for participants, and facilitated the emergence of a pro-social script. It may be quite possible that

the nature of drug addiction made these participants less susceptible to desistance through the institutions identified in Life Course Theory. Nevertheless this study demonstrates that a very different kind of institution can play the same role in the lives of some drug addicted criminals as marriage, work and the military can play in the lives of other desisting offenders.

As made clear in the findings chapter, all the men in this sample believe that sustaining desistance from crime, and sustaining recovery from addiction, are the same process. All attribute their current success to following the guidelines of the 12 Step programmes, especially the suggestion that they be of service to those less fortunate. Maruna (2001) identified the importance of generative work to the maintenance of desistance, and the men in this study confirm that finding. The desire, or more accurately the need, to continually reach for personal growth was voiced by each interviewee. This growth could be best obtained by helping others. There are certainly many theories of addiction and numerous ways to recover from substance addiction. The addiction studies literature document recovery through cognitive behavioural therapy, regression therapy, and Christian conversion, to name but a few (Maruna, 2001). Indeed the 12 Step literature specifically states that their programme is a way to recovery, but certainly not the only way (Narcotics Anonymous, 1993). Nevertheless, 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.

Self-worth was another recurrent theme in the findings and very much fuelled the strong sense of identity of the participants. Characteristics of identity that permeated the data included that of professional worker, productive member of society, good friend, reliable and honest person, and good parent. Each participant had developed a strong sense of self worth that sustained these identities. Whether it was through generative work with others, education, employment or recreational activities, the sense of self-validation was evident. A determination to remain drug and crime free was bolstered by the continued achievements of these men. Maruna (2001) identified that ex-offenders had to learn how to live in the straight world and initial success was often necessary for continued effort. This study demonstrates that continued goal setting, and personal, social and vocational achievements are important for sustaining desistance. Not to be underestimated is the role of social interests and hobbies in the continued state of non-offending. Participants identified that state of mind is extremely important for desistance, and an aspect of state of mind is the ability to enjoy oneself. These

men had to learn how to enjoy life without the aid of narcotics. The discovery of hobbies and interests was crucial for this process. Furthermore the benefits from participation in these activities included self-esteem, new skills and new social bonds.

5.3 The Future: A Continued State of Non-Offending?

In the Liverpool Desistance Study Maruna found that all of his desisting participants expressed a high degree of optimism and control over their future lives, an attitude Maruna termed as a 'useful illusion' (Maruna, 2001:88). All of the desisting ex-offenders sampled for this study also expressed a high degree of optimism and hope about their future lives. The emphasis was placed upon the hope felt by participants, rather than a sense of control. These men had lived in a non offending state for a considerable number of years and had experience of what it takes to succeed as a law abiding citizen. An attitude of maturity and realism was evident when they spoke of their future lives. Furthermore, an attitude of confidence was also evident as each man had overcome many obstacles and reached many goals since they stopped offending. They had learned how to live successfully in the straight world and did not appear to be under any illusions of the work ethic needed to reach their goals.

This attitude of hope and optimism is based on the realisation by these men that they are always going to be addicts with a potential to relapse and re-offend. Therefore they are committed to continue their involvement in the 12 Step fellowships. Everything depends on their peace of mind and emotional balance, which participants state comes from participation in the fellowships. This opinion seemed to be based on their experience of desistance rather than on any dogmatic belief in the recovery movements effectiveness. All spoke of deceased and relapsed friends who didn't keep up their participation. The lessons for them are very clear. Participants stated many times that they did not want to suffer the potential consequences of relapsing back into criminal offending and substance misuse, therefore this recognition that they must do this work can be viewed as a rational choice position. While not perfectly fitting rational choice theory, participants continually weigh up the pros and cons of not participating in these recovery fellowships, an often time consuming activity. Furthermore the new sense of identity that the participants have discovered, and the morals and values that come with it, seem to be under threat by the possibility of ceasing involvement in these fellowships. Therefore this identity can be seen as something that must be reinforced and built upon. The potential for the re-emergence old characteristics, ways of

thinking and behaviour patterns was a real possibility for participants. While this new identity does shield them from relenting, there still appears to be an underlying sense of insecurity.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS

It appears that the specific group that was sampled in this study, that is long term desisting ex-offenders and former drug addicts, share many characteristics with other groups of ex-offenders. The rehabilitative nature of generative work was clear to see from the findings, as was the importance that participants placed upon such work. It was however identified that the particular institutions named in Life Course Theory didn't have an impact on this group of desisters. Nevertheless the specific advantages provided by these institutions, namely work marriage and the military, did apply to the participants involvement in the 12 Step fellowships. Agency emerged as another crucial ingredient in this study, a position that very much reflects the importance of agency in the criminological theories of desistance. As was identified in the literature review successful desistance necessitates a change in the offenders identity: this was verified in the findings of this study. There were, however, some findings that were particular to this group and were not found in the literature by this researcher. Firstly the actual diagnosis that participants made of their lives was very interesting. The identification of selfishness and concern with self as the root cause of their troubles, both past and present, was evident. Participants were particularly concerned with how this selfishness affected their current lives, and strategies for dealing with it. This was the motivating factor for their willingness to engage in voluntary work with others. It is also true to state that none of these men considered themselves 'cured' of their addicted and criminally oriented natures and see recovery work as vital. Secondly the importance of gaining an understanding of why they offended and became drug addicts allowed for the emergence of their new identity. This new script needed to have depth and weight, and was achieved through therapy, counselling and 12 Step work. Finally these men needed to replace the conceptions of achievement and enjoyment through narcotic use with healthy and socially accepted behaviours. This was very much a learning process as they discovered that happiness does not necessarily equal drug induced euphoria. Furthermore this sense of achievement was an important factor for sustaining desistance, self worth and identity.

6.1 Recommendations

- Further research into long term desistance from crime
- Further research into the role of 12 Step organisations in desistance from crime among former drug and alcohol addicted offenders
- Research into the process of de-labelling in the lives of desisting offenders

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APPENDIX A

Request for Participation in Research for Masters Degree Dissertation

Desistance

The study of desistance is the study of how offenders become ex-offenders, and how they maintain their crime free status. It involves an analysis of how persistent offenders overcome the many obstacles they face when trying to turn their life around, obstacles that often include drug and alcohol addictions, lack of education and / or work skills, broken family relationships, homelessness, and so on.

This study will seek to look at the lived experience of five people who have been in desistance from crime for at least a decade. How they have kept their crime free status for such a period of time will be explored.

With this letter I want to request that you consider being a participant in this study. Included below is a brief outline of what would be involved:

Interview: Your participation would involve one interview of approximately 90 minutes duration. The interview would take place in early August 2009, at a place and time of your choosing. There may be a short follow up interview, either in person or by phone, to clarify some points of data.

Data: The interview would be recorded on audio cassette, or by audio cassette and writing answers on a notepad, or else just using a notepad: the choice is completely that of the participant, whatever feels comfortable is best. If audio cassettes are used then they will be destroyed after they are transcribed to written word by the researcher. Furthermore all data will be destroyed after the study is completed. The researcher will endeavour to present the true meaning of data as presented by participants, and undertakes not to falsify or modify any data.

Participation: Each participant has the right to withdraw consent at any time, to demand the destruction of data offered if participation is terminated at a later date, and to refuse to answer any specific questions.

Confidentiality: An assurance of absolute confidentiality is offered by the researcher. In practice this means that no real names or identifiable details will be used in the paper. Also no participants will be made aware of the names of other participants. The only exceptions to this rule are where information falling under the following headings is offered: 1) admissions of current legal activity, 2) harm to children 3) harm to oneself or other adults.

APPENDIX B

CONSENT FORM

Researcher's Name: (use block capitals)	**Title:**
Faculty/School/Department:	
Title of Study:	
To be completed by the: **subject/patient/volunteer/informant/interviewee/parent/guardian** ***(delete as necessary)***	

3.1 Have you been fully informed/read the information sheet about this study? YES/NO

3.2 Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? YES/NO

3.3. Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? YES/NO

3.4 Have you received enough information about this study and any associated health and safety implications if applicable? YES/NO

3.5 Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study?

- at any time
- without giving a reason for withdrawing
- without affecting your future relationship with the Institute YES/NO

3.6 Do you agree to take part in this study the results of which are likely to be published? YES/NO

3.7 Have you been informed that this consent form shall be kept in the confidence of the researcher? YES/NO

Signed_____ Date _____

Name in Block Letters _____

Signature of Researcher _____ Date _____