

Desistance and Prisoner Re-entry: A Real-time Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In the current paper, I explore the state of desistance from crime and prisoner re-entry, primarily in Scotland. As a criminology graduate recently released from a long prison sentence, I gather and analyse the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of the prison to community living transition to contrast and compare my experience with relevant academic literature through the lens of convict criminology. Furthermore, I draw upon relevant first-hand knowledge of desistance and re-entry as each occurs to assess the current rehabilitative climate in Scotland. I discuss the notion of “judicial rehabilitation” and the effects of a criminal record in modern society, questioning the impact of these subtle forms of punishment upon those leaving custody. In doing so, I question whether more could be done to catalyse and sustain these transitions in the hope that society can better enable people to desist and eventually lead fulfilling crime-free lives upon their re-entry.

INTRODUCTION

In the current paper, I compare my own desistance and re-entry journeys with relevant literature interwoven with my own lived experiences. Succinctly, desistance is referred to as abstinence from criminal behaviour for those persistently engaged in offending (Maruna, 2001). On the other hand, prisoner re-entry could be described as the study of “reintegrating returning prisoners”, to borrow a phrase from Travis and Petersilia (2001, p. 308). Since my own release from an extended custodial term in September 2019, it could be said that I am in the unusual position (for me at least) of trying to cogently weave these experiences with relevant literature through the lens of convict criminology. Briefly, convict criminology is composed of people with first-hand experiences of the criminal justice/penal system who subsequently go on to pursue academic work to contest mainstream notions of criminology advanced by conventional academics (Drake & Gunn, 2013).

While many studies have alluded to individual experiences of desistance as well as its aspects and complications (Maruna, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002; Kazemian, 2007; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016), first-hand experiences

of criminological phenomena arguably provide an important way to explore these issues. In this sense, my thoughts analyse and interrogate the literature while, in turn, the literature questions my own thinking and experiences. My process arguably reflects Macedo's (2000, p. 19) assertion that "If students are not able to transform their lived experiences into knowledge and to use that already acquired as a process to unveil new knowledge, they will never be able to participate rigorously in a dialogue as a process of learning and knowing". In this way, it could be argued that I can utilise a negative historical narrative of criminal behaviour and incarceration to my advantage by filtering such experiences through an academic lens to contribute to a cause greater than oneself (Maruna, 2001).

The fact that most people who enter prison will, at some point, return home (Travis, 2005, cited in Boppre & Hart-Johnson, 2019) arguably highlights the importance of creating socio-economic opportunities that not only catalyse desistance but also help to sustain it, thereby reducing recidivism. Crucially, one could say that the *raison d'être* of prison is the rehabilitation of the convicted person (not to mention punishment and public protection). But how does society expect people leaving prison to live law-abiding lives when they come home? From this perspective, the potential reduction of reoffending (and the harm catalysed by crime) arguably reinforces the significance of the desistance/re-entry nexus.

For example, how can people returning from prison initiate and maintain desistance without developing links to employment agencies or academic institutions prior to or post re-entry? As Aresti and colleagues (2010, p. 169) point out, "Understanding the factors that lead to criminal desistance [...] is vital to the development of interventions that reduce reoffending. Such a reduction has several implications for society, in terms of economic gains and issues of public welfare". In other words, there is more to consider than the person simply 'going straight'. In fact, the positive impact of a successful re-entry/desistance model not only benefits the person leaving incarceration, but also strengthens society as a whole.

Nevertheless, can society help people with convictions bridge the gap between the barriers of the individual's past and their prospective future? Can successful re-entry and desistance be considered the sole responsibility of the 'offender'? One could postulate that communities and wider society have roles to play. For instance, how can we expect people with criminal lifestyles to 'go straight' if they are marginalized and stigmatised in the very

communities to which they return? That being said, how do we understand the factors that lead to desistance so we can develop ways and means of creating an environment conducive to reducing recidivism? In my own experience, it seems essential that the desister should comprehend their journey and its root causes just as much as those who study these issues. At the time of writing (November 2020), I have been free for a period of fourteen months and have embarked on the next chapter of my desistance odyssey.

Coincidentally, my own brush with desistance theory occurred while studying for a criminology degree in prison. In the final year before my graduation, I inadvertently discovered the literature whilst trying to decide what criminological topic to use in my independent research project (see McNeill & Weaver, 2010; McNeill, 2014). Initially, my heart was set on composing a piece on Middle Eastern terrorist groups or serial offending. In preparation, the manager of the prison's learning centre downloaded a variety of academic papers that I could choose from in my forthcoming assignment. Tellingly, I opted to write about desistance and rehabilitation in Scottish prisons because it seemed to be a perfect fit. In other words, I felt that the fact I was 'living the literature' gave me a head start and a unique perspective from which to question the processes and policies that impacted my daily life. However, I did not know I had already embarked on the desistance journey until the point I had discovered the literature during my studies in custody.

Succinctly, there are three notable aspects of the desistance journey. The first two, as described by Maruna and Farrall (2004), are "primary desistance" (cessation of criminal behaviour) and "secondary desistance" (identity shift from seeing oneself as an 'offender' to a more pro-social role). The third, "tertiary desistance" (McNeill & Schinkel, 2015), is especially intriguing because it implies that society has a role to play in absorbing the returning individual within a moral, social and political society. In other words, if the individual stops committing crime (primary desistance), they will eventually move away from identifying with pro-criminal identities and attitudes and shift to a more socially acceptable role (secondary desistance). Once these have been achieved and maintained, the individual should be accorded the same socio-economic opportunities as would be extended to others in society and not be penalised or marginalized due to a criminal past. Society has an obligation to help people leaving incarceration if such individuals have demonstrated a willingness to refrain from resuming a criminal lifestyle.

Regardless of whether or not an individual can be classified as a desister whilst still in custody (MacPherson, 2017), the real test of one's commitment to desistance will be seen upon re-entering society. For example, people in prison are unlikely to be viewed as desisters without demonstrating a sustained crime-free lifestyle in the community. Arguably, the 'probationary period' can make-or-break one's potential to 'go straight'. Brickman and colleagues (1982) assertion that those who first help themselves are subsequently helped by others may reinforce this point (cited in Maruna, 2001). In my opinion, I have a significant chance of desisting thanks to my responsibilities as a father and my academic studies, both of which functioned as a 'hook-for-change' (Giordano et al., 2002), as well as my deep immersion in the desistance literature during my incarceration. Briefly, a hook-for-change describes a catalyst for transformation which subsequently initiates the desistance journey.

I could feel the pressure in the back of my mind as I walked out of the prison gates. I carried in my hand a copy of *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild their Lives* (Maruna, 2001), which I thought would act as a good luck charm on the first day of re-entry. My incarceration had been put to good use by learning and reflecting on my past and the kind of future I wanted. The pervasive pessimism of prison provided me with a moment of clarity where I realised that the end result of my life would either be premature death or life imprisonment. As one can imagine, this was not something I wanted for myself (or my son's future). Perhaps not wanting said life enforces the notion of the 'desired self' and the 'feared self' alluded to by Paternoster and Bushway (2009) to describe who the desister wants to be and the malaise they feel they could become if they continue to offend. This, in turn, seemingly reinforces Maruna's (2001) argument that people must formulate a semblance of pro-social identity if they are to enable desistance from offending.

Although I had received a 16-year prison term in 2003 and was released in 2010, I was recalled to custody fourteen months later for a minor charge of breach of the peace (or 'disturbing the peace' as it is referred to in the United States). Two weeks after I returned to prison, my ex-partner gave birth to our son and I was determined that I would do my best to turn my life around for his sake when I was eventually released. Ironically, discovering desistance projected me on to a path where I was best placed to achieve my objective. Re-entering society from prison has placed me in a position where I can put desistance theory into practice by demonstrating a pro-active willingness to

disengage from offending behaviour. Personally, desistance and re-entry are two sides of the same coin, especially in cases of more serious offending. I now turn to examine the literature on desistance and prisoner re-entry.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The vast scholarly work on desistance alludes to multiple aspects associated with the desistance journey, such as cognitive change (Giordano et al., 2002), acquisition of social capital (McNeill & Weaver, 2010; Kay, 2020), the significance of family bonds (Cid & Marti, 2012), as well as shifts in behaviour and self-identity (Shapland & Bottoms, 2017). The academic literature on re-entry, while overlapping with some elements of desistance, references obstacles that are activated when the individual leaves custody (see Wacquant, 2010; Pinard, 2010; Logan, 2013; Durnescu, 2019). These barriers are threefold: personal, social, and structural (Durnescu, 2019). Some of these features include restricted employment prospects, voter disenfranchisement, no access to public housing and welfare, especially in the United States (Wacquant, 2010; Pinard, 2010), as well as stigma and marginalization of a criminal record (Lammy, 2017; Weaver, 2018; Piacentini et al., 2018). Certain aspects associated with re-entry may feature in one particular culture, while not being present in another. For example, there is no universal ban on voting, applying for social welfare or attaining public housing extended to people leaving prison in Scotland as opposed to the United States, as described by Wacquant (2010).

One aspect of the re-entry process impacting the individual's potential for success across cultures is the marginalization and stigma of a criminal record. For example, rather than protecting the British public, Lammy (2017, p. 64) argues that criminal records have the opposite effect by "trapping offenders in their past, denying dependents an income and costing the tax payer money". Lammy (2017) also points out that half of all crimes committed in the United Kingdom are perpetrated by recidivists and cites Home Office (2015) estimations of reoffending as costing the British taxpayers between £9.5 and £13 billion per year. One unusual, yet intriguing, notion is Lammy's proposal of sealing criminal records as a means of supporting those with convictions and helping them to access the labour market post release – a process enacted elsewhere.

In the United States, a judicial procedure exists in the Massachusetts

where an individual can apply to have their criminal record sealed under State Legislature MGL Chapter 276 (s.100a) if it can be demonstrated to the court that there is ample justification for doing so (Lammy, 2017). Not only those convicted of minor crimes can seek to have their records sealed, the law can also apply to some felony convictions. Being a child at the time of the offence is a criterion for sealing one's record, as well as demonstrating considerable transformation since the commission of the crime.

"Judicial rehabilitation", unfortunately, applies only to Massachusetts State law rather than enshrined throughout the country. Briefly, judicial rehabilitation declares under the law of a particular country that an individual with a criminal history has transformed and seeks to support their change (see McNeill, 2014; Herzog-Evans, 2011). However, much more palatable is to present one's case to a court of law in order to be legally acknowledged as a desister rather than completely sealing the individual's criminal record, especially in cases of serious violent/sexual offences where others have been victimised. I would never expect my own record to be sealed, nor would I even ask. However, I have no idea how other people in similar situations feel about the possibility of sealing records.

Aspects of judicial rehabilitation have been enacted into law in several European nations, undoubtedly enabling desistance and re-entry. For instance, Herzog-Evans (2011) states that "French law does not only acknowledge during a judicial court hearing that a person has actually desisted; it also helps considerably by limiting the amount of information that is available on the basis of criminal records and the number of people who can actually see those files...". Furthermore, Larrauri (2011) points out that job disqualification in Spain only applies to cases where the employment role is related to one's index offence. The process parallels Boone's (2011) discussion of a 'conduct certificate' in Holland, which sees people with convictions excluded from positions that mirror past crimes. Resocialisation is also a right embedded within the German constitution (Morgenstern, 2011). As these studies show, Europe is seemingly more progressive than the United States and Great Britain in terms of desistance and re-entry focused policy.

Weaver (2018) cites how "people with convictions [in Britain] appear to be the only group excluded from the Equality Act's 2010 anti-discrimination protections and so one implication might be that people with convictions should be legally recognised as a disadvantaged group entitled to special employment protection". While there are many obstacles

to employment in the Scottish context (especially in the unprecedented Corona Virus epidemic), there has been some progress, at least in helping those convicted of less serious offences find work. Prior to my liberation in September 2019, a news article appeared that outlined plans to help people with criminal records gain entry into the labour force. The formulation of a third-sector organization called Release Scotland described how several well-known companies have pledged their willingness to employ people with convictions (BBC News, 2018). After I read the article, I sought to participate in the initiative prior to my upcoming release.

I made attempts to contact Release Scotland while still in prison and after I had been liberated. However, the website had no phone number and no mailing address. After my release, I emailed them on at least three occasions and it was almost nine months before I received a response. The reply I received seemed perfunctory and provided me with the phone number of *another* organisation (Fair Start Scotland), whose primary focus is helping people get back into the job market rather than solely focusing on those with offending histories. Furthermore, I also contacted Police Scotland's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), another agency that helps those with criminal pasts find gainful work. The VRU was initially formed in 2005 in Glasgow in response to a wave of serious knife attacks and I had always followed their work whilst in custody.

A few of their staff even visited me in prison and expressed the desire to help me when I was eventually released. However, the staff members I became acquainted with in custody had since moved on by the time of my liberation and replaced by new ones. When I telephoned the VRU, I was informed that I was out of the age-bracket of those who qualify for intervention. The irony remains that the *raison d'être* of these organizations is to help individuals with criminal pasts find gainful employment yet there is always an impediment of sorts obstructing one's progress, like age. This will, by extension, place barriers in the way of other people in similar circumstances.

Piacentini and colleagues (2018, p. 1) cite obstacles to employment as "transport difficulties, lack of recent employment experience and limited work history, issues surrounding transitions (from prison to community, from benefits to work), a lack of skills and or qualifications, low self-esteem, confidence and/or motivation" – all realities to which I can identify. For example, I have zero work history, which translates into all of the above, and especially low self-esteem in relation to employment.

My personal situation is compounded by the fact that I do not know how to ‘sell myself’ in a job interview (which could be the result of a lack of self-esteem or inexperience) or write a Curriculum Vitae. The skills I have are not necessarily translatable to the labour market. For example, being able to construct a cogent essay, may not be a skill that employers value in entry level positions. Given the fact that the prison population in Scotland has steadily increased since 2017-18 to an annual average of around 8,200 in 2019-20, primarily amongst the population of adult men only (Scottish Government, 2020), there is still more work to be done in helping people resettle into society after prison.

DISCUSSION

Arguably, scholars of desistance and re-entry describe many factors that can sustain both journeys while, at the same time, seemingly undermine them. As previously stated, there are universal and cultural barriers present in the re-entry process that can, and do, impede desistance. As Maruna (2007, p. 650) points out, “Except for those individuals who die in custody [...], the prisoner also faces the challenge of resettling back into society as an ‘ex-prisoner’. For many, this last test – the struggle for reintegration – can be the most difficult of all”. But how does society (re)integrate those leaving prison if, as Wacquant (2010, p. 612) claims, they were “never integrated in the first place and there is no viable social structure to accommodate them outside”? How does the argument resonate with my own lived experience of the Scottish re-entry/desistance context?

Upon re-entering society, I saw big changes in the general community and broader society, as well as among those living there. For instance, my son was born two weeks *after* I entered prison and was eight years old by the time I returned home. Although he came to visit me in prison throughout my sentence, we both seemed a little unsure of how to react in the moment when finally reunited. But what are the long-term costs of my prolonged incarceration vis-à-vis my relationship with my son? How has this affected our filial bond? Sadly, some scholars argue parental incarceration perpetuate “levels of disadvantage to already disadvantaged kids” (Wildeman, 2009; Arditti, 2012; Wakefield & Wildeman, 2013; Wakefield et al., 2016, cited in Haney, 2018). Others argue that young children experience developmental delays, separation anxiety, and

attachment difficulties (Cho, 2009; Geller et al., 2009), and school-age children have behavioural problems, educational delays, and emotional troubles (Seymour & Hairston, 2001). I can relate to separation anxiety and certain aspects of developmental delays, but definitely do not identify with attachment difficulties in regard to my child. My love for him is beyond questioning, although I am aware that certain issues can and do materialize in the parenting role.

For example, my son is diagnosed as manifesting traits of Asperger's Syndrome. The diagnosis was made while I was still in prison, prompting me to learn as much information as I could about Autistic Spectrum Disorders so I would comprehend the challenges the disorder may present. Moreover, I was unable to be included in all aspects of my son's education, which was very troubling. Education has played not only a huge role in my life, in my transformation, and I prioritize my son's education. I missed his first day of school, his first steps, his first words, not to mention every single one of his birthdays. The first birthday we shared was when he turned nine years old, one year after my release.

I have seen first-hand that there are massive social costs to incarceration. Haney (2018, p. 4) introduces the notion of "debt of imprisonment" to describe the material costs of incarceration that impact on fathers in custody and their kids' lives. In this way, I have first-hand experience of the debt of imprisonment judging by all of the important milestones I missed in my son's life where he needed his father. That being said, we saw each other at visits in the prison and kept in touch by telephone. The area where I have lived all of my life (and returned to after prison) was classed as one of the most deprived communities in Scotland. In fact, one local councillor claimed that the poverty levels in the area were "unprecedented" (Kenealy, 2016). When I returned home, I noticed a lot of talk of food banks and other welfare services that were unheard of before I went to prison. Thankfully, although I have never had to use one, the services are finally here.

When I exited prison, my close friend and older brother were experiencing addiction issues and the years that had passed since our last meetings was evident to me in their general presentation. A few weeks after my release, my friend was admitted to the hospital's Intensive Care Unit, due to health complications catalysed by his severe substance misuse. When I saw him lying in a hospital bed, I did not think he was going to come home. In fact, the subconscious enormity of seeing him in this dire situation induced an

anxiety attack of such magnitude that I almost exited the room. I faced the psychological weight of the physical manifestation that human life is finite and the choices we make can lengthen or shorten our days on this planet. Thankfully, I was able to compose myself and distract from my own overwhelming thoughts by engaging my friend in discussion.

In a surreal moment, we both spoke about our lives and I told him that desistance from crime was somewhat similar to refraining from drug abuse in the context of individuals struggling to cease a pattern of destructive behaviour. For example, I explained that we must identify the triggers that catalyse our offending behaviour/drug usage and initiate a process of self-reflection that helps us achieve a semblance of a pro-social lifestyle. My friend seemed taken aback by my own personal transformation and expressed a determination to give up drugs if he recovered. Miller (2014, p. 324) points out how “the ‘addicts’ [in Narcotics Anonymous] are engaged in an ongoing process of personal transformation in which they learn to manage their ‘allergy of the body’ and ‘disease of the mind’ by avoiding ‘triggers’ to use substances and reframe negative patterns associated with substance use ‘one day at a time’. The addict is in a constant and lifelong pursuit of recovery”.

The parallels between desisters/re-entrees and ‘addicts’ are evident: avoiding triggers, managing negative thought patterns in relation to addiction/criminal thinking in a process of seeking (and securing) some form of personal transformation. Moreover, high incidences of substance misuse amongst people entering and leaving custody (see Maruna, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002; Travis & Petersilia, 2001) also renders this topic more complex. I also know from personal experience that illicit drugs are endemic in Scottish prisons.

Although I have experimented with certain substances in the past, I have never suffered from any addiction issues. However, my friend had been in the grip of severe addiction for almost 15 years and it did not have a happy ending. Against all odds, the hospital discharged him after two months of recuperation. We spent every day together, catching up on lost time and laughing about old times. Close family and friends rallied around him, but the Hydra still lurked deep within. Two weeks before Christmas 2019, my friend passed away, leaving behind a fourteen-year-old daughter. Strangely enough, the parallels between this situation and that of my own Dad’s sudden passing – also from a drug-related incident – at the age of 14 was not lost on me.

In the midst of the upheaval, my own re-entry was exacerbated by the constraints I experienced trying to ‘go online’ and access ‘critical services’ as a citizen. For example, I discovered that multiple pieces of identification are required to open a bank account, register with a doctor and other basic but nonetheless crucial necessities. Prior to my release, I was handed a piece of paper specifying numerous types of identification, as well as the daunting fact that I would be required to present at least three separate pieces of documentation just to confirm my identity. Oddly, these prerequisites consisted of photographic identification and official letters, like a tax or utility bill (documentation that I suspect most, if not all, of those leaving prison do not have in their possession). I must admit that I was completely ignorant of the massive role that such documentation plays in the day-to-day life of average citizens. I was also totally unprepared.

On the day of my release, I visited several banks accompanied by a social worker, who advised that times had moved on and bank accounts are required for social security payments and employment purposes. I volunteered for social work support, a service that was provided on the day I left prison. Given that I had served almost my entire 16-year sentence, I was not subject to any restrictions or supervisory measures. Therefore, I was offered (and accepted) voluntary social work intervention. Immediately upon liberation, my social worker and I met at a prearranged location and went on a frustrating myriad of unannounced visits to banks in a seemingly rigged quest to open an account.

To my frustration, these financial institutions explained to me that I could not open an account without photographic identification such as a driver’s license or passport. Moreover, social security staff informed me that I had to present identification to the Job Centre not only to prove my identity, but also to verify that I had successfully opened a bank account to qualify for benefits. Yes, banks would not entertain me without photographic identification, while the Job Centre wanted proof of my identity and an active bank account. To quickly overcome this dilemma, I could purchase a new passport (somewhere between £70-£100) or a provisional driver’s license (£40). Liberated, I had only £170 in my possession, making neither financially practical at that time. I felt like I was trying to solve an angry Rubik’s Cube.

By the time I successfully opened a bank account, three months had passed since my release. In that period, I had to use my ex-partner’s bank account.

Although we were estranged, her parents brought my son to visit me throughout my incarceration and I spent a lot of time at her home after my release. My primary reason for this was to spend as much time as possible with my son to nurture “precisely those relationships proven essential for reintegration after prison: familial relations of care, reciprocity, and interdependence”, to borrow from Haney (2018, p. 1). Haney (2018, p. 5) describes the notion of “incarcerated fatherhood” to describe “...how the financial confinement of debt and poverty interrelates with the physical confinement of incarceration for many poor fathers”. Although my son had a relatively comfortable life during my years in prison, I did not contribute financially to his upbringing. I did feel bad about this but knew it was beyond my control. There are ways to earn money during custodial spells (e.g. selling drugs) but I was not prepared to go down that road.

My next step was to register with a doctor, which took four months from my re-entry into society because, again, I had no photographic identification. Fortunately, an accommodation support worker eventually telephoned my local doctor who I have known since I was four years old and explained my situation. Exclusion from services for want of proof of identification for those leaving prison appears to enforce the notion of “collateral consequences” (Pinard, 2010). Briefly, Tyner and Fry (2020, p. 360) describe collateral consequences as “hidden sanctions that emerge automatically at the onset of a criminal conviction”.

Several studies (e.g. Pager, 2007; Pager & Quillian, 2005; Prager et al., 2009) point out that many employers refuse to hire people with convictions in the United States (cited in Miller, 2014). In the United Kingdom, 75 per cent of surveyed employers stated that they would not hire an individual with a criminal record (BBC News, 2018). However, recent news reports claim that the government plans to hire one thousand probation officers and are open to the possibility of hiring former prisoners (ITV News, 2020). In the Scottish context, there is the conundrum of people re-entering society being required to show photographic identification to access the same services that people with convictions in the United States are completely prohibited from using. The contrast here exhibits a level of ‘hard power’ in the United States yet ‘soft power’ in Britain. Whatever the culturally or geographically unique idiosyncrasies towards people leaving custody, collateral consequences operate in a sort of opaque space where ‘invisible punishment’ is unhindered:

Unlike formal collateral consequences, such as loss of public housing eligibility, deportation, occupational disqualification, or electoral disenfranchisement, these consequences do not attach by express operation of law. Rather, they are informal in origin, arising independently of specific legal authority, and concern the gamut of negative social, economic, medical, and psychological consequences of conviction (Logan, 2013, p. 1104).

Encouragingly, collateral consequences have been explored in the Scottish context, specifically the disclosure of convictions (Weaver, 2018), along with the barriers to employability of people in and out of prison (Piacentini et al., 2018). While recent changes to disclosure laws in Scotland have reduced the length of time individuals are obliged to disclose certain convictions to prospective employers are encouraging, there is very little progress in relation to people with more serious convictions.

Recently, STV News (2020) revealed that the prerequisite period in which individuals with convictions must disclose prison sentences or community payback orders to potential employers is being reduced. Specifically, sentences of 12 months in prison require disclosing for three years post release rather than 10 years and Community Payback Orders disclosure is cut from five years to 12 months or the length of the order. Noticeably absent from the change is any talk of acknowledging desistance. BBC News (2019) reported that the British Government proposed to scrap disclosure of convictions to prospective employers, although a policy that would not apply to the most serious offences. Encouragingly, we may be closer to judicial rehabilitation in Britain or the recognizing the desisters.

That people with a serious criminal record must always disclose their convictions when applying for a job produces and sustains liminality (Honeywell, 2019, p. 195) – a purgatory-like space where one hovers between two worlds never belonging to either. I wonder if this liminality sustains pro-criminal behaviour and renders individuals as ‘doomed to deviance’ (Maruna, 2001) through lack of socio-economic opportunities. Worryingly, the notion of being ‘doomed to deviance’ refers to how some people involved in persistent offending behaviour believe that they have little choice but to continue offending due to issues of substance misuse, poverty, and socio-economic marginalization, as well as the stigma of a criminal record (Maruna, 2001). This resembles Maruna’s (2001)

“condemnation script”, which describes a narrative in which ‘offenders’ believe they are consigned to their fate as criminals and so ‘going straight’ is an insurmountable obstacle.

In my experience, the majority of the aforementioned obstructions have played some part in my own desistance/re-entry journey. I have zero employment history and a lack of basic skills that many employers require. In turn, I am certain my lack of job skills has exacerbated an already fraught personal situation given the usual difficulties people with convictions experience trying to find gainful employment in the first instance (let alone those with no experience of employment). How can someone with such a checkered past ever ‘sell themselves’ to prospective employers? There have been discussions on the language used in penology and desistance, swapping terms like ‘ex-offender’ with ‘convicted person’ for example (Boppre & Hart-Johnson, 2019). In my personal view, it does not matter to me what terminology is used. Frankly, the focus should be on people ‘going straight’, recognized as desisters (as the case in some European countries) or helping former prisoners find employment.

I have received help in different ways since my return to the community, whether it be moral support, financial help or just kind words. Many people have commented on my evident attempt to stay out of trouble and they are helping me acclimatize myself to society. As Brickman and colleagues (1982) point out, “people who help others are more likely to receive help in comparison to those who do not” (cited in Maruna, 2001, p. 124). I returned home and tried to encourage my brother and friend to desist from hard drug use.

My transformation and clear desire to be a good father and finally ‘go straight’ perhaps demonstrates to some people that I have, indeed, transformed. This may enforce Maruna’s (2001) notion of a “redemption script”, which describes three facets: (1) optimism to surmount barriers; (2) enthusiasm to contribute to a cause greater than oneself; and (3) belief in one’s ‘good self’. Writing and publishing academic articles, while arguably reinforcing my redemption script, does not minimize my past.

On the flip side, it could be argued that academic writing does maximize my desire to desist by functioning as a way of positive reinforcement. While I have little prospects of gainful employment, I have made some use of opportunities to pursue academic advancement. For example, I hope to study for a doctorate at the University of Glasgow subject to funding requirements. While studying for and eventually earning a doctorate is my

ultimate goal, education provides something purposeful to focus on in the midst of the angst and uncertainty of trying to provide for a child, gain employment, cope with transformation, and maintain desistance, especially during the general malaise and uncertainty of the Coronavirus pandemic.

In the interim, I have explored opportunities offered in my local community since my release. For example, I enrolled in a parent-child cookery class that was offered in the local community centre prior to the pandemic. These free lessons provided a new medium through which to bond with my son as well as demonstrate to people in the local area that I was serious about change and not simply paying lip service. Moreover, I also had to familiarize myself with parental responsibilities, such as taking my son to and from school every day and to Karate lessons once a week. In the same way that other academics have described marriage as a protective factor in maintaining desistance (Giordano et al., 2002), my relationship with my son functions in a similar manner.

Unlimited access to my child was my anchor in society. I now have a purpose of focus that would keep me out of trouble and an opportunity to create a new narrative where being a good role model for my son is core. Although I missed the first eight years of his life, I still have much to look forward to. “Men got upset when discussing how they had missed much of their kids upbringing; they cried when recounting how bonds that were once strong became mediated and frayed” (Haney, 2018, p. 12). Although I “missed much of [my] kid’s upbringing”, I did have access to my child throughout my incarceration, albeit limited. I felt blessed because there are so many incarcerated parents who do not see their kids.

Fortunately, I also had other avenues where I could nurture my own embryonic desistance journey. For instance, prior to the COVID-19 lockdown measures I attended Vox Liminis, an organization exploring experiences of prison and rehabilitation through the arts, specifically music and poetry. The eclectic group of individuals get together regularly to explore, practice and support social reintegration (Urie et al., 2019). These small social gatherings provided a space where I personally could detach myself from daily life and look at recent events objectively whilst, at the same time, experience the benefits of a pro-social milieu. These visits occurred around the time leading up to (and during) of my friend’s death and provided a milieu where I could, paradoxically, switch off from events while at the same time think objectively.

Many people do go on to offend after release (Miller, 2014), socio-economic opportunities, family bonds and maintaining my own place of residence are huge protective factors, especially in my own case. Former Justice Secretary Michael Gove explained to prison newspaper *Inside Time* that the three primary factors that provided a ‘firewall’ (to use a cyber analogy) against the temptations of recidivism are employment, strong family connections, and a stable home (James, 2016). The social bond theory (Farrington, 1992) refers to alteration of criminal behaviour during the life course, catalysed by maturation, family bonds, and employment/education (cited in Maruna, 1999). Maruna (2011) further argues that rehabilitation must address the corollary of convictions and the stigma entailed or be ‘doomed to fail’ (cited in McNeill, 2014). Moreover, a high number of people released from custody go on to reoffend within a period of two to three years (Miller, 2014), which may reinforce Maruna’s (2001) claim of some individuals are ‘doomed to deviance’.

In my own case, I have secured a stable home since my re-entry and have started to rebuild familial bonds weakened by long spells in custody. When I returned to the community, I had been provided with supported accommodation until such times as a permanent residence could be sourced (this process took me three months). However, I spent every single day at the home of my ex-partner and my son. My ex-partner and I are no longer romantically involved (we split up not long into my incarceration), but she was supportive of my desire to build a relationship with my son – a gesture for my son’s own well-being, rather than to any bond she and I shared.

Luckily, I secured a permanent residence in my local area, which is a stone’s throw from my ex-partner’s home. However, issues between my ex-partner mushroomed, resulting in me taking custody of my son, which was his wish as well as my own. The employment front is where my biggest challenge lies. While I have very little prospects of employment (even more so during the pandemic), I am hopeful that I can study for my doctorate soon. In fact, I am in the midst of completing my application and research proposal. If my application is successful and I can secure funding, I am almost certain that access to higher education will transform my life in so many ways (for examples of transformative potential of education in the lives of people with criminal backgrounds, see Livingston Runell, 2015; Behan, 2014).

The fact is that I embarked on my own desistance journey whilst still in custody only to continue it after release. Slowly, I refrained from committing

offences and immersed myself in academic pursuits during my carceral spell, slowly shedding my criminal identity and gradually replacing it with an academic one. However, I like to think of prison as the theory part of my desistance journey as opposed to the practice in society. Although it seems I have been on this road for a long time, the truth is the current chapter is still in the embryonic stage. Nevertheless, I am confident that my refashioned narrative (pro-social as opposed to anti-social) provides me with the “redemption script” (Maruna, 2001) that I need to continue building a crime-free lifestyle. Granted there are tough times ahead, but the way I see it is they surely cannot be any tougher than what I have already come through in the past. I just have to remain optimistic.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I examined the desistance literature in conjunction with the scholarly work on prisoner re-entry. I analyzed the similarities and differences between the United States and Great Britain in regards to desistance and re-entry, and how there appears to be a myriad of obstacles impeding a smooth return to society and the potential to refrain from criminal behaviour. Furthermore, I discussed the notion of sealing criminal records in Britain and how the stigma and marginaliation of those with convictions (especially serious offences) are discriminated against in many socio-economic areas. I outlined that several European nations have enacted some form of law where people can either be legally classified as desisters or at least are not discriminated against when seeking employment (unless, of course, the job position is directly relevant to one’s past convictions).

I question whether scholars speak of desistance without also considering re-entry. Are desistance and re-entry not two sides of the same metaphoric coin? How can one expect people to desist if they are still struggling with the same issues they experienced prior to custody? Is it not the case that the custodial experience magnifies these ‘risks’ and ‘deficits’?

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