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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Experiences of self-reflection as identity reconstruction and adaptation to prison life

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Abstract

The role of identity construction has been a central theme in empirical analyses of desistance from crime. Despite the novelty of these studies, their findings are predominantly situated in the post-imprisonment context. There has been limited attention on the drivers of identity change for prisoners who are incarcerated. Based on 16 interviews conducted in an open prison for men, this article demonstrates how experiences of self-reflection shape identity reconstruction for prisoners nearing release and serve as important modes of adaptation to prison life. The article ends with a discussion on the key implications of the study's findings.

KEYWORDS

adaptation, desistance, identity, imprisonment, self-reflection

1 | INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'identity reconstruction' has been a central focus in criminological analyses of desistance. According to several criminologists, the process of desistance involves a reconfigured identity and forming a new conceptualisation of a desired future self (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Vaughan, 2007). Despite the novelty of these studies, their empirical findings are most commonly based on prisoners' post-imprisonment outcomes. There has been little research conducted on how prisoners reconstruct their identities while incarcerated and how they serve as important modes of adaptation to prison life. Additionally, desistance scholars have focused on the role of identity as an explanation to predict desistance

(Farrall et al., 2011; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster et al., 2016; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011) but less is known about what drives identity change inside prison. To address this gap in the literature, this article explores the extent to which narratives of self-reflection shape identity reconstruction for prisoners coming to the end of their sentence. In doing so, the article seeks to develop understanding of the process of identity development among adult male prisoners and the motivating factors that determine their new identity. The findings demonstrate how adaptation to imprisonment influences prisoners' identity reconstruction and how this affects the ways in which they perceive what is valuable to their lives.

2 | IDENTITY RECONSTRUCTION

In contemporary society, definitions of self-identity have expanded in light of critical developments in sociological theory. Traditional representations of 'the self', portrayed as an autonomous agent in search of an essential subjectivity, are no longer theorised as static entities. Identity has been reconceptualised as a product of 'social work' (Garfinkel, 1967; Giddens, 1991). In this light, identity can be understood as a 'set of self-meanings' (Burke, 1991, p.837). These self-meanings are subject to constant reflection by individuals as they engage in the process of constructing, repairing and reinforcing the thread of self-identity. Equally important to this narrative of self-identity is 'a form of introjection, a presentation of self *to* self and the ability to mobilise and hold on to a coherent image of who one knows one is' (DeNora, 1999, p.45, italics in original). This includes the social, economic and cultural recollection of past experiences to facilitate the reinvention or discovery of the perceived self. Foucault's (1988, p.16) notion of 'technologies of the self' describes how individuals establish their identity by seeking to understand, administer and obtain knowledge about themselves. In this way, self-reflection – the ability to learn from lived experiences – can act as a mobilisation tool for the process of identity reconstruction. Identities are transported into the walls of the prison and characterised by encounters inside prison, mediated by social interactions and self-reflection of past experiences.

At the centre of narrative identity is a reconstruction of biographical events and an individual's future combined with 'some degree of unity, purpose and meaning' (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p.233). This reworking of identity is developed and sustained over time as individuals formulate stories about their lived experiences. As meaningful stories are generated through personal experiences, and subsequently reinterpreted and revised, this process gradually leads to a reconstructed self (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). Individual narratives are often shaped by social relationships and specific circumstances which contribute to the production of a certain type of story (Thomas et al., 2021). These stories provide valuable knowledge of how people decide to make decisions within particular social environments. In the context of punishment, identity reconstruction can be utilised as a problem-solving function to turn unfavourable conditions into opportunities for self-development, adaptation to imprisonment and successful reintegration into society.

In his seminal work, *Making good*, Maruna (2001) compared the self-narratives of both persisters and desisters. Desisters formed a 'redemption script' that characterised the identity of those who had desisted from crime. Central to this redemption script was understanding how to overturn obstacles, a desire to 'make good' from past mistakes and a belief in individual agency to foster new conforming identities. Desisters conveyed 'generative' ambitions to take control of their lives and give back to the community. In contrast, those who continued to offend possessed a 'condemnation script', marked by a fatalistic outlook on life, in which persisters perceived the obstacles in

society as insurmountable and therefore destined for criminality. A running theme in Maruna's (2001) study indicates that narrative is not simply limited to retrospective accounts of past events; it supports the creation of individual identity.

Identity construction consists of future aspirations – the 'ideal self' that one aspires to become (Vaughan, 2007, p.396). Paternoster & Bushway (2009) describe the 'feared possible self' as a catalyst for change, the 'image of what kind of future they realise they do not want' (p.1116). In a similar vein, Soyer (2014, p.97) describes 'imagined desistance' to capture the gap between actual and desired realities in prisoners' sense of self. Furthermore, several research studies have found that hope and expectation can play a positive role in desistance, particularly in the early stages. Burnett (1994) states that the definition of hope in the criminological context is 'the perceived availability of successful pathways to related goals' (p.131). Hope is interconnected with agentic factors, such as confidence, motivation and self-belief, which provide support to overcome challenges when released from prison. Where a person has strong levels of hope, they are more likely to identify and seize opportunities and become more resilient in the face of setbacks (Burnett & Maruna, 2004). A lack of hope not only impedes the possibility of sustained desistance but makes life become less rewarding. Nugent & Schinkel (2016) attribute the fragility of hope to social isolation and goal failure. The 'pain of hopelessness' (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016, p.578) erodes any motivation to accomplish intended goals which, in turn, minimises the ability to achieve the internalisation of a conforming identity.

The importance of building 'agency' has been emphasised as important to the formation of a conforming identity (Healy, 2014; King, 2012; Rocque, Posick & Paternoster, 2014). The social context has been highlighted as a defining factor in being able to exercise agency. Societal structures and support mechanisms are required to facilitate a person's change process. Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph (2002, p.1000) argue that these 'hooks for change' provide individuals with a setting conducive to building an alternative identity (see also Weaver & McNeill, 2015). However, much of this body of scholarship has been concerned with identity change in the post-imprisonment context but less attention has been paid to the drivers of identity change inside prison. This article illustrates how prisoners adopt techniques of self-reflection to shape their identity reconstruction and the ways in which they serve as fundamental modes of adaptation to prison life.

3 | METHODS

This article is based on interview data collected as part of a longitudinal study of re-entry and desistance in England. Fieldwork was carried out with the same group of men between 2022 and 2023. The first interview took place in a Category D men's open prison. Two follow-up interviews were completed in the community once prisoners were released. Participant quotations have been drawn from the first wave of interviews. A subset of data has therefore been applied for the purpose of this article. The research design was qualitatively oriented to capture participants' lived experiences. A narrative methodology was employed to recognise 'the storied descriptions people give about the meaning they attribute to life events' (Polkinghorne, 2007, p.479), allowing participants to construct and integrate their narratives before and during imprisonment. This enabled me to understand the position of the prisoner and why they narrate their experiences by situating them within their lives in the way they do. This methodology is underpinned by the social constructionist perspective, which focuses on individual accounts developed by participants to form a coherent life story.

Fieldwork notes were created at various points throughout the data collection process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 prisoners nearing release. Participants were identified with support from prison officers. Prisoners within six months of their conditional release dates were identified as eligible to participate in the study. Brief informal conversations were held with prisoners to talk through the study's aims and procedures. In recruiting participants, effort was made to include a wide range of socio-demographic characteristics and experiences with the criminal justice system. Just over half of the men had been incarcerated at least once prior to this sentence. They were serving prison sentences for a range of offences from conspiracy to steal to attempted murder, with just over a third incarcerated for drug offences. The longest sentence was 19 years and the shortest sentence was three years. Participants were serving an average sentence length of eight years. Half of their sentence was served in prison and the remainder on licence in the community. The age ranged from 23 to 53 years. The average age of the men in this study is 38 years.

Interviews were split into several key themes and covered the same core questions but applied a 'reflexive approach' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p.9) where participants' narratives shaped the contents of the discussion as they unfolded. Interview questions were primarily open-ended, which allowed the men to describe their experiences of imprisonment in their own terms. The primary themes analysed in the findings are centred on identity and adaptation to imprisonment. Interviews were completed privately in the legal hut inside prison and recorded using a digital audio device. Drawing on narrative analysis, transcripts were coded thematically and examined inductively based on emerging patterns grounded in the data. Pseudonyms have been used to preserve the identity of prisoners. In the following section, I document the study's key findings.

4 | FINDINGS

In presenting the findings, I first illustrate the ways in which prisoners coped with imprisonment and examine the impact family ties had on their identity reconstruction. The study found that adaptation to imprisonment facilitated prisoners' identity reconstruction in ways that enabled them to think about care and support for their family. A process of self-reflection influenced a changed mindset about what was valuable to their lives. In the following section, I argue that such narratives of self-reflection – 'looking back' – serve as important modes of identity reconstruction. Participants demonstrated how they reflected on their past identities to develop a new identity consistent with their future envisaged self. The final section presents a discussion on the implications of the study's findings.

4.1 | Adaptation to imprisonment and the impact of family ties

There was broad agreement among interviewees that being able to cope with imprisonment meant having to eradicate social ties from the outside world:

> When I knew I was getting years' worth of a sentence I cut everything off from the outside. I had a girlfriend when I came in. I had to break that off because I wouldn't be able to cope with that in prison and dealing with all the stress outside. It wouldn't be fair on her if I was in prison for years. I closed every single relationship on the outside because that was my way of coping. (Dylan)

> My coping mechanism is to keep quiet, no drama … You have to switch the outside world off. I shut myself away because in prison you become dependent on shutting your door and shutting out the outside world. (Tyson)

For these men, detachment from social ties and the community was a key factor to adapt to prison life. Partner separation was an attempt to shift focus on getting through imprisonment and this element of self-sacrifice aimed to ease prison pains. In these examples, the conditions of adapting inside prison superseded any kind of potential support received from close relationships on the outside. Dissociating from external social contact enabled these men to reorient themselves to get through their sentence. There was one prisoner who, instead of completely abolishing social ties, maintained a relationship he perceived as significant to his life:

> I was involved in some gang stuff. Every time I stepped outside it was a nightmare. 90% I'm getting into a fight and I don't want my mum to see that … It hurt me in the beginning. It's annoying. But other than my mum how I like to do my sentence is to cut off the outside world a little bit. Not completely cut off everything like draining everyone out but while you're on the inside life is still going to move on without you. (Andrew)

Placing a mother as a symbol of resilience served as a primary motivating factor for psychological adjustment to imprisonment. Time spent in prison was perceived as a linear process that would simply continue despite the existence of social ties. While cutting social ties from the outside world served as a coping strategy for some prisoners, children were cited among participants as paramount:

> I'm not scared of dying. I'm scared of what I'm leaving behind. I have three children, two girls and a boy. I'm a nobody to everyone else but I am someone to my kids. (Tyson)

> I've missed my family. If I didn't have the support from my wife, my mum, my kids, I would have nothing to lose. It's the family that keeps you on the straight, isn't it? (Duncan)

Reflecting on close family relationships played a key role to identify what was deemed valuable in life. Family contact for these prisoners helped them navigate through their sentence. Prisoners' self-realisation of the meaning and value attached to their families contributed to the shift in mindset of moving away from a path of crime towards a law-abiding life (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Particularly for incarcerated fathers, learning from past experiences influenced their outlook to build a better future for their children:

> I tried to be a good parent but I know I'm not. This is my comfort zone, my safety. I can go out tomorrow and if I don't want to deal with people I can go back to my room and shut myself in. Outside, I've got to deal with everything. I've got no deals in here. I've got nothing … I want to be there for my boy. Who is gonna bring him up? (Tyson)

> I never took my daughter out of school because I realised with my parents taking me out of school at eleven, I was set up to fail. My kids went to school all the way, done GCSEs, now gone to college. I can't change what I have done but I can change their path. That's what I'm hoping for. (Rory)

Fatherhood had an impact on what type of individual prisoners aspired to be. Adaptation to imprisonment facilitated prisoners' identity reconstruction in ways that enabled them to think about how they envisaged supporting their children and becoming a role model for them in the future. Learning from childhood experiences informed the action prisoners took to remedy their shortcomings and set up their children with a positive career. This aspiration was more viable for men who had somebody outside taking care of their children while they were incarcerated:

> My wife looks after the kids, makes sure they go to school clothed, pays the bills, keeps the house and the car clean. I ask her on the phone what she's doing and she goes through a list of 50 things she has to do in the day. (Rory)

For younger men with minimal family responsibilities, detachment from social ties and the outside world was a more feasible course of action. Being a father carried additional weight, especially in relation to pre-release planning and parental responsibility. Imprisonment had a detrimental effect on prisoners' families and this was increasingly pertinent across men of Pakistani origins, where the family is viewed as a central component of South Asian cultures:

> For my Asian community, everything was hidden. When things opened up, they started pointing fingers, oh that's her son. It's quite different now when your children are saying they're embarrassed because I'm selling drugs. My son bought a car for 20 grand. He said I paid 20 grand, hard fucking cold money out of my own pocket, legit money. People are saying it's your dad's drug money. They are getting the effect now, even though they are working legit. I didn't think what effect it would have on my children. (Duncan)

> I'm anxious because I'm going back in that big world out there after such a long time and things have moved on. I'll try to find my daughter. She's 14 now. She got adopted about 18 months after she was born. I'm going to get my smartphone so hopefully will find out something on social media. Hopefully I'll get an answer. (Zain)

Duncan's criminality had a spillover effect on his family, who, despite living law-abiding lives, were impacted by the 'stickiness' of criminal labels (Uggen & Blahnik, 2016, p.229) and the attached stigma. Research shows that the pain and suffering prisoners experience can transfer to family members in various guises (see Condry & Minson, 2020; Granja, 2016), as evident in Duncan's case. For Zain, the effects of imprisonment compounded separation from his daughter. Underpinning these narratives is a process of self-reflection which influences prisoners' mindset about what is valuable to their lives. This cognitive change requires a certain degree of emotional maturation and self-realisation. It is argued that such narratives of self-reflection serve as important modes of adaptation to imprisonment and play a central part in determining how prisoners reconstruct their identities.

4.2 | Self-reflection and identity reconstruction

Prisoners emphasised the role of religion as an important element of adapting to prison life. There was a spiritual perception of inner healing and self-worth turning to the Islamic faith:

> Main thing for me was Islam, my religion. You got no one in jail. If you don't have family, no loved ones, you haven't got anything. You will always have God. You pray, you feel he's listening, you feel warmth. And whatever he does and plans he gets you through it. As crazy as this sounds, I am grateful for prison because I wouldn't have been that person outside. I wouldn't have prayed five times a day. I wouldn't have done these things. (Mohammed)

> If you're a Muslim it doesn't matter because in prison you are blood. (Zain)

Being a Muslim provided a sense of belonging, especially for prisoners without close family relationships. The motivation through prayer ignited feelings of gratitude and changed self-perceptions in ways that allowed prisoners to think about the reasons for such change. For Zain, religion generated cultural affinity which promoted inmate solidarity and a sense of community and togetherness. Religion allowed prisoners to turn past negative experiences into positive reconstructions of themselves:

> I've treated myself like a computer, booted myself down and then rebuilt the component parts. It's been part of my life. And part of that has been changing my appearance. The reason is that when I'm in my room, that's my cave, my sanctuary. That's my space for me to be who I am. (Elias)

Understanding the self and rebuilding identity are core attributes of human agency (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001). Prisoners held religious affiliation to secure change in their outlook and to reconstruct a new identity. Drawing on lessons from the past meant that prisoners were able to learn about themselves and rebuild their identities:

> I had 15 sessions with a psychiatrist just to learn how to understand my triggers. I wanted to know the reason why I done my crime. My way of coping with prison, my way of learning, was finding out about me first, the way I felt. (Charlie)

Narratives of self-reflection helped prisoners learn more about who they were as individuals and the underlying motivations for their actions: 'prison has given me the opportunity to understand me, to understand my faults' (Charlie). Being incarcerated in open conditions encouraged prisoners to reflect on their experiences prior to imprisonment. Determining the motivating factors of committing the crime served as a catalyst for developing self-understanding and rebuilding the self. Prisoners sought to understand their own strengths, abilities, personalities and what identity they wanted to portray when they left prison:

> The problem is coping mentally of being inside. That sort of teaches you about your own character and about yourself so it's a good life lesson coming to prison. (Dylan)

> I just think in my head about how my life could be as a normal civilian. (Nathan)

> What helped me get through is the stuff to do with the heart. How to deal with the heart and your emotions and how to live your life. So, examples of people going through a lot of trauma because that's what related to me. And it's that perspective, the perspective on your own life that kept me going. (Elias)

For Dylan, self-development of character as a result of being incarcerated helped get through his sentence while for Nathan foreseeing what life could look like as a law-abiding citizen was important. Relatability to Elias was viewed as a common lever for change. Being able to affiliate mutual experiences enabled the filtering of thoughts and the mental capacity to regulate emotions. There was an element of 'cognitive transformation' (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002, p.1000) for some prisoners who were seeking to change for a better life on release:

> I've got all the support around me. There's a lot more out there for me and there's a lot to love. This is a big change for me. It feels weird. I feel like a new man when I put on my uniform and walk out to work. You just feel different, like a working man. It feels good. (Brian)

> I only really reflect on the things that I'm happy about. I've done a lot of time so I've had a lot of time to think. If you want to change you can change. It's down to you really what you want to make over time. Do you want to feel sorry for yourself because you're in prison or do you want to make the best time out of it? (Steven)

For these men, change was linked to developing an identity compatible with a newly envisaged version of the self (Farrall et al., 2011). Opportunity to change facilitated prisoners' desire for positive change, which reinforces the important interplay between personal ambitions and the structural mechanisms to fulfil desired change (Farrall & Bowling, 1999). Open regimes can play a supporting role to equip prisoners with the necessary skills and experience they will inevitably require when released back into society. Prisoners incarcerated for drug offences noticed a significant change in mindset:

> When I first came into prison all I could think of was when I get out, I wanted another pipe. But over time inside, I've got completely drained and I'm not interested in drugs anymore … I think getting cleaned up has been one of the biggest differences inside prison and I don't think I would have been able to do that outside. (Oliver)

> Everyone's got a reason at the beginning, the root cause but you need to find out what that is and try to tackle it. When you're in prison it gives you a different outlook and you can stay clean outside for as long as you can … I've been off drugs and doing drug testing for two years … When you're sober you've got so much more to give to the world. (Dwayne)

Overcoming drug addiction through rehabilitation programmes inside prison was important to build a new self that could be achieved by understanding the motivations of behaviour and working to reconstruct a new identity compatible for aspirations outside prison. The effects of these men's crimes contributed to their identity reconstruction in ways that enabled them to realise what kind of person they intended to become. When asked: 'is there anything you have learnt about yourself while you have been in prison?', this prompted prisoners to reflect on the extent to which they had changed:

> I used to bottle things up. That was my way of coping but now I like to talk to people openly. I like to gather and help people. I never liked talking about things the way I like to talk now and that's something I've learnt from being inside. (Brian)

> Looking back makes you appreciate a little bit more what you've got out there. What I've learned about myself is that I can cope with not having to be on my phone and not having to go out. I can be in my own company. You could shut the door to me and it wouldn't do anything to me. It's made me hungry to get back outside. (Ryan)

> In prison you become so isolated to the point where you become your own company and that is your friend. Only you can sort yourself out. You don't rely on anyone. You can't rely on anyone … You have to work your own ticket because nobody's gonna do it for you. (Tyson)

Getting to the end of their sentence enabled prisoners to look back on their time incarcerated to learn more about themselves. Self-reflection of circumstances, building relationships, and discovering appetite to achieve positive outcomes presented teachable moments for individuals. Being isolated meant that prisoners, for the most part, were left to exercise autonomy relatively independently. In open prisons, there is an expectation to engage in constructive activity, through employment and educational learning. Such expectations are very much dependent on the individual to take initiative and responsibility for their own actions to initiate change. Prisoners are expected to demonstrate proactive behaviour and self-govern conduct to experience benefits within the regime. These individuals underwent a process of changing self-understanding and learning through their own experiences while incarcerated. For Tyson, the limited support within the prison regime encouraged self-reliance and determination to progress sentencing aims and resettlement plans. Perceptions of the self were psychologically driven to maximise benefits within the regime:

> I've learnt a lot of people skills and you get good at reading people. If you can make people feel good then you're halfway there. When someone's guards down they are more likely to do things for you. It's a weird psychology that I've got used to being able to manipulate you into making you think that I'm right … It boils down to how you manipulate your offending supervisor. I might say oh your hair looks nice; guard is dropped because of the compliment. When I go out on a town visit, I get my licence extended because of when my work starts but that's because I've played a game of manipulation. (Jason)

Securing benefits within the prison was fuelled by exercising a psychology of the self that stretched the boundaries of staff-prisoner relationships. Trust was gained by artificially induced interactions to expedite outcomes and progression within the regime. This drifting between personality traits to gain trust echoes Goffman's (1959. p.92) description of 'back-stage' identity. For Jason, tactics of identity revision were presented to achieve personal goals, reinforcing that identity is not a fixed concept or an independent psychological entity, but rather constantly revised as individuals interact with one another. For others, maintaining a sense of self outweighed 'playing the game':

> The staff used to tell me at the start, play the game. I'm thinking to myself it's not a game to me. It's my life. If you do what they tell you to do which is of no benefit you become the mere mortal of yourself, the product of this environment. You lose your own self and you will not be the same person. I decided not to. I decided to be myself, not break the rules, but be myself. I'm not going to play your game. If I don't feel something is right for me, I'm not going to do it. (Mohammed)

Such encounters with prison staff call into question the validity of dialogue and the perceived legitimacy of their decision making in the eyes of prisoners (Beetham, 1991; see also Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012; Khan, 2016). For Mohammed, staying true to the self meant not deviating from core morals and beliefs. Interactions with staff and engagement with the regime were not superficially driven to accumulate benefits. In this instance, self-worth was more important than self-gain to preserve identity. In the excerpts above, there was an act of presenting the self in a way that was psychologically and instrumentally fuelled to gain benefits or maintaining a true self through compliance to the regime but evading the psychological dynamics of prison life. In doing so, some prisoners minimised efforts to engage with officers to avoid being institutionalised and mitigated any possibility of incorporating the goals of the establishment into their moral framework.

5 | DISCUSSION

As this article has demonstrated, narratives of self-reflection – 'looking back' – served as important modes of identity reconstruction and adaptation to imprisonment. Residing in open prison conditions provides an important setting for prisoners to reflect on their lives. Individuals reflected on their past identities to develop a new identity consistent with their future envisaged self. As Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph (2002, p.1000) argue, this process of 'cognitive transformation' that leads to individual change transcends human agency in ways that encourage individuals to think about their behaviour, attitudes and perceptions of compliance and non-compliance. Prisoners engaged with interventions and exercised decisions to influence their self-understanding and outlook on their lives. The ability to self-actualise on their own accord meant that prisoners were able to reconstruct their identity to build and maintain an optimistic narrative about the future (Maruna, 2001). Within these narratives, family ties influenced how prisoners perceived themselves and the decisions they made. Those who closed family ties intended to reorient themselves to focus on adapting to prison life. The effects of prisoners' crimes had important implications for their identity reconstruction and how the self was perceived in relation to wider social and economic spheres. Family contact, experiences prior to imprisonment and significant life events were key indicators for identity change. To adapt and make sense of these experiences encouraged a lot of prisoners to revise their sense of self.

The role of identity reconstruction in prisoners' narratives is reminiscent of Maruna & King's (2009, p.12) construct of 'belief in redeemability'. This understanding is based on the assumption that individuals can play a key role in defining their lives and that past experiences are not necessarily indicative of future projections. Prisoners adapted to their incarceration in ways that enticed them to think about their past and what kind of future they wanted for their families. Developing self-understanding and a willingness to learn about individual motivations and future aspirations were composite drivers of identity change. A sense of optimism and self-belief underpinned prisoners' narratives about what a stable future could look like and how they navigated and made decisions about their sentence instilled hope for this change to be realised. Research shows that developing conforming identities and a changed outlook can increase self-control and desistance (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011). To facilitate change an individual must first believe that change is possible (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002). Changing self-perceptions can lead to more sustainable and long-term re-conceptualisations of the self (Porporino, 2010). A revised perception of the self is a particularly important support mechanism to resettle prisoners for life beyond imprisonment. This form of self-understanding and identity change contributes to a form of 'identity desistance' (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016, p.570) for the internalisation of a conforming identity to be realised and enforced. Despite the pains many people encounter during imprisonment, developing an identity change makes it even more important to alleviate these pains which can subsequently influence positive outcomes in the community.

However, Weaver & McNeill (2010) importantly remind us that 'it is not enough to locate the offender in the change process; it is also necessary to locate the process in its social and cultural context' (p.71). Prisoners emphasised the role of significant others and religion as important factors in the identity change process. For others, especially fathers, being a role model for their children increased a sense of self-esteem and encouraged compliance to the regime. Employment and drug rehabilitation also developed a sense of purpose and self-worth which changed the outlook for prisoners who wanted to overwrite their criminal pasts with positive life trajectories. These 'wounded healers' reflected on lessons from lived experiences to pursue a law-abiding life based on an identity embracing desire and commitment to 'give back' to society (LeBel, Ritchie & Maruna, 2015; Maruna, 2001). Such generative activities were motivated by subjective agency to actively try and change the direction of life aspirations through what Emirbayer & Mische (1998) call the 'projective evaluative dimensions of agency' (p.979). Prisoners' projective dimensions of agency involved placing them in a position consistent with future trajectories and reconfiguring behaviour and actions to correlate with their hopes and desires for life back in society.

There are several important implications of this study. Findings reveal that prisoners can rebuild their identities in pursuit of future ambitions. Reflecting on past experiences while incarcerated allows prisoners to prepare themselves for life beyond imprisonment. While much of the desistance research has focused on the role of identity change in the post-imprisonment context, the findings in this study indicate that individual transformation and cognitive change are not necessarily confined to individual success in society. Prisoners' narratives demonstrate early signs of development towards a conforming identity. The majority of prisoners in this study worked relatively independently towards their personal goals and ambitions. However, while prisoners are primarily responsible for their identity change, the open prison ought to support the facilitation of such change. For prisoners with minimal economic and family support structures, more regime interventions and programmes are required to provide a platform in which prisoners' desired identity transformations can be achieved. As evident from the drug rehabilitation programmes, prisoners can develop a sense of self that encourages them to think about their future lifestyles. The positive effects of participating in these interventions had not worked off for these

participants yet such initiatives should build upon conforming identities in order to contribute to the sustainability of a longer-term reinvigorated self.

Furthermore, the novelty of open conditions grants prisoners with Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), which enables them to work and reconnect with their families outside of the prison. Such activities facilitate the ability for men to enact their new identity of a good worker and aspiring father, all of which contribute to a positive reconstruction of the self. The open prison therefore gives people the opportunity to reorientate and prepare for their transition from prison to the community. The psychological reassurance and formulation of identity are made possible by a clear and explicit end to their time in prison and the end in itself encourages prisoners to reflect on their lives. This possibility of identity reconstruction through self-reflection in the open prison is increasingly significant given the ever-lengthening sentences and obstructive parole board decisions which have become detrimental in meeting this end (see Padfield, 2019). The realisation of a changed identity within the constraining boundaries of imprisonment points to the ways in which prisoners can devise a sense of narrative while negotiating inside an environment where the 'pains of freedom' (Shammas, 2014, p.108) and psychological deprivations (Crewe, 2011) are integrated into the heart of the prison regime. In this way, an imagined identity beyond institutional walls is sustained, a self more conducive to release and desistance.

A key challenge for open prisons is to locate the right balance between encouraging prisoners to be self-sustaining and providing them with tailored support structures and opportunities they require to develop their experiences and skills for life beyond prison. This means utilising the plethora of employment and educational activities to support individual change while prompting prisoners to capitalise on these opportunities. This is particularly important in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, where labour market participation is becoming increasingly unpredictable, both in the United Kingdom and across international borders (Arthur, 2021; Gibson et al., 2021). Research indicates that employment can have a positive impact upon prisoners transitioning into the community and can aid the development of a more 'coherent prosocial identity' (Oswald, 2021, p.235). Open prison regimes which aim to develop identity transformation will increase prisoners' capacity and likelihood of becoming contributing members in society and equip them with the ability required to circumvent obstacles to social inclusion and promote institutional compliance (Burchardt, Le Grand & Piachaud, 2002). Identity reconstruction for prisoners, then, serves as an important mechanism to facilitate positive change and development for prisoners during the early stages of post-imprisonment and which will reintegrate them more purposively into the community.

The research findings reinforce Paternoster & Bushway's (2009, p.1111) 'identity theory of desistance', which states that individual change is driven by a realisation that criminal behaviour is no longer compatible with future aspirations. Prisoners' experiences of identity reconstruction illustrate key 'turning points' in mindset and behaviour which are motivated by previous life experiences, family ties and a desire to build self-understanding. This is important given that key turning points are often found to be motivated by wider social structures and organisational institutions. Prisoners demonstrated this identity change process through a reconstructed version of the self and with a desire to 'go straight', which can therefore be pre-empted during imprisonment. There are empirical parallels with Shapland & Bottoms's (2011) study of young recidivist men in England. Those who decided to desist were not motivated simply by temptation to commit further offending or worried about the consequences of being caught, but were inspired on moral grounds, as they no longer saw crime as an option. For the men in this study, offending diminished their sense of future self and pursuit of life goals, which would contradict their newly formed identities.

6 | CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This article has illustrated that narratives of self-reflection shape identity reconstruction for prisoners nearing release and serve as important modes of adaptation to imprisonment. Examining the ways in which prisoners rebuild their identities before they are released helps to understand the motivations underpinning how prisoners change their perceptions of self and make decisions about their future. Lessons from lived experiences prior to imprisonment encouraged prisoners to think about a new imagined future. Criminal activity opposed their sense of self and life aspirations. Even though family contact was limited, through home and town visits, these interactions were sufficient to realise the effects of their sentence on the lives of their loved ones. Prisoners undertook a process of 'diachronic self-control' (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011, p.274), whereby they understood the consequences of their actions and acted compliantly to minimise the risk of being penalised.

A central theme within prisoners' narratives is the recognition that individual change is a fundamental element of self-identity. Moving away from a criminal past to the identity of a 'changed person' (Maruna & Farrall, 2004, p.4) is a central ingredient to understand crime as incompatible with a new identity construction. Self-understanding, changing perceptions and attitudes towards others, and forming a humanistic outlook that is centred on care and compassion is important for prisoners nearing release. While identity reconstruction is key to navigate the challenges of prison life and prepare for a positive future, this in itself is not sufficient to expedite progress. Programmes and interventions should aim to support future goals that are defined and shaped by prisoners' desired identities. In other words, open prisons, which aim to promote resettlement, have a role in supporting prisoners' future aspirations, the 'ideal self' (Vaughan, 2007, p.396) that one is pursuing. Identity reconstruction through self-reflection can act as a form of pre-desistance for prisoners coming to the end of their sentence. Future research that is involved with supporting identity reconstruction for prisoners will not only mitigate unnecessary prison pains but will serve to better leverage their resettlement pathways and transition back into the community.

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