Narratives of Desistance

A Comparative Study of Desisting Non-Violent and Violent Offenders

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Abstract

In this thesis I have investigated the process of self-schematic transformation that has been argued that offenders undergo in order to desist from crime. I have used narrative interviews with twelve desisting offenders consisting of five non-violent offenders and seven violent offenders. I have analysed these narratives using a social cognitive perspective in order to seek an understanding of the self-schemas of the offenders.

The results show that both non-violent and violent offenders explained their past offenses with references to outside forces, however: for the non-violent offenders substance abuse was more salient than crimes in their narratives and for the violent offenders violence was salient while substance abuse and non-violent crimes were not. Further, in accordance with the theoretical assumptions, the desistance process was generally the high point of a process that begun at an earlier stage. The analysis additionally shows that social influences were highly important for both non-violent and violent offenders in their turning point and desistance process. Finally, the analysis shows that the self-schemas of the desisting offenders can be divided into three different parts; the former self, the true self, and the new self, i.e. who they used to be, who they have always been, and who they are now.

Keywords

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1. Introduction

There is a vast interest in criminality and criminals in society, seen in the number of crime novels sold and the amount of movies and TV-series with a crime theme addressing the “criminal mind” or the issues of what makes someone turn criminal, and it is safe to say that this interest goes beyond popular cultural media as there have been numerous studies investigating the life-course development of offending and criminal careers (e.g. Cernkovich & Giordano 2001, Farrington 2005, Laub & Sampson 2003, Lussier et.al. 2009, Moffitt et.al. 2001, Paradis et.al. 2009, Piquero et.al. 2007, and Schroeder et.al. 2010). Still, despite the vast research on criminality, criminology at large has very little to say about the minds of criminals and there is a need for more research investigating the cognitive and emotional aspects of criminal behaviour. Further, as much previous research and theories have focused on what makes an individual do crime or begin a criminal career, less attention have been given to the issue of what makes criminals desist from crime. The importance of this area is hard to overestimate; research regarding desistance is highly important from a crime preventive perspective, but also from a scientific perspective. There is a scepticism regarding desistance and whether individuals who have been involved in criminal activity over long periods of time actually can desist (cf. Maruna 2001:5). Some researchers have gone so far as arguing that there is a subgroup of individuals who are incapable of desistance; even though they may be able to quit their criminal activity they will still show maladjustment or antisocial problems (Moffitt 2007:65 ff.). This idea seems rather similar to the concept of being a “sober alcoholic” which implies that once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic. Once a criminal always a criminal no matter if you commit crimes or not. Still, there are in fact individuals who have engaged in a vast amount of crimes, sometimes rather severe, that seems to have turned their lives around. What makes these individuals, who some have doomed to deviance, against all odds succeed? Unfortunately, contemporary research has few answers to offer to this question. A greater understanding regarding the factors underlying the desistance process may also provide us with invaluable knowledge about what makes individuals who have experienced criminal careers desist from crime and turn their lives around, something that may prove useful in offender rehabilitation and in areas such as social work and policy measures.

The aim of the current study is to investigate the process of cognitive self-transformation, or reconstruction of the self-schema, that has been argued that desisting offenders go through in
order to desist from crime and “go straight”\(^1\) (Maruna 2001). However, while it has been found that changes \emph{do} occur (Ibid., also Gadd & Farrall 2004, Vaughan 2007), less focus has been on \emph{how} these changes occur; i.e. how this self-schematic reconstruction begin and why, as well as what factors that may influence this process. In this thesis I will address this question by analysing how the process that led to the participants’ decision to desist can be understood from their narratives, i.e. how the participants view the process that led to their desistance from crime and substance abuse. Further, it has been argued that the desistance process is the same for both violent and non-violent offenders (Laub & Sampson 2003:148), and that individuals who engage in offending over long period of crimes tend to engage in “petty crimes” and not severe crimes such as serious violent offending (Maruna 2001:13 f., Piquero et.al. 2007). These assumptions have had the consequence that differences between e.g. violent and non-violent offenders have been overlooked by researchers, either because the desisting process is assumed to be the same for all offenders or that chronic violent offenders “do not exists”. This is something that I wish to remedy in this study by making a comparison of the narratives of non-violent offenders and violent offenders.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the question; what are the processes involved in desistance and how can they be understood from a social cognitive perspective. This also leads to the concrete question if there are any differences in these processes between non-violent and violent offenders and what these differences are?

1.1. Defining Desistance

Even if the concept of desistance have been frequently used in the literature it is hard to find a common definition of the concept. Desistance could be defined as simply the termination of a criminal career (Soothill et.al. 2009:85), but this definition misses one important fact about criminal behaviour, namely that “…’termination’ takes place all of the time” (Maruna 2001:23). It has also been noted that desistance from crime usually takes a zig-zag pattern, referred to as intermittency; one individual may desist at one point and recidivism may occur

\(^1\) When I began my study I sought to make a comparative study between desisting and persistent offenders. I set out to find the persistent offenders in correctional institutions here in Sweden. However, I was at first denied access to a number of these institutions, with a reference to “lack of personnel” or that it was a “breach of secrecy laws”. Finally I turned to the regional office of Stockholm county who in turn filed my request to higher authorities who also denied me access, due to secrecy laws. Since I was not able to find the persistent offenders outside of these institutions, as they cannot simply be identified by "the mark of Cain", I chose to limit my study to desisting offenders.
after several years of desistance (Laub & Sampson 2003), and this leads to the question of when a criminal career actually ends. As a way to solve this problem there has been made a distinction between primary and secondary desistance where primary desistance is a crime free period of time and secondary desistance is when the individual has adopted a self-concept as a “non-offender” (cf. Gadd 2008:180 f., Giordano et.al. 2002).

In this thesis I will adopt the view of Maruna (2001:22 ff.) who argues that deciding to desist and desisting are two different things; one may decide to desist but still recidivate. In this view desistance is a work in progress, “going straight” or “recovery”, closely related to cognitive changes and the subjective experiences associated with desistance. Still, merely focus on how individuals maintain desistance misses the equally important question of how the individuals actually get there and then continue to “go straight”. As the ability to maintain desistance is related to self-schematic changes, or the transition from primary to secondary desistance, I will extend my definition of desistance to incorporate these aspects as well. Thus, I view desistance as an on-going process where the individual goes from primary to secondary desistance and the cognitive changes associated with this process.

2. Research on Criminal Careers

Before I turn to the previous research regarding criminal careers it is important understand what is meant by a “criminal career”. Criminal careers should here be distinguished from career criminals; a career criminal is an individual who commits frequent serious offenses over an extended time period, or so-called chronic offenders, whereas a criminal careers can be defined as “…the longitudinal sequence of crimes committed by an individual offender” (Blumstein 1986:12); it is a trajectory or development over time in the individual’s life (Soothill et.al. 2009:2). The focus for the criminal career research has mainly been the life-course development of offending, onset of antisocial behaviour, specialisation in crime, and also desistance and persistence. Among the main findings of this research is the age curve of offending which shows that the age of onset for the general population peaks during the ages 8-14, the offending peaks in the ages 15-19, and desistance peaks thereafter in the ages 20-25 (e.g. Farrington 2005a:5, Laub & Sampson 2003:86, Piquero et.al. 2007:49, Soothill et.al. 2009:20). The findings also show that a large amount of the population engages in antisocial activities in adolescence though the majority of these individuals desist in the late adolescence or early twenties (Piquero et.al. 2007:49), and at the age of 28 about 85 % of these individuals
will have desisted (Maruna 2001:20). However; individuals with an early onset tend to have longer criminal careers and also to engage in more serious offenses, such as violent crimes (e.g. Farrington 2007, Lahey & Waldman 2005, Moffitt 2007, Piquero & Moffitt 2005, Piquero et.al. 2007:17 ff., Sothill et.al. 2009:61). This research further show that offenders tend to be versatile rather than specialised (Amico et.al. 2008, Farrington 2005b:77, Laub & Sampson 2003:107) though some researchers argue that there are tendencies in specialisation, especially regarding sexual offenses (Soothill et.al. 2009:106 f., e.g. Lisak & Miller 2002), or that specialisation in crime change over time (Svensson 2002).

2.1. Research on Desistance

Despite this vast interest in criminal careers, there is a gap when it comes to research on desistance from crime and in contrast to the research regarding offending trajectories and risk factors there is also a lack of consensus regarding the desistance process among researchers. According to Piquero and Moffitt (2005), offenders who commit crime during adolescence, adolescent limited [AL], desist mainly as a part of the maturation process and the transition to adult roles, though this process may be delayed due to so-called snares, or consequences of their delinquent activities. Chronic, or life-course persistent [LCP], offenders on the other hand rarely desist from antisocial and criminal behaviour. According to this view, the LCP offenders may desist from criminal activities but they will continue to engage in other antisocial activities. (Moffitt 2007:65 ff., see also Moffitt et.al. 2001, for critique cf. Laub & Sampson 2003). Thornberry and Krohn (2005:201 f.) have argued that changes in offending are mainly due to changes in the social environment, especially with regard to risk factors. For individuals with an early onset, the risk factors are stronger and thus less likely to change, and this explains the age pattern in offending. As with the AL offenders, the authors suggest that onset in adolescence is due to maturation, i.e. a search for identity and autonomy; when these are met, the motivation for deviance will subside. Individuals who experience problems in one area may have compensating assets in another and this will help them desist from crime, and this is true even for those who experience an early onset and a long criminal career.

Other researchers have suggested that offending is due to increase in long-term or short-term antisocial potential; long-term factors can be childhood risk factors while short-term factors are situational factors such as alcohol intoxication. Desistance occurs when the antisocial potential decreases due to factors such as getting a job, moving to a new city, decrease in physical capability, drinking less alcohol, less association with male peers, getting married, and having children. (Farrington 2005b) This could also include strong attachment to the parents (see Schroeder et.al. 2010). Other researchers have stressed the situational factors in a larger extent; Catalano et.al. (2005:115) argue that desistance is due to decrease of rewards and/or opportunities associated with antisocial behaviour, and an increase in prosocial opportunities and/or rewards. This is turn may cause a positive change in beliefs and bonds. This process can be facilitated by e.g. a change in environment, such as moving to a new residential area or city, or due to marriage.
Social bonds have been further stressed by Laub and Sampson (2003) who have found that the main causes of desistance are a combination of individual agency together with situational and structural factors. There is a “knifing off” effect were offenders are cut off from the criminogenic environment, and this could either be changes in the social environment, but also routine activities, social control, social support, or structured and meaningful activities. These changes are mainly due to attending boarding school, military service, marriage, or employment. Agency, i.e. personal choice and active engagement in the desistance process, together with the development of a new self-concept as a desister from crime was also found as being of importance. Still regarding criminal careers, desistance is the norm; even the most serious offenders will desist from criminal activity, eventually (Ibid.: 87 ff., 105 ff.).

In addition to this longitudinal research there have also been studies focusing more on the intrapersonal aspects of desistance and especially the cognitive aspects where desistance is viewed as a process rather than the result of some radical changes in life, such as the knifing off process described by Laub and Sampson (e.g. Gadd 2008, Gadd & Farrall 2004, Maruna 2001, Vaughan 2007). One of the most notable studies in qualitative research of desistance is one conducted by Maruna (2001) who found that in order for factors such as job, marriage, and age to have an effect the individuals must undergo a cognitive change in how they interpret their lives, what the author calls “a phenomenology of desistance”. Desisting offenders have formed a “redemption script” and gained a new self-concept, a “true self”, according to which they have always been good individuals, despite their past offenses. This “true self” also incorporates positive attributes such as being smart or kind hearted, which provides them with a belief of being able to “make it”. Their past criminal activity was not part of this true self, but rather it was a consequence of environmental circumstances, e.g. peer pressure. The change usually came through an outside source, either a real person or an imagined force, helping them to choose the right path. The desisting offenders also felt that they had been strengthened by their past experiences and there was a sense of new purpose in life; some wanted to give something back to society or help others from ending up in the same situation as they had been in. These individuals also had a positive view of their futures and they showed high levels of self-efficacy. Additionally, Maruna (2004) found that desisting offenders tended to attribute positive life events stable internal and global sources, i.e.

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2 It is important to note that the authors argue that the desistance process were the same for both violent and non-violent offenders (Laub & Sampson 2003:148), however; they only interviewed four individuals who were classified as violent offenders; they had committed one violent offense each.
positive broad long-lasting personal qualities, creating positive illusions, while persistent offenders did the same but for negative life events.

According to Maruna and Ramsden (2004:141 f.) the narratives of former deviants share five themes in common; 1) reparation and generativity, or themes of reciprocity and a desire to help others as a way to counteract feelings of shame and shift focus on their past lives to the future. 2) Tragic optimism or providence; their suffering has led to something good or that it had some purpose. 3) Vulnerability and mutual dependency; recognition of being imperfect and that they are in need of help. 4) Social embeddedness; feelings of unity or belonging to a social group. 5) Overall coherence and internal integration; sense of wholeness, transforming difficult circumstances into positive opportunities for e.g. personal growth.

Further, Vaughan (2007) suggests that for desistance to occur the individual must be open to new routes of action, review the pros and cons of the possible courses of action and how this relate to the present and future self before finally making a commitment to change his/her life. This process involves a past “me” that the present “I” wish to distance him/herself from and create a future “you”, who the individual wishes to be. Giordano et.al. (2002) have further argued that there are four types of cognitive transformations that the individual must undergo in order to desist from crime; first the individual must be open to change his/her life, second the individual need to become exposed to a hook or a set of hooks for change. Additionally, the individual must create a replacement self that can replace the former “criminal self”, and finally the individual must change his/her attitude to deviant and criminal behaviour. In line with this research, Gadd and Farrall (2004) suggest that offenders generally re-evaluate their lives before the desistance process begins. Important factors for desistance, e.g. marriage and employment, are often associated with conflicts and tensions, and we must understand these if we are to understand the desistance process; i.e. marriage and employment may even be counteractive. We must also go beyond the criminal behaviour as an indicator of desistance and broaden our view to behavioural patterns not necessarily criminal or antisocial and also the underlying supportive attitudes and whether they have changed or not. As Gadd notes (2008:196 ff.), individuals who desist from criminal activities can adopt other forms of behaviour that are equally problematic, e.g. a wife-batterer may stop using violence but still be controlling.

As I have shown, the research concerning criminal careers and desistance span over a whole range of areas and, as I argued above, this research shows the complexity of this area implying that criminal behaviour cannot be reduced to either theories addressing only e.g. the
genetic or social factors as the sole explanation of crime and desistance from crime. For these reasons, I will not adopt a theoretical approach focusing on, and thus explaining, only criminal behaviour but, as Akers argued (1985/1998: 85 f.), I make the assumption that the basic cognitive processes are the same for all individuals and hence I will adopt a general theoretical approach of social cognition in order to understand the cognitive aspects of desistance and the narratives.

3. A Social Cognitive Approach

A general description of the main focus of social cognition is the individual cognitive processes and how these are influenced by social interaction and/or other social factors (Bless et.al. 2004:6 ff., Howard & Renfrow 2003:260). Social cognition is closely related to phenomenology and symbolic interactionism in the shared interest of how individuals create meaning but with the addition of the specific cognitive processes involved in this meaning construction (e.g. Cervone & Pervine 2008:452). While many sociological thinkers have viewed the self and its development as solely the result of social forces, e.g. social interaction (e.g. Berger & Luckmann 1966, Bourdieu 1990, Giddens 1991, Jenkins 2008, Mead 1934), social cognition acknowledges that the development of the self and our social understanding is the result of a bio-psycho-social development. According to this view, the very foundation of our self and our social understanding is part of a biological maturation process as all infants follow the same early developmental pattern independent of cultural context (cf. Gergely & Csibra 2003, Meltzoff 2006, Rochat et.al. 1999, Senju & Johnson 2008, Tirassa et.al. 2006, Tomasello 1999, Tomasello et.al. 2006) while the development of higher social cognitive functions, such as theory of mind (Geary 2005:131, Gergely & Csibra 2003:287, Lowell Stone 2008:76 f., von Tetzchner 2001:498 ff., Tirassa et.al. 2006:197, Tomasello 1999:174), varies between individuals depending on social factors such as the child’s interaction with his/her parents (Söderström & Skårderud 2009:56 f.) and e.g. verbal developmental (Gerrans 2002:316) or neuropsychological factors (cf. Tomasello et.al. 2005). Further, social cognition also recognises the importance of an understanding of the underlying neurological factors in order to understand our social behaviour (cf. Calder et.al. 2002, Carrington & Bailey 2008, Senju & Johnson 2008, Vogeley 2001, Öhman 2002), e.g. mirror neurons, (Pacherie & Dokic 2006, Ramachandran 2003, for critique Newlin & Renton 2010:1697 ff.) as well as the evolutionary aspects (cf. Cummins 2000, Enard et.al. 2002, Geary 2005, Henrich & Henrich 2006, Herrmann et.al. 2007, Krause et.al. 2007, Lowell Stone 2008, Tomasello 1999,

We use our social cognitive skills in all social encounters and social interaction; we have for example a tendency to categorise individuals according to group affiliation or hierarchies (Howard & Renfrow 2003:272 f., Lowell Stone 2008), and we constantly use social representations and schemas to makes sense of the social interaction (Howard & Renfrow 2003:273 ff.). Due to our limited cognitive capacity, we cannot process all incoming information and we need to be selective in what we “… notice, learn, remember, or infer in any situation” (Markus 1977:63, cf. Bless et.al. 2004:29 ff.), and therefore we must organise our knowledge into different categories in our mind by a process that has been referred to as lumping and splitting (Zerubavel 1996), which means that we lump together similar things into mental clusters as well as differentiate between different clusters, or splitting. When we perceive and focus our attention to an external stimulus we encode it into a category, what category a certain stimuli will be encoded into is in large dependent on our prior knowledge or already existing categories (Bless et.al. 2004:36, Zerubavel 1997:24 f.), as well as its applicability and accessibility; if the category can be used to give meaning to the stimuli and how easily the category can be retrieved from memory. Accessibility is in turn dependent on recency and frequency; how recent and how often the category is used. (Bless et.al. 2004:37 f., Smith & Mackie 2007:65 ff.)

These cognitive structures, in which we categorise social information, can be divided into prototypes, exemplars, schemas, social representations, scripts, cognitive maps, and associate networks (cf. Bless et.al. 2004). All of these structures can be both conscious and unconscious, and we may not be aware when they are activated (Greenwald & Banaji 1995).

Of special importance here are social representations and schemas. Social representations are common sense theories of how the world works, e.g. norms and values; they are consensual and shared with other individuals and they are created and recreated through social interaction. (Howard & Renfrow 2003:262 ff., cf. Smith and Mackie 2007:58 f.) Schemas on the other hand are both cognitive structures representing organised knowledge as well as the

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3 Despite its importance and relevance, I will not go into a deeper discussion regarding the developmental, neuropsychological or evolutionary aspects of social cognition here due to limitations in space. Interested readers are referred to the previously mentioned literature.
mechanisms that we use in information processing since they guide our perceptions, memories, and inference processes. Schemas can be divided into person-schemas, self-schemas, role-schemas, and event-schemas, i.e. knowledge about other persons, ourselves, norms and values connected to roles or social positions, and routinised everyday events. The self-schema, which is the focus of this thesis, can be seen as “… cognitive generalizations about the self, derived from past experience, that organize and guide the processing of self-related information contained in the individual’s social experience” (Markus 1977:64). This schema contain cognitive representations created by the individual’s experiences of specific events and situations, but also more general representations of the individual as a result of continuous categorisation and evaluation of the individual’s behaviour by him-/herself and others with whom the individual interacts. The more experience an individual accumulates of him-/herself, the more stable the self-schema becomes, or increasingly resistant to contradictory or inconsistent information. (Ibid., cf. Cervone & Pervin 2008:496 ff.) Still, changes may occur but when they do they tend to be slow as the new information is stored or merged into the already existing structures (Bless et.al. 2004:68, Howard & Renfrow 2003:271) and it has been argued that achieving a lasting personality change may take as long as 10 years (Maruna 2001:24).

Our self-schema is affected by social factors such as our social affiliations, experiences within and across social contexts as well as our location within the cultural and social structure (see Owens 2003:209 f.). What and how we categorise information are learned in the socialisation process, or our cognitive socialisation. This process can be both explicit in form of formal schooling or implicit through the use of language, discourse, and our social interactions with other individuals. This cognitive socialisation will affect how we reason, what we remember, what we perceive, and how we interpret our experiences. Of importance here are the social groups to which we belong, or thought communities, which includes for example professions, generations, gender, ethnicities, and classes. Dependent on what thought community we grow up in, or belong to, we will learn what to focus our attention on, what is important to remember, and also what aspects of the social world that belong to the same categories and what categories they are differentiated from. (Zerubavel 1997, cf. Bruner 1987/2006:102, Norquay 1999/2006:203 ff.) This means that what is included in our cognitive categories is dependent on our socialisation process. For example, norms and values are organised in our mind in the form of social representations and we share these social representations with other individuals from the same thought community. Even though we share the basic features with
other individuals within the same thought community there are differences between individuals as these social representations are internalised through the social interaction and thus affected by the individual’s unique experiences. Further, the way we organise our self-schema is also dependent on the social context in which we live. It has for example been shown that there are cultural differences in how we encode self-relevant information in form of narratives were individuals of Western societies emphasise individuality while individuals from Asian societies emphasise social affiliation in a larger extent (Wang & Ross 2005). It is important to note that we may belong to several different social groups at the same time and the way we act and think may be dependent on the social context (Zerubavel 1997:17), or what social group that is more salient in a particular situation (e.g. Brewer 1991). Also, at the same time these social groups affects the way we categorise information, our social identification with them is also the results of our tendency to use categorisation; already from an early age we begin to classify ourselves into socially defined groups/categories to which we belong or do not belong (Howard & Renfrow 2003:273).

The concept of thought communities is somewhat similar to the concept of habitus as described by Bourdieu; the habitus in which we live, or are born into, affects our choices, possibilities, constraints, and experiences. Depending on our habitus, we will be exposed to different practices, norms, parent-child relations, and modes of consumption and this will affect our later experiences and practices. Habitus can be seen as both subjective and collective; the individual experiences differ between individuals within the same habitus but at the same time many of these experiences are likely to be shared with other individuals from the same habitus. (Bourdieu 1990:53 ff.) In other words, habitus can be said to refer to both our individual experience based cognitive structures, e.g. schemas as well as our shared social representations. One important difference between Bourdieu and social cognition is that the latter also address the issues of how and why individuals are affected by the social context on a deeper level while Bourdieu merely provides a description of the end results of this categorisation process.

3.1. Social Cognition and Narratives

But how can all of this be used to understand narratives? Narratives are a vital tool for how we are able to make sense of and organise our experiences and construct our identities (Byrne 2003:30, Hollway & Jefferson 2000:32, Larsson & Sjöblom 2010:274, McAdams 1994, 1996ab, McLean 2005, Pasupathi & Wainryb 2010:735), they are also essential for almost all
human activities such as socialisation, group solidarity, cognitive development, community processes, gender, and cultural enactment (Maines 1993/2006:121 f. cf. Zerubavel 1997, 1996). It has been argued that our narratives are the core of the self-identity in modern societies; our self-identity is “… the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography” (Giddens 1991:53). Our personal biography is a continuous process where we integrate events into the on-going narrative, and it is also both robust and fragile; it is necessary for us to have a sense of biographical continuity in order to maintain a stable self, but at the same time is the narrative we reflexively hold in our minds just one of many potential narratives. (Ibid.:53 f.) The fragility is shown by our constant reconstruction of the narratives due to our experiences in our day to day life and the fragmentation of social institutions (Ibid.:185 f.).

As described above, information is stored in cognitive categories in our minds, and this goes for our narratives as well; the narrative self could be viewed as a cognitive schema that is influenced by, and influences, social interaction (Crewe & Maruna 2006:112, cf. Habermas & de Silviera 2008:709, Haden et.al. 1997:295 f., Johansson 2005:84 f., Mello 2002:233). The ability to form a narrative self-schema is dependent on our social cognitive abilities and their development. Early in infancy the infant learns to differentiate him-/herself from other individuals (cf. Meltzoff 2007, Tirassa et.al. 2006). However, it is through the development of ToM, brain maturation, (e.g. Pasupathi & Wainryb 2010:735) and verbal development (Haden et.al. 1997:296, McAdams 1996a:302. See also Tomasello 1999, cf. Mead 1934, Vygotsky 1978, Zerubavel 1997:79 f.) that children are able to begin the construction of their autobiographical memory, though social influences are also critical for this development, such as the social interaction with the parents regarding the recollection of information (Haberman & de Silveira 2008:708, Haden et.al. 1997:295 f., Nelson 2003:130, Pasupahi & Wainryb 2010:735). Still, it is not until early adolescence that the individual’s life-story is created (McAdams 1996a:302, 310, also Mclean 2005) due to the reminiscence bump or an oversampling of memories. This could be understood by the social cognitive development, the development of a unified psychological conception of personality, the ability to “… coordinate several episodes into a hierarchically organized multiepisode narrative” (Habermas & de Silviera 2008:708), the development of epistemological reasoning, societal demands (Ibid.:708 f.), ToM development, linguistic skills, neural development, and self-concept development (Pasupathi & Wainryb 2010:743 f.).
To tell someone about your life is a cognitive achievement as well as a selective memory recall and an interpretative feat. The ability to tell stories about ourselves is dependent on our ability to structure perceptual experiences, organise our memories, and also to divide and order the events of our lives. (Bruner 1987/2006:100 ff.) Our narratives rely on a memory function known as the episodic memory which can be seen as the preservation of events with which we have made cognitive contact and our experiences of these contacts. Cognitive contact includes here both experiences and knowledge; the episodic memory is the memory of how we acquired these experiences or knowledge. The episodic memory can be contrasted with the semantic memory which is only concerned with the knowledge *per se* and not how it was acquired. (Hoerl 2007:631, cf. Nelson 2003:126, Passer & Smith 2008:264, von Tetzchner 2001:216 f.) When we recall, or remember, information we activate knowledge that we have stored in our long-term memory and bring it into our short-term memory. Information that we have stored in our cognitive schemas are recalled more accurately and quickly though we may also falsely remember information that is relevant to our schemas. (Howard & Renfrow 2003:265) We have for example a tendency to view ourselves retrospectively in a favourable light, highlighting our successes and downplaying our failures (Smith & Mackie 2007:109 f.), and to notice and remember information that is consistent with our self-schemas (Cervone & Pervin 2008:498). Still, if the reasons for the encoding are more significant and engaging the accuracy of the information recall improves. (Howard & Renfrow 2003:265 f., also Bless et.al. 2004). Our narratives and our autobiographical memory are also influenced by the social context in which we live. It has been suggested that the way we tell personal stories have changed over historical time; in early and pre-modern societies narratives were used to create cultural myths that served to solidify social structures as well as to produce common ways for the members to understand and explain the world and creating a cultural belief system and a collective memory. In modern societies there have however been a change in how we construct our narratives; as the old myths and cultural models for how we are supposed to live our lives are vanishing there has been a greater focus on individualism. We are in a greater extent encouraged to develop our own autonomous self, by e.g. parents and school, and this is reflected in our personal narratives. (Nelson 2003, cf. Giddens 1991, McAdams 1996a) The idea of cultural influences on our narratives have been supported by cross cultural research showing that how we encode, i.e. memorise, and express our narratives varies between cultures, were some cultures emphasises individuality more than others (Wang & Ross 2005, cf. Bruner 1987/2006:102, McAdams 1996a, Norquay 1999/2006:203 ff., Zerubavel 1997).
3.2. Theoretical Assumptions

As I have now described the foundation of the social cognitive approach I adopt in this thesis, I will now turn to the theoretical assumptions I make with basis in this approach. Based on the theory presented here I make the assumption that we construct our self-schema in the social interaction with others and that this schema can change but these changes are part of a process were new information about the self is merged into our already existing self-schema and this is a continuous process as it takes time for these changes to occur (cf. Bless et.al. 2004:68, Howard & Renfrow 2003:271, Maruna 2001:24). Additionally, I argue that the turning point experienced by the individuals is actually the high point of this self-schematic transformation and that the actual process begun at an earlier stage in the individual’s life; it is the doorstep where the individuals go from primary to secondary desistance, i.e. adopt a new self-schema as a desisting offender. Still, this does not necessarily mean that it is the end of this process as the creation of the narrative self is a continuous process (e.g. Giddens 1991:53). Further, I assume that recurring themes of the narratives represent more salient, and thus important, aspects of the participants’ self-schemas (Owens 2003:208); i.e. the more emphasis the participants’ put on certain themes in their narratives, the more important these themes are for the construction of the participants’ self-schemas. Finally I argue that since we are not wholly aware of our cognitive categories (Greenwald & Banaji 1995), I cannot merely ask the individuals what their turning point was, as some researchers have suggested⁴ (cf. Christian 2009, Maruna 2011 personal communication), but rather I must look at the individuals life as a whole in order to investigate this process of change.

4. Narrative Methodology

It has been argued that humans are natural storytellers, essentially narratives are what makes us human; we are a *Homo narrans* with an inherent tendency to tell and understand stories (Squire 2008:43 f., see also Nelson 2003). Considering this, a methodology based on narratives would come naturally, or in the words of Maines; “… if humans are inherently storytellers, so are sociologists” (1993/2006:124).

⁴ See http://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/foley/instruments/interview/ (2011-04-07) for an example of an interview guide by Dan P. McAdams.
The use of narrative methodology have received vast support in the social sciences and its popularity can be seen in the so called narrative turn that the social sciences have undergone during the last two decades (Atkinson & Delamont 2006:xxii ff., De Fina 2009, Maruna 2001:39, McAdams 1996:380, Squire et.al. 2008:1); narratives are now used in a number of fields within the human sciences, ranging from anthropology, cognitive science, criminology and sociology to theology and literary criticism (Atkinson & Delamont 2006:xiv, Crewe & Maruna 2006:109 f.), but also investigative interviewing (Youngs & Anter 2009) and therapy (Larsson & Sjöblom 2010:272, Morgan 2007), and it has inspired new paradigms in psychology (Maruna 2001:39) and sociology (Maines 1993/2006). Some researchers have even argued that academic work on narratives has been “… evidenced in every field of the human sciences” (Maines 1993/2006:121), and that all qualitative methods are essentially grounded in narrative and discourse processes (Mello 2002:231).

Despite the vast support of, and interest in, narrative methodology and theory there is a lack of consensus regarding the definition of “narratives” and questions of analysis process, approach, empirical material and the role of the researcher (Squire et.al. 2008). The definition of narrative used in this thesis is in line with the definition provided by Maines (1993/2006) who argue that there are three necessary elements for a story to be considered a narrative; 1) a selection of past events for the purpose of focus and commentary, 2) the transformation of these events into story elements, and 3) a temporal ordering of these events. (cf. Bruner 1987/2006:103, Salmon & Kohler Reissman 2008:78)

Narrative interviews can be used as a way to gain an insight to how the individuals’ self-schemas are constructed (e.g. Maruna 2001), and how they influence our motives, intentions and reasons behind our actions (Johansson 2005:85 ff, Ward & Maruna 2007:85). This can give us invaluable knowledge of not only the phenomenological reasons behind an individual’s actions, but also how the actions are influenced by the broader social context (Larsson & Sjöblom 2010:274) such as internalised norms and values (Gadd & Farrall 2004, Johansson 2005:95 f.) and unconscious cognitive aspects (cf. Hollway & Jefferson 2000). The use of narrative interviews have some clear advantages over other methods that tries to investigate the individuals’ life histories, an example of this are semi-structured retrospective life-history interviews (cf. Laub & Sampson 2003) which are associated with a number of problems, most notable is memory biases (Laub & Sampson 2003:193, Piquero et.al. 2007:84 ff., cf. Christianson 1998:79 ff., Passer & Smith 2008:272 ff). Memory biases are however not a problem for narrative interviews since it is not the stories themselves and the “facts” they
convey that are of interest but rather how they are told, i.e. the individual outlooks and theories of reality (Maruna & Matravers 2007:431) and how they view their lives and thus how they construct their self-schemas.

4.1. An Experienced Centred Approach

In the current study I have adopted an approach that can be referred to as an experience centred narrative approach. The experience centred approach is based on the assumption that there are “…internal representations of phenomenon – events, thoughts and feelings – to which the narrative gives external expression” (Squire 2008:5). Narratives are both sequential and meaningful in the sense that personal narratives “… includes all sequential and meaningful stories of personal experience that people produce” (Ibid.:42) and this could include events (e.g. turning points), but also longer stories defined by certain themes and include an individual’s whole life history. Narratives, according to this approach, also involve reconstruction of stories in space and time, i.e. they are changing over time and are highly influenced by the broader social and cultural context in which they are told. (Ibid.:42 ff.)

In this thesis I will adopt this view by investigating the narratives of desisting offenders with a focus on their entire life history, or “big” stories (Phoenix 2008:64), and how they reconstruct their pasts, perceive their present lives and anticipate their futures (see McAdams 1996a:307 ff.). The approach that I use lies also close to what McCormack (2004:220) refers to as analysis of narrative which is distinct from narrative analysis. Analysis of narrative is when the researcher views the stories as data and analyses these stories for themes, while narrative analysis is when researchers gather descriptions of events and create a story from these. This means that I will search the participants’ narratives for themes that are connected to the participants’ criminal careers that they view as meaningful. An experienced focused approach will be useful for this purpose since it does not consider past events as objective “facts” (cf. Labov & Waletzky 1997/2006, Patterson 2008) but rather focuses on the individuals’ perception of them. This view have been supported by researchers who suggests that narratives main concern is not to understand the objective reality but rather the individuals’ theories of reality (Crewe & Maruna 2006:102, cf. McAdams 1994), and it also recognises that narratives are highly influenced by the individuals’ cognitive structure, information processing and perception which in turn is highly influenced by social and cultural factors (e.g. Crewe & Maruna 2006:102, Mello 2002:233).
The experienced centered approach could be criticised from drawing assumptions on what constitutes a good narrative (Squire 2008:52 ff, cf. Habermas & de Silviera 2008, McAdams 1996a:314 ff.) and that there is an expectation that the narratives told are to be coherent and non-contradictory and include certain themes. This approach has also been criticised for being highly individualised and neglecting the importance of language and cultural factor as well as for the risk of over-interpreting the results and that there is no way to compare different interpretations since they all may be “true”. (Squire 2008:54) However, these problems can be solved with a well-specified and testable theory (Hollway & Jefferson 2000:3 f., Larsson & Sjöblom 2010:274, Squire 2008:52), and there is a general assumption that narratives in fact do show temporal ordering but the capacity to produce coherent narratives are due to cognitive development as well as social factors (e.g. Habermas & Silveira 2008, Maines 1993/2006: 121 f. McAdams 1996a:207, Salmon & Kohler Reissman 2008:78 f., for critique see Hollway & Jefferson 2000:152 f.), and on the interaction between the storyteller and the listener (Mello 2002:233 f.). Further, what is included in the narrative is dependent on the context in which the narrative is told, as well as the broader social and cultural context (e.g. Andrews 2008:94 f., De Fina 2009, Lucius-Hoene & Depermann 2000:203 ff., Norquay 1999/2006, Squire 2008:54 ff.), which also solves the problem of a “micro bias” (Maines 1993/2006:138, Phoenix 2008:69).

4.2. The Current Study

In this study I have interviewed a total of twelve desisting offenders; eleven males and one female\(^5\) of mixed ethnicities, and the ages of the participants varied from 23 to 66. Of these participants were five non-violent offenders and seven were violent offenders. All but one of these participants could be regarded as so-called chronic offenders since they show long criminal careers, spanning up to thirty years, with a vast amount of crimes ranging from shoplifting to severe violent offenses such as attempted murder. All of the participants were active in certain organisations working with helping desisting offenders to reform their lives in four Swedish cities. The initial contact with the participants, as well with contact persons who came to mediate contact between me and participants, was made by me by e-mail to a

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\(^5\) I interviewed a second female though this interview has been excluded from this study. The reason for this is that a contact person was present during the interview in order to help the participant to feel comfortable and to help her remember events of her past life. This contact person actively engaged in the interview by e.g. asking the participant questions, many of which were suggestive, telling her what she should talk about, as well as telling me stories of events in the participant’s life and how it affected her.
number of organisations were I provided a brief presentation of myself and my project and I asked for permission to visit the organisations in order to present myself and my project. Six of the organisations I contacted responded to my invitation, but due to practical and logistic reasons I only made a personal visit to three of these prior to the interviews. In addition to these visits I also had a number of “off the record” talks with some of the desisting offenders were we discussed a number of topics ranging from experiences of correctional institutions and crime prevention to art and politics.

Due to the nature of the topics discussed in these interviews, I let the participants decide the time and location for the interviews in order to find an environment they felt comfortable with (see Hydén 2008). Most of the interviews took place at separate rooms at the organisations though a few interviews took place at the participants’ homes. In most interviews only I and the participant were present, though in one interview conducted at the participant’s home his children and wife were at home. In two interviews a female student was present; in these interviews it was the participants themselves who asked her to sit down with us and listen to their stories. All participants volunteered to participate and the reasons for their participation varied between the participants; some found talking about their lives had a therapeutic effect, others wanted to pass on what they had learned to others, or as one participant put it; “There is no-one who listens to us and that’s why I tell [my story to] you, they will listen to you”.

During the interviews I have adopted an approach based on the assumption that as an interviewer I should take the role as a good listener while my participants take the role of storytellers (Hollway & Jefferson 2000:31 ff.). This approach is preferable since it allows the participants to freely convey their own experiences; it can be seen as a form of free association in which the participants are free to talk about their life-stories and form associations between events in a way that makes most sense to them (e.g. Ibid.:152). Further, I have used standard interviewing techniques in this study such as open-ended questions (Hollway & Jefferson 2000:34, Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2000:203 f.), refraining from “why” questions, not questioning the participant (e.g. Hollway & Jefferson 2000:35 f., Engquist 1984:46 ff.), follow up what has been said in the narrative order, and using the participants own words when asking questions (Hollway & Jefferson 2000:36, Lamb et.al. 2003, Sternberg et.al. 1996:440). These techniques have been proved useful in eliciting stories in e.g. forensic interviews with children since they target the episodic memory rather than the semantic memory providing more informative and accurate answers and minimises the influence of the researcher (e.g. Cederborg et.al. 2001:1355 ff., Lamb et.al. 2003:926,
Sternberg et.al. 1996:440). Needless to say, I have not made any moral valuations of their crimes or blaming them for what has happened during the interviews (see Hollway & Jefferson 2000:100 f.).

It is important to remember though, as the participants are forced to select events, categorise them, and define how they are relevant as well as trying to achieve coherence, the stories do not mirror past events but they are influenced by the interview context (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2000, cf. Norquay 1999/2006:202). Further, all narrative stories involve an explanatory component; even if I use an approach in which I allow the participants to construct their stories as freely as possible, they are produced as a response to my research question (Hollway & Jefferson 2000:35) and they are also directed towards an audience, either present or imaginary; i.e. me or you who are reading this thesis (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2000:202, 213 f.). This means that the stories told are designed by the participant to answer this overall question of my study, as well as their perceptions of my expectations. By using open ended questions, I can avoid setting any limits or expectations on what kind of narrative that is expected other than the overall theme of the interviews and thus minimising the effect of me on the participants. In fact, in the majority of the interviews the participants told me their entire life-stories without me asking any, or very few, questions.

4.3. Analysis of Narrative Data

As I stated earlier, the approach that I use in this study is both experience centred (Squire 2008) and an analysis of the narrative (McCormack 2004). This means that the main interest for me in this study is to analyse the life stories of the individuals in order to find meaningful events and experiences that can be associated with the individuals’ criminal careers such as onset, persistence, turning points, and desistance. In order to analyse the stories and make comparisons regarding themes, scripts, and schemas, I need to code the interviews into categorises which are then compared within and between the desisting offenders in search for similarities and differences.

The use of coding in narrative interviews have been heavily criticised by several researchers; Hollway and Jefferson (2000:68 ff.) argues that coding of data overlooks the form of the data, or the *Gestalt*, and thus misses events or themes may affect each other over the individual’s life. It has also been suggested that coding overlooks differences between individuals within a category (Ibid.:108 ff.). It has additionally been suggested that narrative analysis should focus on the “… content, form and context of narratives … while keeping the text as whole and
unfragmented as possible” (Frost 2009:10). Others have gone so far as arguing that “coding is not narrative”; the coding of data lead to a creation of an artificial form that are used to create clarity and present the findings of the studies and it leads to dangers of misinterpreting and/or diminishing the nature of the narratives and separate the stories from the human environment. (Mello 2002:235)

I do not object to this critique of coding and I do acknowledge the advantages of providing a holistic, or Gestalt, account of the narratives. Still, I will use coding in my study for a couple of reasons. First, due to the sample size I use and the limitations in space in this thesis, providing a whole account of the individuals’ Gestalt as well as making a comparative analysis is just not possible. Secondly, providing a categorical account is preferable when one is interested of comparing groups or phenomenon that is shared by a group of individuals while a Gestalt approach is preferable when one is trying to understand the individual as a whole (Larsson & Sjöblom 2010:276). Finally, due to ethical reasons providing a whole account of an individual may prove problematic since it makes the participants easier to identify (Hollway & Jefferson 2000:90 ff.).

In this thesis I have coded the interviews, using NVivo 7.0, in two waves; first I have searched the interviews for important factors or events in the individuals’ lives that emerged in this study. These factors have been coded under a few main categories; childhood, adolescence, young adult, and adult. I have made a division between non-violent and violent offenders, analysing these two groups separate from each other in the coding process. These categories are used in order to provide a chronological order for the different factors that emerged in the analysis of the interviews that can be compared within each group and also be used to contrast the groups to each other. In the second wave of coding I have analysed the two groups for themes as well cognitive processes that can be associated with the desistance process and self-schematic changes. This includes themes associated with the participants’ self-schemas, turning point process’, themes of agency⁶, and how they view their crimes. Further I have made extensive use of pen portraits, not included here, in order to maintain a Gestalt feeling of the narratives and this have been of great use in both the coding process as well as during the analysis.

4.4. Ethical Considerations

Since narrative research is interested in detailed descriptions of the inner life of the participants one runs the risk of invoking cognitions and emotions that may have been submerged by the participant, and narrative interviews calls for sensitivity on the part of the interviewer (Larsson & Sjöblom 2010:277, McCormack 2004:233 f.). Sensitive topics should here be distinguished from sensitive events; an event is something that you experience while a topic is something that appears in the interview situation. An event has the potentiality of becoming a sensitive topic, but it does not have to; talking about traumatic experience can re-traumatize the individual but it also have the potential to heal. Sensitive topics are defined relationally, the interview is a joint process in which the interviewer and participant is part of a circular process trying to make sense of the topic of the interview. They are also socially defined, what is considered a sensitive topic for one individual may not be considered such for another. (Hydén 2008) Of my participants, many had suffered from traumatic experiences from childhood and throughout their lives. The stories also involved crimes that the participants had committed; many of these crimes were serious violent offenses. This called for great sensitivity on my part and I have been careful not to engage in topics that the participants were not comfortable with.

One important criterion for qualitative research is that of informed consent. Hollway and Jefferson (2000:85 ff.) suggest that when informing the participants of the study, a broad definition of the research topic is preferable since this do not constrain the narratives and prevent the participants from tailoring their stories to fit the answers they assume I want or my expectations of the interview. There is, however, a problem with informing the participants in advance in this kind of research of what they are consenting to and what telling stories of their experiences might bring, e.g. emotional consequences. Since I do not have any predetermined questions or more narrowly defined topics, it is impossible to know in advance what the stories will be and what memories or emotions the stories may evoke. Thus, I have informed the participants on the overall topic of my thesis, what methodology I use, and that I am interested in their life-stories; I left for them to decide what these stories would include.

This also brings the question of avoidance of harm into focus since sensitive topics involves the risk of causing psychological distress. Being upset or distressed is not necessarily harmful; it may even have some therapeutic effects to talk about personal and emotionally difficult subjects in the context of a trustworthy and supportive context (e.g. Vajda 2007). However,
possible therapeutic effects can never be assumed or used to justify intrusion of someone’s life, and it is important that the participants are in control over their involvement (Grinyer 2004:1340 f). Still, even though the participants are co-operating in my interviews in the sense that they choose what topics they talk about, they may not know in advance what these topics will be. Consenting to participate in an interview may not be a wholly conscious decision; rather it may be an emotional as well as one of trust and respect or their feelings and impressions of me. However, a good indicator for how comfortable the participants are in the interviewing situation and the topics we talk about is how much they disclose to me. (Hollway & Jefferson 2000:87) During the interviews I have paid close attention to this and I have not asked about topics that the participants have not felt comfortable talking about or are trying to avoid. In order to not put me in a superior position towards the participants, I have also focused on the positive aspects of their stories and thus highlighting the strengths and positive sides of the participants. (Hydén 2008:126 ff., cf. Hollway & Jefferson 2000:84 f.)

Due to the nature of the topics discussed I choose to end all interviews with a more neutral subject; what the participants think society could do to prevent individuals from starting a criminal career and work to help those who are criminal to desist from crime. I have also used debriefing at the end of the interviews asking the participants of their thoughts and feelings about the interview in order to see if the interviews caused them any forms of distress. None of the participants stated that they felt any distress during the interviews; some told me that they felt it had a therapeutic effect and that talking about their lives helped them in the desistance process. Further, I have talked with a number of participants after the interviews of topics ranging from literature to family life, in order to create a more relaxed atmosphere.

5. Results

In this section I will present the main results of the interviews; i.e. the main events in the participants’ lives such as their early childhood memories, the onset of their criminal careers and substance abuse, how their lives was until they experienced their turning points, and what these turning points were. I have made a distinction here between non-violent and violent offenders. After the review of the overall results of each group I will present the main findings of the analysis, or a deeper discussion regarding the results of the cognitive and emotional
factors associated with their narratives in general and their self-schemas and the desistance process in particular.

All quotes have been translated from Swedish to English by me. I have tried to stay as close as possible to the original sentence structure and phrasing though some words are not possible to translate directly from Swedish to English and I have been forced to use synonyms. Still, I have tried as far as possible to preserve the meaning conveyed in the original statements. In order to prevent identification, I have decided to not use pseudonyms.

5.1. The Life-Stories of Non-Violent Offenders

The non-violent desisting offenders consists of five participants, one female and four males, who came from rather different backgrounds though all except one were ethnical Swedes. The ages of the participants varied from 25 to 66. All of the participants had had substance abuse problems, four of them had abused mainly narcotics and one participant abused alcohol. In addition to this had all participants engaged in criminal activity, mainly property crime, dealing narcotics, and in one case economic crime. At the time of the interview were all participants recovering from their substance abuse problems and they were desisting from other criminal activities. The period of desistance and recovery varied between the participants from one to eleven years.

Most of the participants stated that they grew up in rather good family conditions, however; one participant had been the victim of physical abuse by his stepfather as a child;

“[I] was only seven months old the first time he hit me, (JB: Okay) and that was because I screamed and didn’t want to sleep, my mother have told [me] /.../ [I had] for instance sore hair until I was almost twenty five because he took me in the hair and threw me down the stairs and that kind of stuff, and then he could.. [my] mother have told about.. Chunks of hair still in his hand and that kind of stuff. I have had a lot of wooden shoes kicked to my back and head and everywhere...”

This violence continued until he was thirteen years old and his mother got a divorce. As a child he never had any contact with his biological father, it was not until he was older that he found out that his stepfather had threatened his father to kill him if he ever made contact with

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7 The symbols used in the quotes stand for; .. = unfinished sentence, ... = long pause, [ ] = comments, () = short interpose, bold = participant put emphasis on certain words, and underline = my emphasis.

8 I use here the definition of substance abuse provided by DSM-IV (Deas et.al. 2005).
his child. It was his grandparents, and mainly his grandfather that he came to form a close relationship with and he used to live with them during the holidays. Until this day, he has not been able to forgive his mother for not leaving his stepfather earlier. At the present moment, he has made contact with his biological father and they now have a rather good relationship.

The other participants did not make any accounts of having similar experiences, however: although they initially stated that they grew up in good family conditions all said at a later stage that there were some problems at home, or as a participant described it; “Dysfunctional without it being visible”. This included being depreciated by the parents, lack of contact with, or death of, parents, as well as gambling and economic problems. In addition, one participant stated that there were inconsistencies in the parenting style of his parents, something that he learned how to take advantage of. Further, with the exception of one participant the participants’ parents did not react strongly towards the problems with substance abuse or criminality experienced by the participants in fact; none of the other participants mentioned any sanctions by their parents. In one case this could be explained by an onset age of 44.

Three of the participants experienced problems in school, one was bullied and another was a “dork” who kept mainly to himself. One participant also said that although he did rather good in school he did show some problems and “… one can say retrospectively that that might have been signs that it.. Something was not right”, this included running away from a school trip as well as a “war” he had with one of his teacher which reached its climax when he brought a slingshot to school and scaring the teacher to the point that she called the police. This participant would later drop out of high school as a consequence of his substance abuse.

There were also early signs of antisocial behaviour in another case where the participant ran away from home and shoplifted “… these little things like hair-slides and cute erasers and candy and such” at the age of seven. However, it was in adolescence that things start to happen for this group. It was during this period that most of the participants came in contact with alcohol and narcotics, and here friends played an important part, as one participant put it:

“I was fourteen then (JB: Okay) and I had.. He who I hung out with was sixteen and the rest that we.. So it was parties and everything and then it was the people.. Most of them was between eighteen and thirty (JB: Yeah, okay) so it was considerably older people and there were no problems to get [alcohol] from the liquor store and this kind of stuff”
Alcohol also acted as a precursor for narcotic abuse; three of the participants began to abuse alcohol prior to the abuse of narcotics, two of them at a fairly young age. After the initial experience, the abuse of narcotics escalated for all participants. This escalation could be a consequence of the fact that the initial drugs lost their effects, which was the case for three of the participants;

“We started with pills and this stuff, we.. You know, after a while when you have smoked, the smoke [cannabis] does not work (JB: No, okay) so fucking good, unless you got really good smoke. So then you can put other things in yourself for it to work better, like morphine or benzo [benzodiazepines]”

Nevertheless, friends continued to play a critical role for the participants;

“You try stuff; you are in those circles where all the drugs are, you are with those people like in the same circle and like start to smoke weed.. Yeah but to hang out with others sort of. And someone there takes amphetamine, yeah but then I might try it like this.. (JB: Okay) It becomes like this.. I know like.. When I remember from the beginning, I never had.. [I] had that thought that ‘No, damn, sitting there with a needle in the arm, I’ll never do that’ (JB: Mm) but that is how it ended up anyway. You raise the bar and then it’s like different reasons as one says, you are in those.. Hangs out with others who are taking the stuff and you like wants to.. In the end like it becomes like that as well, [and] the drugs loses their effect…”

There was however one notable exception to this age pattern; one of the participants actually began his substance abuse at the age of 44 and he had not engaged in any other forms of antisocial behaviour prior to this. This onset came after he had made a new friend;

“And one time we had a party, so I got a little bit drunk, so he said to me; ‘You’ll get something that will make you alert and awake.’ I didn’t know.. He put amphetamine in my coffee, I drank of it.. I got such a.. I was hooked on that drug afterwards”

He continued to abuse narcotics for another 18 years after this experience. Further, for all but one of the participants substance abuse was closely related to other forms of criminality. For some participants the criminal activities began prior to the onset of substance abuse and this included e.g. shoplifting but also pyromania in one case where the participant began to start grass fires and ends up setting a pallet warehouse on fire. Still, for one participant his crimes were not associated with his alcohol problems but rather a fear of saying no to other people, and this lead him to get involved in setting an abandoned house on fire, smashing cars, and
economic crime. With exception to this, criminal behaviour was largely a consequence of the substance abuse; the type of crimes varied between the participants though it was mainly property crimes such as theft and burglary, but also fraud and dealing narcotics. In many cases it was as a way for them to get money in order to finance their substance abuse;

“Yeah but with more drugs it became kind of a natural step to start stealing and stuff. And yeah, well then it became a.. It was also this part criminality that one started to sell drugs then just because to.. Everything to get money and finance this living like with drugs and have this.. To know that you never needed to run out of drugs sort of…”

All, but one, of the participants had served time in prison, and all had undergone treatment at treatment facilities. This was mainly when the participants were young adults, though for two participants their first contacts with the justice system was in adolescence; one participant was arrested after smashing cars and was sentenced to probation and another participant was arrested for narcotic related crimes twice and sentenced to treatment. Two of the participants served several prison sentences, but it was mainly shorter sentences. One exception was the female participant who got arrested a number of times but never served time in prison;

“… you didn’t get prison sentences and then it’s.. [It] has always been in this world like that the males take the blame, it’s a little bit macho kind of, ‘Yeah, but I’ll take the blame for this’ (JB: Yeah, okay) One has also.. One has blamed it on one’s boyfriends. Like it has been part of a little deal and I have never admitted to anything and (JB: Yeah?) I have never known anything, and as a small innocent girl it has been kind of easy”

Those times she got arrested she got sentenced to treatment and she said it never had any deterrent effects. Still, two of the participants experienced their turning point while doing time in prison. For one of them, it was due to a feeling that he had had enough;

“Yeah, so I did my six months and then I came out and I thought that ‘What the hell, I have no desire like.. I have no desire to do another round’. I have messed up my life like three times and I have had to rebuild everything afterwards. I just felt ‘No, I can’t do this, I want peace and quiet, I don’t want to have to look over my shoulder and see if the cops are there the whole fucking time. I want to have it peaceful’”.

He relapsed right after his release, but after this final relapse he has been clean from narcotics and from crime. His turning point was also the consequence of a feeling that he could not trust
anyone and this realisation came after he had been “betrayed” by one of his closest friends following his final prison sentence. Another participant decided to desist from crime after he was sentenced to prison for economic crimes, and during his prison sentence he underwent “… all treatment programs that the prison service has to offer…” and of special importance was the cognitive treatment he received. All of the participants had undergone treatment, often several times, and even though they mostly relapsed it could also have positive effects, but it was usually a long process and many visits to different treatment facilities where the participants took something with them from each visit.

The turning points could also be due to other events in life; one participant met a woman after he had been at a treatment facility and together they decided to quit their substance abuse. He was able to stay clean; however she was not able to do this and this saddened him greatly. For the female participant the final turning point came when she got pregnant; after a hospital visit it turned out that the baby had a heart problem and she had to deliver him one and a half months prematurely. After the birth her baby was extremely weak, almost dead, and her only thought was about the prescription drugs she would be able to get if he died. However, when her baby was taken to the operation room and she saw him lying on a stretcher with life-sustaining apparatuses, something changed;

“I have been in many situations in life where one has been afraid, but as afraid as I was then I don’t think I have ever been, I have never met like this ... Like total fear. That I don’t know if.. What do you say.. One like.. Is this the last time I will see him in life? Somewhere in that moment was my struggle against the drugs over”

From that moment, she has been able to stay clean from narcotics and criminality for about eleven years.

5.2. The Life-Stories of Violent Offenders

The lives of the former violent offenders differ significantly from the non-violent offenders; all of the participants in this group have committed numerous violent crimes, some of them severe. This group consists of seven individuals; of these were three ethnic Swedes, though all but one were born in Sweden. The ages of the participant varied from 23 to 56. Six of the participants had had substance abuse problems, for all but one this included narcotics. At the time of the interview all offenders were relatively clean from their substance abuse; one participant who had abused alcohol was still drinking alcohol on occasion though he was
striving for sobriety. Regarding their crimes, all participants stated that they were desisting from crime though in one interview it was revealed that the participant had been involved in a fight four months prior to the interview. Beside this, the participants had been desisting from crime for about one to four years. All of the participants had served time in prison for violent crimes as well as other crimes. Most of the participants had committed a number of crimes beside violent offenses, ranging from shoplifting to fraud, though for most of the participants the violence was ever present in their narratives beginning at an early age. In fact, two of the participants did not mention any crimes other than their violent crimes.

Six of the participants had experienced problems at home and these problems varied from being victim of physical and psychological abuse to parental substance abuse problems. Two of the participants had been victim of violence;

“I got a lot.. I got beaten before I left my mother (JB: Ah..) and when I say beaten, it was.. She used to beat me with a horsewhip. She used to humiliate me, leave me sleeping outside the door on a carpet like a dog. (JB: Yeah?) It was not the physical violence that was the worst, it was the psychological”

He grew up feeling unloved and unwanted and his mother would later send him away to boarding school when he was 8 years old, the summers he had to spend in summer camps. Another participant stated that he grew up with a violent stepfather who physically abused him, his mother as well as his siblings; e.g. one time when his handicapped sister was cooking he walked up to her and broke her fingers. Though the problems in the family went beyond physical abuse, for example was he and his siblings locked down in a cellar two nights for three Christmas’ while his stepfather drank alcohol with the alcoholics in the city.

For the other participants the problems took other forms; one participant said that when he grew up there was a lot of alcohol abuse and arguments between his mother and father, though there was no physical violence. In another case the participant had a rather ambivalent view of his family; he thought the situation was rather good and that he got a lot of love from his family but there were also a lot of substance abuse and violence at home. From an early age he was also taught by his grandmother to fight and she encouraged him to fight against other children.

In one case there were “no problems at home” to begin with; the participant had engaged in antisocial behaviour before he had turned 10 and this included stealing, starting grassfires as well as sniffing glue and paint thinner. He was physically punished for these activities by his
“father” but in the participant’s mind this was normal, though as he turned 10 things changed as he found out that his father actually was his stepfather;

“What happened with me there, it was that all these beatings, slaps, spankings, punishments, in my mind he had no right to do that. And there it became a hatred towards him, that he had hit me and I began to hate him for that, and at the same time I felt somewhere that everyone lied to me, it was a lie everything that I had believed in, it wasn’t like that.. Then I began to lie and mess up even more and became more obstinate and cocky, and aggressive”

Still, his parents also tried to help him by taking him to sports games and other activities, grounding him and forcing him to do his homework at home, though this had very little effect on his antisocial behaviour which actually escalated.

Further, three of the participants were abandoned by their mothers at an early age, and in two cases they had no fathers or significant others that could care for them. For one participant this happened when he was sentenced to serve time in a juvenile correctional institution; his mother gave the responsibility for him to the state and then she “... turned her back to me without saying a word to me”. In another case the mother could not deal with the participant’s behavioural problems and sent him to foster care. This participant also idolised his father, but he would later find out that his father had stolen money from him and, “[t]hat’s make me furious, like he is my greatest idol what.. Like how the fuck can he do something like this?” Later in high school he would also be kicked out from his father’s home. He and his family had been contact with the social services, but according to the participant nothing changed at home. Additionally, some of the participants mentioned their problems at home to e.g. school nurses, but this only worsened the situation at home and they decided to keep it to their own.

For all participants, the antisocial behavioural problems began at an early age; for one participant problems began to show already in infancy;

“I began, like before I was one year old I sat and banged my head into walls, (JB: Yeah?) I had to carry a helmet because I had such problems with aggression. Like already before I had turned one”

In addition to this he used to run away from the kindergarten and in elementary school he fought a lot including physically attacking teachers. Two other participants began shoplifting at an early age, one at the age of 4 and another at 8. Both these participants came in contact with the police for the first times at the ages of 8 and 9 for shoplifting and for trashing a
house. Further all of the participants started to engage in violence at an early age, in all cases before adolescence. For one participant the onset in violence came at the age of 9 during which time he was bullied at school and one day his mother tells him to fight back; he and a friend takes each a cudgel and attacks their antagonists;

“...And yeah.. When they came down, I hit you know.. I knocked their teeth out and everything. It was rather severe really. And I don’t know.. It was like a rush through my body, I just felt how.. Like one felt invincible in some way, it was kind of scary but rather cool at the same time. That's how my criminal career started”

After this incident he ran up to the schoolyard where he attacked his brother’s bullies as well as a teacher with his cudgel. He was forced to change school, and at his arrival at the new school “[t]he first thing I did on that school was to ask who was the strongest one at the school yard and then I went up to him and beat him up”. His violence continued for another thirty years until he was 39 years old. Another participant was also bullied in school, and this ends with him stabbing one of the pupils through the hand with a fork. He was left in peace after that incident since, according to him, they thought he was crazy and unpredictable and he “…could have outbursts and when I got an outburst, I could have killed someone.” In addition to the bullying he also suffered from dyslexia and this led to more violence; “So often I felt that I couldn’t manage that verbal part, so I used violence instead”. He managed to overcome his verbal problems later by reading books but despite this the violence continued throughout elementary school and he was finally forced to leave the school after throwing another pupil out from a window at the second floor.

In adolescence the violence continued for all participants; one participant was convicted for aggravated assault on an ex-girlfriend’s father. He served his sentence in a juvenile correctional institution where he was beaten by the other inmates until he stabs one of them in the throat with a fork. In order to not get transferred to an adult institution he joins the army at the age of 18 and during his service he finds that he could use his propensity of violence in a new way. However, after serving three years he developed post-traumatic stress syndrome and he ends up shooting an officer in the leg. In another case, the participant began to sell narcotics at his home together with his parents at the age of 15 and this was also the age he carried out his first aggravated assault, together with his mother. During adolescence he started to commit crimes with friends and burglaries with his stepfather, he also began boxing and using steroids, “So I dared to hit back like that and then it directly became my identity, so I fought like hell really. I fought all the time”. At several times this violence became rather
severe and at age of 18 he was sentenced to prison for the first time for assault, aggravated assault, and fraud. In a third case the participant had at the age of 14 three cases of attempted murder on his stepfather towards whom he felt a lot of anger;

“We almost killed him. I kicked a wooden shoe up his arse and we tore his clothes apart, it was just shreds. We smashed him completely really. And I have never enjoyed.. Like I have fought a lot in my life but I have never enjoyed.. And that’s kind of terrifying that you enjoy almost killing another human being”

His anger also led him to begin training boxing; “I was training boxing solely to be able to kill my stepfather; it was the only thing on my mind while I was training. I trained and trained and trained”. The violence was also directed towards other individuals; e.g. a school counsellor, who was “harassing him”, and this conflict escalates to the point that the participant kicks him in the scrotum so hard it breaks as well as breaking two ribs on him.

The participants also engaged in other forms of criminal activities during adolescence and young adulthood and these crimes included burglaries, smash-and-grabs, dealing narcotics, extortion, muggings, robbery, car theft and fraud;

“... more violence came into the picture because I started to use alcohol.. more alcohol and pills, so I got a large search for a number of violent crimes and stuff, and yeah it continued like that and it was grand thefts, it was assaults, aggravated assaults, narcotic crimes, fencing, illegal use of vehicles, and I also have some car thefts and I have figured in like these murder investigations”

For another participant the criminal activity was a consequence of his father being diagnosed with a lung disease and was terminally ill. His father had told him that the only time he felt alive was when he gambled and this causes the participant to engage in muggings, robberies, as well as dealing drugs in order to help his father financially. After the passing of his father, he continues to engage in crime but now for solely selfish reasons.

The substance abuse began at a fairly young age for all six of the participants experiencing substance abuse problems, the age of onset ranged from 8 to 15 years. This substance abuse included sniffing glue and paint thinner at the age of 8 in one case, amphetamine or hash at the ages of 10-13 for other participants. For one participants the substance abuse problems began at the age of 15 when he began to sell and use narcotics, mainly hash, and at this age his stepfather also injected him with amphetamine “… because I should know how it was. Yeah, so that I should now what it tasted like he told me, but he wanted to see me high, that’s
what it was all about”. During this time his girlfriend broke up with him and this caused his substance abuse to escalate further; from that day he was never without hash and he started to use other drugs as well and during his life he had tried “[e]verything from all kinds of medical drugs to LSD, ecstasy, amphetamine, hash, (JB: Yeah?) cocaine, crack.”.

With regard to school achievements some of the participants stated that they did rather well in school, though they also experienced problems in school; one participant had, for example, to change to resource classes twice due to his aggression and he gets an internship at a flagpole knob factory though when he begins high school he is finally expelled.

All of the participants were arrested for crimes during adolescence; one participant was sentenced to probation, another spent time in a juvenile correctional institution and later a military prison after shooting his officer. However, throughout their lives all of the participants had served time in prison, in most cases more than once; one participant was even registered 59 times in the prison and probation services’ records. Still, none of the participants stated that the prison had any deterrent effects;

“So every day was like the same, you knew exactly what you should do and then it almost became like you enjoyed it in there, (JB: Yeah, okay) unfortunately. So it was absolutely not deterrent, I can’t say that. Unfortunately”

At times, the violence also continued within the correctional institutions, two participants stated that they fought with other inmates. In one case the violence were directed towards non-ethnic Swedes or inmates that were hanging around the correctional officers, the other participant said that;

“Then I made myself a name within the prisons, I didn’t take shit from anyone, rather I just walked up to the biggest one and hit and hit as much as I could. So they got respect. I was the first one when it came to beat up rapists and such, yeah paedophiles and wife abusers, they got beaten up”

All participants recidivated after these initial prison sentences, and this included violence;

“And I continued.. I started to feel worse psychologically, I don’t like drugs.. Couldn’t really handle them. Owing a lot of money, sold a lot of drugs and in the end it went wrong, I got really much money in debt so I had to do a lot of extortion and such. (JB: Mm) threaten people and hit people /.../ And yeah, the violence got a lot more severe, like I have almost beaten people to death several times, like stabbed them to death”
Three of the participants also continued with other forms of crimes such as fraud, dealing drugs, theft, and extortions as well as substance abuse. However, in young adulthood things were starting to change for this group. After serving a prison sentence one participant came in contact with a Swedish woman with whom he moved to Sweden and had two kids. She also convinced him to meet a doctor who diagnosed him with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD]. However, after eighteen years she divorced him since she and their two children were afraid of him. After the divorce he tried to commit suicide and he recidivated into crime and he got arrested, and while awaiting trial in remand prison with full restrictions\(^9\) he experienced his turning point;

\(\begin{align*}
\text{“And then I got paper and a pen and I started to write /.../ I simply wrote about my life. I wrote it down and by writing and reading [about] myself I started to ransack myself. And I have understood that if I want to change my life, I must first change myself as a person. That's what happened”}
\end{align*}\)

For two participants the turning points came when they each met a woman. One stated that he was “burned out” after being constantly followed and arrested by the police and then he meets a girl with whom he falls in love and he feels that he wants to live a normal life together with her. After being sentenced to treatment after his final arrest he undergoes the twelve step program and after this treatment he decides to change his life. For the other participant the turning point came when he met a woman who was also abusing narcotics and he had to take care of her and they came to have a daughter together. During this period he was clean from drugs and alcohol, though he was sentenced to prison for aggravated assault and after a stay at a treatment facility he started his own contracting business which was successful and he realised that he did not have to “cheat” to succeed.

Turning points could also come in the form of an outside force. One participant was sentenced to prison for an aggravated assault, after his sentence he visits a treatment facility and he also gets an education as a treatment assistant. He relapsed once more and went to another treatment facility where he met his wife. After the treatment they both continued their substance abuse until he got arrested for an aggravated assault and in remand prison he had a revelation;

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\(^9\) This means that the inmate is not allowed to get visitors, read newspapers, meet other inmates, watch TV or listen to radio, and gets his/her mail examined by the attorney.
“It was a voice inside of me that said ‘It’s okay, I’m with you, if you straighten up then I’ll be with you’ and to me.. I believe that.. I believe it was the Son who said that, (JB: Mm) the Son of God”

After this experience he started to do volunteer work at a Christian organisation were he now works helping other individuals in distress and he also works with desisting offenders. For another participant the turning point came when he visited an organisation that works with individuals trying to desist from crime after he had served a prison sentence for an assault. When he arrives at this organisation he meets two of the workers there;

“I’m a little bit reserved but they start to talk about themselves and like how they have lived and such, and in some way it’s the first time that I understand what someone is saying and they understand what I’m saying. We meet, an identification arises between us were we might not have done the same things but emotionally it’s exactly the same tings”

He also realises that if they have been able to turn their lives around so can he and he begins to undergo treatment programs and is currently working at the organisation.

Still, in two cases the participants did not experience any turning points in the same way the others did. One participant reaches a realisation while undergoing treatment at a treatment facility and by examining himself and his behaviour he changes his view of himself and decides to leave his criminal career and substance abuse and he starts to work at an organisation that helps other desisting offenders turn their lives around. He also suffers from physical problems as a consequence of his substance abuse, and he states that if he starts to abuse narcotics or alcohol once more he will die. In another case, the participants state that he merely contacted an organisation that works with desisting offenders following a prison sentence and he started to work there and he is currently searching for other jobs.

6. Analysis

In the previous section I have given a short review of the criminal careers of the participants in this study, though as the focus of this thesis is on social cognition I will now turn to a more thorough analysis of these narratives. In this section I seek to make a comparative analysis between these two groups and the social cognitive aspects of how they view their former
criminal careers and substance abuse, their perceptions of the desistance process, and finally how their self-schemas are constructed.

### 6.1. Social Cognition and Criminal Careers

The way that individuals view their past lives is a vital piece in the construction of their self-schemas, and since the focus of this thesis is criminality I will in this section investigate how their past crimes and substance abuse are represented in the participants self-schemas, i.e. how they view their criminal careers as well as the cognitive and emotional motives provided by the participants. It has been argued that (e.g. Maruna 2001) that the way that desisting offenders view their lives and former criminal activity differs significantly from the persistent offenders. According to this view, desisting offenders attribute their past criminal activity or substance abuse to outside sources or environmental influences, it is not part of the self, while on the other hand positive events are attributed to the self, it is they who are responsible for these positive aspects and their stories are high in agency. In the analysis I found that these outside sources were not necessarily environmental influences such as friends but it could also be individual factors such as substance abuse or psychological and psychiatric conditions. Still, the common theme for the participants was that it was something that was beyond their own control that affected their choices and behaviour.

The non-violent offenders showed a remarkable lack of agency, with the exception for the turning point, regarding their past lives; in fact they rarely talked about any positive events in their narratives. For three of the participants their stories only involved one episode of agency, for one participant there were no episodes. Still, there was one participant who was high in agency, for instance regarding his skills as a DJ;

> “Then I played as a house-DJ at one place and wasn’t allowed to play at the other place because it was an competing club but they agreed that it worked. I can play on both because there was no-one who were as good. There was no-one who could play.. If I was at one place, then everyone was there and was I at the other place [then] everyone was there”

The violent offenders were also rather low in agency; four of the participants had only one episode of agency in their narratives with exception to their turning point process. Still, three of the participants showed four to five episodes of agency and a common nominator for these participants was their intelligence and/or the ability to succeed against all odds;
“However, I did rather good in school but I had dyslexia as I’ve told you (JB: Yeah) that. I actually got rid of it by reading books /.../ And then, in this school I had really good grades and I had a teacher in French who also liked me and I had even been in something called the theatre club (JB: Yeah?) and I should be. And that was rather fun, I was to play Molière and that had never happened before in my life. For someone who has dyslexia and be able to play, you know before the pupils and the parents, it was kind of big.”

Still, in their desistance process and in the formation of their new self, most participants’ narratives were high in agency, though I will return to this later; before I do this I will address the issue of how the participants viewed their criminal careers and substance abuse.

Turning to the substance abuse and beginning with the non-violent offenders; as I have shown earlier, friends played an important part in their narratives and thus also for how they view their past lives and their self-schemas (cf. Howard & Renfrow 2003:263, Markus 1977:64). In other words, they explain their substance abuse and criminality by attributing part of the causes to social influences and this also have consequences for how they construct their self-schema in the sense that according to their narratives they are not fully responsible for their past actions but it was other individuals who made them commit their crimes and/or begin their substance abuse. However, there were also other factors besides peers that the participants emphasised in order to explain their substance abuse; for a participant who had suffered from alcohol abuse, alcohol was a way to escape the troubles in his life, mainly the trauma he had experienced in his childhood;

“Because when I was sixteen I came in contact with alcohol for the first time (JB: Yeah, alright) and then I understood like ‘This is my thing. Here I can escape, here I don’t feel any pain, here I do not feel any fear, nothing’ and alcohol is what has driven me and has been my weak spot. The devil inside of me, it has been alcohol in some way”

In another case alcohol was also used by the participant to ”escape” from the troubles in his life, but also to overcome his social anxiety about talking to women, which he claims could be a consequence of growing up without a mother. Both alcohol and narcotics were further used to fill a void he had inside of him, and this void he describes as being the emotional problems he got from growing up with a father with gambling problems. Alcohol and narcotics was for him a way to shut down all these emotions, and to overcome his social anxiety.
These two cases highlight the social influences on the participants’ self-schemas; according to the participants the emotional and psychological problems that they use to explain their substance abuse are actually a consequence of other individuals’ behaviour towards the participants. This means that the cause for their substance abuse is to be found outside the individual rather than being the consequence of solely their own actions, it was someone else who was responsible for their psychological and emotional problems and these problems caused in turn their substance abuse. Further, at times it was the substance abuse that caused, for example, psychological and emotional distress and this in turn led to a “vicious circle”. Nevertheless this was still something that was external from the participant in the sense that it was beyond the participant’s control and it caused the participant to turn to substance abuse;

“Because the more it becomes this vicious circle, the more I’m in the substance abuse and it becomes criminality, and my life like falls apart and the more troublesome feelings I get and anxiety /.../ I need the drugs to really shut down all that fucking shit.. Like I have gathered so much anxiety and so many troublesome feelings so it’s all about to shut down, escape, and numb (JB: Yeah?) and like that. And then it’s like.. Heroin was the ultimate shut-down drug so to speak, it’s like.. (JB: Yeah, okay) Shuts down completely...”

Still, in three cases the substance abuse was not mainly a way to shut down or to escape a troublesome past; in one case the participant started to abuse narcotics due to the feeling he got and he frequently talks about the sexual arousal associated with amphetamine, for another it was a way to both “escape” but also the “satisfaction” she got from the narcotics and she states that her substance abuse was due to chance. Still, even for these participants there were influences of outside sources in the form of antisocial peers in the sense that the participants began their substance abuse either due to group affiliation or that it was someone else who introduced them to narcotics. Many of the participants also referred to their substance abuse as a “disease”, it was not part of their selves but rather something that happened to them.10

Regarding their crimes and other forms of antisocial behaviour, they were in large explained as a consequence of an “outside source” that the participants used in order to construct their self-schemas but also in order to understand and explain their past behaviour, as the case was with the substance abuse. What outside sources the participants used varied both between participants but also within the narratives, ranging from substance abuse and psychological

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10 This could, however, be a result of the treatment programs they had undergone.
factors to social influences such as group affiliation, and at times multiple sources were given;

“But to gain friends, because. This sensation seeking, like belonging to the group and when one found the drugs it was like. So this belonging to the group like, yeah but it gives like an adrenaline rush and at the same time it became more of an economic purpose to be able to steal something one could trade for drugs or fence”

These outside sources could also change over time in the participants’ narratives. An example of this is a participant who had engaged in pyromania in adolescence and the primary motive for him was the rush he got from viewing the firefighters arrive at the scene and he collected newspaper articles of his fires. He explains that his former pyromania could be due to a frustration of growing up without a mother, a social influence, and he also uses social comparisons (cf. Owens 2003:208) in order to explain his behaviour stating that he have understood that “…there are many who become addicts that go through such phase.” As he grew older and became more involved in criminal activity he formed, what he refers to as, a “criminal life-style” and the outside sources changes and are replaced by his substance abuse in the sense that he had to commit crimes in order to finance the substance abuse.

Turning to the violent offenders; none of them gave any elaborative statements of why they began and continued to abuse narcotics and/or alcohol; when they talked about their substance abuse they generally only mentioned it in passing or describing it as something that just happened;

“They were. Like, they were more criminal than I was so I started to distance myself from my family and socialised with them [instead], it became more burglaries and more violence and it became hash and it was beer and it’s LSD and in the end I started to do drugs. As a twelve year old I started to do amphetamine…”

He gives no motives or explanations for why he started to abuse narcotics or why it escalated; the influence of antisocial peers is implicit in the above quote though he does not elaborate on in what way they influenced him and his substance abuse. There were a few exceptions were the participants briefly mentioned their substance abuse as a way to deal with anxiety or that it was a “heavenly experience”, though no-one gave any elaborative explanations. As the substance abuse was not as salient for the violent offenders as it was to the non-violent offenders; this implies that substance abuse was not as important for their self-schemas.

In contrast to the substance abuse, most of the violent offenders gave extremely thorough and elaborative accounts of their violent crimes and the underlying motives, and in some cases
detailed descriptions of these crimes. In contrast with the crimes for the non-violent offenders, the violent offenders both explained the violent crimes with references to outside sources but they also took full responsibility for their crimes or failed to provide any explanations in some cases. There was however a significant difference in the narratives regarding the type of crime; none of the violent offenders provided any detailed accounts of their non-violent crimes. This implies that violent crimes were an important part of their self-schemas whereas the other crimes and substance abuse were not, and I will return to this later in the thesis. Still, when they talked about their non-violent crimes it was often with a reference to an outside source, as the case was with the non-violent offenders. These sources could either be substance abuse, sensation seeking, or social influences; in one case was the participant’s crimes a way to help his father financially and in another case the participant explains his criminal activity with a reference to his ethnicity:

“Like I’m [ethnicity] so I have something else behind me, another type of problem really than many other criminals because I have always been criminal, I was actually raised to be a criminal and that’s a fucking difference”

It could also be that the participants referred to several different outside sources, as the case was for one participant;

“Then it became, when I was released.. Then I fucking had to turn to criminality again in order to get my drugs, I didn’t get any money from the social services or couldn’t manage a job, then it became this criminal…”

However, things are rather different when it comes to the violent crimes for this group. These crimes are explained by the participants at times as a consequence of an outside source, though this outside source took many forms such as ADHD, provocations, family situation, or hatred towards other individuals or society,

“Yes, hatred towards society, towards the system. (JB: Yeah, okay). I had so much hate within me, I wanted.. I was hate, it was the hatred that taught me”

But it was not always explained with reference to an outside source; one participant explains, for instance, his violence with a reference to sensation seeking;

“... this rush I get when I assault a human being (JB: Mm?) it’s like.. I can’t explain it, but it’s like.. I don’t know if you have tried bungee jumping or something like that or how you feel afterwards when you have done something you think is cool, that you can feel like “YEAH!”, a rush. (JB: Adrenaline?) Adrenaline exactly, mixed with
euphoria. And I have searched for that by fighting. I have been a little bit involved in football hooligan circles, skinheads.. I have searched for groups that like to fight”

It could also be emotional, or personal, factors that was externalised. In one case the participant do not make any references to outside sources in some circumstances, though his violence is still not entirely part of his “self” but rather an “outside” influence in the form of anxiety and it is the anxiety that made him resort to violence. Thus rather than social influences on his self-schema, it is an emotional one. He states that when he went to a treatment facility he first believed that he was a psychopath, due to his criminal past, but he was told that he had anxiety problems and he uses this experience to explain his violence;

“So actually I’m a rather sensitive person, anxious and such, and like afraid to do anything wrong, and when you do these crimes that I have done and to do these things towards people, you are raping yourself, and this means that.. Yeah, my anxiety manifests itself on you”

Anxiety is a recurrent theme in his narrative and this implies that it is highly important in the construction of his self-schema and his understanding of his past life.

The participants also used social influences in order to explain their actions, and these influences could be that the participants wished to “become someone”, status, or respect. The references of becoming someone, status, and respect implies an influence of social norms, i.e. the participant’s social representations (cf. Howard & Renfrow 2003:264), on the self-schemas; e.g. norms of what is worth striving for. In these cases it refers to the shared social representations of the “world of criminals” or a criminal thought community. These social representations were not necessarily the same as the culturally defined goals in Merton’s (1938/1998) sense of the concept; with regard to the violent crimes it was rather mainly about a sense of power and respect; “I have never abused alcohol or drugs, I simply abused violence and violence gave me a sense of power, of respect that often wasn’t respect, it was mostly fear.” It could also be that they felt they were forced to use violence as a way to gain respect among the other criminals, “… you must always show your power, if you show that you’re weak then others can walk over you.” This violence could at times become rather severe; one participant assaulted another person for eight hours because there was a rumour that he had been recording conversations on his mobile phone, and “… I didn’t even check the phone but it was more the power, he shall lie down on the floor, he shall be like you know.. It was my thing”. In these examples the participants’ use of social representations in order to explain and understand their behaviour and construct their self-schemas is rather clear; they perceive
that the violence was a way for them to gain or maintain respect and status in their social group. However, in some cases they did not use external circumstances to explain their behaviour or failed to provide any explanations;

"We beat up policemen and yeah, it was.. We would beat up lots of greasers, we had this idea that we didn’t like greasers. [laughing] So yeah, it was, one can say, a hobby we had to beat them up when they walked in the city /.../ Yeah, it really was a strange hobby”

“It was me and some friends that had been on a festival and there we had fought a couple of guys and I had really hit someone. Like really severely. And then I had hit someone else in a small village called [village], I also hit him hard in one place and bit him in the face so he had to get five stitches in the face”

In these two examples violence was not something that the individual tried to explain with reference to any outside sources, even though they mention that they were together with their peers they do not use this as an explanation.

As I have shown, the narratives of the non-violent and the violent offenders differ not only in the crimes they committed but also in how they perceive their former criminal careers and substance abuse. For the non-violent offenders much emphasis is put on their substance abuse and less focus is on their crimes. They explained both their substance abuse and criminal careers with references to outside sources in a large degree. For the violent offenders on the other hand, less focus is put into describing or explaining both substance abuse and non-violent offenses while their violent crimes was a large part of their narratives. In fact, for five of the participants the violence was the main theme in the narratives. The violent offenders explained, in large, their crimes and substance abuse as the consequence of the influence of an outside source though in some cases they did not do this, rather violence was a “hobby” or something that “just happened”.

6.2. The Social Cognitive Aspects of Desistance

The process that led to the final decision to desist from crime and substance abused differed somewhat between all participants, some described it as a form of “moment of clarity” while others described it more in terms of a process. Even though the descriptions of the turning point process differed between the participants there were two common themes for most of
the participants, these were; the influence of other individuals and that their turning points were the result of an ongoing process that began at an earlier stage.

Beginning with the non-violent offenders; for all but one of the participants the process that led to the turning point began at an earlier stage, and this was especially clear in one case. In this case the participant had undergone several treatment programs and she had been able to stay clean from drugs after one treatment, though she states that she was still criminal and she later relapsed into substance abuse. She had several children during the time she was active in her substance abuse and criminality though she lost custody for all but one. The fear of something happening to her children was a major concern for her;

“Of course you would like to be a good parent like this and I believe that this fear, because I was doing drugs during the whole pregnancy. The fear of the child becoming sick or damaged in some way. And yeah, that the society [social services] could come and what they could do made me.. I started to build a façade”

This façade was created by her starting an adult education, she and her boyfriend bought a house and she states that this made it “… easier to live in the illusion that one was like everyone else”. The fear of what might happen to her children is something that she returns to in another stage when she returns home after a visit to a treatment facility and had just given birth to one of her children;

“So it was like a very chaotic and tough time like trying to maintain. Because I was.. I had lost the custody of the other children and I didn’t want to lose this son that we had then. It was a lot of fears”

As it happened, her turning point actually came when her last child had to be delivered prematurely and had to be operated and she describes the moment when she saw him on the stretcher as meeting this “… total fear”. As I have showed, this was not a new fear for her and not the first time she actually had to face her fears since she had lost custody of her other children, though it was the first time one of her children was about to die. She further mentions that the reason for her desistance was also due to feelings of guilt;

“…and that’s what might have made the difference. No, [when] I became free from drugs, then it was much because I had a lot of guilt because of what I have done to my children and particularly [name] who was born with heart problems”

For the other participants the change was not as dramatic though all but one expresses a desire to change prior to the turning point. In one case the participant states that the substance abuse
began to wear him down and as he was well-known among the police and security guards it became harder for him to be out and steal and living his “flashy lifestyle”. As it became increasingly more difficult for him to maintain his criminal activities he started to abuse alcohol rather than narcotics. He had made numerous visits to different treatment facilities, and finally he reached a point of no return; he states that he had taken a number of overdoses and that he felt that the decision to continue or quit was a matter of life and death. He also suffered from low self-esteem and social anxiety and he states that to able to express these emotions in words and to acknowledge them was an important step for him, though he states that he would not have been able to make this change without the help of others. In this case the striving to desist also began at an earlier stage, and although the decision was his social influences played an important part in his narrative. He states that the help of others was crucial to his desistance and the social and emotional support he received and it also had direct effects on his self-schema; by the help of others, in e.g. therapy, he was able to make a self-schematic transformation regarding his social anxiety which was the main cause of his substance abuse.

However, in two cases the participants states that they made the decision to change and succeeded without any previous attempts. Still, in one of these cases the process began at an earlier time. In this case the participant states that he made the decision while in prison due to a feeling that he had had enough and he started to reflect upon his life; “What am I doing? Is this what I want my life to look like? Do I want to come back here? Does it matter? What do I want?”. He also states that he had undergone eleven months of treatment prior to this sentence and he;

“… already had this with treatment within me, like the thinking and the whole NA [narcotics anonymous] and all of this /.../ So I already knew the things that they told me, the thing was that I was not ready receive it then [prior to his sentence]”.

This could be interpreted as that he had internalised, through his previous visits in treatment, the necessary tools for his desistance though he had to reach a realisation by his own in order to be able to make use of these tools; he had the tools to make the necessary changes in his self-schema but he also had to be “ready to receive it” or to use them. In another case, the participant do not state that he made any prior attempts to change however he states that in the process that led him to change his self-schema the cognitive therapy he received in a correctional institution was of outmost importance and he emphasises the importance of a particular therapists who made this change possible and “... she has really turned my life
For the violent offenders, the turning point process took a similar pattern in the sense that it was generally the high point of a process that had begun earlier in their lives, though here the social influences were more salient in their self-schemas; for five of the participants this process was associated with them getting a girlfriend or falling in love. For three of these, this was directly associated with their turning point process while for another his ex-wife provided him with emotional and social support;

“As today I’m grateful for having met her. Had I not met her I would be in prison, or been dead for a long time /.../ My ex-wife [name] has been there for me, she has paid my rent when I have done time [in prison] and visited me even though we are divorced. And it has been shown that she is a true friend. Then she has told me. She has also told me that, ‘Take this as a wake-up call in your head, it’s time to change your life.’ And I think that she really care about me, I’m the father of her two sons”

His turning point would later come when he was awaiting trial in a remand prison and wrote about his life where he realised that he needed to change his life and that he had a responsibility towards his children.

For the other participants having a girlfriend or falling in love had a more direct effect on the self-schemas; in one case the participant stated that before he met his ex-girlfriend he had felt that he had had enough and was burned out due to his criminal activity as well as being constantly arrested and searched by the police. He states that he had a wish to be normal, and this is a further influence of social factors in the form of social representations on his self-schema that is visible in his narrative. Still, it was when he met his ex-girlfriend that things started to change and she gave him the motivation to strive for this “normal life”;

“... I thought about the future as like I will always do this [crime]. But with her, maybe I saw children, maybe I saw family and you know., And this normal life, maybe I got this picture and like, made me want to change myself”

He went to a treatment facility and at first he thought about the other clients as sissies and jerks but after eight months things changed as he got to work on and examine himself, and this led him to change himself. During his time at the treatment facility he got emotional support from his ex-girlfriend further motivating him and facilitating these changes.

In the other cases, the turning point was due to other factors. For one participant the turning point came while awaiting trial in a remand prison and he had a revelation when he heard the
voice of the “Son of God” inside his head. But as with the other offenders, this was not time he had tried to change nor his first spiritual experience.

“Then I prayed to God for the first time. It was the first time I really prayed, I went down on my knees, ‘Lord, if you exist then help me, fuck I promise that I will go to the employment centre.’ You know, [I] promised a lot of things, promised to quit everything. So I only got two years in prison. [I] had an extensive record, lots of violence, so I thought I would get at least six, seven, eight years because he was at the emergency room. He was in hospital for some months this guy. I got two years and I thanked.. I’m grateful for it [the sentence]”

When he came to prison he had a desire to change his life and this lead him to force, together with two friends, the other inmates to stop smuggle in or use narcotics in the prison, and he helped start a parents group. He went to a treatment facility, got a web-master education as well as education as a treatment assistant. He relapsed once again, went to a treatment facility where he met his wife, they relapsed into narcotics and crime again and he was arrested a final time and it was after this incident that he had his final “life-changing revelation”. However, social influences was also important to him and as with the other cases this involved a woman, his wife, and he “… had someone who finally saw me for who I was, that didn’t.. Yeah, but I felt safe directly” and she is also someone he can trust, something he was not able to do earlier due to jealousy.

There were however one participant who do not state that he had made any previous attempts to change prior to his turning point which he had at a treatment facility. He states that during his stay he was able to put his feelings into words as well as that he have made major changes in his values, i.e. social representations, and have become more honest and humble. In this case, the influences of social factors, in the form of therapy, were highly important in the self-schematic changes. However; he also suffers from the physical consequences of his former substance abuse and if he starts to abuse narcotics or alcohol once more he runs the risk of dying.

However, desistance was not always easy for these participants; one participant had been in a fight four months prior to the interview were he assaulted another individual, though he maintain it was justified since the other had started the fight by hitting him in the face and the participant apologised afterwards “...I’m sorry, I overreacted”’. In another case the participant said that desisting was hard since he had to leave many of his old friends, becoming socially isolated, and he was called a wimp and traitor. Several other participants
mentioned problems associated with desistance, mainly issues regarding how to behave “normally”; “There were people everywhere, I feel like, ‘Fuck, what if they do something? What the hell, should I hit people? I don’t know.’ I felt ‘How the fuck should I behave?’”

These results gives some support to the assumption that the turning point process is not the beginning of a cognitive change within the individuals but rather the high point of a process that began at an earlier stage. The results further show that social influences were highly important for the participants in order to make changes in their self-schemas as well as social representations. Until this point I have mentioned the participants’ self-schemas in connection with the desistance process and how they view their former lives but I have not addressed the issue of how the self-schemas are actually represented in the participants and in the next section I will make a more thorough analysis on this subject.

6.3. The Self-Schemas of Desisting Offenders

In contrast to previous research (e.g. Giordano 2002, Maruna 2001, Vaughan 2007) I have, based on the analysis of the results of this study, divided the self-schemas of the participants into three parts; the former self, the true self, and the new self. In this section I will focus on describing more in detail the self-schemas of the participants with a focus on these three types of selves, and compare them between the two groups.

6.3.1. The Former Self

The former self in my definition refers to the person in the narratives that the participant “used to be” and I found that this usually was a part of the self-schema that the individuals sought to distance themselves from. All of the participants expressed the existence of a former self in their narratives, though in some cases it was made more explicit than in others. Considering the non-violent offenders; what constituted this former self varied between the participants, two of the participants referred to “criminal thought patterns” when they talked about their former selves. In another case this former self involved a need of appreciation from other individuals and a fear of doing anything wrong;

“And I had from that problematic childhood. It had created a perfectionistic behaviour. I wasn’t allowed to make any mistakes; if I did a mistake then I got hit, so when I did something I had to do it so good that there could be no consequences”

This need for perfection and a fear of letting people down was ever present in the narrative of
his former self, and he states that he had a belief that if he performed well people would like him. This pursuit for perfection led him to become a famous DJ in his hometown and to succeed in many aspects of his former life. These beliefs were actually so cemented in his former self that when he moved to a new city where he felt like a “nobody” this led to two accounts of attempted suicide. It was also his fear of saying no that led him to commit a number of economic offenses and other acts of antisocial behaviour. He now distances himself from this former self and this pursuit for perfection.

For the other participants this former self could take several forms but one main theme was the wish to become someone, or someone else. The narratives included a number of stories of these former selves, such as “the social anxious individual” who used narcotics and alcohol to overcome this anxiety and later becomes someone within his group of fellow substance abusers; “the energetic thief” to whom his friends came when they needed something stolen, or as in another case “the young dork” who in his search for an identity ends up with the wrong peer group where he comes in contact with drugs and alcohol. These narratives also contained stories of a wish to be “normal” and, as the case was with the female participant, attempts to convey this image to the rest of the world by creating a façade.

In their descriptions of their former selves, two of the participant stated that they did not want to change their lives but rather continue with their substance abuse. In one case this was explained by the participant as the failure of understanding risks and consequences;

“Yeah but this irresponsibility, you don’t have to worry about what you should be but you could think that you could focus on becoming an addict, you should make money by selling drugs and you didn’t understand the meaning of it. (JB: No, alright) It looked.. Didn’t have like consequence or risk analysis but.. It’s a little bit what it looks like when you become a criminal.. You think like ‘That happens to others’, like you are not aware of risks, but it becomes a justification all the time.”

As the participant states that she was not able to understand those factors previously; this suggests that she is now able to do this and thus she differentiates who she is now and the self-schematic change she have undergone by highlighting how she was.

Comparing to the violent offenders one important difference was that the violent offenders gave expression for a former self more than twice as often as the non-violent offenders. As with the non-violent offenders what constituted the former self varied between the violent offenders as well. One important theme for all of the offenders was violence and aggression;
one participant described himself for instance as a former “torpedo” and in another case violence was the only theme for the participant’s former self. This implies that the “violent self” that they used to be is a highly important part for the participants’ self-schema and their former selves. For many of the participants the former self included emotional aspects such feelings of anxiety, fear, and guilt and this led in many cases to violence and substance abuse.

“Previously I was only hateful and aggressive and it was my way. I got mad and pissed off and used violence, it was a way to take away my fears (JB: Yeah?) and then the others got scared instead”

Another participant was plagued with guilt and this was partly due to his relationship with his mother who blamed him for his grandfather’s suicide when he was 4.5 years old and she had told him that she wished he had never been born. During his life he has;

“... always lived with a feeling of guilt for having survived and that no-one wanted to have me so I have always had this death wish, so it led to me to do things that actually were really dangerous but I actually think that I.. I simply wanted to die”

This guilt was also due to his service in the military during which time he had witnessed executions, women and children getting killed, as well as friends die; “... a close friend to me died about thirty centimetres away from me, he got a bullet in his head and to this day I haven’t understood why it wasn’t me who got the bullet.” He developed posttraumatic stress disorder, and due to his feelings of guilt and anxiety he had he tried to commit suicide at one time but “... idiot as I was, I survived [laughing]” and he had thought about committing suicide at several other times.

However, these emotional aspects is not something that the participants distance themselves from at present nor do they state that it is something that they have entirely overcome, rather they have become better to cope with them. Considering that these emotional aspects is something that they also use in order to explain their violent behaviour, this may be interpreted that what constitutes the former self is not the emotional aspects per se but rather their inability to cope with them, something that they are able to do now.

Further, some of the participants also stated that they previously lacked future prospects; one participant stated that he could not see himself getting older than thirty, another said that “I had no future. It was.. The only future was a day at a time...” while others had some hope for the future as one participant who had a dream of becoming a rock star. In contrast with the non-violent offenders, these statements do not make any references to former social
representations. Still for many participants, norms and values were an important part of their former selves, and this often referred to forms of impression management (e.g. Goffman 1959) or to status. An important theme here was respect, which the participants sometimes had confused with fear;

“It has been like that, but that life have been so fucking messy and it’s always been about this false pride and to assert oneself and to find a place and get a name in this. Yeah, that you are violent and that you will strike back if someone gets at you, ‘They’ll have to kill me’, ‘You should not argue with this guy because if you don’t kill him he’ll get you someday’, it’s that. The respect that you see out there, that they call respect, it’s about scaring people really, it’s simply fears”

Another participant thought that he was “cool” as he became known for his violence and that other individuals were afraid of him. Another part of his former self was that he looked down at his former friends who had been able to live normal lives; he felt that they lived poor lives and he distanced himself from them, but at the same time he states that he also felt like a looser. Further, being someone that people could rely on was an important part of his life leading him to become engaged in crimes of which he initially had no interest in. These norms and values could also include thoughts about living a crime free life and one participant said that to work and earn about 13,000-15,000kr a month did not exist in his world.

6.3.2. The True Self

Also part of the “historical” self of the participants is the “true self” which I define here as the core parts of the self-schema; i.e. recurring themes throughout the narratives of the individual whom the participants states he/she “has always been”.

In the narratives of the non-violent offenders this true self often referred to positive characteristics that the participant possessed which had helped them in their turning point process such as being an honest individual who can stand up for past mistakes and face the consequences. An example of this is a participant who frequently claims to be an honest individual and he states that everyone who knows him knows that he stands for what he has done. After being sentenced to prison he gets the opportunity to be released after the trial and begin his sentence at a later stage. Rather than doing this, he actually tells the attorney to ask the court to let him stay in the remand prison and begin to serve his sentence immediately;

“The attorney looked at me, ‘Are you sure? You are the first one to demand to stay in remand’, ‘Yes, because now I’ll take my punishment’, ‘Yes, but you can appeal’, ‘No.
Yes maybe, but no. I’ll take my punishment because now it’s time for me to rethink [my life], now I shall take care of myself.”

For other participants, this true self could be initially “negative” characteristics that the participant turned into “positive” in the sense that these characteristics had helped them in their lives. In one case, for example, the participants frequently characterises himself as an obstinate and anti-authoritarian person, but this is something he claims helped him to desist;

“And I believe that a treatment, it would only have made me push away from it …/ I work against myself because there’s someone else who tries to do something. Like I become naturally, what should I say.. In opposition (JB: Yeah, alright) because there’s someone who tries to pull me in one direction so I want to pull in the other …/ I listen more if it’s me who make the demands rather than if it’s someone else who make demands. It may sound strange but in a way it’s like that”

In other cases, it could be that the participants found new ways to express these initially negative characteristics; for one participant the reason for her substance abuse and criminal career was partly due to sensation seeking and this is something that she now is able to express in a prosocial way by working with desisting offenders.

The true self could further be used by the participants to differentiate themselves from others, and this could involve references to social representations acting as a yardstick which the participant used to make social comparisons;

“I was actually an adult so I had lived, as you say, forty four years normally, so I knew how to behave among people …/ So I was lucky that I wasn’t that young, so I was so mature that I wasn’t destroyed by the drugs …/ There are many who begin already when they are fourteen years old, they begin at an age so they will never mature …/ When they quit, they can never act like normal people”

With regard to the violent offenders, the true selves were less salient; three of the participants only referred to one to three events which could be classified as a true self, and one participant did not mention a single event. Still there were some common themes; three of the participants stated that they saw themselves as rather intelligent; “I have a fucking good reading head, I have noticed. I have.. Things stuck pretty good, I feel.. I feel relatively smart if I say it like that, it’s just that I use it when I want to.” This true self could also be that the participant did not accept being treated unjust, but also that they were honest individuals and this was something they used to, for example, make downward social comparisons;
“Like I have done many treatments and when I walk into a treatment facility I have had this attitude, ‘No drugs, I shall try to do this and if I want to do drugs, then I’ll leave’ but everyone isn’t like that...”

In some cases it was also that the participants, despite their violent crimes, viewed themselves as rather likeable and popular, or that they actually were nice people;

“I didn’t feel good, like I was very, very insecure but I was also really popular actually, both among girls and other boys because I have always been really nice”

6.3.3. The New Self

Finally, the new self could be contrasted with the former self and I define it here as the individual the participants view themselves as now. This new self was also high in agency for all participants; they frequently talk about of personal achievements connected to this new self. All of the participants gave expression for a new self, though the degree to this was done varied between the participants.

Starting off with the non-violent offenders, one participant states that one major difference in his new self, compared to the former self is that he is now able to talk about personal issues with other individuals, something that is also due to a change in his social representations;

“Because what you really like to do, it’s to talk to someone. It’s kind of tough and you feel like a sissy if you feel bad, you might cry and it doesn’t really belong to this world to do that. So you have to re-educate yourself, .../ You can’t show that you’re crying over something, it’s the same thing.. Fuck, it’s like an invitation, ‘I’m weak, come and step on me’”

In another case the participant underwent many treatment programmes while doing time in a correctional institution and of special importance to him was the cognitive therapy through which he learned how to say no and to develop a new sense of self where he is no longer afraid of other individuals’ reactions; he states that when someone is raising his/her voice towards him, rather than feelings of fear, he now confronts the individual and asking him/her “What do you want to convey?”. He further states that another important self-schematic change is that he is now able to ask for help and that he has been able to come to means with the underlying problems of his substance abuse and how to deal with them.

All of the participants in this group were active in organisations working with desisting offenders, something that could be explained by a selection bias. Still, in three of these cases
the ability to help others was a way for them to use what they had learned in order to help others. One participant taught computer skills to individuals who had been released from prison, giving lectures, as well as providing social support and this helped him in return:

“Like I get helped in the way that I can see other people who comes here with their own experiences and other things, and I mean if I help them to a better life it’s beneficial for me emotionally because I feel good when I go home /.../ I believe that it’s. If you do good, you’ll get good [things] in return. It’s as simple as that and it has worked really, really, really well for me since I started thinking that way”

He also says that he would like to provide a chance for his coming child to grow up in a stable environment with love from his/her parents, something that he never had. However, working with helping others may also lead to ambiguous feelings, one participants state that although he is thinking about studying social work or medicine he is not sure if he wants to work with others experiencing substance abuse;

“Now I have abused [narcotics and alcohol] a large part of my life and then when I don’t I shall continue to work with substance abuse but by working with those who.. Like, that my whole life is only about that”

Looking towards the future one of the participant was extremely optimistic, he stated that his life was almost perfect; he had a wife and they were awaiting their first child and was planning to buy a house, he had a job that he enjoyed, a hobby, and he had got in contact with his biological father. The others in this group were less optimistic; one was thinking about getting a university education and another was thinking about staying at her present workplace though she mentioned that she might get an education in accounting, though her main goal was to stay away from narcotics. In one case the participant actually had a rather pessimistic view; “The future doesn’t look to fucking bright right now really. (JB: No?) I need to find a job or start studying, or something. And that fast”.

The violent offenders often gave expression to a new self and they frequently talked about this new self in opposition to their former selves, as one participant stated rather clearly; “Today I’m someone people can count on and trust, I’m not the old [name] that like mess things up, you can’t trust him; he deceives and fights. I’m not that person.”

One important aspect of their new selves was that the participants were now able to do things they were not able to do before; one participant states that he is now able to open up to others and he as found new ways to deal with provocations and that he is disappointed of the way he
used to behave. Still, he states that he will use violence if someone “hits him in the face”, which was the case when he got in a fight four months prior to the interview but he showed delight over the fact that he felt bad over his reaction and apologised afterwards. The realisation that there are other ways to solve problems rather than resorting to violence was something that other participants mentioned as well, though these changes did not always come easily;

“And I have forgiven. I think that’s what has happened in my life; I have forgiven and understood that violence was not a solution. And I try to learn today, both with my language and body language, not to be violent. I try to learn to not use the violence as a solution all the time, that there are other solutions. And it’s very hard because it’s not easy. [laughing] the old me often returns you know”

The new self also involved emotional and psychological aspects, in many cases the narratives involved stories of how they have been able to start to acknowledge and express their feelings; one participant said for instance that one of his major changes is that he is now able to put his feelings in to words, to understand what the words mean, and in what contexts they should be used. Further, two participants had been diagnosed with ADHD and this was a major step in the formation of their new selves since it provided them with an explanation for why they had reacted the way they did in their past lives and it facilitated their desistance process. A third participant suspects that he has ADHD and is currently awaiting his diagnosis, but the realisation that he might have ADHD have made him make significant changes in his behaviour.

Social representations was important for the former selves for the participants in this group, and this goes also for the new self as the participants had internalised new norms and values. For example; one participant talked in length about media and what he saw as problems with their reports on law and crime, and in particular he thought that media focused too much on the failures of the police and that they glorified the criminal life-style and failed to show the true side of crime. He now works, as all the other participants, with helping other individuals to desist from crime by giving lectures and showing the “true side of crime”;

“... there’s a romanticism about criminality that makes a lot of young people drawn to it, but it’s false, it’s romance from the Hollywood movies, it doesn’t exist. What’s romantic when you are sitting in the forest in your underwear in a hole and I’m sitting with a fucking gun ten meters away and is about to shoot you in the head, what’s the romance with that? Is that romanticism? (JB: No) No, that’s right /.../ The
true side is when you get arrested by the police, how it feels to sit down with the police with drawn weapons, when they break you down, when they put handcuffs hard on you. How it feels to sit alone in a six square meter cell and you must call [the guards] to take a shit or smoke. That you are deprived of your liberty, for a time other people decides over your life, you don’t have any power over your own life.”

As with the non-violent offenders, these participants found that helping others was beneficial. Some of them stated that it was a way for them to give to others what they never had when they were young or trying to prevent others ending up in the same place they had been. In some cases the participants stated that it was a way for them to make up for what they had done; “I can’t compensate the society that I have hurt economically, physically, psychologically so I do this as a penance also…” Additionally, many participants stated that their work was also a way for them to “help themselves by helping others”. They further state that what they had been through had strengthened them but also it had given them experiences that enabled them to help others;

“I know how it feels when you’re a child and you’re psychologically and physically abused every day, I know how it feels. I know how it feels to sit in your bed and cry every night hoping that someone would come and adopt you…”

“So I have a lot of experience to describe the feelings that could be similar to [how] mine [were] back then. Then the histories are not the same, but I believe the feelings are. When you can pinpoint the feelings, you can get a damn good contact with the person /…/ I believe that it can be a good start to tell. Yeah, but emotionally how it feels to really get beaten up by someone you think loves you. It’s a horrible experience”

A main concern for some of the participants was their own children, and they wanted them to have the childhood that they never had, ands this included showing them love and to encourage them pursuing their aspirations and dreams.

Looking towards the future, many of the participants mentioned that they wanted to continue to work with offender rehabilitation; one participant even wanted to start his own treatment facility where he could find a use for his experiences. Further, one participant wanted to get a plumber education, another wanted to build houses, a third is trying to realise his dream to become a musician, and finally a fourth want to further expand his contractor business.
7. Discussion

In this study I set out to investigate the process of cognitive self-transformation that previous research have suggested offenders undergo in order to desist from crime. By analysing how the process that led to the participants’ desistance from crime through their narratives I have sought to answer the questions; what are the processes involved in desistance and how can they be understood from a social cognitive perspective, and if there are any differences between non-violent and violent offenders what are these?

Beginning with the processes involved in desistance the current study show that, in accordance with the theoretical assumptions, the turning point experienced by the desisting offenders generally was the high point of a process that began earlier in their lives (e.g. Bless et.al. 2004:68, Howard & Renfrow 2003:271, Maruna 2001:24). There were no identifiable patterns or differences between the two groups of what constituted this turning point; for some participants it was due to a sudden realisation, a moment of clarity, while others described it as a gradual change. Still, for all participants outside sources influenced the narratives and these sources could take a number of forms such as therapy or significant others. Despite these similarities, there were also some differences; for the non-violent offenders change usually came through social influences in form of treatment or therapy, with the exception of the female participant. There were also additional themes in the narratives associated with the turning point process such as being burned-out or feelings of mistrust towards friends, though these were not common themes for the participants. For the violent offenders a common theme for five of the offenders was that they found a partner or fell in love and this had both direct and indirect effects on their desistance; i.e. finding a partner could either give them the motivation to change or provide them with emotional and social support. The reason for why a partner played an important role for the violent offenders and not the non-violent can only be speculated about though it could be that as the violent offenders usually had bad or traumatic childhood memories of their families in a greater extent they are in a greater need of finding security in the form of social relations or significant others, which they did not have as children but this was something these partners came to provide. In fact, some of the participants repeatedly referred to feelings of security when talking about their partners and their influences on the participants’ desistance process. This can be contrasted with the view of Laub and Sampson (2003) who argues that finding partner has a positive effect upon the desistance process due to social control. Further, most of
the participants who had found a partner were not in a relationship at the time of the interviews but they were nonetheless desisting from crime, something the social control perspective cannot explain but it can be understood from a social cognitive perspective. As with the non-violent offenders there were differences within this group regarding other influences on their desistance processes, these included identification with other desisting offenders, being burned-out, physical health, treatment facilities, and having a good job.

The fact that there were many factors influencing the participants narratives of their self-schematic changes associated with their desistance process could be explained by that changes in personality does not come easily, especially when the individuals’ self-schemas are stable or consolidated within the individual (Bless et.al. 2004:68, Cervone & Pervin 2008:496 ff., Howard & Renfrow 2003:271, Markus 1977:64) which can be assumed to be the case if the individual have lived with substance abuse and criminality basically their whole lives. Therefore it could be expected that not only are the changes in personality a long process but also that it requires stronger, or multiple, outside forces for the changes to occur.

Further, the findings of this study show a general support of the assumption that desisting offenders view their former crimes as a consequence of outside sources (e.g. Maruna 2001); both non-violent and violent offenders in general explained their past criminal careers and substance abuse with a reference to an outside source, in the sense that it was something that caused them to engage in crime or substance abuse. These outside sources varied between the participants ranging from substance abuse, family situation and antisocial peers to childhood traumatisation and psychological or emotional problems. There were however some differences between the groups of non-violent and violent offenders. For the violent offenders, less focus was put into explaining their substance abuse and non-violent crimes whereas they put much effort into descriptions of their violent crimes yet they explained these crimes both by attributing it to outside sources but in some cases they either took full responsibility of their crimes or failed to provide any explanations at all.

The use of an outside source as an explanation of criminal behaviour has been argued to be a “technique of neutralisation” that offenders use in order to justify their actions (Sykes & Matza 1957:667). However, it can also be seen as an important tool in desistance as it implies an understanding and acknowledgement of the societal shared social representations, i.e. norms regarding antisocial behaviour. It also helps the individual to view him-/herself as “anyone else” as well as to protect their self-esteem and increase the sense of personal worth and these justifications can greatly facilitate the desistance process. (Maruna 2001:144)
fact, attributing past negative events to outside sources, also known as externalising, is frequently used in narrative therapy as a way to reconstruct individuals’ self-stories and thus also their self-schema (Morgan 2007, Ramsey et al. 2009); e.g. by referring to substance abuse as a disease as some of the participants did. Still, even though the desisting offenders in this study used an outside source in order to explain their past crimes and substance abuse, this was not always the case and it was the violent offenders who failed to do so. The reasons for this can only be hypothesised about, though some answers can be found by looking at how their self-schemas are constructed.

Maruna (2004) have argued that desisting offenders’ narratives tend to be high in personal agency, compared to persistent offenders. In contrast to this hypothesis, in the current study both groups showed low levels of personal agency, with the exception of their desistance process and the new self, though the violent offenders were somewhat higher than the non-violent nevertheless in this group it was only four participants that showed four to five events of personal agency. The reasons for these differences are hard to speculate about, though it could be due to differences in the choice of methodology and theory; I have made a division between three types of selves and these different selves varied in their levels of agency whereas other researchers have not made such a division but rather measured the overall level of agency in the narratives. Further, it could also be due to methodological aspects where the researcher explicitly asks the participants of episodes of agency, something that I have not done. If you ask the participants to tell you stories of agency it is hardly surprising if that is what they do. However, by letting the participants tell the stories freely I argue that it can provide us with an better insight of how the participants’ self-schemas are actually constructed without risking these stories becoming influenced by the researcher and his/her questions. (see e.g. Maruna 2001, 2004)

In the current study I have found that the self-schemas of desisting offenders can be divided into three parts; the former self, the true self, and the new self. The former self often dealt with emotional issues associated with their substance abuse and criminal careers and often this includes feelings of fear and anxiety. The violent offenders make more references to a former self and their stories about their former selves are in general more elaborative than they are for the non-violent offenders. It is important to note that violence and aggression made up a significant part of their former selves. Both groups make references to different norms and values; for the non-violent offenders it was mainly about a wish of being “normal” or “someone” and this was not directly associated with their offenses. The violent offenders
on the other hand used norms and values as a way to explain their past crimes; they often referred to their violent crimes as a way to gain respect.

With regard to the true self, there are some differences between the two groups; the non-violent offenders gave expression to this more often and it was especially salient with regard to the process that led to their final turning point and desistance. For the violent offenders, this true self were not as salient and did not constitute a major or consistent theme in the narratives. For both groups this true self were however mostly concerned with highlighting positive aspects of the participant such as being intelligent, likeable, or that they were honest. Further, they often made downward comparisons to other individuals.

The new self was often high in personal agency as the participants often associated it with personal achievements. For some participants it also involved a change in social representations, or norms and values, and this was particularly true for the violent offenders who frequently sought to distance themselves from their old social representations that they used to explain their violent crimes. Both groups talked about changes in behaviour and also in how they react in certain social situations or towards social stimuli. One difference between the two groups was that the violent offenders emphasised in a larger degree difficulties they experienced regarding their self-schematic changes. Both groups were concerned with helping others either desist from crime or to prevent others to begin a criminal career, though this was much more frequent and salient for the violent offenders and some of the non-violent offenders wanted to do something else with their lives. This could also be due to a selection bias; all participants were active in organisations helping offenders to desist. Still, the desire to help others can be viewed as a way for the new self to further distance itself from the former self; they want to prevent others to end up in the same place they have been, to not become *who they used to be*, or help others desist from crimes, to become *who they are now*.

As the violent offenders do not talk about a true self in the same extent as the non-violent offenders but have a much stronger new self and former self it could be hypothesised that it might be necessary for these to distance themselves in a larger extent from who they used to be since due to the nature of their crimes it is harder to find a “good true self” and thus they are in need to create a whole new sense of self where they distance themselves from who they used to be and the actions of their past lives. This could also help explaining the results regarding how the participants perceived their past crimes; the violent offenders did not always attribute their past actions to an outside source, in contrary to previous research and theory, though this might be understood from the division of the self-schemas and the
emphasis these participants put on distancing themselves from their former selves as their put more emphasis on constructing a new self and thus reduce the importance of the former self and their former actions on their self-schema.

These results show congruence to the study conducted by Giordano et.al. (2002) in the sense that the desisting offenders in this study have undergone a cognitive transformation in which they have formed a “replacement self”, a new self, and they have all changed their attitudes toward their former criminal activity and substance abuse as well as towards antisocial behaviour in general. Further, all participants have experienced certain “hooks for change”, i.e. outside factors that facilitate both the formation of a new self and the desisting process per se. In contrast to this view, but in accordance with Maruna (2001), I have also found that the cognitive self-schematic transformation is not a complete reinterpretation of the self in the sense that the desisting offenders completely abandon their former self in favour of a “replacement self”. Even though the participants construct a new self and that this in large opposed to their former selves in their narratives there are also a part of the self-schema, the true self, that show consistency over time in the narratives in the sense that it refers to a core part of the self-schema that is, from the subjective point of view, unaffected by the cognitive self-schematic transformation that the participants have undergone. Further, the former self is also part of the participants’ self-concept even though they distance themselves from it and this is something that Giordano et.al. (2002) fails to acknowledge.

Due to the sample size used the results cannot be generalised beyond this study. Despite this I argue that these results do establish a reason to question some of the assumptions being made in the previous research, e.g. that there are no such thing as chronic violent offenders (Maruna 2001:13 f., Piquero et.al. 2007), and that the desistance process are the same for all offenders independent of crime (Laub & Sampson 2003:148) or that desistance is only due to changes in social environment (e.g. Catalano et.al. 2005, Farrington 2005b, Laub & Sampson 2003). I also argue that for future research it may prove profitable to further explore the narratives of individuals who are, or have been, involved in crimes and to go beyond the statistical analysis and semi-structured interviews and let the offenders tell their stories as this can provide new perspectives of not only their criminal careers but also the cognitive and emotional aspects of their crimes and substance abuse. Much of the research underlying rehabilitating policies is based on so-called evidence based research and mainly prospective longitudinal research, experimental studies, and meta-analysis (e.g. Nutley & Davies 2000). However, narrative research could provide us with invaluable insights on the question of the three W’s; “…what
works for whom in what circumstances?” (Ibid.:98) since it allows us to understand the processes of change from a cognitive and emotional aspect, i.e. to see what the actual changes are and how they occurred. It may also prove rewarding to further investigate the differences, and similarities, between offenders that have committed different kinds of offenses and whether or not the processes associated with desistance are the same for all, a notion that this study partly questions. It may also be profitable to analyse differences in ethnicities and especially gender differences as female offenders often have been excluded or neglected in criminological research (cf. Collier 1998, e.g. Laub & Sampson 2003, Piquero et.al. 2007), something that the current study is also, unfortunately, guilty of.

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9. References


