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Maintaining Desistance

Barriers and Expectations in Women's Desistance from Crime

Robin Gålnander



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Academic dissertation for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Criminology at Stockholm University to be publicly defended on Friday 30 October 2020 at 13.00 in Digitally, via video conference (Zoom), public link shared at www.criminology.su.se three weeks in advance.

Abstract

Maintaining desistance is about struggling. It is about leaving a destructive and unwanted way of life behind in pursuit of something else, something unknown, something 'normal'. When people who have lived their entire life at the margin of society – in poverty, drug use, criminalisation and condemnation – set out to change their lives, what does that mean? Individual reform is not an easy task for anyone, and perhaps even less so for people involved in criminalised lifestyles. Yet, this is at the core of current understandings in criminology and the criminal justice system. But how do people involved with the criminal justice system go about such reform? And how do individual resources and social structure shape the road to inclusion and 'normality'?

This book is the culmination of a research project covering women's desistance from crime. The overarching question that the research project grapples with is 'What is important in the lives of criminalised women as they set out to change their ways of living and acting?' This broad focus thus includes aspects that may facilitate or hinder desistance; what helps, what impedes, and why?

The results and discussions draw on repeated in-depth interviews with ten women in Sweden. The women had spent the majority of their lives in a position as 'other', segregated and excluded from conventional society. For decades, the women were engaged in criminalised lifestyles circulating around common street crime. At the start of the project, these ten women had just set out on a journey towards a new life, striving to leave crime, drugs, exclusion and condemnation behind. The project's longitudinal design allowed me to take part in the women's desistance journeys, and study the processes involved.

Findings from the project have been published as articles in scientific journals. This book situates these findings, and discusses the implications of the project as a whole: its methodological, empirical and theoretical contributions. Taken together, the results elucidate both expectations and inhibitions associated with desistance; hopes, outlooks, achievements, as well as barriers or hindrances faced along the way. These different findings emphasise the uncertainties involved in 'going straight' or maintaining desistance, in ways that adds nuance to and critically furthers contemporary understandings in the research field and criminal justice practice.

The prospective and exploratory approach of this project thus adds to current knowledge by elucidating experiences of structural barriers, relational uncertainties, personal doubt, hope, and aspirations involved in ongoing desistance processes. Looking forward, it is important for future research and criminal justice practice to acknowledge desistance as complex processes. Desistance journeys are subject to relapse and fraught with emotions, hindrances, setbacks but also hope and aspirations that all must be taken into consideration if society is to understand and better support people attempting such reform.

Keywords: *Women's Desistance, Criminalisation, Longitudinal Research, Qualitative Interviews, Life-Course Criminology.*

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genuine and spot-on feedback on my research ideas and drafts. It is often said that a PhD-journey is a lonely undertaking. You have gone out of your way to counter this. Thank you. I have also had the privilege to present findings and research ideas at conferences around the world, and the international colleagues who attended and offered their feedback left me stoked. Special thanks to the Nordic Research Council for Criminology who, together with my department, made these travels possible.

Cherished friends and family: I love how keenly you have followed my work with this project. Discussing my research with you has clarified the significance of the findings outside the academic bubble. I will end on a more personal note with a final thank you to my Dad, who left us way too soon. You were the cornerstone of my existence. Even your sudden death has taught me so much about life. It chars my heart that you never saw me become a researcher, but I know you would be proud.

LIST OF PUBLISHED ARTICLES

Article I

Gålnander, R. (2019). Being Willing but Not Able: Echoes of Intimate Partner Violence as a Hindrance in Women's Desistance from Crime. *Journal of Developmental and Life-Course Criminology*. Vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 437-460.

Article II

Gålnander, R. (2020). "Shark in the Fish Tank": Secrets and Stigma in Relational Desistance from Crime. *The British Journal of Criminology*. Vol. 60, no. 5, pp. 1302-1319.

Article III

Gålnander, R. (2020). Desistance From Crime – to What? Exploring Future Aspirations and Their Implications for Processes of Desistance. *Feminist Criminology*. Vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 255-277.

CONTENTS

I. Introduction	1
<i>Why Women?</i>	3
<i>What Is Desistance?</i>	7
II. Reviewing Contemporary Understandings of Desistance	9
<i>What is Known about Women's Desistance?</i>	13
III. Conceptualisations of Desistance	21
<i>Criminal Careers or Criminalised Lifestyles?</i>	21
<i>Desistance as Processes</i>	23
<i>Desistance from Crime and Recovery from Drugs</i>	25
IV. Methodology	29
<i>Study Design and Recruitment Procedure</i>	30
<i>The Women</i>	34
<i>The Interviews</i>	36
<i>The Longitudinal Approach</i>	44
<i>Longitudinal Desistance – A Process</i>	49
<i>Method of Analysis</i>	55
V. Echoes, Sharks, and Futures: Summary of the Articles	58
<i>Article I: Being Willing but Not Able</i>	58
<i>Article II: "Shark in the Fish Tank"</i>	60
<i>Article III: Desistance From Crime – to What?</i>	63
VI. Developing Desistance: A Discussion of Contributions	67
VII. Final Words	75
<i>Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning på svenska</i>	78
<i>References</i>	86
<i>Appendix</i>	98

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

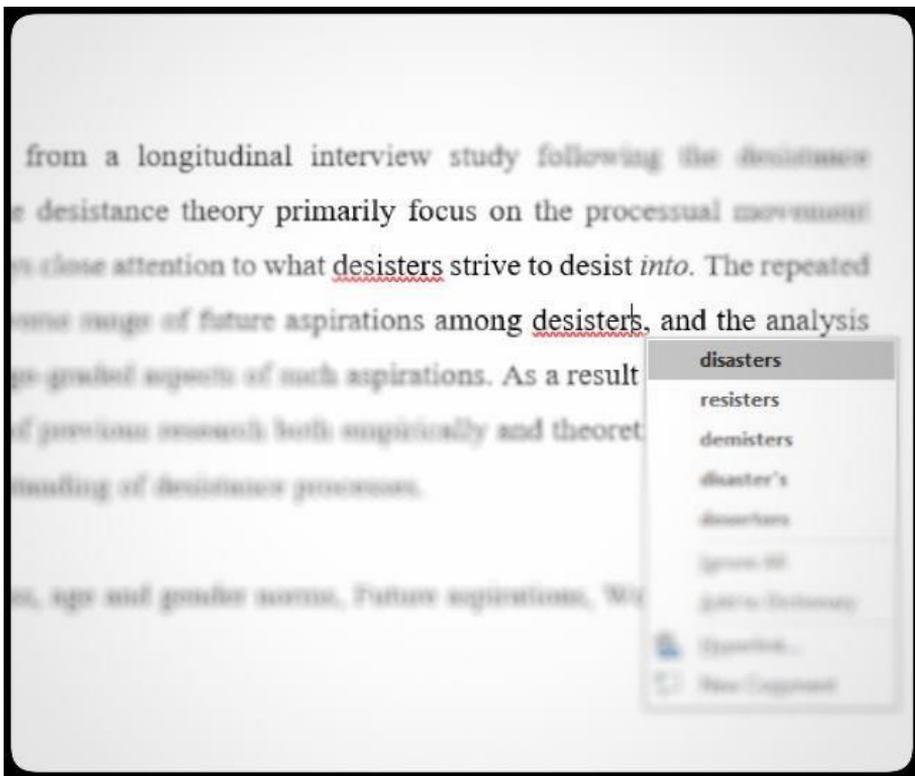


Figure 1: Desisters or disasters?

Figure 1 introduces this book with a screen shot of what is, to me, a familiar sight. Generally, linguistic assistance in word processing programs is helpful. Figure 1, however, presents an example of unhelpful assistance. The program does not acknowledge 'desisters' as a word describing people

who are in the process of desistance from crime (a theoretical concept that will be critically (re)viewed and carefully defined later in this book). Instead, it suggests ‘disasters’, which serves as an effective yet brutal commentary on what is at stake in the social processes this book addresses.

This book is the culmination of a research project covering women’s desistance from crime. The results and discussions draw on repeated in-depth interviews with ten women in Sweden. At the start of the project, these ten women had just set out on a journey towards a new life, striving to leave crime, drugs, exclusion and condemnation behind. Imagine reinventing yourself. Where would you start? What would you aspire to achieve? Now imagine that you were broke, or locked up. Individual reform is not an easy task for anyone, and even less so for people involved in criminalised lifestyles. Yet, this is at the core of current understandings in criminology and the criminal justice system (see e.g. Giordano Cernkovich & Rudolf 2002; Maruna 2001). How do people involved with the criminal justice system go about reform and reinvention? The longitudinal design of this research project enabled an approach where I could follow the lives of ten women for two years, from the first steps of their desistance journeys.

Meeting the same ten women for repeated interviews allowed me to take part in the women’s desistance journeys, and study the processes involved. Findings from the project have been published as articles in scientific journals. This book situates these findings, and discusses the implications of the project as a whole: its methodological, empirical and theoretical contributions. Taken together, the results of this project elucidate both expectations and inhibitions associated with desistance; hopes, outlooks, achievements, as well as barriers or hindrances faced along the way. The purpose of this book is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how and why people desist from crime. The overarching question that the research project grapples with is ‘What is important in the lives of criminalised women as they set out to change their ways of living and acting?’ This broad approach thus includes aspects that may facilitate or impede their desistance; what helps them, what hinders them, and why?

Before I go into more detail regarding how I conducted the study and what can be learned from it, this introductory chapter deals with a couple

of key questions. These are questions that I consider fundamental for situating this piece of research and its contribution to present knowledge of why and how people cease and desist from criminalised acts. Such questions include what the concept of ‘desistance’ entails and how it is defined in the present study, and why I have chosen to interview women specifically – given criminology’s overwhelming focus on men and their criminalised acts. I then move on to review the theoretical understandings of desistance to date, further situating the contribution of this particular piece. In the third chapter, I grapple more closely with a selection of key issues in contemporary conceptualisations of desistance. Chiefly, I address (i) the concept of ‘criminal careers’ or ‘criminalised lifestyles’, (ii) the understanding of desistance as processual, and (iii) how drug use factors into desistance research. Then follows a rigorous discussion of the project’s methodological considerations including study design, a description of the women and how I recruited them, as well as a discussion of interview procedure. Subsequently, I briefly summarise the articles that have resulted from this research project. Finally, the two concluding chapters deal with the specific contributions of this project, highlighting its potential to develop current knowledge and future research on desistance from crime, as well as criminal justice practice.

Why Women?

The ‘elevator pitch’ I have used to describe my research project, its aims, and its scope, reads along these lines:

I meet and interview ten women who have lived their entire lives at the margin, excluded from society and in ‘deviant’ lifestyles that entail a lot of drug use and other crime. Right now, they are striving to change their lives around, and I get to follow them in this process, to see what helps – and hinders – their efforts.

Throughout the five years that I have conducted my research, this pitch has generally been met with curiosity, appreciation and support. However, among the critics, this pitch has repeatedly (both at conferences and in less formal settings) faced one question in particular: ‘Why women?’ This puzzled me at first, and my spontaneous response ‘why ever not?’ did not quite suffice as an answer in academia.

Of course, there are several justifications of why one would dedicate a research project to the study of women's desistance from crime. Perhaps the first has to do with the state of desistance research, since it is significantly gender biased towards men's life histories and experiences. While many of the research projects that have been greatly influential to desistance theory have included men and women in their samples, the focus has been on men's stories, leaving women's experiences sidelined in analyses and thereby also theoretical development (see e.g. Carlsson 2014; Farrall & Calverley 2006; Maruna 2001; see also Barr 2019 for a recent overview). The practise of sidelining women's experiences and prioritising men in desistance research could be seen as a continuation of women's absence in criminological research more generally (Barr 2019; Gelsthorpe & Morris 1988; Heidensohn 1985; Heidensohn & Silvestri 2004; Stanko 1998).

The historical neglect of women in criminology has also resulted in single-gender samples across some of life-course criminology's most influential research projects (such as the Cambridge Study in Delinquent Development or the Glueck Data). Furthermore, centring men in contemporary life-course criminology could be a response to Laub & Sampson's (2001:10) call for research that studies the criminal career "among those who reach some reasonable threshold of frequent and serious offending". As the vast majority of criminalised acts are carried out by men, this could justify an empirical focus on men in 'criminal careers' (Chesney-Lind & Pasco 2013; see e.g. Carlsson 2014:58 for a recent Swedish example of this approach). While the understanding of men's criminality is often in line with legalistic definitions, criminology and the criminal justice system has treated 'the female offender' as a different social problem traversing socially unwanted acts that not always qualify as crime in a legal sense. For example, women's sexuality outside of matrimony and motherhood has been conflated with deviance and criminalisation in a way that is not the case for (heterosexual) men (Broidy & Cauffman 2017). There is thus a strong tradition within life-course criminology to view men as the 'real' criminals, which is in itself telling of the view of normality and deviance (Heidensohn 1989), and how the effects of this view still influence research designs and focus within life-course research to date.

Two main issues emerge from the question ‘why women’. First, it expresses scepticism of what women’s experiences could contribute to the overall knowledge of desistance processes. This is primarily a question of generalisability, and refers to how women’s experiences are seen as gender specific while men’s experiences are thought of as the genderless norm (Miller 2014). Secondly, ‘why women’ implies questioning why women’s experiences would matter at all, seeing as how women offenders are so few in numbers. Women are marginalised in the criminal justice system, but they do exist and their experiences matter – to them and to society at large (see Barr 2019). In fact, recent decades have seen a net-widening effect causing significant changes in the way women’s crimes are defined and dealt with both in Sweden and internationally (Chesney-Lind & Pasco 2013; Estrada, Bäckman & Nilsson 2016).

Having read fascinating and inspiring results from desistance research on men’s stories and experiences, I wanted to hear women’s stories and experiences of desistance. Hence, I designed this research project to bring women’s experiences of desistance from crime to light, and to bridge a potential knowledge gap. In recent years, several others have identified a similar need, and important contributions to the understanding of women’s desistance has been produced (see e.g. Barr 2019; Leverentz 2014; Rodermond et al. 2016; Österman 2018). I hope that this book will further this development in desistance research, and contribute to a deepened understanding of desistance processes as a whole.

Among feminist research on women’s experiences of desistance, there is a notable tendency to argue for the inclusion of women’s stories in order to *give voice* to women, who are not heard in the debate (Sharpe 2017; see also Barr 2019; Österman 2018). While I agree that women’s voices and experiences must be heard when debating crime, ‘criminal careers’ and the criminal justice system’s reaction to socially unwanted actions, I am less inclined to think of my research as an opportunity to give women a voice. The women interviewed in this research project were not lacking their voices. What they were painfully aware of, however, was that their voices were rarely heard. Norah presented a good example of this at our second interview:

Norah: People don’t get it. We need more... I mean knowledge [R: Yeah]. People need more information, more knowledge of the

system. How it works, and how people work [R: Yes]. Cause I mean, people don't get it. They're like "Pull yourself together and get a job" [R: Right] But if it was that simple, you would have done it already. I mean people don't give up their kids (to the social services) because it's easy, you know?

This quote expresses frustration stemming from not being heard, and repeatedly being told that one's experiences do not count. Nina presented another good example:

Nina: *I really wanna keep doing this thing with you (meeting me for interviews) [R: Yeah?] Yes. 'Cause I want this to break through. People in general have no knowledge about this. It's hushed and it's awkward, so you get silent and awkward, talking about these things. [R: Right] And these are experiences that not everyone has, you know? [R: Oh yes, definitely] So it's important to reach out, that it's brought to light, how this works. What works. 'Cause if you don't know that, then you can't change anything either.*

This eagerness to reach out was shared by several of the women. For some, however, repeated experiences of being hushed and met with prejudice or even punishment when speaking of their experiences had led to abandoning any attempts to speak up. Maia offered a clear example of this. Coming back from a cigarette break during our first interview, she interrupted my getting us back to where we had left off, to state something important to her:

Maia: *I just tell you things. Things I've never told anyone. And without fixing or leaving stuff out. And... It just hit me now I mean, how easy it was to talk with you. 'Cause you're not judgmental. So I just tell you. 'Cause when I've sought help before, I've felt so strongly that I need to be on my guard. Guard what to say or not. 'Cause they don't understand. But here I've just told you... without consequences. There'll be no diagnosis, there'll be no... you know? [R: Right, yes]. And that's so different. [...] What a relief! [...] Damn, I mean I just feel so (breaths out) Yeah no, damn it feels so good!*

Following these quotes, this book is not about "giving voice" to women desisters. They already had a voice before I met them. This book is about their experiences, and about listening to what they have to say. The project

has been guided by an exploratory approach to knowledge production, where I have entered the interviews with openness and sought to understand the women's experiences. Of course, my understanding is informed by my readings of contemporary developments in desistance research, but the interviews have also been guided by what the women have pointed out to be important aspects of their lives. This research was inspired by Holstein & Gubrium's (1995) 'active approach' to qualitative interviewing. The active approach entails activating both the researcher and the interview participant in the knowledge production of the interview. While the methods chapter will discuss this approach further – what it meant for the project as well as the women – it is worth noting already here that the approach thus enables active listening.

Hence, at the heart of the interviews were the women's experiences of desistance from crime. This book manifests that actively listening to women's experiences of desistance from crime can be beneficial for theoretical advancement and research on processes of desistance, and for practical advancements in the criminal justice system and societal efforts to support women's desistance. Listening to the women who are the subjects of this research project allows for a deepened understanding of the often difficult and largely uncharted pathways out of a life of criminalisation, punishment and marginalisation. Before reviewing how I went about following the ten women's desistance processes in detail, the next chapter will put 'desistance' under scrutiny.

What Is Desistance?

The meaning of the term 'desistance' has been widely debated. Two main approaches to understanding desistance from crime has divided the literature, where desistance can be conceptualised as either processes by which individuals transform from offenders to non-offenders, or as more clear-cut events of termination of criminalised activity (Halsey & Deegan 2015; Rodermond, et al. 2016). The interpretation of desistance as an event has been criticised for oversimplifying a complex phenomenon, and a major problem attached to this view of desistance is to determine when an individual actually has terminated the criminalised activity. Temporary breaks in offending understood as 'intermittent desistance' are very common, which problematises the view of desistance as a clear-cut event (Carlsson 2013; Halsey & Deegan 2015). Therefore, desistance is

increasingly seen as processual, thus allowing the complexity of the phenomenon to be developed and understood (Broidy & Cauffman 2017). This is especially the case in qualitative desistance research, which is largely concerned with how individuals reform, reshape and make sense of their lives and senses of self in search of change and ‘normalcy’ (see e.g. Giordano et al. 2002; Maruna 2001; Stone 2005).

A recent review of desistance research identified a research-policy divide, meaning that while viewing desistance as a process has become dominating in theoretical development, policy development oftentimes rely on a more event-based view (Bersani & Doherty 2018). To ‘cease and desist’ an activity is to stop doing it (to cease) and refrain from repeating it again (to desist). As such, a distinct point of termination of criminalised acts still holds relevance within theory and practice, but should be viewed within desistance processes (Bersani & Doherty 2018; McNeill & Maruna 2007). As McNeill and Maruna (2007) point out, much like the colloquial term ‘going straight’, contemporary understandings of desistance from crime elucidate the *going* – the procedural movement of change. This research project deals specifically with this process of *going* straight, or maintaining desistance.

CHAPTER II

REVIEWING CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDINGS OF DESISTANCE

Situated within life-course criminology, desistance research was given a lower priority for a long time, compared to research on onset and continuation of criminalised actions (Laub & Sampson 2001). As manifested in a number of systematic reviews of contemporary studies in desistance (e.g. Bersani & Doherty 2018; Rocque & Slivken 2019; Rodermond et al. 2016), desistance research is now a prevalent theme in criminology. This chapter discusses what can be learned from this multitude of research, and what explanations to why and how people engaged in criminalised lifestyles stop their offending this study builds on to develop further.

One important point of departure for theorising desistance is the famous age-crime curve, i.e. the empirical find that crime on an aggregated level is concentrated to a specific age group: people in their late teens (see e.g. McNeill & Maruna 2007; Sivertsson 2018). Consistent with this finding, analyses of individual offending trajectories reveal a similar pattern, where crime (often measured as registered criminal offences) peaks in late adolescence and declines with age (Bersani & Doherty 2018; Sivertsson 2018). However, it is important to acknowledge that there is heterogeneity in the magnitude and duration of these trajectories over the life course (see Sivertsson 2018). While the vast majority of people account for none or a few convictions (most often occurring in late adolescence), a small group of individuals persist in their offending over time, and account for the majority of convictions in a cohort. The same pattern is found among men

and women, in Sweden and internationally (see Sivertsson 2018 for Swedish longitudinal conviction data).

Nevertheless, eventual desistance from crime is the norm, even among individuals who have been labelled as prolific and persistent offenders (Bersani & Doherty 2018). Research has overwhelmingly established that most people who engage in crime and develop what has been termed ‘criminal careers’ do desist (see e.g. Farrington 1997; Laub & Sampson 2003; Tham & von Hofer 2009). Hence, people are very likely to desist from crime, but as this is unlikely to be caused by aging in itself, the questions of how and why people desist remain.

Here, too, the desistance literature offers several and sometimes conflicting perspectives. These different views can be distinguished by whether they focus primarily on structural or subjective catalysts of change. This distinction stems from a classic sociological debate (see e.g. Baltes & Nesselroade 1984; Dannefer 1984; Hitlin & Elder 2007). Within desistance research, the same division has also been referred to as structure and agency, external and internal, or social and subjective (Bersani & Doherty 2018; Farrall et al. 2014; Kazemian & Maruna 2009; LeBel et al. 2008). Following this distinction, structural theories emphasise how historical, institutional and cultural forces influence the individual’s life-course. According to this view, social context shapes an individual’s capacity for action, and at the extreme, this view can conceptualise individuals as passive or as being determined by social context. Subjective theories on the other hand centre intent and agency within individual actors as the driving force for change. Agency is thus a key concept in desistance research, but the definition of the term is still somewhat vague (Carlsson 2014; King 2014). Agency can be understood as “attempts to exert influence to shape one’s life trajectory” (Hitlin & Elder 2007:183). When the subjective view is taken to the extreme, structural forces are dismissed and individuals are seen as ‘super-agents’ who construct their lives according to their own actions (Bersani & Doherty 2018; Farrall & Bowling 1999).

On the structural end of this continuum, some theories suggest that crime in fact declines naturally with age, and that such spontaneous desistance is a change in behaviour that cannot be explained, as it occurs regardless of

what else happens (see Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990). This theoretical view thus dismisses social, subjective, and psychological factors, as desistance results from the “inexorable aging of the organism” (Gottfredson & Hirschi 1990:141). Others have sought to ‘unpack’ the meaning of age and potential driving forces behind the seemingly normative desistance from crime. Paternoster & Bushway (2009), who emphasise the role of individual agency in desistance, offer a prominent example from the subjective end of the continuum. Here, desistance from crime is conceptualised as a choice, and this choice is what drives the desistance process as “offenders *first decide to change*” (Paternoster & Bushway 2009:1106, emphasis in original). Furthermore, in what could be viewed as arguing that desistance should be conceptualised as normative and reasonable, they highlight how “maintaining commitment to a criminal identity” seems very difficult, and “relinquishing it very easy, since by many measures it appears to be a very Hobbesian life – an existence that is ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short’” (Paternoster & Bushway 2009:1122).

Most contemporary desistance theories consider both subjective and structural catalysts for change, at least to some extent. Individuals are commonly considered as capable actors constructing the trajectories of their lives, but their actions are carried out within the bounds of their social circumstances (Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson & Crosnoe 2003). Research has shown subjective factors such as agency or confidence in one’s ability to change to be necessary, but perhaps not sufficient, conditions for individuals’ abilities to desist from crime (Burnett & Maruna 2004; LeBel, Burnett, Maruna & Bushway 2008). Drawing on this, agency is used throughout this project as a term for conscious actions taken to influence the life course. As such, when the women in this project are described as ‘striving towards desistance from crime’, it means that they continuously took conscious action in order to change their lives, desist from crime and approach mainstream society. Agency in desistance is thus dependent upon a will to change. However, the actual ability to change is also dependent upon economic, social and material resources available to the individual (Nilsson, Bäckman & Estrada 2013).

Structural forces, such as economic systems, social values, and society’s concept of crime greatly influence the life-course, including desistance

from crime (Farrall, Sharpe, Hunter & Calverley 2011). As criminalised women strive to desist from crime and to be accepted in mainstream society as ‘normal’ women, this process entails reconstructing or reshaping their identities (see Fredriksson & Gålnander 2020; Giordano et al. 2002; Maruna 2001). This process entails relating to and positioning the self within capitalism and patriarchy as well as class-, age- ethnicity-, and functionality based systems of oppression (de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005; Lander 2015; Mattsson 2014). Such power relations direct the choices available, i.e. what kind of identities are possible to create. Individual resources are thus largely dependent on social position, which in turn is regulated by an intersecting web of norms.

The lives of people in the contemporary western world is guided or regulated by class- and age-graded gender norms that inform the conception of what is appropriate behaviour. These norms can be understood as framing a normative life script, entailing a socially constructed conception of a ‘normal’ way of living and ageing. Life scripts thus offer normative guidelines for how life should be lived, constituting ordering principles for human existence and action viewed as linear, and focused on the future and progression. Such life scripts are built on middle-class ideals of respectability and normality, and among the most prominent ordering principles are the concepts of a career, heterosexual monogamy, and family formation, which should be pursued and achieved at the right time in life (Carlsson 2014; Elder et al. 2003; Halberstam 2005; Lander 2015). Following the normative life script means leading a normal life, whereas deviation from the script comes with social costs, including stigma, guilt and shame, as well as economic and material sanctions (Carlsson 2014). As such, agentic pursuits of normality are guided by life scripts that proclaim chrononormative maturation (Freeman 2010).

Utilising this conception of classed and gendered age-norms and their importance for definitions of normality and deviance has the potential to further the theoretical understanding of desistance as normative behaviour. Within this frame, desistance can be understood as a normative conception, i.e. as something people are expected to strive for and in the end accomplish (Lander 2015; see also Laub & Sampson 2001). As criminalised actions are conceptualised as deviations from the norm, individuals are supposed to want to desist in accordance with a general

striving for normality. Hence, desistance is normative, but awareness of the importance of normality, as well as the norms separating normality from deviance, has yet to rise to the fore of the theoretical understanding of desistance processes.

What is Known about Women's Desistance?

Desistance literature has widely prioritised the question of 'what works'. More specifically, a lot of research has been undertaken to investigate certain mechanisms that have proven helpful in individuals' struggles to change their lives from convictions to conventionality. What can be drawn from such research to understand women's desistance processes specifically has been critically discussed in a systematic review (Rodermond et al. 2016) that is now a standard reference among studies of women's desistance. The review covers both quantitative and qualitative research. Most of the qualitative studies included in the review were focused exclusively on women, whereas the quantitative studies that included women also featured men in their samples.

Addressing mechanisms that have been established as facilitators of desistance in research on men, research shows that relationships to a romantic partner (married or not) can facilitate women's desistance as well (Rodermond et al. 2016). However, the review stresses the importance of studying the specific circumstances of such relationships to gain a fuller understanding of the influence of romantic relationships on women's desistance. For example, living in a cohabitational relationship with a drug-using partner can come with increased social control, which may reduce a woman's officially registered convictions. This would in turn signal desistance in quantitative studies. However, violence against women is very common in the drug scene (See article I; see also Gray et al. 2016; Holmberg et al. 2005). Isolation and control are common features of these relationships, and it follows that women can decrease their official offending and still drift further away from conventional society at the same time. Hence, the social control of cohabitational relationships that has been highlighted as conforming in research on men can have a vastly different meaning for women in criminalised lifestyles (cf. DiPietro, Doherty & Bersani 2018; Laub, Nagin & Sampson 1998; Leverentz 2006). Furthermore, this actualises the question of what is actually measured in

desistance research, which will be further discussed in the section *criminal careers or criminalised lifestyles* below.

Research has shown that women's own opinions on their relationship can be crucial to understand when and how relationships work in desistance, as levels of happiness in a relationship have shown positive effects on women's desistance (Rodermond et al. 2016). In a similar way, obtaining employment has proved a prominent facilitator of men's desistance, yet surrounding circumstances moderate employment effects for women. Leaning on Cobbina (2009), Rodermond et al. (2016) argues that this moderate employment effect for women might be due to the fact that for desisting women with a history of illicit drug use and other crime, employment is only available in low-level positions on the labour market. Previously convicted men are unattractive on the labour market, and because of structural gender-based discrimination, women desisters might be even more so (see also Lander 2003; Maher 1997).

Moreover, the quantitative studies in Rodermond et al's (2016) review indicate that education, mental health, family formation, and economic independence have an effect on desistance (see e.g. Benda 2005; Huebner, DeJong & Cobbina 2010; Uggen & Kruttschnitt 1998). The qualitative interview studies largely support these findings, adding detailed insights into the 'how and why' such mechanisms work for women's desistance (see e.g. Cobbina 2010; McIvor, Trotter & Sheehan 2009). An example of this methodological synergy is offered by the gathered understanding of motherhood as a potential facilitator for desistance. Within the research on women's desistance, there is an overweight of research on the effect of children and motherhood on desistance (see Rodermond et al. 2016). Quantitative research indicates that motherhood has some effect on desistance for women. This claim is nuanced and even problematised by qualitative studies. Such research points out that while motherhood can serve as a motivation to remain crime-free and thus maintain desistance, interviews also highlight how stress and expectations (their own as well as others') related to motherhood can sometimes enhance the struggles involved in maintaining desistance, causing women to relapse into drug use and other crime. Such stress was often brought about or escalated by financial issues (Rodermond et al. 2016).

So far, reviewing the desistance literature has highlighted the importance of paying attention to surrounding circumstances when assessing mechanisms important for women's desistance from crime. Life-course criminology is concerned with lives. This research project is a manifestation of that. Following this, the repeated interviews captured much more than 'just' the women's attempts at desistance. Therefore, this project has been influenced by ethnographic studies of women in criminalised lifestyles more broadly. The next segment will critically review some insights from such studies, and discuss how desistance research can build on this knowledge.

Ethnographies on Women's Criminalised Lifestyles

Among the most influential studies on criminalised women and their lives are ethnographical dissertations, wholly focused on women. In particular, Lander (2003), Maher (1997), Rosenbaum (1981), and Taylor (1993) have all greatly improved our knowledge of the living situations for criminalised women. Although none of these works explicitly addresses processes of desistance, their findings have implications for research in this area as well. The focal concern for these ethnographies is the ubiquitous influence of criminalised drug use on the women's lives. In that respect they differ from the mechanism-oriented studies discussed above, with their focus on (officially registered) non-drug crime. Even though the contexts that have formed the women's lives differ in time and space across the ethnographic studies¹, drug use is the main theme shared in the women's life histories.

Striving to live up to normative ideals of femininity with its focus on respectability, purity and selflessness, drug use presents the biggest issue in the women's perceptions of self. Comparing themselves to 'good' or 'normal' women serves to emphasise the ways their lives deviate from the norm. 'Good' women do not use drugs, and in a world of narrowing opportunities, the available ways to present oneself in a better light are

¹ Rosenbaum's (1981) study covers 100 women in the streets of San Francisco Bay (95) and New York City (5) at the end of the 1970's, Taylor (1993) and Maher (1997) were active in the 1990's, conducting repeated interviews with 26 women in Glasgow and 45 women in Brooklyn, respectively. Lander's (2003) study followed the lives of eight women in Stockholm between 1997-1999, with a follow-up 13 years later (Lander 2018).

getting more and more restricted as the *deviant* lifestyle progresses (Lander 2003; Maher 1997; Rosenbaum 1981; Taylor 1993).

This dilemma illustrates one of feminist criminology's most important findings: that criminalised women suffer from 'double deviance' as they break the rule of law as well as heteronormative gender conceptions of femininity, proclaiming women respectable and morally exemplary (King 2013; Lander 2015; Leverentz 2014; Stone 2015). This double deviance can thus result in decreased opportunities for action as well as further negative effects from stigma, guilt, and shame, presenting insurmountable barriers to women's desistance journeys.

Many aspects of how these ethnographies paint women's lives resonate with narratives from the women in this project. Thus, much can be drawn from such research in order to develop the understanding of the women's desistance processes. One important theme concerns narratives on marriage as a normative dream. Living with men can present a seductive way for women to present themselves as feminine, normal and good within the dominating heteronormative and monogamous gender-frame (Rosenbaum 1981). Much in line with the mechanism-oriented studies above, the ethnographies problematise the understanding of marriage as facilitating desistance (as suggested by research conducted on men, see e.g. Laub, et al. 1998). Quite to the contrary, the ethnographic studies show how criminalised women living with criminalised men suffer repeated battering and exploitation from such partners. Instead of presenting a pathway to a better life, such situations instead limit opportunities for action, locking the women in a drug spiral as they often react to such misery by escalating their drug use to numb or distance themselves from despair (Lander 2003; Maher 1997; Rosenbaum 1981; Taylor 1993).

Another important contribution drawn from these ethnographies is how motherhood can work as a strong motivational force due to its implications for perceptions of what a 'good woman' is (Lander 2003; Rosenbaum 1981; Taylor 1993). Becoming a mother can, like marriage, be understood as a normative dream, presenting one of few available ways for criminalised women to pass as feminine and *normal*. On the other hand, motherhood comes with many risks for these women. To fail at motherhood, and risk being perceived as a 'bad mother', can in many ways

be worse for women's gender projects than to fail in other aspects of life (Byrne & Trew 2008). Similarly, losing custody of children has been conceptualised as the ultimate feared future prospect among criminalised mothers (Sharpe 2015). The women in both Maher's (1997) and Taylor's (1993) studies additionally had to relate to the then much debated discourse on 'crack babies', i.e. the view of women drug users as selfish, unable to care for others and therefore as unfit mothers (see also Lander 2003). Within a contemporary American context, the same moral-panic mechanism is present in the discourse on 'meth-moms' (Stone 2015).

Thus, motherhood, much like heterosexual monogamy, can present both opportunities and risks for women striving for desistance and normalcy. Normative dreams of marriage and family formation can pull women towards a will to change their lives, thereby working as facilitating mechanisms in desistance. At the same time, motherhood puts criminalised women under severe scrutiny. Increased stigma and social control from authorities, family, friends and the general public can, together with financial stress, limit criminalised mothers' abilities to pass as normal. Additionally, motherhood's heightened stakes and expectations can increase stress and be perceived as simply too hard for the women to live up to. If such pressures prove impossible to cope with, criminalised mothers may relapse back into drug use and other crime (Halsey et al. 2017; Rodermond et al. 2016). Following the discussion above, this is a good example of how agency and structure both shape women's will and ability to desist from crime.

By emphasising the importance of substance (ab)use, together with the awareness of how constructs of normality and deviance shape women's lifestyles, the understanding of processes of desistance might be further developed. Altogether, this review of previous research emphasises the impact of gender norms on our lives and life choices. The ethnographic studies also underscore the importance of an intersectional approach to better understand (women's) lives as they unfold. An intersectional approach can be defined as an analytical ambition to explore social structural constructs like gender, age, sexuality, class, functionality and race as complex and interlocking categories of power and oppression. Life courses are complex phenomena, and our opportunities for action (e.g. desistance) are constructed, enabled and limited by such intersecting

power relations (Elder et al. 2003; Halsey & Deegan 2015; Lander 2015; Maher 1997; Rodermond et al. 2016; Rosenbaum 1981; Taylor 1993). Utilising an intersectional approach enables studying the links between desistance from crime and how an individual's social position is constructed by and enmeshed in a social structure (cf. de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005; Elder et al. 2003; Mattsson 2014). In effect, this can bridge the classic sociological debate on structure and agency.

Recent Research on Women's Desistance

This research project builds on findings from ethnographies by following the lives of women striving towards desistance from crime. In recent years, other feminist research with a similar ambition has produced important contributions to the understanding of women's desistance processes (see e.g. Barr 2019; Leverentz 2014; Sharpe 2015/2016/2017; Österman 2018). These studies capture how women's desistance narratives shape and are shaped by interactions with individuals and institutions. As such, their findings contribute not only to the understanding of women's desistance, but also of how contemporary society constructs gender, class, notions of (women's) criminality, and convicted people's place in society (Barr 2019; Leverentz 2014; Sharpe 2015; Österman 2018).

As an illuminating example, research has shown how women desisters make sense of their selves and their desistance journeys through a certain logic obtained by their participation in twelve-step rehabilitation programmes (Leverentz 2014). Twelve-step programmes involve a self-help approach that is very popular throughout contemporary western societies including the USA, UK, and Sweden. These approaches are politically appealing because they fit the prevailing neoliberal agenda focused on individualistic narratives, and because they are inexpensive (Helmersson Bergmark 1995). Twelve-step narratives impel criminalised individuals to take responsibility for their actions, and to never stop working towards normalcy. However, criminalised women (and men) “do not live in the same world of the professional white male founders of Alcoholics Anonymous” (Leverentz 2014:180).

Thus, women desisters are encouraged to believe that hard work and persistence will lead to success, in spite of the many structural barriers hindering such success for those with histories of criminalisation.

Furthermore, twelve-step programmes offer a view of a criminalised individual (e.g. drug user, offender, or prisoner) as someone with a lifelong “sick” identity. Hence, recovery is a process that can never fully be achieved or left in the past. This ‘sickness’ must be kept up front, making it difficult for criminalised people to fully move beyond being an “ex”-offender or -prisoner and achieve affiliation as a ‘normal’ person within the mainstream (Helmerson Bergmark 1995; Lander 2015; Leverentz 2014).

Moreover, these studies emphasise how economic marginalisation is central to women’s offending and desistance (Barr 2019; Leverentz 2014; Sharpe 2015; Österman 2018). Importantly, while these studies manifest how women desisters are discriminated against on the labour market, they also highlight how significant physical and mental health issues sometimes interfere with their ability to work (Barr 2019; Leverentz 2014; Sharpe 2015; Österman 2018). Mental health problems are more common among women than men in criminalised lifestyles (Belknap & Holsinger 2006; Nilsson 2002; Österman 2018) and can have severe implications for processes of desistance, as seen in article I of this study.

Elaborating on the influence of romantic relationships in women’s desistance, Barr (2019) offers additional insight. While marriage has been shown to be more beneficial for men, a lower effect has been documented for women. Barr suggests that this effect may be spurious, and that married women are likely to be treated differently (i.e. more leniently) by the criminal justice system. This may especially be the case if she has children. Hence, the “good marriage effect” for women may be an effect of gendered criminal justice processes (Barr 2019).

Lastly, the studies reviewed in this segment are, like my own research project, prospective in nature. Research implies that the understanding of agency and structure in desistance may depend on a project’s temporal point of view (Barr 2019; Carlsson 2016). Traditionally, much of the influential desistance research relies on retrospective life-history interviews. Such research has been successful in presenting certain life events as ‘turning points’ or ‘wake up calls’ on which a transition from deviance towards normality can be pinned (see e.g. Laub & Sampson 2003). Importantly, desistance was already achieved when the process was

studied, and recent research has stressed how such retrospective narratives of past life-changes are revised and rewritten based on current views and circumstances (Barr 2019). Hence, connections between key moments, behaviours, and identity change are not always clear or stable in narratives over time. Additionally, when studied prospectively, desistance appears as processes full of uncertainty, relapse and hesitancy (Burnett 1992, see also Barr 2019; Fredriksson & Gálnder 2020; Halsey et al. 2017; Sharpe 2015). In light of success, retrospective narratives of desistance may overvalue the individual's agency and downplay the ambivalence, insecurity, and structural barriers faced at the time (Barr 2019; Carlsson 2016; 2017; Leverentz 2014). Thus, prospective research nuances established understandings of desistance processes drawn from retrospective accounts. The discussion of findings in chapter six offers additional contributions to this development.

CHAPTER III

CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF DESISTANCE

This book has dealt with critical distinctions such as whether to view desistance as processual or event-based, and the important interplay between individual agency and structure. Moving forward, this section will discuss some additional key issues in contemporary understandings of desistance, with the aim to further the theoretical development of the field.

Criminal Careers or Criminalised Lifestyles?

One of the articles in this research project bears the title *Desistance from Crime – To What?* and deals empirically and theoretically with future aspirations among desisters. A related, conceptual query concerns what to term the previous way of life that would be changed or left behind in a desistance process. Most research has relied on the term ‘criminal career’, to the point where literature reviews have exposed a ‘criminal career paradigm’ (Piquero, Farrington & Blumstein 2003; Sivertsson 2018). While traditional criminological theories attempt to explain differences in crime *between* individuals, the criminal career paradigm marks an empirical and theoretical shift towards longitudinal studies of continuity and changes *within* individuals over time (Carlsson 2014). ‘Criminal careers’ are defined as longitudinal sequences of crimes committed by an individual offender (Piquero, Farrington & Blumstein 2003). It follows, then, that desistance is the procedural move away from such ‘criminal careers’.

However, throughout this book and the articles attached to it, I have avoided this term for several reasons. Firstly, the criminal career paradigm is based on a largely uncritical approach to what ‘crime’, ‘criminal behaviour’ or ‘criminal offender’ actually means (Graham & McNeill

2018). ‘Crime’ does not exist as a concept on its own but should be conceptualised as a social construct, dependent on society’s definition of certain actions as unwanted, harmful or otherwise worthy of control (Christie 2004). For example, women’s sexuality outside of matrimony and motherhood has been conflated with deviance and criminalisation in the 20th century (Broidy & Cauffman 2017). As such, definitions of crime, criminal actions, and offenders differ over time and space, rendering a critical conceptualisation paramount within life-course research. Therefore, I prefer ‘criminalised actions’ over ‘criminal behaviour’, to emphasise the social interaction and power dynamics inherent in the act of criminalisation.

Secondly, the concept of ‘career’ is problematic, as it puts too much emphasis on progression and (positive) development. Indeed, some life-course research has shown that what actually characterises ‘criminal careers’ is an absence of progression and development (see e.g. Healy 2016). Relatedly, none of the women interviewed in this research project identified as “career criminals”. Instead, they talked about having lived in *lifestyles* circulating around continuous engagement in common street crime. This finding is consistent with other studies on identity among women involved with the criminal justice system, which have also found women to strongly identify as persistent in their offending without identifying as career criminals (see e.g. Allen 2018).

One possible explanation for this finding is that the ‘career’ is a gendered concept. Although the traditional male pattern of linear progression is now increasingly relinquished, women's careers have traditionally been characterised by limited opportunities, low paid part time work, breaks of different lengths for childcare and other domestic ‘duties’, and disadvantageous assumptions about commitment and capability (Wilson 1998). As a gendered concept closely associated with middle-class men, criminalised women may be less prone to identify as pursuing a career.

Moving forward from this discussion, the terminology preferred throughout this project is desistance from ‘criminalised lifestyles’. A ‘lifestyle’ is here defined as a collective pattern of criminalised acts based on choices made from life chances and options available (see Cockerham, Rütten & Abel 1997 for a similar definition). Hence, within this project,

desistance from crime refers to the procedural move away from a lifestyle largely circulating around continuous engagement in criminalised actions.

Desistance as Processes

Although contemporary desistance research has largely adopted a processual view of desistance, few studies actually engage with the meaning of the term 'process'. As a result, 'processes of desistance' has become a fuzzy concept, difficult to pin down. The desistance literature now offers different ways to theorise desistance processes.

The theory of cognitive transformation (Giordano et al. 2002) offers a cognition-focused example of processual desistance. Drawing on Mead (1913), this theory conceptualises desistance processes as comprising four types of cognitive transformations. These four types are theoretically structured in an ideal typical sequence where (1) a shift in the actor's overall readiness or openness for change influences receptivity to potential (2) 'hooks for change' (e.g. being offered a job or housing). Hooks then influence (3) a shift in identity towards a desirable 'replacement self', and this identity change gradually leads to (4) a transformation in the way the actor views deviant behaviour, from desirable and rewarding to unwanted and incompatible with the new, changed identity.

However, such a sequential understanding and (more or less) linear modelling is problematised by research emphasising how processes of desistance are subject to relapse (cf. Halsey et al. 2017). Thus, any understanding of desistance processes needs to be able to account for such setbacks. One way of going forward is to learn from research on women leaving abusive heterosexual relationships (see e.g. Enander 2010). In this light, the process of leaving a criminalised lifestyle can be conceptualised as comprising three stages: breaking up, becoming free, and understanding. The first stage covers action, i.e. the factual cessation of criminalised acts. Desistance research has convincingly shown that people involved in criminalised lifestyles wish to and indeed often do break up from their continuous offending. However, they are also likely to fall back into old habits and ways of action, thus acting out intermittent offending rather than desistance (cf. Carlsson 2013). It follows that such changes in actions are not sufficient to sustain desistance on their own. The second stage comprises the process of becoming free, and involves release from

the strong emotional bond that people have with their accustomed way of life. As such, it involves the processual move away from key aspects of life such as friends, romantic partners, routines and spatial dynamics, all of which are likely to have an emotional hold on the desister. In research on women leaving abusive relationships, this stage has been shown to start before the actual breaking point, and may go on for several years thereafter (Enander 2010). The last stage – understanding – covers cognition and entails desisters defining the criminalised lifestyle as unwanted and harmful for them. This is expected to take place after the breaking point.

A third and final example of processual understandings of desistance can be drawn from recent research in criminology. Following labelling theory, the desistance process has been sequentially divided into primary, secondary and tertiary desistance. Primary desistance here refers to a period of non-offending, while secondary desistance refers to a change in self-identity where the individual no longer thinks of herself as an offender (Maruna & Farrall 2004). Tertiary desistance in turn is a relational component, centring recognition of an individual's change by others and the desisting individual's development of a sense of belonging or affiliation with conventional society (McNeill 2016).

However, the sequential logic inherent in these concepts suggests a specific order in time (and perhaps importance), which has been questioned in recent research (see Nugent & Schinkel 2016). In accordance with Mead (1934), how we act can be construed as dependent on self-conception, which in turn depends on how we see ourselves reflected by others, which again depends on how we act. This suggests that desistance falls into different spheres (the world outside, within ourselves and in relation to others) rather than different sequences. To better capture this, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) propose using the terms *act-desistance* referring to non-offending, *identity desistance* referring to the internalisation of a non-offending identity and *relational desistance* referring to a recognition of change by others. The journal articles included in this book draw primarily on this understanding of processual desistance.

Furthermore, Nugent & Schinkel (2016) offer theoretical concepts that have proven useful to make sense of the maintenance of desistance that this research project addresses. Addressing the three concepts isolation,

goal failure, and hopelessness, Nugent & Schinkel theorise the pains involved in desistance processes. Isolation is a common experience among desisters, who often feel compelled to sever their ties to peers and surroundings to escape criminogenic influences that could otherwise pull them back towards a criminalised lifestyle. However, an inability to connect to prosocial networks or new activities can lead to unwanted, prolonged and thus painful isolation. Such isolation can lead to loneliness, but also to an indecisive perception of self. Individuals who have previously identified strongly with a certain peer group or location can feel out of place when approaching new surroundings in desistance (Fredriksson & Gålnander 2020). In effect, they can feel stuck in a liminal position, identifying neither with their old offending selves nor with a new identity as changed and accepted part of conventional society (Nugent & Schinkel; see also Hunter & Farrall 2018).

Moreover, a clash between the need to achieve identity desistance, while not obtaining the recognition of this needed for relational desistance, can lead to the pain of goal failure. As is clear from article III in this project, desisters set up many goals on the road to desistance (e.g. of housing, employment, education or meaningful social lives). Barriers blocking the achievement of such goals can lead to painful frustration. A combination of the pains of isolation and goal failure can lead to further pain of hopelessness. A lack of hope can make life less fulfilling, making sustained desistance less probable. In this state, the maintenance of desistance is precarious, and setbacks or relapses are a real risk (Halsey et al. 2017; Nugent & Schinkel 2016). A phenomenological approach similar to that of Nugent & Schinkel (2016) has guided the quest for a deeper understanding of desistance processes that is at the heart of my research discussed in this book.

Desistance from Crime and Recovery from Drugs

Research in life-course criminology shows that criminalised lifestyles are often conflated with drug use, especially among women (Estrada & Nilsson 2012). The relationships between drug use and offending, and the overlap in populations involved in drug use and offending, are well established (Bennett & Holloway 2004; Colman & Best 2020). Drug use has also been emphasised as occupying a special position among factors that complicate desistance from crime. Aside from the direct links

between drug use and offending, drug use often presents barriers to desistance by restricting individuals' life chances, especially pertaining to entering and maintaining relationships and occupations (Bäckman, Estrada & Nilsson 2017; Laub & Sampson 2003). Hence, drug use limits opportunities for willing desisters to approach mainstream society. This is especially the case in societies that prioritise state intervention towards prosecution of possession and use of illicit drugs (Estrada & Nilsson 2012).

Sweden has one of the most punitive drug policies in the world. From the end of the 1960s, the political definition and understanding of the drug issue shifted from medicinal to social and legal terms. Given that Sweden prioritises interventions against drugs, it is not surprising that all but one woman in this study had experiences of continuous and habitual drug (mis)use. Working towards a 'drug free society' as the official goal, the 1970s and 1980s saw Swedish drug policy develop in an increasingly restrictive direction. Notably, possession of drugs for personal consumption is punishable by incarceration since 1985, and since 1988 drug use itself is criminalised. The punitive turn in Swedish drug policy is strikingly illustrated in a 1991 report from a governmental task force. The report, named *We Never Give Up*, stated that "it shall be difficult to be a drug misuser. The more difficult we make their lives, the more clear the other alternatives, i.e. a drug free life, will appear" (quoted in Lenke & Ohlsson 2002:65). In line with this approach, the police can demand blood or urine samples from individuals they *suspect* have taken drugs. This coercive measure is widely used; nearly 40 000 blood or urine samples are collected each year (Öberg 2016), with the deliberate intention to make life hard for drug users. Despite these punitive interventions, drug use has increased in Sweden since its criminalisation in 1988 (Guttormsson 2019). There is, however, little doubt that the Swedish approach has "succeeded" in its intention to make life difficult for drug users, as Sweden attains among the highest drug-induced deaths per capita in Europe (EMCDDA 2019)².

² As always with international comparisons, there is a possibility that part of the difference observed is due to differences in measurements. There are for example indicators that

The punitiveness of Swedish drug policy is worthy of emphasising as it is largely at odds with the picture of ‘Nordic exceptionalism’ portraying the Nordic countries as distinct from the rest of Europe and characterised by low prison numbers, knowledge-based crime policy and a non-punitive public debate (Bäckman et al. 2017; Lappi-Seppälä & Tonry 2011). Importantly, Swedish drug policy has in practice involved criminalisation of both drug use and drug users. Research shows that making life as a drug user difficult has not functioned as intended. Instead of guiding drug users away from a life of drugs and crime, Swedish drug policy has locked people in a world of ever-decreasing opportunities, resulting in increased marginalisation and death rates among drug users (Bäckman et al. 2017).

The well-established relationship between drug use and offending makes it reasonable to assume that processes of desistance from crime and recovery from drug use share a common ground. However, research on desistance from crime and recovery from drugs has mainly been undertaken within separate disciplines (Colman & Best 2020; although see Bäckman et al. 2017). Desistance and recovery have arisen out of two different research traditions that were rarely linked to each other. While recovery originated from clinical research on mental health, desistance originated from the criminal career paradigm in criminology (Colman & Best 2020). Very recently, attempts at merging the knowledge produced in these separate research fields has shown how theories of desistance and recovery share common features. They both deal with transformational processes, which are not linear but dynamic, gradual and subject to relapse (Colman & Best 2020).

It is clear from studies of the interdisciplinary overlap that theories and innovative practices can be developed further by joining forces in desistance and recovery research, and the discussion and development of desistance processes in this book is influenced by research from both domains. Throughout this research project, the investigated processes are consequently framed as ‘desistance from drug use and other crime’. Although it is clear that the women’s desistance processes often involve recovery, I choose the term desistance over recovery for several reasons.

the Nordic countries detect and register more fentanyl-induced deaths than other European countries (see EMCDDA 2019).

First, this is a study in criminology, and its main contribution is to the subfield of desistance within life-course criminology. Second, although the case for many, not all women in the study had issues with drug use. All women, however, had been convicted for criminalised acts. Furthermore, in desistance, the women struggled primarily with the effects of the *criminalisation* of their drug use, rather than with recovery from drug dependency per se. Although research on recovery has convincingly shown that recovery entails more than cessation of drug use and (like desistance) is a social process (Best, Hamer & Hall 2020), the link to clinical mental health research gives recovery medicinal connotations which would be misleading in this context.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

As previous studies has pointed out, researching ongoing processes of desistance among women is far from a straightforward endeavour (Sharpe 2017; Österman 2018). It encompasses recruitment of a hard-to-reach population of often vulnerable women on the edge of society, and attempts to make sense of “hugely complex and often extremely chaotic life-experiences, which in turn are embedded in ‘messy’ narratives” (Österman 2018:34). Hence, this research project was demanding, and involved making continuous difficult methodological choices. In light of this, I have allowed this chapter to be rather expansive, taking care to discuss my research methods and the choices I made in detail. This review of the research procedure is in line with a research agenda emphasising reflexivity and transparency. The project as a whole is informed by a feminist perspective that can be construed as more than just a research practice. Here, feminism is a wider reflection of a way of thinking and being in the world, involving a critical standpoint that influences everyday choices and actions. Moreover, a feminist research practice includes an explicit intention to bring structural inequity to light, thus bringing the unseen into clear view. Being at the heart of feminist research practice, reflexivity requires that the researcher critically examines the research process undertaken, and openly discusses underlying assumptions (Österman 2018). Furthermore, it is my belief that a careful description of the research procedure will help readers understand and make sense of the findings and conclusions presented in the chapters to come.

The interviews that make up the core of this contribution were conducted during two years, 2016-2018. Prior to that, the project plan underwent a

formal ethical vetting procedure with the Swedish Ethical Review Authority³. Ethical considerations were key to every step of the research process, and such ethical discussions will permeate this review of the project's methodological procedure. I begin this chapter by discussing the study design and how I got in contact with the ten women. Then follows a presentation of the women, before proceeding with a discussion on interview technique and focus, followed by a careful consideration of the implications of a repeated interview design. The chapter is then drawn to a close by discussing my method of analysis.

Study Design and Recruitment Procedure

Each journal article in this research project draws on findings from a longitudinal interview study following the desistance processes of ten women in Sweden. Using a prospective design, I conducted repeated interviews with the women on a six-monthly basis for two years, thus resulting in four interviews per woman in total. The overarching purpose of these interviews was to follow the women's efforts to desist from crime.

All of the women were in the early stages of desistance when first interviewed, meaning that they identified themselves as currently striving towards a changed lifestyle, leaving a criminalised lifestyle behind them. Early stages is thus not linked to age, but to time spent on a desistance journey (see Farrall & Calverley 2006 for a similar approach to desistance). This methodological set-up, prospectively following women desisters with repeated, qualitative interviews is (to my knowledge) unique within Nordic criminology. It is also theoretically relevant, as it allowed for frequent interviews during an intensive period of the women's desistance processes. The proximity allowed the project to take part in desistance processes as they unfolded, which is a strength since it differs from many of the most influential studies within desistance research (see Rodermond et al. 2016). As such, following women in the early stages of desistance can be considered a limitation in scope, but a strength in perspective. Two years is, when the life-course is concerned, a short span. In desistance, however, the first two years can be conceptualised as formative – even though little is still known about the early stages of desistance. This approach thus

³ Reference number: 2016/844-31/5

allowed for an in-depth analysis of an under-theorised and under-researched phase critical to understanding desistance from crime.

The recruitment approach was deliberately broad, with an expressed will to engage a diverse sample encompassing different experiences of criminalisation and ‘deviant’ lifestyles. As an effect of this, ten women in different ages (spanning 23-53 at first interview) enrolled from different parts of Sweden via probation offices, prisons, and NGOs facilitating re-entry. Additionally, some women had no ties to any support unit, governmental or other. Both the prisons and the NGOs were located in different parts of Sweden. Geographic diversity has been requested in previous research (see e.g. Farrall et al. 2014), and is theoretically relevant to life-course research as living conditions vary with social setting.

Recruiting from a variety of both governmental and non-governmental sectors of society allows for studying diversity in desistance experiences. The NGOs focused on different issues, some being only for women while others also included men in their work. Some focused on sustaining work opportunities for desisters, others on treatment of and recovery from drug abuse, and still others were centred on nourishing social activities like housing and daytime companionship. This approach differs from influential work on women’s desistance (see Barr 2019; Leverentz 2014), where study participants were closely connected to particular support organisations, and geographically focused to one location (see also Österman 2018 for a diverse sample).

Oftentimes, I initially got in contact with the women via gatekeepers at the different support organisations or prison and probation services. As a rule, I met gatekeepers in person to discuss the aims of my research project and the criterion for inclusion of suitable interviewees. Suitable interviewees were defined as women who had at that point recently set out for a change in lifestyle from crime and ‘deviance’ to ‘normalcy’ and thus were in early stages of desistance. Such meetings frequently resulted in direct contact with potential interview participants. From these encounters, the sample can be labelled a pragmatic and empirically based selection (Järvinen & Andersen 2009), as the women that were present and available at the time of my visit became subjects of the study. From such initial contacts, the sample expanded further. This recruitment procedure led to a diverse

sample, both in age, place of residence, and experiences with criminalisation, the criminal justice system and other support organisations.

The resulting age span is worthy of a comment. It may read as counter intuitive for people to be in the *early stages* of desistance when in their 50's. Surely, since the famous age/crime-curve so convincingly shows how crime on the aggregate level is concentrated around young adulthood, women in their 50's must have been trying to desist for a long time? This (mis)understanding reflects the discursive power inherent in normative life scripts, and normative expectations on desistance from crime. Already in their 30's, people are supposed to have *matured* into an orderly life. Those involved in crime should want to cease such activities and desist. This understanding makes it discursively difficult to imagine people in their 40's and 50's still pursuing a life that deviates from the norm. However, the age/crime curve also shows that some people do (see e.g. McNeill & Maruna 2007; Sivertsson 2018). The fact is that people also change in their 50's (Elder et al. 2003; Sivertsson 2018), and all but one woman (Sofia) emphasised how their current desistance process was their first serious attempt at a break with their criminalised lifestyles.

Obtaining contact and affirmation from suitable interview subjects is crucial to any interview-based research project. I remember being nervous in this initial step, meticulously (over)preparing to retain some element of control over the situation. Every time I asked a woman if she would like to participate in the study, I sat down with her in private and informed her about the study as well as what inclusion in it would entail. As part of the ethical vetting procedure, I had constructed a brief information sheet for them to read and sign. It was important to me to emphasise that even though I intended to meet the women for repeated interviews, this piece of paper was in no way a contract obliging them to see anything through.

However, I felt that the women paid little attention to the (to me, formative and important) information and signing procedure. It appeared as if they had already decided to participate, and were eager to get such paperwork out of the way. After a somewhat awkward read-through of the form and securing their formal consent, I advised them to hold on to the information sheet. I do not believe (m)any of them did. Hence, these

moments made visible that what was crucial and decisive to me from a researcher's perspective was inconsequential to the women as interview subjects. Nevertheless, apart from facilitating the all-important ethical notion of informed consent, those first encounters with the women were also an opportunity to create rapport.

Importantly, my ability to control the setting for obtaining contact and affirmation from suitable interview subjects was sometimes more limited. One such occasion was the recruitment of Louise. It was over an hour into my first interview with Johanna when Louise burst into the cramped back-office where we sat. As she began to apologise for disturbing, I told her that we were due for a break anyway. Louise then proceeded to show off her newly bought shoes to Johanna, and the two of them went out for a cigarette. Before the interview with Johanna continued, she explained that Louise was a close friend who had been released from her last prison sentence shortly after Johanna had been released. They were thus in the same early stage of desistance. Johanna briefly explained that Louise had barged in because the room we sat in also doubled as Louise's unofficial shelter, since Louise was struggling with housing. We then resumed our interview, and afterwards I asked Johanna whether she thought Louise would be suited for inclusion in the study. Johanna was optimistic, quickly picked up her phone and called Louise to ask her. All I could do was cling to the armrests of my chair and hope for a "yes". I sat close enough to hear both ends of the brief conversation, which went like this:

Johanna: Hi, what are you doing?

Louise: I'm outside, eating rhubarb pie.

Johanna: Uhu, wanna get interviewed?

Louise: Yeah, guess I could. I'll be right in then!

And as simple as that, I had gained another of my ten interviewees. Of course, this could be interpreted as a strike of good luck. However, I see it as a telling example of how a sample can expand in qualitative research. The example also emphasises the importance of gaining access to a field. Once inside, gaining additional access is so much easier. Lastly, this is an example of how qualitative research is teeming with surprises, and a researcher's own flexibility and improvisation is key. This way of making contact and gaining acceptance for inclusion was not what I had planned

or prepared for. However, from my prepared position, I was able to improvise in a way that was greatly beneficial for the research project.

The Women

Johanna: It's a lifestyle, what with the drugs and all [...] and perhaps my identity as well. [R: Right] But, you don't tell people everything, you know? I mean, normal people wouldn't either!

The ten women had all spent the majority of their lives in a position as *other*, segregated and excluded from conventional society (see Becker 1963; Braithwaite 1989; Lander 2015; Maruna et al. 2004). Some basic characteristics of the women are presented in a table in the appendix. All but one of the women came from severely disadvantaged backgrounds. More often than not, they grew up in broken homes, and poverty, crime, or drug use was part of everyday life. Many of the women had spent parts of their childhood and adolescence in foster care and/or incarcerated. Throughout their lives, all women were repeatedly reminded of their otherness in encounters with schoolmates, teachers, social workers, the criminal justice system, friends, and romantic partners. As a result, the women had internalised a sense of otherness and identified as excluded from conventionality (cf. Lander 2015; see also article II). Thus, for the women in this study, attempting desistance from crime meant striving for inclusion into mainstream society from positions as excluded others. This change in lifestyle entailed a significant change of surroundings, and the newness pertained to places of residence, social networks, daily activities, contact with authorities, and medications – all presenting new challenges in the women's lives.

For decades, the women had all been engaged in criminalised lifestyles circulating around common street crime including drug related offences, theft, burglaries, and assault. Importantly, due to Sweden's punitive drug legislation many of the women had served numerous short sentences for minor drug offences, often in combination with thefts. Short sentencing is common practice in Sweden, where most convicted people spend less than four months in prison (Persson & Svensson 2018). Aside from prison convictions, the women had also been subjected to incarceration repeatedly in the form of compulsory treatment for their drug (ab)use. Such compulsory treatment is initiated by the social services and regulated

by the Care of Alcoholics and Drug Abusers Act. Despite being framed as care, the women saw this compulsory treatment as punishment. Moreover, being subjected to this form of incarceration was seen as more embarrassing than a prison sentence. Norah elaborated on this feeling:

Norah: I mean (Compulsory treatment) is extremely... embarrassing. [R: Okay?]. It's like I can't even be a junkie without getting punished for six months, you know? [R: Right]. I'd rather do something (a criminal offence) and get six months in prison. Cause six months in an institution just because Soc (the social services) think that I'm a failure as a junkie, that's just extremely fucking heavy.

Despite sharing a general way of life in criminalised lifestyles, offending as well as conviction history varied significantly within the sample. All women had been convicted. All but one had been imprisoned. Johanna had the longest aggregated conviction history, and had spent a total of thirteen years in prison⁴. Maia was the only woman who despite convictions had not been incarcerated. She told me that she had “evaded” incarceration, which she pinned on having lived in relationships with “very overprotective” men. *Overprotective* is a rephrasing of the violent and controlling intimate partners that have impinged on Maia’s life for decades (see article I for an in-depth analysis of how experiences of “very overprotective” men influence the women’s processes of desistance). These men prohibited Maia from any contact with other drug users. Instead, Maia’s partners provided her with drugs, which explained how she had *evaded* a prison sentence during her time in a criminalised lifestyle. However, Maia is the exception, as every other woman in this study had been incarcerated.

Furthermore, all but one of the women had been using and/or abusing narcotic drugs on a regular basis. Half the sample (Norah, Doris, Marie,

⁴ Most of the women kept careful records of how much time they had been sentenced to and served inside a prison facility. Louise, however, did not, and she knew that she differed in this regard from most others around her. What she did know was that she had been sentenced to prison eight or maybe nine times when I first met her, with the longest sentence being one of 2,5 years. All other sentences had been around a year each. When she guessed her aggregate prison time, she guessed five years of total time served. However, based on her self-reported history of convictions, this figure might thus have been underestimated.

Kate, and Susie) had used heroin as their primary drug, while the others (Louise, Sofia, Maia, and Johanna) had mainly used amphetamines. Age varied greatly within the sample, spanning from 23-53 at the first interview. Age variation was not actively pursued in the recruitment process, but was beneficial for the analysis (see article III in particular). Moreover, the women lived in different parts of Sweden and were of Swedish or other Nordic ethnicity. Six of the ten women had underage children; four were (at least partially) in custody of theirs. The other two had lost care of their children to the social services. An additional two women had adult children. Three of the women (Louise, Nina and Susie) were homeless at the time for the first interview, and only four of the ten women remained in the same accommodation during the two years of interviews. Initially, their employment and educational records were minute. However, six of the women held some form of (mostly part-time, sometimes undeclared) employment, and five of the women underwent different forms of education during the time of study.

The Interviews

This research project employs an explorative approach. Built on a bedrock of a prospective and qualitative interview-based study design, it comprises four sweeps of repeated interviews. Conducting this research meant making continuous critical choices which are worthy of discussion here.

Interview Technique and Themes

The interviews that make up the foundation of this research project had a broad approach. To fulfil the aim of the study, the interviews needed to encompass experiences of facilitating as well as hindering aspects of desistance journeys. To allow for this, the interviews were often lengthy. The usual interview lasted between two and two-and-a-half hours and resulted in approximately 70 single-spaced pages of transcripts each. Open ended, the interviews were structured only in the sense that I came prepared with a number of broad themes I thought would be fruitful to talk about. In this regard, the first sweep of interviews differed from the follow-ups. At the first sweep of interviews, the format as well as themes covered were similar across the interviews. Informed by previous research and the current theoretical understanding of desistance, I had written down themes covering the women's family, peer and partner relations, experiences of police, prison and social services, drug use and other

criminalised activities, victimisation, as well as resource focused themes such as financial situation, debts, education, employment and health.

I began each interview by inviting the women to describe themselves. I found starting on an open-ended question like this highly beneficial. Importantly, it signalled that I was interested in the interview participant as a person. Qualitative interviewing strives to lessen the power discrepancy inherent in any interview setting. On a continuum spanning from Habermas' (1984) ideal conversation (no power discrepancy between different speakers) to the police interrogation (full power discrepancy between speakers), this way of centring person rather than (past) action situates the interviews closer to conversation than interrogation, and can equalise power in the interview setting.

Furthermore, describing oneself necessitates introspection. The women did not have readymade answers, but were instantly engaged in self-reflection. Following the active approach to qualitative interviewing developed by Holstein & Gubrium (1995), self-reflection is sought after in a research tradition that stresses how knowledge is produced by the participants in the interview setting. As such, this opening question served to "activate" the interview participant and engage her in self-reflection, introspection, and knowledge production. Further pursuing an active interview format, I followed up on the initial self-presentation by asking if they thought they were different now (in desistance) than what they had been like before (engaged in criminalised lifestyles). I also asked how significant others (friends, partners, or family) would describe her. This way of having the interviewee access different subject- and time positions is key to the active approach (Holstein & Gubrium 1995), and among the benefits are an increased understanding of the phenomena of interest.

Relatedly, the interviews were guided by my active listening. Following this tradition, active listening is a multifaceted interview tool that serves to create an unforced yet theoretically relevant interview format. The practice builds on DeVault's (1990) notion of sensitive feminist interviewing, which requires competent asking and listening grounded in background knowledge of the interviewee's experience. In practice, I paid close attention to what the women told me and let the interviews flow through their narratives via follow-up questions. This procedure allows the

interview to be based on their narratives, yet on point and relevant in relation to my research questions and my understanding of contemporary desistance research. In effect, the method provides unforced direction by connecting the researcher's interest to the interviewee's experience, bridging the concrete and abstract (Holstein & Gubrium 1995). Undoubtedly, the study design was helpful in constructing unforced interviews. Since my primary interest was how the women were doing in their every-day endeavour of maintaining desistance, basically everything they told me was relevant. This pseudo-conversational approach to interviewing (cf. Oakley 1981) allowed for the women to participate in directing both the rhythm, direction and level of detail for each topic. Inviting respondents to decide on their own wording and direction of interviews "provide[s] accounts rooted in the realities of their lives" (DeVault 1990:99), which sits well with the general aim for this research project and its feminist and interactionist foundation.

Furthermore, the women appreciated this approach. In fact, several of them gave their view of the interviews either during our sittings or as I thanked them afterwards. Sometimes, this feedback was caught on tape. Marie presents one such example. Marie worked as a professional ex. As such, and in direct contrast to every other woman in this study, she was used to being interviewed. Because of this, she could put our interview into perspective. This was her spontaneous reflection at the end of our first interview:

Marie: I usually find these interviews so tedious. [R: Okay?] Like, just (breathes out) "Uhh, so dull", you know? [R: Haha] Not that it's emotionally hard in any way, I just think it is/ but you have really been super comfortable to talk to!

R: So good to hear! That's amazing!

Marie: Yeah but I mean it! Yes.

R: Thank you very much.

Marie: You're really good at this.

R: Oh that is great. Could you even pinpoint something in particular?

Marie: Yeah well just the approach. Cause most of them just begins like "let's see here, question one: how did you start?" [R: Oh yeah, right.] That's how it is, usually. But we've just been talking, almost in reverse. And then this just lead us in to that and, more like loose talk, you know. [R: Yes] And that was very comfortable, really.

Striving to equalise power between the women and myself, I involved them in setting up a time and place for each interview. Some women preferred to visit my office at the university. They expressed how the university was a “safe spot”, where no one would recognise them for what they had been (which is telling of the class exclusionary practice of higher education. This wish to be incognito is further discussed in article II). A few of the women held fulltime employment, and they preferred meeting there for our interviews. Others welcomed me into their homes, which is truly touching and telling of them trusting me. Trust of course goes both ways, and it is reasonable to assume that my (gendered) privilege is showing as I gladly accepted their invitations.

Trust is vital in interpersonal research. Feminist scholarship has emphasised how a researcher’s positionality affect trust and knowledge production (see e.g. Ramazanoglu & Holland 2002; Stanley & Wise 1993). Although the standpoint feminist notion of how “only women can understand women” has been dismissed as essentialist, who the researcher is in terms of sex, race, class and sexuality will affect trust and what s/he will find (Sharpe 2017). As is evident in article I, all of the women had been violently victimised by men, which affected their trust in men generally. How then did my positionality as a (white, educated, middle-class) man affect the interviews? There is no comprehensive answer to this question. Bodily impressions extend way beyond sex, class, age, or race and encompass personal attributes like tone of voice, tattoos, clothes- and hairstyle etc. (Coffey 1999; Skrinjar 2003). The level of trust and openness visible in the interviews suggests that the women read my general appearance as distinctly different from the violent men of their pasts, which allowed for rapport despite me embodying the ‘other sex’.

Nevertheless, the interviews were undoubtedly affected by social difference between me and the women due to my being a white middle-class man, without children, and educated and employed by a top university. In many ways, the women and I lived worlds apart, and there was social distance to bridge when we met. However, as argued by Sharpe (2017), while such social distance may hinder rapport, the opposite can also be true. I found that my position as an Outsider allowed me to ask naïve questions about the women’s lives that often resulted in valuable

knowledge production. There were no ‘stupid questions’, but the women kindly and carefully shared their experiences with me, without questioning my intentions or integrity. Importantly, a researcher’s social position will always affect the knowledge production in interpersonal research (Warren 1988). My reflection is that overall, my privileged positionality has facilitated my role as a researcher when conducting this study.

Returning to the different settings for the interviews, one was scheduled to take place in my office, but when I met up with Maia at the subway station on that sunny summer day we decided to stay outdoors and hold our interview in a park instead. Lastly, I held two interviews inside a prison. Interestingly, on both occasions, the women had very little time left to serve on their sentences. Hence, I offered them a choice; would they prefer that I came to visit them while incarcerated, or would they rather do the interview after release? The fact that both women chose the former is telling of at least two things: the dullness of life while incarcerated, and the uncertainties of life post-release.

The different interview settings of course offered different possibilities for me to create the atmosphere I wanted for the interviews. For example, when interviews were held in my office, I could guarantee access to toilets and coffee or tea, and make sure that no one would disturb the session. I was stripped of this control when interviewing in the field, but toilets and drinks were always provided at the women’s workplaces or homes and in prison. However, interruptions were common when interviews were held at the women’s homes or work places. These interruptions were often brief and insignificant disruptions, and the interviews could be resumed quickly. However, on rare occasions such interruptions could be more problematic. Once or twice, interviews were interrupted by partners or colleagues (always men) who needed something from the place where we sat. Such interruptions compromised the atmosphere I tried to create, where we could talk safely and openly about anything and anyone. I felt uncomfortable speaking about topics that could involve these people afterwards, taking care to cover other themes for some significant time after they had left us alone again.

I always brought a snack to share, which was appreciated and a good way to create a relaxed atmosphere for interviewing. While the prison

interviews had different conditions (there was a toilet and coffee, but the prison guards did not allow me to bring a snack, and of course the women's freedom was restricted), those interviews were still relaxed and free from interruptions.

While the interviews were similar regarding what themes were covered during the first sweep, the follow-up interviews varied greatly within the sample. Ahead of each follow up, I reread the transcript from our last interview to refresh my memory and prepare some themes I wanted to talk about (the same technique has been used in other longitudinal and sweep-based interview studies, see e.g. Farrall et al. 2014). Departing from what we had talked about last time, I then prepared to follow up on themes that each woman had highlighted as important aspects of their lives. Therefore, even though I began each interview by, very broadly, asking them how they were doing, each interview took its own direction from there. Indeed, sometimes the interviews could take directions that I had not foreseen, despite my preparations. New important things emerged in the women's lives between our interviews, and the project's explorative approach allowed for pursuing such leads as they came. This approach thus again invited the women to direct the interviews to topics they found important, which further rooted their accounts in the realities of their lives (DeVault 1990). In effect, this method enabled a flexible form of interview apt to reflect what the women subjectively understood as salient in their lives. This has been argued to produce rich and authentic data embedded in the social lives of interest for the study (Österman 2018). In addition to following up on what each woman had stressed as the most important aspects of her life, the follow-up design also allowed me to bring up themes and ideas that had emerged in interviews with the other women. This allowed for cross-evaluating potentially shared narratives across the sample. The particular benefits of repeated interviews are discussed further later in this chapter.

Sensitive Topics

The interviews contained sensitive topics including victimisation, shame and stigma of their own criminalised acts, strained relations to friends, families and partners, mental and physical health, drug cravings, and economic marginalisation. Because of this, it was common for the interviews to stir up emotions – both happy and sad. On occasion, some

of the women cried during interviews. I listened and offered a comforting approach, discussing ways to understand or deal with the issue. Although I emphasised the women's freedom to pause, break off or discontinue the interview whenever they pleased and without having to tell me why, no interview was discontinued. We did take breaks; for snacks, the toilet, or whenever they wanted a smoke, but those breaks were due to the interviews being lengthy (2-2,5 hours on average), and not specifically due to upsetting emotions.

In previous qualitative interview studies, a question has been raised as to whether interview participants might feel uneasy utilising the opportunity for breaks, even if the researcher stresses their availability (see Carlsson 2014). Against this backdrop, I was pleased to find that the women took my word for it and asked for a break when they wanted to. Rounding up each interview, I always prepared a "safe" topic to end on. As I saw the women on a half-year basis, most often in November/December and May/June, the ending theme I prepared was about their plans for Christmas or the summer. Granted, due to problematic and stressful familial situations and poverty, such themes could be seen as sensitive topics. However, the women were generally looking forward to such happenings, and the topics suited for ending on a happy note.

Arguably, qualitative interviews should not avoid sensitive topics. In my view, it would not be possible or preferable to conduct qualitative research on desistance without it leading to emotional experiences, both happy and sad. Previous research has discussed the potential harm as well as good that can come out of in-depth interviewing (see in particular Atkinson 1998). As with the excerpt from Marie above, other women also offered feedback on the positive and valuable aspects of our interviews. One common theme (already touched upon in the introduction) is that the women stressed how they had wanted to tell their story for a long time, but always felt that they lacked the opportunity to do it. Many of the women in this study expressed how their stories had been neglected or otherwise not cared about or paid attention to. Some of them linked this to the gendered notion of crime, and how (past) criminalised activities are shameful and something that should be hidden. When Nina reflected on this, she pointed out that people in general have little knowledge about women in criminalised lifestyles, because their stories are not heard. And

as a consequence of people knowing so little about women's stories, there is no discursive place for them in societal discussions or debates. Instead, it becomes "silenced", and painted as "shameful". It follows that women's stories and experiences of criminalised lifestyles are in need of elucidation. Their stories are valuable to crime policy as well as to future research. And, more to the point made here, telling their stories is valuable to the women themselves. This is captured by Maia, who emphasised how good it felt to finally speak her heart without fear of repercussion. Here is a longer excerpt that accentuates this clearly:

Maia: I just tell you things. Things I've never told anyone. And without fixing or leaving stuff out. And... It just hit me now I mean, how easy it was to talk to you. 'Cause you're not judgmental. So I just tell you. 'Cause when I've sought help before, I've felt so strongly that I need to be on my guard. Guard what to say or not. 'Cause they don't understand. But here I've just told you... without consequences. There'll be no diagnose, there'll be no... you know? [R: Right, yes]. And that's so different. [...] What a relief! [...] I understand now, where I should turn for help. A fellow human [...] Damn, I mean I just feel so (breaths out) Yeah no, damn it feels so good! [...] And these are scary things. Hurtful things. But when we talk about it... I can see now. This gave me so much. I just feel really, really, really great and happy! [R: That's superb!] I just feel like/ this is how it should be done! [...] I really needed to talk it out.

This excerpt highlights the emotionally valuable potential of in-depth interviews. Seeing this also elucidates a severe deficit in the support offered by authorities to criminalised people wanting to change their lives and desist from crime. The desistance literature shows the importance of making amends with one's past in order to be able to move on (see in particular Maruna 2001). However, this excerpt, along with similar experiences among several of the women in this study, serves to question what chance is actually offered to women desisters to talk about their experiences in a therapeutic way. To Maia, our interview offered an unprecedented opportunity to speak to *a fellow human*. Even though my interviews were not intentionally therapeutic, the opportunity to talk informally and without reproach about their secrets, previous actions, and remorse over previous actions clearly had therapeutic meaning for the women (cf. Atkinson 1998). Along with the findings in article II, it is my

hope that this empirical finding will serve to inform policy on the importance of addressing shame and remorse over previous actions for people who try to change their lives and desist from crime. All of the women in this study were accustomed to being evaluated and risk assessed, yet unaccustomed to uncritical and non-judgmental conversation. Saddening as this insight is, it also sparks hope for a better way to treat willing desisters in the future.

The Longitudinal Approach

Prospective interviewing is highly valuable for life-course research as it is well suited to capture processes of within-individual change over time, which are at the heart of this field. During the time I conducted the repeated interviews, I continuously collected field notes. These notes concerned methodological considerations and interactions with the women. Spanning the full duration of the project, they comprise 42 single-spaced pages and make up the foundation for the reflections made in this section.

When it was time to contact the women for their first follow-up interviews (sweep 2), I was a bit apprehensive. Would they remember me? What if they did not wish to see me again? This apprehensiveness quickly washed off as I received very positive responses from the women. They remembered me, and they actually seemed to look forward to meeting me again. The women wanted to participate, and they had often anticipated my call. Several exchanges with Johanna illustrates this well. She was the one I contacted first to set up a follow-up interview. A bit nervous, I had prepared a little speech including a careful presentation of who I was and why I was calling. I dialled her number, and Johanna replied with a simple “Hello?”. I began to carefully introduce myself when she interrupted me, saying “Yes, I saw that. My phone said ‘Robin Researcher’, I thought you’d be calling soon”. Johanna had saved my number. She had not forgotten me, and she was anticipating my call. We set up our second interview and met within a week.

Granted, other times demanded a lot more effort, patience and persistence on my behalf. The women did not always answer when I called. Sometimes we had to cancel appointments because something had come up. On rare occasions, I was stood up without notification (although there were always

apologetic explanations afterwards). More than anything, the repeated interviews demanded flexibility from me. Luckily, PhD-life provides just that. These less straightforward experiences can also be illustrated by exchanges with Johanna. When it was time for sweep three, Johanna did not reply when I called. Instead, I got a text message saying that she had been working all weekend (this was on a Monday), and therefore, she said, “I am sleeping today”. She also said she would call me on the next day. I replied, saying “I got your message. Sounds great. Rest today and we’ll talk tomorrow”. Around 8 am in the following morning, Johanna called me. She told me that she had thought about the study and that it should be time for a new interview. She even said that she had been thinking about whether she should call me to set it up. We decided to meet for an interview later on that same day.

To me, this interaction is indicative of many things. First, her initial decision to screen my call and call me when more suitable implies that she is comfortable in our interview subject – researcher relation. She is powerful enough to set her boundaries, which is vital from an ethical point of view. Furthermore, this interaction provides confidence in assuming that when we met for interviews it was because she wanted to. Lastly, her considering taking responsibility to set up the interview indicates that she saw our interviews and the research project as rewarding and important. If Johanna considered taking responsibility to set up interviews, Louise actually did so. At sweep three, Louise called me, suggested a time and a place to meet, and thus booked our interview. I am truly touched by the consideration that all ten women has shown for my research throughout this project.

Follow-up and Timing

The study’s design to repeat interviews on a six-monthly basis turned out well, which is a lesson worthy to pass on to future longitudinal interview studies. The interval was close enough both for me as a researcher and for the women as interview subjects to remember the last interview, while also providing enough time for both of us to present new things to talk about. Only on one occasion, at sweep two, one of the women (Susie) had difficulties recollecting our previous session. Since our first interview, she had experienced an intense period including relapse into heroin addiction and subsequent conviction. Luckily, I had prepared ahead of the follow-

up and could remind her of our last meeting and what we had been talking about.

Even if Susie seemed to appreciate my memory support during our interview, this aspect of repeating the interviews could make me uncomfortable. Reading or listening to previous interviews and preparing topics to talk about could easily make me feel like the ‘sociological stalker’ referred to by Sharpe (2017). During the interviews I could recall details about our previous conversations that the women had no way of remembering, thus manifesting the roles of researcher/respondent and the inherent differences in power. To offset feelings of discomfort on their behalf as well as my own, I (half-jokingly) reminded the women of how I was able to “cheat” and listen to our recordings ahead of our meetings, and thus remember details that would come across as eerie otherwise.

An important lesson from the study design is that a lot will happen in the first two years for anyone setting out on a desistance journey. Between our interviews, the women managed to leave their substance replacement therapy treatments, apply for and obtain employment and education, move into new accommodations, take up and put down drugs as well as commit thefts and other criminalised actions, engage in different psychoanalytical treatment programs and go in and out of relationships with partners, friends and relatives. The six-monthly interviews offered proximity to these life events, which created an unforced atmosphere that enabled talking about the various issues as they played out in their lives.

The repeated interview design was especially imperative to capture disappointments stemming from the women wanting so much to happen while often feeling that very little happened for their benefit and progress. As is uncovered in article III, the women all held dreams and aspirations for their future. Such aspirations were often hampered by bureaucratic (in)action and a lack of social- and state support. These important empirical findings would not have appeared as prominently in a single-interview cross-sectional design. Furthermore, to recall a success story (such as successful desistance) in a retrospective study design is very different from talking about the process as it unfolds. This research project has emphasised the uncertainties involved in the *going* straight, or maintaining desistance processes. Thus, an important takeaway from this

project is that the closeness provided in qualitative and prospective, longitudinal approaches might be required to better capture the complexities involved in ongoing desistance processes.

Trust and Expectations

Even though the women generally expressed excitement and anticipation ahead of our repeated interviews, the interview design could also spur feelings of stress, pressure, or disappointment. This was evident during the first follow up (sweep two), as some of the women articulated or showed signs of associating the interview with a feeling of slight stress. The women tied this discomfort to uncertainties as to whether what they had experienced in the last six months would be “enough” to be of interest to me. Thus, while repeating interviews on a six-monthly basis is a way to build trust, they may also read as ‘check-ups’, in effect implying normative expectations of development and progress (cf. Sharpe 2017). I took care in addressing these feelings of inadequacy, particularly by reminding the women of the purpose of the study – to follow their desistance processes as they unfolded; for better, for worse or anything in between.

At the heart of this issue is another important empirical finding. Indisputably, the two years covered in this study involved hectic periods for all of the women. Nevertheless, some of the women also had periods where they faced less ‘action’. Interestingly, as far as desistance is concerned, such downtime was good. Big and important happenings were often adverse and came equipped with negative outcomes (such as eviction, losing a job, relapsing into drug use and other crime, being caught for committing such offences, or separating from an intimate partner). Nevertheless, unwanted inaction frustrated the women as they wanted and indeed needed to feel a sense of progress and direction in their ongoing desistance processes to make sense of and attach a meaning to their present situations. As is evident in article III, the women aspired to live ‘normal’ lives, which can arguably be considered less eventful than what is generally offered in the early stages of desistance.

Keeping Contact

When interviewing people in unstable housing situations, it is wise to ask interviewees for contact information to someone close to them, whom they trust and can rely on (see also Farrall et al. 2014; Nilsson & Flyghed

2004; Sharpe 2017). Louise, Nina and Susie were homeless when I first met them. These three (and only they) provided me with contact information to their mothers (in two cases) or a best friend. Interestingly, I did not ask them to do so, but it was their initiative. Equally interesting, in all three cases this additional information turned out to be vital for my ability to reach them for follow-up interviews.

Nina was imprisoned at the time for our first interview. Despite being due for release nine days after our interview, she did not have an address to be released to. As such, she was unable to provide me with either an address or a phone number for upcoming interviews. Instead, she gave me her mother's contact information, which was my only way of reaching Nina post release. Similarly, Susie's phone number was out of use at the time for Sweep 2 so I called her mother instead, who told me that Susie was serving a short prison sentence at the time. I then proceeded to contact an inspector from the prison and probation service that I had met during my initial contact-making days, and set up the interview in prison on Susie's own request. At Sweep 3, Louise and Nina had changed phone numbers. I received their up-to-date numbers from their contact persons without any trouble at all.

An important yet unsurprising finding from this study is that stable housing is paramount for maintaining desistance. With unstable housing, not much else can be stable either, and the women who struggled with housing also struggled with social contacts, employment, health, money, the law, and sobriety (cf. Carlen 2003). Luckily, the contact persons that these women had provided me with could direct me back to them every time I asked them to. Although phone numbers may change, those close relations did not falter during the study period. Future longitudinal research is advised to ask for contact information of such close relations to facilitate staying in contact with people lacking a stable home address. As a result, all but one of the women met me for every sweep during the two years. Indeed, some of the women gave five interviews instead of four. Susie is the one whom I did not get to interview all the way through the end of the project. She was homeless at sweep one, imprisoned at sweep 2, in jail at sweep 3, and out but homeless again at sweep 4, where I could not get in touch with her. I have however been in regular contact with all of the women after the data gathering was concluded, to share results from

the study. This includes Susie, who at the time of writing is “doing really good now”.

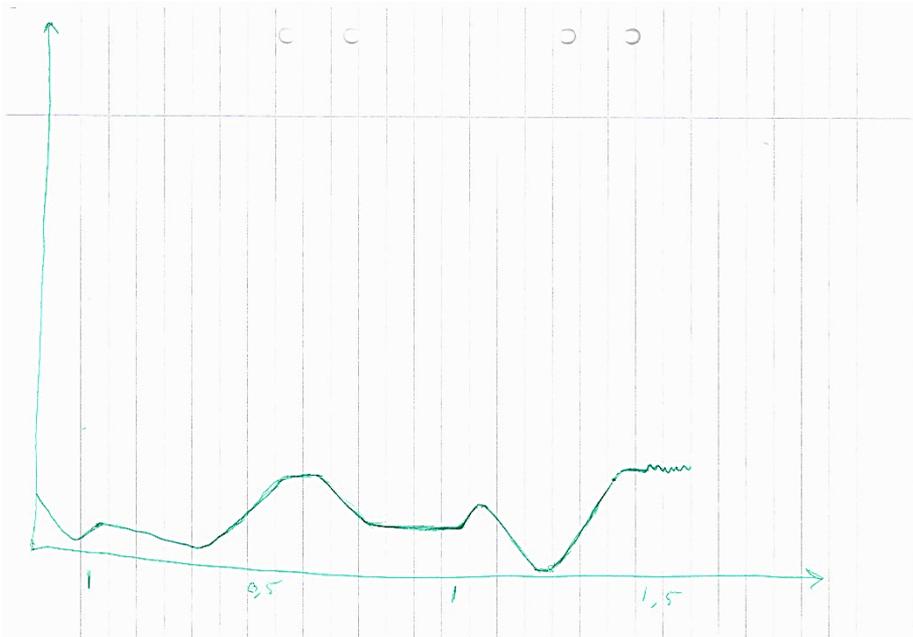
Longitudinal Desistance – A Process

The women went through a lot during the two years I followed them, which was reflected in their talk about relationships, employment, education, monetary-, health- and housing situations, and many other aspects of their lives. At the concluding sweep of interviews, I wanted the women to look back on the two years in focus for my study, to reflect on what had happened during this time and what it had meant for them and their desistance processes. To support them in this reflection, I presented the women with a piece of paper and a pen. On this paper, I drew an x- and y-axis, while explaining my vision to them. The x-axis had four points representing the four interviews we had undertaken over two years. The y-axis represented their own, subjective assessment of quality of life or ‘how they had been’ at these given points in time. I then suggested that the women drew a line illustrating how they had experienced the last two years.

At first, the women doubted their ability to draw, or feared they would forget about important aspects from the time in question. I supported them and, having listened to previous interviews as a way to prepare myself for our meetings, I could remind them of things we had spoken of as important before. With such encouragement, the women began to draw out illustrations of how they had experienced the last two years. These drawings are a great compliment to the interview excerpts, and offer fine and varied graphic images of how life in desistance looks – and feels. Here, I present four such drawings, with short comments discussing what the women told me as they drew these illustrations. Thus, this section combines a methodological and empirical discussion that presents a modest and exploratory contribution to the emerging field of visual criminology (cf. Brown & Carrabine 2017; Fitzgibbon, Graebisch & McNeill 2017). Indeed, while many aspects of criminology is visible in news coverage and mass-media imagery, (especially women’s) desistance processes are largely invisible in contemporary cultural expressions. However, making the mental and emotional aspects of desistance processes visible is required to develop a critical understanding of the phenomena (McNeill 2018).

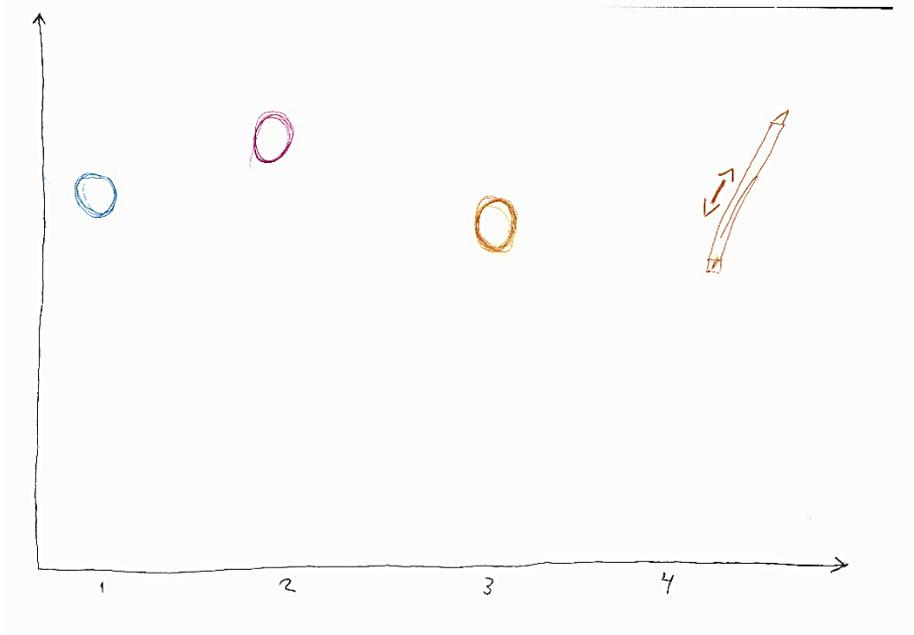
same partner and the chartered holidays they took together. “That’s life”, she said. “It goes up and it goes down”.

Kate



Kate’s line is drawn low, but it fluctuates over time depending on her feelings about many different aspects of her life. The initial downward slope represents her declining further treatment with methadone that she was entitled to via a substitute treatment program. Going off methadone is rough, and she did not feel good during this time. The succeeding fluctuations during the first year is linked both to her attempts at education, and to her body image and varying success in workout habits. The steep decline almost resulting in her hitting rock bottom between our third and fourth interview represent an accumulation of feelings of isolation, poverty and repeated goal failure, which resulted in a state of hopelessness. This was a scary episode in her life, the low point of which is brought about by her relapsing with thefts and a hit of heroin. Although Kate was frightened by this experience, she quickly bounced back and felt improved going forward from there.

Louise

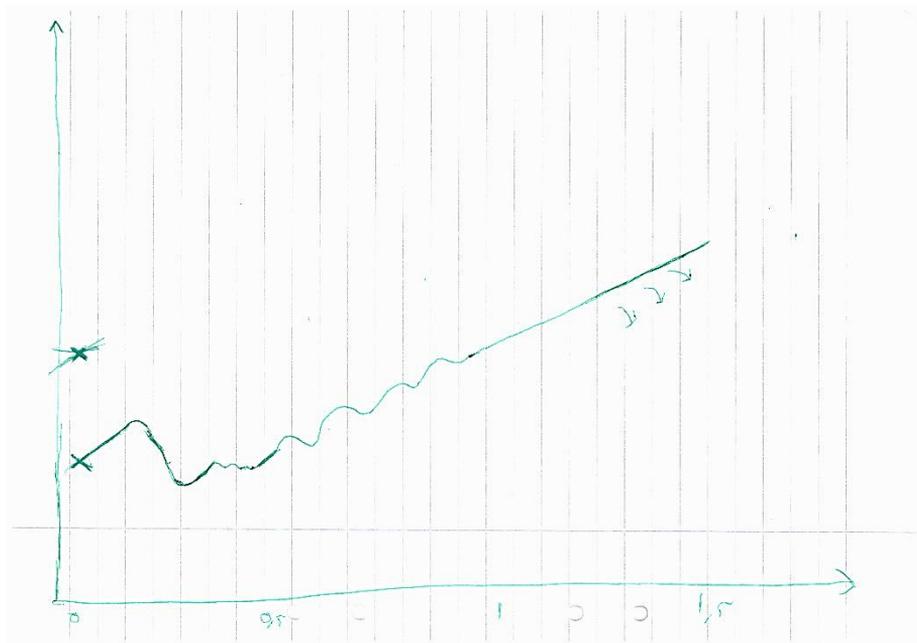


In sharp contrast to many of the other women, Louise scored herself high on quality of life. Interestingly, Louise's life was not void of setbacks. When I first met her, she was homeless. She later rented a house but was evicted when she served six weeks in prison for a petty drug offence and driving without a license. In this eviction, she lost everything she owned. This marks the lowest point, at interview three, which she commented with "Life's never been bad, really. But you know, it was more stressful there. Harder, I think". At our last interview, she lived in a trailer that she shared with a friend, and despite struggling with money, she was content with her life. She drew an interval as her last point, referring to how her present quality of life varied with her daily emotional state and what that particular day brought. When I contacted her to share the publication of article III, she told me that she had just been released from yet another short prison sentence, for a petty drug offence and driving without a license.

Louise's story is telling of many things. One worth mentioning here is that the deterring effects of prison diminish when people are incarcerated many times and with short sentences. For Louise, who had been in prison

about ten times, another six weeks was not such a big deal. Short sentences also prevent any resettlement measures, which was tangible for Louise who was repeatedly released into homelessness and unemployment (cf. Persson & Svensson 2018). Related to this, Louise's story is also in line with the findings of Grundetjern & Miller (2018), who argue that women desisters often face bleak and limiting life circumstances post desistance, with few means to become economically self-sustaining or independent. Louise lacked a future vision where she would get her license back and thus be able to drive her car legally. Instead, Louise found empowerment in driving without a license. Even though the prison spells were tiresome, the alternative (a life without cars) was more limiting to her.

Johanna



When I drew the graph outline and presented my idea, Johanna quickly replied “You’re drawing, right? I can’t draw!”. Nevertheless, she attempted to recall where she had been in life two years earlier, and started out by marking a cross close to the middle of the y-axis. She had a job she liked, but she was also under supervision, which she described as *control*. “I didn’t feel free, you know”. Then, before she started drawing her line, she recalled details about her previous life circumstances that made her change

her mind. In particular, she recalled how she shared her one-room apartment with a friend, a dog, her son and his girlfriend. Lowering her cross, she said: “Oh, that was tedious. I’ll move it down. I’m moving down. I’m taking that fucker down”.

The steep decline and low point represents her feeling fatigued, bored and lacking a positive future outlook. She lost her job despite the company wanting to keep her on, as the employment services declined extension of her wage subsidy. She spent her days at home. Even though her roomies had moved out, her apartment was a mess. At her lowest, she took a hit of amphetamines, cleaned out her apartment, and felt better about herself and her life. Then followed a period of anxiety particularly tied to the employment services not being able to offer her a new job, which forced her to resort to welfare and undeclared work. After six months of such anxiety, Johanna took up a small daily intake of amphetamines, which she framed as “self-medication”. As seen in the graph, this stabilised her emotional and mental state, and she felt progressively better and better. During this time, she identified important milestones such as receiving treatment for her hepatitis, fixing her teeth, and becoming debt-free. Recently before our fourth interview, she had even been to a hairdresser, which she said “had never happened before”.

However, three arrows were presently pulling at her quality of life. These arrows represents a gnawing feeling of how she “ha[s] to put it down”, “can’t keep this up”, and “ha[s] to pull [herself] together”. She said that she could scold herself for “not taking that last step” and fully stopping her drug use. We talked about what she wanted in life, and how the drugs were in her way of achieving that, when she suddenly interrupted herself to correct her statement. “What’s really in my way is the law. The fact that it [her self-medication] is illegal”. In brief, Johanna felt good about herself and her progression towards a “normal life”, but she was reluctant to put the drugs down completely. She was not held back by her drug use, but by the harsh state control of her drug use.

To summarise, these drawings present clear examples of the complexity involved in maintaining desistance. The women’s lives, their social-, mental- and emotional states, were precarious and subject to ups and downs, setbacks and triumphs, as well as flat lines. Importantly, the graphs

clearly show how the women bounced back after setbacks – including relapses on narcotic drugs. This empirical finding has implications for criminal justice policy, which in its current form employs a zero tolerance approach to relapse for people under penal supervision. These findings suggest that reincarceration due to an inability to present a negative urine sample is an unnecessarily punitive practice.

Furthermore, the fuzzy lines that several women drew representing the present is also interesting, and telling of the many uncertainties experienced by women desisters, even two years into the process. The graphs are indicative of how much actually happens in two years' time in desistance. They also serve to capture and represent the processual understanding highlighted throughout this research project.

Method of Analysis

The analysis took place continuously as the project unfolded. I delved into the interview excerpts through a thematic analysis comprising explorations both longitudinally across the different sweeps of interviews, and horizontally across the sample. From the different topics covered in the interviews, common threads emerged between the women as shared experiences and as developments over time. The first stage of a more focused analysis was transcription and coding. In proximity to completion, I transcribed each interview verbatim and coded them into thematic nodes using QSR NVivo.

Initially, thematic coding built on the interview topics. Hence, the women's experiences of partners, friends, education, health, victimisation, contact with the police etc. all received their own nodes in a coding scheme. However, such prepared themes were often complemented during the interviews, as the women would come up with additional topics to cover aspects of their lives. Such unforeseen empirical findings are key to qualitative research, and in this case a likely result of the open and exploratory approach that informed the interviewing and analysis (cf. Aspers 2011; Rennstam & Wästerfors 2018).

The different analytical themes of the three journal articles included in this book all span several aspects of the women's lives. For example, the main theme in article I, dealing with traumatic experiences of past violent victimisation in desistance, is an overarching theme that seeped through

the women's stories about various topics and therefore were coded across different nodes. In particular, this analytical theme was prominent in the women's talk of *partners*, *victimisation*, and *health*. This theme manifested itself at the first sweep of interviews, and grew with every follow-up. The same is true for the main themes in articles II and III.

For article II, dealing with secrets and stigma when approaching mainstream society was a theme particularly common in the nodes *self-description*, *self-presentation (to others)*, and *work*. It was clear from the first interview through every subsequent sweep that the women put much thought and effort into their attempts at approaching conventional society. The longitudinal approach enabled following these attempts as they unfolded, which created the foundation for article II.

The overarching theme in article III, dreams and future aspirations, spanned topics such as *work*, *education*, *housing*, and *family*. This theme was already noticeable in the first sweep of interviews, where it was tied primarily to the question of why the women wanted to desist. Every subsequent interview followed up on how the women felt they had progressed (or not) towards the aspirations they had shared with me at the first interview. In addition, at the fourth and final interview, we revisited this theme of future aspirations, to explore if and how the women's aspirations had changed as their desistance journeys had progressed. Specifically, I asked them where they wanted to be or what they hoped would have happened in two years' time. Having discussed their responses, I then changed the phrasing of the question slightly, from hope to belief. As I did, I was careful to articulate that what they believed was to come did not have to differ from what they hoped for; it could be different, but in no way necessarily so. These questions and their respective responses constitute a major part of the analysis of article III.

As this book manifests, the project as a whole comprises more than a sum of the three topics in particular focus for the included articles. The approximate 100 hours of interviewing enabled engagement in a multitude of aspects of the women's lives. However, the focus was always on the women's experiences, and on what was most pressing and important in their lives. Undoubtedly, the rich material grounding this research project could have resulted in several additional articles, each elucidating pressing

issues in the women's lives. The three articles included in this book is the result of a combination of my active interviewing and listening to the women's stories on experiences of desistance from criminalised lifestyles, and my own understanding of contemporary desistance research and where this project best could contribute with new, exciting and important knowledge production to an expanding field. All three articles emphasise the processual aspects of desistance, particularly elucidating the struggles and hindrances, relations, motivations, and future aspirations involved. All three grapple with vital features of desistance from crime, and the methodological approach along with the focus on early stages of desistance among women elucidates new perspectives which problematise and develop current understandings and established 'truths' about desistance. The next chapter presents summaries of the three journal articles and their contributions to contemporary desistance research.

CHAPTER V

ECHOES, SHARKS, AND FUTURES: SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLES

This chapter presents summaries of the three journal articles included in this book. All articles draw on findings from the longitudinal interview design discussed above. These summaries concentrate on the aim and scope as well as findings and conclusions of each article.

Article I: Being Willing but Not Able: Echoes of Intimate Partner Violence as a Hindrance in Women's Desistance from Crime

As an echo from the past distorts every time it bounces, lingering experiences of past violent victimization evoke new experiences of hindrances to the women's desistance processes, long after the violent relationships are over.

Gålnander 2019:438

The first article deals with the women's traumatic experiences of past violent victimisation. Particularly, it elucidates how such experiences affect their opportunities to desist from crime. Criminalised women are subjected to continuous violence of a magnitude that is difficult to comprehend for someone who is not familiar with a criminalised lifestyle or the narcotic drug scene (Holmberg, Smirthwaite & Nilsson 2005; Jacobs 2001; Miller & Schwartz 1995). All ten women had been exposed to excessive and recurring violent victimisation, especially by intimate partners. Although none of them lived in such destructive relationships

when I met them, it was clear that these experiences had left traces that still invoked serious consequences for their life chances and opportunities.

The analysis unravels two distinct patterns of how experiences of violent victimisation *echo* and obstruct the women's efforts to change, desist from crime, and approach the mainstream. First, echoes of violent victimisation from intimate partners restrict the women's social lives, complicating an already fragile (re)connection to conventional society. Second, post-traumatic stress disorders directly related to violent victimisation restrict their agency and limit their abilities to act towards desistance.

The social consequences of violent victimisation are in part linked to the protected identities that the women obtained to get away from their perpetrators. Such protected identities necessitated that the women moved from their hometowns, changed their names, cut contact with friends and family (to make sure that they were not targeted by the violent men in their attempts to get to the women) and restrict their social mobility in many ways ranging from contacts with authorities to use of social media. As the women found themselves in a new city, under a new name and without the support from family and friends, isolation quickly ensued. Isolation is a common and painful experience among desisters that has been highlighted as potentially harmful for desistance processes (Nugent & Schinkel 2016). Additionally, the women were restricted in their chances to connect with new social contacts, partially because their previous traumatic experiences constrain their ability to trust in other people. Repeatedly finding themselves hindered in their efforts to connect with new people, the women faced goal failure which at worst could result in a state of hopelessness and marginalisation that aside from being painful also put their desistance processes at great risk of relapse.

The health-related consequences are primarily evident in the women's coping with post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD). Five women – half the sample – had PTSD clinically linked to recurring violent victimisation. PTSD can render even slightly stressful situations insurmountable, such as picking up and leaving children at day-care, seeking and applying for work or housing, or meeting new people. Being in the early stages of desistance, the women often faced such situations in their attempts to (re)connect with mainstream society, and PTSD often severely restricted

the women's opportunities for action. Much as with the social consequences, PTSD could render the women isolated, failing with their set goals and sending them into a state of hopelessness where their fragile desistance projects were at great risk.

Several of the women had ADHD in combination with PTSD, which further restricted their lives and especially their contact with the psychiatric care system. Additionally, drug use further complicated the women's eligibility for psychiatric care. The psychiatric care system wanted to medicate the trauma, but deemed the women unreceptive to medications due to abuse of narcotic drugs. Thus, the women were referred to the social services to deal with their addictions first. Hence, women with psychiatric problems who also struggle with drug use risk "falling through the cracks"; being too mentally unstable to get off the drugs, and too attached to the drugs to be treated for their mental illness. Falling through the cracks resulted in much pain and isolation along with feelings of failure and hopelessness. In some cases it also lead to relapse into drug use and other crime. A combination of mental health issues and drug related issues is common among criminalised women. The analysis stresses the importance of a holistic view in the care of women desisters that simultaneously targets both drug-related- and mental health issues.

In conclusion, Article I emphasises the complexity involved in attempting to leave a life of exclusion, marginalisation, drug use, crime and punishment behind. Such a change in lifestyle is a difficult endeavour for anyone, and this article unravels how all the classic structural barriers identified in previous desistance research (such as difficulties in obtaining housing, work, or new social contacts) are amplified as previous experiences of excessive and recurring violent victimisation echo in the present. In effect, these echoes of violent victimisation hinder the women's opportunities to act towards their goals of desistance from crime and inclusion into conventional society.

Article II: "Shark in the Fish Tank": Secrets and Stigma in Relational Desistance from Crime

"I feel like I don't even know how to be - I mean, what do they talk about, normal people?"

Kate, quoted in Gålnander 2020a:6

Fitting in with mainstream society can be a difficult task. For women with a history of convictions, the road to acceptance is particularly bumpy and narrow – full of pitfalls and doubt. In desistance, women with a criminalised past are often confronted with a dilemma: on the one hand, there may be much to gain by being upfront about the past. In particular, a troubled past can be utilised to emphasise how much the desisting individual has *changed for the better* (Maruna 2001). On the other hand, a criminalised past comes with significant social stigma, and segregation or even exclusion from conventional society is common (Braithwaite 1989; Maruna et al. 2004). Disclosing a deviant past can thus lead to further discrimination and even condemnation. The dilemma remains: how much should you disclose about your troubled past in desistance? Will people understand what you are going through?

Article II is devoted to these questions, and the hardships of fitting in with the mainstream for people with a criminalised past. All ten women had spent decades as outsiders, segregated and excluded from mainstream society (see Becker 1963). During their entire lives, they had been stigmatised based on their gender, poverty, convictions, drug use, and physical and psychological health. This multidimensional stigma had been internalised to affect the women's senses of self, and the analysis illustrates how their striving for acceptance and inclusion into the mainstream were hindered by feelings of guilt and shame.

Often, the women felt that they had to keep their histories secret from what they termed 'normal Smiths'. The analysis uncovers how this was caused by double-edged fear. Fear was double-edged in the sense that while the women were afraid of normal people's prejudice and shaming if told about their past, they also figured that normal people were afraid of them and their pasts. Such double-edged fear stemming from internalisation of multidimensional stigma made it insurmountable for the women to even speak about their pasts, let alone utilise it to emphasise a change for the better. The results show how guilt and shame made some women avoid socialising altogether, which of course hindered their efforts to (re)connect with society.

Despite the women's efforts to keep their pasts a secret, such secrets could nevertheless be revealed. When that happened, the result was often

additional feelings of guilt and shame for the women. Importantly, normal Smiths were more inclined to see a desister's history as a thing of the past than the desister was. Indeed, normal Smiths could reveal secrets about the women's past to others in order to emphasise how they had changed (and were still changing) for the better. However, such occasions were not successful in bringing the women closer to mainstream society. Instead, the women wanted to disappear from the face of the earth on such occasions, overcome by guilt and shame. The social stigma of their previous lifestyles had been internalised as part of their identity. When internalised, stigma becomes less tied to acts and more tied to the individual's social being, making it inherently difficult to discard.

Thus, having internalised multidimensional stigma stemming from their lives as 'deviant outsiders', even a well-intended recognition of change can become unwanted – at best perceived as a backhanded compliment. Indeed, such recognition can even read as an insult. Being recognised as 'better than before' can confirm that what they did before was wrong or bad, furthering guilt and shame. When struggling to reform and pass as normal in a new social context, being continuously perceived in light of what they were before thus becomes problematic. Being recognised as 'an improved other' implicates that the desisting individual still is an other, albeit 'better'. Such recognition can be counterproductive, cementing rather than alleviating a position as deviant. It follows from this discussion in article II that redemption is difficult, as recognition highlights unwanted labels.

These findings have implications for theory, policy and practice. Particularly, both future research and the criminal justice system could be developed by a reconceptualisation of what desistance entails. As of now, both focus strongly on *change* for individuals striving to desist from crime and (re)connect with society. For example, the Swedish prison and probation service work under a devise named "better out". Conceptualised as a vision for rehabilitation, the intent is to aid convicted people towards a better life post sentence. However, the choice of wording risks signalling that they are working to change their clients from something 'bad' to something 'better'. Based on the findings from article II, I suggest that this well intended vision should be rephrased into something more in line with desisters ambitions and aspirations for the

future. Rephrasing rehabilitation in line with desisters aspirations would signal that the prison and probation service is working *with* its clients towards a shared goal – rehabilitation of convicted people into full or ‘normal’ citizens of conventional society.

As a final remark pertaining to conclusions from this article, I wish to emphasise that convicted women are in need of support and tools to cope with excessive guilt and shame. That criminalisation results in guilt and shame is well established, and this article offers an in-depth contribution that expands our knowledge of how this affects ongoing attempts at desistance from crime. It is clear from the analysis that the women lack ways to cope with their guilt and shame, to the point where they would rather isolate themselves than engage in situation that could result in additional shaming.

Article III: Desistance From Crime – to What? Exploring Future Aspirations and Their Implications for Processes of Desistance

It was soon clear, however, that the women allowed themselves to dream, and that much of their current situation circulated around the active and agentic pursuit of such dreams.

Gålnander 2020b:263

Desistance processes are precarious, and setbacks and relapses are common features, harmful both for the individuals directly involved and for society at large (see Halsey et al. 2017). Desistance research has primarily prioritised the processual movement away *from crime*. Aiming to extend existing knowledge, I dedicated article III to the future-oriented question of what desisters aspire to be(come), and what they believe that they are desisting *into*. Particularly, the article addresses the questions: What aspirations do desisters hold for their futures as they begin their journeys towards a changed lifestyle? How do desisters go about pursuing these aspirations? And how do structural forces, personal resources, and life chances affect this pursuit?

The repeated in-depth interviews revealed a diverse range of future aspirations among desisters, and the analysis unravels gendered, class-, and age-graded aspects of such aspirations. The women perceived their

present as well as their futures in relation to their pasts. Having lived lives of exclusion and conviction, these pasts were often conceptualised as being in the way of the future, as obstacles to be overcome. Processes of cumulative disadvantage had stripped the women of socio-economic resources, and some women lacked even the most basic human necessities of shelter, social contacts and health. This was especially true among the older women in the sample, which is in line with theory since the downward-spiral process of cumulative disadvantage progresses further with time spent in an excluded and convicted social position (Sampson & Laub 1997). Despite their scant circumstances, the women allowed themselves to dream. The analysis reveals important divisions in future aspirations among desisters and, importantly, how opportunities to realise them are dependent on gender, class and age. The analysis clearly shows how social position affects future aspirations among desisters, and a severely disadvantaged position could put up stark barriers to the very ability to visualise a chance for inclusion in mainstream society.

In short, these results implicate that age-graded connotations of future aspirations coalesce with poverty and gendered expectations of normality. Life scripts as cultural imaginaries tied to class, age, and gender condition what dreams are available to pursue – or even formulate. The younger women dreamed of futures of inclusion and normality, often in line with a middle-class ideal of normative femininity. Their social position offered structural and personal opportunities for inclusion in the mainstream, notably including the possibility to build new identities via higher education or (re)claiming an identity as caring mothers. Such opportunities allowed the younger women to visualise a future as included citizens of conventional society.

Conversely, the older women had difficulties discerning a place for them in society. Notions of the “happy family” and higher education appeared to be blocked, perceived as something for others, not for them. This understanding was exacerbated when support units that the women relied on failed to deliver what they needed to feel included as members of society. One prominent example relates to the employment service’s inability to present the women with opportunities for “real work”: i.e. hired positions where they would conduct meaningful tasks and pay taxes. Instead, they were offered passive forms of pastime in rehabilitative

programmes that could entail “sitting and knitting”. These rehabilitation programmes are constructed in accordance with dated gender ideals proclaiming passivity and servility, causing them to clash with contemporary femininity ideals sprung from a middle-class position, which inform the aspirations among desisters.

Relatedly, although stable housing was important to everyone, essential differences emerged in the narratives. While the younger women dreamed of a house where they could live happily with their children, the older women sought solitude and dreamed to retreat into a house in the countryside where they would be left in peace, able to escape the control of men and patriarchal society that had characterised their lives. Here, the influence of normatively age-graded as well as gendered and classed life scripts on desisters’ outlook and future aspirations is conspicuous. While the younger women were able to formulate and pursue dreams of inclusion in mainstream society in line with a middle-class ideal of normative femininity, the older women often faced more restricted options. As a result of blocked opportunities for education, employment, and happy families, the older women’s future aspirations were characterised by dreams of freedom and escaping the toil of otherness.

As a final point, it is worth emphasising that if desisters can acquire basic existential human necessities, they are more free to hope, plan, and even take action towards fulfilling their goals, which likely will drive them towards inclusion in society. Moving slightly away from the article’s main focus on structural factors, the analysis also deepens the theoretical understanding of desistance processes by analysing how dreams and future aspirations interact with agentic efforts to guide the pathway into conventionality and acceptance. Some women took successful steps towards their dreams of inclusion in the mainstream. In the concluding discussion of article III, I argue that the power inherent in achieving interim goals on the way towards a visualised dream must be acknowledged in desistance research, policy and practice. Such interim goal fulfillments have emotional value that spark hope and allow dreams to take firmer shape, rendering the pathway to desistance clearer and more tangible. Importantly, setting up and fulfilling interim goals on a journey towards inclusion and normality provides desisters with a sense of

direction and a reassuring notion of *being on the right track* towards the dream.

These findings have several implications for policy and practice. Particularly, the discussion emphasises vast opportunities for state support systems such as the prison and probation services, social services, and employment services to offer more effective actions. If they were to factor in future aspirations of willing desisters, state support could help desisters identify and pursue interim goals on their ways towards desistance from crime and inclusion in the mainstream. Specific needs will, of course, vary between individuals, but the mechanism of achieving interim goals towards inclusion should guide efforts to develop more effective policy and support programmes. Moreover, state support units should inform desisters about what support the state can offer to facilitate the identified steps towards desistance. Willing desisters harbour dreams and future aspirations that established citizens of society would define as rather modest. After years of exclusion, poverty and conviction, however, such modest dreams can be perceived as insurmountable without societal support. Article III emphasises dreams of having a home, education, and employment. All fall within areas where the state has ample opportunity – and in fact obligations – to offer support for its citizens, convicted or not. In the final paragraphs of article III, I problematise the fact that such support is increasingly withheld from people with convictions, in Sweden but also internationally (see e.g. Dwyer 2004; Gottschalk 2016). Rendering people ineligible for residing in public housing, receiving public benefits like welfare and student loans, and working in certain occupations presents structural barriers that can prove detrimental to processes of desistance. In effect, such policy risks locking willing desisters in marginalised positions with few alternatives to a continuation of a criminalised lifestyle.

CHAPTER VI

DEVELOPING DESISTANCE A DISCUSSION OF CONTRIBUTIONS

This chapter will discuss some key contributions drawn from this research project that have potential to further the understanding of desistance processes. This discussion builds on findings presented in the three included articles. While the articles have their respective main themes that they outline and discuss in detail, each article also presents important findings that go beyond the main arguments made. This chapter deals specifically with these important ‘bonus tracks’. With a holistic view including overarching findings of the project as a whole, such findings are advanced and developed further here than what was possible in the journal articles.

Starting off, article I offers a critical contribution to the understanding of a key theoretical concept within desistance research: ‘Knifing off’. In order to break up from criminalised lifestyles, prospective desisters tend to ‘knife off’ their old friends and surroundings, meaning that they cut off contact to peers and places that could potentially pull them back towards crime and conviction (Laub & Sampson 2003; Maruna & Roy 2007). The idea is to gain a ‘fresh start’ and be rid of social expectations or bad influences. The protected identities obtained by several of the women in this study to escape violent intimate partners offer salient opportunities for knifing off. However, as is clear from article I, the women’s experiences serve to complicate this key concept in desistance theory.

Protected identities forced some of the women to move from their old hometowns and knife off their bonds to friends and even relatives as they could otherwise be used by abusive ex partners to find, control, and hurt them. Hence, protected identities could present opportunities for fresh starts for the women, allowing the knifing off of destructive and criminogenic elements of their social surroundings. However, in the process, the women were forcefully cut off from their entire social networks. Pro-social and supportive contacts disappeared as well, resulting in prolonged and involuntary isolation for the women (cf. Nugent & Schinkel 2016). Stripped of their social networks and in a new environment, breaking the resulting isolation proved a tough barrier to overcome.

The findings from article I thus highlight harms of escalating social exclusion for individuals leaving a criminalised lifestyle behind. To counter this, efforts should be made to aid desisters' attempts to socialise and meet new people to break the isolation brought on by the process of knifing off. The women identified several areas where they felt unsupported. This could serve as a call for action to develop authorities' response to forced knifing off and ensuing isolation.

Article II offers several insights that are worthy of further engagement and discussion. One interesting discovery pertains to how Kate repeatedly finds herself in situations where she is compelled to tell the truth about her past, despite preferring keeping her past secret. When I asked her how this could be, why she was expected to tell her 'life story', she replied "Well, you always do in treatment". The *treatment* she refers to is a variety of self-help and twelve-step programmes which are commonly used for desistance and recovery, in Sweden and internationally (cf. Leverentz 2014). The practice and language of such treatment programmes has been problematized in previous research due to the inherent potential for furthering labelling and stigma (Leverentz 2014). Twelve-step programmes and the language used for talking about addiction parallels the discourse on prisoners and convicted people. For example, members of AA remain alcoholics for life. They may abstain from drinking and thus be 'recovering alcoholics', but they are nevertheless still a form of alcoholic. This identity is not reversible or removable. The same can be said for the discursive understanding of convictions and incarceration; one

can be an ex-prisoner, or an ex-offender, and one may cease and desist criminalised acts for good, but one cannot return to a pre-prisoner identity (Ebaugh 1988; Leverentz 2014). Article II, and article III, shows that the women aspire to lead conventional lives, have their pasts deleted, and pass as ‘normal’ in the eyes of ‘normal people’. Against such empirical findings, the twelve-step approach and the general discourse on ‘ex-offenders’ can be counterproductive to processes of desistance, as it may serve to cement labels that desisters want to leave behind for good.

Indeed, desistance is often conceptualised as *changing for the better* (e.g. Maruna 2001; Nugent & Schinkel 2016). Article II challenges this notion, which is at the heart of the generativity approach in desistance (see e.g. McNeill & Maruna 2007). Often set within a twelve-step logic, generativity is a way to cope with stigma and gain social recognition as a changed individual. By sharing experiences, strength and hope with others who are less far along in recovery and reconnection with mainstream society, the desister can utilise past wrongdoings to make good, and gain a new social role as a ‘professional ex’, ‘wounded healer’, or peer supporter (this is the twelfth step). This practice is thus conceptualised as grounded in the generative desire and commitment to ‘reach back’ and help other similarly stigmatised people, and in doing so separate stigmatised deeds from the person, who is recognised as changed (cf. Masson & Österman 2017).

However, the women in this study were dealing with internalised, multidimensional stigma stemming from a lifetime of marginalisation and being labelled as ‘deviant outsiders’. When internalised, stigma becomes tied less to acts and more to the individual’s social being, making it inherently difficult to discard. Article II clearly shows how it was insurmountable for the women to capitalise on the generative potential of revealing past wrongdoings, i.e. to use information of their pasts to emphasise how they had changed for the better. Having internalised multidimensional stigma, even a process of social recognition can become unwanted and, at best, be perceived as backhanded compliments. Indeed, such recognition can even read as an insult, since social recognition as ‘better than before’ can confirm that what they did before was wrong or bad, furthering guilt and shame. When struggling to reform and pass as normal in a new social context, being continuously perceived in light of what they were before thus becomes problematic. Being recognised as ‘an

improved other' implicates that the desisting individual still is an other, albeit 'better'. This renders the 'ex'-label problematic. Such recognition can be counterproductive, cementing rather than alleviating a position as deviant.

It follows that redemption is difficult, as recognition of change highlights unwanted labels. Article II is full of examples of how heavily stigmatised desisters prefer to have their pasts deleted and build a new identity over creating a changed identity by continuously being perceived in light of past shameful and guilt-laden acts. This finding thus challenges current understandings of the spheres involved in desistance processes (as discussed in chapter three, cf. Nugent & Schinkel 2016). Going forward, article II suggests that relational (or tertiary) desistance is conceptualised more in terms of the importance for desisters to gain social recognition as 'normal' or included in mainstream society, and with less focus on recognition of change, from something 'bad' into something better.

Since research on men's desistance has conceptualised generativity as enabling social recognition and de-labelling necessary for relational desistance, the findings in article II suggest gendered aspects of generativity in desistance. The process of internalising stigma may be at the heart of this gen(d)erativity dilemma, as double deviance results in criminalised women being disproportionately affected by stigma, guilt and shame (cf. Masson and Österman 2017; Sharpe 2016).

A last aspect suitable for further discussion here pertains to the management of secrets and stigma that is at the heart of article II. As is clear from the article's discussion of findings, the women were convinced that little to no good could come of displaying discreditable information when approaching conventional society. However, since it is up to the stigmatised individual to disclose concealable stigmas, withholding discreditable information can render the individual blameworthy. This presented dilemmas for the women as they were approaching conventional society. Nevertheless, when facing the choice, the women preferred keeping their past secret over using it to emphasise a change for the better. This practice arguably involves a rational aspect; as long as a secret is kept, the women are still in control of it. In effect, revealing the secret remains an option. Once a secret is out, however, it is difficult if not

impossible to return to a pre-reveal identity. On the other hand, waiting too long before revealing a secret can present risks to social relations. Additionally, a secret always risks being revealed by someone (or something) other than the person keeping it (which happened to several of the women, see article II). As pointed out by Goffman (1963:74) “nearly all matters which are very secret are still known to someone, and hence cast a shadow”. It follows that if a secret is revealed ‘too late’ or by someone other than the person keeping the secret, people might get hurt, and further guilt and shame can be put on the individual for being dishonest in keeping a secret.

Article III critically reviewed current understandings of hope vis-a-vis agency in desistance. Hope has been framed as a necessary if not sufficient condition for the success of an individual’s desistance process (LeBel et al. 2008). Yet, hope has been a notoriously fuzzy concept within desistance research, proven difficult to pin down. Article III contributes to current knowledge with a careful discussion of the concepts hope, dreams, and future aspirations. The result was a distinction between dreams and future aspirations intended to guide that study as well as future research in its attempts to capture, analyse, and discuss the different strivings among desisters. In article III, dreams were conceptualised as inner wants and wishes directed towards the future, which can be held without a specific intention to take action to realise them. Future aspirations in relation to such dreams capture the active pursuit of dreams, via agentic action.

This theoretical distinction is thus also a contribution to the overarching debate on the role of agency and structure, as discussed in chapter two. While some theorists have emphasised the importance of hope in desistance, others have warned that an over-reliance on such personal motivations or agency results in overly simplistic conceptualisations of desistance. The contribution made in article III thus utilises future aspirations in a fruitful way to capture how hopes or dreams are purposefully pursued in agentic efforts that are always acted out in an interplay between the (individual) resources at hand (i.e. social position) and structural forces such as economic systems and sociohistorical cultural values (i.e. social structure, cf. Farrall et al. 2011; Nilsson et al. 2013). Theorising future aspirations in this way offers a valuable contribution,

highlighting how agentic and subjective strivings for a better future are critical for desistance processes, yet conditioned by social context.

Furthermore, article III elucidates an important discrepancy between the women's own aspirations and what state support units such as the prison and probation services, social services, and employment services actually offer them. The criminalised lifestyles that the women have been involved in entail entrepreneurial elements in a fast paced, drug heavy street-crime setting (cf. Maher 1997). When turning to conventional society, they envision themselves as self-employed entrepreneurs, salespeople or emergency-care nurses. Against this backdrop, it is understandable that the women experienced frustrating goal failures when they, after years on benefits, were offered 'activity grants' instead of employment. Examples of activities that the women were offered in relation to these grants were knitting, sewing and gardening. The women viewed such activities as slow or passive and thus unsuitable for them. Kate even framed it as "some kind of human storage". Johanna said that she "would flip!" if she were offered such a deal at an upcoming meeting with the employment service (which she anticipated would happen). Several of the women in the study shared this view.

As stated in article III, this discrepancy between the women's aspirations and the reality of employment programmes is a telling example of how rehabilitation programmes available for women desisters are constructed in accordance with outdated gender ideals proclaiming passivity and servility, and how such programs clash with contemporary femininity ideals sprung from a middle-class position, which inform the aspirations among desisters striving to lead 'normal' lives. This discrepancy is likely to be detrimental for people striving towards desistance and integration into the mainstream. Although a criminalised lifestyle comes with many problems, it also provides individuals with at least momentary escapes into excitement and power. As pointed out by Maruna, LeBel, and Lanier (2004:137), if approaching conventional society "means little more than accepting docility, self-hatred and stigma, there is little reason to desist from such diversion". During the years that this study followed the ten women's efforts to desist from crime, three women momentarily relapsed into drug use (Kate, Johanna and Susie) and other crime (just Kate and Susie) as a direct response to experiences of repeated goal failure,

frustrating bureaucratic (in)action, and feelings of unwanted passivity (cf. Halsey et al. 2017).

Another important finding from article III that can be developed further here refers to how the younger women in the sample aspired to educate themselves. Such educational aspirations included concrete plans to undertake higher education. Despite coming from severely disadvantaged backgrounds, and often without having finished lower secondary education as youths, the younger women perceived higher education as attainable in desistance. This finding stands in stark contrast to findings concerning perceptions of higher education among young women desisters in other countries (see e.g. Sharpe 2017). One explanation to this is the fact that higher education is free in Sweden, whereas in many other countries (including the UK, where Shape's study was undertaken), higher education comes with significant tuition fees, which effectively obstructs (women) desisters from enrolling. Education was a prominent way to build identity for the women in this study, and recent research has emphasised the power of education as a catalyst for identity change in desistance (Honeywell 2020).

A last contribution to be drawn from article III is the critique offered in relation to a key concept within desistance research and the criminal justice system: **re-integration**. Re-integration implies that prospective desisters who are to be 're-habilitated'/'re-integrated'/'re-settled' or 're-stored', previously occupied a social status to which it is desirable to return. This is simply not the case for the women in this study, and the same has been said for "the majority of criminal prisoners worldwide" (Carlen 2012:3). Coming from severely disadvantaged backgrounds, and having spent (parts of) their childhoods incarcerated or in foster homes, the women felt that they had never been part of conventional society. Spending adulthood in criminalised lifestyles advanced such experiences of exclusion or marginalisation. As is clear from article II and article III, such life-long marginalisation or even exclusion makes it difficult for prospective desisters to comprehend what a normative life would entail. The women's dreams and aspirations in desistance were always about breaking new ground, about achieving things, status, or security that they had never experienced previously. Therefore, although the women strived for integration, the prefix 're' in re-integration, re-settlement or re-entry is

misleading. A more cynical reading of reintegration in this regard is that ex-prisoners are deliberately kept in the margins – they are to re-enter society by being returned to the same marginalised position that got them into prison in the first place – which can explain why reconviction is more common than change post release (cf. Carlen 2012). The language used in re-entry research and criminal justice practice should be revised to avoid this pitfall. Instead of restoration, focus could be on supporting full citizenship among people who have served their conviction time. If we are serious about breaking the revolving doors of prisonisation, there needs to be a place in society for released prisoners other than a return to the margin.

CHAPTER VII

FINAL WORDS

The prospective and longitudinal design with repeated in-depth interviews allowed this project to follow the desistance processes of ten women as they unfolded. This approach enabled close encounters with a complex phenomenon, and the results serve to deepen the understanding of desistance from crime. As a main contribution from this research project as a whole, the different findings have emphasised the uncertainties involved in the *going* straight, or maintaining desistance processes, in ways that add nuance to and critically further contemporary understandings in the research field and criminal justice practice. In search for ‘what works’, much previous research has focused on turning points or opportunities for change via retrospective recollections from people who have ‘made it’ in desistance (Carlsson 2012; see e.g. Giordano et al. 2002; Laub & Sampson 2003). The prospective and exploratory approach of this project thus adds to current knowledge by elucidating experiences of structural barriers, relational uncertainties, personal doubt, hope, and aspirations involved in ongoing desistance processes. Looking forward, it is important for future research and criminal justice practice to acknowledge desistance as complex processes subject to relapse and fraught with emotions, hindrances, and setbacks, but also with hope and aspirations that must all be taken into consideration.

Desisters face many obstacles on the road to reform. Ending up a disaster is a real risk. Succeeding in conventional society, by obtaining employment, housing and a meaningful social life, can prove challenging to anyone (cf. Merton 1938). People with convictions face barriers added to such challenges in the form of labelling, discrimination, poverty,

exclusion or outright condemnation (Sampson & Laub 1997). This research project has exposed implications of such barriers for heavily stigmatised, victimised and socially excluded women as they attempt to leave criminalised lifestyles and approach conventionality. Among the most striking features of the women's desistance processes was the intrinsic isolation involved (cf. Nugent & Schinkel 2016). The women were largely alone in their battles against gendered discrimination, poverty, drug dependency, repeated convictions, trauma and internalised stigma. Article II elucidates that internalising the multidimensional stigma of a criminalised lifestyle makes it difficult to socialise and break isolation in desistance. Article I emphasises this even stronger in relation to how past victimisation hinders desisters' efforts both at socialising (due to trust issues and forced knifing off of pro-social support networks) and how psychiatric conditions (such as PTSD and ADHD) render dealing with everyday situations insurmountable without proper interpersonal support. Article III concludes that for some of the women, a life integrated into mainstream society was perceived as something for others, unachievable for them.

As such, victimisation and condemnation complicate desistance even further, and the barriers commonly faced by people with convictions are even tougher to overcome when struggling with trauma and internalised stigma. In many ways, then, desistance among heavily stigmatised, victimised and socially excluded women can be likened to an obstacle course (cf. Österman 2018). The punitive Swedish drug policy constitutes another tangible structural element on this obstacle course which promotes processes of marginalisation for people defined as having a drug problem (Bäckman et al. 2017; see also Room 2005). The vast negative implications of a policy that criminalises drug use and drug users is an issue raised repeatedly in Swedish criminological research (Alm & Bäckman 2020; Bäckman et al. 2017; Estrada & Nilsson 2012; Lander 2003; 2015;). This research has emphasised the multifaceted repercussions facing women whose bodies and entire lifestyles are criminalised, controlled, convicted and marginalised. Since the intended outcome has been achieved (it is hard to be a drug abuser), but with opposite effects (drug use is increasing, along with convictions and drug-related death rates), evidence suggests that a change of policy is the way forward.

What desisters really want, and need, on this obstacle course towards inclusion and redemption is solidarity and citizenship integration (cf. McNeill 2016). As argued in the conclusion of article III, if state support units such as the prison and probation services, social services, and employment services were future oriented and based on considerations of wants and needs, and on solidarity rather than looking back at previous, condemned deeds to estimate risk for future socially unaccepted action, more effective and successful support could be developed to help people who strive to change their lives and cease offending. Effective and successful support is urgently needed since relapse and reconviction is a source of much harm, both for the individuals directly involved and for society at large.

I realise that such suggestions may sound farfetched in relation to the punitive aims of contemporary criminal justice systems. Why should people convicted of crimes be listened to? Why should their hopes and aspirations to do good in the future be facilitated? As pointed out by Maruna (2020), the answer to such rhetorical questions is that this is how justice should work. At the heart of justice lies the opportunity – or even requirement – for individuals to prove themselves worthy of integration into the mainstream. Just as justice requires harmful acts to be punished, it follows by the same logic that good acts should be rewarded, and justice systems need to facilitate both processes. If the criminal justice system is serious about its utilitarian aim to reduce crime, more emphasis needs to be on the latter than the former. This research project offers insights into what desisters need when attempting to leave criminalised lifestyles. Trauma treatment, opportunities to socialise, being perceived as people, and assistance with housing, education and employment are issues that all fall within areas where support from the state can be expected by its citizens, convicted or not.

POPULÄRVETENSKAPLIG SAMMANFATTNING PÅ SVENSKA

När människor fastnar i kriminaliserade livsstilar leder det till stora problem och mycket lidande, både för de individer som är direkt berörda och för samhället i stort. Samtidigt är det en mödosam process att lämna ett sätt att leva för ett annat. Både i forskningen och i samhälleliga insatser för att bryta kriminaliserade livsstilar utgår man ifrån att individer behöver förändra sitt sätt att vara, tänka och leva (se t.ex. Giordano et al. 2002; Laub & Sampson 2003; Maruna 2001). Däremot diskuteras sällan vad en sådan livsstilsförändring innebär på djupet. Hur gör människor för att förändra sina liv och upphöra med brott? Hur påverkar individuella och strukturella förutsättningar möjligheterna till sådan förändring? Varför misslyckas så många med sina försök att vända på sina liv? Vilka svårigheter och kval möter de som försöker? Kan vi förstå dessa viktiga frågor bättre ökar möjligheterna för att fler ska kunna ta sig ur destruktiva mönster.

Sådana frågor står i fokus för den forskning som den här boken avhandlar. Boken fullbordar ett forskningsprojekt som fokuserat på kvinnors upphörande med brott. Den huvudsakliga forskningsfrågan som väglett projektet är 'Vad är viktigt för kriminaliserade kvinnor när de strävar efter att förändra sina liv och upphöra med brott?' Denna breda forskningsfråga fångar både hinder och hjälpmedel på vägen mot ett annat liv; Vad hjälper? Vad hindrar? Och varför?

Resultaten och analyserna bygger på upprepade djupintervjuer med tio kvinnor i Sverige. Dessa kvinnor hade levt större delen av sina liv i utanförskap, marginalisering och fattigdom. I decennier hade kvinnorna varit aktiva i kriminaliserade livsstilar, där vardagen präglades av såkallad 'gatubrottslighet'; drogrelaterade brott, stölder, inbrott, misshandel och liknande. När projektet drog igång hade dessa kvinnor precis påbörjat sina försök att förändra sina liv och upphöra med brott. Under två års tid kunde jag genom de upprepade intervjuerna ta del av deras erfarenheter och följa deras strävanden i realtid. Jag har presenterat resultat ifrån

studien genom artiklar som publicerats i vetenskapliga tidskrifter. Här följer sammanfattningar av dessa resultat.

Artikel I: Våldsutsatthet hindrar upphörandeprocessen

Den första artikeln fokuserar på kvinnornas upplevelser av våldsutsatthet, och hur sådana erfarenheter påverkar möjligheten att upphöra med brott. Vardagen för kvinnor i kriminaliserade livsstilar är våldsam på ett sätt och till en nivå som är svår att förstå för människor som inte är bekanta med den kriminaliserade drogvärlden. Samtliga tio kvinnor har tidigare levt liv präglade av våld, särskilt från män de varit i relationer med. Även fast alla kvinnorna hade lämnat dessa relationer när jag träffade dem var det mycket tydligt i våra intervjuer hur dessa erfarenheter fortfarande hade allvarliga konsekvenser för deras liv och möjligheter.

Genom intervjuerna framträdde två tydliga linjer i hur tidigare våldsutsatthet ekar tillbaka i nutid och hindrar kvinnornas strävan att lägga om sina liv och inkluderas i samhället. Våldshistoriken får nämligen både sociala och hälsomässiga konsekvenser.

De sociala konsekvenserna är delvis knutna till de skyddade identiteter som kvinnorna erhållit för att komma bort ifrån de våldsamma männen. Sådana skyddade identiteter har gjort det nödvändigt för kvinnorna att byta stad, ändra sina namn, säga upp kontakten med nära och kära (för att dessa inte ska råka illa ut, eller på annat sätt användas av männen för att komma åt kvinnorna) och begränsa hur de rör sig i det offentliga rummet, i allt ifrån myndighetskontakter till användandet av sociala medier. När kvinnorna hamnar i en ny stad, under nya namn och utan stöd från familj och vänner är risken stor att de blir isolerade. Isolering är vanligt bland människor som försöker upphöra med brott, och tidigare studier har visat att isolering är skadlig för sådana upphörandeprocesser. Kvinnorna är dessutom begränsade i sina försök att skapa nya sociala kontakter, vilket delvis beror på att tilliten till andra människor inskränkts på grund av det våld de utstått under många år. När kvinnorna upprepade gånger försöker skapa nya sociala kontakter utan att lyckas kan detta i värsta fall leda till känslor av hopplöshet och utanförskap, vilket förutom smärta även utsätter kvinnorna för stora risker att återfalla i brott.

De hälsomässiga konsekvenserna är framförallt kopplade till PTSD (posttraumatiskt stressyndrom) som fem av de tio kvinnorna blivit

diagnosticerade med som direkt följd av deras upprepade våldsutsatthet. PTSD gör det svårt att hantera stress även i vardagliga situationer som att hämta och lämna på dagis, söka jobb, bostad eller träffa nya människor. Eftersom kvinnorna ofta behöver hantera sådana stressiga situationer i sina försök att inkluderas i samhället ställer detta till stora problem för deras upphörandeprocesser. Även här kan PTSD leda till att kvinnorna isolerar sig, misslyckas med de mål de sätter upp och således hamnar i ett stadie av hopplöshet som innebär stora risker för återfall i brott.

Flera av kvinnorna har ADHD i kombination med PTSD, vilket försvårar för dem både i vardagen men särskilt i kontakten med psykiatrin. Kvinnor med psykiatriska problem i kombination med drogproblematik hamnar dessutom mellan stolarna på psykiatrin och socialtjänsten, då deras drogbruk gör dem olämpliga för medicinering inom psykiatrin. Således är kvinnorna för beroende av kriminaliserade droger för att få hjälp genom psykiatrin, men har samtidigt för stora psykologiska problem för att kunna sluta med narkotikan. Att på detta sätt falla mellan stolarna vållar stor smärta, isolering, känslor av misslyckande och hopplöshet samt till och med återfall i brott. Således visar studien på vikten av ett holistiskt stödpaket som hjälper dessa individer att ta itu med både narkotikaproblematiken och de psykologiska bekymren samtidigt.

I sin helhet visar studien på den enorma komplexitet som det innebär att försöka lämna ett liv av utanförskap, narkotikaanvändning, kriminalitet och bestraffning. Sådana livsstilsförändringar är svåra för vem som helst som försöker sig på det, och denna studie visar hur alla de klassiska barriärerna som identifierats i tidigare forskning (exempelvis svårigheter att skaffa arbete, bostad och nya sociala kontakter) försvåras ytterligare genom att tidigare erfarenheter av allvarlig och upprepad våldsutsatthet ekar tillbaka i nutiden och försämrar kriminaliserade kvinnors möjligheter att handla och verka för att nå sina mål och inkluderas i det konventionella samhället.

Artikel II: Stigma och upphörande med brott

“Jag känner att jag vet fan inte riktigt hur man är – alltså vad pratar man om, normala människor?”

Den andra artikeln fokuserar på det samhälleliga stigma och de skuld- och skamkänslor som följer kriminaliserade livsstilar. De tio kvinnorna har levt

decennier i utanförskap. Under hela sina liv har de blivit stigmatiserade utifrån deras kön, fattigdom, domar, drogbruk, samt fysiska och psykiska hälsa. Denna mångfacetterade stigmatisering har påverkat deras självbild, och studiens resultat visar tydligt hur kvinnornas strävan efter att accepteras och inkluderas i samhället hindrades av skuld- och skamkänslor.

Kvinnorna upplevde ofta att de behövde hålla sin historia hemlig för "vanliga Svenssons". Sådana upplevelser bottnade i en tudelad rädsla. Dels var kvinnorna rädda för att mötas av ytterligare skuldbelägganden och fördomar om de skulle berätta om sitt förflutna. Men kvinnorna menade även att "vanliga Svenssons" var rädda för dem och deras erfarenheter. Denna tudelade rädsla gjorde det oöverstigit för kvinnorna att prata om sitt förflutna överhuvudtaget, och än mindre möjligt att synliggöra var de kom ifrån som ett led i att manifesteras en förändring. Resultaten visar hur skuld och skamkänslor fick vissa kvinnor att helt undvika sociala situationer, vilket så klart försvårade deras försök att bli del av det konventionella samhället.

Även om kvinnorna själva försökte hålla sin historia dold så kunde sådana hemligheter läcka ut ändå. När det hände ledde det till ytterligare skuld- och skamkänslor för kvinnorna. Ofta kunde "vanliga Svenssons" visa förståelse och betona och synliggöra den förändring som kvinnorna gått (och fortfarande går) igenom. Kvinnorna själva ville dock helst sjunka genom marken när sådana situationer uppstod, översköjda av skuld och skamkänslor som var mycket svåra att hantera. Stigmat och utanförskapet från deras tidigare liv hade blivit del av deras identitet. När det sker är det oerhört svårt att skaka av sig känslor av att vara annorlunda, att inte passa in eller att vara fel. Att i det läget bli uppmärksam på den förändring de gått igenom blir problematiskt. Att bli bekräftad som 'bättre nu' påminner dels om att vad de gjort tidigare var 'dåligt', vilket ökar på skuld- och skamkänslor. Vidare kan sådana kommentarer cementera känslor av avvikelser och att vara annorlunda, eftersom 'bättre än en avvikare' implicerar att kvinnorna fortfarande är avvikare, även om de är bättre nu än de var förr.

Dessa resultat har implikationer både för forskning och för rättsväsendet. Framförallt bör både forskning och kriminalvård reflektera över det fokus

som läggs på *förändring* hos människor som strävar efter att bryta med kriminalitet och närma sig det konventionella samhället. Kriminalvårdens vision om att dömda ska komma 'bättre ut' från fängelsevistelser kan således problematiseras. Artikel II visar att fokus fortsättningsvis bör läggas på att få tidigare fängelsedömda att känna sig och fungera som 'normala', fullvärdiga och delaktiga medborgare, snarare än att fokusera på förändring från något 'dåligt' till något 'bättre'. Vidare visar studiens resultat att fängelsedömda kvinnor behöver få stöd och verktyg för att hantera skuld och skamkänslor. Bättre stöd behövs också både i fängelse, frivård och av arbetsförmedlingen för att tidigare fängelsedömda ska känna hopp om att få plats bland 'normala människor' i samhället.

Artikel III: Hopp och framtid i upphörandeprocessen

Artikel III är framåtblickande. Medan största fokus för upphörandeforskningen har varit just på att individer ska upphöra med brott, ställer artikel III frågan om vad dessa individer ska ägna sig åt istället – och vad samhället kan erbjuda som stöd. Vad ser människor som levt hela sina liv i utanförskap, kriminalitet och ofta missbruk framför sig när de önskar förändra sina liv? Vilka drömmar och planer har de? Hur bär de sig åt för att nå dessa, och hur spelar strukturella förutsättningar in i deras strävanden?

Resultaten visar på en stor bredd i de tio kvinnornas framtidsaspirationer, och analysen avslöjar genus- klass- och åldersgraderade aspekter av sådana framtidsaspirationer. Kvinnorna såg sin nutid och framtid i ljuset av deras förflutna. Att ha levt i utanförskap och fördömande gör att det förflutna ofta upplevdes vara i vägen för framtidsutsikterna, som hinder att överkomma. Genom en process där ofärd och inskränkt handlingsutrymme leder till ökad ofärd och ännu mindre handlingsutrymme i en nedåtgående spiral hade kvinnorna nått en punkt där de saknade de mest basala mänskliga behov såsom tak över huvudet, hälsa och en social samvaro. Detta gällde särskilt de äldre kvinnorna i studien. Trots skrala förutsättningar tillät sig alla kvinnor att bära på drömmar inför framtiden. Analysen klargör hur framtidsaspirationer och, än viktigare, hur möjligheterna att uppfylla dem skiljer sig åt beroende på genus, klass och ålder. Ens sociala position påverkar ens framtidsaspirationer, och marginalisering kan till och med hindra själva

förmågan att föreställa sig ett liv som inkluderad i det konventionella samhället.

I korthet visar studien att framtidsaspirationer är både kopplade till ålder och formade av fattigdom och genusrelaterade förväntningar om normalitet. Meningsfull sysselsättning var viktigt för de flesta, och vägen dit behöver ofta gå via utbildning. Att ägna sig åt utbildning kändes dock betydligt mer görbart för de unga kvinnorna i studien än vad det gjorde för de äldre, vilket visar på åldersnormer i samhällets syn på utbildning och när det 'ska' ske i livet. På många sätt hade de yngre kvinnorna lättare att föreställa sig ett framtida liv som fungerande medborgare och som inkluderade i samhället. De äldre kvinnorna i studien hade svårare att urskilja någon given plats för dem i det konventionella samhället. Trots att de ofta delade drömmen om normalitet och inkludering i samhället så uppfattade de ett sådant liv som någonting för andra, men ouppnåeligt för dem själva. Som ett resultat präglades de äldre kvinnornas framtidsvisioner mer av en strävan efter frihet och att få bli lämnade ifred. Dessa uppfattningar spädades på när samhällets stödsystem misslyckades att erbjuda kvinnorna det de behövde för att känna sig som delaktiga medlemmar i samhället. Ett tydligt exempel var när arbetsförmedlingen inte kunde erbjuda dem vad de ansåg vara 'riktiga jobb', utan istället erbjöd passiv 'sysselsättning' i form av dagligverksamhet baserad på stickning och liknande. Detta belyser att många stödprogram vilar på förlegade genusideal som premierar passivitet och servilitet, vilket krockar med kvinnornas framtidsaspirationer som istället grundar sig på nutida medelklassideal; de ville leva socialt aktiva liv, ha meningsfulla jobb, betala skatt och vara en del av samhället.

Slutligen är det viktigt att poängtera att om människor som strävar efter att bryta kriminaliserade livsstilar kan trygga basala mänskliga behov är de också mer fria att hoppas, planera och agera mot sina uppsatta mål. Sådana mål kommer sannolikt föra dem närmare det konventionella samhället. Studien visar även hur viktigt det är att stora mål och drömmar bryts ner i mindre enheter eller delmål, som känns mer konkreta och nåbara. De som lyckas formulera sådana delmål – och infria dem – har lättare att närma sig det konventionella samhället och lägga brottsligheten bakom sig. Att på det här viset sätta upp och infria delmål kan ge en viktig känsla av riktning och om att 'vara på rätt väg' mot det större målet; livsstilsförändringen

från utanförskap och vanemässig brottslighet till att bli 'normal' och inkluderad i samhället.

Studien har flera kriminalpolitiska implikationer. Främst belyser den de stora möjligheter som statliga stödorgan såsom frivården, socialtjänsten och arbetsförmedlingen har att ge effektivare och mer riktat stöd till individer som strävar efter att bryta kriminaliserade livsstilar. Genom att i större utsträckning se till vad individen själv önskar uppnå i närstående framtid kan statliga stödorgan hjälpa till att sätta upp mål och delmål tillsammans med sina klienter. Studien visar att personer som önskar bryta en kriminell bana ofta hyser drömmar som inkluderade medborgare skulle anse vara ganska blygsamma. Efter år av utanförskap, fattigdom och bestraffning är det dock tydligt att sådana blygsamma drömmar kan uppfattas som oöverstigliga utan hjälp ifrån samhället. Studien lyfter drömmar om ett eget hem, utbildning och arbete. Samtliga dessa är områden där samhället har stora möjligheter, och faktiska skyldigheter, att erbjuda stöd och hjälp till sina medborgare. Genom att lägga upp stödprogram i samförstånd med individer som önskar upphöra med brott kan sådant stöd effektiviseras, vilket ger bättre förutsättningar att lyckas bryta det lidande som kriminaliserade livsstilar orsakar både på individ- och samhällsnivå.

Sammanfattande slutsatser

Den här boken placerar in dessa resultat i ett större sammanhang genom att diskutera hela forskningsprojektets sammanvägda kunskapsbidrag. Fokus är på projektets metodologiska, empiriska, teoretiska och praktiska bidrag, dvs. vad studien tillför för ny kunskap både när det gäller forskning och samhällliga insatser kring att bryta kriminaliserade livsstilar. Sammantaget lyfter studien både förväntningar och förhinder i upphörandeprocessen. I långa och djuplodade intervjuer framträder berättelser om att lämna ett oönskat, våldsamt och destruktivt sätt att leva för ett annat, okänt och 'normalt'. Det är inte alltid lätt att passa in i dagens samhälle. För kvinnor som blivit dömda till fängelse är vägen särskilt krokig, full av fallgropar och tvivel. Hopp, förväntningar och framsteg varvas med strukturella och personliga hinder i vad som framträder som oerhört komplexa och sköra processer. Mer än något annat belyser forskningsprojektet den stora ovisshet och osäkerhet som upphörandeprocessen innebär. Genom att trycka på det processuella, att

den här livsstilsförändringen böljar fram och tillbaka med framsteg, motgångar och perioder av stillestånd, bidrar studien till ökad förståelse för hur det går till när människor försöker bryta kriminaliserade livsstilar. Denna insikt om att felsteg varvas med framsteg är ett viktigt bidrag såväl till forskning som till praktiskt socialt arbete, där den går på tvärs mot rådande praktik inom de samhällsinstanser som arbetar för att bryta kriminaliserade livsstilar. Den nolltoleranspolicy som dominerar den kriminalpolitiska debatten gällande återfall i narkotikaanvändning och andra brott är således problematisk, och riskerar faktiskt att orsaka fortsatt brottslighet snarare än det åsyftade upphörandet.

Med sin framåtblickande och utforskande ansats resulterar forskningsprojektet i kunskapsbidrag gällande de strukturella barriärer, relationella ovissheter, personliga kval, hopp och aspirationer som alla är del av upphörandeprocessen. Det som forskare och praktiker som arbetar för att hjälpa människor ut ur kriminaliserade livsstilar särskilt bör ta med sig från det här forskningsprojektet är att individers upphörande med brott verkligen är komplexa processer. Vägen till ett annat liv är kantat av hinder, motgångar och tvivel men även hopp, förväntningar och starka viljor, och allt det behöver beaktas om samhället ska kunna förstå och erbjuda bättre stöd till människor som vågar sig ut på en sådan förändringsresa.

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APPENDIX

Table A: Characteristics of the women

	Age	SES Child	Marital status	Children	Employment	Education	Primary drug
Norah	23	Low	Partner	1	Part-time	Junior High, High School, University	Heroin
Doris	29	Low	Partner	1	No	Junior High, High School	Alcohol, heroin
Marie	34	High	Married	1	Full-time	No	Heroin
Kate	35	Low	Single, then partner	1	No	High School	LSD, amphetamines, heroin
Susie	36	Low	Single	2	No	No	Heroin, other opiates
Louise	43	Low	Single	No	Part-time, then no	No	Amphetamines, designer drugs
Nina	43	Low	Single	3	No	Industrial work training	No habitual drug use
Sofia	48	Low	Partner, then single	No	Full-time	No	Amphetamines
Maia	52	Low	Single	1	Occasional	No	Amphetamines
Johanna	53	Low	Single	2	Full-time, then no	No	Amphetamines

Age and marital status at first interview. SES child is the socio-economic status of each woman as a child. Information about marital status, employment and education pertains to the period of study. Primary drug use refers to the full life-course.

