

# House, bells and bliss? A longitudinal analysis of conventional aspirations and the process of desistance

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/euc](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/euc)**Jennifer Doekhie and Esther Van Ginneken** 

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## Abstract

Various studies have pointed to identity change and cognitive transformation as important predictors of desistance. Yet, even persistent offenders have conventional aspirations, which include a job, a house and a family. This article examines the development of conventional aspirations of 23 Dutch (ex-)prisoners using qualitative longitudinal data. Findings show no association between conventional aspirations and desistance as both desisters and persisters expressed conventional goals ('house, bells and bliss'). A lack of substance and detailed scripts to flesh out the essence of the desired conventional roles meant it could be difficult to turn vague ideals into concrete action pathways. Finally, conventional aspirations and criminal lifestyles were not mutually exclusive; some of the persistent offenders used criminal pathways to fulfil conventional roles.

## Keywords

Agency, desistance, identity, imprisonment, re-entry

Various theories of desistance hold that moving away from crime is triggered (or at least accompanied) by changes in identity to a prosocial and conventional self (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Attempts to fulfil a conventional life are thought to involve changes in routines and social network, and a greater stake in conformity, which have been offered as explanations of why individuals stop or reduce their offending (Farrall, 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2003). Nevertheless, persistent offenders also hold conventional aspirations, identities and values similar to those of desisting offenders (Liem and Richardson, 2014; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011). This article examines in detail the nature and development of such conventional

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aspirations and how these aspirations relate to self-reported criminal behaviour in a sample of Dutch men who made the transition from prison into society. We show that it is necessary to delve below the surface of 'catch-phrase' conventional aspirations to understand how they are related to desistance and persistence.

Aspirations can be understood as a future-oriented dimension of a person's identity. The meaning given to different aspects of the self (the current and future self), or self-identity, is fluid and can be reconstructed through both social interactions (Becker, 1964; Felson, 1985) and various roles a person (aspires to) fulfil(s) in society (for example, parent, employee or partner). The dissonance arising from conflicting perceptions of the (future) self motivates human action, which allows individuals to shape their lives into a certain direction (Festinger, 1962). In other words, people tend to behave in a way that is consistent with how they view themselves and, if the perceptions of their present and future (desired) identity are inconsistent, they act to reduce the inconsistency. The notion of a cognitive script or 'role rule prescriptions' can be useful for understanding and explaining behaviour (Abelson, 1976; Harré and Secord, 1972). For example, in order to make a valid claim on a conventional identity such as a parent, an individual must have access to a script that comprises behavioural routines on how the global role of a parent must be 'performed' in situations and interactions with others. From the above, we may deduce that changes in (offending) behaviour could result from changes in a person's aspirations and, more generally, their identity.

### *Identity and desistance*

Desistance appears to be a complex process of moving away from offending, which is related not only to criminal behaviour but also to social, situational and existential factors, including a person's identity (Maruna, 2001; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Identity theories of desistance centre around the idea that long-term desistance requires a 'fundamental and intentional shift in a person's sense of self' (Maruna, 2001: 17). Giordano et al. (2002) argued that an openness to change necessarily precedes desistance, but that identity transformation is further realised through exposure to 'hooks for change' (2002: 1000), such as family, employment, prison and treatment, which creates the opportunity to fashion a *replacement self*. Thus, according to this theory, identity change occurs as a result of changes in social bonds and conventional roles. In contrast, in the Identity Theory of Desistance (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009) the direction is reversed: identity change precedes socio-structural changes. According to this theory, moving to a positive *possible self* (that is, a conventional, non-offending identity) is motivated by the deterrent image of a *feared self* (that is, the envisaged future if a person persisted in offending), which leads to a rejection of a criminal lifestyle early on in the desistance process. The dual contribution of these positive and negative future self-images initiates the desistance process and increases the likelihood that people will encounter and grab on to hooks for change.

The aspect of a 'conventional' or 'prosocial' self is key in these theories. Maruna (2001) concluded that individuals in the process of desisting from crime adopted more conventional identities, such as a family man or a good parent, than the active offenders. Giordano et al. (2002: 1001) even noted that a conventional identity would be 'fundamentally incompatible with continued deviation'. A person's identity may be comprised of how one currently views oneself ('actual self'), as well as one's 'ought self', which represents a person's

sense of duty and one's 'ideal self', including hopes for the future (Higgins, 1987). By fulfilling conventional roles, desisting offenders may be bringing their actual selves more in line with images of their ought and ideal self.

Various studies have confirmed the role of identity in the desistance process and showed that offenders who successfully desisted experienced a shift towards a conventional identity (for example, F.-Dufour and Brassard, 2014; Harris, 2011; Schinkel, 2015). However, others have offered evidence that it is possible to disengage from offending without the internalisation of a non-offender identity (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016), and that persisters may continue offending despite a positive, prosocial identity and conformist values (Bottoms and Shapland, 2011; Liem and Richardson, 2014). A few longitudinal studies have found empirical support for the idea that a prosocial identity is associated with a decreased likelihood of future offending (Bachman, Kerrison, Paternoster, O'Connell and Smith, 2016; Bottoms and Shapland, 2011; LeBel et al., 2008; Na, Paternoster and Bachman, 2015; Rocque, Posick and Paternoster, 2016; Walters, 2018). What distinguishes successful desisters from persisters may be related to confidence in their ability to go straight and commitment to desistance, or a sense of agency (Burnett, 2013; Liem and Richardson, 2014; see also Farrall, 2002).

It is particularly difficult to capture the broad construct of 'identity' empirically (Abdelal et al., 2006). Qualitative studies tend to approach identity inductively (what emerges from participants' narratives) and holistically in relation to how participants see themselves, including goals, values, self-worth and roles. Quantitative studies deductively operationalise identity and tend to focus on one element, such as a sense of self-worth (Na et al., 2015) or the extent to which participants see themselves as prosocial (Bachman et al., 2016).

Continued offending despite conformist and prosocial values may be partly explained by socio-structural barriers to conventional goods and roles. Strain theory has already recognised that a (perceived) lack of legal pathways to achieve goals may lead to different strategies, including downscaling goals, finding illegal ways to achieve the same goals, or withdrawing from society, dismissing both goals and means (Merton, 1938). Indeed, many offenders face difficulties in finding meaningful, stable employment and housing after release (Harding et al., 2014; Petersilia, 2003; Visher and Travis, 2003). Yet social support and structural opportunities, including employment, are needed to sustain lifestyle changes (Bachman et al., 2016; F.-Dufour and Brassard, 2014; Farrall, 2002; Harris, 2011). Thus, attempts to fulfil conventional roles and construct a prosocial identity may wither if they cannot be sustained by legal opportunities to ensure a level of financial security and reinforced by a supportive social network (Schinkel, 2015; Soyer, 2014). Although rehabilitation programmes in prison may alter future criminal behaviour by enhancing offenders' skills needed to achieve prosocial life goals, imprisonment often uproots people's lives even further and many ex-prisoners face the added burden of a multitude of conditions tied to their release. The combination of 'desperate circumstances' and a succession of seemingly insurmountable obstacles may easily turn optimism into fatalism, which can result in self-sabotage and reoffending (Halsey, Armstrong and Wright, 2016).

In sum, structural factors, release preparations and re-entry challenges may have an impact on efforts towards realising a conventional identity, so it is important to contextualise the aspirations offenders have. Furthermore, the nature of what is considered 'conventional' is value-laden and variable. For example, whereas the American

dream entails self-made success in terms of employment, possessions and status, the – perhaps more modest – ‘English dream’ appears to comprise ‘a not-too-onerous but safe job as an employee of a stable company, enough money, some consumer luxuries, a steady girl-friend and (possibly) kids’ (Bottoms et al., 2004: 384). Even within one cultural context, there are multiple acceptable modes of conformity in terms of lifestyles, although ‘conventional’ is usually understood to mean law-abiding.

The relative importance and causal order of subjective versus social structural factors remains a topic of debate in desistance research (LeBel et al., 2008). In this article, we deliberately focus on one side of the debate, namely the subjective side, and zoom in on the notion of conventional aspirations as part of a person’s identity and how this relates to ‘act desistance’ (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016) or criminal behaviour. This study provides an in-depth perspective on the nature and content of conventional aspirations and how they develop over time, and to what extent they relate to conventional and criminal behaviour. In particular, it unpacks the notion of conventionality and distinguishes between goals and pathways. By doing so, we build on various earlier studies (for example, Burnett, 1992; Farrall, 2002) and go beyond individuals’ expectations about their desistance to highlight a different aspect of ‘subjective factors’ and ‘identity’; this may ultimately contribute to a better understanding of causal processes of desistance.

### *The Dutch penal landscape*

The Netherlands provides an interesting context for the study of desistance following a prison sentence. The country is known for its liberal penal climate, which is reflected in a (currently) low imprisonment rate (51 per 100,000 inhabitants),<sup>1</sup> relatively humane conditions of confinement and relatively short sentence length. Only 7 percent of all Dutch prisoners are sentenced to more than a year in prison (Kalidien, 2017), which is low compared with 68 percent in the UK (Allen and Watson, 2017) and 97 percent in the US (Carson and Anderson, 2016). Although the Netherlands is currently experiencing declines in recidivism rates, still one-third of all released prisoners in 2014 were involved in a new criminal case within two years (De Looff et al., 2017).<sup>2</sup>

Dutch prisons have implemented a system in which phased re-entry and rehabilitation programmes are available only for offenders who show motivation to live a conventional, crime-free life. Access to rehabilitation programmes, extra visiting hours and education is granted when a prisoner shows prosocial behaviour, and prison staff are expected to foster prisoners’ motivation by helping them formulate short-term and long-term goals (Van Gent, 2013). Within this responsabilisation paradigm, conventional goals are considered an important indicator of motivation to change, so it is of great significance to understand to what extent they can, in fact, facilitate change.

## **Methodology**

### *Participants and procedure*

This qualitative longitudinal project is a sub-study of the Prison Project (Dirkzwager et al., 2018), which examines prisoners who were: men, born in the Netherlands and aged 18–65. The current qualitative sub-study uses the same inclusion criteria, but also

restricts itself to prisoners who were (a) imprisoned between two and four years at the point of release, (b) convicted of a criminal offence and not in appeal, (c) not treated under hospital order (in Dutch: TBS) or in a programme for revolving door prisoners (in Dutch: ISD) or in a minimum security prison, and (d) not convicted of a sex offence.<sup>3</sup> To be able to examine changes in identity, specifically the development of aspirations, a longitudinal approach was utilised in which participants were interviewed on three separate occasions up to a year after release.

The Dutch Prison Service provided a list containing all soon to be released prisoners meeting the inclusion criteria.<sup>4</sup> From the 84 men on this list, 44 were approached in prison by the first author (Jennifer Doekhie) and 36 agreed to be interviewed. After ensuring confidentiality, they were individually interviewed in a private room; these semi-structured interviews lasted on average 1.5 hours, covering a broad range of topics on imprisonment, re-entry challenges, social network, motivation, agency and criminal behaviour.<sup>5</sup> However, eight interviews had to be excluded afterwards for various reasons (for example, the participant had received additional sentences or was appealing the case). Out of 28 men from the original sample interviewed in prison, 24 participants were located and re-interviewed approximately three months after release and 23 men a year after release. The post-prison interviews were conducted at participants' residences, in public locations, at the probation office, or in prison. Participants who were not in prison were given a small cash incentive (€10) as a token of appreciation for their time and effort. All the interviews were conducted by Jennifer Doekhie. In sum, for this article, we analysed 69 interviews with 23 men collected during three interview waves between November 2013 and January 2017.

Descriptive characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1. The men were on average 27 years of age at the in-prison interview. They had on average spent 38 months in prison (min. 30 months, max. 50 months) at the time of release and were convicted of mostly violent offences such as armed robbery and attempted manslaughter. Five men were reincarcerated at the time of the second interview, three men at the time of the third interview. Nine men (including the men who were incarcerated) reported criminal activity at the time of the second and/or third interview; seven of these nine men reported that they were criminally active at both the second *and* the third interview. Participants were all given a pseudonym and these are used to identify quotes in the Findings section.

The last column of Table 1 identifies the self-reported desistance/persistence trajectories from pre-release up to a year after release. The label consists of three letters (A, N, C) in various combinations. At the in-prison interview, responses to the question 'How do you see your life after prison concerning criminal activity?' were classified as criminal (C), meaning continuing crime; non-criminal (N), meaning refraining from crime; or ambivalent (A), meaning unsure about continuing or refraining from crime. For each of the follow-up interviews, self-reported behaviour was classified as criminal (C) or non-criminal (N). Behaviour that was illegal under Dutch criminal law was labelled as criminal. Technical violations of licence conditions were not considered criminal offences, nor was informal employment when it did not involve any illegal activities.

Although we acknowledge that the process of desistance can be characterised as 'a journey of growth which comprises a multitude of pathways, turning points, dead ends

**Table 1.** Descriptives of prisoners ( $n = 23$ ).

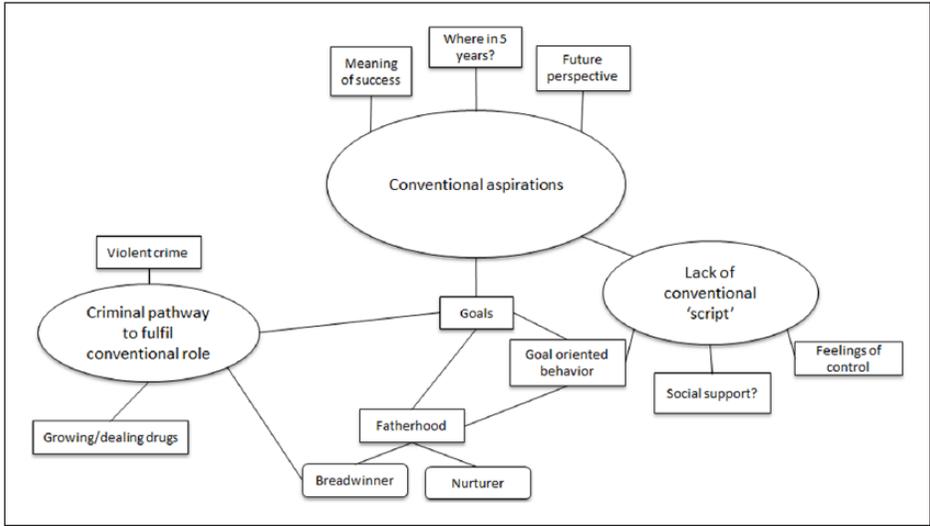
Name	Age	Sentence	Offence type	Social situation	Trajectory
Ab	20–24	2–3 years	Robbery	Partner, no children	CCC
Casper	35–39	2–3 years	Kidnapping, extortion	No partner, 2 children	ANN
Dave	20–24	2–3 years	Robbery	No partner, 1 child	NNN
Leon	20–24	2–3 years	Robbery	No partner, 1 child	CCC
Peter	50–54	2–3 years	Fraud	Partner, 1 child	NNN
Tom	30–34	2–3 years	Robbery	Partner, 2 children	NNC
Tony	20–24	2–3 years	Robbery	No partner, 1 child	CCC
Bart	30–34	4–5 years	Aggravated theft, extortion	No partner and children	NCC
Chris	25–29	4–5 years	Robbery	No partner and children	ANN
Isaac	30–34	4–5 years	Robbery	No partner, 3 children	ANN
Jack	25–29	4–5 years	Robbery	No partner, 1 child	NNN <sup>a</sup>
Martin	20–24	4–5 years	Robbery	Partner, no children	ACC
Milo	25–29	4–5 years	Attempted manslaughter	No partner or children	CNN
Nathan	20–24	4–5 years	Robbery	No partner or children	NNN
Oscar	20–24	4–5 years	Robbery	No partner or children	NNN
Pascal	30–34	4–5 years	Robbery	No partner or children	CNN
Roy	25–29	4–5 years	Robbery	Partner, 1 stepchild	CCC
Rudy	25–29	4–5 years	Robbery	No partner or children	CCN
Sam	20–24	4–5 years	Robbery	No partner or children	NNN
Simon	20–24	4–5 years	Robbery	Partner, no children	NNN
Vince	25–29	4–5 years	Burglary	No partner, 1 child	ANN
Wessel	20–24	4–5 years	Attempted manslaughter	No partner, 2 children	CCC
Xavier	20–24	4–5 years	Robbery	No partner or children	NNN

<sup>a</sup>Three months after release, Jack was in prison again for violating his licence conditions: he had no official registration address, which was needed for the conditional release. We classified him as non-criminal (N) at all three waves, even though he was in prison at the time of the second interview.

and relays' (Phillips, 2017: 6), for the purpose of simplicity we decided to classify participants as 'desisters' ( $n = 14$ ) when they reported no involvement in crime at the two post-release interviews (combinations NNN, ANN and CNN) and as 'persisters' ( $n = 9$ ) when they reported involvement in crime in at least one of the two follow-up interviews (combinations NCC, CCC, ACC, NNC and CCN).

## Analysis

For this study, we were especially interested in participants' goals, aspirations and roles, as well as their expectations in relation to crime. We therefore focused our current analysis on questions such as 'What do you want to achieve in life?' and 'Where do you see yourself in five years from now?' These were asked at each of the three interview waves and formed a gateway to conversations about *working* and *desired selves* (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Questions on social ties and roles, such as fatherhood or contact with former friends,



**Figure 1.** Thematic map, showing three main themes that were identified from analysing all three interview waves.

allowed us to gain insight into possible new roles and intentional self-change (Kiecolt, 1994). Questions concerning goal-oriented behaviour, feelings of being in control and perceptions of being able to refuse or avoid criminal offers captured the notion of agency.

The longitudinal data were analysed using a hybrid approach of deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Layder, 1998). Codes and descriptive themes were initially identified from theoretical concepts and the interview protocol (such as ‘goals’), combined with codes that were more ‘data driven’ (such as ‘growing/dealing drugs’). Each interview wave had the same codes. For each code concerning the topic of this article, we made a table containing the labelled fragments of all three waves, sorted by participant. This way, we could start analysing the change in the different narratives across different waves. For the next step, we used an inductive perspective to unravel three related main themes: (1) conventional aspirations; (2) lack of a conventional ‘script’; and (3) criminal pathway to fulfil a conventional role (see Figure 1). We went back and forth between our data and the literature to use existing theory and theory emerging from our analysis, in line with an adaptive theory approach (Layder, 1998). Atlas.ti facilitated the process of data management and analysis.

## Findings

The desire to achieve a ‘normal life’ was a recurrent theme in most of the interviews, with the exception of two men (one desister, one persister) who said they had no goals for the future and preferred to live day-by-day instead. All other desisters and persisters had conventional aspirations, such as having a partner, a house and children. Below, we explore the content and development of these conventional aspirations in greater detail

and highlight two dimensions related to the attainment of these goals: that is, the lack of conventional scripts and possible criminal pathways to fulfil conventional aspirations.

### *'House, bells and bliss'*

Conventional aspirations were often expressed through the Dutch catch-phrase 'huisje, boompje, beestje', which we have translated as 'house, bells and bliss' (literally, house, tree, pet). This generally entailed having a home, a family and enough money to support the family.

For most men, pre-release expectations of the future, in response to the question where they saw themselves in five years and what they wanted to achieve, were vague or even unrealistic. For example, during the in-prison interview five men envisioned themselves 'getting rich', others dreamed of living abroad. They did not specify what they would be doing all day and did not have a plan for how to realise these goals.

After release, however, goals became more specific, realistic and modest, especially for the men who desisted from crime. Dreams of 'house, bells and bliss' were supplemented with concrete goals, such as getting one's driver's licence, paying off debts and finding a new job. Experiencing success in the process of reintegration seemed to contribute to the clarification of goals. Milo (CNN), who had never in his life earned money legally, dreamed of owning a resort abroad and being a millionaire when interviewed in prison, but after release he found a low-skilled job and started dating a girl whom he stayed together with throughout the research period. A year after release, Milo was about to be a father and had managed to get a permanent position, which enabled him to buy a house:

- JD: What are your goals for the future?  
 Milo (T3): A job! A new job. That's the next thing I am going to handle. The house is ready, children, wife... Now a job. ...  
 JD: What is a good job for you? Because your current job is already good?  
 Milo: Yeah, the salary is okay. But it's dirty work. And I don't think I can move up in this line of work any more than I've already done. I would like to start my own shop, but I don't know yet.

Milo's aspirations turned conventional once he found himself embedded in conventional institutions, including legitimate employment, house ownership and a stable family. Besides being able to meet financial needs, Milo's job and employment aspirations served as an 'avenue' to construct a prosocial replacement self (Opsal, 2012).

A change in aspirations, including what are considered acceptable pathways to realise aspirations, was characteristic of desisters. Vince (ANN), who was criminally active from a young age, had already expressed values such as being happy and proud of himself in prison, but at the final interview he explicitly rejected crime as a means to achieve his aspirations when asked about his views on personal success:

- JD: What is your definition of personal success?  
 Vince (T3): I think, when you're content with the things you have in life. If you can just accept that some things aren't meant to be for you. Then you can achieve success.

- JD: Not meant to be? In what way?  
 Vince: For example, like, that criminal activities can get you things that you can't achieve with a normal job. If you just appreciate the small things in life, and just accept them the way they are. That is success, I think, because it will never give you stress. Sometimes I go into town and I just buy shoes. Before, I bought an entire outfit, so to speak. Yeah, success in life, just being happy, making people happy.

Persisters still expressed vague or unrealistic aspirations at the post-release interviews. They had particularly high material aspirations, although failure to achieve those would sometimes turn their outlook on the future into fatalism, in the absence of (conventional or criminal) successes after release (see also Halsey et al., 2016).

- JD: So if you never find a job in which you make a lot of money, you'll always do things on the side?  
 Wessel (CCC, T1): I'll always do things on the side.  
 JD: But not violent things?  
 Wessel: No. But that's what I said, right, I'm someone who needs some... I know that if I get a job, I may earn 1200–1300, maximum, with my history. My girlfriend, if I get one, add another 1600... Then I need, minimum per month, I want at least 6000–7000 extra.  
 JD: Otherwise?  
 Wessel: I know what I'm like. If I go into town, on the out... I already spend a lot of money on clothes. If I go out in the evening I spend a lot of money too, at least 600–700 euros, just on drinking and using [drugs] that night.  
 JD: How do you see the future now?  
 Wessel (T2, in prison): I don't see it very positively, but yeah... you know. Yeah really, it really bothers me sometimes. I've shut it out a bit, to be honest.

The notion of 'house, bells and bliss' was commonplace, but turned out to be somewhat of an empty shell, a cliché without real meaning, which was just as easily linked to mansion-sized houses as to more modest homes. The idea itself, then, was not necessarily realistic, or concrete – which was especially true in prison and among persisters. It offered little direction for the future or for behaviour more generally.

### *'I know life on the streets, but I don't know what the other life is like'*

On a superficial level, most participants could identify with the catch-phrase aspiration of 'house, bells and bliss'. When prompted further, however, most men (both persisters and desisters) did not have a clear picture of what this 'normal' life would entail. Put differently, they lacked a clear and specific conventional script for how to 'perform' a role

in this desired normal life. Tom (NNC), like most other persisters in the sample, had an extensive criminal record and had therefore always been surrounded by crime. Also, he did not grow up in a traditional, non-criminal family, so he had no experience of house, bells and bliss. Yet, in his pre-release interview, he expressed high hopes for a picture-perfect life. In the first few months after release, Tom attempted to live according to his image of a conventional life, yet old substance abuse habits and spending time with criminal friends gave rise to marital problems. At the time of the last post-release interview, Tom was homeless and committing crime again. He said he wanted to change, but was not sure if he was able to kick his bad habits.

- Tom (T1): But I don't know it yet; *and* work, *and* no stress, *and* no problems... Yeah, I don't know, that's it for me. Just that. I have always taken path A, now I'll try path B. And it promises better things.
- Tom (T3): I know life on the streets, but I don't know what the other life is like, with so many setbacks, and what happens then. How to behave. I still really want to change my life.
- JD: Yeah, why?
- Tom: Because I know the criminal life... This time too, it's so easy, you pick it up again so easily. But it's worth nothing, absolutely nothing. What do you achieve with it? I still want to experience the other side. When I worked briefly as a cook, I liked it so much... all the things I needed to remember and the certificate I had achieved too, of course. I really wanted to get my diploma. I don't know why I ruin it the way I do.

Tom talked about 'path B', 'the other side' and 'a normal life' to refer to a conventional life – a life he desired but found difficult to realise, especially because he had no scripts for dealing with setbacks. His script for setbacks was avoidance, substance abuse and crime. When the going got tough, Tom's default option – the most easily available identity script – was criminal rather than conventional.

This struggle of participants to fulfil conventional aspirations – due to a lack of a detailed conventional script – was also apparent in relation to fatherhood. Considering all three interview waves, we observed a deterioration in the reported quality of the majority of the relationships between fathers and their children. At the time of the in-prison interview, 11 out of 23 participants had (step-)children and 7 reported they had a good relationship with them. Most of them expected to maintain the reported good relationship after leaving prison. However, a year after release, only 3 out of 11 participants who had children (all desisting from crime) reported a good relationship with their child(ren) – although the family situation was often not conventional in the traditional sense of the mother and father living together with their children (see also Jardine, 2017). For information on how to be a good father, the men could not rely on any traditional identity scripts. Not only because this did not apply to their situation but also because they had been in care or their own fathers had been in prison, resulting in no 'good fathers' as role models in their lives (Purvis, 2013). It appeared that these men (who were desisting from

crime) adjusted the superficial identity scripts of ‘being a father’ to their situation and wrote their own, new scripts as they went along.

- JD: What is a good father to you?  
 Milo (CNN, T3): Being consistent. Being there for him. Giving him a base. And then do the things well that didn’t go well for me. You try to, at least. We grew up in different circumstances. My father didn’t speak Dutch, we were beaten. These days you can’t beat your child any more.
- JD: You will have a new role as a father. What impact does this have on you?  
 Milo: I’m starting to feel more responsible. I have to watch what we spend now.

For some men, desistance appeared to facilitate better relationships with their children, and their children were also a source of motivation to live a crime-free life. The three men (all desisters) who reported a good relationship with their children a year after release identified themselves with the nurturing role of being a father (Forste, Bartkowski and Allen Jackson, 2009) and, for them, being a good father included giving up crime. Nevertheless, they also had to cope with the strains of non-traditional family life (for example, custody battles) and fragile selves in relation to their role as father. Similarly to motherhood, then, fatherhood could serve as a transformational identity script (Rumgay, 2004) or a positive possible self (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). However, these scripts often lacked a detailed notion of what fatherhood is really like and action scripts for dealing with setbacks that could help cushion attacks on their fatherhood identity. This is particularly problematic considering the marginal circumstances and lack of social capital of many (desisting) offenders.

The problems with the role of being a father were most evident among men who persisted with crime: five persisters were no longer allowed to see their children and some said this might be for the best, given the instability of their situation.

- Roy (CCC, T3): It may be better for the boy, actually. I tried to do my best for him, but I don’t know if I’m a good role model. But at least he’s had some sort of father.

The lack of conventional scripts was also reflected in perceptions concerning employment, especially among persisters. Tony (CCC), who had been criminally active since he was a teenager and had almost no experience of conventional employment, described his struggles to find a job – going from one interview to the next and never receiving a call back. A year after release, he still had not worked (but was engaged in criminal activity to attain certain goods):

- Tony (CCC, T3): I have nothing.  
 JD: And you are under supervision so you thought you would have a chance to put work on your resume?

Tony: That's what I told them [the parole officer], but they keep saying: we try and do our best, but you also have to look for yourself. I tell them, 'of course I am looking, but the words I use [when applying for a job] don't work. With those words you [parole officers] use it goes faster, you know.' ... They talk in a 'white people' way, it sounds more appealing. When I speak, I don't know, I am too rude, I am too straight. I just tell them [employers] 'I have done this and this, I am interested in what you do and I want to learn, are you interested in me?' If not, then have nice day. I don't need to hear your reasons, just answer me yes or no.

Most persisters had few or no past experiences with conventional employment (unlike most desisters) and had been acquiring skills in criminal life in the meantime, drawing them even further away from conventional scripts concerning employment. Moreover, frequent disappointments in the job search can contribute to the internalisation of a person's social identity of 'deviant other', as illustrated by Tony's quote above (see also Harding, 2003). Work experience before imprisonment and connections to employers are a valuable asset not only in terms of capital, but also in terms of scripts for how to talk and dress to increase the chance of finding legitimate employment. Tony's quote further suggests that there might be a cultural component to conventional scripts, which we return to in the discussion section.

### *'I'm just happy when my harvest is ready'*

Although most men held conventional aspirations, the pathways to achieve these goals and fulfil these roles were not always conventional. Six men viewed crime as the best way to achieve an income to support a family. Out of nine men who had committed crime at some point after release, six had committed further violent crimes.

Roy (CCC, T1): You have to be able to live up to your task of being a man. That's what's important to me, that is what it's all about. To be able to take care of your wife and family. What kind of man are you when you need to live off your wife's money? No, that's not an option.

Most persisters made a distinction between violent crime and growing and dealing cannabis: whereas the former was regarded as wrong and high risk, the latter was seen as harmless, lucrative and relatively risk free. A few were indeed involved in growing and dealing drugs and almost all of them strived towards using less violence and professionalising the cultivation of cannabis. Ab (CCC), who was reincarcerated at the time of the third interview and had not yet seen his daughter since she was born, would rather move to another city to continue his drug dealing than quit this line of work for his daughter.

Ab (T3): I think that I, because I have a daughter, started to see it differently. If people would continue to see me like that [as someone

who grows and deals cannabis], it doesn't bother me now, when she's still little, but I don't know how that's going to change when she's older. Maybe people will say bad things to her, or something. Then I'd move to a different city, just keep my head down. Stay undercover.

Ab and Roy saw no paradox in continuing lower-risk criminal activity and being a good father (although Ab did plan to stop smoking cannabis after release because in his perception this did not suit his role as a father). In fact, for most persisters crime seemed to be a way of doing masculinity (Carlsson, 2013), by being able to take care of their family and fulfilling their 'task of being a man'. In this context, the meaning of fatherhood for men who continued crime was more representative of a breadwinner role (as opposed to the nurturing role of the desisters; Forste et al., 2009).

The men's moral views did not always correspond with the law, but this did not necessarily affect their identity; conventional aspirations and criminal engagement were not mutually exclusive. Generally, the participants did not see themselves as criminal, even if technically they were (in line with Liem and Richardson, 2014). In fact, some men even derived a substantial amount of self-worth and pride from their criminal activities.

Ab (CCC, T3): It definitely gives me satisfaction. I'm just happy when my harvest is ready. ... Because I'm proud that I've achieved that then, that I did that on my own. And people work for it too, because of me other people earn money as well. So I'm quite proud of that.

For Ab, experiencing success in his criminal endeavours was a source of pride, reflecting the fulfilment of an intrinsic value aside from the instrumental value of financial security. Even though the persisters mostly did not approve of violence and expressed a commitment to de-escalation (from violent crime to drug-related crime), most had not yet been able to achieve this in the study period.

## Conclusion and discussion

Given the recurring theme in criminological literature of a desire to live a conventional or normal life, even among persistent offenders, this article set out to critically examine the conventional nature of offenders' goals and aspirations and how these change over time. The following key findings emerged after our analysis of the longitudinal interview data. First, consistent with some important desistance research (Bottoms and Shapland, 2011; Burnett, 1992; Farrall, 2002), there was no association between conventional aspirations and desisting behaviour: both desisters and persisters expressed conventional goals in prison and after release. Second, conventional aspirations expressed by prisoners were often superficial and usually became more detailed and realistic only after release when they were bolstered by conventional successes (in line with Farrall, 2002). Third, many participants (both desisters and persisters) lacked detailed identity scripts that could help them carve out pathways to fulfil their conventional aspirations and roles; this seemed to be related to their lack of conventional role models and social capital.

Fourth, conventional aspirations and a criminal lifestyle were not mutually exclusive. Persisting offenders were often committed to using criminal pathways to achieve conventional aspirations and fulfil conventional roles.

Extending theories that suggest a role for identity and cognitive transformations in the process of desistance, we argue that conventional aspirations alone are not enough to capture identity change and cognitive transformations. Our findings suggest that concrete pathways and scripts to realise conventional aspirations and possible selves are more important in explaining desistance. We observed that offenders did not necessarily experience dissonance between conventional social values and aspirations and criminal behaviour. However, we do agree with Bottoms and Shapland (2011) that there appears to be a moral ranking of different types of crimes, in the sense that offenders regarded drug crimes as less morally objectionable and harmful. The results are also partly in line with research done by Liem and Richardson (2014), who found that reincarcerated lifers, similar to successfully desisting lifers, had a good and prosocial self-image. In fact, some persisters in our study pointed out that their engagement in crime was and would continue to be their means to achieve and maintain 'house, bells and bliss'. It appeared that for some offenders the conventional pathway was simply not attractive and rewarding enough, so they turned to illegal means ('innovation'; see Merton, 1938). As Carlsson (2013) described in his research on masculinity, striving to fulfil the role of a 'family man' is linked to a financial aspect, which can motivate the engagement in crime if it cannot be achieved legitimately.

Persisters indeed saw the role of a father primarily as being the breadwinner, as opposed to the nurturing role identified by desisters (Forste et al., 2009). None of the persisters in our study could draw from experiences of their own youth with stable and conventional father-and-son relationships (Purvis, 2013). This was problematic in the pursuit of wanting a family and becoming a good father, because they had no clear image of what it entails to be a good father and there were no 'scripts' available from which to enact this prosocial role (Rumgay, 2004). Yet most desisters also had poor experiences with family and interpersonal relationships, which forced them to be creative and reformulate these scripts as they 'lived fatherhood'. In this context, the global identity of a father provides only a 'skeleton' script (Abelson, 1976) with just a glimpse of how this role must be performed, which may not be sufficient for the challenging circumstances of transitioning from prison to society. We suspect that the same can be said for conventional aspirations more generally: catch-phrase notions such as 'house, bells and bliss' are not enough to trigger desistance, because they lack substance and a detailed and realistic blueprint for what this entails in the context of less conventional circumstances. Future longitudinal studies, particularly large-scale ones that aim to predict offending and desistance, should therefore work towards developing methods and measures to capture identity scripts and pathways, as opposed to values, a sense of self-worth and goals alone.

The findings of this study challenge some ideas of existing desistance theories that make a distinction between a criminal and a conventional identity (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). The persistent offenders in this study seemed to have accepted a form of a criminal self that coexists alongside other non-criminal identities, which illustrates the intricate ambivalence of having conventional aspirations while being engaged in (and, in some cases, committed to) criminal activities.

This study, then, proposes to distinguish more clearly between aspirations to quit crime, on the one hand, and aspirations for a conventional life on the other, when studying processes of desistance. At the same time, our findings highlight the complexity of using subjective measures such as identity change to capture reintegration success and desistance. Subjective measures bring to the forefront the multifaceted nature of desistance, including any apparent contradictions between aspirations, values and behaviour. Yet the meaning of conventional goals and discourse more generally is highly context dependent. In particular, conventional ‘talk’ may be common as a response to criminal justice intervention, but frequently fails to translate into actual change given the interplay of a person’s history, the impact of a sentence and many unforeseen obstacles and disappointments (see also Soyer, 2014). This brings up age-old and highly relevant questions including ‘what are we really measuring?’ and ‘whose standards do we use to qualify something as an indicator of success or desistance?’ and ‘how do subjective measures of change relate to objective and persistent outcomes?’

The findings further illuminate the complexity of behaviour directed towards the achievement of goals and their role in continuing with or disengaging from crime. For the persistent offenders in our study, crime was not a goal in itself but a means to an end. They were trying to attain culturally approved goals and expressed a desire to do so in a non-violent (and more socially acceptable) way, but most did not succeed by their own standards of success. Success was more likely, it appeared, for offenders who scaled down their goals and adapted them according to their (constantly changing) circumstances – in line with what Merton (1938) saw as ‘ritualism’.

Nevertheless, offenders might hold different views of what is socially and morally acceptable in order to fulfil their goals. In particular, cultivating and dealing cannabis was not regarded as reprehensible by participants. This may be explained by the somewhat ambiguous moral and legal standing of cannabis growth and distribution in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, consumers can buy and use cannabis without legal repercussions (even though possession is still officially against the law) and so-called ‘coffee shops’ can sell cannabis to consumers in small quantities. Yet the people who cultivate and sell cannabis to coffee shops are criminalised and subject to law enforcement; the supply of coffee shops therefore takes place through the ‘back door’ (Korf, 2008). Participants who were involved in this ‘industry’, viewed it as a simple and harmless case of supply and demand, which provided them with a lucrative business opportunity. In addition, participants in our study viewed cultivating cannabis as a skill, an art to grow a good harvest and to be able to deliver (constant) quality. From this, offenders derived a sense of pride and self-worth that may be similar to the feelings non-offenders derive from conventional employment.

### *Strengths, limitations and implications*

This longitudinal qualitative study aimed to unpack the forward-looking dimension of identity comprising aspirations and behavioural scripts, giving a critical insight into the conventional values, goals and roles of offenders convicted of serious offences, who had served relatively long prison sentences in the Netherlands. By doing so, the research is distinct from previous qualitative studies that took a holistic approach to identity and it

makes concrete which elements it is particularly important to consider, also in future quantitative research. The study benefited from a very good retention rate over three waves without prior selection of participants by a gatekeeper. A few limitations should be kept in mind.

First, our distinction between desisters and persisters relied on a binary categorisation of self-reported offending within a period of one year after release from prison. This is, admittedly, a rather simplistic conceptualisation of the complex construct 'desistance'. Given our sample size, it was not possible to say anything meaningful or reliable about the nature (for example, frequency and severity) of offending in relation to the development of conventional aspirations and scripts. Yet, in this article, we have shed a light on the relationship between criminal behaviour and aspects of identity, which can be considered an element of desistance in itself (that is, 'identity-desistance'; see Nugent and Schinkel, 2016).

Secondly, our study touches not only on the process of desistance but also on reintegration into society after release from prison. It is difficult to (conceptually and empirically) separate struggles associated with this transition from efforts to desist. It is likely that the transition process, as well as expectations associated with parole conditions, shaped aspirations to some extent. It would be worthwhile in further research to operationalise subjective and objective aspects of reintegration success and desistance and study them in relation to each other. Furthermore, since desistance is a gradual process, our one-year follow-up sheds light only on the early stages of desistance, and future longitudinal studies should examine how conventional aspirations and, more importantly, conventional scripts evolve over longer periods of time.

Thirdly, the article focused on the content and development of aspirations and scripts more than on the contextual or individual factors that could explain differences between people in the development of aspirations and scripts (although, where possible, we included this in our analysis). Given the qualitative nature of our data and owing to sample characteristics (that is, fairly homogeneous), we were unable to say anything about correlations or predictors. We hope that our findings provide the impetus for further research, perhaps of a quantitative nature, to identify (1) the determinants of conventional scripts (rather than superficial aspirations) and (2) in what circumstances people choose criminal pathways to fulfil seemingly conventional aspirations. Here, it may be particularly relevant to consider a person's migrant and cultural background, to identify whether conventional aspirations and scripts have a cultural dimension (see Calverley, 2013, for important groundwork). Dominant cultural narratives about what is conventional may actually have an exclusionary or stigmatising effect if people deviate from norms, even within legal boundaries, or if they cannot meet societal standards of self-sufficiency. Similar considerations are relevant in relation to social class.

In light of our findings, we signal a need for practical support in the transition from prison to society. Currently, rehabilitation courses offered in (Dutch) prisons and by probation services already focus on goal-setting, cognitive skills and attitudes. Yet the lives of (persisting and desisting) offenders are often infused with non-conventional experiences. So support in prison and on licence should focus on helping offenders to formulate not just 'empty' universal goals but positive life scripts needed to give real direction to their lives (Maruna and Ramsden, 2004). More concretely, this could

consist of, for example, enabling parents in prison to invest in relationships with their children and giving them support in these roles if needed. There are some promising initiatives, in the Netherlands and abroad, that are trying to facilitate this,<sup>6</sup> but they often depend heavily on volunteer and charity involvement and are not seen as a core aspect of reintegration efforts. It is important to recognise that scripts cannot be learned from a book, so offenders must be given opportunities to learn ‘on the job’, literally and figuratively. Naturally, scripts alone are not enough; many difficult life circumstances cannot simply be remedied by ‘a little agency and planning’. Support and employment opportunities should not be reserved for people who have already proven their ability and motivation to behave according to conventional norms, because the transformative potential may in fact be greatest for the group of people who apparently struggle with this the most. Otherwise, we should not be surprised to find that the conventional social value of self-sufficiency is interpreted differently depending on the scripts and pathways that people have access to.

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### Notes

1. *Council of Europe Annual Penal Statistics*, SPACE I – Prison populations (2018); based on 2016 statistics . URL (accessed 29 November 2018): <https://www.coe.int/en/web/prison/space>.
2. In 2002, this number was 55 percent.
3. Sex offenders were excluded because they are known to experience substantially different challenges in the desistance process; see, for example, Laws and Ward (2011).
4. In the Prison Project, almost all participants had a short prison term so only four participants interviewed in the period November 2013 – August 2014 were part of the original Prison Project and extra participants were recruited.
5. The first author (Jennifer Doekhie) can be contacted for more information about the interview schedules.
6. See, for example, ‘Ouder, Kinderen en Detentieprogramma’ (Parent, Children and Imprisonment Programme), offered by Exodus (<https://www.exodus.nl/okd>).

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