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Dimensions of desistance : a qualitative longitudinal analysis of different dimensions of the desistance process among long-term prisoners in the Netherlands

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

1.1. BACKGROUND

In the past decades a growing body of literature has been dedicated to explain desistance from offending behaviour, or to answer the question why some offenders quit crime and others do not. From a classic biological approach, desistance can be explained by processes of maturation (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Moffit, 1993; Matza, 1964) and sociological theories contributed a great deal to the desistance framework by focusing on changes in social control or bonds and on the effects of important life events in the journey away from crime (Hirschi, 1969, Sampson & Laub, 1993).

While research in the past has predominantly focused on the effects of external social factors and life events that trigger and foster change, currently more psychological explanations infuse a prominent line of research emphasizing the importance of subjective, individual factors coming from within the offender, such as cognitive shifts and developing a new sense of self-identity (Maruna, 2001; Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Also, because it remains difficult if not impossible to determine when criminal behaviour has permanently ceased, more scholars are approaching desistance first and foremost as a developmental *process* instead of 'an event that happens' (Maruna, 2001, p. 17). The process is considered to develop gradually, the frequency of and variety in crime may decrease, and it supports the subsequent termination of offending and maintaining a state of non-offending (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Loeber & LeBlanc, 1990; Maruna, 2001). In addition, since any process of change is complicated and highly individualized, desistance can also be viewed as "a journey of growth which comprises a multitude of pathways, turning points, dead ends and relays" (Phillips, 2017, p. 6). In this context, Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Holmes and Muir, (2004, p. 383) contemplated that "people oscillate on what we might visualise as a dimension, or continuum, between criminality and conformity".

When considering desistance as a continuum or a process with different dimensions, criminologists increasingly study the role of identity and its link to the process of (behavioural) change. This is of importance since an individual's actions of behaviour can be regarded as an expression of identity as people tend to behave in a way that aligns with their identity, and try to relieve dissonance felt between conflicting identities (Festinger, 1962; Foote, 1951). In the desistance field,

ending a period of engaging in crime (*primary desistance*) is associated with being able to identify with a life without crime and internalizing behaviour that fits the *role* of a non-offender identity, a 'changed person', which Maruna & Farrall (2004) refer to as *secondary desistance* to solidify the fragile state of crime-free breaks in *primary desistance*. The idea is that when a person experiences a change from an offending to a non-offending identity, crime will be perceived to be incompatible with the 'new' identity which will add to the gradual distancing from a past identity (Vaughan, 2007). A new identity does not have to be completely 'new', it could also entail a reconstruction of a 'good core' self that was hiding in the individual all along (Maruna, 2001). In sum, it seems important to study the contribution of identity to desistance as it motivates and guides human behaviour, and thus, also criminal or non-criminal behaviour (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Aside from non-criminal behaviour and identity, another dimension was recently added to be important in studying desistance as a 'relational' process: social support from others for attempts at (primary and secondary) desistance, which is called *tertiary desistance* by McNeill (2016b). This dimension appeals to an individual's sense of belonging, and support could be experienced from informal and formal 'others': family, partner, friends, employers, criminal justice social workers, and the wider community. McNeill (2016b) argued that to secure desistance, change also has to be recognized and supported by the wider community.

Recently, Nugent and Schinkel (2016, p. 3), refined this existing desistance framework of secondary, primary and tertiary desistance. They challenged the implied ordering in time and importance, and introduced the terms *act-desistance* ("non-offending"), *identity desistance* ("internalization of a non-offending identity") and *relational desistance* ("recognition of change by others") to describe the different dimensions of desistance. According to Nugent and Schinkel (2016, p. 3), these terms refer to the "world outside, within ourselves and in relation to others". Rather than being a linear process, desistance progresses in these different spheres, possibly at the same time, hereby acknowledging the 'multitude of pathways' in the desistance journey. In other words, an individual can already make attempts at identity desistance while still offending (no act-desistance) or receiving recognition for successful attempts to refrain from crime (relational desistance) without making progress at the level of identity. The two theoretical frameworks of primary, secondary and tertiary desistance (Maruna & Farrall, 2004; McNeill, 2016b), and act-, identity and relational desistance (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016) have the notion in common that the process of desistance is presumed to entail different dimensions: non-offending, identity change and support and recognition from others in attempts to quit crime. Yet, whereas the former one posits sequencing in time of the different

dimensions of desistance, meaning secondary desistance can only be followed by primary, the latter framework questions this temporal ordering implying that each dimension can progress simultaneously.

While theories on desistance have become more prominent in the criminological literature and many empirical studies on desistance have already been carried out, still various questions remain unanswered. First, much is still unknown about what can be viewed as identity and which aspects of identity may be important for desistance. Although the notion of identity seems to be associated with refraining from crime in the desistance literature and is increasingly being studied, it is still a difficult and complex concept to disentangle. Identity can be a quite vague and hollow term which is explained and operationalized differently by scholars. This may generate inconsistent findings and will hinder attempts to move forward in what we know about desistance (see Kazemian, 2007). Second, as will be shown below, most prior empirical studies do not meet the necessary criteria to study the different dimensions of desistance *over-time*. Research is often cross-sectional and retrospective which can be complicating when it concerns identity *change* and desistance as a *process*. Third, as also will be shown below, most previous research incorporating the role of identity is based on participant populations that have not necessarily experienced imprisonment or that were already released when data collection started. Since imprisonment is the most severe punishment in Western society, prisoners constitute a complex and specific group of high-risk offenders. More than 10 million people are held captive in prisons worldwide (Walmsley, 2016). Almost all these individuals will be released at some point and a part will be released on parole after serving a prison sentence.

The central aim of this study is therefore to gain more insight into the different dimensions of desistance, relating to primary or act-desistance, secondary or identity desistance and tertiary or relational desistance among prisoners transitioning to society. A qualitative longitudinal research design is used in which a sample of Dutch prisoners, who were serving relatively long prison terms and were supervised in the context of parole after release, were interviewed multiple times starting in prison and following them up to a year after release.

1.2 THEORIES ON DESISTANCE FROM CRIME

Explanations for understanding why and how some offenders quit crime and others do not, can roughly be distinguished into three theoretical perspectives: ontogenic, sociogenic and identity theories (Graham & McNeill, 2017). Ontogenic approaches comprise classic biological deterministic explanations of desistance being a product of ageing and processes of maturation (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Moffit,

1993; Matza, 1964). Yet, age as the sole explanatory mechanism of why individuals disengage from crime seems to neglect other factors that come with age and could possibly explain change. Sociogenic theories revolve around the 'structuration' of desistance by focusing on changes in social bonds and on the effects of important life events explaining the cessation of crime (Farrall & Bowling, 1999; Hirshi, 1969, Sampson & Laub, 1993). These developmental processes include the commitment to a spouse instead of peers, engaging in stable employment, and life events such as having children and thus becoming a parent. Sociogenic theories emphasize that desistance occurs as a result of external, social factors.

Over the past two decades, the literature on desistance from crime has been advanced with important theoretical ideas. Identity theories postulate that an individual has its own contribution to desistance and therefore highlight more individual factors coming from the offender, such as cognitive shifts and the development of a coherent pro-social identity (Maruna, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Understanding "changes in people's narratives and personal and social identities" plays a central role in the identity perspective (Graham & McNeill, 2017, p. 6). The basic assumption is that people are active in shaping their own world and that cognitive shifts precede actual changing behaviour. Thus, a change in how one sees oneself and the sort of person one wants to be, could play an important role in actively taking steps towards a life without crime. In these theories long-term desistance requires a "fundamental and intentional shift in a person's sense of self" (Maruna, 2001, p. 17). The present study predominantly draws on notions from identity theories to explore this 'sense of self' more in depth with regard to desistance. Moreover, the theoretical ideas of Maruna (2001), Giordano and colleagues (2002) and Paternoster & Bushway (2009) are discussed to frame the present study.

Maruna's framework of 'making good' (2001) has taken a central place in the literature on desistance, especially the role of fashioning an alternative, pro-social identity for the purpose of making sense. He claimed that individuals who were going straight created a story about their new identity to make sense of their place in the world and to help people and society understand who they are now and why. In some cases, a good character trait or aspect of one's core self which was 'hidden' for a few years or was only present in childhood, is being used to express an image of oneself that, according to them, was actually there all along. In this *narrative of desistance*, the emphasis is on a coherent pro-social identity that cannot exist alongside a criminal identity and dissociates the individual from the past criminal life. Note that the ideas of Maruna and colleagues (Farrall & Maruna, 2004; Maruna, 2001; Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell & Naples, 2004; Maruna & Roy, 2007) postulate that offenders do not go through an actual *change* in identity, but rather discard their criminal identity in favour of the 'good person', 'the real me' they were all along. Their

criminal past is not being silenced, but used in a positive way through the so-called 'redemption script'. In contrast, the accounts of offenders who persisted in their criminal behaviour were characterized by a 'condemnation script' in which they felt doomed to a life of deviance and helpless in overcoming re-entry obstacles.

Giordano and colleagues (2002) proposed a theory of cognitive transformation in which an individual first needs to experience a cognitive shift and be open to change. This then enables offenders to grab onto possible turning points (Sampson & Laub, 1993), or what Giordano et al. (2002) called 'hooks for change' (p. 1000), such as a job or meeting a potential partner. These hooks create opportunities to move into more conventional roles. Then, fashioning a new replacement self which casts off the old identity ("someone like me does not do something like that") is the next step and finally, there is a shift in how one perceives the criminal lifestyle. For example, robbing people is not seen as 'cool' anymore, but as hurting. This is a cognitive process of identity change that leads to refraining from criminal behaviour. According to this theory, the change in identity only takes place after the offender is involved in conventional hooks for change which he or she feels more or less drawn to depending on the openness to change.[1]

The Identity Theory of Desistance (Bushway & Paternoster, 2011; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) postulates that a change in the criminal identity is fuelled by the image of a desired and future pro-social identity. These 'possible selves' represent individuals' ideas of "what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (Markus & Nurius 1986, p. 954). The *feared self* (what they are afraid of becoming) can lead to a rejection of the criminal identity and stimulate an offender to work towards a *future self* that is not involved in criminal behaviour (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). This will only happen when offenders come to realise that their failures or losses in the criminal world are due to their own behaviour, instead of being plain bad luck. Furthermore, they have to link these past failures to possible failures or losses in the future to initiate a move towards changing their identity and life.

Despite differences in these theoretical frameworks, all assume that the role of (future) identity or the 'self' in the desistance process is highly important. In fact, although the different scholars use a variety of terms and labels, their ideas and concepts have much in common. For example, Paternoster and Bushway's notion of the *possible future self* seems to be similar to Giordano and colleagues' *replacement self* and Maruna's *real me;* although the first two are essentially different from the

1 In 2007, Giordano, Schroeder & Cernkovich (2007) revised their theory of cognitive transformation by adding the concept of the 'emotional self' (p. 1611). Furthermore, in their revision, they awarded a greater role to social processes contouring motivation to change.

person's previous identity, while Maruna's concept of 'true self' allows the person to undertake "what he or she was always meant to do" (2001, pp. 87-89). Furthermore, in all these theories the idea of a 'conventional' or 'pro-social' self is key. Maruna (2001) concluded that individuals in the process of desisting from crime were adopting more conventional identities such as a family man or a good parent than the active offenders did. Giordano et al. (2002, p. 1001) even noted that a conventional identity would be "fundamentally incompatible with continued deviation".

Primary, secondary, tertiary desistance and act-, identity and relational desistance

Many theoretical attempts have been made to provide clarity to the concept of desistance as a process in which an individual gradually disengages from crime. As mentioned before, Maruna and Farrall (2004) advanced existing desistance theories by introducing the terms primary and secondary desistance. Grounded in the work of Lemert (1951) on primary and secondary deviance – primary deviance referring to experiment with deviant behaviour and secondary deviance referring to internalizing deviance, becoming part of the individual's identity –*primary desistance* refers to a period in which one does not offend (behaviour), while *secondary desistance* entails a "reorganization based upon a new role or roles" (Lemert, 1951, p. 76). In the case of desistance this could be the role of a person who has changed and is maintaining a state of non-offending.

In general, the focus in the desistance field has mostly been on the end state of secondary desistance. Primary desistance was viewed by some as a topic of little theoretical interest, because after all, every offender experiences crime-free breaks from time to time (Maruna, Immarigeon & LeBel, 2013). However, the frequently made linear distinction in primary and secondary desistance offers little insight into how the transition from primary to secondary desistance might be achieved or why some individuals might achieve secondary desistance but then return to offending again (Healy, 2010; King, 2013). The categorical distinction of primary, secondary and tertiary desistance implies that an individual goes from one phase to the other. In addition, by proposing that secondary desistance solidifies behaviour in primary desistance, it also implies that the next phase is of more importance than the previous one.

Instead of viewing desistance as a linear process, Nugent and Schinkel (2016, p. 3) made an attempt to delineate different 'spheres' of desistance which do not suggest importance in sequence or time. Put differently, the desistance journey entails different dimensions and each can progress in its own way and at its own pace. The term act-desistance refers to the absence of offending, identity desistance entails internalizing the identity of a non-offender and relational desistance includes the support and recognition of change by others (called tertiary desistance by McNeill,

2016b). Note that the first two dimensions of desistance can be achieved by the individual himself (although partly dependant on others), but relational desistance is outside the individual's control. In other words, an individual needs others to achieve relational desistance.

Furthermore, these different dimensions exist parallel to each other so an individual can, for example, make attempts at act- and identity desistance at the same time, approaching desistance as a more holistic, but also more complex, process. Nugent and Schinkel (2016) argued that success will be limited or fragile, when one or more of these dimensions are not in place. Although they provided new insight into the process of desistance and how these different terms might relate to each other, they did not add new information to the 'identity desistance' term in an attempt to flesh out the concept of identity. Since the present study examines the dimensions of these theoretical frameworks, a brief discussion of what these dimensions entail according to the literature will follow below.

Primary or act-desistance

Since it remains difficult (if not impossible) to determine when someone has truly and permanently disengaged from crime, the absence of criminal behaviour as referred to might possibly be temporary. A certain period without criminal behaviour can (theoretically) either be 'real' desistance as much as it can be a mere lull between offences (Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman & Mazerolle, 2001). Various scholars have therefore also raised questions about the reduction of the seriousness of offending and the amount of criminal behaviour to make up for (attempts at) desistance (Bushway et al., 2001; Uggen & Massoglia, 2003). For example, one of the four elements as described by Loeber and LeBlanc (1990) in order to elucidate desistance is called de-escalation: reducing the seriousness of criminal behaviour.

The operationalization of desistance has been challenging and for a long time it has been based on the absence of official numbers on (re)conviction, new offenses or arrests during a specific amount of time (see Kazemian (2007) for a review of definitions being used in the past). Also, self-report is being used to determine desistance; individuals who identify themselves as ex-offenders refraining from crimes (e.g. Maruna, 2001; Warr, 1998).

Secondary or identity desistance

A non-offending identity often seems to go hand in hand with a conventional identity – one that is incompatible with continued crime- since the search for a conventional or pro-social identity is the common theme that appear to link the desistance theories framing the current study (Maruna, 2001; Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). In this context, the various roles a person (aspires to) fulfil(s) in society – e.g. parent, employee or partner- add to the construction of identity.

Identity change also seems to incorporate a future element involving thoughts or cognitive shifts in the way someone perceives his current self and a self which is projected in the future (Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). According to Farrall (2005), a successful desistance journey comprises existentialist elements of a sense of what might lie ahead in the future and which steps might lead to the realization of that future. What individuals think and expect of the future to come then, guides and motivates behaviour (Atkinson, 1964; Meisenhelder, 1985; Rotter, 1966). Thus, expectations of a future self frame the forward-looking dimension of identity in the desistance process based on the psychological idea that individuals project their self into the future and then act on it. The process of identity change then also entails concrete actions towards a (future) self-concept. This relates to the concept of *agency*, which is a term frequently used in criminological discourse, yet a clear definition lacks. Different definitions and measures are used (and sometimes mentioned in one breath with identity), but agency seems to encompass a few aspects: being goal oriented, the ability to influence and adjust your choices and believing in the desired outcome of your actions (Bandura, 2006). Individuals who see a certain desired outcome as attainable will strive for this outcome (and act more agentic) and when it is seen as unattainable, people will withdraw and not put effort into it (Scheier & Carver, 1992).

Tertiary or relational desistance

Aside from shifts in behaviour and identity, an individual must also receive recognition and support in their desistance journey to accumulate a 'sense of belonging' (McNeill , 2016b, p. 201). Relational or tertiary desistance then is rooted in a symbolic interactionist perspective in which change or reform is 'negotiated' through interaction of the offender with significant others (Shover, 1996). It is based on the idea that the perception of other people interacts with, for example, the confidence of being able to maintain a certain identity (Ebaugh, 1988). The source of support is based on three levels: the micro-level involves the direct surroundings of the individual, the meso-level relates to the wider community, and society as a whole is integrated in the macro-level (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Although individuals are able to gain support for their efforts at change from their significant others (micro), it is suggested that support experienced from criminal justice agents or employers (meso) or the way society deals with ex-offenders in general (macro) can also contribute to relational desistance. This turn our attention to the role of the criminal justice system, specifically parole supervision, in the desistance and reintegration process.

When individuals return from prison to society, their desistance pathways may be affected by the criminal justice system which plays a role in the process of reintegration. Note that although processes of desistance and reintegration are

inextricably linked to each other for individuals released from prison, desistance is not synonymous with reintegration. For example, it could be possible that someone returning from prison to society is reintegrating well, but is not making attempts at identity desistance (suggested to be a part of desistance). Or that one is refraining from crime (primary or act-desistance), but still has difficulties to adjust to life outside prison walls (LeBel et al., 2008; McNeill, 2006). So although the present study focuses on the process of desistance, it inevitably overlaps with the process of reintegration and rehabilitation of prisoners who are returning to society. Therefore, examining how ex-prisoners' supervision assists or hinders attempts at primary/act and secondary/identity desistance, and how it possibly contributes to tertiary/relation desistance, is of greatest importance for prisoners returning to society.

1.3 PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON DESISTANCE FROM CRIME

Research in the field of desistance has made enormous progress in the last decades, yet there is still ground to cover. In this paragraph, an overview of previous research concerning desistance will be provided. Since the literature on offending and non-offending (primary or act-desistance) is enormous and overlaps with general criminal career research (see e.g. Blumstein et al., 1986; Bushway et al., 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993), it will not be discussed here. The focus, therefore, will largely be on research done on the topic of identity. Also, prior research on (parole) supervision in the context of desistance will be considered. The discussion below is by no means an exhaustive overview, but meant to highlight some important findings in light of the focus of this study.

Previous research on secondary or identity desistance

Since Maruna's influential study (2001) there has been increasingly more research devoted to study the concept of identity in the desistance process, although it is not always labelled as such and the conceptualization of identity differs, which makes it challenging to compare. Some research examines identity for example by measuring personality characteristics such as being a good person, being kind or having self-esteem (Na, Paternoster & Bachman, 2015; Rocque, Posick & Paternoster, 2016; Bachman, Kerrison, Paternoster, O'Connell & Smith, 2016). Others have created specific deviant identities such as a 'thief', being violent or a 'hustler' (Crank, 2016; Irwin, 1970). In general, qualitative studies show that offenders who successfully desisted seemed to experience a shift in their identity which supports the theoretical idea that identities play a significant role in het desistance process (e.g. Aresti, Eatough & Brooks-Gordon, 2010; Dufour & Brassard, 2014; Harris, 2011; Schinkel, 2014). Quantitative studies show that most prisoners have (high)

expectations to desist (Visher, Kachnowski, La Vigne & Travis, 2004; Crank & Brezina, 2013; Dhami, Mandel, Loewenstein & Ayton, 2006; Zamble & Quinsey, 1997), but that, when these aspirations are followed over time and after release from prison, only those identifying with a pro-social role such as a 'family man' appear to be associated with non-recidivism (Burnett, 1992; 2013; LeBel et al., 2008). Others have offered evidence that it is (also) possible to refrain from offending for lengthy periods of time without the internalisation of a non-offender identity (Bottoms et al., 2004; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016), and that persisters may continue offending despite a positive and pro-social identity (Liem & Richardson, 2014). Most of the existing studies have a cross-sectional design, but a few have a longitudinal design and are thus more adequate to capture the process of identity change. Below, the discussion of previous research first concentrates on cross-sectional designs that examined factors that seemed to be associated with prisoner's future expectations, followed by longitudinal research which was able to link pre-release expectations to behaviour, and finally, longitudinal research providing insight into the movement from a criminal to a conventional identity.

Future expectations

A few cross-sectional studies have zoomed in on prisoner's own pre-release expectations (presumed to reflect identity) by examining which social or individual factors (excluding pre-prison factors) seem to be related to these expectations (Crank, 2016; Dhami et al., 2006; Van Ginneken, 2015; Visher & O'Connell, 2012). Dhami and colleagues (2006) showed that, from a range of factors, the perceived return to family/friends upon release was related to lower forecasts of recidivism among a sample of UK and US offenders approaching release. They illustrated that social bonds can be a source of social support depending on the perceived strength and quality of the bond. Similarly, Visher and O'Connell (2012) demonstrated that being a father, being married, experiencing family support and higher levels of self-esteem were related to optimistic pre-release expectations among a sample of US prisoners. From a more qualitative perspective, Van Ginneken (2015) interviewed 30 offenders approaching release and observed that offenders with a positive outlook on the future in general were characterized by having goal-oriented thoughts, concrete plans to achieve certain life goals and motivation to do so, in line with elements of Snyder's Hope Theory (1994). Crank's research (2016) among 700 prisoners illustrated that expectations of a 'straight' future were more likely among prisoners who did not identify themselves with a deviant identity such as a thief or being violent. However, over half (56.7%) of the prisoners who could identify with a violent identity also reported future expectations to desist.

Longitudinal studies using a follow-up to explore how expectations link to primary or act-desistance, suggested that individuals with future expectations to desist from crime seem more likely to be successful in overcoming re-entry challenges (Burnett, 1992; Burnett & Maruna, 2004; Howerton, Burnett, Byng & Campbell, 2009; LeBel et al., 2008; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011; Visher et al., 2004; Souza et al., 2013). For example, in a qualitative study on short-term 'revolving door prisoners (Howerton et al., 2009), participants who were optimistic about their chance in society to be crime-free, appeared to be more successful in their endeavours to find a job, which they felt was necessary to be able to refrain from crime. Shapland and Bottoms (2011) found that participants who made a decision to desist were more often actively seeking support from pro-social bonds such as partners and parents. However, while most prisoners in these studies expressed (high) expectations to desist, most of them were re-arrested, reconvicted or re-imprisoned again at the follow-ups. For example, 56 percent of the 113 young adult (age 19–22) male prisoners in the research of Shapland and Bottoms (2011) said at the time of the first interview that they decided to quit crime in the near future. An additional 37 percent wanted to quit but did not know if they were able to. Nonetheless, after three years, 90 of the 113 young men (79.6%) were reconvicted. Similarly, while 80 percent of Burnett's research (1992) 130 offenders claimed a desire to desist, 82 percent of the sample had reoffended at the 10-year follow-up (Burnett & Maruna, 2004).

Moving from a criminal to conventional identity

Longitudinal research exploring shifts in identity predominantly uses a quantitative approach, sometimes supplemented with a (cross-sectional) qualitative subset or some open questions in the structured interviews (Na et al., 2015; Rocque et al., 2016; Bachman et al., 2016, Shapland & Bottoms, 2011; Visher & Travis, 2003). Overall, quantitative longitudinal research illustrates that individuals who envision a conventional alternative identity, might be more likely to desist and that a successful transition to a pro-social, non-criminal world seems to include identity transformation. Burnett (1992; 2013) made an early attempt to produce a typology of desistance identities drawing on 130 prisoners' accounts and their motivation to change. In brief, 'converts' moved to conventional identities and said they were changed, 'avoiders' were deterred by the future costs of crime, and 'non-starters' felt that crime was just a misstep in their non-criminal life. It appeared that only the 'converts' were confident they would never engage in crime again, while the other types were ambivalent about reoffending because of being drawn to opposite goals; conventional and criminal (Burnett, 2013). LeBel and colleagues (2008) managed to do a criminal records check 10 years after release of the original 130 repeat offenders' of Burnett's study (1992; Burnett & Maruna, 2004) and found that identifying with the

role of a 'family man' was positively related to the absence of criminal behaviour. Conversely, feelings of being 'doomed to deviance' (Maruna, 2001) were related to recidivism (reconviction and re-imprisonment).

Seven longitudinal studies attempted to gain more insight into the movement from a criminal to a conventional identity change by (also) adopting a qualitative approach across the multiple interview waves (Farrall, 2016; Farrall, Hunter, Sharpe & Calverley, 2014; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011; [2] Healy, 2014; Irwin, 1970; Nugent, 2017; Opsal, 2012; Soyer, 2014). Irwin's classic and cogent account of *The Felon* (1970) presented an array of criminal identities. Drawing from interviews with 41 prisoners before release and re-interviewing 34 in the first months after release while they were on parole, various types of criminals were identified such as the 'Thief', the 'Man in the lower class', and the conventional 'Square John'. Types differ in their outlook on life, what it entails to be 'doing all right' and consequently in how they deal with life after release. However, Irwin (1970, p. 7) also outlined that "not all felons have a criminal identity". Contrary to Irwin's criminal identities, Healy (2014) focused on non-offending identities. Her analysis of 73 male probationers in Ireland (re-interviewing 14 of them after 6 years) resulted in three types of desisters, which she referred to as: 1) authentic desisters, who were able to transform a visualized identity into a meaningful crime-free identity 2) liminal[3] desisters, who are in between social worlds and develop a substitute self while working towards a desired future self, and 3) imagined desisters, who imagined a future non-offending self, but felt this identity was not attainable given the current situation. While the first two types were more or less refraining from crime, the third type did not; although they could be involved in less frequent and less serious offending. The third type resonated with the concept of 'imagined desistance' apparent in the narratives of the 23 young offenders (15–18 years old) in Soyer's research (2014) who each were interviewed at least five times. The youngsters felt somewhat disillusioned in thinking that juvenile incarceration would give them tools to actively build a crime-free life and work on the non-offending identity they imagined. This non-offending identity could be for example, the 'adult' identity as the young individuals (16–21 years old) in Nugent's qualitative longitudinal research (2017) envisioned when trying to desist after a limited offending career. Originating from disadvantaged backgrounds, the 'adult' identity was something felt beyond reach for these individuals. Although almost all

2 Although Bottoms and Shapland (2011; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011) conducted a largely quantitative research, they added a few open questions at each interview wave, creating some opportunity for participants to elaborate on their views and to reflect. This is why their research is included in this section.

3 The term 'liminal' was used by Turner (1970) referring to individuals who find themselves in between two different worlds.

participants remained confident to achieve their (conventional) goals, some also scaled down on their aspirations and in the months that followed, most of them retracted from social life since conventional aspirations such as obtaining a job and settling down seemed faraway. Desisting participants seemed to exchange a sense of belonging, status and respect derived from criminal world, for a legal, but limited existence due to the lack of fulfilling a pro-social identity. This illustrated the importance of chances to fulfil other, pro-social identities.

Bottoms and Shapland (2011) made a considerable contribution to the desistance field interviewing a sample of 113 serious young offenders up to four occasions. In the end, 97 men participated in either the third or fourth interview. Although they utilized a predominantly quantitative research design, they also added a few qualitative questions at each interview wave. Their findings provided evidence that persistent offenders also have strong conventional values and revealed how most individuals deploy various strategies to be able to resist the temptation of crime, introducing the term 'diachronic self-control' into life-course research. Participants in their research for example mentioned to sit at home, watch TV and playing videogames all day: "very boring, but not offending" (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011, p. 274), which could be seen as being in a similar vein as the 'limited existence' found in Nugent's research (2017).

The extensive study of Farrall (2002) followed a sample of 199 UK probationers over the course of 15 years in five sweeps starting in 1997. He succeeded to re-interview 177 (89%) individuals at least once, 105 of the original sample could even be retraced and interviewed at the fifth interview wave (Farrall, 2016; Farrall et al., 2014). Originally set out to understand the role of probation in supporting desistance, Farrall (2002) concluded that desistance was an interplay between motivation rooted within the individual and social interaction. One of the conclusions regarding identity was a gaze directed towards the future to guide behaviour, and the importance to assist ex-offenders in creating plans for a desired future self. One avenue facilitating the construction of a pro-social replacement self, was for example, finding legitimate employment, hereby linking social factors to identity. In similar vein, Opsal (2012), who started with 43 just released US parolees and managed to interview (only) nine of them three times in the 12 months after the initial interviews, discovered that when the imagined pro-social identity could not be solidified by for example, experiencing difficulties in finding a job, some parolees started to reengage with their past criminal selves. Aside from identity desistance-related insights, the studies of Farrall (2002; 2016) and Opsal (2012) also provided mixed findings about the role of probation or parole supervision in the desistance process.

Previous research on tertiary or relational desistance and the role of supervision

Since the terms tertiary or relational desistance have been introduced recently (McNeill, 2016b; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016), research on the topic, particularly on the meso-level, is limited. However, earlier studies focusing on experiences of individuals being supervised have already shed more light on the contribution of supervision to the desistance process in general. Yet, they are mostly cross-sectional.[4]

An early study of Leibrich (1993), who interviewed 48 probationers that remained crime-free for three years, illustrated that the relationship with the supervising officer was experienced for most to be significant in supporting the desistance process by treating them with respect, care and trust, while only half actually mentioned supervision to be helpful for their desistance journey. Rex's (1999) 60 probationers in England and Wales appreciated probation officers that were experienced as being reasonable, fair and encouraging. She concluded that these perceptions could facilitate commitments to refrain from crime. The nine men on parole after a long-term imprisonment in Schinkel's research (2014; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016) were able to achieve some success in relational desistance at the micro-level since there was family or a partner from whom they experienced support and recognition for trying to turn their lives around, expressing belief in them. However, since six of these nine men were living an isolated life because of the fear of temptation, contact with the outside world was mainly facilitated by the check-ins they had to attend with the criminal justice social workers that were monitoring them. These men reported some experiences that "their criminal justice social worker was a source of hope and motivation" (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016, p. 6). Although being cross-sectional, the studies mentioned illustrate that supervising agents could make a valid contribution to relational desistance, hereby 'assisting desistance' (Farrall et al., 2014).

Apart from the cross-sectional studies mentioned, only three longitudinal studies in the context of parole or probation and its contribution to desistance have been done. The first, done by Farrall (2002; Farrall et al., 2014), provides a 15-year examination of 199 probationers over five sweeps of interview and illustrates the indirect impact of the correctional system on desistance. While half of the sample was making successful attempts at desistance, only a few mentioned the role of probation in this process (direct impact). However, Farrall (2002) noted that probation, contrary to prison, did not restrict opportunities regarding housing, employment and relationships, hereby enabling the desistance process to develop and progress. In addition, he observed that it was more beneficial for desistance

4 For a more extensive review of cross-sectional studies into supervision and desistance, the reader is referred to the review of Weaver & McNeill (2010).

when the supervisor and the probationer were working in a partnership, but also, that the value of probation could be experienced only years later, when life events were starting to unfold and the advice of the probation officer suddenly seemed to make sense. The fifth sweep of interviews indicated that while the thought of change or the desire to change came only years later after probation had ended, the advice given by their probation officer during supervision still seemed to play a part in the process of change, increasing its impact (Farrall et al., 2014).

The second longitudinal study on parole possibly contributing to desistance was done by Opsal (2009; 2015). She conducted a qualitative analysis of 43 US parolees, of whom she managed to interview 30 in the second wave and only nine in the third wave. She described that her participants felt they were only monitored by their supervisor rather than receiving assistance in the reintegration process. A few, however, mentioned the positive function of parole by providing an explicit direction and structure in a chaotic life. One of the main conclusions of the longitudinal data was that parole was experienced to hinder efforts at identity desistance, particularly in the fulfilment of roles, such as becoming an employee, a mother and other social roles because of parole conditions and governance. For example, since parolees in the US are not allowed to have contact with others on parole, this was felt to be unhelpful in facilitating social relationships which could provide them: "with a sense of belonging, emotional support, and motivation to stay out of prison" (Opsal, 2015, p. 199). Or in other words, to achieve relational desistance at the micro-level. The study suggested that parole officers could pay more attention to conflicting conditions and the impact of these conflicts.

Thirdly, the Returning Home Study (Yahner, Visher & Solomon, 2008) focused on reintegration, but their quantitative longitudinal data of 740 former US prisoners provided insight into the possible contribution of parole to desistance. While participants varied in their belief whether parole would help not to engage in crime again, findings also showed that nearly all participants felt they were treated with respect and a quarter mentioned that the most helpful thing in their view was that their parole officer had provided encouragement. Only 6 percent explicitly mentioned their parole officer to be a "source of strength in helping meet their biggest challenges after release", which for most part was to find a job and go straight (Yahner et al., 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, parole was associated with a higher chance to return to prison in the year following release due to technical violations of parole conditions, and parolees who had positive feelings towards their parole officer were less likely to be imprisoned again than participants who felt less positive.

Main shortcoming of previous research on desistance

While appreciating the value of the amount of research done on the process of desistance, it remains an enormous challenge to deconstruct the concept of identity and the change herein, and previous research in this area also has its limitations. First, most of the studies adopt a cross sectional approach (e.g. Harris, 2011; King, 2013; Liem & Richardson, 2014 Schinkel, 2014) which, although providing important insights, does not allow to study change. Second, a substantial amount concerns studies adopting a quantitative longitudinal approach (e.g. Rocque et al., 2016; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011; Na et al., 2015; Burnett & Maruna, 2004; Yahner et al., 2008). These studies are able to describe change, but leave ample room for participants to reflect on their decisions and considerations which seem important to understand the process of desistance in greater depth. Third, most prior studies focus on specific offender populations, such as revolving door prisoners, young offenders, probationers (e.g. Farrall, 2002; Healy, 2014; Soyer, 2014). Relating closely to this point, participants in most studies have not been incarcerated or were not interviewed in prison, but after release (Farrall, 2002; Healy, 2014; Hucklesby, 2008; Opsal, 2015; Vanhaelemeesch, Vander Beken & Vandevelde, 2014). Given the fact that prisoners constitute a complex and specific group of high-risk offenders and face many re-entry challenges upon release (Petersilia, 2003), it is of great value to include the experiences of prisoners when they are approaching release and follow them during their transition to society. Fourth, existing research reporting on experiences of supervision typically portray 'front-door' practice populations instead of early release 'back door' schemes (Padfield & Maruna, 2006; Tonry, 2003). Front-door practice refers to offenders doing community service or being supervised in the context of a conditional sentence, mostly referred to as being on probation. Most of these individuals did not come from a prison setting which accounts for a different dynamic. Studies examining 'back door' practices, referred to as parole, are mostly cross-sectional (see Healy & O'Donnell, 2008; Schinkel, 2014) and therefore do not allow to follow participants through the process of re-entry. In addition, previous research in this area has tended to rely on parolees who were invited by their supervising officer to participate in the study, were identified to be committed to desist, who eventually desisted or were seen as successful in their supervision endeavours (see for example Healy & O'Donnell, 2008; King; 2013; Leibrich, 1993; Rex, 1999; Schinkel, 2014). Therefore, current knowledge is primarily based on selective and more successful samples of parolees/probationers. Fifth, the large majority of these desistance studies originate from Anglo-Saxon countries (e.g. Maruna, 2001; Bottoms & Shapland, 2011; Farrall, 2002; Healy, 2014; Hucklesby, 2008; Opsal, 2015; Harris, 2011; King, 2013; Liem & Richardson, 2014; Schinkel, 2014), and it is unclear how these findings translate to other non-Anglo-Saxon countries and the Dutch context.

So, although the theories on desistance have become more prominent in the criminological literature, and a lot of empirical studies have been carried out, many important issues and questions remain open.

1.4 THIS STUDY

The current study seeks to contribute to existing knowledge of the desistance process – and to overcome some of the shortcomings of prior studies – by (a) conducting a qualitative longitudinal research design following 28 (conditionally released) prisoners from shortly before until a year after release and interviewing them at three separate occasions; (b) using unique information from a Dutch context; and (c) using multiple data sources to include different 'views', from the offender and from the parole officer.

Analytical framework and research questions

Figure 1.1 presents the schematic overview of the dimensions of desistance as studied in this thesis. The current study examines the process of desistance in a sample of Dutch long-term prisoners, by interviewing them three times: data collection started in prison with 28 prisoners, continued three months after release where 24 of the original sample could be interviewed, and 12 months after release 23 of these men were re-interviewed. In line with the above theory section, and thus current desistance literature, different but related dimensions of desistance are assumed to be important. Each of these dimensions can change over time, and changes in these concepts can be distinct but are probably related (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). First, primary or act-desistance is important, which can be examined by consulting criminal records, but also by studying self-reported crime. Second, it is presumed that secondary or identity desistance comprises the shift to a pro-social and *non-offending* identity which can be facilitated by the various conventional roles a person fulfils in society (e.g. parent, employee or partner). Thus, as it presumes to reflect a change towards a future identity, *expectations* for (non-) offending and *aspirations* to fulfil conventional roles are examined more in-depth. Thirdly, tertiary or relational desistance is perceived social support and recognition for efforts to change from family, partner, children and friends, and possibly from the criminal justice system, such as parole supervision (See Figure 1.1). Specific research questions are formulated to explore the interplay between changes in these dimensions, in particular the role of identity.

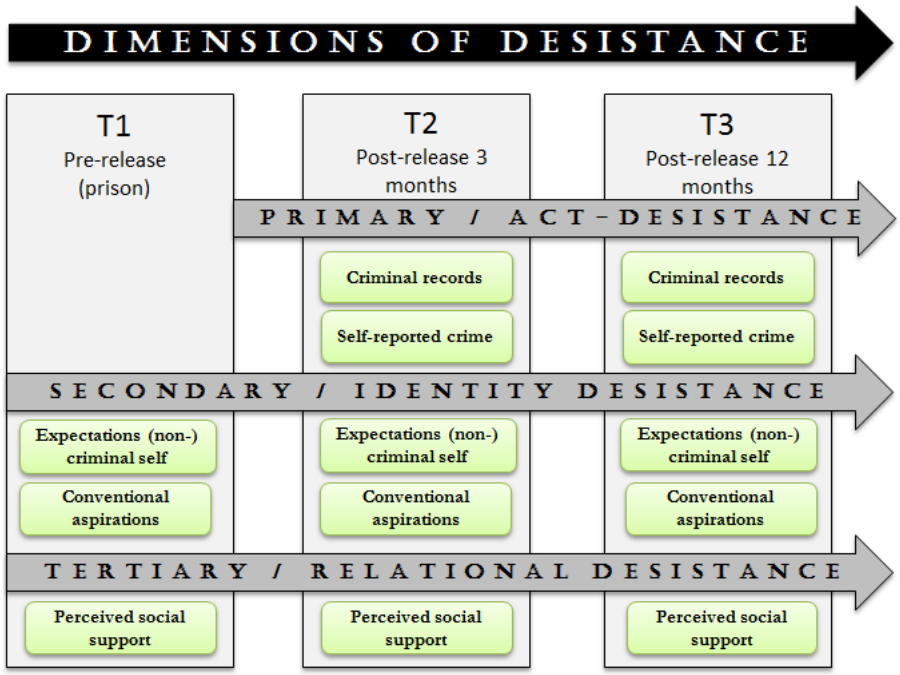

Figure 1.1 Schematic overview of dimensions of desistance as studied longitudinally in this thesis.

First, the current study focuses on a certain aspect of identity, i.e. future expectations for a (non-)criminal self. Using the interview data of the first round of interviews when prisoners were approaching release, it is studied what their outlook on life after release was, in particular regarding future criminal behaviour. Gaining insight into their future expectations regarding primary or act-desistance, and how they interact with early attempts at non-offending after release may enhance knowledge of the transition from prison to society and long-term desistance (see Apel, 2013; King, 2013; Souza et al., 2013). This study therefore first explores the pre-release future expectations regarding the (non-)criminal self and examines how social and individual (agency-related) factors, that seem to play an important role in the disengagement from crime, are linked to these future expectations. Following LeBel et al. (2008, p. 133),[5] the term social factors in the current study refers to the external social bonds such as employment, an intimate partner, children and parents, and the term individual – or subjective – factors refers to the way people experience and try to make sense of the world around them, such as goals, feelings of control

5 These two dinstinctions are sometimes referred to as external and internal, structure and agency and social and subjective (Kazemian & Maruna, 2009; LeBel et al., 2008).

and motivation to desist (Bandura, 1989; Burnett, 1992). Social bonds serve as a (potential) source for perceived social support, which then could relate to tertiary or relational desistance. So, to begin with this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1A. What are the pre-release expectations of prisoners regarding future criminal behaviour?
1B. How do social and individual factors relate to expectations of prisoners regarding criminal behaviour?

Second, the longitudinal design of this study allows to compare a specific aspect of identity, i.e. prisoners' pre-release expectations, with their primary or act-desistance after release. Furthermore, the reasons ex-prisoners give whether their expectations came true or not were explored, connecting to relational desistance and agency, leading to the following research questions:

2A. To what extent do prisoners' pre-release expectations regarding future criminal behaviour compare to their criminal behaviour after release?
2B. What reasons do ex-prisoners give for these expectations to come true or not?

Third, this study focuses on another aspect possibly reflecting identity change, i.e. the development of conventional aspirations. A recurring theme in the field of desistance is criminal versus conformist values, or living a conventional life that is not compatible with criminal values and lifestyles (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Maruna, 2001; LeBel et al., 2008). This involves for example to 'live a normal/regular life', 'be a family man' and 'be a good person' (Shapland & Bottoms, 2011, p. 262), but also a good parent or a 'worker' employee identity can help individuals to move away from their identity as an offender (LeBel et al., 2008; Opsal, 2012; Sampson & Laub, 1993). A shift in one's goals and aspirations, for example to live a conventional life, is viewed to a be an important element of the desistance process as it may reflect the process of identity change (Maruna, 2001; Shover, 1996). Thus, focusing on another aspect presumed to reflect secondary or identity desistance, this study portrays the conventionality of (ex-)prisoners' aspirations from pre-release up to a year after release, and explores how these relate to primary or act-desistance. This study therefore addresses the following research questions:

3A. What is the nature and development of conventional aspirations of (ex-)prisoners?
3B. How do conventional aspirations relate to criminal behaviour?

Fourth and finally, to broaden the criminological lens beyond the micro-level, and to include the criminal justice system on a meso-level, this study also incorporated the role of parole supervision. The nature of parole supervision of Dutch (ex-)prisoners in terms of official conditions is studied, as well as the way in which parole officers and ex-prisoners navigate these conditions. The focus is particularly on how the release conditions and the interaction with the parole officer shape the parole experience. This study therefore explores how the men in the current sample experienced parole supervision in their conditional release and then, how the parole experience interacted with act, identity- and relational desistance. It focuses on answering the following research questions:

4A. What is the nature of parole supervision of Dutch (ex-)prisoners?
4B. How do (ex-)prisoners experience their parole supervision?
4C. How does the parole experience interact with dimensions of desistance?

Research design and data used

Since the above theory and literature section has shown that desistance is a process rather than a decision someone makes to simply 'desist', it seemed crucial to carry out multiple interviews with the same sample in order to truly advance knowledge on this topic. In line with research done by other scholars (e.g. Bachman et al., 2016; Opsal, 2012), desistance in the present study was studied in a timeframe of 12 months after release, which Maruna (2001, p. 48) referred to as "a significant life change worthy of examination". Although an extensive description of the research design and methodology used in this study will be presented in *Chapter 2*, to illustrate the strengths of the current study in addressing the research questions it is necessary to give a short overview here as well.

This study was a sub-study of the Prison Project which targeted prisoners who were: men, born in the Netherlands and aged 18-65 (Dirkzwager et al., 2018). In addition to these criteria, the present study also focused on prisoners who (a) were imprisoned for a – to Dutch standards – relatively long time, i.e. between 2 and 4 years at the moment of release,[6] (b) were convicted for a criminal offence (not on appeal), (c) were not in an ISD or TBS programme[7] or a minimum security prison, and (d) were not convicted for a sex offence.

6 Sentence length was between 2,5 and 5 years.

7 ISD (in Dutch: Instelling voor Stelselmatige Daders) is a facility for so-called persistent´revolving door´ criminals and TBS is a court imposed detention under a hospital order. See Chapter 2, p. 31 for an explanation of this criterion.

To select new participants, the Dutch Prison Service in August 2014 provided a list of prisoners in all prisons throughout the entire country of the Netherlands, meeting the inclusion criteria and to be released between September 2014 and October 2016. By far the majority of the convicted individuals were still in appeal, and a large part had already left prison to spend the final phase of their prison spell elsewhere. As a result, the list contained only 84 eligible long-term prisoners held in 13 penitentiary institutions throughout the Netherlands.[8] The first round of interviews took place in prison approximately three months pre-release (T1) in the period June 2014 to October 2015; 44 men could be approached in prison and 36 were interviewed.[9] Eight interviews were excluded because of various reasons. In total, 28 men could be included as part of the initial research sample (*Chapter 4* is based on this sample).

The second round of interviews was carried out on average three months after release (T2) in the period March 2014 to May 2016. All 28 ex-prisoners could be located via the given contact information or via their parole officer. One was still detained since the first interview and three refused to participate in the post-prison interview when being contacted. In the end, 24 of the 28 participants were successfully interviewed at the follow-up (*Chapter 5* is based on this sample). The third wave of interviews was conducted a year after release (T3) in the period from May 2015 to January 2017 and 23 men consented to participate in the final follow-up (*Chapter 6* and *7* are based on this sample). A total of 75 in-depth interviews were carried out across all interview waves and 23 men could be interviewed on all three occasions resulting in 69 interviews.

The design of the in-prison and both post-prison interviews was semi-structured and included a broad range of topics from the literature and previous research. The topics in the interview were primary/ act-, secondary/ identity and tertiary/relational desistance oriented, but also included questions about experiences in prison and interventions. Questions concerned the meaning given to and experience of intimate relations, friends, children, parents, parole and employment (possibly contributing to tertiary or relational desistance), as well as questions about goals, obstacles, self-change, different selves (aspects of identity) and criminal activities (primary or act-desistance). The basic idea was to capture the meaning and perception of these topics at multiple stages, in prison and after release. Each interview also had a specific focus, mostly linked to the period in which the interview took place. The first (in-prison) interview for example, focused on future expectations after release. The second interview concentrated on the experience of the first fragile months after

8 For a detailed description of the selection of participants, see Chapter 2.

9 Participants refused to participate or did not show up (n=4); participants that could not be reached when visiting the prison (n=4), for example because they were placed in solitary confinement or due to administrative problems.

release and future plans, and the third and final interview revolved around reflection on the past year being out of prison. In addition, the final interview started the conversation with open questions about the participants' childhood and upbringing, how they entered crime and how it evolved into more serious crime.

Innovation

The current study, with its longitudinal design and focus on under-researched aspects of identity, addresses new and currently unanswered questions regarding desistance. In addition, the current study will overcome some important shortcomings of prior research. Therefore, it advances current knowledge in several important ways. First, by zooming in on aspects of 'identity' such as future expectations and aspirations, this study seeks to advance our understanding of identity change in particular and the desistance process in general. Gaining more knowledge about pre-release expectations, the extent to which these expectations are realised, and the factors playing a role in this process contribute to the core of the discussion about the link between subjective factors and behaviour. Second, the qualitative longitudinal design is particularly suitable to look at dynamics and change in the desistance process using the stories people tell (narratives) and the meaning they ascribe to them (Josselson & Lieblich, 1993; Maruna, 2001). Third, most longitudinal research fails to take the experience of persisters into account, magnifying success stories of desisters and disentangling why they desisted. The current research selected prisoners who met the criteria and was able to follow most sample members on their way out. This also allowed to include the trajectories of individuals who were less or not at all successful in or willing to refrain from crime. Fourth, obtaining self-reported crime from serious offenders, instead of merely official data measuring desistance, allows to examine (a part of) the criminal career instead of the *criminal justice career* (Bushway & Tahamont, 2016, p. 375), thereby including a fuller spectrum of criminal involvement, uncovering hidden crime. Fifth, most research in the area of desistance stems from Anglo-Saxon countries, yet recently there is some essential work on desistance coming from other countries in Europe (e.g. Cid & Martí, 2012; Carlsson, 2013). In the Netherlands, some explorative work was carried out in the southern part of the country in which desisters and persisters were interviewed using life narratives (Van Halderen, De Croes & Vogelvang, 2015). Although the study was designed to be longitudinal, only a few participants could be reinterviewed six months after release (6 out of 17 prisoners of the original sample). More recent work examined social factors in the process of desistance among Dutch female offenders (Rodermond, 2018). By linking longitudinal quantitative data to a cross-sectional qualitative subset, it is suggested that contextual factors and individual factors play an important role in the process of disengaging from crime, and social factors may support the process when it has already started from within

the offender. The findings provide tentative support for identity changes possibly preceding act-desistance (in line with LeBel et al., 2008). Other than these studies, the Dutch context remains largely neglected.

1.5 THE DUTCH PENAL LANDSCAPE

Prison rates, sentence length and conditions of confinement

The Netherlands are long known for their liberal penal climate which put rehabilitation at the core of policy since decades (Boone, 2011) and is mirrored in the mild confinement conditions and relatively short-term sentences. After a staggering increase in two decades time, the total number of prisoners quadrupling to 120 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2005 (Downes & Van Swaaningen, 2007), the Netherlands experienced a significant decrease in the total number of prisoners from 50,650 in 2005 to 35,250 in 2016, a drop of 30 percent (CBS, 2017). The Dutch prison population currently ranks as one of the lowest in Europe, with 53 prisoners per 100,000 inhabitants (Aebi, Tiago & Burkhardt, 2016). This decline has resulted in empty prison cells and in the closing of several prisons (De Looff, Van de Haar, Van Gemmert & Bruggeman, 2018).[10] Recidivism rates have also slowly been going down in the years 2002–2015, with 35.2 to 27.6 percent of all released offenders being imprisoned again within two years. However, 45 percent still comes into contact with the criminal justice system again for a new crime within two years, 35 percent even in the first year after release (WODC-Recidivemonitor, 2018, De Looff et al., 2018; Weijters, Verweij & Tollenaar, 2017). Statistics in other countries also demonstrate the importance of the first year after release. For example, US statistics show that recidivism occurring in the first year after release accounts for almost two thirds of all the re-arrests measured in the first three years, and almost half (21.5%) of all the reconvictions in three years (46.9%) take place in the first year (Langan & Levin, 2002). In England and Wales, 47 percent of all released offenders are reconvicted within one year of release (Ministry of Justice, 2013). In sum, national and international recidivism rates highlight the fragility of the first year after release, and therefore the relevance of examining this period.

Short-term sentences and short prison spells are typical for the Dutch penal climate; only 7 percent of all Dutch prisoners is sentenced to more than a year in prison (Kalidien, 2017). In contrast, this number is 68 percent in the UK (Allen & Watson, 2017) and 97 percent in the USA (Ann Carson & Anderson, 2016). In the Netherlands, the average time of imprisonment is 105 days and only 2 percent of

10 There is a proposal to close more prisons (*Kamerstukken II* [Parliamentary Papers] 2017-2018, 24 587 no. 725).

all prisoners is released after an imprisonment of two to four years (De Looff et al., 2018). For Dutch standards (but also for the majority of European countries),[11] being released after spending two to four years in prison is considered a long period of time. Although they are convicted for serious crimes such as armed robbery, violent burglary, extortion, assault and attempted homicide, little is known about the criminal pathways of these prisoners. It is important to gain more knowledge about this group since the crimes they are convicted for can have a devastating impact on the victims and also impact society and feelings of safety at large. In addition, re-entry challenges can be even more challenging for prisoners serving longer terms. Longer periods away from society could result in difficulties reconnecting to the labour market and weakening of social bonds while at the same time being exposed to deviant peers for longer periods (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1993).

The Netherlands is further known for the humane and mild conditions of confinement when viewed from an international perspective. Prison uniforms are absent in Dutch prisons, cell sharing is limited and unsupervised visits are allowed (Tonry & Bijleveld, 2007). Furthermore, prisoners in the Netherlands are allowed to make formal complaints, they are able to send and receive letters and there are options to request leaves (Dirkzwager & Kruttschnitt, 2012; Molleman & Van den Hurk, 2012). Although the Netherlands can still be viewed as having mild confinement conditions, budget cuts and a growing punitive climate have contributed for example to limiting daily activities in prison and the introduction of a 'standard regime'.

Since 2014,[12] a system of promotion and demotion has been introduced to the prison system in which prisoners who show pro-social behaviour and motivation to work on their future are 'upgraded' from the basic, sober regime they came in at the start of imprisonment to a so-called plus-regime. In practice, prisoners have to fill in a questionnaire, the so-called 'Reflector' which is a digital questionnaire aimed at inventorying prisoners' awareness of criminogenic factors, and to complete a Choose for Change course (in Dutch: Kies voor Verandering) to show their motivation to disengage from criminal life. The Choose for Change course revolves around three core mechanisms: cognitive transformation (identity, purpose in life), self-efficacy and (perceived) social support (Nelissen & Schreurs, 2008). Combining these mechanisms should lead to more *motivation to change*. In this course, concepts of identity are present as well. Elements of the course for example, dive deeper into past, current and future selves focusing on reflection, contemplation and thinking ahead (Nelissen & Schreurs, 2008). After completing the questionnaire and the Choose for Change course, prisoners can be promoted to the plus-regime which entails five

11 Prison terms in two thirds of 47 surveyed countries are on average shorter than 1 year (Aebi et al., 2016).

12 *Staatscourant*, 20 February 2014.

more hours for extra activities than the basic regime. Prisoners in the plus-regime are also allowed to apply for leaves, participate in behavioural interventions and apply for (practical) assistance with aftercare.

Assistance with aftercare is an important aspect of release preparations to reduce recidivism risks for which the Ministry of Safety and Justice [in Dutch: Ministerie van Veiligheid en Justitie] and the Association of Dutch Municipalities [In Dutch: Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten; VNG) have made agreements to ensure that every prisoner meets five basic conditions upon release: housing, income, obtaining a legal ID, debts and care (VNG & Ministerie van VenJ, 2014). More specifically, this means that the prisoner has a valid ID, accommodation upon release, income from employment or social benefits (and if not employed, some form of daily activities), insight into debts and access to care and insurance (Weijters, Rokven & Verweij, 2018).[13] Nevertheless, only 'motivated' prisoners, who completed the Reflector and the Choose for Change course, can use the four hours that are reserved for reintegration activities and apply for extra courses or extra assistance with aftercare (DJI, 2017). As a result, prisoners who do not show motivation to change their ways, have to spend time in their cells during the time reserved for reintegration activities.[14]

Conditional release and supervision

In the Netherlands, individuals sentenced to prison for two or more years are conditionally released after having served two thirds of their imposed sentence (art. 15 lid 2 Sr). Before the conditional release, prisoners are gradually prepared for resocialization by a system called 'phased re-entry',[15] which allows prisoners to gain more freedom up to the actual conditional release date, for example by going on leave and engaging in rehabilitation opportunities.

After release, offenders often have to adhere to the general condition of not committing any crimes until the actual (administrative) end of their sentence; in addition, specific conditions can be imposed aimed at reducing recidivism and

13 Although reports have illustrated that there are serious shortcomings in the system of ensuring aftercare (see RSJ, 2016; De Koning et al., 2016; *Kamerstukken II* 2017-2018, 28 719 no. 52).

14 Up until March 2014, *all* prisoners who served a minimum sentence of four months were eligible to enter behavioural and vocational courses to work on their rehabilitation in the context of the *Prevention of Recidivism Program* (Dutch Prison Service & Dutch Probation Service, 2007). This program was abolished in 2014 triggered by cutbacks and a more punitive penal climate focusing on pushing back recidivism instead of positive life in custody circumstances (see Bosma, 2017 for an evaluation of the programme).

15 A bill to replace phased re-entry by electronic detention (*Kamerstukken I*, 2014, 33 745, no. 1) was barely approved by the lower house of the Dutch Parliament in 2014, but then overruled by the Senate. The new Parliament has now agreed to maintain the system of phased re-entry.

protecting the victim.[16] Specific conditions may concern certain restrictions, such as attending check-ins and conforming to location bans, interventions facilitating behavioural change, such as drug bans and courses to improve vocational or cognitive skills, and professional help, such as seeing a psychologist or assisted living facilities. The Dutch probation service is given the task to supervise these ex-prisoners and monitor their compliance (Boone & Beckmann, 2017; Flight, Nauta, & Terpstra, 2011). For monitoring purposes, parolees can also be subjected to wear an ankle bracelet. If the parolee violates the imposed conditions, he or she can be sent back to prison.

1.6 SOCIETAL RELEVANCE OF THIS STUDY

The topic and findings of the current study are of societal relevance for criminal justice actors working with individuals in prison and (ex-)offenders, and for society at large for several reasons. First, much importance in rehabilitative interventions in prison and after release is given to cognitive shifts and aspects of identity transformation by paying attention to setting goals and making plans for the future, see for example the above mentioned Choose for Change course. This is done with the aim to increase motivation to change and facilitate behavioural change. In prison, this can get prisoners promoted to a plus-regime in which they get access to rehabilitation activities, and after release this is important for parole supervision showing that someone is motivated to change. But to what extent does setting goals and expecting and making plans for a crime-free life indicate change? And, how do returning prisoners deal with the increasing responsibilisation when opportunities to strive for goals and to realise plans to live crime-free are sparse?

Second, gaining a better understanding of factors contributing to desistance is highly relevant for correctional practice as it can offer guidelines for interventions within offender rehabilitation. For example, improving knowledge about which factors seem to be related to prisoner's pre-release expectations, and how these interact with behaviour after release can contribute to the advancement of early interventions in prison.

Third, examining in which way parolees' perceptions of supervision are experienced as helpful or not for the desistance process provides insight into the practice of supervision through the eyes of the ones 'subjected by it' (Robinson & McNeill, 2008). Gaining more understanding on how conditionally released offenders perceive the parole supervision, as well as why and how they experience it to be helpful may add to the practice of parole officers as this can be useful in their efforts to assist parolees towards a life without crime. This way, it may add to achieving

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some form of tertiary or relational desistance which is presumed to be important for the desistance process. Furthermore, it creates understanding for the difficult position the Dutch probation service finds herself balancing supervision tasks of protecting society and supporting rehabilitation efforts of offenders to reduce crime.

Fourth, although recidivism rates in the Netherlands are slowly going down, still 45 percent of all released prisoners comes into contact with the criminal justice system again within two years and a quarter is imprisoned again within this period (De Looff et al., 2018; Weijters et al., 2017), leading to high costs for society. The first year after release seems to be particularly fragile: almost 35 percent of ex-prisoners is rearrested in the 12 months following release (WODC-Recidivemonitor, 2018). This emphasizes the importance of gaining more knowledge on the first year of transitioning to society. In addition, the sample in this study consisted of serious offenders, the large majority responsible for violent (property) crimes, such as domestic and other robberies. Crimes that are known to have an enormous impact on the victim(s), their social environment and feelings of safety and security in society, and have been classified as High Impact Crimes (HIC; Ministry of Security and Justice, 2014; 2016). The dramatic increase in the number of violent robberies in the Netherlands (from 1,905 in 2006 to 2,911 in 2009), led to a special taskforce appointed to investigate this phenomenon (Taskforce Overvallen, 2010; Van der Mark, Van Nobelen & Mesu, 2014). Preventing and controlling these (future) high impact crimes (HIC), which also includes other violent crimes, was then given top priority by the Ministry of Security and Justice when a national action programme was launched in 2011 (in Dutch: Programma Gewelddadige Vermogenscriminaliteit PGVC), which for example resulted in intensified supervision after release for offenders convicted for a HIC crime. The first recidivism rates of this group of high-risk offenders illustrate that 57 percent of domestic burglars and 37 percent of robbers who were convicted in 2013, were convicted again for a new offence within two years of their HIC conviction (Beijersbergen, Blokdijk & Weijters, 2018). However, while the percentage for reoffending robbers seems relatively low, caution must be taken since this number may be affected by the fact that robbers are often given a longer term sentence, which adds to the relevance of the current study. Given the societal impact of these crimes, reducing recidivism among these serious offenders was given priority and still remains crucial to protect potential future victims for whom these crimes can have an unmistakable and devastating impact.

1.7 OUTLINE STUDY

The current study aims to understand the realities of prisoners' life pre-release and after prison and to capture different dimensions of the desistance journey, with a specific focus on the concept of identity such as expectations and aspirations.

Chapter 2 deals with methodology and presents the process of data gathering. From interviewing in prison, building rapport with participants to retracing participants after release and interviewing them again in different locations across the country. Also, information is presented about creating the interview schedules for the different waves, ethical considerations and how the data was analyzed afterwards. The secondary data sources will be described briefly before turning to the quality of the data.

Chapter 3 gives an overview of the characteristics of the men in the sample concerning their social situation, judicial process and experiences during imprisonment. Data from the interviews and criminal records were used to describe the sample on several topics before, during and after imprisonment.

The consecutive Chapters (4, 5, 6 and 7) use empirical data to examine the mechanisms as laid out above. *Chapter 4* starts with the examination of identity desistance by exploring the expectations of prisoners regarding their future criminal behaviour after release (RQ 1A) and the role of social and individual factors in these expectations (RQ 1B). Interview data from the first round of interviews (T1), which took place in prison, were used to answer the research questions.

Chapter 5 relates identity desistance to act-desistance by investigating to what extent prisoners' pre-release expectations come true or not after release (RQ 2A). In addition, the chapter seeks for mechanisms that possibly explain corresponding or non-corresponding expectations by examining the reasons given by (ex-)prisoners for continuing or refraining from offending behaviour (RQ 2B). Longitudinal interview data of two waves (T1 and T2) were used to compare expectations to self-reported offending behaviour and analyze the arguments given by the research sample.

Chapter 6 illuminates another concept relating to identity desistance by examining in more detail the nature and development of conventional aspirations in the research sample (RQ 3A) and how they relate to act-desistance (RQ 3B). Longitudinal interview data from three waves (T1, T2 and T3) were analyzed to capture the development of conventional aspirations and self-reported act-desistance.

Chapter 7 examines what parole supervision in the Netherlands looks like for this particular research sample of conditionally released prisoners (RQ 4A). The chapter continues with (ex-)prisoners' perceptions of parole (RQ 4B) and then analyzes the parole experience specifically on the level of act- identity and relational desistance (RQ 4C). To answer the research questions in Chapter 7, longitudinal interview

data from three waves (T1, T2 and T3) were used and also criminal records were consulted to capture act-desistance more fully. In addition, information from parole files of the research sample were investigated.

Chapter 8 presents the conclusion and general discussion. It offers a summary of the key findings of the empirical chapters of this thesis, the answers to the formulated research questions and discusses how they advance existing theory and previous research. The strengths and limitations of the study are discussed followed by suggestions for future research, and implications for policy and practice.

While the primary focus in the chapters is to answer the research questions concerning different dimensions of desistance and integrating the experiences of all sample members of this study, a few men have been portrayed more in-depth through a description of their life story. The aim of these life stories is to provide some contextual nature of the central topics of this study. This way, the reader is given more background information on different participants and the stories serve as a broad illustration of the findings in the chapters. Between each chapter in this dissertation is a life story of one of the sample members, six in total. The sources used to describe their stories are the interview data combined with data from parole files and criminal records (more information about the purpose and format of the life stories can be found in *Chapter 2*). The separate life stories serve as a bridge from one chapter to the next, illustrating how the key concepts of this dissertation work in practice given the context.

Table 1.1 *Outline of this thesis*

Chapter	Topic	Research questions	Interview data from X waves	Other data
1	Introduction	-	-	-
2	Methodology	-	-	-
3	The Men		T1 In prison T2 Three months after release T3 A year after release	Criminal records Parole files
4	Social and individual factors & pre-release expectations	1A) What are the pre-release expectations of prisoners regarding future criminal behaviour? 1B) How do social and individual factors relate to expectations of prisoners regarding criminal behaviour?	T1 In prison	
5	Pre-release expectations & post-release behaviour after release	2A) To what extent do prisoners' pre-release expectations regarding future criminal behaviour compare to their criminal behaviour after release? 2B) What reasons do ex-prisoners give for these expectations to come true or not?	T1 In prison T2 Three months after release	Criminal records
6	Conventional aspirations, identity change & desistance	3A) What is the nature and development of conventional aspirations of (ex-)prisoners? 3B) How do conventional aspirations relate to criminal behaviour?	T1 In prison T2 Three months after release T3 A year after release	Criminal records
7	Parole supervision & desistance	4A) What is the nature of parole supervision of Dutch (ex-)prisoners? 4B) How do (ex-)prisoners experience their parole supervision? 4C) How does the parole experience interact with dimensions of desistance?	T1 In prison T2 Three months after release T3 A year after release	Criminal records Parole files
8	Conclusion & Discussion	-		