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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 2
# METHODOLOGY



## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Since desistance is a process of change, this study used a Qualitative Longitudinal Research (QLR) design which is able to capture changes over time and an individual's understanding of these changes (Farrall, Hunter, Sharpe & Calverley, 2014). QLR collects data at multiple points in time of the same person in order to study change (Farrall, 2006). Interviewing individuals multiple times allows to create insight into dynamic mechanisms that play a role and also on how the individual gives meaning to these changes over time. Farrall et al. (2014) point out that QLR is of particular relevance to the study of desistance, since desistance is about change and QLR focuses on identifying changes within individuals over time.

Following other studies in this field (e.g. Healy, 2014; Maruna, 2001; King, 2013; Opsal, 2009; Schinkel, 2014; Van Ginneken, 2015), the primary data in this study are the stories of the participants to see "how social experience is created and given meaning" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 8). In this context, the aim is to create understanding or 'verstehen' (Weber, 1949). The meaning they ascribe to certain events and how they 'frame' these events (McAdams, 1985; Maruna, 2001) is examined through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This produces rich information on motives and ways of thinking.

To optimize the validity of the data several strategies were employed. First, different data sources were used to include different 'realities' and allow for triangulation. In addition to interview data, parole files and criminal records were consulted to increase validity of the results. Second, large effort was made to maximize the external validity by selecting participants from a national list based on release dates. This way, I strived towards a final sample in which each prisoner who met the inclusion criteria could be included in the study, although it was not the aim to make claims about the prison population in general. Third, external validity, or 'transferability' in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was optimized by making use of case-to-case transfer examples (Firestone, 1993). In the current study, this has been done by providing a 'thick description' of six individual cases to enable the reader to assess whether the conclusions described in the chapters can be drawn from these cases and to assess whether these conclusions can be

applied to other similar cases. This chapter presents an overview of the procedure, fieldwork, interview schedules, difficulties in and reflections on the interviews and the use of parole files and criminal records.[1]

## 2.2 POPULATION AND PARTICIPANTS

### Population

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). These selection criteria also meant that there was a selection of participants concerning gender, age and country of birth. Since the large majority of Dutch imprisoned offenders are male and aged between 18–65, country of birth probably had the most impact on this selection given the fact that 40 percent of the Dutch prison population is not born in the Netherlands (De Looff et al., 2017). This inclusion criterion was implemented in the Prison Project, because these prisoners could for example, return to their country of origin after release (Dirkzwager et al., 2018), which would be detrimental for the current study which aimed to follow all participants up to a year after release. However, second generation immigrants were included in the study.

In addition to the larger Prison Project-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, (b) were convicted for a criminal offence (not on appeal), (c) were not in an ISD or TBS programme or a minimum security prison, and (d) were not convicted for a sex offence. These extra inclusion and exclusion criteria in this study were selected for multiple reasons. Firstly, prisoners who had been imprisoned between 2 and 4 years at the moment of release were selected since these individuals can be seen as long-term prisoners in the Dutch context and were convicted for serious (mostly violent) crimes, often with a high impact on victims, feelings of safety and society at large (High Impact Crimes, Ministry of Security and Justice, 2014; 2016). More importantly, spending longer periods in prison means more possibilities for rehabilitation activities aimed at improving skills, changing attitudes and preparing for return to society. This is relevant because re-entry challenges can be even more challenging for prisoners serving longer terms. Longer periods away from society could result in a failed connection to the labour market and weakening of social bonds, while at the same

1 Because Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 have been published in (inter)national journals they all contain their own method section. These method sections are completely based on Chapter 2. However, numbers of participants may vary because data from different waves were used for the empirical chapters.

time being exposed to deviant peers for longer periods (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Sutherland, 1947). Furthermore, although the large majority of prisoners in the Netherlands is released within a year (De Looff et al., 2017), longer prison spells are more common in many other countries such as the UK and the USA (Allen & Watson, 2017; Ann Carson & Anderson, 2016). This means that, solely based on the length of imprisonment, the findings of this study have potential to transfer to international settings, certainly compared to other Dutch prison research which mainly focused on short-term prisoners.



Secondly, eligible prisoners had to be convicted and not in appeal. If their case was in appeal, this meant that the official end date of their imprisonment was uncertain and I needed an end date in order to follow participants through time. I also noticed, when interviewing a few prisoners of whom I thought they were not in appeal, but whose cases turned out to be in appeal after all, that their mindset was more concentrated in the present and not directed towards release and the time after release, which was essential for this study.

Thirdly, individuals staying in a facility for so-called 'revolving door´ offenders (In Dutch: Instelling voor Stelselmatige Daders, ISD) were excluded. This group differs from the prison population in general, because detainment in these facilities is legally not a sentence, but a custodial measure. Also, drug dependency usually plays an significant role in the criminal pattern of 'revolving door' offenders and is also treated separately. In addition, offenders with a court imposed detention under a hospital order (TBS) were also excluded. This is not an official 'punishment' and is imposed by a court on people that have been declared (partially) unaccountable for the crime(s) they committed as a result of psychiatric problems. These offenders receive mandatory psychiatric treatment after having served a custodial sentence. The length of a detention under a hospital order is two years and can be renewed every two years. In practice, this means that no record of an official end date could be found for these offenders which was crucial for this study. Furthermore, individuals staying in a minimum security prison were not eligible. They were in a final stage of detention phasing where they gained privileges and freedom (for example sleeping at home in the weekends, working during daytime) to an extent that we cannot speak of a closed prison setting anymore, it was as if they were already 'on the outside'.

Finally, sex offenders were also excluded, because of the characteristics of this specific group and their difference from the general prison population. Desistance processes among sex offenders are being studied by different scholars and highlight other challenges to aspects of identity (Wößner, Wienhausen-Knezevic & Gauder, 2016; Laws & Ward, 2011).

## Participants

When the data collection for this study started in November 2013, only four participants of the original Prison Project sample were eligible to be approached for an interview. Since the focus of this study was on long-term prisoners, new participants were added to the sample. To select the participants, in August 2014 the Dutch Prison Service provided a list of prisoners to be released between September 2014 and October 2016, aged between 18–65, born in the Netherlands and staying in one of 28 prisons throughout the entire country of the Netherlands. The original list encompassed 363 men, but 136 men were not meeting the additional inclusion criteria and could be excluded immediately for various reasons: they were following a penitentiary programme outside prison (replacing the final phase of a prison sentence), for example in an assisted living facility, they were staying in a minimum security prison, a facility for revolving door criminals or at a psychiatric prison. Soon after I began to trace the remaining 227, I found out via prison and probation staff that another 143 men should be excluded as well because of the following reasons: they were already staying outside of prison (n=57), an additional (or remaining) sentence was added to their current sentence (n=21), they were convicted for a sex offence after all (n=20), they were transferred to a minimum security prison (n=30), they were staying in a facility for revolving door criminals (n=7), they were staying at a psychiatric prison (n=3) or they were illegal, not Dutch citizens or untraceable (n=5). Eventually, the list contained 84 eligible long-term prisoners held in 13 penitentiary institutions throughout the Netherlands. When the data collection period of this study ended in October 2015, 44 men could be approached in prison and 36 were interviewed. Eight interviews were excluded afterwards because of the following reasons: they were convicted for a sex offence (n=2), they received an additional sentence while imprisoned (n=2) which meant they would not be released any time soon and therefore had to be excluded, they were in appeal (n=3) and one prisoner was detained for a shorter time than initially intended. In the end, 28 men were included in this study in the prison interview (T1).

It should be noted that I envisaged to interview 30–35 men at the start of the study, but the administrative process limited the number of interviews I could carry out each month. However, 28 men were close to the 30 I desired to include at the start and this sample size fitted well into sample sizes in international PhD research using qualitative interviews, concluding that the most common sample sizes were between 20–30 (Mason, 2010). Also, it has been noted that the number of participants needed in a study can be reduced when the research design involves multiple in-depth interviews with the same sample, such as in the current study.

All 28 men could be located three months after release (T2) and most of them could be contacted in person, either face-to-face or via text-messaging or phone. One was still detained since the first interview; his initial release date was moved into the

future, probably due to non-motivated behaviour in prison. Three men, of whom only one was contacted 'directly', refused to participate in the post-prison interview; one of them stayed in contact via email, but after several attempts sent the message that he was fed up with the system and did not want to cooperate. The other two were contacted via their parole officer or the assisted living facility. Both let me know they were quite busy with rehabilitative endeavours and that it took up all of their time. For example, Nick's mentor notified me that the reason he did not want to participate was because of a new job and other obligations, such as adhering to the conditions of parole. He felt there was no time left in his week. In the end, 24 of the 28 participants were successfully interviewed at the follow-up.

At the final interview, approximately 12 months after release (T3), I managed to contact and convince all participants of T2, except for one. This participant had been cooperative in the previous interviews and stayed in contact with me after the interviews. Some weeks before our last interview had to take place, I lost contact with him. Eventually, I found him via a new Facebook account and it appeared he moved abroad to pursue a job offer. Unfortunately, I was unable to establish a Skype or telephone interview with him. In total, data from 75 interviews with 28 men have been collected at three different points from pre-release to post-release (see Table 2.1). From the total of 28, 23 men participated in all three interview waves.

Although a relatively small sample of Dutch male prisoners was interviewed in this study, the sample was based on a list, which contained all imprisoned men in all Dutch prisons that fitted the inclusion criteria. Every prisoner that was scheduled to be released within the timeframe of data collection could be included in the research. However, it must be noted that men serving relatively long prison spells and who show motivation and pro-social behaviour have the possibility to apply for a penitentiary programme that was introduced in the Penitentiary Principles Act 1999. This programme serves to replace the final phase of a prison sentence since it can start in the last six weeks to one year of the remaining sentence. During a penitentiary programme, prisoners can stay outside regular prison walls, e.g. in an assisted living facility or a minimum security prison and engage in activities aimed to prepare prisoners for their return to society. A substantial part of the list obtained from the Dutch Prison Service had already started their penitentiary programme and did not reside in prison anymore. In practice this means that it was likely that the remaining men that were approached from the list in prison approximately three months before their actual release date, were seen as the more 'unmotivated' ones, not following a penitentiary programme. As soon as this was known, efforts were made to approach others from the list sooner than planned to be able to speak to them before they started a penitentiary programme. However, this was not always possible because in some cases men did not fit the selection criterion of a minimum imprisonment of 2.5 years anymore.

Thus, while the current research sample consisted of men who fitted the inclusion criteria, there seemed to occur some sort of self-selection, which resulted in a sample that did not only consist of seemingly motivated prisoners, the sample also included the seemingly 'unmotivated' ones, men who could be seen as having a high risk of reoffending after release.

Table 2.1 *Participants in this study and their participation in the three interview rounds (N=28)*

| Name | Age | Sentence | Offence type | T1 | T2 | T3 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aaron | 30-34 | 2-3 years | Robbery | x | | |
| Ab | 20-24 | 2-3 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Casper | 35-39 | 2-3 years | Kidnapping, extortion | x | x | x |
| Charles | 20-24 | 2-3 years | Robbery | x | | |
| Dave | 20-24 | 2-3 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Leon | 20-24 | 2-3 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Peter | 50-54 | 2-3 years | Fraud | x | x | x |
| Richard | 20-24 | 2-3 years | Robbery | x | x | |
| Tom | 30-34 | 2-3 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Tony | 20-24 | 2-3 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Bart | 30-34 | 4-5 years | Aggravated theft, extortion | x | x | x |
| Chris | 25-29 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Isaac | 30-34 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Jack | 25-29 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Kay | 25-29 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | | |
| Martin | 20-24 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Milo | 25-29 | 4-5 years | Attempted manslaughter | x | x | x |
| Nathan | 20-24 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Nick | 20-24 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | | |
| Oscar | 20-24 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Pascal | 30-34 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Roy | 25-29 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Rudy | 25-29 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Sam | 20-24 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Simon | 20-24 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | x | x |
| Vince | 25-29 | 4-5 years | Burglary | x | x | x |
| Wessel | 20-24 | 4-5 years | Attempted manslaughter | x | x | x |
| Xavier | 20-24 | 4-5 years | Robbery | x | x | x |

## 2.3 FIELDWORK

### Getting in: Approaching the participants

Interviewing in prison meant that many of the typical challenges of prison research had to be overcome (Liebling, 1999; Bosworth, Campbell, Demby, Ferranti & Santos, 2005). In this context, I think my previous experiences with collecting data in prison helped me at not being seen as "green, uncomfortable and out of place" (Sparks, 1989, cited in Liebling, 1992, p. 103) and knowing my way around prison and prison rules. For the present study, the most important thing was getting 'social access' (Noaks & Wincup, 2004) by establishing a feeling of trust with the prisoners so they could be interviewed optimally and convinced to participate in the future post-release interviews. Specifically much attention was given to the first minutes of the contact between the interviewer and the prisoner and throughout the interview by trying to make a connection and treating them as equals, despite the unequal setting of the prison, which sometimes was very apparent given the beeper I had to wear and the positioning in the interview room (I had to sit close to the alarm button in case of an emergency). Another good tactic was to find something external which we both could relate to. For example, my notes about Leon's interview say:

> He is very suspicious at the start of the interview and replies with short answers. Then, we get to talk about a movie on Dutch-Surinamese slavery which was on TV last week. I also watched the movie and it turned out we were both a bit astounded by a particular scene in the movie. When I made a Surinamese joke about the scene, he has to laugh and the ice is broken. I'm relieved, because it took me some effort to get him to sit down and talk. (Fieldnote July 6th, 2015)

Some participants mentioned that it was a while ago that they spoke to someone 'normal'. According to Bosworth et al. (2005, p. 257) a feeling of isolation is in particular common for prisoners serving longer terms and interaction with someone from the community could help them feel "a bit more like a human being and a bit less like a prisoner" (see also Schinkel, 2014). The practical endeavours of doing fieldwork were also time-consuming, since there was a lot of travelling to the various penitentiary institutions across the country, some located more rurally. Furthermore, dealing with prison rules or communication between staff and prisoners made the moment of contact quite challenging. One of the participants (Wessel), of whom I learned in the following interviews that he always took good care of his appearance, mentioned he was not informed about my visit while I actually had informed the prison some time beforehand:

> Normally you hear if you get a visitor in the morning, but now he [prison guard] just came up to me and said I had to go to this room for visit. And I had just came from my daily run. Couldn't shower, couldn't shave, so I just grabbed a shirt out of the closet. I was pissed.

Some interviews were curtailed by prison timetables. Most prisons were not keen on allowing prisoners to skip work obligations in order to participate, although there were a few exceptions. Nevertheless, for the most part this meant interviews had to be scheduled on that part of the day where they did not have to work. In this 'free' period, prisoners were also entitled to yard shift, visiting hours, church services, library time, sports, education and recreation. Although some participants said to voluntarily give up one of the services mentioned above, for most of them, obviously, these were important and not be missed. Some prisoners wanted to cook before they were being locked up in their cells again for the evening, so at some occasions I had to reschedule and come back. Unexpected events in prison could delay procedures: participants that were sent to solitary confinement on the morning of the scheduled interview and participants who had an appointment with their lawyer at the same time of the scheduled interview. To conclude, the participants and the rules in the prisons were additional challenging factors. Doing prison research means working your way around daily timetables, compulsory programmes and unexpected events.

## Interviews in prison

The interviews were conducted in a separate room where no staff members were present or could overhear to guarantee privacy. All participants were given information about the research and received an information leaflet (see Appendix I) which included the (simplified) aims of the present study and a brief description on how confidentiality would be maintained. I invested time in making clear that my research was carried out independently from the criminal justice system. It was made clear that participation was voluntary and whether or not they would agree to participate would not in any way hold consequences for their detention phasing. Also, it was stressed that their real names would never be used in publications to maintain privacy and confidentiality, and no information would go to lawyers or prison staff of any institution they were staying. Although prison staff in general was interested in the study and the results, they were very discrete and respectful and did not ask for more information about a certain participant after an interview. To minimize the chance of refusals and to emphasize the autonomy of the researcher, the prison staff was clearly requested to avoid asking the participants for participation. It was crucial that the researcher asked for participation in person. My request was carried out at almost all times, yet prison staff sometimes informed

potential participants about my visit and already mentioned it was in the context of a study being conducted. I did not get any refusals in advance, so it did not seem to impact the willingness to participate.

To minimize chances of information resulting from the interviews being biased and to have a full registration of the interview, a voice recorder was used to record all interviews if participants agreed to it , enhancing the reliability and accuracy of the data (Beyens & Tournel, 2010; Bryman, 2004). Although some previous research reported trouble getting audio equipment inside the prison to record interviews (see e.g. Healy, 2010; Bachman et al., 2016), for this data collection permission was obtained to bring in a tape recorder by each penitentiary institution separately. It was emphasized to participants that the recording was confidential and would only be heard by me and maybe other members of the research team. To prevent refusal on the recording issue, I explained to prisoners that if they would allow me to record their interview it would enable me to pay attention and focus on what they were saying instead of writing all the time (Moser & Kalton, 1971). Moreover, I explained the added value of minimizing bias or, as Liebling (1992, p. 96) said: "to accurately represent the subject's own view" when transcribing the interview. Participants seemed susceptible to these arguments reflected in nodding their heads to agree. In general, most prisoners did not seem to mind the tape recorder and even understood and said they were glad that the story was put down in their own words, especially because some mentioned that their words sometimes get 'twisted' when they talk to someone from the criminal justice system. There were only a few who refused tape recording their interview or who asked to turn off the recorder at certain moments. In that case, notes were written down extensively during, but mostly after the interview to minimize the loss of data. Two interviews were conducted in two parts. For example, in the middle of one interview, one participant had to go out to the yard for recreational hour with all the other prisoners. Afterwards, we continued the interview. Most in-prison interviews took on average 1.5 hour, with some finishing at 45 minutes, but many went towards two hours. All participants signed a consent form (see Appendix I).

## Maintaining contact with participants

Longitudinal research among ex-prisoners is difficult, costly and time consuming and faces many challenges when locating participants (Farrall, 2006; La Vigne, Visher & Castro, 2004). First, it is necessary to have as much information as possible on their location after release. To obtain that, at the end of the first interview in prison, all participants were asked for permission to contact them again after release. For this, names, addresses and other contact information of themselves, relatives and friends that would be helpful in tracking them down, were noted. Two

participants refused to provide contact information. However, they did agree to be interviewed again after release if I could find them, turning it more or less into a challenge, or even a bet. For example, my notes about Roy's interview say:

> He does not want to give any contact information of himself or his girlfriend or anyone else. When I ask him, if I can interview him again after release to see how he is doing, he smiles and says: if you can find me, you can interview me. Deal? (Fieldnote January 9th, 2015)

Secondly, ex-prisoners are typically hard to trace. Some change addresses, they don't stay in contact with their family, they hide, or they move to another country. To overcome these challenges, and thus to minimize attrition, I gave my business card with email and phone number in prison and tried to stay in contact with the interviewees in the period from release to the second interview by phone, email or via a text messaging service. Occasionally, birthday and Christmas cards were sent to the participants for example if the birthday was between two interview rounds. In a few cases the participants even contacted me themselves after they were released – and indicated to be open for a follow-up interview. Even Wessel, who was arrested again for a serious crime, was keen on staying in contact with me:

> When he is released, he sends me a text with his new address and phone number. And that he is doing all right. When it is time to interview him after three months, his phone number is not working and I find out that he cut his ankle bracelet and fled the facility he was staying. When I visit him in prison after his arrest, he apologizes for not staying in contact. He forgot to take his notebook, which contained my number, from the facility he ran away from. When he fled, he threw his phone in a lake, so he was not able to contact me with his new number. (Fieldnote May 19th, 2016)

Thirdly, when participants are found, the next step is to convince them to participate again. Some were quite busy men now, compared to the time in prison, because they were rebuilding their lives with jobs and courses. Or they were reconnecting with criminal life again and a nosy researcher would be the last thing they needed. To overcome this challenge, I conducted both the in-prison and the post-prison interviews myself in the hope of establishing a bond and becoming someone they already knew when being traced after release. This was a good strategy, since when contacting the participants for the second interview, none of them had difficulties remembering the researcher from the in-prison interview and all were willing to

participate again. Even when I could not directly contact the participant; for example an email from an employee at the assisted living facility where Simon was staying read the following:

> This Friday, I brought up the request you had in relation to interviewing him again. Simon only needed a minute to recall the interview. He didn't forget, that's for sure. Simon is willing to make an interview appointment again. (Email October 3rd, 2015)



Also in the case of Bart it turned out to be crucial that he already knew me from the previous interviews. At the final interview, which took place in prison again, I remembered from the previous interviews that he was not too keen on talking with social workers:

> When I arrive at the prison where Bart is staying, they let me know that he does not want to come down. First, I am somewhat surprised, because we previously had two good interviews, but when someone of the prison staff asks me if I am a parole officer, I connect the dots. I ask the prison staff if they could call again and clarify that I am Jennifer from Leiden University. Fortunately, Bart wants to come down now and he even seems quite agitated towards the prison staff that he almost missed his appointment with me, because of miscommunication. (Fieldnote October 29th, 2015)

### Post-prison interviews

The post-prison interviews lasted between one and 2.5 hours and were slightly longer than the in-prison interview. Locations of both post-release interviews were by default at the participant's home or the assisted living facilities where they were staying (30%), unless they preferred to be interviewed at an alternative location which included public areas (37%) and private rooms at the probation office (13%). Some interviews were carried out in prison if they had returned (20%). It was not allowed to give any reimbursement to the prisoners at the end of the in-prison interview, but a small cash incentive (€ 10) was provided at the end of the post-release interviews. This was primarily done to show appreciation for them taking the time to meet with me, but some of the participants refused to accept the fee, explaining they "did not do it for the money". At the start of the study, I applied for my Certificate of Good Conduct which I kept with me at all times when visiting the prisons and also during fieldwork. Furthermore, confidentiality agreements were signed for the Prison Project as well as for the Dutch Probation Service.

Besides protecting the privacy of my participants, I also had to protect my own privacy, especially with the post-release interviews which mostly took place at participant's residences. The Prison Project designed a safety protocol to maximize protection in case of an incident. I adapted this protocol and adjusted it slightly to suit my research project. It entailed the following: I informed another member of the research team about my scheduled interview, location and other details. At the start of the interview, I would send a text message to this person and when the interview was finished, I would send another message. This way, someone was always aware of where I was located and I would never schedule an interview at someone's house when it did not feel 'right'. Of course, I could never eliminate all risks, but this was one way to increase safety. Since I used Facebook as one of the strategies to relocate participants, at the start of the project it happened a few times that released prisoners added me as a friend on Facebook, since they had my business card and knew my full name. I decided to be completely honest and tell them my Facebook account was private and that I was using another one for my research project. I was afraid that some would then reject to see me for another interview or just feel rejected at all by adding the (possibly) first person they knew on Facebook, but they were understanding and we connected via my other account.

## 2.4 INTERVIEWS

### Interview schedule

Three separate interview schedules were created to guide the in-depth interviews in the multiple rounds. I did not choose the life history interview used in many other research as my interview tool, since it has been suggested that this type of interview might generate narratives where agency is the primary explanatory mechanism (Carlsson, 2016; Giordano et al., 2002). In an effort to avoid this bias, which qualitative research in general might be prone to (Bersani & Doherty, 2017), I constructed three semi-structured interview schedules which held more or less identical questions for the three interview rounds, but left enough space for the conversation to incorporate other issues.

Topics from the literature and previous research that were presumed to facilitate the process of desistance were incorporated. Moreover, an additional search for questionnaires and topic lists from other (cross-sectional and longitudinal) studies was carried out to find useful questions or topics for the present study (Visher et al., 2004; LeBel et al., 2008; Dirkzwager & Kruttschnitt, 2012; Harding, Wyse, Dobson & Morenoff, 2011). The interview schedules went through a few rounds

of redesigning[2] and after that, a pilot was done with three participants (that were not included in the final sample) in October 2013 to 'test' the interview schedule and adjust where needed (see the following paragraph for the main deviation). The topics in the interview related to the different dimensions of desistance: primary/act desistance, secondary/identity desistance and tertiary/relational desistance (Maruna & Farrall, 2004; McNeill, 2016b; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). More specifically, questions concerned the meaning given to and experience of intimate relations, friends, children, parents, parole and employment (possibly sources of relational desistance), as well as questions about goals, obstacles, change, different selves (reflecting identity) and criminal activities (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 started with the same question: 'Describe yourself in three words' to break the ice and set the participant at ease (Rubin & Rubin, 2004), but also to examine (the change in) how they perceived themselves (see Figure 3.1 in *Chapter 3* for a visual map of the answers of the sample to this question). Also, each interview ended with the same question: 'Where do you see yourself in five years from now?'.

The interview schedule for the in-prison interview comprised three parts. The first part of the interview focused on life before the current imprisonment with regard to living situation, partner and children, and ambitions before the current imprisonment. How did they view themselves before they got imprisoned? What did they strive for? Part two included the prison experience; visits, perceptions of prison staff and interventions. Main focus were questions about changes in self-perception and identity during this imprisonment, such as 'How do you think you have changed during this imprisonment?'. Part three covered the plans after release, expectations for the (non-)criminal self, goals and perceived obstacles. Questions concerning future act-desistance and identity were for example: 'How do you see you future?' and 'How do you see your life after prison concerning criminal activity?'.

The topics and structure of the follow-up interviews were almost identical to that of the in-prison interview, although concentrating more on experiences since release and goals and plans for the future. The interview usually started discussing what it was like to have some form of freedom[3] and if changes in society impacted their lives. Then, questions revolved around the meaning given to and experiences with parole supervision and the parole officer, and relationships with parents, partner, children and friends.

2 During a fruitful visit to Queen's Belfast University in October 2013, Prof. Shadd Maruna took a closer look at one of the first versions of the interview schedule. He provided valuable comments and suggestions to improve the interview schedule.

3 Note that almost all were under parole supervision.

Also, I asked how they had experienced reactions to their release from social networks and employers and how they reflected on their time in prison. If it did not already come up, they were asked about what they were doing to get by in the past few months since release, specifically about post-prison criminal activities. Then, topics on (and changes in) motivation to quit crime, self-esteem and self-efficacy were dealt with. The ex-prisoners were also asked to reflect on their former expectations of their (non-) criminal self and factors that played a role in refraining from or continuing in crime.

The emphasis in the final interview was on reflection and the impact of changes during the first year after release. In contrast to the other two interviews, this interview set out to gather more information on their childhood and upbringing, how they entered crime and how it evolved into more serious crime, adding more story to their life which I got to know so far. Since I already had interviewed them on two occasions before, I felt this was the right moment for them to open up and also to reflect, while not being in prison anymore. Of course, in the previous interviews we already discussed (sometimes briefly, sometimes more extensively) childhood experiences or their introduction to more serious crimes, so I could already start by putting some pieces together. Conducting multiple interviews with the same person also allowed to check information on accuracy, for example childhood experiences, which added to the quality of the data.

## Difficulties in the interviews

In general, the interviews went prosperous and none of them, except for two, had trouble telling 'stories' about many aspects of their life. Indeed, they were not all natural 'storytellers', but the semi-structured interview schedule stimulated a flow and guided direction. Although I tried to keep the words I used in the interview as informal as possible, there was one word in the interview schedule that caused some confusion or lack of understanding: the word 'definition'. After a couple of participants asked me for the meaning of the word, from then on I added some extra explanation to the question: "What is the definition of success to you?", such as "What does it mean to you to be successful?" or "What is success to you?".

One of the most challenging questions for participants in my opinion was the 'ice-breaker' question about describing themselves in three words. They all smiled when I asked this particular question and some scratched their head. For some participants it was difficult to reflect (on their life, choices, themselves) as well as to think ahead. There were a few men for example, who indifferently said to live day by day and not thinking of tomorrow. In such cases, I tried to get a bit more out of the answer by asking for example "If you think of you in a few years from now, what are you doing, who are you dating, how are you making money?", but I never forced it.

Furthermore, in the context of the topic of this dissertation, some participants were not too strong in reflecting on their actions or showing insight into their own choices while the interviews were aimed at this reflexivity.

Furthermore, as a result of the pilot, the question about what kind of offence they were convicted for was replaced from somewhere at the start of the interview to somewhere near the end. I felt the question was 'ruining' the flow of the conversation so I moved the topic a little bit further from the start and I started asking how long they had been doing time and how they had experienced it. Either within the scope of this topic or in answering an earlier question on how they initiated into crime and how it evolved into more serious crime, the current offence came up. This way, it felt more natural in the conversation and participants could share it whenever they were ready for it.



## Analysis of interview data

All interviews were transcribed using transcription software F4 and effort was made to maintain the flavour of the speech as much as possible by including street language and words from other languages (usually with a cultural component) that were used by the participants. Also, I made extensive field notes of the process of gaining access, maintaining contact, recontacting and interviewing all participants during all interview rounds which I sorted in a table to be able to compare field notes.

The analysis started by reading the transcripts a few times to familiarize myself with the data and to gain an overview of the content. This was an organic and continuous process since it concerned three rounds of interviews from which data was being collected partly simultaneous. Using thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006), themes and codes could be identified according to an inductive and a deductive way. At the start of the study the focus was more deductive and theory-driven and less 'data driven' (represented in Chapters 4 and 5), and later on the focus shifted to a more inductive way of analyzing (represented in Chapters 6 and 7). I went back and forth between the data and the literature to use existent theory and theory emerging from the current analysis, in line with an adaptive theory approach (Layder, 1998).

All interviews were coded after transcription. This involved labelling fragments in the separate interviews with a 'code'. Strauss and Corbin (1998, p. 61) described this process as: "breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data". First, themes and codes were derived from the research questions, the interview schedule, theoretical notions and previous research described earlier (this is called a-priori coding; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Secondly, new codes emerging from the data (first in-prison interviews) were added to the existing codes. Adding new codes to the initial list allowed to have an open mind during the coding process instead of dividing all fragments in existing codes. To increase the reliability of the

coding process, all the fragments were compared to the code they had been given to check whether the fragment 'fitted' the code. This sometimes resulted in fragments being slightly recoded. Then, all transcripts were reread to identify and link evolving codes and themes (pattern coding, Miles & Huberman, 1994) which resulted in a thematic framework which was then used to code the rest of the transcripts (see Appendix IV). Figure 2.1 visualizes the coding process. For each empirical chapter, I assessed which set of codes was relevant for the topic and these were then further analyzed across all interviews, since each interview round had more or less the same codes.

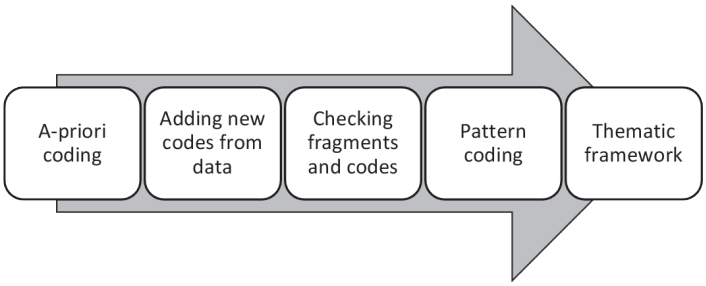


*Figure 2.1* Coding process

To strengthen the reliability of the data and the coding (King & Horrocks, 2010), two additional members of the research team separately coded the data to assess the thematic analysis and coding decisions. We then compared our codes and discussed codes that did not match until we reached agreement. This was more a deductive process using descriptive codes from theory and previous research and most codes matched, although I myself coded more thorough and detailed. Then, for the more inductive analysis, I gave access to all transcribed interviews to an external researcher who was unfamiliar with my data, to assess if we would come to the same conclusions independently. We drew the same conclusions based on the data, but we were also able to refine the analysis by combining two sets of interpretations of the data.

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software package (CAQDAS) Atlas.ti facilitated this process of data management and analysis and contributed to the enormous amount of data being manageable and allowing to work systematically during analysis. To identify quotes in the following chapters, all participants received a pseudonym and readers must bear in mind that the quotes used in the chapters have been translated from Dutch to English.

While the qualitative longitudinal research design has enormous strengths when examining dimensions of desistance, it also has some methodological limitations. Conducting a prospective longitudinal study bound by a time path, it was not possible to claim that I have achieved saturation with the data. While saturation is often a guiding principle in collecting qualitative data, it has also been debated (Mason, 2010). In this context, Strauss and Corbin (1998) argued that there is always the possibility for the 'new to emerge' from the data and that when the researcher starts analyzing, it is important to become disciplined and cut the data when necessary instead of seeking for new themes that do not necessarily add something to the overall story. For the purpose of this study, I conducted three rounds of interviews that covered a broad range of topics. To analyze the different topics for the empirical chapters, I had to decide which codes were relevant to the topic hereby already cutting down the data. To avoid missing important things relevant for the topic of the chapter, I read all the interviews for each chapter again to look for fragments that might be additionally relevant.

## Reflections on the interviews

To carry out all the qualitative interviews myself meant I was my own research instrument (Liebling, 1992). I was actively engaged in building a relationship of trust, yet I contemplated about possible implications. Reliable information is important in scientific research, but getting too close to participants may decrease the reliability of the data whereas too much distance can breach trust. I kept in mind that an interview is an active process between a participant and a researcher and as a researcher in qualitative interviews, I could not be completely neutral, objective or distant (Holstein & Gubrium, 2004; Liebling, 2001). However, it was important to have appropriate distance towards the participants to remain critical of what was being said, and to find balance between human interaction and scientific responsibility (Decorte & Zaitch, 2016). This mostly went well, but the longitudinal research design allowed me to get to know most of these men quite well and they also travelled along with me in my life. I remember one of the last interviews in which the participant got emotional because he lost someone dear to him. I, at that point, had also lost a significant other and I tried not to get emotional during the interview. Nevertheless, the participant noticed me choking up a little bit. Of course, I do not know how this might have influenced the interview. After the interview, the participant mentioned that "it was nice to see you are also just human". Finding a balance was sometimes a challenge, but I think I have managed to stay true to my role as a researcher.

It has been pointed out that repeated interviews can also have a normative impact on the side of the participant implying expectations of growth and progress (Thomson & Holland, 2003). This was likely the case for one participant (Richard) who went abroad after things did not turn out the way he wanted. My notes about efforts in locating and approaching him for the final interview say:

> He was doing really well when I spoke to him at T2. He was proud he got himself a job and had high hopes for the future. When I contact the living facility he was supposed to be staying at, I find out he lost his job, started gambling again and eventually left the country. When I contact him via Facebook for the final interview, he lets me know he went abroad for a work opportunity, but was now unemployed for three months already. He keeps postponing the day he is back in the Netherlands so I can interview him and we fail to set up a Skype meeting. I am starting to feel he is not doing that well, but he does not want to meet possibly because of some feeling of shame that he is not living up to his (and maybe mine?) expectations. (Fieldnote March 2016)

Sharpe (2017) called the way we as researchers try to trace and locate our research subjects in longitudinal research a form of 'sociological stalking'. With this in mind, I wanted to respect the lives and personal space of the participants as much as possible and while I tried to have all men participating in the follow-up interviews, I did not pursue this too vigorously. In other words, if someone directly told me to leave him alone, I would leave him alone after asking twice. For example, my notes about Nick's refusal to participate in both post-release interviews say:

> Via his mentor at the assisted living facilitate he is staying, he lets me know he does not want to participate again. Of course, I try my best to convince him with all the reasons I got, but when he explains he has too much going on right now (work, courses, parole conditions) and he needs to focus on 'keeping his head straight', I decide to let it rest and take no for an answer. I don't want my research to stand in the way of his attempts at desistance. (Fieldnote May 7th, 2016)

In this context, during a presentation at a conference a few years ago, someone asked me if I thought about whether and how my presence in their lives on several occasions might have contributed to their process of desistance. This question always stayed in the back of my head and to this date, I have no answer to it. Indeed, the questions I asked were not things they thought about on a daily basis. Some even explicitly said they had never thought about it up until now. It was not uncommon for questions in my interview schedule to evolve into deeper conversations about life,

purpose, their place in society and happiness. This connected to more existentialist thoughts on what the future holds for them, which in turn reconnected to my research topics. It is unsure if some men shared things which they otherwise would not have or, developed thoughts that would not have developed if I was not asking certain things (see also Schinkel's contemplation on this issue; Schinkel, 2014, pp. 108-109). Sometimes I also deliberated about ethics when I asked participants to look back on their time in prison while they frequently said they had closed this chapter. This became especially evident when Dave said to me in the final interview:



> Shall I tell you something weird? Since I am having these conversations with you… Last night I dreamt that I got imprisoned again. I swear! I thought, what the hell, where am I, you know? I wanted to get out and then suddenly I woke up, I realised fortunately I am in my own room.

Aside from revealing the impact of the imprisonment on him and a fear for future imprisonment, it also uncovered a possible side-effect of having repeated interviews, asking the same questions and expecting participants to reflect and look back on their time in prison while they deliberately tried to not 'go there anymore'. Occasionally, it felt like I was reminding men of their previous 'prisoner' identity while they were trying to get rid of it.

Another aspect I would like to highlight is the possible contribution of my own (Non-Western) cultural background to gaining access to participants. In this context, Sharpe (2017) noticed that some of her participants with a different cultural background might have refused to talk to her or went silent in interviews, because she belonged to a particular social group (white, middle class). In my case, I did not belong to the dominant social group she refers to, but rather I shared the minority social group with a large part of the research sample (individuals with a Non-Western migrant background). I believe this allowed for rapport and a feeling of 'familiarism' throughout the interviews, but it was also important in establishing contact in the first minutes of meeting someone. In terms of age was my own age slightly above the average age of the sample, which made it quite easy to relate. Furthermore, being a women interviewing male participants in prison (and outside) might have played an invisible, but inevitable role in the course of the interviews. Participants could have been involved in impression management (Decorte & Zaitch, 2016), but I tried to be aware of not only obtaining a one-sided image of them.

## 2.5 PAROLE FILES AND CRIMINAL RECORDS

In addition to carrying out multiple interviews with the participants, which allowed to gain insight in and understanding of participants' experiences, I obtained permission to analyse parole files and consult criminal records of the research sample to increase the validity of the results by including different views (Noaks & Wincup, 2004). Parole files of the men in the research sample were examined (see Chapter 7) and contained information from the Prosecutorial Office about the imposed specific conditions, such as check-ins, participation in courses and electronic monitoring, and about violation and sanctions up to a year after release. Aside from this official information, parole files also included extensive notes and reports from parole officers about their contact with the parolees: doubts with regard to a parolee's rehabilitation efforts, deliberations concerning missteps and considerations whether or not to sanction violations. These files were systematically examined by (a) collecting the release conditions for all participants; (b) searching for violations and the arguments deployed whether or not to sanction; and (c) analyzing the parole officers' notes, mostly recorded at the check-ins. Studying these notes offered insight into the practice of the parole officers and allowed to include their perspectives concerning the supervision of the parolees.

Data from the Criminal Records Office (Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice) were consulted for the purpose of triangulation of the theoretical construct of primary or act-desistance, to describe the sample's criminal history in Chapter 3 and in the life stories (see paragraph 2.6). Criminal records contained criminal history and revealed offending that was noticed by the criminal justice system within a year after release of all sample members. These official records included information about conviction, incarceration and recidivism. Consulting the criminal records was by no means an attempt to test the 'truth' of the self-reported crime by the research sample, rather using both measures of crime contributed to the triangulation of the theoretical construct of primary or act-desistance (Maruna & Farrall, 2004; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016) which is then viewed from multiple vantage points (Sullivan & McGloin, 2014, p. 13): from the criminal justice system's and from the participants'. In all cases when the official criminal records indicated offending behaviour (recidivism), participants also mentioned that they had been involved in criminal behaviour. In general, however, the criminal records contained less offending than reported by participants themselves in almost all cases in which individuals continued offending (Ab, Martin, Tony, Roy, Tom, Leon and Wessel). Either participants reported to be engaged in criminal activities, but this had not (yet?) been noticed by the criminal justice system, or participants mentioned to be engaged in *more* criminal activities than were registered in their record. Note that criminal records do not include arrests

by the police that were not prosecuted. Only when a filed report becomes a criminal case which is being prosecuted by the Prosecutorial Office, this case will be added to the criminal record.



## 2.6 LIFE STORIES

Although the experiences of all participants are integrated in the specific chapters, I also wanted to portray a few participants who are either exemplary of a certain 'type' of re-entry trajectory or somewhat of an exceptional case in this particular sample. While the primary focus in the chapters is to answer the research questions concerning dimensions of desistance, the aim of the life stories is to provide some contextual nature of these topics. This way, the reader is given more background information of different participants and the stories serve as a broad illustration of the findings in the chapters. Another important reason is a methodological one: enhancing the external validity or 'transferability' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of qualitative data, since these life stories may serve as case-to-case transfer examples (Firestone, 1993).

Being able to conduct three interviews with most participants in this study and following them during their transition, facilitated a certain classification in each analysis stage: in prison this was based on their expectations regarding future criminal behaviour (criminal, non-criminal and ambivalent) and at the two follow-up interviews this referred to the self-reported and official offending. Combining these classifications resulted in different desistance trajectories. The last column of Table 2.2 identifies the self-reported and official 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, behaviour was classified as criminal (C) or non-criminal (N). Behaviour that was illegal according Dutch criminal law was labelled as criminal. Technical violations of license conditions were not considered criminal offences, neither was informal employment when it did not involve any illegal activities.

Table 2.2 *Classification of participants who participated in all three waves (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[4] |
| Martin | 20-24 | 4-5 years | Robbery | Partner, no children | ACC |
| Milo | 25-29 | 4-5 years | Attempted manslaughter | No partner and children | CNN |
| Nathan | 20-24 | 4-5 years | Robbery | No partner and children | NNN |
| Oscar | 20-24 | 4-5 years | Robbery | No partner and children | NNN |
| Pascal | 30-34 | 4-5 years | Robbery | No partner and children | CNN |
| Roy | 25-29 | 4-5 years | Robbery | Partner, 1 stepchild | CCC |
| Rudy | 25-29 | 4-5 years | Robbery | No partner and children | CCN |
| Sam | 20-24 | 4-5 years | Robbery | No partner and 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 and children | NNN |

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. The stories will be described according to a specific format (see Appendix V) in chronological order, starting from childhood and ending a year after release, reflecting on what they had experienced in their transition from prison to society (or for some back to prison

4 Three months after release, Jack was in prison again for violating his license conditions, because 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.

again) and contemplating what their future would be like in five years from now. 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 2.3 *Selected participants for the life stories and the number of participants in each classification.*

| | T1 Expectations | T2 Behaviour | T3 Behaviour | n | Life story of |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| NNN | Non-criminal | Non-criminal | Non-criminal | 8 | Simon |
| NNC | Non-criminal | Non-criminal | Criminal | 1 | |
| NCC | Non-criminal | Criminal | Criminal | 1 | |
| CCC | Criminal | Criminal | Criminal | 5 | Wessel & Tony |
| CCN | Criminal | Criminal | Non-criminal | 1 | |
| CNN | Criminal | Non-criminal | Non-criminal | 2 | Milo |
| ACC | Ambivalent | Criminal | Criminal | 1 | Martin |
| ANN | Ambivalent | Non-criminal | Non-criminal | 4 | Casper |

The six participants whose lives will be described in more detail all represent a different trajectory. Four participants (Simon, Wessel, Tony and Casper) together represent three trajectories that were most prevalent in this sample: 17 out of 23 participants could be categorized in the trajectory that Simon (n=8), Wessel and Tony (n=5) and Casper (n=4) fit into. This does not mean all 17 men in these trajectories are all the 'same' men, there were a lot of in between participants' differences, even within the same trajectory. For example, while Wessel continued serious violent crime, Tony was determined not to be involved in violent crime anymore, but instead persisted in low-risk crime. These four life stories may be illustrative for more common persistence/desistance pathways among (ex-)offenders. The life stories of two other participants (Milo and Martin) are taken into account, because they represent a less common trajectory in the current sample. Maybe their stories are somewhat more off the beaten track but also shed light on desistance as "a journey of growth which comprises a multitude of pathways, turning points, dead ends and relays" (Phillips, 2017, p. 6).

## **LIFE STORY 1** DESISTER 'CHANGING IDENTITY'



### Who is Simon?

Simon, a 24-year old guy with non-Western ethnic roots to 4.5 years in prison for an armed robbery. He was arrested three times before the current imprisonment, mostly for drug related and violent offences. He was registered on a list of 'most notorious' young repeat offenders by the authorities. At our interview in prison, his demeanour was laidback and he described himself as being a kind and helpful person who liked sports.

### Background

Simon was born in a large urban city in the Netherlands. His parents divorced when he was three years old and he stayed with his mother and little sister. Simon cherished warm feelings for his mother, being raised by her and always felt he could talk to her. In contrast to his father who didn't raise him and frequently clashed with him. Difficulties with authority and lack of focus emerged at elementary school: teasing other children, bullying, disobeying the teacher, acting tough. Simon said he had always been 'a pain in the ass' at school, but when he was a teenager he also got into trouble outside of school, returning home past his curfew (sometimes in the middle of the night) and being untraceable. He frequently got beaten up at home and grounded, but his ideas on why punishment didn't prevent him from more antisocial behaviour reflect a few important debates in criminological literature : "I think it was just in me. My mother hit me, it hurt, I knew what I've done wrong. It had a reason, the beating… But yeah, it was just in me, I guess. You cannot beat it out of your DNA. It just has to go out sometime."

At age 14, Simon was caught carrying a weapon at the local soccer club. He had no intention to use it though, he wanted to show-off. He was convicted to community service and was glad he did not have to go to prison. After getting into trouble in and outside of school, his mother reached her limit with this incident and send him to live with his father (in another large city in the Netherlands). Simon was not amused about this decision, because he had to rebuild his social network, yet he succeeded to do so. He went to school and almost finished his education, but unfortunately he could not find an internship. After the deadline passed, he had to leave school because of this and got into a string of temporary jobs, for example in the kitchen and in construction. None of these jobs resulted in a steady income and according to Simon, the combination of these events culminated to the point it really went wrong:

> People say you cannot think that way, but I think it's the truth. If I could have just finished my education, I think I, I know for sure… That I would be further in life than I am now. I went to school, I got my [high school] diploma, I behaved well. And I was never afraid of hard work, I worked for my money. […] And then no internship… Honestly, it [getting involved in crime] happened like that [snaps his fingers].
> JD: Was it a decision or did something come across your path?
> Simon: You hang around with boys who are already in crime, but I didn't do anything wrong [yet], I just rolled with them. And then eventually, when you have no internship and only temporary jobs….You roll with them more often, you go with their flow. I was easy to go in their flow… and that's how I got stuck in it.

He first got involved in petty thefts which quickly turned into dealing drugs and fraud using debit cards. Making money easily fuelled his desire for wanting more and more:

> And then you see, hey there is money and you want more, more, more. You start thinking bigger. Maybe you have 4,000 euro now, you'll spend it tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. Then you think to yourself, no 4,000 euro is not enough, I want 8,000 euro. You start thinking bigger and higher [amounts].

At the same time, the way he valued money changed rapidly: "there is no value in that [criminal] money, to be honest. You buy expensive clothes, but there is no feeling involved because you don't work for it, you only grab." He quickly got used to the money and reflected on his life as being good at that time. For some of his crimes he never got arrested, but some got him in prison, mostly for short sentences of a few months.

In this criminal period, Simon started dating a girl, whom he got pregnant. He looked back on this being a high point in his life that he was about to become a father. However, she had a miscarriage and that same pregnancy also became his low point. His girlfriend knew he was working the streets: "She did not approve of it, actually, but yeah, she got used to it anyway of course." They dated for four years, but the long prison term eventually made an end to it.

## Current imprisonment

The pursuit for more money got Simon involved in a violent armed robbery which he was caught for. He thought he would be sentenced to 6 years in prison, but at the trial the verdict was 4.5 years. Simon was 21 when he entered prison to serve his first long-term sentence. Looking back he said it was a waste of time, yet it went

quite fast and he expected it to be a lot harsher. This expectation was rooted in his thoughts of spending a longer prison term and therefore being surrounded by 'real' criminals. Instead 'boys' his age, but serving shorter sentences, were predominantly present during his incarceration. He was also surprised by the mild conditions of confinement that characterize the Dutch penal system; for example, there were more opportunities for recreation and making phone calls than he'd expected. Furthermore, he'd always felt safe in prison and never had to look over his shoulder. According to Simon, doing time is easier when you prevent yourself from thinking of the outside world: "thinking of where you could have been and what you could have done if you weren't in prison can destroy you when that cell door closes at 5".



The first year of imprisonment was tough for him and his girlfriend. After a lot of troubles and waiting, Simon broke up with his girlfriend after a relationship which lasted four years. He was realistic and acknowledged the fact he had a long-term sentence and she had to wait a very long time if they wanted to continue the relationship: "I cannot hold you [girlfriend] by me and you want to do your own things [outside]. So just go, I made the decision myself of course. I said, I'm not in here [prison] for nothing, you know that. It's better for it to be this way." He stayed in contact with her though ever since and expressed some tiny hope that maybe in the future they could be back together. For a long time, he kept a phone illegally in his cell. It was his way to keep in touch with family in the evening behind closed doors, because the public 'phone-times' in prison were always during working hours. However, prison staff found the cell phone during a search and he had to spent a week in isolation. The first two years of his imprisonment, Simon enjoyed the visits from his ex-girlfriend, mother and friends, but after these years, he did not care for it much. He explained it's tough when his mother cries at visiting hour and at a certain point, conversations with friends about the outside world are just confrontational especially when he returns to his cell and they leave and go party outside.

Simon could get along with everyone in prison: "whether he's young, old, junkie, black, white, it doesn't matter to me. Everyone gets respect from me and if you give me respect, you get respect back from me." He described himself being someone who prefers talking in situations of conflict instead of fighting: "but if you touch me, yeah, you're going to get it." He never went looking for fights and according to him, he only got into one fight during his prison term with another prisoner who came looking for a fight with him and he could not walk away.

Simon participated in a rehabilitation programme and finished a Choose for Change and a Cognitive Skills Training as part of this programme, mostly motivated in order to be promoted to a plus-regime. He did not think they were really of value for his reintegration. However, when talking about positive effects of this imprisonment, he mentions being more mature, looking at life differently and not wanting to cause more pain to his family. In the future, he said he will think before he acts, which is the core

of Cognitive Skills Training. Simon was not granted any leaves. He found this difficult to cope with: "I have not been outside for 3.5 years. It's tough. And here [in prison] they say they help you with returning to society, but I haven't seen society yet."

## Pre-release expectations

Simon said he did not want to be in prison again for a long-term sentence and did not want to cause his mother anymore pain: "I hope those two things will keep me strong and motivated." He certainly did not see a place for crime in his life anymore and was determined to find a job, be normal and find a place to live. In addition, he mentioned a desire to have children someday, be a good father and a good person. Worries were present when he thought of finding employment, because he was under the impression that employers are reluctant to hire ex-prisoners. He applied for a sheltered housing programme and was hoping they would be able to make up for the lack of aid in prison and assist him in achieving his goals. He looked forward to being free, which for him meant: "to make your own choices, when you will eat, when you will shower, when you need fresh air, when you go out, everything. In here, you are being directed."

## First months out – transitioning from prison to society

After an imprisonment of 3.5 years, Simon was assigned to the sheltered housing programme he applied for. He wanted to start fresh and selected a location away from his old neighbourhood. He was excited to use his cell phone again instead of having to do this secretly as he did in prison. It took him a few weeks to adjust to life in society, but he vividly recalled the first day:

> I adjust easily. But on the first day, I was allowed to go to the supermarket with some money and buy my own stuff. I think you could tell by just watching me that I didn't have a clue what to do. So many people and then having to take your own stuff. That's kind of like… hey…shit… They also asked me, I was like sorry, I just got out, I will be okay, but I have to count till 10 now and then it will be all right. It was… quite scary actually.

Simon was very content with the aid he got from the sheltered housing programme. They asked him what he needed and first proposed to apply for social benefits, but he refused and said he wanted to work for his money. In his search of employment, they did request welfare to bridge the period without money and helped him with his papers. He actively started seeking for jobs and soon, this resulted in a job at a local fast-food chain. He enjoyed working, although he felt he was capable of more, but he recognized he had to start somewhere and it was better than doing nothing.

In contrast to the assistance he received from the sheltered housing programme, Simon experienced his parole supervision as not very helpful. Although he appreciated his parole officer, he felt he merely had to attend check-ins and was asked how he was doing. He expected more help from the probation service. Simon did not have to wear an ankle bracelet which added to the feeling of freedom he experienced since his release. He kept emphasizing that he is a normal person now, having a normal job and how crime was not a part of his life anymore. His mother was still his prime motivation. He sounded determined when he spoke of ricocheting criminal offers: "when someone would say I can make a million doing this or that, I say: you take it, I'm gonna go to [name of fast-food restaurant where he worked] and work. Let me know how it went. Simple as that. I stand by my decision and will not be distracted anymore." Simon did not feel oblivious to the fact that there will be ups and down in achieving his goals, however he felt prepared to deal with setbacks. Soon after release, Simon met a girl he had known already for quite some time and started dating her. She was living a conventional life and motivated him in his attempts to do the same, encouraging him to keep his head clear and stay focused.



### Process of reintegration – a year after release

When I had to interview Simon for the third time, I found out he was forced to leave the sheltered housing facility where he was staying because of a disagreement with a staff member concerning an act of aggression. Against his wishes (and apparently also against his parole officers' wishes), he got transferred to a location in his old town: "I wanted to start over in a new town, but now I see my old friends again here and you can easily fall back into the old routine which I was afraid of. But fortunately it did not happen, but being here makes it easier of course." Simon faced some setbacks since he was transferred. He lost his former job at the fast-food chain, because he couldn't meet the travel expenses anymore after being relocated and could not find another job in the area. He was volunteering in the meantime and considering to go back to school. Furthermore, he was annoyed at being pulled over by the police at least 20 times since he moved back to his former neighbourhood. Simon claimed there was no reason to stop him for questioning and that in his perception this was the result of labelling. His expectation was that this labelling would occur in search of a job, but he was surprised to see that employers did not ask about his past. He hastened to add that it helps when you know where you can apply for a job without  a certificate of conduct.

Since he had to return to his mother if he did not find a place of his own by the time he was allowed to leave the sheltered housing facility, his next goal was to get a place of his own. He said he had already been away from home for six years, so it would be weird returning there. As a result, he felt great motivation in achieving this goal, but did not know how he would get there without some help. He already

enlisted himself at a housing corporation, but waiting lists in large urban Dutch cities are long so housing prospects ("Even to start, a single room, studio, anything!") were low.

When asked who supported him the most during the past year, Simon mentioned his family and himself. He felt great support of his family who didn't judge him and still trusted him. He was thankful they did not push him away. His mother was still his number one ("My mother is my all, my wife, my friend, my father, my all") and he did not stay in touch with his father anymore. The limited role he fulfilled in Simon's life was not enough for him to feel emotionally connected to him. He planned on doing things differently when he would have children someday:

> Simon: He made me, that's all. Conceived me. I would be there for my children, [I would be] a different father.
> JD: What is a good father in your opinion?
> Simon: To be there for your child.[…] Go to school sometimes, see how they are doing in school, give them money sometimes for clothing or anything, go to soccer. You name it, if they are involved in something, you join them.

The relationship with his new girlfriend stranded when Simon got busted cheating on her. She found out when he left his phone on during a nap and she got access to it. Although he said he was the one who ruined it, he did not express any remorse: "I have to act out a little, right. [...] She has to continue her life. Yeah, it's a pity, but yeah guys…I think all guys are like this."

Since the previous interview, Simon was still refraining from crime and involved in diachronic self-control by avoiding tempting situations. Of course, time restrictions from the sheltered housing programme prevented him to go out at night, but he actively avoided situations involving alcohol:

> See, everyone drinks of course. I drink for fun. But if someone else drinks and get aggressive and you have words, that person has a weapon, you continue, you also find something and in the end you accidentally beat him to death… Yeah where are you then? You go to prison again, for what? Because you went partying. [...]
> JD: Why not walk away from a situation like that?
> Simon: Yeah, you have been drinking. You think about leaving, but in the end…. Alcohol talks. And that's the reason I don't drink at all anymore, I did not drink, I'm done with that. So now, if I ever would go out and see a conflict like that, I would retract and walk away.

Another example of him avoiding temptation was not to look at high-end clothing from expensive brands. And if he looked, it did not trigger an urge of having it right away. If he wanted it, he would "not fight of steal for it anymore, just act normal and save for it. And if I don't have it now I'll have it next month or the month after that. Louis Vuitton will never leave." These examples of diachronic self-control reveal a different way of thinking on a more latent level influencing Simon's behaviour. It resulted in him "laying low and be a normal person in society".



Looking back on the past months since he got to the new location, Simon expressed disappointment in the level of assistance he got. He thought they could help him in his endeavours finding a house, but that was not the case. When discussing the controlling function of this sheltered housing programme, I asked him if he thought he would be able to stay straight (refrain from crime) without it: "Honestly, I think so. You know why? Because I said to myself: I don't want it [crime]. From 6 AM till 9 PM I'm allowed to leave this place, I could also do the wrong things then. They cannot check up on me [...]". He continued to elaborate on what help people like him should get when they are release:

> What they should do when guys with a long-term sentence are released, they should *really* [emphasis] help them. So many things are being built, why don't they built some boxes for guys coming from prison and don't have housing. Then assign them a mentor who helps them getting a job, weekly talks. Then they [ex-prisoners] also feel: hey, I'm getting help becoming a normal person in society. Here, you are just abandoned. I think it's a shame. Especially for guys who spent more time in [prison].

Similar to other participants in the sample, Simon mentioned Germany as an example where more attention is given to future rehabilitation for prisoners, getting paid a normal wage for in-prison employment. Being released with honestly earned money maximizes prisoners' chances to make it on the outside and makes attempts at rehabilitation more fruitful.

Simon talked about being a 'normal' person multiple times. Normal for him meant being a normal person in society with a job, a house, a family and he firmly believed that as long as he desired and strived towards these goals, eventually he would achieve them. Furthermore, he expressed a generative desire to give something back to society by helping 'guys like me'.

## Future

As much as he loved his mother, worst-case scenario would be if Simon was living with his mother again in five years from now and if he would return to crime. A positive painted future included having a place of his own, employment and a family. Simon could envision himself contributing to the rehabilitation of other ex-prisoners: "If 10 or 20 out of 100 criminals become normal…I 'm not saying everyone wants to be [normal], but for the ones who do, that they get the help and they can get normal.."