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 4
TO DESIST OR NOT TO DESIST?▪

A qualitative study of a sample of Dutch prisoners and their pre-release expectations for future criminal behaviour

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on a sample of 28 male long-term prisoners in the Netherlands who were about to return to society. The aims of the study are to examine their future expectations regarding criminal behaviour and to explore how social (e.g. employment, family support) and individual factors (e.g. agency) are associated with these expectations. Since such expectations may affect their actual (criminal) behaviour after release, it seems important to gain more insight into pre-release expectations and factors that might play a role. Pre-release semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted and these interviews included questions about future expectations, social ties and sense of agency. Prisoners expecting to quit criminal activities had both close social ties to society and scored high on individual factors. Prisoners who did not expect to disengage from crime had weak social ties (or no social ties at all) and a weak sense of agency or self-confidence.

Keywords: long-term prisoners, future expectations, social ties, agency.

▪ A shorter version of this chapter was published in Dutch as: Doekhie, J.V.O.R., Dirkzwager, A.J.E., & Nieuwbeerta, P. (2017). Het rechte pad: Toekomstverwachtingen van langgestrafte gedetineerden in Nederland. *Proces, Tijdschrift voor strafrechtspleging, 96*, 207-223.

Monday 1PM. In a separate room in prison where no staff members were present or could overhear us, I patiently wait for Ab (24 years). He is a long-term prisoner and spend the past 2.5 years in four different prison locations for an armed robbery. In a few days he will be released. Ab is a cheerful guy who immediately starts talking about his life and experiences in prison. He tells me about the gun that was found in his locker at school when he was only 15 years old. About the drugs he started dealing and the money he has made. He tells about his brother who was shot in that same drugs scene and passed away. But he also tells me about his principles and values, the rule that he'd rather not use violence. That he wants children and longs to marry his girlfriend who stood by his side all these years. When I ask him how he envisions his life after release, he goes quiet for a second. Then he says: "this is the only thing I am good at. I wouldn't know what else to do". When I ask him where he sees himself in five years from now, he frowns even more profound. I make a joke that I am making him think hard on this Monday afternoon, to which he replies: "More [thinking] than I've done in all these years here [in prison]."

4.1. INTRODUCTION

In the Netherlands, a relatively small group of offenders is serving longer terms in prison. In fact, only 7 percent of all Dutch prisoners are sentenced to more than a year in prison (Kalidien, 2017); only 2 percent is released after an imprisonment of two to four years; and 1 percent after serving four years or more (De Looff, Van de Haar, Van Gemmert & Bruggeman, 2018). Since the average time of being imprisoned in the Netherlands is 105 days, for Dutch standards, being released after spending two to four years in prison is considered an extensive period of time. Although prisoners serving more long-term spells are convicted for serious and violent crimes such as armed robberies, violent burglaries and attempted manslaughter, knowledge about this group remains scarce. Given they are responsible for serious crimes known to have major impact on the victims, on society at large and on feelings of safety (violent crimes are classified as High Impact Crimes (HIC) by the Dutch Ministry of Security and Justice, 2014, 2016), gaining more knowledge about this type of offenders seems of great interest. In addition, re-incarceration rates within two years after release are similarly high for long-term prisoners and short-term prisoners. For example, 25 percent of all offenders released in 2015 after serving two to three years in prison, was in prison again for a new crime which is almost the same number (27%) for short-term prisoners serving less than two months (De Looff et al., 2018).

Sending an individual to prison serves various goals: such as reducing recidivism, incapacitation, deterrence, retribution and rehabilitation (Von Hirsch, Ashworth & Roberts, 2009). While a longer stay in prison results in an immediate removal of this

individual from society for a longer period of time (incapacitation), some research illustrates that imprisonment length or sentence length does not have a clear effect on reducing future crime (deterrence) (Loughran et al., 2009; Snodgrass, Blokland, Haviland, Nieuwbeerta & Nagin, 2011; Wermink, Nieuwbeerta, Ramakers, De Keijser & Dirkzwager, 2018). This implies that solely sending individuals to prison to serve longer terms does not seem to contribute to reducing recidivism.

Serving the goal of rehabilitation, the focus shifts to what happens during imprisonment when working towards release. Rehabilitative activities involve both the individual himself and the external, social context. Before 2014, only prisoners serving longer prison spells (more than four months) could be involved in rehabilitative activities (in contrast to short-term prisoners who participated in the regular daily programme and were bound to 'just' do their time). This has changed from March 2014, when a system of promotion and demotion was implemented in Dutch prisons. [1] In theory this means that all prisoners (so not only long-term prisoners) who behave in a pro-social manner and show motivation to change their ways can be upgraded from the regular, sober regime they start in when they enter prison, to a so-called plus-regime. The plus-regime allows prisoners to participate in courses and activities aimed to change their behaviour or thinking, apply for leave and receive assistance with arranging aftercare. Aftercare in prison focuses on social factors by working on problems in the area of employment, housing and care. Long-term prisoners have more chances and time to be engaged in prison-based rehabilitative activities. This suggests that on the one hand a longer prison spell could induce behavioural change that reduces the likelihood of recidivism. On the other hand, longer terms in prison also mean a longer period away from society, which could result in a failed connection to the labour market and weakening of pro-social bonds (Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Thus, re-entry challenges can be more challenging for prisoners serving longer terms and this could increase recidivism.

When approaching the end of imprisonment and the imminent release date, inmates have to think about their life after prison, contemplate about continuing or disengaging from a criminal lifestyle and how to deal with re-entry challenges such as difficulties in finding employment and reconnecting to family and friends (Irwin, 1970; Petersilia, 2003). The current study explores future expectations of long-term prisoners in the Netherlands approaching release and focuses on future criminal activities. It is important to gain more insight in prisoners' *own* future expectations of criminal behaviour, since psychological literature illustrated that expectations can direct (future) behaviour (Atkinson, 1964; Rotter, 1966), and therefore, possibly future criminal behaviour as well. Two theoretical streams served as a framework to

1 *Staatscourant*, 20 February 2014.

examine prisoners' future expectations and factors that might play a role in shaping these expectations. The present study examines the idea that social factors, such as employment, housing and social support (Sampson & Laub, 1993), and individual factors, such as agency (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001) that explain how and why people quit crime, can also play a role in the future *expectation* to quit crime. The main research questions addressed here are: (1) What are the pre-release expectations of prisoners regarding future criminal behaviour? And (2) how do social and individual factors relate to prisoners' expectations regarding criminal behaviour? Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 28 prisoners who were imprisoned for a minimum of 2.5 years at the moment of release. The interviews included questions about future expectations regarding criminal behaviour and factors that may be related to these expectations, such as social ties and a sense of agency.

Prisoners' expectations of future criminal behaviour

The present study explores the future perspective of long-term prisoners in the Netherlands regarding criminal activities. Since future behaviour can be influenced greatly by the expectations people have about the consequences of their actions (Atkinson, 1964; Rotter, 1966), it seems relevant to discuss what is known from literature on how realistic these expectations are when it concerns their own future. In general, people are biased towards the positive and therefore tend to have a positive future prospect (Taylor & Brown, 1988; Weinstein 1980). People tend to believe that they will do better than someone else or that chances are low(er) that something could happen to them instead of someone else: "it won't happen to me" (McKenna, 1993, p. 39). This is called 'unrealistic optimism'. On the one hand this can contribute to less motivation to protect oneself, by engaging in activities that minimize the chance for negative events to happen (Oettingen, 1996; Weinstein, 1980). Also, it can stand in the way of making plans in achieving goals, because of the thought that it will be okay anyway. On the other hand, unrealistic optimism could increase motivation and perseverance in high risk situations where chances of success are uncertain (Taylor & Brown, 1988). When this topic is examined in the population of prisoners, it could be argued that 'unrealistic optimism' may be beneficial for the process of re-entering society after a prison sentence (high risk situation). Yet, being overly optimistic could also obstruct actively taking concrete steps to disengage from crime and deal with well-known re-entry challenges such as finding a job and housing (Petersilia, 2003), because people might think they will be fine anyway. In this context, expectations play an important role: to perceive a desired outcome as attainable will motivate behaviour to achieve this outcome and contribute to perseverance when being faced with adversity (Scheier & Carver, 1992; Taylor & Brown, 1988).

Research findings demonstrate that prisoners are quite positive about their future when thinking of life after prison. For example, US and UK prisoners seem to give a lower estimation of recidivism compared to official statistics on recidivism for ex-prisoners (Burnett, 1992; Dhami, Mandel, Loewenstein & Ayton, 2006; Visher, La Vigne & Castro, 2004). Maruna's influential study (2001), examining differences in the narratives of individuals who had disengaged from offending and others who continued crime, illustrated that the stories of desisting offenders were characterized by an optimistic future outlook. However, this link could only be established in retrospect, which means it remained unclear if the desisting individuals were already optimistic at the time of release, or that, knowing they had successfully abandoned crime, a positive mindset was present at the time of the (post-release) interview. In addition to these research findings, Schinkel (2014) interviewed 12 long-term prisoners (sentenced to four years or more) and nine parolees, and suggested that disengaging from crime did not necessarily seem to 'need' an optimistic outlook; also a rather uncertain future perspective could be linked to moving away from a criminal life. She explained this by arguing that (optimistic) thinking could be strengthened when successes on the outside occur, such as finding housing or obtaining employment.

Theoretical framework

To examine the factors associated with future expectations regarding criminal behaviour, the present study draws on two prominent theoretical streams: (1) social control theories (Hirschi, 1969; Laub & Sampson, 2003) and (2) identity theories (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). These two theoretical streams differ in which factors are thought to be more important in disengaging from crime – respectively social factors and individual factors – and together they provide a possible explanation for when and why people desist. The current study presumes that factors from these theories might also play a role in the *expectation* to stop, or desist from, crime.

Control theory (Hirschi, 1969) postulates that an individual's proclivity to deviate is universal and the question should therefore be why some people indeed conform to society. The core thought is that people form ties to conventional society, such as employment, housing and the relationship with children and a partner. Sampson & Laub's age-graded theory of informal social control (1993) added that informal bonds can develop and become stronger gradually, also depending on age. For example, ties to parents will have more impact on children, while for adults, ties to employment, partner and children will become increasingly important as they grow older. These 'stakes at conformity' can be at risk when someone engages in criminal activities, which then motivates to refrain from criminal behaviour (Hirschi, 1969). Stronger ties could constrain the inclination towards criminal behaviour, which

highlights the quality of bonds instead of the mere presence. In sum, social control theory is based on the idea that individuals are motivated by external, social forces that direct their (criminal) behaviour.

In past decades, the field of criminology has increasingly been expanded by paying attention to more internal, subjective and complex processes that seem to play a role in the process of disengaging from offending (Bandura, 1989; Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). The basic assumption here is that people are active in shaping their own world and cognitive shifts precede actual changing behaviour (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). Identity theories posit that change has to come from within the 'self' before that individual will take steps towards a life without crime. The explanatory mechanism here is the concept of identity change: moving from the old, criminal identity to a pro-social one that does not involve criminal behaviour. A cognitive shift takes place when a person starts to envision a future conventional non-offending self which can replace their current offending self.

Bandura (1989) criticised approaches in which the human being was viewed as a passive actor, as in control theories. He proposed an *agentic view* in which individuals are perceived to be actively shaping their lives into the desired direction. Although increasing attention is being paid to the concept of agency within the field of desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Vaughan, 2007), there is no agreement on the definition of this concept (Healy & O'Donnell, 2008). Despite the lack of a clear definition, 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; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). The last aspect refers to self-efficacy, a sub mechanism of agency (Bandura, 1989): believing that goals can be achieved, to concur obstacles and being confident in one's own abilities. Or, as Maruna (2001, p. 147) concluded in a group of ex-offenders that successfully moved away from criminal life, that: "they had a plan and were optimistic that they could make it work." Burnett and Maruna (2004) described agency as the motivation to strive towards a goal and the ability and capacity to reach this goal, or "the will and the ways".

Previous research

Previous studies have provided evidence for the importance of social factors when re-entering society after prison, such as the role of employment, family and partners (Ramakers, Nieuwbeerta, Van Wilsem, Dirkzwager & Reef, 2014; Naser & La Vigne, 2006). Family and partner can be a valuable source of emotional and financial support, but also to provide housing and a feeling of stability. Other studies have shown that for example, receiving visits in prison from significant others reduces the chance at recidivism after release (Cochran, 2014; Duwe & Clark, 2013).

A few studies have zoomed in on prisoner's own pre-release expectations 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 a significant predictor of 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 dependent on the perceived strength and quality of the bond. Similarly, Visher & 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 were motivated to do so. Lloyd & Serin (2012) showed in a sample of 142 minimum-security prisoners that a positive expectancy for desistance was related to a strong belief in the ability to desist (agency), and suggested that optimism, realistic or not, could be necessary to maintain strength and confidence in one's own abilities.

In sum, both social and individual factors are proposed by theory to play an important role in processes of behavioural change, such as desisting from crime. Some previous research suggests these factors can also relate to future expectations for life after prison. The current study examines how social and individual factors, which are associated with desistance, relate to future expectations regarding criminal behaviour in a sample of Dutch long-term prisoners.

Dual contribution social and individual factors

Combining social and individual factors, persons can be divided into four categories (see Table 4.1). Prisoners with a high score on both factors (multiple and/or strong social bonds and a strong sense of agency) will be, based on theory and previous research, more likely to have expectations to disengage from crime in the near future. Conversely, prisoners with low scores on both factors (few and/or weak social bonds and a low sense of agency) will not or less expect to refrain from crime. The future expectations of prisoners with both high and low scores will vary on a continuum between refraining and continuing crime.

Table 4.1. *Typology of social and individual factors and hypotheses*

Type	Social factors	Individual factors	Expected direction prisoners' forecasts
I	+	+	Non-criminal
II	-	-	Criminal
III	+	-	Between non-criminal and criminal
IV	-	+	Between non-criminal and criminal

Note: a plus sign means a high score, a minus sign means a low score.

4.2. METHODS

Procedure and participants

The current study is a sub study of the Prison Project, a longitudinal research on effects of imprisonment among Dutch male detainees aged 18–65 years (Dirkzwager et al., 2018). Our target sample met the same basic criteria as the Prison Project participants, but additionally focused on prisoners who (a) had been imprisoned 2.5 to four years at the moment of release, (b) were convicted for a crime that is not in appeal, (c) were not in an ISD or TBS programme or a minimum security prison, and (d) were not convicted for a sex offence. Since only four participants of the original Prison Project sample met the extra criteria, an additional data collection was initiated based on a new list provided by the Custodial Institutions Agency (DJI) that consisted of prisoners in 28 prisons across the country, meeting the inclusion criteria and to be released between September 2014 and October 2016. Since the aim of the research was to explore future expectations, it was important to interview the prisoners before release. The list contained 84 long-term prisoners who met the criteria.[2] This small number reflects the criminal justice system in the Netherlands, where longer term prison sentences

2 The original list encompassed 363 men, but 136 men were unfortunately not meeting the additional inclusion criteria and could be excluded immediately for various reasons: they were following a penitentiary programme (replacing the final phase of a prison sentence) outside prison, 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 beginning to trace the remaining 227, another 143 men could be excluded in addition because of the following: 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 in a psychiatric prison (n=3) or they were illegal, not a Dutch citizen or untraceable (n=5).

are rare – by international standards. By the end of the data collection period, 44 men in prison were approached and 36 were interviewed.[3] Eight interviews were excluded afterwards because of various reasons.[4]

When approaching the prisoners, an explanation was given about the study and it was pointed out that participation was voluntary. Furthermore, they were informed that this study was conducted independently of the Netherlands Ministry of Security and Justice and that information was not shared with other inmates, nor with prison staff or the Probation Services. Interviews were all done by the same interviewer and took place in a private room. They lasted one to two hours and with permission of the participants, 26 out of 28 interviews were tape recorded. Notes were taken during the interviews with the two participants that refused audio recording and written down immediately after the interview.

The average age of the participants was 27 years (range 21 - 53 years). Table 4.2 presents some information about the sample. The majority is convicted for violent crimes (such as armed robbery). All the participants were given a pseudonym.

3 Participants refusing 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.

4 For two participants we uncovered that they were convicted for a sex offence after all, two participants received another sentence while imprisoned, which meant they would not be released any time soon and therefore had to be excluded. One prisoner was detained for a shorter time than we initially thought and three prisoners appeared to be in appeal.

Table 4.2. *Descriptives of the participants*

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

Interviews and analysis

Data was collected using an interview protocol comprising questions about social and individual factors known from theory and previous research to be related to desistance and the expectations regarding desistance. Prisoners were asked about their expectations for future criminal behaviour and how they envision their life after release. Social factors were reflected in questions about living and working conditions and relationships with parents, partner, children, criminal and non-criminal friends. Moreover, questions about future goals and feelings of being in control of your own life and the choices you make were added to dissolve the concept of agency.

The interviews provided rich data comprising a wide array of topics. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and first read multiple times. To organize the data it was then coded with Atlas.ti. A list of pre-set codes were initially formed based on the interview protocol and conceptual framework, this is called a-priori coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then new emerging codes were added to the existing codes during the coding process. To minimize subjectivity in the interpretation of the results, coding of the interviews and categorizing the participants into the typology (as mentioned above) was done by two researchers independently.[5] If a person had two or more (strong) bonds such as housing situation after release and relationships with children and parents, the participant was given a high score on social factors. Likewise, a high score on the individual factors meant that a high sense of agency was found in the narrative. This included to what extent a person felt he is in control of his life, takes responsibility for his own actions and whether he is goal-oriented. In the next section, the typology will be discussed and quotes will be given to illustrate the high and low scores.

4.3 RESULTS

Future expectations regarding criminal behaviour

The future expectations of the interviewed prisoners could be divided into participants who expected to quit crime after release (non-criminal future expectation, n=11), participants who were certain that they would continue offending (criminal expectation, n=10) and participants who did not have clear expectations about their offending behaviour (ambivalent expectation, n=7). Dave's future outlook illustrates the non-criminal expectations:

> I am not going to do that stuff anymore when I'm out, I've thrown away too many years already.

Ten out of 28 prisoners expected to continue crime after their release, although most of them thought they would engage in less serious crime in comparison to what they have been convicted for (for example, dealing drugs instead of robbing a jewellery store). Seven prisoners expressed more uncertainty when they talked

5 The categorization of the sample in four profiles done by the two researchers separately corresponded highly with each other. In three cases there was a difference in interpretation, but after an extensive screening of the material, consensus was reached.

about future criminal behaviour. They doubted whether or not they would refrain from crime. Some said they wished to quit, but at the same time were not sure whether this will happen, as Vince described:

> The chance that I will be back in prison? (Sigh)…. I can't say. Let's say 50/50, I also had some bad habits you know, I gambled, used drugs and partied a lot.

Social and individual factors and future expectations

To examine how social and individual factors relate to future expectations the participants were categorized in four different types. Table 4.3 shows the results of these categories combined with the future expectations of the participants.

Table 4.3. *Typology of social and individual factors combined with future expectations.*

Type	Social factors	Individual factors	n=	Future expectation
I	+	+	5	Non criminal (4) Ambivalent (1)
II	-	-	12	Non criminal (2) Criminal (9) Ambivalent (1)
III	+	-	5	Non criminal (1) Ambivalent (4)
IV	-	+	6	Non criminal (4) Criminal (1) Ambivalent (1)

Note: a plus sign means a high score, a minus means a low score.

Type I: high social factors, high individual factors (n=5)

Participants in this group had multiple strong social ties such as a place to live, a job, partner, children and/or a good relationship with parents. They felt supported by people from their social network and those people also visited them during their imprisonment. The possibility to return home after release also demonstrated the experienced support of their parents. Four out of five participants had one or more children who they felt closely related to. They saw their child(ren) during the visits in prison or when they were on leave and expressed how much they missed them. In addition, they talked about being a role model and about what it meant to be a good father.

A high score on individual factors was illustrated by the need to take charge and be in control of one's own life. Participants realised that old 'friends' and life on the streets had not been very good to them, but they acknowledged the choices they made and took responsibility for them:

> Now through prison, this has made me think of what I've achieved in my life so far: nothing! And I was always fooling around, chilling on the streets, never finished my education and changed schools every time. And finally I was in school, doing something that was really useful, and see what happens: I blew it. At a certain moment I thought: this has to change. (Dave)

All participants in this group expressed a feeling of control over their future and achieving their goals. Moreover, this seemed to give them a feeling of optimism in dealing with the future. Their interviews indicated that they were confident in their own capabilities and seemed to actively distance themselves from the criminal lifestyle.

Type I prisoners almost all expected to refrain from criminal activity. The support from social ties (e.g. housing after release and meaningful relationships with partner or children) seemed to play an important role in these positive future expectations. The next fragment illustrated the importance of the strength of social bonds. This prisoner had girlfriends in the past, yet he did not stop committing crimes until now:

> Tom: Because she entered my life she helped me, she pulled me away from there [criminal life]. And I felt the progress, because when I started dating her, I stopped doing a lot of bad things. And then I noticed, there was no stress, I was relaxed and I enjoyed every day! So I thought, let me take this other path. Because I never gave it a chance. And now I know it will all be all right when I leave prison.
> JD: How do you know this for sure?
> Tom: Just because, I know who has my back and who is with me. And I know what I want. The criminal life is something I already know, but I don't know what it's like to work and have no stress and no problems. I've always taken path A, now it time to try path B.

Participants in the type I group tended to realise how much they sacrificed living a criminal life and seemed motivated to actively avoid situations where they might be tempted to be criminally active. They displayed having faith in their own capabilities to achieve desired goals and explicitly explained how they planned to deal with challenges and temptation:

> Certain things will not be on my 'to do' list anymore. You have to be careful otherwise you'll be in the danger zone in no time. I don't want to go there, it's slippery. Money talks. Sometimes it is also wise to decide to not be involved in something. That is also a decision. (Peter)

Type II: low social factors, low individual factors (n=12)

Participants in this category had no, few or weak social ties. They did not get visitors (anymore) in prison. These men grew up in criminal surroundings where stealing and violence were quite normal. A life without crime seemed hard to imagine:

> I don't mind having a criminal record, I know people see me as a criminal. To be labelled as a criminal does not matter to me. I've been involved in crime all my life and I do not plan to do it differently. (Rudy)

Two out of 12 participants had a romantic partner. According to them, these partners did not agree with their criminal lifestyle, but they continued the relationship (for now). Four participants had (step)children, but it did not appear as if they were involved in meaningful relationships with them. They were barely involved in raising them and one child lived abroad, so opportunities for contact were already restricted. Furthermore, the network of most of these participants was predominantly criminal or at least high-risk.

Prisoners in this group seemed to blame their behaviour on external causes instead of taking responsibility for their own choices. One participant appeared to have little control over his own actions when he said he was not purposely engaged in crime, but that sometimes "things happen and he cannot walk away." The rest of this group justified their criminal involvement, because they had no diplomas or they could not find employment. They explained that they were trying to make it, "just as anyone else in this world." However, not being able to deal successfully with certain obstacles seemed to contribute to pessimistic feelings to be able to succeed in conventional society. Nonetheless, they were quite confident of the success of their criminal activities. Interviews indicated they were very goal oriented regarding crime, but they expressed a lack of confidence about their abilities to 'make it' in conventional society:

> Quitting? To be honest... if I don't make a little extra money on the side, someone like me trying to make it to according the book… We can never do that. I don't have any papers, but I am creative. I know how to solve things and make money. (Tony)

Nine out of 12 type II prisoners envisioned a future where crime is still present. In their perception, their past or surroundings have driven them to crime and they admitted to find it difficult to actively turn this in a different direction. The lack of pro-social ties (partner, children and parents) did not appear to enhance this process. In addition, the criminal network seemed to have a negative contribution to the future expectations since they expressed the wish to return to these networks. However,

there were two participants in the type II group that clearly envisioned a non-criminal future, yet they seemed to have no clear or more detailed idea on how to fulfil this positive forecast.

Type III: high social factors, low individual factors (n=5)

In this group the prisoners had multiple social ties (housing, children, non-criminal friends, no one had a partner). Despite their criminal past, the social network seemed strong. They mentioned they would be welcomed back home after release by their parents, with whom they maintained a good relationship. Two out of five expected that their previous employer would hire them again. Vince expressed he desired to be a good father for his daughter and he had some non-criminal friends whom he highly appreciated.

> Those are my real friends from way before I became criminally active. When I chose the criminal life, they just stayed normal. They will also be there when I get out. They always ask me what I am doing with my life, but yeah... I usually take the easy way out. (Vince)

Participants in this group had overall low scores on the individual factors. They did not have clear goals – which could be related to their age since most of them were under 30 years old – and were ambivalent about feeling in control of their life. Furthermore, a belief in being able to avoid crime appeared low:

> I don't want to come back here anymore. But what I can say: for this crime I will not be convicted anymore, but you never know what might happen… (Xavier)

One participant appeared to be goal oriented in his criminal actions. Similar to type II participants, he expressed faith in his ability to successfully achieve criminal goals, but did not have the same faith in the outcome of actions in the conventional world.

Almost all type III participants had an ambivalent image of future criminal activities. According to them, not knowing what the future might bring affected their future perspectives. They felt as if they did not have the opportunity to influence choices and therefore felt ambivalent in dealing with obstacles.

Type IV: low social factors, high individual factors (n=6)

Participants in this group had no, few or weak social ties. No one was involved in an intimate relationship and they tried to distance themselves from criminal friends who were present in their surroundings. One prisoner had children, but feelings of shame were dominant in his interview when talking about being absent in their

childhood. Type IV participants mentioned a connection to their parents, but from their interviews it appeared that they did not see them often, that they were already very old or involved in crime themselves.

A high score on individual factors in this group was illustrated by a strong desire to live a 'normal' life. The element of taking charge of your life could clearly be found in the narratives of these men. They seemed determined to guide their life in a chosen direction:

> Isaac: I am a mechanic; I can paint, so I hope I can get some work. I am going to that facility [assisted living facility where he applied for], nothing can keep me from that road, I want to go there.
> JD: What is most important for you to quit crime?
> Isaac: I don't want to be lived by these people. I want to be able to take my own decisions, good decisions.

The six participants of this type were all experienced in the criminal world and the majority showed a new insight and realization that the life they had been living did not fulfil their wishes. Questions about fate and making your own choices provided answers revealing what the criminal world represented in their perception as well as their awareness to take responsibility.

> Richard: When you are from the street, you are not cool. There are risks in criminal life and those risks influence your perseverance. If you die is totally up to you. You decide how you run your business. The choice is always yours, you can distance yourself, also on the streets, you can say: no, this is not for me.
> JD: To what extent do you think life just happens or can you influence your own destiny?
> Richard: Your destiny is the situation where you find yourself in and then you have to try to exert as much control as you can given the circumstances. You can be active or passive in this process, but you should never expect that everything is laid out for you. Picasso was a great painter, but his son was a loser, because success is not determined by the situation at birth, but by the influence you have on the situation or circumstances. So yes, you should always use the power you have to control a situation. Combined with some optimism I think.

The future expectations of type IV participants were mainly non-criminal. A desire to follow another path in life seemed to contribute to this forecast. Even given their lack of strong social bonds they seemed eager to strive towards this non-criminal path (and to be able to build non-criminal social bonds). Sam explained:

> If someone would contact me, to do something… I would just leave it. Go my own way. Maybe it is easy to say now that I'm still in prison, but… I don't think like that anymore. You get older, I want to have children. So now I really want to work and find a house for my own. (Sam)

While the lack of social ties could be a trigger to strive towards a non-criminal future on the one hand, the same lack of social ties also seemed to play a role in ambivalent and criminal future expectations, even if participants had high scores on individual factors. Milo mentioned he did not want to live this way anymore, but he admitted to pick up right where he left things before he got imprisoned :

> No, I'm not pleased at all. Of course it is nice to be able to rely on something, but this is not living. At least, it is not the right way of living. But I have to do something: I can wait two months for a paycheque or social welfare, or I can go to school, but still, I will need money. (Milo)

4.4 DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study was to explore the future expectations regarding criminal behaviour of soon to be released prisoners and to examine how social factors – such as employment, housing and social support of partner – and individual factors – such as feelings of control and a belief in one's own capabilities – relate to these future expectations. Knowledge of expectations regarding future criminal activities is important, because they can influence actual (criminal) behaviour (Atkinson, 1964; Rotter, 1966).

The interviewed prisoners expressed non-criminal, criminal or ambivalent expectations. Based on theory and previous research that emphasizes social and individual factors (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993), the participants were divided into four different types based on high or low scores on these factors. A high score on social factors displayed multiple strong social bonds, for example because they were sure they could obtain employment after release or they felt supported by family. A high score on individual factors meant experiencing feelings of control over the future and displaying a belief in their own ability to quit crime and achieve desired goals. It was examined how social

and individual factors that play a role in the process of desistance contributed to future expectations of prisoners regarding desistance. Having a place to stay after release or having a job, support of parents, partner and/or children combined with a belief in one's capacities and feelings of control turned out to be associated with expectations to refrain from criminal activity. Perceived support from social ties, such meaningful relationships, appeared to contribute greatly to these positive future expectations, but these prisoners also had concrete plans to work towards goals. Vice versa, having weak (pro-)social ties (or no social ties at all) and a weak sense of agency was linked to criminal expectations. However, ties to the criminal network were strong and they displayed a high sense of agency concerning criminal activity, which seemed to contribute to their criminal expectations. Prisoners who showed average faith in their own abilities, but had support from strong social ties expressed a more ambivalent expectation regarding future criminal behaviour. The idea of uncertainties about the future and the feeling that they therefore did not have enough control to influence the direction of life, seemed to contribute more to their ambivalent expectations than the support of their strong social ties.

In sum, the results showed that soon to be released long-term prisoners who thought they were capable and confident enough to take charge of their life, had a more positive outlook regarding refraining from future criminal behaviour. Social bonds did not seem to contribute to more confidence, but the prisoners in the current sample with weak or no social ties still mentioned non-criminal expectations if they had a high sense of agency. These findings provide support for the ideas of Giordano and colleagues (2002) and Maruna (2001) who contended that these internal, subjective factors play a more prominent role in the process of actual desistance than social, external bonds. Striving towards a non-criminal future seemed even more important in the absence or weakness of social ties. Those who scored high on individual factors predominantly expressed non-criminal future expectations, but having a high score on just social factors did not necessarily link to imagining a future without crime. From previous research it is known that family and partners are an important source of (perceived) support and stability in the process of rehabilitation (Dhami et al., 2006; Naser & La Vigne, 2006), and the results from the current study point out that these factors were indeed reflected in a non-criminal expectation of prisoners who experienced support from these ties, but a lack of social bonds did not necessarily link to a pessimistic outlook regarding criminal behaviour. However, theory and research also draws attention to the perceived strength and quality of bonds(Dhami et al., 2006; Sampson & Laub, 1993). A possible explanation for differences in future expectations could be that the perceived strength of social bonds of the prisoners with ambivalent expectations

was lower than that of prisoners with non-criminal expectations. Future research could dive deeper into the perceived quality of social bonds in relation to pre-release future expectations.

The current research has several limitations. First, a relatively small – and possibly selective – sample of male prisoners has been interviewed. Nonetheless, all penitentiary institutions across the Netherlands were included and prisoners were selected based on a national list of all prisoners who fitted the inclusion criteria. Second, the current study focused on prisoners who served longer prison terms in the Netherlands. Future research focusing on prisoners serving similar prison terms in other countries is needed to see to what extent the findings of the current research also apply in a different context. Despite the limitations mentioned above, the current research provides new knowledge on prisoners and their future expectations. This is of importance, because if expectations influence behaviour (and therefore recidivism), it is possible to intervene in early stages in the process of rehabilitation. The current study shows that the combination of social bonds and individual factors (such as feeling in control of your own choices and life) are important for expecting to disengage from crime in the future. Individual factors however also contribute to non-criminal expectations when not combined with social factors. The criminal justice system in the Netherlands already focuses on several social areas, such as housing, employment and maintaining relationships, and prisoners can apply for behavioural interventions to enhance cognitive skills (Van Gent, 2013). Since 2003, the 'Enhanced Thinking Skills' course from the UK (Clarke, 2000) was introduced to the Dutch prison system as the Cognitive Skills Training (in Dutch: COVA) and in 2007 it was fully accredited by the Dutch Correctional Services Accreditation Panel for Behavioural Interventions. Aside from impulse control and problem solving skills, COVA also focuses on taking responsibility and feelings of control and perspective taking (Henskens, 2016). An evaluation of the effectiveness of this course indicated a 'marginal to small' effect for perspective taking and no effect with regard to taking responsibility/ feeling of control (Buysse & Loef, 2012), which creates potential for improvement. Also, the Choose for Change course incorporates notions from cognitive transformation (identity, purpose in life), self-efficacy and (perceived) social support (Nelissen & Schreurs, 2008). The aim of the course is to stimulate prisoners to think about their life after prison and if they want to change their path. However, this course is mandatory if a prisoner wants to be promoted to the plus-regime, which can be problematic because prisoners might engage in the course for the sole benefit of enjoying more privileges.

Research findings imply that it is also valuable to expand this focus on cognitive skills by paying more attention to individual factors, such as working on self-esteem and gaining confidence so prisoners increase feelings of agency. The large majority of detainees in the Netherlands (70%) for example, showed a low score on self-

esteem in a study examining interventions in prison (Fischer, Captein & Zwirs, 2012). It might be fruitful to explore how the existing behavioural interventions offered in Dutch prisons can be supplemented with more confidence-related activities or interventions. Enhancing feelings of agency might for example also benefit from 'doing well' or experiencing success in performance tasks (Caspi, 1993, Maruna, 2001). However, with the introduction of the basic prison regime, which has become the regular regime for most prisoners in the last decades (Boone, 2007), opportunities for extracurricular activities that might develop or boost self-esteem, are sparse. Discovering avenues to offer activities that are experienced to be meaningful and rewarding by prisoners themselves, such as music, art, or education, (song)writing (see e.g. Cox & Gelsthorpe 2012; Digard & Liebling, 2012; McNeill, 2018), might be a rewarding exercise. If prisoners' feelings of agency could be enhanced, maybe they feel more confident to pursue personal goals and dreams upon release and be better equipped to face and deal with challenges in the process of re-entering society.

LIFE STORY 3 DESISTER 'LACK OF PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT'

WHO IS CASPER?

Casper was a 35-year old man (Dutch ethnic background) who served a three year sentence for a violent robbery when interviewed in prison. Although participating in some community services when he was younger, he had been criminally active for a few years, but this was his first imprisonment. He described himself as laidback, helpful and quiet. Casper had three kids, but was no longer together with his girlfriend.

Background

Casper was the youngest in a family of six, but largely grew up without family. When he is seven years old, Child Protection Services placed him in custody of the court because they deemed his home environment not safe enough. This was the start of a long period of foster care and boarding schools. He said he never felt home in all those years anywhere and had to take care of himself all on his own. His turbulent youth also included switching schools frequently, but he managed to complete elementary school. From the age of 12, Casper got involved in a series of shoplifting and fights, finding expression for the anger that accumulated during the years: "In that time someone just had to look at me and I would punch him in the face." He got involved with the police, got arrested and had to do a few community sentences. When he was 18 he realised he could not just punch someone in the face over nothing and "turned himself around." He obtained a job as a cab driver, met his ex-girlfriend and became a father. It was only a few years later when he got involved in criminal activities, mostly transporting and dealing drugs and car parts. He was 25-years old when someone who he had to take from A to B in the middle of the drive mentioned there was also 'something else' in the truck as well. Casper remembered that an instant feeling of stress came over him worrying that the police might stop him. After that time, he decided not to do this type of rides anymore, but the money convinced him and when he needed financial aid to support his children, he got in the game again. He continued to do this for a few years and never got caught. On a Tuesday morning at 6 AM, the police arrested him at home for the current offence. Casper was in total shock and said he did not see this coming, believing someone turned him in. His lawyer said he did not need to worry as he would walk out of the courtroom a free man. However, he got sentenced to three years in prison.

Current imprisonment

Talking about his imprisonment, he mentioned a good prison climate in the various prisons he stayed in and the period in prison was relaxed, with no fuss, no fights, no nothing. He said to himself that he needed to accept his sentence otherwise he would just end up in solitary confinement. The hardest thing for him to deal with was the psychological impact of prison: "you get ripped out of society all of a sudden". The positive thing about prison was that he learned to stand up for himself during his imprisonment, otherwise he would be overruled all the time. But he also emphasized he had managed to stay true to himself.

Casper completed a Choose for Change course, but considered it to be "dumb and simple". He had an opportunity to get involved in a VCA certificate, yet he had not been to school for over 20 years now and thought it would not be something he could catch up. He was not involved in other courses and made no further attempts to educate himself during imprisonment.

Some friends visited Casper in prison at the beginning, but he never asked for his kids to come, thinking it would be too hard that he had to return to his cell when they went home. He cut all ties with his family so they never came to visit and Casper was clear he never wanted to be in touch with them again. Casper smoked marijuana on a daily basis because it made him at ease and helped to keep him from getting angry and confrontational. He had been on leave for seven times which he experienced to be awkward at first. He recalled having to choose if he wanted to go with Christmas or on New Year's Eve for his first leave. This was, in Casper's words, a "no brainer" since New Year's Eve would be disastrous given all the temptation outside.

Casper compared the process of release preparations in prison to a game of table tennis, 'ping-ponging' to yet another person who claimed they could help you. It drove him crazy and at a certain point, he firmly asked for a single person who would guide him instead of 10 different ones. Casper thought he was ill-prepared for release, because he was going back to nothing. He wanted to have financial aid concerning his debts and would have liked to already have applied for social benefits, which was only possible after release.

Pre-release expectations

Casper was rather ambivalent about the future. Ideally, he would like to do it the right, the legal way, but he also wanted to meet the demands of three kids 'growing up fast'. In this context, he believed it was possible that at some point he would favour the illegal way: "you never know what the future brings, if something good passes along, I will not say no". He was convinced that money served as the only trigger for him to engage in crime, but he doubted if crime and happiness could go hand in hand. Casper's priority was to create the option for his children to study if they wanted to and that money should not be an obstacle. He also worried about financial issues

concerning his own future: he had a lot of debts and in the past few years he had left all the letters from the credit agencies requesting him to pay, unopened. He would start with paying off his debts after release. The future perspective of being broke after release made Casper start saving up some money in prison by requesting more work shifts, working both mornings and afternoons. He did not need to worry about accommodation, because he managed to hold on to the house he lived in before prison, so it reassured him that he could return after release.

First months out – transitioning from prison to society

Casper did not tell anyone he was being released. He took a train to his hometown and went straight to his house to get the key. In his own neighbourhood, things had hardly changed but a bit further down the road he mentioned there were new buildings, a hotel, a movie theatre. The first weeks out, he got into a string of parties with strangers, drinking and waking up on the couch not remembering how he got home, similar to what Liem (2016) described in her work with lifers being released and playing 'catch up'. Soon, he felt there was no value in it for him, he did not feel happy because of it and he was not in a good place having mood swings every day. The dominant feeling of these first months was a fear of being lost, isolated and overwhelmed. It was all too much. He sought retreat from daily social life, spend a lot of time in his house afraid of temptation outside and of making missteps. His supervision was at the highest level, although it was not electronically monitored, and he was very aware of the constant surveillance.

He had to wait some weeks before he received his social benefits, but he profited from the money he saved up in prison. He was keen on getting to work or doing something to fill the days and to get his mind in the right direction:

> So I can get my thoughts to change, it is just that I have to find the real me and give everything a place in my head. I used to be very willing and accommodating, helpful to others, not picking any fights. But now, I don't feel like it and I want people to leave me alone, otherwise I can get angry.

Soon after release, he also wanted to visit his kids, but this turned out to be somewhat of a deception:

> I rang the doorbell, door opens. Two eyes look at me. I say, 'yes I'm here and I'm looking for your mother, is she at home?' 'Yes she is.' 'Well then can you call her for me?' 'Mom, some guy is at the door for you!

His kids did not recognize him at first, which he talked about with some indifference ("I thought it was kind of funny") and he also retracted slowly from their lives in these first months after release, also because their mother seemed not too keen on him actively participating. Casper cut the ties with all of the people in his former network and because he was not working or otherwise daily engaged, opportunities for social contact were sparse. He was still using marijuana on a daily basis, but cut down on his alcohol use. Being intensively supervised also meant a high frequency of contact with his parole officer. She was really on top of things, a bit too much for his liking, yet he appreciated her efforts in assisting him with rehabilitation efforts and trying to surmount his obstacles.

Process of reintegration – a year after release

After the initial months after release, which he described as a 'drama', Casper kept struggling to find his place, being low in energy and not motivated to do anything. He stopped taking care of himself and his house and saw no purpose in life. His parole officer was alarmed and arranged a few meetings with a psychologist and psychiatrist, but Casper did not experience these meeting as helpful and concluded he had to do it on his own. When his parole officer arranged an intake for employment possibilities and called credit bureaus with regard to his debts, he gradually started to see a brighter side to being out of prison. The financial help with his debts took a leap and eventually, Casper could start in a thrift shop five days a week. It was not a paid job, but he could 'work' here in order to receive his social welfare while at the same time it kept him busy and he could get used to working life. He hoped that getting some work experience would help him find an actual paid job. In the meantime, Casper expressed a lot of positive feelings with regard to his activities and colleagues in the thrift shop and also important, it provided structure to his days and weeks.

Looking back a year after release, he was very content with the process of reintegration after release and gave a lot of credits to his parole officer. He also said, he would not change anything looking back on the process. He was lucky to have such a committed parole officer, but could imagine that it might be different for others depending on who guided you through conditional release. Unfortunately, he experienced a change of parole officer, which he not really fancied. The previous one had gone the extra mile for him and he felt the current one did not do much more than monitor him.

He was still using marijuana daily, because it gave him peace and space to adjust to life outside. His use of alcohol was recreational now and he said to make sure he was never back in that place right after release when he sometimes did not even know where he was when he woke up. People were still sometimes staring at him

at the supermarket, but he tried to ignore them. Sometimes he could not hold back and said out loud: "Yes, it's me!". He lost contact with his kids, but felt it was for the best at this time while he was putting his life together. His life was still quite isolated with minimal social contacts, but there was a routine going to the thrift shop and his debts were being paid off. Furthermore, he was actively looking for a paid job and thought his chances were good now he was spending time at the thrift shop. If it was necessary, someone from the shop could vouch for him.

He said prison changed him in the sense that it made him harder, he would not help people anymore as quickly as he used to with the chance of being used or screwed over. His definition of success was just accepting things how they are and trying to live life as it is, although he strongly felt crime was a choice. He had firmly refused offers that came his way and let everyone know they did not have to approach him anymore:

> You can take the good road or the bad one. It is easier to take the bad one, but then you are at risk. But it's still a choice.

Future

Casper expressed a desire to reconnect with his children in the future, but was pessimistic if this would actually happen. The mother of his kids was not particularly keen on him being back in their lives. Furthermore, he did not want to look ahead too much and continued to say that he lived day by day and had no idea what the future might bring. If Casper envisioned his future in five years from now, he hoped his family would leave him alone and would not be seeking contact. This was a closed chapter in his life. Furthermore, he hoped not to be in prison again but he could not say with certainty that this would not happen. Envisioning a positive future for himself was difficult, because he felt he was never allowed to think of a positive future and make plans from a very young age. He concluded to say that he was afraid of wanting things of which he was unsure he was able to achieve it. Casper did not dare to dream.