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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 6

HOUSE, BELLS AND BLISS?▪

A longitudinal analysis of conventional aspirations and the process of desistance

ABSTRACT

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

Keywords: desistance, imprisonment, identity, agency, re-entry

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6.1 INTRODUCTION

Various theories of desistance hold that moving away from crime is triggered (or at least accompanied) by changes in identity to a pro-social and conventional self (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Attempts to fulfil a conventional life are thought to involve changes in routines and social network, and a greater stake in conformity, which have been offered as explanations of why individuals stop or reduce their offending (Farrall, 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003). Nevertheless, persistent offenders also hold conventional aspirations, identities and values similar to those of desisting offenders (Liem & Richardson, 2014; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011). This article examines in detail the nature and development of such conventional aspirations and how these aspirations relate to self-reported criminal behaviour in a sample of Dutch men who made the transition from prison into society. We show that it is necessary to dive below the surface of 'catch-phrase' conventional aspirations to understand how they are related to desistance and persistence.

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

Identity and desistance

Desistance appears to be a complex process of moving away from offending, which is not only related to criminal behaviour, but also to social, situational and existential factors, including a person's identity (Maruna, 2001; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Identity theories of desistance centre around the idea that long-term desistance requires a 'fundamental and intentional shift in a person's sense of self' (Maruna,

2001, p. 17). Giordano et al. (2002) argued that an openness to change necessarily precedes desistance, but that identity transformation is further realised through exposure to 'hooks for change' (p. 1000), such as family, employment, prison and treatment, which creates the opportunity to fashion a *replacement self*. Thus, according to this theory, identity change occurs as a result of changes in social bonds and conventional roles. In contrast, in the Identity Theory of Desistance (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) the direction is reversed: identity change precedes socio-structural changes. According to this theory, moving to a positive *possible self* (i.e. a conventional, non-offending identity) is motivated by the deterrent image of a *feared self* (i.e. the envisaged future if a person would persist offending), which leads to a rejection of a criminal lifestyle early on in the desistance process. The dual contribution of these positive and negative future self-images initiates the desistance process and increases the likelihood that people will encounter and grab onto hooks for change.

The aspect of a 'conventional' or 'pro-social' self is key in these theories. Maruna (2001) concluded that individuals in the process of desisting from crime had been adopting more conventional identities, such as a family man or a good parent, than the active offenders. Giordano et al. (2002, p. 1001) even noted that a conventional identity would be 'fundamentally incompatible with continued deviation'. A person's identity may be comprised of how one currently views oneself ('actual self'), as well as one's 'ought self', which represents a person's sense of duty and one's 'ideal self', including hopes for the future (Higgins, 1987). By fulfilling conventional roles, desisting offenders may be bringing their actual selves more in line with images of their ought and ideal self.

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

It is particularly difficult to empirically capture the broad construct of 'identity' (Abdelal et al., 2006). Qualitative studies tend to approach identity inductively (what emerges from participants' narratives) and holistically in relation to how participants

see themselves, including goals, values, self-worth and roles. Quantitative studies deductively operationalise identity and tend to focus on one element, such as a sense of self-worth (Na et al., 2015) or the extent to which participants see themselves as pro-social (Bachman et al., 2016).

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

In sum, structural factors, release preparations and re-entry challenges may impact efforts towards realising a conventional identity, so it is important to contextualise the aspirations offenders have. Furthermore, the nature of what is considered 'conventional' is value-laden and variable. For example, while the American dream entails self-made success in terms of employment, possessions and status, the – perhaps more modest – 'English dream' appears to comprise 'a not-too-onerous but safe job as an employee of a stable company, enough money, some consumer luxuries, a steady girl-friend and (possibly) kids' (Bottoms et al., 2004, p. 384). Even within one cultural context, there are multiple acceptable modes of conformity in terms of lifestyles, although 'conventional' is usually understood to mean law-abiding.

The relative importance and causal order of subjective versus social structural factors remains a topic of debate in desistance research (LeBel et al., 2008). In this paper, we deliberately focus on one side of the debate, namely the subjective side, and zoom in on the notion of conventional aspirations as part of a person's identity and how this relates to 'act desistance' (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016), or

criminal behaviour. This study provides an in-depth perspective on the nature and content of conventional aspirations and how they develop over time, and to what extent they relate to conventional and criminal behaviour. In particular, it unpacks the notion of conventionality and distinguishes between goals and pathways. By doing so, we build on various earlier studies (e.g. Burnett, 1992; Farrall, 2002) and go beyond individuals' expectations about their desistance, to highlight a different aspect of 'subjective factors' and 'identity'; this may ultimately contribute to a better comprehension of causal processes of desistance.

The Dutch penal landscape

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

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

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1 Council of Europe annual penal statistics. *SPACE I – Prison populations* (2018) – based on statistics from the year 2016.

2 In 2002, this number was 55 percent.

6.2 METHODOLOGY

Participants and procedure

This qualitative longitudinal project is a sub-study of the Prison Project (Dirkzwager et al., 2018), which examines prisoners who were: men, born in the Netherlands and aged 18-65. The current qualitative sub-study uses the same inclusion criteria, but also restricts itself to prisoners who were (a) imprisoned between 2 and 4 years at the moment of release, (b) convicted for a criminal offence and not in appeal, (c) not treated under hospital order (in Dutch: TBS) or in a programme for revolving door prisoners (in Dutch: ISD) or in a minimum security prison, and (d) not convicted for a sex offence.³ To be able to examine changes in identity, specifically the development of aspirations, a longitudinal approach was utilised in which participants were interviewed on three separate occasions up to a year after release.

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

Descriptive characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 6.1. The men were on average 27 years of age at the in-prison interview. They had on average spent 38 months in prison (min. 30 months, max. 50 months) at the time of release and were convicted for mostly violent offences such as armed robberies and

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3 Sex offenders were excluded because they are known to experience substantially different challenges in the desistance process, see for example Laws and Ward (2011).

4 In the Prison Project, almost all participants had a short prison term so only four participants interviewed in the period November 2013 – August 2014 were part of the original Prison Project and extra participants were recruited.

5 The first author can be contacted for more information about the interview schedules.

attempted manslaughter. Five men were re-incarcerated at the time of the second interview, three men at the time of the third interview. Nine men (including the men who were incarcerated) self-reported criminal activity at the time of the second and/or third interview, seven of these nine men reported that they were criminally active at both the second *and* the third interview. Participants were all given a pseudonym and these are used to identify quotes in the findings section.

The last column of Table 6.1 identifies the self-reported desistance/persistence-trajectories from pre-release up to a year after release. The label consists of three letters (A, N, C) in various combinations. At the in-prison interview, responses to the question 'How do you see your life after prison concerning criminal activity?' were classified as criminal (C), meaning continuing crime; non-criminal (N), meaning refraining from crime; or ambivalent (A), meaning unsure about continuing or refraining from crime. For each of the follow-up interviews, self-reported behaviour was classified as criminal (C) or non-criminal (N). Behaviour that was illegal 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.

Although we acknowledge that the process of desistance can be characterised as 'a journey of growth which comprises a multitude of pathways, turning points, dead ends and relays' (Phillips, 2017, p. 6), for the purpose of simplicity we decided to classify participants as 'desisters' ($n=14$) when they reported no involvement in crime at the two post-release interviews (combinations NNN, ANN and CNN) and as 'persisters' ($n=9$) when they reported involvement in crime in at least one of the two follow-up interviews (combinations NCC, CCC, ACC, NNC and CCN).

Analysis

For this study, we were especially interested in participants' goals, aspirations and roles, as well as their expectations in relation to crime. We therefore focussed our current analysis on questions such as 'What do you want to achieve in life?' and 'Where do you see yourself in five years from now?' These were asked at each of the three interview waves and formed a gateway to conversations about *working* and *desired selves* (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Questions on social ties and roles, such as fatherhood or contact with former friends, allowed us to gain insight into possible new roles and intentional self-change (Kiecolt, 1994). Questions concerning goal-oriented behaviour, feelings of being in control and perceptions of being able to refuse or avoid criminal offers captured the notion of agency.

The longitudinal data were analysed using a hybrid approach of deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006; Layder, 1998). Codes and descriptive themes initially were identified from theoretical concepts and the interview protocol (such as 'goals'), combined with codes that were more

'data-driven' (such as 'growing/dealing drugs'). Each interview wave had the same codes. For each code concerning the topic of this paper, we made a table containing the labelled fragments of all three waves, sorted by participant. This way, we could start analysing the change in the different narratives across different waves. For the next step, we used an inductive perspective to unravel three main themes: 1) conventional aspirations; 2) lack of conventional 'script' and 3) criminal pathway to fulfil conventional role (see Figure 6.1). We went back and forth between our data and the literature to use existent theory and theory emerging from our analysis, in line with an adaptive theory approach (Layder, 1998). Atlas.ti facilitated the process of data management and analysis.

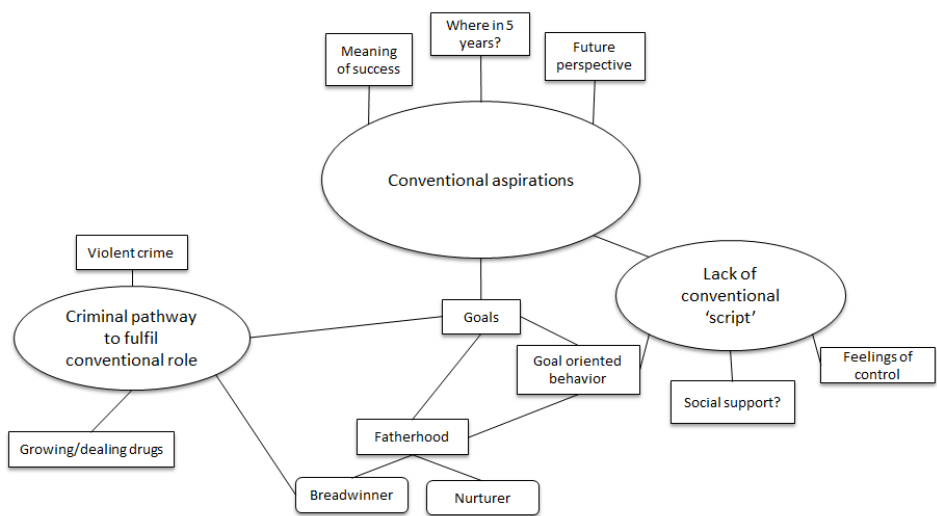


Figure 6.1. Thematic map, showing three main themes which were identified from analysing all three interview waves

Table 6.1. *Descriptives of Prisoners (n= 23)*

Name	Age	Sentence	Offence type	Social situation	Trajectory
Ab	20-24	2-3 years	Robbery	Partner, no children	CCC
Casper	35-39	2-3 years	Kidnapping, extortion	No partner, 2 children	ANN
Dave	20-24	2-3 years	Robbery	No partner, 1 child	NNN
Leon	20-24	2-3 years	Robbery	No partner, 1 child	CCC
Peter	50-54	2-3 years	Fraud	Partner, 1 child	NNN
Tom	30-34	2-3 years	Robbery	Partner, 2 children	NNC
Tony	20-24	2-3 years	Robbery	No partner, 1 child	CCC
Bart	30-34	4-5 years	Aggravated theft, extortion	No partner and children	NCC
Chris	25-29	4-5 years	Robbery	No partner and children	ANN
Isaac	30-34	4-5 years	Robbery	No partner, 3 children	ANN
Jack	25-29	4-5 years	Robbery	No partner, 1 child	NNN ⁶
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

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 6 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.

6.3 FINDINGS

The desire to achieve a 'normal life' was a recurrent theme in most of the interviews, with the exception of two men (one desister, one persister), who said they had no goals for the future and preferred to live day-by-day instead. All other desisters and persisters had conventional aspirations, such as having a partner, a house and children. Below, we explore the content and development of these conventional aspirations in greater detail, and highlight two dimensions related to the attainment of these goals: i.e. the lack of conventional scripts and possible criminal pathways to fulfil conventional aspirations.

'House, bells, and bliss'

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

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

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

JD: What are your goals for the future?

Milo (T3): A job! A new job. That's the next thing I am going to handle. The house is ready, children, wife... Now a job. [...]

JD: What is a good job for you? Because your current job is already good?

Milo: Yeah, the salary is okay. But it's dirty work. And I don't think I can move up in this line of work anymore than I've already done. I would like to start my own shop, but I don't know yet.

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

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

JD: What is your definition of personal success?

Vince (T3): I think, when you're content with the things you have in life. If you can just accept that some things aren't meant to be for you. Then you can achieve success.

JD: Not meant to be? In what way?

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

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

JD: So if you never find a job in which you make a lot of money, you'll always do things on the side?

Wessel (CCC, T1): I'll always do things on the side.

JD: But not violent things?

Wessel: No. But that's what I said, right, I'm someone who needs some... I know that if I get a job, I may earn 12-1300, maximum, with my history. My girlfriend, if I get one, add another 1600... Then I need-, minimum per month, I want at least 6-7,000 extra.

JD: Otherwise?

Wessel: I know what I'm like. If I go into town, on the out... I already spend a lot of money on clothes. If I go out in the evening I spend a lot of money too, at least 6-700 euro, just on drinking and using [drugs] that night.

JD: How do you see the future now?

Wessel (T2, in prison): I don't see it very positively, but yeah... you know. Yeah really, it really bothers me sometimes. I've shut it out a bit, to be honest.

The notion of 'house, bells, and bliss' was commonplace, but turned out to be somewhat of an empty shell, a cliché without real meaning, which was just as easily linked to mansion-sized houses as more modest homes. The idea itself, then, was not necessarily realistic, nor concrete; which was especially true in prison and among persisters. It offered little direction for the future or for behaviour more generally.

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

On a superficial level, most participants could identify with the catch-phrase aspiration of 'house, bells, and bliss'. When prompted further, however, most men (both persisters and desisters) did not have a clear picture of what this 'normal' life would entail. Put differently, they lacked a clear and specific conventional script for how to 'perform' a role in this desired normal life. Tom (NNC), as most other persisters in the sample, had an extensive criminal record and had therefore always been surrounded by crime. Also, he did not grow up in a traditional, non-criminal family, so he had no experience with house, bells and bliss. Yet, in his pre-release interview, he expressed high hopes for a picture-perfect life. In the first few months after release, Tom attempted to live according to his image of a conventional life, yet old substance abuse habits and spending time with criminal friends gave rise to marital problems. At the time of the last post-release interview, Tom was homeless and committing crime again. He said he wanted to change, but was not sure if he was able to kick his bad habits.

Tom (T1): But I don't know it yet; *and* work, *and* no stress, *and* no problems... Yeah, I don't know, that's it for me. Just that. I have always taken path A, now I'll try path B. And it promises better things.

Tom (T3): I know life on the streets, but I don't know what the other life is like, with so many setbacks, and what happens then. How to behave. I still really want to change my life.

JD: Yeah, why?

Tom: Because I know the criminal life... This time too, it's so easy, you pick it up again so easily. But it's worth nothing, absolutely nothing. What do you achieve with it? I still want to experience the other side. When I worked briefly

as a cook, I liked it so much... all the things I needed to remember and the certificate I had achieved too, of course. I really wanted to get my diploma. I don't know why I ruin it the way I do.

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

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

JD: What is a good father to you?

Milo (CNN, T3): Being consistent. Being there for him. Giving him a base. And then do the things well that didn't go well for me. You try to, at least. We grew up in different circumstances. My father didn't speak Dutch, we were beaten. These days you can't beat your child anymore.

JD: You will have a new role as a father. What impact does this have on you?

Milo: I'm starting to feel more responsible. I have to watch what we spend now.

For some men, desistance appeared to facilitate better relationships with their children, and their children were also a source of motivation to live a crime-free life. The three men (all desisters) who reported a good relationship with their children a year after release, identified themselves with the nurturing role of being a father (Forste et al., 2009) and for them, being a good father included giving up crime. Nevertheless,

they also had to cope with strains of non-traditional family life (e.g. custody battles) and fragile selves in relation to their role as father. Similar to motherhood, then, fatherhood could serve as a transformational identity script (Rumgay, 2004), or a positive possible self (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). However, these scripts often lacked a detailed notion of what fatherhood is really like and action scripts for dealing with setbacks that could help cushion attacks on their fatherhood identity. This is particularly problematic considering the marginal circumstances and lack of social capital of many (desisting) offenders.

The problems with the role of being a father were most evident among men who persisted with crime: five persisters were not allowed to see their children anymore and some said this might be for the best, given the instability of their situation.

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

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

Tony (CCC, T3): I have nothing.

JD: And you are under supervision so you thought you would have a chance to put work on your resume?

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

Most persisters had few or no past experiences with conventional employment (unlike most desisters) and had been acquiring skills in criminal life in the meantime, drifting them even further away from conventional scripts concerning employment. Moreover, frequent disappointments in the job search can contribute to the internalisation of a person's social identity of 'deviant other', as illustrated by Tony's quote above (see also

Harding, 2003). Work experience before imprisonment and connections to employers are not only a valuable asset in terms of capital, but also in terms of scripts for how to talk and dress to increase the chance of finding legitimate employment. Tony's quote further suggests that there might be a cultural component to conventional scripts, which we return to in the discussion section.

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

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

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

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

Ab (T3): I think that I, because I have a daughter, started to see it differently. If people would continue to see me like that [as someone who grows and deals cannabis], it doesn't bother me now, when she's still little, but I don't know how that's going to change when she's older. Maybe people will say bad things to her, or something. Then I'd move to a different city, just keep my head down. Stay undercover.

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

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

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

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

6.4 CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Given the recurring theme in criminological literature of a desire to live a conventional or normal life, even among persistent offenders, this article set out to critically examine the conventional nature of goals and aspirations of offenders and how these change over time. The following key findings emerged after our analysis of the longitudinal interview data. First, consistent with some important desistance research (Burnett, 1992; Farrall, 2002; Bottoms & Shapland, 2011), there was no association between conventional aspirations and desisting behaviour, as both desisters and persisters expressed conventional goals in prison and after release. Second, conventional aspirations expressed by prisoners were often superficial and usually only became more detailed and realistic after release when they were bolstered by conventional successes (in line with Farrall, 2002). Third, many participants (both desisters and persisters) lacked detailed identity scripts that could help them carve out pathways to fulfil their conventional aspirations and roles; this seemed to be related to their lack of conventional role models and social capital. Fourth, conventional aspirations and a criminal lifestyle were not mutually exclusive. Persisting offenders were often committed to using criminal pathways to achieve conventional aspirations and fulfil conventional roles.

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

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

Findings of this study challenge some ideas of existing desistance theories that make a distinction between a criminal and a conventional identity (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). The persistent offenders in this study seemed to have accepted a form of a criminal self that co-exists alongside other non-criminal identities, which illustrates the intricate ambivalence of having conventional aspirations while being engaged in (and in some cases, committed to) criminal activities. This study, then, proposes to more clearly distinguish between aspirations to quit crime on the one hand, and aspirations for a conventional life on the other, when studying processes of desistance. At the same time, our findings highlight the complexity of using subjective measures such as identity change to capture reintegration success and desistance. Subjective measures bring to the forefront the multifaceted nature of desistance, including any apparent contradictions between aspirations, values and behaviour. Yet, the meaning of conventional goals and discourse more generally is highly context-dependent. In particular, conventional 'talk' may be common as a response to criminal justice intervention, but frequently fail to translate into actual change given the interplay of a person's history, the impact of a sentence and many unforeseen obstacles and disappointments (see also Soyer, 2014). This brings up age-old and highly relevant questions including 'what are we really measuring?' and 'whose standards do we use to qualify something as an indicator of success or desistance?' and 'how do subjective measures of change relate to objective and persistent outcomes?' The findings further illuminate the complexity of behaviour directed towards the achievement of goals and their role in continuing with or disengaging from crime. For the persistent offenders in our study, crime was not a goal in itself, but a means to an end. They were trying to attain culturally approved goals and expressed a desire to do so in a non-violent (and more socially acceptable) way, but most did not succeed by their own standards of success. Success was more likely, it appeared, for offenders who scaled down their goals and adapted them according to their (constantly changing) circumstances; in line with what Merton (1938) saw as 'ritualism'.

Nevertheless, offenders might hold different views of what is socially and morally acceptable in order to fulfil their goals. In particular, cultivating and dealing cannabis was not regarded as reprehensible by participants. This may be explained by the somewhat ambiguous moral and legal standing of cannabis growth and distribution in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, consumers can buy and use cannabis without legal repercussions (even though possession is still officially against the law) and so-called 'coffee shops' can sell cannabis to consumers in small quantities. Yet, the people who cultivate and sell cannabis to coffee shops are criminalised and subject to law enforcement; the supply of coffee shops therefore takes place through the 'back door' (Korf, 2008). Participants who were involved in this 'industry', viewed

it as a simple and harmless case of supply and demand, which provided them with a lucrative business opportunity. In addition, participants in our study viewed cultivating cannabis as a skill, an art to grow a good harvest and to be able to deliver (constant) quality. From this, offenders derived a sense of pride and self-worth that may be similar to the feelings non-offenders derive from conventional employment.

Strengths, limitations and implications

This longitudinal qualitative study has unpacked the forward-looking dimension of identity comprising aspirations and behavioural scripts, giving a critical insight into the conventional values, goals and roles of offenders convicted of serious offences, who had served relatively long prison sentences in the Netherlands. By doing so, the research is distinctive from previous qualitative studies that took a holistic approach to identity and makes concrete which elements are particularly important to consider, also in future quantitative research. The study benefited from a very good retention rate over three waves without prior selection of participants by a gatekeeper. A few limitations should be kept in mind.

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

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

Thirdly, the article focussed on the content and development of aspirations and scripts more than on the contextual or individual factors that could explain differences between people in the development of aspirations and scripts (although, where possible, we included this in our analysis). Given the qualitative nature of our

data and due to sample characteristics (i.e. fairly homogeneous), we were unable to say anything about correlations or predictors. We hope that our findings provide the impetus for further research, perhaps of a quantitative nature, to identify (1) the determinants of conventional scripts (rather than superficial aspirations) and (2) under what circumstances people choose criminal pathways to fulfil seemingly conventional aspirations. Here, it may be particularly relevant to consider a person's migrant and cultural background, to identify whether conventional aspirations and scripts have a cultural dimension (see Calverley, 2013, for important groundwork). Dominant cultural narratives about what is conventional may actually have an exclusionary or stigmatising effect if people deviate from norms, even within legal boundaries, or if they cannot meet societal standards of self-sufficiency. Similar considerations are relevant in relation to social class.

In light of our findings, we signal a need for practical support in the transition from prison to society. Currently, rehabilitation courses offered in (Dutch) prisons and by probation services focus on goal setting, cognitive skills and attitudes. Yet, the lives of (persisting and desisting) offenders are often infused with non-conventional experiences, so support in prison and on license should focus on helping offenders to formulate not just 'empty' universal goals, but positive life scripts needed to give real direction to their lives (Maruna & Ramsden, 2004). More concretely, this could consist of, for example, enabling parents in prison to invest in relationships with children and giving them support in these roles if needed. There are some promising initiatives, in the Netherlands and abroad, which try to facilitate this,⁷ but they often depend heavily on volunteer and charity involvement and are not seen as a core aspect of reintegration efforts. It is important to recognise that scripts cannot be learned from the books, so offenders must be given opportunities to learn 'on the job', literally and figuratively. Naturally, scripts alone are not enough; many difficult life circumstances cannot simply be remedied by 'a little agency and planning'. Support and employment opportunities should not be reserved for people who have already proven their ability and motivation to behave according to conventional norms, as the transformative potential may in fact be greatest for the group of people who apparently struggle with this the most. Otherwise, we should not be surprised to find that the conventional social value of self-sufficiency is interpreted differently depending on the scripts and pathways that people have access to.

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7 See for example: 'Ouder, Kinderen en Detentieprogramma' (Parent, Children and Imprisonment Programme), offered by Exodus (<https://www.exodus.nl/okd>).

LIFE STORY 5 DESISTER 'CONVENTIONAL GOALS'

WHO IS MILO?

Milo was 27 years old ("tomorrow 28!") at the time of the in-prison interview, was proud of his non-Western ethnic roots and was sentenced to five years in prison for an attempted manslaughter. He described himself as being ambitious, smart and someone who does not go looking for conflicts. Nevertheless, he had been arrested multiple times and the current sentence was his second long-term prison sentence, both for violent offenses. He grew up in criminal surroundings and had been criminally active since adolescence, mostly involved in drug-related crime.

Background

Milo was born the youngest in a family with six children. His father migrated to the Netherlands a few decades ago and by the time his mother joined him, five kids had already been born. Milo was the first and only one born in the Netherlands. He said he had always been on his own, and always been living alone. They were not allowed to speak Dutch at home (his father did not speak Dutch), they did not get any allowance and they took the occasional beating. Milo felt there were a lot of things he would do differently when he would become a father himself. At age 13, he started working on a farm, but soon he learned he could make a lot more money using other ways he learned on the streets: "By then, I knew that I was making 20 guilders a day and if suddenly you can make 100 guilders a day, yeah, you do the math. It's kind of a domino-effect."

Milo expressed clear ideas about what drove him (and other young boys) to spend so much time on the street: the age gap between his father and himself was too wide and made communication at home difficult: "So, what we [kids his generation] did: we went outside, to the street. And as long as you are outside, you automatically do the wrong things, because eventually you get bored. And when you start learning about making money... well, let's just say you are a long way from home." Milo hooked up with likeminded youngsters on the streets and got involved into fights and stealing. This evolved into dealing drugs which developed into maintaining his own drug network. Crime became part of his everyday life and it was hard for him to go back to a life without crime: "As soon as you earn more money than you can spend, you know it's hard to go back. You keep making excuses in your head, trying to justify your behaviour."

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Milo got kicked off from multiple schools and had been to three elementary and three high schools growing up. According to him, he was an easy learner, yet he was a real troublemaker in the classroom, being too active: "I was rather on the streets than in class." In the end, he did finish an intermediate vocational education for plumbing from which he concluded he could be a brainiac if he wanted to. He even entered a national job contest where he finished third. Looking back on this time he reminisced: "Back then there were enough employers that said to me, if you're looking for a job, you can always come to me".

The death of his eldest brother in a car crash was considered to be the absolute low point in his life. His family turned very religious afterwards, which he could understand, because: "No one buries his own son. Everyone was personally affected by the situation, it was a turning point in our life." The consequence of this turning point, as Milo called it, was that he put his feelings away and did not talk about it: "Of course, you try to get some peace, but what do you do with it? Sorrow or grief will not do anything. He is not here anymore, and that's that." When Milo was 20 years old, he got arrested and convicted for the first time for an assault. He spent a year in prison (which he experienced as being really long) and after he got out, he expanded his drug dealing activities and stayed out of prison for a few years. When asked, he said that everyone in his hometown knew him and he is seen as a criminal. He himself did not feel he was a criminal:

What is criminal? I see criminals being the burglars and robbers. I see this [dealing drugs] as another way of surviving. It's... yeah, you don't hurt people with it. At least, not how I see it. If someone is using drugs, he wants it himself right? If he doesn't get it from me, he will get it from someone else. [...] I have never caused someone pain in his life. Except for this man [victim of the current crime]. But that's a whole other story.

Milo's highpoint in this period was earning a certain amount of money, illustrating the value of attaining monetary aspirations. It was also during this time, he met his girlfriend whom he dated for a few years and before his next arrest, they were living together and it became serious. Acting on his lingering desire to educate himself, Milo took a 21+ test⁸ at a higher vocational education institution and passed. He could enter a study in Economy starting in September, but in June of that same year, he was arrested.

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8 Those who are 21 years or older and do not have the required prior education diplomas to enter a higher education institution, are given access when they successfully complete a so-called '21-test'.

Current imprisonment

Before Milo got arrested for the current crime, he was a fugitive for a month until he turned himself in at the police station. Thinking back, he vividly recalled how difficult it was to stay on the down low: You have to look over your shoulder all the time. You get really paranoid. They started observing me and my whereabouts, so I couldn't go anywhere anymore. Had to sleep somewhere else all the time. It became a nomads life." The crime he was warranted for was not drug related, but concerned an attempted manslaughter (first accused for attempted murder). His brother, who was also serving time in prison, was his accomplice. In court, Milo was sentenced to seven years in prison, but in appeal this downsized to five years.

Looking back, Milo said this prison term went fast, but acknowledged that maybe this was only possible to say in retrospect. The most difficult thing about imprisonment for him was to lose everything he had. At the start of imprisonment, he felt it being quite dramatic. He did not expect much from it though: "it's just doing time and leave. Of course it's tough, I am not going to lie. There were times I was lying awake, couldn't sleep. But yeah, you have to make the best of it, that's all you can do." It did feel less heavy than the first imprisonment, because he knew where he would end up, but he hastened to add that it would never get easy doing time, just more bearable. Milo had seen six or seven different correctional facilities during the current prison term and said he had never been sanctioned for violence, only for keeping cell phones. Furthermore, he emphasized he never accepted that prison was his 'house', like some prisoners do: "My thoughts are always on the outside. I'm on autopilot and I'm only concerned with things from outside. What happens inside, does not interest me." Reflecting on his motivation to participate in the study ("having a good conversation"), I asked him if he ever had a good conversation with someone in prison and he replied: "Never. It sounds weird, but I also did not feel like it. Maybe it will come, but I never asked and nobody ever asked me". He was able to keep his house and the relationship with his girlfriend about two years into his imprisonment, before he had to make an end to both. According to Milo, it is impossible to maintain a relationship in prison. He did not care much for visitors anymore. His ex-girlfriend visited every week and once in a while his parents and sisters would come until the relationship ended and his parents were spending longer periods abroad. Now near the end, phone calls were sufficient for him.

During his reintegration programme, he said it was obligated to enter a Choose for Change course and lifestyle training which he felt were 'useless'. Initially, he was also set up to enter an aggression regulation training, but according to him, this was then removed from his record by the probation offices and he did not have to do it. Aside from behavioural courses, Milo looked for reasons to leave his cell and committed to educating himself in prison as he successfully finished several courses.

Milo was technically eligible for the last step in his phased re-entry, being conditionally released with an ankle bracelet. However, since he had to report an address which was not located in his hometown (that was a restricted area for him because it was the city where the crime took place), Milo saw no other option than to finish his sentence, because everyone he knew lived in his hometown and he could not think of an address outside this area to stay. So he had no other option than to stay inside for a few more months, which also meant he would not be electronically monitored after these months. The lack of a suitable address also impeded opportunities to go on leave, so as a result, Milo had not been on any leaves during the 3.5 years in prison.

When I asked him if he thought he changed during this imprisonment, he mentioned a different way of looking at life. He appreciated more things than before and felt he became more mature: "Childhood is slowly fading away. Maybe it is because of me getting older, or maybe it has something to do with prison, I don't know. Your character does change. Yeah, there is a lot of patience here [prison], cause without patience you won't make it in here [prison]." Furthermore, he discovered that he lives an abnormal life, referring to the criminal lifestyle as "crime, the rush, kick, drama". Others think it's not normal, but he and others (meaning criminals) see it as normal and he could not really explain that. When prompted further, Milo admitted that growing up hearing how important it was to have money for your future went at the expense of school, which he kind of regretted: "Then, you don't think about what school represents, it's only until later that you will regret it. Yes, of course I would have rather stayed in school and get my diplomas. But yeah, [I] made some wrong choices."

Pre-release expectations

When asked about his in prison release preparations, he experienced it all to be a deception and pointed out that, despite all the courses they offer, he would be out on the streets again without any money. Social welfare would take at least two months before that was arranged, so he wondered what he was supposed to do in the meantime. He felt he was almost forced back into crime: "No one helps. If you say 'help', they all look the other way." He expressed a goal of starting a company of his own and admitted he thought about this idea a lot in the past: "I never acted on it out of a fear to fail. It would cost me, I would lose money, so I just distanced myself from the idea. The safest option was the road I was following already. That put food on the table."

After release, he was planning to live in the house of his parents for a while, because they were abroad, but he desired a place of his own. He felt it was too late to start studying, he felt he was too old for that now. Although Milo had bold aspirations, dreaming of building a holiday resort abroad, his slightly fatalistic outlook frequently rose to the surface, for example when he said about his future: "I don't want to do

what I did, but something else. Move into another direction, meet new people, a new life. A different life. I am now in a drag, a routine and once you are in, you will not get out. It is like a black hole.” Although he expressed the desire for a different life, he also had doubts about having the right state of mind for a more conventional life when he disclosed that after release, he would pick up his old drug dealing business right where he left it:

Unfortunately yes. Of course it’s nice that it’s there as a safety net, but it is no life anymore. Or at least, not the right life. But yeah, I have to do something. I can’t wait two months for a salary or social benefits, that doesn’t do anything. I can go to school or do some production work, but I don’t want to do that till I am 60, please no. So the ambitions are there, just not the right one.

This fatalistic outlook that he was ‘doomed to deviance’ was enhanced by his belief that he had limited options to find employment given his record. More importantly, Milo himself was not a strong believer of second chances.

When asked to estimate the chance that he would be back in prison again, Milo firmly said that if he would return it would not be for a long-term again, but only for a short period: “Prison is, yeah, drug dealers get caught and released after two months. If you assault someone, you’ll get five years! [...] So yeah, I won’t make that stupid mistake again. That is what they taught me.” When I asked him what he worried about the most, he replied:

The future. It’s still a bit blurry, I cannot envision it. Where will I be in 10 years from now? I don’t care about 70 or 80 years, but in 10 years, how will I be? Will I be here [in prison] again? Will I, yeah. Somewhere else, married, children? Yeah, that’s the question that haunts me.

First months out – transitioning from prison to society

As opposed to the scrawny Milo I met in prison, a 10 kilo heavier Milo opened the door when I met him a few months after release. He smiled and said: “I’m happy now and well-fed.” He lived in his parents’ house for a month or so after release and then moved in with his new girlfriend whom he already had known for 10 years, but only hooked up with after release. He was on the list for a house of his own, but needed to show paycheques of three months and those three months had not passed. Milo was smoking marijuana on a daily basis. He started early in the morning to simplify the process of getting up. He himself had no problem with his use, but his girlfriend preferred he used less.

In the first months out, Milo received social benefits and started working as a freelance plumber: "That was a difficult time. [...] If you work as a freelancer, you need to have some big clients otherwise you will not make it." He quit and applied for a job at a plumbing firm. He filled the gaps in his resume with work he had done in prison (such as construction work) and when he was invited within a few days for an interview, they did not ask anything about his past. He was hired and started working as a plumber, making long days leaving the house at 5.30 in the morning and returning at 5 PM. He slowly got used to getting up early in the morning and he enjoyed the degree of freedom and autonomy that came with the job. Still, he believed he was working beneath his level/ he felt he was capable of working at a higher level.

Milo was not electronically monitored, but had to check up with his parole officer every two weeks. Supervision was not really 'supervision', according to him: "You just go there, say hi, yes I'm fine. And then you leave again. That's it." Nevertheless, his parole officer made clear from the start he wanted to assist him in every way possible and Milo appreciated this, but it never resulted in anything concrete. He felt the role of the parole officer should start sooner, already in prison:

They [parole officers] should visit you in prison. I had never seen a parole officer, yes one who came to write a report [on his conditional release], after that you never see them again. And then outside, you see them all the time. But outside, then it's done, then you are already outside, right? They should come inside, say things, help you with employment, housing, finances, everything, so yeah, you can't really say that the probation services is an organization that helps.

To show his motivation and avoid questions, Milo sometimes send a picture of him at work with a construction helmet on for in his file, then they leave him alone. Milo was not involved in criminal activity anymore and said he made the decision to "just go out and work". It felt better and gave him peace of mind, no fear and no anxiety. When I referred to our conversation in prison when he called his criminal life 'abnormal', he replied: "Yeah, maybe that's why I started a normal job now."

The relationship with his parents was strong and Milo saw them almost every day. His brother (the accomplice) was also out of prison and they were in touch occasionally: "we are not best friends, but we are also no enemies." Milo felt supported and motivated by his family and girlfriend and expressed high value for these family bonds. He had cut off ties with all his former friends and criminal networks and was mostly family focused.

The next step for Milo in achieving goals would be to start studying again and be a teacher, but he was not sure if he was eager enough and maybe this was the reason he did not start already. However, in five years from now he envisioned himself being a teacher, buying a house and having children.

Process of reintegration – a year after release

At our last encounter, Milo greeted me in his newly bought home and proudly started off with the big news he was about to be a father. He obtained a permanent position at the company he worked which enabled him to get a mortgage for a house to raise his family. Although he did not enjoy working there too much, he benefited from the goals he could achieve through this job: "I'm not going to lie and tell you I like it. Absolutely not. I would rather not work there, but yeah, you have to." He was excited to be a father and looking forward to his son being born. Since Milo did not have a good role model in his own father when he was young, he felt he had to 'invent' fatherhood for himself. Milo's social contacts were limited to his girlfriend and his family, those supported him during the past months. Milo still smoked marijuana and his use increased during the pregnancy as a way to retract at certain moments to contemplate all the changes occurring in his life. It was a lot to take in, but Milo felt happy and prosperous.

Milo was still under parole supervision, but had to attend check-ins once a month now. Sometimes, it would suffice to just make a phone call to his parole officer to say he is doing fine. These were rather short encounters. He had no problem with his parole officer, kind of even liked him, but he did not see the added value of parole. He even was convinced that if we would have continued crime, his parole officer would never have noticed it.

When I ask him what guided him to the road to desistance, he was convinced prison contributed to him being non-criminal: "Without prison I would still be on the old path." And he felt old now, having much more to lose and not wanting to take the risk to be incarcerated again: "You make a decision. Doing time is no problem, anyone can do time, that's why you're a man. It's about the damage around doing time, that is what counts." Although he gave credits to the prison system, he downplayed their role by pointing out that *they* didn't change him, *he* changed himself.

Future

A negative future in five years for Milo would be returning to prison ("horrible!") and failing as a father. He strived to do things right that went wrong in his own childhood. When thinking about a positive future, Milo was committed to finding another, better job in addition to his already present house, bells and bliss. After all, he bought a nice house, was involved in a good relationship and a soon to be father, so he felt he could now strive towards a higher level job. A job that would do him more justice.

