The Lonely Road to Reform

On the Detriments of Loneliness in Women's Desistance from Crime

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Introduction: Desistance from crime – to what?

What does it mean to desist from crime? To leave a destructive and unwanted way of life behind in pursuit of something else, something unknown, something 'normal'? How do people who have lived their entire life at the margin of society – in poverty, drug use, criminalisation and condemnation – approach such a major change in lifestyle?

I devoted my five years as a PhD-student to tackling these big and important questions. Utilizing a prospective and longitudinal approach, I conducted repeated in-depth interviews with ten women in Sweden. The women had spent the majority of their lives in a position as 'other', segregated and excluded from conventional society. For decades, the women were engaged in criminalised lifestyles circulating around common street crime including drug related offences, theft, burglaries, and assault. At the start of the project, these ten women had just set out on a journey towards a new life, striving to leave crime, drugs, exclusion and condemnation behind. The research project's longitudinal design allowed me to take part in the women's desistance journeys as they unfolded, and study the processes involved.

Findings from the project have been published as articles in scientific journals, and culminated in the dissertation *Maintaining Desistance – Barriers and Expectations in Women's Desistance from Crime* (see Gålnander, 2019; 2020a,b,c). These publications offer careful and comprehensive insights into women's desistance, highlighting struggles and experiences faced when attempting to change one's way of living and acting. However, the rich interviews still harbour more themes and insights than I have been able to cover so far. One such theme that I believe is particularly relevant to contemporary Nordic crime policy is how lonely the women were on their desistance journeys. This paper will explore this finding. Doing so will elucidate an important mental and emotional aspect of *going straight* or desisting from crime. This finding has clear and important implications for criminal justice policy and practice, which will be discussed as well.

1. »I just sat by myself all the time«

> **Maia**: So much is new. And it's lonely. It is lonely! I lead a very lonesome life [...] I don't know where to turn after 30 years of drug abuse and ... I have nothing to do with that crowd anymore and ... Perhaps I'm not meant to fit in this society?

Desistance is a lonely endeavour. Maia's quote is an exemplary initiator for this discussion since it so clearly captures what is a prevalent theme in the interviews. How did they get here? Why were the women so lonely in their attempts at desistance?

Both in desistance literature and in criminal justice practice, a key understanding is that people who are willing to change their lives around and desist from crime need to remove themselves from their friends and surroundings, as such elements otherwise could exercise a criminogenic influence on their lives. This process has been conceptualised as 'knifing off' of criminogenic environments (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna & Roy, 2007), and the idea is to gain a 'fresh start' and be rid of social expectations or bad influences. However, as is clear from Maia's quote, the women's experiences serve to complicate this key concept in desistance theory and practice.

The women often found themselves in extended and involuntary isolation. Such isolation has been shown to be a common yet detrimental aspect within ongoing desistance processes (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). At the heart of this problem lies that the women were unable to fill the void created by the process of knifing off of the past. This resulted in loneliness and boredom, and the women could often feel stuck in a liminal position where they had cut off from their old life and identities but were unable to gain a new sense of self and belonging with the mainstream (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016; see also Hunter & Farrall, 2018).

When making sense of a relapse, Susie pointed to her involuntary isolation and the ensuing boredom as the culprit of her setback in desistance:

> *Susie:* So I was supposed to stay away from everybody. To the point where I got super depressed. 'Cause I just sat by myself all the time. [R: Right, yes.] And then ... I don't know for how long it was, maybe like two months?
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> *R:* After you got out?
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> *Susie:* Right. And I thought »Well I can do it once« [R: Right]. »It'll work out«. And with that I just fell right in. [...] No but I mean you just feel so lonely. And everything was so damn boring, you know? I had nothing to do. The only ones I talked to was my family and my supervisor. [R: Right]. Heh, and that was it [...] Yeah no I just thought everything was so boring. So I let in one person after another. Kept thinking »Well that person is fine«. But then it just spiraled.

Loneliness in desistance thus pertains both to missing the old life, while simultaneously finding the new life empty and unsatisfying (cf. Grundetjern & Miller,

2019). The fact that this unwanted situation caused Susie to relapse into drug use and other crime which ended in a new prison sentence underscores how powerful loneliness can be as a destructive force in desistance.

2. No avenues to socialise

Kate had her daughter living with her every other week, and she found the weeks she was by herself to be difficult. She told me: »I have a hard time when I'm alone, you know? Yeah, most of the time I just shut myself in with Netflix or something«. When I asked her about her social life »outside of the family«, she replied:

Kate:	Oh God. So tragic. It is very scanty actually.
R:	Yeah? That doesn't have to be tragic though?
Kate:	But it is. I mean it really is. I miss having friends. Like I used to. [R: Right] And it's just so hard to make new friends when you're this old, you know? I used to think that »When I become a mother I'll hang out with lots of other moms« but no, that didn't happen at all. [...]
R:	Do you feel like you're lacking avenues to meet people or is it something else?
Kate:	Yeah no that's a thing. Like when I went to school I could meet people there [R: Yes] But that didn't really work out either.

Both Susie and Kate are disappointed with their *scanty* social lives in desistance. This is a theme shared among many of the women, who's previous lifestyles in a fast paced, drug-centred street setting were vibrant with social interactions. The women were used to having people around them at all times. Now in desistance, they ought to stay away from these old relations. However, the alternative to old company was not new company, but rather an absence of company. This new and *scanty* social life resulted in feelings of loneliness and boredom. In this situation, the women's already precarious desistance processes were at severe risk, since they could romanticise the past, vibrant and socially active life in light of their new and lonely situation (Grundetjern & Miller, 2019). The old life was described as *hard*, *scary*, *dirty* and *worthless*, but it could nevertheless entice as a fuller life than what they found for themselves in desistance.

Loneliness in relation to romanticising a past social life can therefore be conceptualised as a force with the potential to both pull desisters back towards their old lives, and to push them away from a new way of living. Life-course criminology has theorised a division between push and pull factors as a useful organiser of various factors related to desistance. Pull factors creates understanding for what factors, situations or circumstances that can attract desisters and motivate them to pursue an alternative, conventional lifestyle. Push factors are negative or unwanted circumstances that can push prospective desisters away from a criminalised lifestyle and towards desistance (Berger et al, 2017).

In this case, loneliness works as a detrimental force risking to push the women away from their desistance journeys. Simultaneously, romanticising their past vibrant social lives can pull lonely desisters back towards their old lifestyles.

A recurring theme among the women was to identify a lack of avenues to socialise and meet new and 'normal' people as a culprit to their loneliness. Having escaped their old circumstances, they now found themselves in new and unfamiliar environments. Sofia's case exemplified this clearly. In order to escape an abusive ex partner, Sofia was forced to leave her hometown and live under a new name with a 'protected identity'. When reflecting on her particular situation, Sofia said:

> *Sofia:* I mean I believe that most people who quit drugs and crime, who start working and all that. They have people supporting them. 'Cause it's pretty rare to do what I/ to be forced to do what I did, you know. [R: Yeah?] I mean move up here, with nothing. And like ... It's no fucking cakewalk, bagging a new social life when you're this age. That's just facts, it's not.

Several women in this study had similar experiences with protected identities, which had forced them to knife off their bonds to friends and even relatives as they could otherwise be used by abusive ex partners to find, control, and hurt them (see Gålnander, 2019). Hence, protected identities could present opportunities for fresh starts for the women, allowing for knifing off of destructive and criminogenic elements in their social surroundings. However, in the process, the women were forcefully cut off from their entire social networks. Pro-social and supportive contacts disappeared as well, resulting in prolonged and involuntary isolation for the women (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Stripped of their social networks and in a new environment, breaking the ensuing isolation proved a tough barrier to overcome. Both Kate and Sofia emphasised age as a complicating factor, as they meant that finding ways to make new friends is harder in middle-age than it would be in youth. These narrowing opportunities suggest age-graded struggles with loneliness in desistance.

3. »What do they talk about, normal people?«

As highlighted by Susie, the women often found themselves lacking any sort of social contacts outside of the authorities commissioned to monitor their progress in desistance. Probation officers or the social services was often perceived as control rather than support (cf. Sharpe, 2016), and the women's need for social interaction was not addressed by these authorities. Indeed, what few avenues for social interaction that the women could find were sometimes taken away from them by these controlling authorities. Kate elaborated on one such instance:

> *R:* Alright, so the home support was cancelled, you said?
> *Kate:* Yup.

R: That was once a week last time I saw you

Kate: Right. And that was/ heh, I mean … I had to go for that, you know? Although I would've needed something else entirely.

R: Okay, so you had to take what you could get?

Kate: Yes. But it got messy. I had to apply for it myself, too.

R: Okay, but why was it messy? Messy how?

Kate: No maybe not messy but … They want their help to be practical. They're supposed to come over and help you with the dishes, laundry, something concrete. But my carer was real good, and you know, humane. […] And then the social services were like »This isn't working, you're not doing what you're supposed to do« [R: Oh?] And went on about how I didn't plan my time right, because we were just chatting when she came over. But I mean what the fuck? I have no one else to talk to! [R: Exactly] I have no psychologist, of course I'll talk to her when she comes over and I've just been in bed feeling like shit forever.

R: Yes of course! And is that not part of their purpose?

Kate: Nah, no. That's not their purpose.

Kate thus found herself in an isolated state, and *felt like shit*. Her only social interaction aside from her three-year old daughter was the home support carer that she had applied for herself. But when the social services found out that they were talking more than they were cleaning, the support was canceled. Although Kate was outspoken and clear about her need for someone to talk to, the social services did not exchange the home support for some other, more fitting form of support.

What Kate, and many of the other women, strongly needed was some sort of social training that could identify suitable avenues for socialising and prepare them to meet the »normal people« they now aspired to hang out with. Decades of internalised stigma had made the women assume a social position as 'deviant others'. The women's narratives are full of examples of them differentiating themselves from *normal people*. In desistance, they wanted to abridge this apparent gap in search of affiliation with the mainstream. However, normality was a foreign concept to the women. Kate expressed this most clearly as she said »I feel like I don't even know how to be – I mean, what do they talk about, normal people?«. Such unfamiliarity with *normal people* often caused the women to keep to themselves and avoid situations that they felt incapable to manage. Several of the women expressed a wish to connect with what they termed *normal people*, but felt blocked out from doing so. Louise elaborated on this:

Louise: (Deep sigh) Hanging out with people who are like this (cups her hands around her eyes, demonstrating tunnel vision) is very difficult. [R: Yes?] Cause they're afraid of you. And most often you don't even get in touch with them.

Sofia shared similar experiences of the struggles to connect with *normal people* who either fear or lack insight into the life that these women used to lead.

Sofia: So I don't know but … In a way I do picture myself with that steady life as a normal Smith. Where my past isn't looming like a shadow, you know? [R: Of course] With me having a normal social life with people who don't share my background. 'Cause now my only social life is with people who know what I've been through and who might've been there themselves, in some capacity. [R: Sure] And I feel like/ I mean I'm fucking past that now. [R: Yes] Question is if I can get out of there, you know? Or sure I can but when and how and to where is the real question I guess.

This feeling of not even knowing where to turn to or what to work on to get closer to mainstream society and its *normal people* was a theme shared among the women. Since this strong and recurring separation between themselves and *normal people* is tied to the women internalising decades of stigmatisation (see Gålnander, 2020a), this is likely to be a gendered issue. Previous research has shown that women desisters suffer more from stigma than men do (Sharpe, 2016; Masson and Österman, 2017). Due to gendered expectations on (middle-aged) women to be respectable and morally exemplary, women with a history of convictions and drug abuse are seen as particularly deviant, rendering the gap between them and *normal people* even more difficult to abridge (Lander, 2015). By extension, this means that the process of knifing off in play in the women's narratives have gendered connotations as well. Women desisters might have a particularly hard time filling the void created by knifing off of the past, as they are more likely to experience petrifying guilt and shame which causes them to withdraw from *normal people*. Instead of connecting with new people in order to gain a sense of belonging with the mainstream, women desisters risk internalising stigma in a way that can lock them in a lonely and liminal position, not belonging to neither their old, deviant lifestyles nor their aspired conventional ones.

I will conclude this analysis of the women's experiences of loneliness in desistance with emphasis on how the women lacked avenues to socialise or even talk to anybody. Maia had been in close contact with the social services for the most part of her *30 years of drug abuse*, and despite having been diagnosed with a complex post-traumatic stress disorder, she had »never been offered anything« in the way of therapeutic trauma treatment. By the end of our first interview, Maia was struck by the realization of the therapeutic quality of our interviews (Atkinson, 1998). Reflecting on what our interview meant to her, she also realised how the authorities had failed to support her with what she actually needed. Maia elaborated:

Maia: I just tell you things. Things I've never told anyone. And without fixing or leaving stuff out. And … It just hit me now I mean, how easy it was to talk to you. 'Cause you're not judgmental. So I just tell you. 'Cause when I've sought help before, I've felt so strongly that I need to be on my guard. Guard what to say or not. 'Cause they don't understand. But here I've just told you … without consequences. There'll be no diagnose, there'll be no … you know? [R: Right, yes] And that's so different. […] What a relief! […] I understand now, where I should turn for help. A fellow human […] Damn, I mean I just

> feel so (breaths out) Yeah no, damn it feels so good! […] And these are scary things. Hurtful things. But when we talk about it … I can see now. This gave me so much. […] I really needed to talk it out.

4. Concluding discussion

Loneliness was a ubiquitous theme throughout the interviews, with detrimental effects for the women's desistance processes. The analysis of this finding offers valuable insight into how the women made sense of this situation – and what they needed to break their isolation. Their requirement was as simple as it was pressing: they needed someone to talk to. A human being with compassion who could serve as a nonjudgmental social training support for desisters as they set out to meet a new and unfamiliar world. Although the women knew what they needed, and were outspoken about this need, neither the social services nor the probation services could offer them adequate support. This finding thus points to an apparent lack in how Swedish authorities work to support people who want to quit crime and drugs and find their place in mainstream society. Arguably, having someone to talk to in a nonjudgmental setting is not a tall order. Setting up a talking support service with focus on meeting, hearing and discussing desisters' needs, and supporting them with tools for social networking skills should be a compelling, concrete and doable project for Nordic criminal justice policy and practice. Such needs are, among other things, gendered and age-graded, which should be taken into account. Based on the findings of this study, such support has the potential to mean the difference between failure and success for people trying to quit crime and drugs. All in all, this seems like a cost-effective and easy way to meet a complex problem with the potential to reduce recidivism, reconviction, relapse, misery and death in our society.

Author bio

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