

Sex Offending and Situational Motivation: Findings From a Qualitative Analysis of Desistance From Sexual Offending

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Abstract

Sex offending is typically understood from a pathology perspective with the origin of the behavior thought to be within the offending individual. Such a perspective may not be beneficial for those seeking to desist from sexual offending and reintegrate into mainstream society. A thematic analysis of 32 self-narratives of men convicted of sexual offences against children suggests that such individuals typically explain their pasts utilizing a script consistent with routine activity theory, emphasizing the role of circumstantial changes in both the onset of and desistance from sexual offending. It is argued that the self-framing of serious offending in this way might be understood as a form of “shame management,” a protective cognition that enables desistance by shielding individuals from internalizing stigma for past violence.

Keywords

desistance, routine activity theory, sex offending, shame management, situational motivation

Within popular discourses, men who have been convicted of sexual offences have been deemed to be fundamentally sexually deviant and incapable of change, constantly seeking out opportunities to sexually reoffend (see Levenson, Brannon,

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Fortney, & Baker, 2007; McAlinden, 2012; L. M. J. Simon & Felthous, 2000; Spencer, 2009). In recent years, this view has been challenged by research that demonstrates that, on the whole, reoffending rates for sex offending are comparatively very low (Harris & Hanson, 2004; Lussier & Cale, 2013), and a single conviction for sexual offending very rarely predicts a lifetime of predatory behavior (Hanson, Harris, Helmus, & Thornton, 2014; Lussier, Tzoumakis, Cale, & Amirault, 2010).

Barnett, Wakeling, and Howard (2010), for example, provided “survival curves” for a large sample of individuals convicted of sex crimes for “proven sexual reoffending” (defined as a conviction or caution for a further sexual offence) for each of the four risk levels predicted by the Risk Matrix 2000 assessment tool.¹ Sample outcomes were tracked for up to 4 years. The survival curves showed a pronounced leveling off after about 40 to 44 months, suggesting that for those individuals who reached this stage without reoffending, future reoffending would be unlikely (this was the majority of individuals. More than 80% of the very high risk group, and more than 95% of the low risk group reached this stage without being reconvicted). However, this 4-year follow-up is limited by time “at risk” in the community, and it is not clear whether this effect would be maintained over longer time scales. Harris and Hanson (2004) examined the offending careers of more than 4,700 individuals convicted of sexual offending and concluded that the longer an individual remains offence-free in the community, the less likely they are to reoffend sexually. Overall reoffending rates for “child molesters” over time were 13% after 5 years, 18% after 10 years, and 20% after 15 years. In short, sexual recidivism rates are low, and most reoffending takes place within the first 5 years, following which there is a leveling off of reoffending rates. Indeed, by plotting crime longitudinally rather than cross-sectionally, Lussier and Davies (2011) concluded that “a sex crime is more reflective of a transitory phase of the criminal career rather than evidence of a sexual career in the making” (p. 530).

However, relatively little is known about the desistance process for this population. Drawing on autobiographical interviews with a sample of 32 men who had committed a sexual offence against a child, our analysis joins a growing body of research that has emerged in recent years that seeks to understand how and why men who have sexually offended in the past are able to desist from further sexual offending (see, for example, Farmer, McAlinden, & Maruna, 2015; Harris, 2014; Lussier & Cale, 2013; Masson, Hackett, Phillips, & Balfe, 2015). The semi-structured, “life story” interviews (McAdams, 1993, 2008) were designed to help understand the way participants made sense of their previous offending and situated this aspect of their past lives into their current self-identities.

These narratives strongly echoed “situational” theories of sexual offending against children (e.g., Wortley & Smallbone, 2006), explaining past offending as being related to a particular set of circumstances in play at the time of their offending, stemming in some way from “routine” activities that were not planned or created by the individual specifically to abuse a child. Instead of organising their lives around offending or the careful grooming of situations in which they could offend, interviewees characterized their offences as something that “just happened” as a consequence of circumstances in play at the time. We argue that, whether true or not, participants utilized these situational

explanations as a form of stigma management to allow them to develop a positive identity as a non-offender (Covington, 1984; Hood, Shute, Feilzer, & Wilcox, 2002). In our conclusion, we highlight some implications of these findings for practitioners engaged in sex offender risk management and rehabilitation.

Motivation, Sexual Offending, and Desistance

Sexual offending has tended to be understood as the outcome of a confluence of primarily psychological “risk factors” that predispose an individual to sexual aggression (Finkelhor, 1984; Mann, Hanson, & Thornton, 2010; Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Ward & Siegert, 2002). Most of these factors involve psychological, developmental, or neurological explanations—such as abnormal sexual interests or sexual preoccupations—shown to be correlated to recidivism (Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004). Where external social factors or broader life circumstances have been considered by researchers, they have often been constructed as factors that can destabilize dynamic risk factors (see, for example, Laws, 1989; Pithers, Kashima, Cumming, & Beal, 1988). This lack of attention to situational factors may be related to an unwillingness to allow individuals justifications or “excuses” for their harmful behaviors.² For instance, Salter (1988) and others argued that when individuals blame their offending on family or occupational stress, this allows them to continue to offend without experiencing the guilt associated with such behaviors. The result is a general unwillingness, in much therapeutic work, to construct sexual offending as anything other than a wholly internal, stable phenomenon (Mann & Beech, 2003).

A growing body of scholarship has sought to challenge such constructions, echoing the well-known “person-situation” debate in personality psychology, in which Mischel (1968) famously challenged the idea that personality is consistent across different situations. For example, drawing on situational crime prevention (Cornish & Clarke, 2003) and “routine activity theory” (Cohen & Felson, 1979), Wortley and Smallbone (2006) argued that even behaviors related to sexual offending can be highly variable from one situation to another, and that the immediate environment can influence people to behave in ways they would not otherwise have done. Routine activity theory focuses on the circumstances in which crime is committed rather than the characteristics of those who commit it. Cohen and Felson (1979) argued that, for a crime to be committed, three elements need to converge in time and space: (a) a motivated individual, (b) a suitable target, and (c) the absence of a capable guardian (see also Leclerc, Wortley, & Smallbone, 2011).

Cohen and Felson’s focus, however, was firmly on the second two components of this formula. Indeed, from a strong situationist perspective, motivation is also thought to be driven by environmental factors. According to Briar and Piliavin’s (1965) idea of situational motivation, the motivation for delinquency lies in the situation rather than the person, and desires to commit crime can be situationally induced: “Because delinquent behavior is typically episodic, purposive, and confined to certain situations, we assume that the motives for such behavior are episodic, oriented to short term ends and confined to certain situations” (p. 36). Crime in such a framework is regarded as a

“rational choice,” understood in the circumstances of the offending. Osgood, Wilson, O’Malley, Bachman, and Johnston (1996) argued that the easier the deviant act and the greater the symbolic and tangible rewards, the greater the inducement to deviance.

In the context of sexual offending, situational motivation can manifest in four key ways, according to Wortley and Smallbone (2006): Environments can present cues that can influence behavior, social pressure can be exerted by particular environments, particular environments can serve to weaken moral constraints, and environments can produce emotional arousal. As in personality psychology, these arguments are now largely accepted in the science of sexual offending, with a general consensus that sex offending, like other types of behaviors, results from the interplay between environmental and individual factors. For instance, Mann and colleagues (2010) argued that “aggressive offenders are not aggressive all the time . . .” and suggest that even when individuals do harbor deviant motivations, “the problematic behavior of interest arises through interaction with the environment” (pp. 5, 7).

However, the situationist argument, at least in its strongest form, presents a clear challenge in regard to efforts around sex offender rehabilitation and treatment. Situationists in criminology have consistently argued that crime reduction efforts are better aimed at changing the environmental factors that allow for crime than seeking to correct or change individuals convicted of crime (Clarke, 1980). Indeed, a remarkable body of research in the situationist tradition has demonstrated how even small changes to the social environment can have a sizable impact on reducing crime rates on a macro level (Sutton, Cherney, & White, 2013; Wortley & Mazerolle, 2013). Behavior change, in this context, is better understood as an alteration in a person’s routine activities than an internal change in fundamental psychology (Freisthler, Midanik, & Gruenewald, 2004).

The growing body of research around desistance from crime has not, so far, fully explored the relationship between changes in a person’s routine activities, and desistance from crime. It has, however, sought to unpick and better understand the interplay between internal and external factors in understanding how individuals previously committed to lives of crime are able to move away from such patterns of behavior (see especially LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008). Indeed, this literature is sometimes broadly divided into research on social variables (such as changes in employment or marital status) and complementary changes in subjective/cognitive domains such as beliefs or personal identity (Farrall & Bowling, 1999). However, extant desistance research typically involves the study of persistent engagement in “street crimes” such as drug dealing, burglary, or gang-related violence (Bottoms & Shapland, 2011; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001), and, until recently, very little research has explored the role of these desistance factors in regard to sexual offending. The findings from the current study, outlined below, suggest that this interplay between a person’s daily activities and the people it brings them into contact with, and their sexual offending, is worthy of investigation.

One important early study, however, does suggest a possible role for routine activities in desistance from sex offending. Kruttschnitt, Uggen, and Shelton (2000) conducted a retrospective analysis of the offence trajectories of 556 individuals convicted

of sexual crimes (against both adults and children) to determine whether informal social controls, specifically employment and marriage, predicted desistance and whether such bonds are conditioned by formal social controls such as probation and treatment. They found that job stability significantly reduced the probability of reoffending, although marital status exerted virtually no effect. Kruttschnitt et al. conclude informal social controls such as employment condition the effects of formal social controls such as sex offender treatment. Although Kruttschnitt and colleagues do not specifically point to the influence on desistance of changes in routine activities, other studies have indicated the relationship between work, consequent changes in routine activities, and desistance ([Sampson & Laub, 1993](#)).

Aim of Study

The aim of the study as a whole was to understand why men who have committed sexual offences against children desist from further sexual offending. In this analysis, we explore the role of situationist themes in the self-understandings and self-explanations of individuals who desist from sexual offending against children.

Method

The analysis draws on a qualitative data set of life story interviews collected to better comprehend the narrative self-understandings associated with desistance from sexual offending against children (for a full description of the method used in this study, see [Farmer et al., 2015](#)). As noted above, routine activity theory is essentially a macro-level explanation of crime, in that it is typically used to explain changes in crime levels at an aggregate level (e.g., how changes in the use of closed circuit television [CCTV] cameras can reduce overall rates of offending in a city), and the theory's main adherents have little interest in getting "inside the minds" of individuals ([Schwartz & Pitts, 1995](#)). At the same time, however, the theory makes clear assumptions about individual psychology that can be explored in the self-narratives of individuals. In particular, the theory assumes that for some individuals, their moral beliefs and socialization are, in certain circumstances, insufficient to prevent them committing crime. Thus, motivation for crime can be situational.

Sample

The research employed a purposive sampling strategy, which identified a group of 25 individuals convicted of sex crimes who had been desisting for some years, and a comparison group of seven individuals who were within approximately 12 months of their last offence and so could not yet be said to be fully desisting. Both groups were under the supervision of the probation service in England and Wales at the time of the interview, and most but not all had completed a sex offender treatment programme, either in prison or in the community. Every research participant had been convicted of a sexual offence against a child (almost always resulting from a pattern of this

behavior with one or more victims). These included “contact” as well as “non-contact” offences, although most had been convicted of contact offences such as sexual assault or rape.

For the purposes of this study, “desistance” from such offending was initially operationalised as a period of 5 or more years of living in the community, with no new charges or investigations for new sexual crimes. Time since the last conviction is a useful proxy measure as previous research (e.g., [Hanson et al., 2014](#)) has shown that sexual recidivism rates approximately halve after 5 years crime-free in the community, and halve again after 10 years. For some, this crime-free 5-year period began after their release from prison; for others, where they were convicted of historical sexual offences, it included time prior to their conviction and subsequent prison sentence. This allowed for comparisons of those who desisted “naturally” (i.e., their desistance was unrelated to the actions of the criminal justice system) and those who desisted following their arrest and subsequent conviction for their offence. However, when the research began, we struggled to identify suitable candidates for this group so the 5-year rule was initially relaxed to 3 years. Consequently, a number of participants with fewer than 5 crime-free years were interviewed before a more reliable means of identifying those who had been crime-free for longer periods was found. Most of the small, comparison sample of interviewees had more than one conviction for sexual offending, with their most recent sex crime committed in the past 12 months from the date of their interview (fieldwork conducted July 2013–April 2014). Similarly, it proved very difficult to identify individuals for the comparison group, and not all participants fully met the criteria we set in this category, although all were considered to have committed their offences recently enough to be sufficiently distinct from the “desisting” group.

Interviews and Analysis

The interview schedule drew upon McAdams’s (1993) life story interview as a basis for the semi-structured interview guide. The life story was chosen as the means of data collection because, as McAdams (2006) argued, people make sense of their lives by organising them temporally in sequences we understand as stories. People “construe their lives as evolving stories that integrate the reconstructed past and the imagined future in order to provide life with some semblance of unity and purpose” (McAdams, 2006, p. 13). Personal narratives are much more than simple stories, as “life stories speak directly to how people come to terms with their interpersonal worlds, with society, and with history and culture” (McAdams, 2008, p. 257). Narrative analysis is particularly concerned with people’s understandings of their lives, the context in which they live them, and their own role within that context. The study of narratives or life stories was, therefore, of significance for this project, where the aim was to gain an appreciation of participants’ own understanding of their lives, and the relationship between these self-understandings and desistance from sexual crime.

Interviews lasted between 90 min and 2 hr, and were audio-recorded and confidentially transcribed. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews. Transcripts

were thematically coded to identify patterns of thought and self-perception within and across interview samples. Following a grounded theory method, initial coding to broad themes was followed by more detailed, focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). Data analysis followed a phenomenological approach (e.g., Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), focused upon understanding and interpreting the meanings interviewees place upon their lives and their position in the world.

Results

Of the sample of 25 desisting participants, 20 accounted for their offences by allocating primary responsibility to situational factors outside their control. In this way, they developed a sort of lay version of routine activity theory in their personal accounts (without, of course, making reference to the theory itself). Participants argued that had the particular set of criminogenic circumstances not arisen, the offending would not have occurred. Furthermore, most of the participants in the study argued that those circumstances arose through chance, or through a set of happenings that they did not deliberately engineer (or “groom”) to commit their offences. In the excerpts from the interviews below, interviewees are differentiated by an interview number and letter: “A” for putatively desisting interviewees and “B” for the small group of individuals deemed to be closer to the point of their offending, who had not yet formed a stable pattern of desistance.³

In many cases, the series of events leading to the offence were related to relationship breakdown or social activities that the individual was involved in. For example, several desisting participants describe how they met their victim through their relationship with another person:

A1: The person that I started dating, I went round to her house and then we was going round to her parent’s house and we got laughing and chatting and ... came round and we all started having a laugh and jokes and they started taking the mick and having things like that and laughing and joking, and it just led from there, I just took it way too far and looking back, I realise that I should’ve just said no . . .

A2: Erm, I was hanging around with these other lads who were younger than me . . . so I’m hanging around with them and they’re coming to my house and everything, and it’s through them that I met this group of girls you know.

A recurring sub-theme was that of participants gaining access to their victims through situations where they were asked to take responsibility for another’s children. The participants here emphasized that they did not engineer the situation to gain access to children. Rather, they were asked, or placed in a position where they were responsible for the children, through routine activities, as in the following:

A3: Because it was easier, she was there, she was available, she lived at my parents’ house.

A4: Erm, she was sort of dumped on me really, they would often leave her with me so we were alone together an awful lot of the time and er . . .

A5: . . . the only room left was (daughter's) room. So I basically moved in my . . . daughter's bedroom, she had a bunk bed, it was a full size one, so I slept on the bottom and she slept on the top but erm, she suffers from anxiety, she always panics about everything and of course she stayed with me a lot, in my bed . . .

In some cases, participants described how changing family relationships or employment situations had resulted in corresponding changes in routine activities. The following participant had previously described how changes in family arrangements meant his victim had moved in to live at his family home. He went on to describe his contact with his victim:

A6: She had her own bedroom and sometimes she'd wake in the middle of the night and I had to wake her and take her back but sometimes I was so tired, I said I'll take you back in a minute and I'd go back to sleep.

Others, however, described how they were approached by their victims:

A7: It was a chance meeting at the time, he approached me first, he came talking to me first time you know, and that was one day when the wife and I were sitting having a pint in the local pub outside and he came up to us then as well and he started chatting.

A8: Erm, basically my offence involved me talking to people who I'd met at (place of work). At the (place of work) everyone kept in touch with everybody.

One participant described how he met his victim online, but again maintained that he had not been looking for a victim. This is an interesting contemporary variation on the routine activities theme in that today, people's routine activities can involve means of interaction that were not available at the time the theory was developed, principally related to the internet:

A9: Basically I was online and I got chatting to people, I'd chat to anybody, it was all I had to do and I came across this female, just a girl who was a police officer, in my head it was a girl and I ended up chatting to her, I said what I said to her, asked her if she wanted to meet up and that's how that offence came about. To me obviously I offended and there's no doubt about that, and like I wasn't genuinely looking to . . .

I: Oh I see. So at that time were you specifically looking for a child?

A9: No, anybody, I just wanted to chat to people, I didn't know what to do with myself at this point, I was so like depressed.

Almost all of the desisting sample members described relatively conventional lifestyles in terms of employment, relationships, and families (see also McAlinden,

Maruna, & Farmer, in press). In the illustrations above, respondents described the origins of their offending as the result of generally chance encounters in the midst of these conventional daily activities. However, this is not the only way that accounts reflected situationist themes. Interviewees also described how their sexual interest in their victim arose as a *result* of those situations. For example, one participant described how he had not had sexual feelings toward his victim until he found himself in a situation where abuse was potentially possible:

A10: I'd say that she just happened to be there, I never really thought about that sort of thing [sex offending]. I'd never had those sort of thoughts before, so I don't know really what came into my head. I know, I'm totally ashamed of it. I know that much.

Another interviewee said that his offending began when his wife was away, and he found himself living alone:

I: So that offence was that something that you'd been thinking about doing for a while, something that you had wanted to do?

A11: No, no, no. I don't know what caused it, I really don't, I've never been able to explain it but accept that I did it.

Overall, participants' accounts reflected their perception of their offending as being largely situational. Importantly, the narratives of the small sub-group ($n = 7$) of comparison interviewees who had offended more recently differed somewhat on this theme. Some of these interviewees generally accepted that they had deviant sexual motivations, even if they did not fully understand the origins of these desires. For example, one said,

B1: I don't know what triggered me into starting to do that considering how shy that I used to be with women, that I'd expose myself to them, erm, I don't know whether it's, I found a release in doing it you know, because I couldn't approach women . . .

Another described himself as simply preferring the company of children to that of adults, and, consequently, actively seeking out situations in which he could share children's company:

B2: I'm always looking for chances to read kids stories and to teach them things and stuff like that and so you know, a relationship built up with the family.

While the latter quote implies an element of "grooming" (McAlinden, 2012), such themes related to the "seeking out" of situations were less common among the desisting sample who framed their involvement with children as accidental and as borne out of their usual routines.

In addition, several desisting interviewees suggested that their offending took place during a period of crisis, and that their routine activities had changed due to distinct

deterioration in their life circumstances. Mental health was a factor that came up several times within this theme:

A12: I think I was suffering from depression and she used to cuddle me a lot, make me feel better and just one thing led to another

Similarly, participants frequently described their offending as taking place at a time of relationship breakdown. In these circumstances, they argued that their routine activities had altered as a result of changes in their relationships, either because of the changes in social control exerted by such relationships, or that they became depressed following the changes in their relationship:

A9: Now I found out . . . that my girlfriend had cheated on me right at the beginning of the relationship and that like burst my bubble massively.

A2: The reason I committed the offence, I was not myself, smoked a lot of cannabis, I was depressed, depression played a big thing in it, I felt unloved . . . I mean loneliness come to think of it was a big thing.

Most of the self-narratives drew upon a variety of these problems, all co-occurring (temporarily) at the time of the person's offending:

A13: I think that was the depression that had probably built up over a number of years. I didn't realize it was there. . . . I think that was probably when I got to the near enough to the bottom of the barrel, erm, and . . . I think to me at that particular moment, [the offending] was just a bit of lark, a bit of a game. That's the kind of way my brain had gone. It wasn't as if this was a start of a new life or anything. It was just something that happened on that particular spur of the moment, and immediately after it, I remember thinking that wasn't what you should have done but something that happens in a minute, you can't put it back, can you?

A14: I was in a relationship, erm, I got injured, I was on painkillers and on the painkillers that I was on forced me into a little bit of depression. I was on antidepressants, erm, I was feeling very low. I alienated my family, I alienated my (children). I became a little bit reclusive in one way because I didn't . . . I came out of my career and I was, well, on the dole [unemployment] so to speak so I was this person on the [couch].

Finally, all of the interviewees in the desisting group emphasized that they had not based their lives around their offending, and that the offending (as opposed to the conviction for the offending) played a very small part in their overall lives and their sense of personal identity, as in the following example:

A8: I got carried away in this instance. . . . I know the difference between right and wrong. I know what I should and what I shouldn't do and I think ethically, I think I'm a good person...

Several participants differentiated between the role of their offending in their lives, which they invariably described as being very minor and the impact of the conviction upon their lives, which invariably was very large:

A2: I'd like to think they're a small part but they're not, are they? Because from that day on till that day now, it's still having an effect on me today and it will have an effect on me for the rest of my life, so that's a huge part.

Discussion

There are at least three ways to interpret data like these above. First, these situational explanations utilized by those who are desisting from crime might be understood as an accurate representation of the life histories of the sample members. After all, considerable evidence links crimes, even sexual offences, to situational opportunities and constraints ([Wortley & Smallbone, 2006](#)). Likewise, the idea that people are more vulnerable to committing sexual offences at a low point in their lives is supported by research ([Watt & Withington, 2011](#)) and makes sense from theoretical perspectives that suggest offending is most likely when individuals have little to lose (see, for example, [Hirschi, 1986](#)). Indeed, researchers have reached a general consensus around the idea that sex offending is the product of an interaction between internal and external factors ([Mann et al., 2010](#)). For instance, [Ward and Beech \(2006\)](#) argued that psychological vulnerabilities make it more likely that people will struggle to deal with situational opportunities and that "individuals can behave in ways they would not normally consider and may even engage in actions that they would view as utterly reprehensible in their normal environments" (p. 53). As such, the purposive sampling strategy utilized in this study could have simply identified a high proportion of individuals convicted of sex offences who lacked strong internal motivations and had high external pressures to offend. Such an interpretation, of course, would be consistent with their subsequent desistance from criminal behavior post-conviction.

Second, an alternative interpretation, common to the therapeutic literature, is that these accounts are best understood as cognitive distortions, minimalizations, neutralizations, and excuses (see [Maruna & Mann, 2006](#)). Rather than accept their own role in the offending, individuals are blaming their circumstances, blaming the victim, blaming the context. According to many traditions in sex offender treatment, until they are able to stop making such excuses and accept that their offending was a matter of personal choice, they remain at a high risk of recidivism and are essentially unreformed. For example, in an influential treatment handbook for working with sex offenders, [Salter \(1988\)](#) wrote,

Careful listening to their descriptions of the abuse will detect constant externalisation. Blame is placed on their wife's nagging, their wives' lack of interest in sex, their own problems at work, provocation by the child, lack of attention and care from the world in general, excessive care and attention from the child . . . and on their own emotional loneliness. . . . These excuses have the cumulative effect of reducing offender responsibility. (pp. 107-108)

A third interpretation involves a mix of both of these perspectives but reaches a conclusion opposite to that of Salter (1988). That is, although the circumstances described by interviewees may have been perfectly genuine, it is still possible that the emphasis of these contexts and the de-emphasis of internal responsibility or pathological thinking serves, at least partially, as a post hoc, revisionist (self-) history intended to shield the individuals from the considerable guilt involved with sexual offending. Furthermore, rather than being a criminogenic or cognitive distortion that facilitates future offending, the situational nature of the narratives collected for this research may be a key “shame management” technique critical to the process of social reintegration (see [Ahmed, Harris, Braithwaite, & Braithwaite, 2001](#)) and, relatedly, to desistance from crime ([Maruna & Mann, 2006](#)).

The label “sex offender” carries considerable negative connotations and was openly rejected by many of the participants in this study. In this way, participants may have been considering the impact of such labelling on their future selves, and attempting to construct a more positive personal identity. They did not wish to be viewed as a “sex offender,” and they did not wish others to view them in this way either. This is consistent with Paternoster and Bushway’s (2009) theory of desistance, in which it is argued that people desist from crime when they can foresee a “feared future self” arising from their criminal activity, and consequently develop a more positive future identity. In a similar way, participants in this study were keen to avoid the negative implications of being labelled a “sex offender,” and used situational explanations of their offending to (partially) justify and make more understandable their sexual crimes. In this way, it could be argued that negative labelling acted as a “clarifier” (Sagarin, 1975) of the significance and harm of the individual’s actions, and forced them into a rapid reappraisal of their sexual offending.

Desistance research suggests that a core element of the process involves the development of a coherent self-narrative or explanation of why an individual did what they did and yet is no longer the same person as the one who committed the crimes (see Maruna, 2001). This narrative work plays an essential role in the process of managing the stigma that is naturally associated with being convicted of a crime, and few crimes carry a stigma as profound as that of sexual offending. Indeed, individuals who commit sexual offences against children are generally considered as “monsters” (J. Simon, 1998) or the “lowest of the low” (see, for example, [Ricciardelli & Moir, 2013](#)). Research suggests that expectations of stigmatisation can result in significant negative consequences, including recidivism ([Braithwaite, 1989](#); [LeBel et al., 2008](#)) and sexual violence ([Jahnke, Schmidt, Geradt, & Hoyer, 2015](#)). Such fears were clear among the present research sample who described harassment and hatred from others aimed at both themselves and their families:

A3: Erm, oh dear it’s, I don’t really like the way I am at the moment, I’m a recluse because of the situation because I’ve gone through all this now, because I’ve been inside, because I’m known to be a known sex offender, my confidence in my ability to be accepted into normal society is . . .

A15: [I feel] ashamed, full of guilt, remorse, erm, angry I suppose, erm, angry with myself because of what has happened, obviously. It's led to a lot of fallouts...

I: And how have the reactions of other people since then affected the way that you think?

A15: Like I says, I try and, I mean . . . I've had a bit of abuse out the window and that, and there's been a lot of stuff that's gone on that's been out of my control.

Interviewees expressed particular concern about the perception of immutability associated with sexual offending, the notion that “once a sex offender, always a sex offender” and the essential otherness of the person convicted of such crimes (Spencer, 2009). The situational self-narratives of desisting individuals, therefore, enable them to construct their sexual crimes as *aberrations*, unrelated to their true self-identities, and, hence, maintain a positive self-image in their own and others' eyes (Maruna & Copes, 2005). For instance, in their study of sex offender recidivism, Roger Hood and colleagues (2002) found that those individuals deemed to be “in denial” of their offence by a parole board were less likely to reoffend than those who took responsibility for their crimes. Hood and colleagues (2002) interpreted this finding as follows:

Some “deniers,” when faced with the stigma of conviction and punishment may not accept their deviant sexual acts as a reflection of their “real self.” Nor may they wish to associate with those they regard, unlike themselves, as “real” sex offenders. It is possible that such persons may be less likely to become “secondary deviants,” that is, persons who accept and seek to justify their sexual deviance. (p. 387)

Likewise, in our own research, although none of the interviewees denied they committed the offences they were convicted for, several openly rejected the label of “sex offender” or denied having internal motivations for sex offending. For example, one interviewee stated,

A16: I don't think I was a sex offender. . . . [The offending] didn't, to me at the time, it was entertainment or it was a digression or it was a distraction, it wasn't there to achieve anything. That's the whole point about it, which makes it even more annoying really.

In this way, the interviewees might be said to be “signalling” their desistance (Maruna, 2012) by implicitly acknowledging the negative implications of their crimes and the approbation of society, and attempting to separate themselves (or their *current selves*) from their offences.

This is consistent with how excuses are used outside of the criminal justice context (Maruna & Copes, 2005). For instance, research suggests that people who attribute failures to external rather than internal factors do better on a range of psychological factors such as self-esteem and mental health and are more likely to persist at difficult tasks (Snyder & Higgins, 1988). This interpretation is also broadly in line with contemporary research trends in the study of sex offending. For instance, meta-analyses (Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004) and literature reviews

(Blake & Gannon, 2008; Marshall, Marshall, & Kingston, 2011; Schneider & Wright, 2004; Ward, Hudson, Johnston, & Marshall, 1997) have largely failed to find support for the idea that denial of offending, externalizations, and situational excuses for sexual offending are predictive of recidivism. Indeed, Maruna (2001) argued that rather than being seen as part of a “hardening process,” justifying further criminal acts, such “neutralisations” might be seen as a “softening” process, signalling a weak attachment to crime and an overall acceptance of societal values.

If, indeed, this third type of interpretation is correct, this would lend support to the argument made by a growing array of clinicians and researchers in the field that the insistence upon challenging and proscribing external accounts in therapeutic work with individuals convicted of sex offending is unnecessary and possibly iatrogenic (see, for example, Bullock & Condry, 2013; Digard, 2014; Lacombe, 2008; Marshall et al., 2011; Maruna & Mann, 2006; Waldram, 2007; Ware & Mann, 2012). Participants in the current study had, in effect, rejected the label “sex offender” and the negative connotations that sit alongside that label, and had developed a much more positive self-identity (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). To create and maintain this more positive self, participants had taken steps to account for their previous offending in ways that made it seem more situational, circumstantial, and ultimately more understandable. Thus, their desistance was associated with the creation of a positive personal identity, and their situational accounts of their offending contributed to and were consistent with this.

Therefore, those charged with the treatment of such individuals need to be cognizant of the potential value of such “neutralisations” in the stigma management process and of the capacity of people who have committed harmful acts to create an appealing self-identity that distances them, cognitively and socially, from their sexual offending. Rather than focusing on getting people who are desisting from sexual offending to take more responsibility for things they have done in the past, it may be that the aims of rehabilitation and public protection would be better served by encouraging them to take responsibility for things they *will* do in the *future* (see Maruna & Mann, 2006). In this way, practitioners might help develop and reinforce non-offending identities rather than risking undermining them.

Study Limitations

There are a number of limitations with this study. First, as a work of grounded theory, the sample size was adequate and a degree of “theoretical saturation” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was obtained. Saturation is defined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as “being the point where “no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category” (p. 61). This is identified when similar examples are being noted repeatedly, and no new examples arise. Therefore, within the limitations of the grounded theory methodology, the sample size was adequate. However, despite this, caution should be adopted when considering whether the results are generalizable, given the relatively small sample size.

Second, cross-sectional studies have been criticised as a means of conducting desistance research. Such studies, according to [Farrall et al. \(2014\)](#), do not allow for investigation of the “processes of desistance as they unfold” (p. 19), which would be the case when a longitudinal, prospective approach were taken. [Farrall et al. \(2014\)](#) argued that the process of desistance from non-sexual crime is not an event that happens in one stage; rather, it takes place over a period of time, during which people will vacillate in and out of crime before reaching a final state of desistance. Generally, it is assumed that the relationship between desistance and the formation of new social bonds over time could be better examined using a longitudinal methodology, which would enable the researcher to correlate such life events with crime over the life span, rather than relying on the individual’s memory of such events. Cross-sectional research designs do tend to emphasize the significance of personal cognitive subjectivities rather than structural change.

A third potential limitation of the study was the selection procedure for the sample group. Although purposive, the initial sampling strategy of interviewing men who had been desisting for at least 5 years could not be followed in the early stages of the research, and, as indicated above, this was relaxed to 3 years for the first few participants. Nevertheless, the strategy of interviewing a group of men who had not been reconvicted of sexual offences for some years had been achieved, and the later interviews were with men who had been conviction-free for many years. Similarly, as described above, problems were experienced in meeting the criteria set for the comparison group. These issues illustrate the problems inherent in conducting research with highly stigmatised people.

A final problem with the sampling strategy was its reliance on time since conviction as a measure of desistance. Of course, individuals within the group may have committed further offences that had not been detected, although improved monitoring and public protection arrangements mean that undetected crime among the study group was less likely (for detailed discussion of these issues, see [Farmer et al., 2015](#)).

Conclusion

This study found that men who were desisting from sexual crime tended to explain their past offences as being situational—rooted in a particular set of circumstances that were not necessarily of their making. That is, they claimed they had not set out to manufacture the circumstances in which abusing a child became a possibility for them. We have argued that this could be based in reality, or it could be a distortion of reality. Either way, being able to explain their past offences in this way imparted certain advantages to the desisting individual. It enabled them to manage shame attached to their offences, and gave them a means of accounting for the harm they had caused to others. In this way, their situational accounts of past offences contributed to the development of a new, more pro-social identity as a non-offender, and consequently was a helpful factor in their desistance. We contend this brings challenges to those rehabilitative practices whereby those convicted of sexual crimes are encouraged to “take responsibility” for their past crimes. While there is little evidence to suggest therapeutic approaches

focusing on past criminal acts contribute to desistance, we have argued that there is tangible evidence to suggest that practitioners might better spend their time encouraging and enabling those they work with to maintain a firm focus on a positive future self.

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Notes

1. Risk Matrix 2000 is an actuarial risk assessment tool that sorts people into one of four groups, low, medium, high, and very high, depending on reconviction rates (Barnett, Wakeling, & Howard, 2010).
2. There is an extensive criminological literature on “excuses” and “justifications” (e.g., [Maruna & Mann, 2006](#); [Pollock & Hashmall, 1991](#)) and a related psychological literature on “denial” and “minimisation” (e.g., [Barbaree, 1991](#); [Levenson & Macgowan, 2004](#); [Marshall, Thornton, Marshall, Fernandez, & Mann, 2001](#)) in samples of individuals convicted of sexual offences. The impact of such “neutralisations” on identity formations in individuals previously convicted of sexual offences, and the implications of either adopting or rejecting the “sex offender” label for therapeutic and reintegrative initiatives, is something we intend to explore more fully in subsequent papers.
3. Note that to protect the anonymity of the research participants, the interview numbers vary across the range of publications derived from the study.

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