Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

_____   _____
Sarah Martins Vitorino   Date

Overcoming the Odds:
Understanding Formerly Incarcerated Women's Desistance from Crime

By

Sarah Martins Vitorino
Doctor of Philosophy

Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

_____

[Irene Browne, Ph.D.]
Advisor

_____

[Robert Agnew, Ph.D.]
Committee Member

_____

[Elizabeth M. Bounds, Ph.D.]
Committee Member

_____

[Corey L. M. Keyes, Ph.D.]
Committee Member

Accepted:

_____

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D.
Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

_____

Date

Overcoming the Odds:
Understanding Formerly Incarcerated Women's Desistance from Crime

By

Sarah Martins Vitorino
B.A., Westfield State University, 2004

Advisor: Irene Browne, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
2012

Abstract

Overcoming the Odds:
Understanding Formerly Incarcerated Women's Desistance from Crime
By Sarah Martins Vitorino

Increasing rates of female incarceration along with high rates of recidivism are overpopulating America's prison and jails with women who, according to statistics, have little chance of breaking the cycle of crime and reincarceration (Henriques and Manatu-Rupert, 2001). Despite little likelihood of succeeding, however, a small number of women find ways of overcoming the challenges of incarceration and reentry and not only stop offending, but manage to create a meaningful, productive life (Byrne and Trew, 2008). To better understand how and why women defy the odds, I constructed a project that drew together the desistance and positive psychology literatures—two distinct streams of theory and research. Extending Shadd Maruna's (2001) work on desistance from crime and building on the contributions of feminist criminologists, I conducted life-history interviews with 20 formerly incarcerated women (10 self-reported that they were still committing crimes (i.e. persisting) and 10 self-reported that they were no longer committing crimes (i.e. desisting). I also administered a well-being measure (MHC-SF) to these women, building on the work of positive psychologist Corey Keyes. Data analyses revealed that desisting and persisting formerly incarcerated women varied in terms of the narrative themes that they used to describe events in their life and in their mental health scores. Desisting women demonstrated higher levels of overall positive mental health, enacted various resilience strategies for dealing with challenges, and had access to key mentors and support networks, which ultimately connected them to tangible resources and opportunities. Women who were persisting in crime had varying qualitative and quantitative mental health data, including high mental health scores but evidence of low mental health in the qualitative data, enacted fewer resilience strategies, and had access to very little by way of social or tangible resources. My findings suggest that there could be a relationship between well-being and desistance. As well, my findings indicate that quantitative mental health research with women who are committing crimes and those who are using drugs may be more reliable when supplemented with qualitative data. My dissertation findings provide support for broader policy and programming that promote well-being and desistance for formerly incarcerated women.

Overcoming the Odds:
Understanding Formerly Incarcerated Women's Desistance from Crime

By

Sarah Martins Vitorino
B.A., Westfield State University

Advisor: Irene Browne, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
2012

Acknowledgements

My deepest thanks to the twenty women who shared their stories with me. What an honor and privilege it was to hear about your struggles, your successes, and your dreams. Your stories are the soul of this dissertation; without your words, my project would be lifeless. It is my sincerest hope that I have represented your voices in a way that does justice to your experience and intentions. I have learned so much from your wisdom and courage about how to overcome the odds and live a meaningful life.

I want to thank my parents, Julie and Braz Vitorino, for your love, support and example. You always said that hard work pays off and you have worked so hard to give your children opportunities you never had. It would take lifetimes to express how much I respect and admire you both. I want to also thank my grandparents, Belmira and Manuel Vitorino and the late Ana and Manuel Martins, for your love, support, and example. I also want to thank my brother, Dr. Philip Vitorino, for your understanding, steady support and willingness to laugh with (and at) me. I want to thank my brother and sister-in-law, Steven and Katie Vitorino, and nieces, Grace and Amber Vitorino, for their unfailing love and support.

It is with deepest gratitude that I wish to thank my advisor, Dr. Irene Browne, for her commitment and genuine investment in my project. You consistently pushed me to improve and never settled for anything less than my best. So many hours, so many drafts, and so many signatures later, your support has had such an unforgettably positive impact on my life and my work. Thank you, Irene.

Dr. Elizabeth Bounds, thank you for believing in me and my work from the very beginning and supporting me over the years. Dr. Robert Agnew, thank you for your solid advising and for introducing me to criminology, which sent me on this amazing journey. Dr. Corey Keyes, thank you for your support on my committee and your powerful research, which informed so much of my project.

I want to also thank Berky Abreu who has been a second mother to me since I arrived at Emory. You have been one of my strongest supporters through thick and thin. Thank you, Linda Calloway, for offering encouragement, warmth and your incredible sense of humor when I needed it most. Thank you, Dr. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, for believing in me all these years.

Thank you, Dr. Rosemary Magee, for recommending countless articles from the New York Times, your advice, and for being an incredible mentor. I am so grateful to Allison Dykes for being such a powerful role model, reliable source of the very best humor, and loyal friend. Thank you, Cindy Bryant, for your support—you are so special.

I want to thank all of my bold, brilliant, and beautiful friends (who are more like family) including Brooke Dodson-Lavelle, Lauren Holtkamp, Sasha Smith, Asia Valecce, Donna Troka, Sherice Chevannes, Carlos Monteiro, Maria Town, Meadow Overstreet, and Bianca Jakaran. I appreciate your steady loving presence and feel honored to be a part of your lives. Thank you, Dr. Rez Pullen for being right there with me during those early morning and weekend dissertation sessions. We did it, buddy. Thank you,

Overcoming the Odds:
Understanding Formerly Incarcerated Women's Desistance from Crime

Table of Contents

Overcoming the Odds:
Understanding Formerly Incarcerated Women's Desistance from Crime

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Increasing rates of female incarceration along with high rates of recidivism are overpopulating America's prison and jails with women who, according to statistics, have little chance of breaking the cycle of crime and reincarceration (Henriques and Manatu-Rupert, 2001). Despite little likelihood of succeeding, however, a small number of women find ways of overcoming the challenges of incarceration and reentry and not only stop offending, but manage to create a meaningful, productive life (Byrne and Trew, 2008). Although a great deal of research focuses on recidivism (repeat offending), very little attention is given to desistance, or the process of moving away from crime and building a conventional after prison. While these women figure among the minority, they are important in terms of understanding not only the cycle of incarceration, but also the process of desistance. Since the harsh realities of incarceration and reentry generally foreclose opportunities for the likelihood of living marginally, let alone escaping the cycle, it follows that much can be learned from studying just how these women manage to thrive in spite of near impossible odds.

My research builds upon the desistance literature, which seeks to understand how and why individuals desist or cease offending. According to Burnett and Maruna (2006) ex-offenders who reinvent themselves are "the most successful desisters" (94). Shadd Maruna (2001), one of the leading scholars in the area of desistance, draws upon personal narrative to shed light on why certain people desist from crime when, "according to common wisdom and our best predictive calculations," they should be persisting (6). He

found that, compared to persisting offenders, desisting ex-offenders are more interested and active in others' welfare and "more consistently optimistic in their outlooks" as is demonstrated in their narratives, which reveal a greater frequency of redemption sequences, in which "'something good' emerges out of otherwise negative circumstances" compared to the frequency of contamination sequences, in which "a decidedly good event 'turns sour'" (97). What is unclear about this finding is whether or not, compared with persisting offenders, desisting ex-offenders are measurably more optimistic generally or if their positive outlook is restricted to the content of their "self-stories," perhaps as a way to harmonize their "checkered pasts" with "their new, reformed identities" (6)

The distinction between a convicted offender's broader positive well-being, as opposed to a more isolated expression of optimism exhibited in a life story narrative, surely has important implications for what McNeill and Maruna (2007) see as "secondary desistance." The concept, first outlined by Lemert (1951), describes ex-offenders who achieve a lasting self-transformation that is characterized by a highly pro-social orientation (Bottoms et al. 2004; McIvor et al. 2004; McNeill and Maruna 2007). The following hypothetical statement illustrates the value in determining the overall well-being of an ex-offender, as opposed to the frequency of redemptive and contaminative statements alone:

> "<u>I was sick for a whole month when I got off drugs, but eventually I got better</u>. *I'm the type that always gets sick no matter what. It's so depressing. I just hate myself for having the worst luck.* **I can go a few days feeling pretty good, then I'll go out in to the cold or something and bam! Back to being sick!**"

In the above paragraph, both a redemption sequence, shown as underlined, and a contaminative sequence, shown in bold, appear. However, according to positive psychologist Corey Keyes' (2003) dimensions of emotional and psychological well-being, the content suggests a degree of unhappiness and a lack of self-acceptance, shown in italics. Thus, further questions raised by Maruna's research include what specific dimensions of well-being (i.e., emotional, psychological, social) are reflected in the content of persisting and desisting offenders' narrative sequences, and how do those different dimensions reflected in narrative sequences relate to formal measures of subjective well-being?

The emerging field of positive psychology focuses on the very same "motivational themes" (14) identified by Maruna (2001)[1] within narratives of desisting ex-offenders, including optimism (Seligman 1998), redemption sequences (Grossbaum and Bates 2002), turning points (Wethington 2003), meaning in life, generative and pro-social concerns (Emmons 2003), all of which have been found to correlate with positive well-being. For my study of incarcerated women, I employ Corey Keyes' (2003) multidimensional concept of subjective well-being, defined "as a state in which an individual feels positive emotion toward life and is functioning well psychologically and socially" (294). While Maruna (2001) only briefly mentions how an ex-offender's optimism seems to reflect positive health, I argue that this and other positive aspects

---

[1] For additional research citing related aspects of positive well-being see Rumgay (2004); Byrne and Trew (2005); Farrall (2005); Chen (2006); Sommers, Baskin and Fagan (1994). While these studies report similar findings to Maruna (2001), none describe these aspects as potentially indicative of positive well-being nor are they concerned with measuring well-being. Keaveny and Zauszniewski (1999) study narrative life events and psychological well-being among women in prison, but they operationalize well-being as the "absence of anxiety and depression" and are therefore operating under a traditional, rather than positive psychological point of view.

identified with secondary desistance point to the likelihood that positive well-being plays an important function in the desistance process.

My dissertation joins the literatures on desistance and positive psychology as these relate to the experiences of formerly incarcerated women. In particular, I replicated Maruna's methodology with a new sample of desisting formerly incarcerated women to see if I could replicate his findings. By bringing literature from positive psychology into dialogue with the literatures on desistance, I introduce positive well-being as a worthwhile and relevant assessment for formerly incarcerated women, and suggest the possibility that positive well-being could play a major role in women's desistence.

My dissertation explores the relationship between well-being and desistance among incarcerated women. My research design closely mirrors the methodological approach employed by Maruna (2001), but will be the first to explicitly measure positive well-being among formerly incarcerated women and answer the following questions: 1) Are there differences in the narrative sequences between desisting formerly incarcerated women and persisting formerly incarcerated women? 2) Are there differences in subjective well-being among desisters and persisters? 3) How is subjective well-being related to desisting and persisting women's life narratives? 3A) How do dimensions of well-being relate to the content of redemptive and contamination narrative sequences? 3B) How do measures of well-being relate to the frequency of redemptive and contamination narrative sequences?

My research project investigates if or at what point positive well-being contributes to the process of desistance among women formerly incarcerated at Metro State Prison in Atlanta, Georgia. I compared data from 10 women who self-report that

they are "desisting" from crime with 10 women who self-report that they are "persisting" in crime. Women were identified through recommendations by volunteers, chaplains, and colleagues who work with formerly incarcerated women, as well as via flyers posted in various clinics and restaurants throughout Atlanta.

By focusing on formerly incarcerated women, I combine the desistance and positive psychology literatures to address the question of how and why some women thrive under harsh circumstances while others do not. In addition, focusing on the experiences of women specifically answers numerous calls for broadening our understanding of women's experience of incarceration and desistance (Casey-Acevedo et al. 2001; Laub and Sampson 2001; Giordano et al. 2002; Deschenes et al. 2007; Wright et al. 2007). There are important differences in women's offending that, among other statistics, indicate the less serious nature of women's offending when compared to men's. For example, the number of incarcerated women is less than one tenth the number of incarcerated men; women are committing fewer and less serious offenses than men (Steffensmeier and Allen 1996); and women are more likely than men to desist from crime and at a younger age (Beck and Shipley 1997; Laub and Sampson 2001). As I explain in the next chapter, women's pathways into and away from crime are uniquely gendered and require theory and methods that are sensitive to women's lives (Rumgay 2004).

Contributions

In addition to analyzing patterns and key themes between two groups (desisters and persisters), I compare the life history narrative with scores on the well-being measures for each respondent. This allows me to gain insight into the quantitative

measures that go beyond the analysis of aggregate patterns. In particular, although the desistance and positive psychology literatures cover parallel concepts and processes, their methods can yield different pictures. Specifically, my findings illustrate how desisters' life narratives appear to be consistent with their well-being scores while persisters' life narratives reflected much lower levels of well-being than was reflected in their quantitative well-being measures.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter 2, I review the relevant literature on desistance and positive well-being. I discuss the contributions in both fields that relate directly to my project, focusing on theorists Shadd Maruna and Corey Keyes whose research aligns most directly with the aims of my project. I begin the chapter by discussing why the odds of desistance are so low and the pressures to commit crime so high, highlighting factors related to women's pathways into crime, the impact of incarceration, and the landscape of reentry. I then provide an overview of the literature on desistance, spotlighting the contributions of Maruna (2001). I focus on the contributions of the desistance literature that are most relevant to the experiences of female offenders, and parallels between the desistance literature and positive psychology. I then discuss limitations of the desistance literature and how these gaps in the literature could be addressed by recent findings within the positive psychology literature. I outline certain concepts and theories within positive psychology that have particular salience for the experiences of incarcerated women, as suggested by the research involving this population. Specifically, I explore the fairly recent studies linking positive well-being and redemptive narrative sequences, drawing important connections to Maruna's (2001) findings.

Following my review of relevant literature, Chapter 3 consists of a detailed account of the methods and design of my study, including the site, sample, selection process, as well as interview and data collection procedures. I pay close attention to the correctional landscape in Georgia and particularly, Metro State Prison given that all of the participants in my study had been incarcerated there. I conclude the chapter by explaining how I analyzed the data.

The results of my study are incorporated into Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7. Specifically, Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the resilience strategies women employ that support their desistance. These include identity-based, psychological and interpersonal resilience strategies. Chapter 6 describes how and why social supports are important to the desistance process both in terms of how they are intricately tied to resilience strategies and for their role in connecting women with tangible resources. In Chapter 7, I compare the content of life history narratives with measures of well-being for each participant. Specifically, I illustrate how desisters' narratives showed greater consistency in terms of how they described their lives and their measures of well-being than did persisters, whose narratives painted a very different picture from their quantitative well-being scores—namely, that they were not experiencing high levels of positive mental health.

In Chapter 8, I begin with a summary of my major findings and how they relate back to the literature on desistance and well-being. I discuss some of the limitations of this study, including the small sample size and possible confounding variables. I then

offer recommendations for future research, policy and programming. I conclude the chapter with some of my reflections on the project as a whole.

Chapter 2: Desistance and Well-being: A Review of the Literature

Introduction

Experiences before prison, during incarceration and after release all stack the odds against women successfully integrating into society and developing positive mental health. Yet, regardless of how difficult it is for women to succeed due to individual circumstances and institutional barriers, some manage to desist from crime and appear to exhibit positive mental health.   This project examines how and why women are able to achieve positive outcomes despite such terrible and challenging circumstances.   In this chapter, I review three literatures relevant to my project: 1) crime and recidivism; 2) desistance and 3) well-being.   I pay particular attention to Maruna's research on desistance, and explain how Maruna's concept of "redemption narratives" aligns with the theory of well-being grounded in research on positive mental health. I explore the ways in which the field of positive psychology might offer relevant and useful models for understanding the desistance process.   I argue that by combining the insights from desistance and positive mental health, we can achieve a fuller understanding of the process of desistance among formerly incarcerated women.

Recidivism

Formerly incarcerated women face extremely strong forces pushing them back into offending once they are released. Rates of female incarceration have grown more than 700 percent since 1977 (Greene and Pranis 2004) and roughly two-thirds of women reoffend in the first three years following their release from prison (Deschenes et al. 2007).   A number of factors contribute to the likelihood of women's offending and recidivism including lack of education, access to employment opportunities, substance abuse, and histories of abuse (Deschenes et al. 2007; Gadd and Farrall 2004; Henriques et

al. 2001; Richie 2001). Understanding these forces and how they are related to re-offending provide an important context for my study of how some women beat these odds and desist from crime. According to the criminology literature, the tremendous pressures to re-offend stems from at least three key sources: (1) conditions and predispositions that led to original offending; (2) experiences within prison and; (3) conditions women encounter upon release. I will discuss each of these key sources in turn.

Causes of Crime

The growing problem of female incarceration is attracting considerable attention to the complexities of female offending (Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2003). Although fewer women are incarcerated and for less serious crimes than men, the startling increase in the number of incarcerated women "far outpaced male growth in the past quarter-century" (Greene and Pranis 2004; Kruttscnhitt and Gartner 2003). The dramatic increase in rates of female incarceration has been explained by both structural/institutional forces, such as the "War on Drugs," as well as gender-specific causes that help to explain female crime (Deschenes, Owen, and Crow 2007).

Researchers have found a number of conditions facing women that improve the likelihood that they will offend and become incarcerated. Mainstream criminologists have been criticized for overlooking and sometimes missing the importance of gender in understanding criminal offending (Daly and Maher 1998). Feminist theories of crime are especially useful for understanding what causes female crime, because these theories emphasize how gender, class and race are implicated in the processes that lead to offending.

Merton's (1968) theory of deviance presupposes that society provides a script for success though does not guarantee that all citizens have equal access to resources and modes for achieving success. The resulting dissonance can be understood as "anomie" where the individual is unable to achieve success through conventional methods and must therefore turn to deviant modes in order to accomplish such a goal (Merton 1968). Feminist criminologists have expanded upon Merton's (1968) theory when explaining female crime, particularly in terms of understanding the relationship between motherhood and offending (Moe and Ferraro 2006). According to Moe and Ferraro (2006), "a substantial line of research has connected the most common crimes for women to various survival mechanisms employed under coercion, battery, poverty, and substance abuse" (137) and "in most cases, motherhood…provided the motivation for women's economically based offenses" (147). Moe and Ferraro (2006) explain that many pathways to female criminality are in large part forged by socio-economic disadvantage faced by mothers with few conventional alternatives for meeting basic needs. Moe and Ferraro (2006) along with Chesney-Lind (1997), Belknap (2001), Richie (1996) and others have made a strong case that sociocultural constraints affect women and mothers in ways that limit their conventional opportunities to sustain themselves and their families, and as a result, increase their likelihood of offending.

The relation between gender and offending must be understood in terms of the "intersection" of gender, race, and class. The majority of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women face overwhelming economic disadvantage. Richie (1996) uses the term 'gender entrapment' to describe "how gender, race/ethnicity, and violence can intersect to create a subtle, yet profoundly effective system of organizing women's

behavior into patterns that leave women vulnerable to private and public subordination, to violence in their intimate relationships and, in turn, to participation in illegal activities" (4). Due to their subordinate status, women are more likely to be victimized as children and as adults, yet it is especially difficult for them to escape from those circumstances when they are dependent on their more powerful abusers for economic support (Richie 1996). When abused girls run away from home, they must contend with life on the streets which increases the likelihood that they will become involved with drugs and other illegal modes of making a living (Richie 1996).

In addition to supporting drug habits, explanations as to why women commit minor property crimes have focused on their role as primary caretakers who generate income through crime in order to provide for their families (Ferraro and Moe 2003). Nearly 80% of incarcerated women are mothers, two-thirds of which have at least 2 children under the age of 18 (Morash and Schram 2002). Of these mothers, most were considered the sole or primary economic provider for their children prior to arrest, but were living below the poverty line (Young and Reviere 2006). Later in the chapter, I will summarize the research on the role of motherhood in the desistance process.

White women and women of color who offend are more likely to come from low-income areas and face discrimination both in terms of individual racism and institutional inequalities, which make it increasingly difficult to build a conventional life free of crime (Richie 2001). For example, formerly incarcerated women are likely to have little education, limited employment experience, and a lack of employable skills, which makes it especially challenging for them to obtain employment, let alone jobs that provide a livable wage (Alexander 2010; Maruna 2001; Petersilia 2003; Richie 2001).

Furthermore, access to gainful employment becomes all the more challenging when women have a criminal record (Alexander 2010). Without access to legitimate modes of survival, it follows that women are left with little choice but to offend.

Economic deprivation also leads to experiences and behaviors that are linked with offending (i.e. trauma; drug addiction; family instability, etc.). Poor women are more likely than women from high socioeconomic backgrounds to have histories of emotional, sexual, psychological and physical abuse dating back to their childhoods and continuing into adulthood (Giordano 2010; Marcus-Mendoza and Wright 2003; Morash and Schram 2002; Richie 2001; Maruna 2001). Of course, abuse and trauma alone do not cause women to offend and reoffend; however, in the absence of accessible treatment options, some women cope with the low self-esteem, shame, stigma, and distress caused by traumas in ways that place them at greater risk for offending (Giordano 2010; Rumgay, 2004; Leibrich 1996; Richie 1996; Sommers, Baskin and Fagan 1994). For example, roughly half of the women in prison have run away from home at an early age to escape abuse, but find that there are few legitimate ways to survive once they are living on the streets (Casey and Wiatrowski 1996). In situations where girls are not old enough to obtain employment, they are excluded from the possibility of a legitimate job. Abused girls who have run away from home cannot always seek help from shelters or other social services that help homeless populations because they could be identified, arrested for running away, and/or forced to return to their abusive environment. Exclusion from legitimate opportunities and the fear of being forced back into abusive homes leaves them with few options but to remain isolated from potential services and embedded in street culture where drugs, prostitution, robbery and other crimes are altogether common.

Women with histories of abuse are more likely to form relationships with abusive others, and some explanations of women's offending have linked their crimes to their experience of abusive relationships or relationships with offending others. In terms of violent crimes, much of the literature explaining female violence has associated violent behavior with preceding histories of abuse so common among female prisoners (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004, 151; Broidy and Agnew 2004:15). According to Chesney-Lind and Pasko (2004), "one out of three women in U.S. prisons [was] there for a violent crime," of which "over 93% of female homicide offenders killed an intimate, family member, or acquaintance" (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004:151). Casey and Wiatrowski (1996) estimate roughly half of the women convicted of homicide killed an abusive other (226). According to Giordano (2010), women who have been victims of abuse can develop an "anger identity" in which they continue to perpetuate the violence that affected them (75; see also Giordano et al. 2007; Agnew 1992). Other women may become involved with crime as a result of their relationship to a partner or spouse who is already an established offender (Byrne and Trew 2008).

The high prevalence of traumatic experiences, low socioeconomic status, and the likelihood that women were homeless at one point in their lives also helps to explain high instances of untreated mental and physical illness, as well as substance abuse. Disorders that are most commonly represented among this population include posttraumatic stress disorder, major depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia (Freudenberg 2002). In addition, roughly one third of the women in prison have attempted suicide at one time (Casey and Wiatrowski 1996:227). Despite the high incidence of mental illness among women in prison, only two fifths of women received mental health treatment in prison

(Freudenberg 2002). This is especially important because untreated mental illness upon release from prison is a strong predictor of post-incarceration recidivism (Bates 2004). Formerly incarcerated women also experience disproportionately higher rates of physical ailments, such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, syphilis, and hepatitis C, even when compared to women of comparable socioeconomic backgrounds (Young and Reviere 2006; see also Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2003; Freudenberg 2002). It should be clear then that formerly incarcerated women are faced with the challenges of psychological and physical conditions that can make desisting from crime and building a conventional life especially challenging.

Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women are likely to struggle with substance addiction, including illegal drugs and alcohol. Women with substance abuse problems have the added challenge of battling addiction in order to desist from crime (i.e. the crime of using illegal drugs and/or the crimes they commit in order to supply their habit). According to Godsoe (1998), "the majority of women arrested for all crimes test positive for drugs," which may reflect attempts to cope with prior abuse and/or efforts to self-medicate untreated mental illness in the absence of proper healthcare and/or prescriptions (5; see also Petersilia 2003). Women are more likely to be incarcerated for "non-violent and minor property crimes such as prostitution, larceny, shoplifting, check or credit card fraud, forgery/counterfeiting, and drug possession," which more often than not can be tied to addictions (Ferraro and Moe 2003:12).

Literature involving female crime has been dominated by a focus on research relating to drug offenses in part because recent increases in rates of women's imprisonment can be explained largely by an increase in incarcerations for drug law

violations (Gilbert 1999). Davies and Cook (1999) insist the increased rates of female incarceration are "no doubt partly due to the nexus between property crime and illicit drug use," where women commit crimes to support their drug habits (67; see also Giordano 2010; Richie 2001). For the most part, with respect to women imprisoned for robbery, "not only did these women report that they were under the influence of drugs at the time of the robbery," but they were also likely to report "that they committed the offense 'to get money for drugs'" (Chesney-Lind and Pasko 2004:152). For women with substance abuse problems, drug rehabilitation is crucial to the desistance process (Giordano 2010; Uggen and Thompson 2003).

Despite the high rates of substance abuse among women who offend, the current justice system does not require mandatory enrollment in a drug rehabilitation program nor does it provide all incarcerated people with access to such treatment; as a result, most drug addictions typically go untreated while women are in prison. Studies have shown that "incarceration does not reduce recidivism among drug offenders; only treatment does that" (Godsoe 1998:6). Yet, "it is estimated that no more than 10% of drug-abusing women are offered drug treatment in jail or prison" and "when help was offered it usually involved limited services such as 12-step groups" (Freudenberg 2002:1896). Access to drug rehabilitation is essential given that as many as "90% of incarcerated drug offenders will likely return to drugs and crime within three years if they do not receive substance abuse treatment" (Godsoe 1998:6). For women with substance abuse problems, the absence of rehabilitation programs coupled with the denial of public assistance "when they need it most…virtually compels them to return to drugs for lack of any other options" (Godsoe 1998:6). Building a conventional life with untreated addiction, mental

illness, physical ailments, and past traumas can be an extremely challenging and daunting task. According to Rumgay (2004), female crime is inseparable from the "strategies which women invoke to negotiate and survive the kinds of material deprivation, social exclusion and psychological vulnerability that dominates" their lives (406).

While crime exists within all classes and races, African American women are disproportionately represented among incarcerated women (Greenfeld and Snell 1999). African American women comprise half of all women imprisoned and represent the fastest growing of any population of prisoners (Godsoe 1998:4). Despite these alarming statistics, Bush-Baskette (2004) claims that African American women are still only marginally represented in feminist criminological literature. She criticizes much of the research, calling it "piecemeal and incomplete" due to "the lack of data sources that provide information with regard to the intersection of race and gender throughout the criminal justice process" (185; see also Mann 1995). While there is a need for more research on the mass incarceration of African American women, there have been some notable contributions within the modest body of literature on this population.

A number of criminologists argue that racial discrimination both in terms of the ways it shapes women's lives and the practices of the criminal justice system can help explain the vast numbers of incarcerated African American women (Reiman 1979; Chesney-Lind 1996; Bradley and Davino 2002; Bush-Baskette 2004). Certain of these perspectives focus on the individual factors related to the social experiences of African American women that generally, as a result of their race, class and gender, anchor these women in poverty and disadvantage (Henriques and Manatu-Rupert 2001). Furthermore, because they are more likely to be living in poverty than Whites, African American

women are at higher risk for victimization and have fewer accessible resources to cope with the effects of their victimization, which places them at greater risk for involvement with the justice system (Arnold 1999). Thus, my study of formerly incarcerated women pays attention to race – both in the sample design and the analysis.

While the literature on recidivism provides strong insights into repeat offending and some of the obstacles to successful reentry, it does not directly address how and why certain women manage to overcome these obstacles and have positive adjustments both during and after their incarceration. For the most part, research on incarcerated women has been engrossed with the interplay of victimization and deprivation at the expense of recognizing women's agency and strategies for navigating such debilitating circumstances (Marcus-Mendoza and Wright 2004). Feminist and desistance approaches are shifting the focus away from a lack model to a positive model, recognizing women's agency and the "complex ways in which women's identities and backgrounds shape how they negotiate power, resist depersonalization, and make sense of their time in prison" which can ultimately help them desist from crime (Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2003; Byrne and Trew 2008).

Incarceration

The difficulties of incarceration itself compound women's experience of disadvantage by adding the trauma of lost freedom, separation from children, limited access to treatment and potential abuses at the hands of prison guards and other inmates (Waterson 1996). The process of incarceration can be dehumanizing and have devastating effects on those imprisoned, including stifling women's feelings of self-worth and agency (Goffman 1961). Given that the majority of women in prison are mothers, separation

from their children can be an especially challenging aspect of incarceration (Waterson 1996). In part due to the remote location of most women's prisons, fewer than one in four women are able to maintain physical contact with their children and "like other mothers who are separated from their children, incarcerated mothers also suffer from 'filial deprivation,' which is characterized by remoteness, emptiness, helplessness, anger, guilt, fears of loss of attachment, and rejection" (Young and Reviere 2006:118).

Another challenging aspect of incarceration for women is the risk of sexual and physical abuse by both staff and fellow inmates. The potential for "abuse takes many forms, ranging from rape, sexual assault, criminal sexual contact, and mistreatment of prisoners impregnated by corrections staff to abusive, degrading language and privacy violations" (Morash and Schram 2002:138). Estimates of the prevalence of female prisoner abuse vary by institution; however in 1995, "the Department of Justice estimated 135,000 rapes of female inmates throughout the country" (Banks 2003:69). Female prisoners are vulnerable to attacks from violent inmates as well as from guards who have power over their access to food, visitations, and other privileges (Morash and Schram, 2002). Banks (2003) suggests that many instances of "abuse likely go unreported because of the women's fear of repercussions, or because there is a perception that correctional officers are more credible witnesses than a woman incarcerated for criminal conduct" (70). The challenges of incarceration can disempower women already in a vulnerable state, which poorly prepares her for the challenges of reentry.

Research with incarcerated women has shown that in some instances, incarceration can provide relief to women whose lives had been dominated by suffering (Henriques and Manatu-Rubpert 2001; Bradly and Davino 2002). Henriques and Manatu-Rupert

(2001) explain that, since their preprison environment was dominated by physical or sexual abuse and/or drug addiction, some women experience prison as a "safe haven" (11-12). While it is important to include a positive subjective experience of incarceration as a characteristic of positive adjustment to prison, this characteristic alone overlooks the experiences of incarcerated women for whom incarceration is traumatizing in comparison to their pre-prison environment. Not only that, even Henriques and Manatu-Rupert (2001) caution that for women with poor preprison environments, the experience of respite in prison may do little more than delay their return back to that environment (12). Still, while being incarcerated "may temporarily shield women from abusive relationships," Henriques and Manatu-Rupert (2001) warn that this security does not come without serious costs, including separation from their children and being unable to keep up with important responsibilities (11). Furthermore, prison environments promote "dependence and passivity" in women (Kruttschnitt and Gartner 2003:20). These qualities, though reinforced and rewarded in prison, may condition women to the point that they are unable to become self-sufficient upon release. In sum, incarceration can be a traumatizing experience for women, adding to the complexity of trauma and psychological aftermath that women must contend with upon release. Since most formerly incarcerated women often experience emotional, physical and psychological traumas as a result of their incarceration, they are a greater risk for reoffending after prison.

Reintegration

After women have been incarcerated once, their chances for recidivism increase tremendously. According to Richie (2001), roughly two thirds of the women in prison

have prior convictions and in most cases, whether the woman had been arrested in the past turned out to be the most significant factor in predicting whether or not she could return to prison (see also Greenfeld and Snell 1999). Having a criminal record comes with specific disadvantages and poses serious challenges to successful reintegration. In the United States, imprisonment as a form of legal punishment results in a host of consequences for an individual beyond the actual time of their sentence. These residual punishments can include exclusion from parental rights, jobs, voting rights, housing, public assistance, and welfare (Alexander 2010). Long after their sentences are served, formerly incarcerated women continue to be punished by the stigma of their criminal record and being denied access to various legitimate opportunities. According to O'Brien and Lee (2006), the most important concerns expressed by women leaving prison "include housing, creating ties with family and friends, finding a job or legitimate source of income, staying 'clean' (from substance use if applicable or mandated), desistance from illegal behavior, and meeting parole conditions" (263). Many of these concerns arise in part due to laws that "deny welfare payments, veterans benefits and food stamps to anyone in detention for more than 60 days," and as a result of the Work Opportunity and Personal Responsibility Act of 1996, which denies formerly incarcerated people "Medicaid, public housing, Section 8 vouchers, and related forms of assistance" (Wacquant 2001:106). Incarceration also renders state and federal prisoners ineligible for Pell Grants, a financial imperative for low-income persons in pursuit of higher education (Wacquant 2001).

There is also a lack of employment opportunities for formerly incarcerated women. That is, formerly incarcerated women already have dim employment prospects

due to their low levels of education and work experience. The denial of public aid exacerbated by the difficulty of attaining employment for formerly incarcerated women with both a criminal record and poor work history severely limits their potential for financial stability and jeopardizes their eligibility for having their parental rights reinstated (Godsoe 1998). Once they also have a criminal record, employers are even more reluctant to hire them. Research has shown that a criminal record severely impacts one's ability to find employment and even more so for African Americans (Alexander 2010; Pager 2003). Discrimination against individuals with a criminal record is not only legal, but is also a common screening practice for many employers.

Formerly incarcerated women are also likely to struggle with the effects of stigma and rejection within their communities and in society as a whole, which can impede their reintegration and increase their likelihood for reoffending (Giordano et al. 2002; Dodge and Pogrebin 2001; Braithewaite 1989). When taking into account the demographics of the majority of women in prison, many of these women will be faced with limited family and community support and few resources to not only desist from crime, but also to meet the challenges of life after prison.

Desistance

Much of the research on women who offend has focused on identifying what causes them to commit crimes initially and persist in offending over time, in spite of experiencing the consequences of incarceration which intends to deter such behavior. Within the last two decades, however, a branch of literature on female crime has emerged and expanded that focuses on explaining women's movement away from crime, or desistance, as a distinct area of study that identifies factors that both support and curtail

the desistance process.[2]   The desistance literature identifies the critical junctures along the way that provide offenders and ex-offenders with the resources to desist from crime once they are released.   As I described in the earlier part of this chapter, the majority of female offenders come from disadvantaged backgrounds: the majority are poor and working class; many are women of color; many are drug and alcohol-dependent and survivors of abuse.   Once they are released from prison, these risk factors for crime reassert themselves. Giordano et al. (2007) explain that "given the highly disadvantaged positions of many offenders," desistance can be a "daunting and potentially demoralizing challenge" (1637). Yet, some women manage to "desist" from a pattern of offending. In this next section, I review the literature on female desistance, with a focus on the ways in which cognitive transformations, social supports, individual resilience and access to resources help women desist from crime. I will also highlight aspects of the desistance literature that seem to resonate with research on positive mental health and make the case that the field of positive psychology offers relevant and useful models for understanding the desistance process.   In doing so, I will demonstrate the ways in which my study bridges gaps in both the desistance and positive psychology literatures by exploring how and why formerly incarcerated women's narratives and psychological well-being might relate to the desistance process.

---

[2] Desistance researchers have found that there are factors that seem to affect male and female desistance alike, as well as certain factors that are unique to women and men. For the purposes of this project, I will focus on what is known about female desistance. There is some debate about the extent to which theories of crime and desistance can be applied to both men and women equally, there is general agreement that while there may be points of overlap, women have a uniquely gendered experience that, along with their race and class, shapes the ways in which they experience the world, including their relationship to crime (Giordano et al. 2002; Sommers et al. 1994; Uggen and Kruttschnitt 1998; Maruna 1999; Broidy and Cauffman 2006; Hollin and Palmer 2006; Mazerolle 1998; Katz 2000).

Within the last decade, research on desistance "has transcended mere description (for example, who desists and when, how long do criminal careers last, etc.)" (Farrall and Maruna 2004:358-9) and evolved into an understanding of desistance as a process "consisting of interactions between human agency, salient life events, and historical context" (Laub and Sampson 2001:4). Because the process of desistance is very much tied to an individual's subjective experience, one particularly relevant approach to understanding desistance is to explore narrative accounts of life experiences. Maruna (1997) argues that "narrative studies offer a potent, systemic framework for studying the human change process from the perspective of the individual" (13). Applying this narrative thesis to criminal behavior is particularly useful because, as discussed above, often the *external* conditions that the majority ex-offenders face upon release are pushing them towards re-offending.

According to narrative theorist McAdams (1993), individuals make adjustments to their narrative stories over the course of their entire lives, reconstructing them when new events transpire (Maruna 1997:8). Applying this narrative perspective to desistance, Farrall (2005) claims that "when people try to stop offending . . . and succeed in doing so, they are not merely 'no longer offending,' but in some cases have gone through lengthy periods of rebuilding, remodeling, and remaking their own social identities" (372). Narrative research can offer insights into understanding how "the internal changes involved in desistance from crime are likely to be charted and understood on this narrative level" (8).

Research on female desistance has identified "social, cognitive, and emotional processes" that work together in helping women successfully desist (Giordano et al.

2007: 1627; see also Rumgay 2004; Maruna 2001). Research has shown that after a period of offending, desistance is often precipitated by a cognitive shift, transformation or turning point that involves a reshaping of the individual's identity that is in line with a conventional lifestyle and motivates them to stop offending (LeBel et al. 2008; Giordano et al. 2007; Farrall 2005; Rumgay 2004; Giordano et al. 2002; Maruna 2001; Laub and Sampson 2001). In their theory of desistance, Giordano et al. (2002) argue that desisters undergo a cognitive transformation in which they create a "replacement self" in place of their marginalized and stigmatized criminal identity. Giordano et al. (2002) emphasize the role of women's choice, power and agency in initiating cognitive transformation and that there are various "hooks for change" that can trigger the desistance process. For example, they find that religion can serve as one such "hook" by providing women with a way of life that is "fundamentally incompatible with continued deviation" (Giordano et al. 2002:1000-1).

Cognitive transformations are also particularly important when considering the role of children in the desistance process. Giordano et al. (2002) found that women often included references to their children in their narratives, but there was "considerable variability" in the significance that women attached to their children in terms of explaining why they stopped offending (1039). What appeared to be most salient was whether or not women experienced cognitive transformations that made offending inherently incompatible with their newfound sense of self (Giordano et al. 2002). For example, some women who commit crimes in order to provide for their children may not necessarily see their role as a "good mother" as being incompatible with criminal persistence. With that said, Giordano et al. (2002) concluded that "exposure to a new

condition (in this case the presence of children), or even a high level of attachment to one's children, does not on its own constitute a powerful impetus for desistance without some accompanying cognitive changes" (1043). This argument seems to be further supported by the fact that the great majority of incarcerated women were mothers at the time that they offended, which implies that presence of children was not enough on its own to prevent mothers from committing the offense that lead to their incarceration (Richie 1996; Watterson 1996). Still, for some women, the birth of a child or a renewed sense of commitment to their role as a parent can serve as powerful motivation for change (Giordano et al. 2002; McMahon 1995).

Giordano et al (2002) build upon the work of Maruna, a scholar at the forefront of studies on desistance who researched life narratives of desisting and persisting offenders and finds that desisters' narratives were more likely to reflect "making good," or what he defines as the ability "to find reason and purpose in the bleakest of life histories" (2001:9-10). Maruna's (2001) theory of desistance also focuses on the importance of a redemptive, prosocial narrative identity—its adoption, maintenance and ultimate acceptance by others. What is interesting about Maruna is that he doesn't just focus on changing conditions (such as participating in a re-entry program or getting a job), but on the stories people tell themselves about those conditions. In analyzing the life histories of formerly incarcerated men and women, Maruna (2001) employs McAdams' coding techniques in search of contamination sequences, in which "a decidedly good event 'turns sour'" and redemption sequence, in which "the opposite occurs, 'something good' emerges out of otherwise negative circumstances" and finds that desisters were much more likely to frame events in their lives using redemptive sequences (2001:174). At the

same time, his findings indicate that persisters were much more likely to frame the events of their lives using contamination sequences (Maruna 2001).

Maruna's research shows that the ways in which desisters and persisters tell their stories is directly connected to their identity transformations (2001). Maruna (2001) argues that the process of adopting and enacting a prosocial identity is the major vehicle through which desistance is attempted and maintained over time. A redemptive, prosocial narrative identity allows the desister to redefine their shameful pasts as well as reconstruct who they are and how they would like to behave moving forward (Maruna 2001). Farrall (2005) explains that "when people try to stop offending . . . and succeed in doing so, they are not merely 'no longer offending,' but in some cases have gone through lengthy periods of rebuilding, remodeling, and remaking their own social identities" (372). Cognitive and identity transformations can lead to increased agency and improved coping strategies for dealing with shame as well as for overcoming numerous obstacles to desistance (Giordano et al. 2002; Giordano et al. 2007; Rumgay 2004; Maruna 2001).[3]

Desistance researchers have found that desisters' self-narratives were more likely than those of persisters to include elements that suggested a more positive outlook and orientation to life (Maruna 2001; Farrall 2005; Rumgay 2004). For example, compared to persisters, Maruna (2001) found that the narratives of desisters were more likely to

---

[3] My findings fit well with Rumgay's (2004) and Giordano et al. (2002) theories of female desistance, so I reference their work quite frequently when I interpret the interview data. I did not design my study using either of these theories as a framework; I discovered them after collecting my data and looking for theoretical frameworks beyond Maruna to assist me in interpreting the data. Rumgay's (2004) theory not only highlights the importance of narrative scripts and identity for the desistance process, but she also draws on the literature on resilience which is why her theory is the most appropriate framework for understanding the skills and strategies that support desistance. Giordano et al. (2002) focuses on the cognitive transformations that precipitate and help to facilitate desistance.

incorporate an optimistic outlook; self-efficacy; a silver lining approach, in which the individual describes something good as arising out of a bad experience; idealistic passion; sense of agency; generative concern, or concern for the next generation; commitment to giving back and leaving a positive legacy; and a sense of purpose and meaning in life. These findings directly overlap with what positive psychologists understand as symptoms of or correlates with positive mental health such as gratitude, purpose or meaning in life, and turning points (Emmons 2003; Peterson and Chang 2003; Wethington 2003; Grossbaum and Bates 2002; Seligman 1998). These positive factors overlap with symptoms of positive well-being, teased out of the narratives of desisting individuals, shed light on the processes behind their positive self-transformations and movement away from crime (Maruna 2001).

When explaining why desisters tell redemptive narratives, Maruna (2001) explains that these newfound identities function to minimize and redeem shameful experiences, provide purpose in life, and often create opportunities for giving back to future generations—typically in the form of using one's story to help steer young offenders away from a life of crime. According to Maruna (2001), the positive well-being literature provides some possible explanations as to how and why desisters develop and perpetuate redemptive narratives. For example, Maruna (2001) likens the ways in which desisters make sense of their past crimes to the ways trauma survivors rationalize and redeem the traumas they've experienced. Maruna (2001) goes on to say that finding some redemptive quality in an otherwise painful or shameful experience can help lessen the "psychological distress" associated with the memory (106). Briefly, when quoting Bandura (1989), Maruna (2001) seems to suggest that desisters' optimistic outlooks,

personal efficacy, and ability to reconfigure negative experiences into positive ones, closely resembles the characteristics of those who exhibit positive well-being and/or accomplish great feats (105). Although Maruna (2001) stops short of making a direct link between desistance and positive well-being, he implies that the desisters in his study exhibited qualities that closely parallel positive well-being symptoms. In this way, Maruna (2001) creates a blueprint for further exploration of a possible connection between desistance and positive well-being. Maruna's (2001) work is limited insofar as his sample was predominantly male and he did not directly measure well-being. I find Maruna's (2001) analysis compelling and will extend his work by employing a female sample and exploring the relationship between desistance and well-being.

I designed my study to parallel Maruna's work. That is, I recorded life history narratives from formerly incarcerated women who were "desisters" and "persisters," analyzed these narratives for redemption and contamination sequences, and incorporated a measure of well-being into my study (discussed below). As I began to analyze the data, I found that I needed theoretical frameworks beyond Maruna to assist me in the interpretation of the interviews. I found that my findings fit well with Rumgay's (2004) and Giordano et al. (2002) theories of female desistance. Rumgay (2004) integrates many theoretical perspectives, including that of Maruna, into her theory of female desistance. Though she does not herself interview formerly incarcerated women, Rumgay's theory builds on the findings of other researchers by making important connections about the patterns found by other scholars. In her theory of female desistance, Rumgay (2004) not only highlights the importance of narrative scripts and identity for the desistance process, but she also draws on the literature on resilience

which is why her theory is the most appropriate framework for understanding the skills and strategies that support desistance (2004). Giordano et al. (2002) interviewed 127 delinquent girls and boys in 1982 and conducted follow-up interviews with most of them 13 years later. Giordano et al. (2002) found that cognitive transformations often precipitated and helped to facilitate female desistance. I integrate their theories into my data analysis chapters and discuss their work in Chapters 4-6 in reference to the interview data.

One limitation of qualitative research on desistance to date is that while it has uncovered some aspects of well-being in desisters' narratives, it has not directly measured positive mental health. For example, Maruna (2001) found that, compared to persisting offenders, desisting ex-offenders were "more consistently optimistic in their outlooks" and told more redemptive narratives, but Maruna was unable to discern dessiters' levels of mental health[4]. What is unclear about this finding is whether or not, compared with persisting offenders, desisting ex-offenders were measurably more mentally healthy or if their positive outlook was a reflection of something else altogether. For instance, do redemptive narratives and positive outlooks function as a way to harmonize their "checkered pasts" with "their new, reformed identities" (6) or do participants craft narratives with redemptive themes as a strategy for gaining acceptance

---

4 Maruna's (2001) desisters also exhibited more positive psychological and social subjective orientations than those of persisting participants. Compared to the persisting sample, narratives of desisters were more likely to incorporate an optimistic outlook; greater indications of self-efficacy; a silver lining approach, in which the individual describes something good as arising out of a bad experience; sense of agency; generative concern, or concern for the next generation; sense of purpose and meaning in life; and many more redemptive sequences than contamination sequences (Maruna, 2001). These positive factors, teased out of the narratives of desisting individuals, shed light on the processes behind their positive self-transformations and movement away from crime.

from a society that can be mistrusting of people with a criminal record? Do individuals who are mentally healthy tend to tell redemptive stories because they are experiencing positive well-being at the time of the interview? These questions are important when trying to unpack why desisters tended to have more redemptive sequences in their narratives and the role these sequences play in the desistance process. Recent studies in the field of positive psychology could offer some answers to these questions. Studies in positive psychology on narrative sequences have shown a strong correlation between high frequency of redemptive sequences and positive well-being[5] when using the exact same life history format as Maruna (McAdams et al. 2001; Bauer et al. 2008; McAdams 2006; Singer 2004; Grossbaum and Bates 2002). For example, Grossbaum and Bates (2002) found that, among mid-life adults (two-thirds of whom were women), individuals with the greatest life satisfaction and levels of well-being also told narratives with more redemptive sequences. In short, they found that "narrative themes can reflect well-being" (Grossbaum and Bates 2002:121). In an effort to understand these patterns in desisters and persisters narratives, I introduce positive well-being as a paradigm that is measurable, able to address the "subjective aspects of human life (emotions, thoughts, motivations, and goals)" (Maruna 2001:8) and that has been shown to have a strong empirical relationship to narrative sequences (McAdams et al. 2001).

Positive Mental Health

The criminology and desistance literatures have documented what leads many women to commit crimes and the various ways in which women are able to desist from crime after incarceration. What this body of work has not done explicitly, however, is

---

5 McAdams and Bowman 2001 found high scores of generativity to be correlated with redemption narratives. See also McAdams 2006 for more on relationship between generative concern and redemptive sequences.

examine the effects of well-being on crime and most importantly, desistance from crime. There is reason to believe that positive well-being can have a profound impact on an individual's ability to desist from crime. For example, Maruna (2001), Farrall (2005), and Rumgay (2004) have demonstrated that desisters seem to exhibit symptoms of or characteristics that correlate with positive well-being such as having meaning in life, feeling optimistic, possessing generative concern, and experiencing "turning points." Furthermore, Maruna (2001) argues that desisters were more likely than persisters to tell redemptive narratives about their lives, using positive re-framing of negative events. These findings seem to suggest that positive well-being, in a variety of forms, can contribute greatly to the desistance process; however, none of the aforementioned studies directly measured positive mental health. One of the main purposes of my study is to bridge the gap between the desistance literature in the field of criminology with positive psychology. In putting these two (previously mutually exclusive) fields in conversation, we can re-frame how we understand desistance to incorporate positive mental health and well-being and in doing so, illuminate new ways of understanding desistance and offer fresh guidance on the kinds of tools we need to be providing formerly incarcerated women with in order for them to desist and succeed in building a conventional life after prison.

The field of positive psychology, which seeks to understand the symptoms and experience of positive mental health, emerged out of the field of traditional psychology, which tends to focus more on the symptoms and psychoses that characterize mental illness (Keyes and Haidt 2003). Positive psychology researchers argue that mental health is more than the absence of mental illness, rather it should be understood as a positive

state, with positive symptomology and experiences that can be understood as "the good life" (Keyes and Haidt 2003). In this way, positive psychology shares in common with the desistance literature a focus on understanding and promoting desirable, successful and positive outcomes. In addition, positive psychology researchers have focused on issues that overlap closely with the characteristics, experiences and needs of formerly incarcerated women in general and desisters in particular. However, the positive psychology literature has not studied the population of formerly incarcerated women nor have they looked at the relationship between desistance and positive mental health. My study seeks to fill this gap by exploring possible connections between desistance and positive mental among formerly incarcerated women.

In addition to the stated connections between positive psychology and desistance research, there exists many benefits to focusing on formerly incarcerated women's levels of well-being. Research has shown that there are measurable benefits of positive mental health that can drastically improve people's lives (Keyes 2004; 2005; 2007). Positive well-being is optimal not only because it leads to a fuller, more positive experience of life but also in terms of its role in reducing the impact of life's difficulties, by acting as a buffer against potentially damaging situations (Keyes 2004; 2005; 2007). According to Keyes (2007), when comparing adults with varying levels of mental health, "adults who were diagnosed as completely mentally healthy functioned superior to all others in terms of the fewest workdays missed, fewest half-day or less cutbacks of work, lowest level of health limitations of activities of daily living, the fewest chronic physical diseases and conditions, the lowest health care utilization, and the highest levels of psychosocial functioning" (100). In addition, Keyes (2007) found that flourishing adults "reported the

lowest level of perceived helplessness (e.g., low perceived control in life), the highest level of functional goals (e.g., knowing what they want from life), the highest level of self-reported resilience (e.g., learning from adversities), and the highest level of intimacy (e.g., feeling very close with family and friends)" (100). The benefits associated with high levels of positive well-being are advantageous for all people, but can be especially salient for formerly incarcerated women who face enormous challenges as they attempt to rebuild their lives with a criminal record. Formerly incarcerated women, with few tangible or monetary resources, can experience enormous advantage if they were to exhibit positive mental health and experience the many benefits associated with it.

The desistance literature suggests that symptoms of positive mental health are present among desisters, but has not explicitly measured or explored well-being as an important factor in female desistance. (When referring to positive well-being or positive mental health, I am referencing Keyes' (2003) definition of subjective well-being "as a state in which an individual feels positive emotion toward life and is functioning well psychologically and socially" (294).) The positive psychology literature has looked at "survivor" populations (who share much in common with formerly incarcerated women) in order to understand how they are able to overcome trauma and adversity. For example, Januff-Bulman (2004) explains that trauma survivors tend to fare better when they are able to transform their negative experiences into something meaningful. In addition, Valentine and Feinauer (1993) find that well-adjusted survivors of sexual abuse exhibited an "ability to find emotional support" from safe and positive people which they described as an important resilience factor (218).

Some research has even shown that there can be potential benefits associated with facing a lifetime of challenges. McAdams and Bowman (2001) explain that "survivors of illness and trauma often report increased self-reliance and broader self-understanding, enhanced self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness in relationships, and a changed philosophy of life" (26; see also Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1995). Other important research on women and African Americans' subjective well-being shows that despite discrimination, economic hardship and social disadvantages, Black women actually have better mental health than White women (Keyes 2009). Scholars argue that the African American community may provide social and psychological resources for individuals to build resilience after repeated exposure to adversity (Cobbs and Turnock 2003; Keyes 2009; Ryff et al. 2003). Unfortunately, this research is based on samples with unspecified offending histories, which makes it unclear as to whether or not these findings would hold true for formerly incarcerated Black women compared to formerly incarcerated White women and whether or not these levels relate to offending behavior in significant ways. Given that nearly all formerly incarcerated women have experienced adversity, abuse and/or trauma in their lives, it makes sense to understand them as survivors of abuse and as such, a relevant—though previously unaddressed—population to the positive psychology literature.

In addition to the benefits of mental health in terms of helping people overcome trauma, positive mental health can also equip people with the tools necessary for meeting everyday challenges and improving quality of life. While some might argue that the situation facing women upon release from prison is so fraught with challenges that efforts to help women achieve happiness is not exactly a priority, I would argue that positive

well-being isn't simply about making people feel good. High levels of well-being can benefit anyone, but formerly incarcerated women, in particular, stand to benefit from the positive symptoms of mental health because they will undoubtedly encounter difficulties during and after their incarceration. What is most important about positive well-being for formerly incarcerated women is that it can equip them with mental tools to manage life's stressors and setbacks in resilient and effective ways. Ryff and Singer (2003) claim that positive well-being allows people to "flourish under fire" when most people are unable to manage such stress. This phenomenon can be explained, in part, because aspects of well-being such as "optimism and hope, spirituality and religiousness, extraversion, and the appraisal and coping processes" play a critical role in mediating challenges in life (Ryff and Singer 2003:25). Higher levels of subjective well-being have also been "linked with higher personal and social 'goods'" that include improved employment performance, better cognitive and physiological functioning, as well as "increased levels of social capital such as civic responsibility, generativity, community involvement and volunteering" (Keyes 2006:6).

Given the challenges that formerly incarcerated women face such as low employable skills, abusive relationships, and addiction (outlined in the beginning of the chapter), the employment and social benefits of high levels of well-being can be especially important in terms of reintegration post-incarceration and for restoring community relationships particularly in the aftermath of victimizing crimes. Positive psychology offers a framework for understanding the strategies individuals employ to successfully navigate life's challenges as well as a standard for understanding successful outcomes among women who have been incarcerated—namely that promoting mental

health is worthwhile.   Though researchers have found that desisters exercise some of these same strategies (e.g. religiousness, optimism, etc.) they tend to be analyzed in isolation outside of the umbrella of overall well-being and as a result, do not offer a full picture of the ways in which mental health as a whole may relate to desistance.

In Keyes' (2003) model of mental health, purpose in life is an important component of psychological functioning and very much a symptom of flourishing in life (299). According to the positive psychology literature, meaning and purpose in life is an essential to one's experience of feeling fulfilled and satisfied with life (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2003:94-95). McAdams and Bowman (2001) explain that adjusting to any particular situation is as much about the event as the individual's interpretation of said event (28). The ways in which individuals find and make meaning of events in and regarding their lives as a whole can both aid in one's ability to cope with past events as well as contribute to one's ability to maintain an identity into the future.   Similar cognitive processes have also been shown to strongly influence desistance (Sommers et al. 1994:128; see also Sutherland 1937; Irwin 1970; Shover 1985). For example, LeBel and colleagues (2008) found individual meaning making systems can have positive or negative impacts on the ways people experience events, where "positive 'mind over matter' helps the individual to triumph over problems and make the best of situations, while a negative frame of mind leads to drift and defeatism in response to the same events" (155). Giordano et al. (2007) also found that "human striving for self-realization and a sense of worth or purpose" plays a significant role in the desistance process (1613; see also McAdams et al. 1997).

In the positive psychology literature, one way that individuals make meaning in their lives is by focusing on the positive elements in negative experiences which is referred to as "benefit-finding" or positive reframing (McAdams & Bowman 2001:26; see also Tedeschi & Calhoun 1995). By providing the individual with a redemptive script to understand disruption of one's sense of self or place in the world, benefit-finding can lead to "better psychosocial adaptation and mental health overall" (McAdams & Bowman 2001:26). The ability to derive positive meaning or motivation from negative experiences can lead to successful coping and positive psychological growth (Wethington 2003: 51).

Psychologists have found that positive reframing can help mediate the challenges associated with painful situations, which is something that desistance scholars have also found. According to McAdams (2006) the process of positive reframing is significant because it represents the narrator's ability to transform their negative experiences into positive stories and identities, which ultimately contribute to how they view themselves and behave in the world (89). Reframing hardships as redemptive allows narrators to find meaning in their most difficult experiences which was something Maruna (2001) found to be a common theme in desisters' narratives when he used McAdams' life history narrative questionnaire. The mental health symptom of meaning in life has been shown to help survivors of abuse overcome their traumas and lead successful lives as well as assist formerly incarcerated people with desistance (LeBel et al. 2008; Giordano et al. 2007; Maruna et al. 2006; Valentine & Feinauer 1993). Given this parallel regarding a positive mental health symptom supporting success in both literatures, there is reason to

believe that other possible connections may exist between mental health as a whole and desistance.

Another psychological process that has been shown to relate both to subjective well-being and desistance is the experience of turning points, or pivotal moments that result in major shifts in the ways that individuals understand themselves and their life stories (Sommers et al. 1994:146; Wethington 2003). In positive psychology, turning points represent significant shifts in people's lives that can be positive or negative, but *psychological* turning points depend on the individual's interpretation of an event or situation and the impact this cognitive evaluation has on their lives (Wethington 2003:39). Researchers often look to the ways individuals understand and narrate turning points that involve a stressful or negative event, to understand how and why they are able to derive a positive meaning or benefit from the experience (Wethington 2003:46). In the desistance literature, turning points have been found to mark pivotal shifts in the direction toward and away from offending (Maruna 2001; Farrall 2005; Rumgay 2004). Understanding turning points is crucial to the study of desistance as reports of such transformations are often the impetus for the development of pro-social orientations and the process of desistance (Byrne & Trew 2008; Sommers et al. 1994; McIvor et al. 2004). For example, Byrne and Trew (2008) found that turning points were especially important in women's entry into crime as well their pathway away from crime (Byrne & Trew 2008)[6]. Laub and Sampson (2003) claim that turning points often precipitate the transition from offending to desistance and "serve as the catalyst for sustaining long-term behavioral change" (149). Desistance research can benefit from the deeper analysis of turning points found in the positive psychological literature.

---

[6] Wethington (2003) found that women tend to narrate more turning points than men.

Positive psychology provides a useful framework for understanding the population of formerly incarcerated women because of its relevance to the population and compatibility with some of the elements associated with desistance. Positive mental health is not only important in terms of promoting quality of life among formerly incarcerated women, but also because higher levels of positive mental health have been shown to act as a buffer for challenging experiences and symptoms of mental health can also assist abuse victims with overcoming trauma (Valentine & Feinauer 1993). I argue that positive psychology is an appropriate and complementary literature to the desistance literature because it can offer insight into the ways in which formerly incarcerated women can both mediate the barriers to desistance and foster those factors that promote desistance. For these reasons, my study measures formerly incarcerated women's mental health and explores the potential relationship between well-being and the desistance process.

At the forefront of the positive psychology literature, Keyes' (2002) concept of mental health offers a comprehensive, multidimensional framework for understanding the symptoms that comprise well-being (see also Keyes 2003). According to Keyes' (2002) model, the highest level of mental health is called *flourishing*, average levels of mental health is referred to as *moderately mentally healthy*, and low levels of mental health is called *languishing*. Individuals fall along this mental health continuum based on the degree to which they are exhibiting mental health symptoms that are grouped according to three dimensions—emotional, psychological and social well-being[7] (Keyes 2002; 2003). The dimension of emotional well-being encompasses those symptoms, such as

---

[7] For a detailed explanation of each symptom of well-being, please see Table 2 in Chapter 3 of my dissertation.

positive affect, happiness, and life satisfaction, which collectively represent one's "positive feelings about life" (Keyes 2002; 209). In addition to feeling good about one's life, mental health also involves functioning positively both psychologically and socially (Keyes 2002; 2003). Psychological well-being includes the symptoms of self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others (Keyes 2002; 2003). Together, these symptoms of psychological well-being encompass one's ability to "like all parts of themselves, have warm trusting relationships, see themselves developing into better people, have a direction in life, are able to shape their world to satisfy their needs, and have a degree of self-determination" (Keyes 2002; 209).

In addition to emotional and psychological well-being, optimal mental health requires that the individual be functioning well socially along symptoms such as social coherence, social actualization, social integration, social acceptance, and social contribution (Keyes 2002). Individuals experience social well-being "when they view social life as meaningful and understandable, when they see society as possessing potential for growth, when they feel they belong to their communities, are able to accept all parts of society, and when they see their lives as contributing to society" (Keyes 2003:300). All of the symptoms within the three dimensions of well-being are measurable through the Mental Health Continuum (MHC) survey instrument (available in both short and long forms) (Keyes 2008). To date, I have found no research that applies Keyes' theory of mental health or his measure to the population of formerly incarcerated women. I am expanding the literature by using Keyes (2002) multidimensional model in my analysis of formerly incarcerated women's life narratives and by using Keyes' (2008)

MHC-Short Form to measure mental health among formerly incarcerated women. Employing both of these methods allows me to compare the narrative experience of mental health with well-being scores. In addition, I am capturing a fuller picture of the presence or absence of mental health symptoms and overall well-being among desisters and persisters.

Although the literatures in positive psychology and desistance identify what seem to be similar or overlapping processes and constructs, they employ distinct methodologies to measure those processes and constructs. The field of positive psychology has developed and administered measures of positive mental health, compared the resulting scores with respondents' narrative analyses, and found significant patterns linking well-being and narrative sequences. Desistance researchers have conducted similar narrative analyses and identified some symptoms of positive mental health[8], yet have not directly measured desisters' mental health nor have they explored in great detail how mental health informs the desistance process. I am utilizing both methods—narrative analysis and quantitative measures of well-being—in my own study, and am therefore able to compare the information that I gather from life history narratives with well-being scores.

Summary

The experience and demographics of women who offend involve an intricate web of disadvantage stemming from experiences before, during and after incarceration. In addition to a lack of economic resources, incarcerated women often (1) have often experienced personal trauma and difficulties that lead to high rates of untreated emotional and mental distress; (2) are likely to have substance abuse problems and; (3) often have

---

[8] Desistance scholars cite some symptoms of positive mental health such as (meaning in life, optimism, etc.) but do not extend their analyses to consider overall mental health as an important factor for interpreting these symptoms or understanding desistance.

few resources and few positive coping skills. That is, the odds are "stacked against them" in terms of achieving positive mental health, desisting from crime and being equipped to meet the challenges of building a conventional life with a criminal record. Despite all these challenges, however, some women manage to succeed. Theories and research on the process of desistance reveal many of the intricacies that contribute to women's movement away from crime—some of which seem to suggest that desisters may exhibit symptoms of positive well-being. What these researchers do not do, however, is directly measure well-being, and thus it remains to be seen if this is an important factor in the desistance process. Given the findings in both the desistance and positive psychology literatures, it appears that there are important connections between the two literatures that might serve to inform one another and ultimately help to better understand the process of female desistance. My study helps to fill the gap within the literature by exploring how positive well-being might relate to desistance among formerly incarcerated women.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objectives for this project are: 1) to examine how and why women are able to achieve positive life outcomes and desist from crime in the midst of overwhelming challenges and 2) to combine insights and methods from the desistence literature and the positive psychology literature. As discussed in my literature review (Chapter 2), Maruna (2001) found that desisters' told stories of "redemption" while persisters told stories of "contamination."[9] My research builds upon Maruna (2001) by assessing whether the narrative sequences are systematically related to subjective well-being and by employing an all-female sample. The specific research questions guiding the main objectives for this project are: 1) Are there differences in the narrative sequences between desisting formerly incarcerated women and persisting formerly incarcerated women? 2) Are there differences in subjective well-being among desisters and persisters? 3) How is subjective well-being related to desisting and persisting women's life narratives? 3A) How do dimensions of well-being relate to the content of redemptive and contamination narrative sequences? 3B) How do measures of well-being relate to the frequency of redemptive and contamination narrative sequences? In this chapter, I explain why employing a mixed methods approach to collecting and analyzing

---

[9] Narrative psychologist, McAdams (2006) differentiated between two types of redemptive sequences that represent different ways the narrator interprets and understands negative events which is reflected in the manner they talk about such events (see also McAdams and Bowman 2001). The first type of redemptive sequence involves an event that starts out negative but becomes positive (e.g. my girlfriend kicked me out of the house, but then I found a wonderful new home down the street) (89). In the second type, the event starts out negative but over time or after reflection, transforms into something that is beneficial to the narrator or others (e.g. getting HIV made me to appreciate life and live it to the fullest) (89). These two types of redemptive sequences illuminate the ways in which the narrator processes or makes meaning out of negative events and in doing so, transforms them into something positive (89).

data was most appropriate for addressing my research questions about formerly incarcerated women's narratives, well-being and desistance. I then discuss my research site and sampling design, provide an overview of the demographics of my sample population, and explain my data collection methods and measures.

RESEARCH DESIGN

At the start of this research project, I intended to use a sample of incarcerated women because I wanted to explore what desistance looks like for women still in prison. However, I have since decided to study formerly incarcerated women rather than incarcerated women for both methodological and substantive reasons. The methodological reason is that I was unable to gain access to incarcerated women within a reasonable time frame for this project. The substantive reason is that I can address my research questions more directly because "desisters" is usually defined in terms of individuals who are not currently in jail or prison as in the case of Maruna's (2001), whose samples of desisters and persisters were comprised of individuals outside of prison. Aside from this change, the rest of my research design and data collection techniques have remained unchanged since my dissertation prospectus.

My research questions cover two important variables: narrative sequences and subjective well-being. Fortunately, there are well-established methods for collecting data on both of these factors. In order to capture the details of individual experience, I use both qualitative methods in the form of life history interviews and other open-ended questions along with a standardized measure of subjective well-being. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) a mixed methods approach is best suited for understanding both if a phenomenon is taking place, as well as how it comes to be.

These measures allow me to build upon the methods used by Maruna (2001) (life history interviews) and the research on positive psychology (standardized measure of well-being and qualitative analysis of well-being) to explore the role of well-being in the desistance process. In order to see how narrative sequences and subjective well-being are related to desistance, I follow Maruna's method and compare formerly incarcerated women who are "desisting" from crime and a group who are continuing to offend.

Operationalizing desistance

What is known about how and why some women, despite having experienced the challenges of incarceration and reentry, come to exhibit positive outcomes in the years following their release? The budding criminological literature on desistance addresses this question by focusing on individuals who have been out of prison for some time without committing additional crimes. As Giordano et al. (2002) explain, there are some offenders who manage to "pull themselves up by their own cognitive 'bootstraps'" particularly when "society has provided them with little in the way of raw materials" (993). Within the last decade, research on desistance "has transcended mere description (for example, who desists and when, how long do criminal careers last, etc)" (Farrall & Maruna 2004:358-9) and evolved into an understanding of "desistance as a process consisting of interactions between human agency, salient life events, and historical context" (Laub & Sampson 2001:4). The literature on desistance distinguishes between individual and environmental factors, with consideration for their complex interaction, for the purposes of understanding what influences individuals to stop offending rather than reoffend.

Put simply, desistance refers to the cessation or absence of criminal behavior for a period of time after a period of offending (Maruna 2001:46). Simple description notwithstanding, there is considerable debate within the field of criminology about what constitutes, or should constitute, the meaning of desistance. To begin, theories of desistance sometimes arise to explain deviations from what is understood as persistent criminal behavior (Laub & Sampson 2001). For example, according to Moffitt (1993), a life-course persistent offender commits a series of crimes over the course of their lifetime (674). Unlike the majority of offenders who Moffitt (1993) calls *adolescence-limited* offenders, committing the majority of their crimes during adolescence, *life-course persistent* offenders do not age out of criminal behavior and as a result, are responsible for the majority of all crimes committed (676). Moffitt (1993) predicts that because there may be certain neuropsychological factors specific to life-course persistent offenders, then it is likely they will continue offending at high rates for most of their lives (680). Contrary to Moffitt (1993) who believes that anti-social behavior is the undercurrent in persistent offending (679), Tunnell (1990) claims that persistent offenders were making rational choices about offending and when these offenders were asked, they said that they continued to offend because they did not believe punishment was certain or harsh (675). The assumption here is that if the punishments offenders received were certain and harsh, then they would not choose to reoffend. The understanding of desistance is therefore tied to the framework for understanding repeat offending, or persistence.

Debate about the best operationalization of desistance has also impacted the ways in which researchers study desistance. Moffitt (1993) and Tunnell (1990) point to some of the practical difficulties that arise when studying persistence and desistance. First, in

order to truly understand life-course offending, one must be able to track behavior until the end of an offender's life, at which point it would be impossible to interview them (Maruna 2001). Second, it is difficult to determine the difference between a lifetime that involves criminal activity and life-course persistent offending (Maruna 2001). In other words, do the types of crimes matter? Is a serial killer classified in the same way as someone who cheats on their taxes once or twice every twenty years? Should the time-lapse in between crimes be considered a period of desistance or is it understood in terms of the crimes that bookend the lull? These questions are left unanswered because, as Laub and Sampson (2001) argue, "the study of desistance from crime is hampered by definitional, measurement, and theoretical incoherence" (1). There are a number of reasons why this may be the case. For one, looking for persisters outside of official statistics, such as those acquired from prison, parole, or probation data comes with some limitations. One limitation is that women who are persisting and have not been caught may not wish to disclose this fact to a researcher regardless of the level of confidentiality guaranteed. Locating a sample based on official reports alone would be incomplete because most crimes either go unreported or undetected, representing a "dark figure" of crime that official statistics fail to capture (Coleman & Moynihan 1996). Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) point out that "characteristics such as sex, age, and social class affect arrest records" (340) so to rely on official statistics alone misses the impact of legal biases. For these reasons, Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) distinguish between *official desistance* and *behavioral desistance* in order to understand the full picture of offending, whereby the former represents official statistics of offending and the latter refers to the individuals account of offending behavior (339). In other words, sometimes the most

accurate reflection of an individual's offending behavior comes from the individual's own personal account. According to McIvor (2004), "self-report studies have been used not only to gain a 'truer' picture of offending, but also as a means of shedding light on why offending occurs, and the degree to which it correlates with other social factors, particularly gender, race and socio-economic position" (58; see also Muncie 1999).

Relying solely on official report data would likely miss the reality that most crimes are never brought to the attention of police (Maruna 2001). At the same time, there is potential for inaccuracies in self-report data (McIvor 2004). Adults may be less likely than adolescents to disclose information about their offending behavior, particularly if it involves very serious or violent crimes (McIvor 2004:60-1). In spite of this inherent limitation, Maruna (2001) trusted participants' accounts of offending because he believed that they would reveal the most accurate picture of offending. For Maruna (2001), "offender self-reports are generally more reliable than most alternatives," including official criminal records that reflect when offenders get caught, rather than capturing an accurate picture of overall offending behavior (48). I have chosen to interview women who have been incarcerated at least once, because this information can be easily verified through the Georgia Department of Corrections. On the other hand, like Maruna (2001) I also rely on participants' self-reports to determine whether they are persisting in crime or desisting from crime.

Qualitative approach to studying desistance

Qualitative approaches are especially useful for understanding how and why desistance occurs. For Maruna (2001), qualitative differences in individual experience and decision making processes have been "largely neglected in the study of crime" and as

a result, "individual differences have not received the same attention as the more easily measured structural factors influencing criminal behavior" (8). Unlike aggregate analyses, narrative research captures the nuances of individual experience, how and why people make decisions and understand their behaviors. According to Maruna (2001), narratives are significant to the study of desistance because of their mutable quality and the fact that they can serve not only to "explain people's behavior," but they also "act to shape and guide future behavior, as people act in ways that agree with the stories or myths they have created about themselves" (40). Maruna (2001) contends that the desistance process involves reinventing and reinforcing a newfound prosocial identity, and that self-narratives are the site for this identity construction. He argues that the factors that distinguish desisters from persisters, such as the frequency and type of narrative sequences, can shed light on how these individuals make sense of their lives and what this can teach us about the process of desistance (Maruna 2001). Farrall (2005) points out that desistance is a process that involves "lengthy periods of rebuilding, remodeling, or remaking their own social identities" (372). Transforming one's identity has been shown to play an especially critical role in the process of desistance for women (Rumgay 2004). According to Rumgay (2004) desisting women are likely to reform their identities in ways that allow them to embrace and embody a pro-social, conventional social script around which they can organize their lives. Like Maruna, Rumgay and Farrall, I argue that life-history narrative research provides a unique window into participants' psychological and social experiences and as such, represents the ideal method "for the understanding of long-term behavioral patterns like desistance" (Maruna 2001:43).

Narratives are a particularly useful methodological tool for research on desistance as well as for the study of mental health (McAdams 2006; McAdams et al. 2001). Studies have shown that narratives play a special role in the way people understand themselves and behave in the world, and as such is an important empirical lens through which to study well-being (McAdams 2006). Researchers have found that there is a significant relationship between levels of positive well-being and the ways individuals tell stories, in particular whether those stories follow a theme of redemption or contamination (Grossbaum & Bates 2002; Singer 2004; McAdams et al. 2001). Some psychologists have theorized that autobiographical narrative is integral to the process of healthy development and functioning (Fivush & Buckner 2003). According to Frank (2002), everyone is in pursuit of moral development and narratives can actually function as a vehicle for attaining an elevated moral state, especially when constructed in the company of others. Bauer and colleagues (2008) also point out that narratives serve a critical function in that they not only warehouse valuable lessons from the past but also those "major life goals, dreams, and plans" that guide future behavior (88; see also McAdams 1985). Narrative is also the site in which individuals unpack positive and negative events in ways that point to possible levels of well-being. For example, individuals high in well-being "tend to frame especially difficult scenes in their life stories as transformative episodes wherein they experienced intense pain and suffering but through which they learned new lessons in life, attained new self-insights, deepened personal relationships, and/or came to a more profound understanding of the world in which they live" (Bauer et al. 2008:99). In this way, the recounting of negative events provides the narrator with a redemptive opportunity to emerge victorious in spite of the

difficulty they've encountered. As a result, narrative themes can help researchers understand important clues about the way an individual is functioning in life (Bauer et al. 2008:85; see also McAdams 2001). In particular, Bauer et al. (2008) argue that "narrative identity provides life with unity, purpose, and meaning" which is important to the individuals experience and understanding of their own well-being and happiness (82). Narrative research, therefore, is both a valuable method for the study of desistance as well as positive well-being.

Quantitative measure of well-being

While Maruna (2001) only briefly mentions how an ex-offender's optimism seemed to reflect positive health, I argue that this and other positive aspects identified with desistance point to the likelihood that positive well-being plays an important function in the desistance process. I employ Corey Keyes' (2003) multidimensional concept of subjective well-being, defined "as a state in which an individual feels positive emotion toward life and is functioning well psychologically and socially" (294). I chose Keyes' (2003) definition as a way of distilling the concept of well-being. The idea of flourishing for Keyes (2003) was well-suited for a study of formerly incarcerated women because it encompasses so many facets of well-being. Specifically, the symptoms of mental health fall along three dimensions of well-being, namely emotional, psychological and social well-being (See Table 2). Emotional well-being involves positive feelings such as positive affect, happiness, and life satisfaction; psychological well-being involves positive functioning in the areas of self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, environmental mastery, autonomy, and positive relations with others; and social well-

being comes from positive functioning in the areas of social acceptance, social actualization, social contribution, social coherence, and social integration (Keyes 2003).

At present, major qualitative research on desistance points to the presence of factors associated with positive well-being without naming them as aspects of positive mental health, or flourishing. In order to both determine whether well-being might be an important factor in the desistance process for formerly incarcerated women, I add a standardized measure of well-being in addition to analyzing narratives for evidence of well-being and factors that support desistance. Together, these methods are useful in determining whether a distinction needs to be made between measures of participant's well-being and the qualities of well-being exhibited in their life story narratives or if the two reflect similar outcomes of well-being. To measure subjective well-being, I use Keyes' (2006) standardized measure of well-being because it has been tested and shown to have high reliability. In addition, I will also be able to compare my results to other studies of positive well-being within positive psychology. Keyes' (2006) measure serves as a standardized tool for measuring a phenomenon that could help us understand how and why narrative sequences are related to life history narratives and the desistance process.

Qualitative measure of well-being

I take the research a step further by also including qualitative measures of well-being culled from the life history narratives. While Maruna (2001) looked for redemptive sequences for the purpose of drawing connections to their narrators (desisters and persisters), his methodology was not designed to explore whether there was something significant in the content or context of these sequences that could be useful in

determining why desisters' and persisters' narratives contain more redemptive and contamination sequences respectively[10]. I, on the other hand, employ a qualitative approach to understanding the sequences themselves in order to see if specific dimensions of well-being (i.e., emotional, psychological, social) are reflected in persisting and desisting offenders' narrative sequences, and how those dimensions relate to formal measures of subjective well-being among desisters and persisters. This qualitative data would be a useful comparison with the measures of well-being as a way to better understand how well-being affects formerly incarcerated women and ultimately, their desistance.

Open-ended questions

In addition to administering Keyes' (2006) standardized measure of well-being and taking a closer look at narrative content, I am collecting qualitative data on subjective well-being by asking open-ended questions about the topic, in order to gather in-depth information in addition to well-being scores. I also encourage participants to elaborate when the topic of conversation relates to specific dimensions of well-being so that I have a stronger context for analyzing the content of narrative sequences. In addition, I ask participants to describe their well-being in their own words. These interview questions and probes enable me to compare women's ideas about well-being with formal measures

---

[10] My methods overlap with and differ from Maruna's in two additional ways. Maruna's (2001) procedure included demographic questions, "open-ended questions regarding crime and corrections-related experiences" as well as queries about participants' theories of crime (50). I also include a few brief questions on demographic variables including, age, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, and details about prior convictions and incarcerations, but I do not ask about participant's theories of crime because it would likely elicit explanations of offending, which does not directly relate to the aims of this study. Instead, I ask participants to share any advice they may have for women who are nearing release from prison as responses to this question might be more likely to include theories about successful reentry and desistance.

and definitions given in the literature and to address the question of how narratives are related to subjective well-being. This is a useful method for gathering additional narrative content and context for interpreting narrative sequences and to better understand how formerly incarcerated women understand their own well-being as it relates to their offending behavior. In other words, this method allows me to supplement Keyes' standardized measure of well-being with additional insight into the narrator's understanding and experience of their well-being. Using both a standardized measure of well-being and qualitative approach in collecting and analyzing narratives is necessary in order to better understand how and why well-being might relate to formerly incarcerated women's narratives and desistance.

SAMPLE

Study Setting

Georgia's Correctional Context

Most of the participants lived in the greater Atlanta area, though some participants resided in other parts of Georgia. My sample consisted of women formerly incarcerated at Metro State Prison for women in Atlanta, Georgia. Although all participants have at one time been prisoners at Metro State Prison, they were not under correctional supervision, parole or probation, at the time of the study. There are important benefits and implications associated with Georgia as the site of this research. The problems of incarceration in Georgia in some ways reflect, and in others, exceed, those taking place on a national level. The conditions in prison and after incarceration that affect well-being and desistence are fairly similar across states. That is, the main features of being "locked up" don't change much from state prison to state prison.

The problems of overcrowding in facilities and recidivism in Georgia are fairly representative of national trends (see Immarigeon & Chesney-Lind 1992). According to the 2007 Georgia Department of Corrections annual report, "one of every 15 adults in Georgia is under supervision today," which includes incarceration in prisons, jails, parole, probation, house arrest and residence in day reporting centers (Clark et al. 1997:7). In just under three decades, the number of women incarcerated in Georgia grew by 596% (Greene & Pranis 2004), which has resulted in overcrowding of prisons and jails. Georgia is, on average, more punitive than many other states, with its enforcement of not three, but "Two Strikes and You're Out" legislation which means that individuals who have been convicted of two crimes among the types forbidden by this law are likely to face life sentences (Clark et al. 1997). Although Georgia is ranked 9th in terms of population size, it has the 5th largest prison population in the nation (Clark et al. 2007) with "77 female prisoners per 100,000 female residents" in 2004 (Frost 2004). In 2009, the racial makeup of the female prison population was roughly 50% white and 48% black, with less than one percent of prisoners identifying as Asian or Native American, and less than 4% as Hispanic (GDOC 2008:6-7). In 2009, 73.3% of incarcerated women in Georgia reported some combination of drug and alcohol substance abuse (GDOC 2008:49). Together, these statistics not only position Georgia as having a significantly large female prison population but also, for the purposes of this research, shed light on the fairly harsh correctional environment incarcerated women must navigate.

Metro State Prison for Women

Formerly one of three state prisons for women in the state of Georgia, Metro State Prison (MSP) was the only closed/maximum security prison that also behaved as the

"central receiving and diagnostic unit for the state correctional system" (Cook et al. 2005:112). In May 2011, MSP was closed due to structural issues and all of the incarcerated women were transferred to other prisons throughout the state. Prior to its closing, MSP was responsible for conducting a series of physical and mental health assessments for every woman who was a state prisoner. From there, many of the women were transferred to other facilities, while women who had serious mental illnesses as well as the only woman on Georgia's death row remained at MSP. In 2010, Georgia Department of Corrections reported MSP had the capacity to house 905 inmates[11] and was filled near capacity. Other than the administrative staff and correctional officers employed by MSP, the facility was maintained by women assigned to work "details" that resembled a typical work week. Work details include "Building & Back Gate Orderlies, Food Service, Maintenance, Inside & Outside Grounds, Paint Detail, GEMA, GSP Driver Services, Warehouse, Food Warehouse, GCI Panel Shop, Laundry, Sanitation and Georgia Public Safety."[12] On weekends, the institution slowed down which allowed the women some time to rest, while providing only two meals on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. Metro State Prison offered "Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous and relapse prevention programs" and all inmates were required "to complete Substance Abuse 101, an education awareness program" (Edwards 2000:42). Due to the fact that "these programs are limited, there is often a wait for admittance" (Edwards 2000:42). There were also some vocational training opportunities including, "Cosmetology, Building Maintenance, Laundry, Food Preparation, Warehouse, Computer Technology, Customer

---

[11]see http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/GDC/FacilityMap/html/metro_state_prison_w.html
[12]see http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/GDC/FacilityMap/html/metro_state_prison_w.html

Service Representative, VISION Program (Training of guide dogs for the Blind)."[13]   In

addition to the representative nature of Georgia as far as the national correctional

landscape, Metro State Prison was chosen for the possibility of access to formerly

incarcerated women as well as for the particulars of this prison in relation to others in

Georgia.

Participant Selection

While expanding, the population of female offenders is still much smaller than

that of males, which makes the case for widening the net to gather a sizable sample with

varying degrees of criminal behavior (Richie 2001). Also, given that Maruna's (2001)

study involved 10 women, I chose to double his sample size so that I could have equal

numbers of desisters and persisters. While a sample size of 20 is too small for

generalization, it is "useful in examining a situation in depth from various perspectives"

(Myers 2000:3). For these reasons, my sample included 20 women who were formerly

incarcerated at Metro State Prison. By interviewing formerly incarcerated women, all

members of the sample had the shared experience of being detected by police at least

once coupled with a prison sentence as punishment[14]. This is important for two reasons.

First, with so many possible offending histories ranging in quantity, severity, and

punishment, this is a way of standardizing the sample so that all individuals committed at

least one crime that resulted in incarceration at the same institution (MSP). The second

reason has to do with the very slim chance that committing a crime would result in

incarceration. Piehl and DiIulio (1995) report that "most prisoners have committed a

---

[13]see http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/GDC/FacilityMap/html/metro_state_prison_w.html

[14] I recognize that there are individuals who are wrongfully convicted, but for the purposes of this study, I relied on the fact that all participants said that they actually committed the crimes they were incarcerated for.

slew of undetected crimes the year before their incarceration," which illustrates the degree to which most offending goes unpunished (3). Given that most offending goes undetected, studying those who have been incarcerated was a practical way of identifying individuals who, following Piehl and DiIulio (1995), are likely to have a broader offending history.

Desisting and persisting women are part of a small, hidden population and therefore, represent a difficult population from which to construct a sample (Maruna 2001; Sommers et al. 1993). For this reason, it was not possible to generate a random sample because I did not have a sampling frame. Because my research questions do not look at causal factors and instead, look at well-being and narrative sequences in order to better understand the desistance process, a random sample was not necessary to answer these questions. On the other hand, a purposive or snowball sampling technique in which there was a chain of referrals was more appropriate for studies of this nature "when population characteristics are not fully known or when subjects are difficult to reach" (Sommers et al. 1994:133). Given that some women were still participating in crime or have had negative experiences with those in authority, many of these women were likely to be mistrustful. Women who were persisting but have not been caught may not have wished to disclose this fact to a researcher regardless of the level of confidentiality guaranteed. In order to get a sizable sample of women willing to talk about their offending, I needed to have someone refer them in order to get them to trust me. For these reasons, a snowball sampling technique with some purposive sampling was used to identify participants.

In order to reach participants, I engaged the help of colleagues who work with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women as well as some of the formerly incarcerated women I have worked with in the past. Participants were recruited through a snowball sample acquired from pre-existing contacts and their recommendations. Among these contacts were formerly incarcerated women, the reentry chaplain at Metro State Prison, as well as community workers, directors of halfway houses, and volunteers who work directly with formerly incarcerated women. Contact persons had a flier that they distributed to potential research subjects. In addition, some participants found about the study after seeing flyers posted in various clinics and restaurants throughout Atlanta. Upon establishing contact with an individual interested in participation, we decided on a meeting space that was both convenient for the participant and allowed for privacy so as to maintain the integrity of the confidentiality agreement[15]. Interviews were conducted in a location that was most accessible for the participant, while offering the most privacy, such as the participant's home or in a private place, which for my study, was an interview room at Emory University.

Characteristics of Study Sample

It took me 5 months to locate and interview 20 women who were formerly incarcerated at Metro. As my analyses in the following chapters demonstrate, the sample size was sufficient to discern important differences between "desisters" and "persisters." To put these results in context, I describe the characteristics of my sample below.

Age and race

---

[15]I acquired a Certificate of Confidentiality from the NIH for this study. Participants were paid $30.00 in cash for participation in this study. They are also reimbursed $5.00 for travel expenses if the interview took place on the Emory University's campus.

Ten women identified themselves as currently offending (persisting sample) and ten stated that they were not involved in anything illegal (desisting sample) at the time of the interview. Groups of desisters and persisters were fairly similar in terms of age and race. Participants' ages ranged from 20 years old to 71 years old, with the majority falling in the 31-50 age range. The average age for both groups was 41 years old. (See Table 1) This broad age range is important for the recruitment process to ensure both a sizable and diverse sample. This range includes adults from various stages of adulthood for the purpose of exploring desistance and well-being without age or maturity being a confounding variable. 15 participants identified as Black or African American, while 5 identified as White (this includes one participant who identified as "Spanish White"). Three desisters and two persisters were white. [16]

Desisters		Persisters	
27	White	20	Black
31	White	28	Black
33	White	31	Black
34	Black	33	Black
38	Black	37	White
40	Black	46	Black
46	Black	48	Black
50	Black	50	White
60	Black	51	Black
60	Black	71	Black

TABLE 1. Age and Race

Types of offenses

[16] One disadvantage of the snowball sampling technique is that the samples are in danger of becoming somewhat homogeneous. For Maruna, a similar phenomenon took place, though his sample was predominantly comprised of white males, which he attributed to Liverpool's racial segregation (2001:177). Atlanta's history of racial segregation remains apparent in many communities as well, which may have played a part in homogenizing this sample.

The types of violent crimes participants reported having committed include aggravated assault, assault, murder, armed robbery, and kidnapping. Non-violent crimes included wire fraud, forgery, destruction of property, driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol, drug possession and solicitation, and prostitution. For both the desisting and persisting groups in my study, there was also a mix of violent and non-violent offenses. Desisters were more likely to have committed *both* violent and non-violent crimes (7 out of 10 both; 2 non-violent; 1 violent), while persisters reported committing *either* violent *or* non-violent crimes over a period of time (6 out of 10 non-violent; 4 both). Roughly three fourths of participants (nine out of ten desisters and seven out of ten persisters) described using illegal drugs at one point in their lives and 6 respondents within each group (for a total of 12) had also sold drugs. Five persisters admitted to still using drugs at the time of the interview. All participants in my sample explained that they had been involved with crime for significant periods of time, most of which went undetected by police.

Motherhood

Consistent with much of the data on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated populations (Richie 2001), 8 of the 10 respondents in both groups are mothers. Four of the desisting mothers have grown children. Three desisting mothers are the primary caretakers of their young children. One desisting mother said both of her children were taken from her because doctors "found drugs in their system when they were born." Six of the eight persisting mothers have grown children. Two persisting mothers are raising young children.

Incarcerations

On average, desisters had been out of prison for shorter periods of time than persisters. The average amount of time since their last release from prison was 1 year and 5 months for desisters and 5 years and 9 months for persisters. Though more recently released, desisters had served longer sentences on average than persisters. The average length of desisters' most recent incarceration was 6 years and 8 months while peristers' average length was 1 year and 8 months. Recall that desisters were more likely to have committed both violent and non-violent crimes which may help to explain why their sentences tended to be longer than persisters. The average number of incarcerations for both groups is somewhat vague because not all participants were aware of how many offenses they had been convicted of and whether or not they served time in jail or prison for all of them[17]. For the most part, however, respondents were able to recall how many times they had been incarcerated. The average desister in this study was convicted of 4 offenses, two of which resulted in incarcerations, while persisters averaged 6 convictions that resulted in 5 incarcerations.

In sum, when compared to persisters, desisters in this sample committed more serious crimes, and were incarcerated less often, but for longer periods of time. Persisters committed less serious crimes, and were incarcerated more often but for shorter periods of time. For desisters still within months of their release from prison, it remains to be seen how long their desistance will be maintained since the first few months of reentry might still be fortified by supports in the form of half-way houses and religious groups.

---

[17] For example, two persisters stated that their rap sheets were so long they couldn't keep track of how many individual convictions they had accumulated. Michelle, a persister, said in jest, "I've got a rap sheet as long as I am tall!" Like Michelle, another persister, Dee, said that her record was so long that when she tried to print out a record of it, she ran out of paper.

Education and Employment

Members of both groups complained about how difficult it was to obtain and maintain a job with a criminal record. Still, desisters in this sample were much more likely to be employed than persisters, perhaps in part because they also had slightly higher levels of education on average. Although just a few, the white participants had more education on average than most of the African American participants. Four out of ten desisters had completed college degree programs or were in college at the time of the interview. Half of the 10 desisters were employed. Among the 5 unemployed desisters, one was receiving disability assistance and one was a full-time student. All of the desisters in this sample had at least a high school diploma or GED, with most having spent additional time working on trades and certifications. All of the persisters were unemployed at the time of the interview. Two of the unemployed persisters reported receiving assistance through social security or disability. Of the six persisters who had earned a high school diploma or GED, four also completed some college. The remaining four persisters did not complete high school nor had they earned a GED.

Religion & Spirituality

All of the desisters in this sample referenced Christian religious themes or going to church at some point during their interview. When asked how they would describe their religious beliefs or spirituality, one referred to herself as "very spiritual" and another said that she believed in "doing what's right," while the remaining eight explicitly stated that they were Christian and that they "believed in God." Seven persisters explicitly stated that they were Christian and "believed in God," but none said they regularly attended church services. The remaining three described themselves as spiritual.

Early abuse and rape

Research on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women has uncovered an intricate web of abuse, challenges and trauma that characterize their early, adolescent and adult lives (Richie 2001; Maruna 2001). Similar experiences were chronicled by all respondents, with many reporting very early sexual encounters, most due to sexual abuse/molestation or what is now called statutory rape. Respondents usually described these events as especially pivotal moments, in some cases because they resulted in pregnancy at a very young age and for others because they precipitated their involvement with crime. More often than not, respondents reported being molested by their father or a male family member. These experiences were described as especially painful because the majority of respondents who were molested also shared that when they told their mother about the rape, their mother either did not believe them or blamed them for it. In general, when women talked about being victims of sexual abuse or assault they did not have resources or supports in place to protect or help them with their healing process. I discuss these experiences of abuse and trauma greater detail in the next chapter.

Sexuality & Gender Presentation

Although I did not ask about sexuality and gender presentation explicitly, these issues came up in some of the interviews. Four respondents, two persisters and two desisters, had relationships and sexual encounters with women, but only one incorporated these experiences into their sexual identity—a desister identified as bisexual. For all four of these women, their newfound or renewed Christian faith brought with it a strong pressure not to act on their attraction to women. Same-sex attraction and sexuality posed a problem with their faith and families, as well as with some of the chaplains and pastors

who supported desisters. Gender presentation came up among participants usually surrounding discussions about their sexuality. Two persisters talked about how their masculine gender presentation, or being "a girl who looks like a boy," afforded them more privileges and attention while incarcerated, but may have inhibited their ability to live a conventional life on the outside. For example, Jo, a white persister, said that she was treated "like a superstar" in prison simply because she looked "boyish." On the other hand, when looking for a job on the outside, Jo believes that looking "boyish" and having tattoos makes it harder to find work than if one looks especially feminine, like "Susie Homemaker."

Overall, the demographics of my sample were fairly representative of the population of formerly incarcerated women as a whole. All of the respondents in my study reported experiencing some form of child abuse or neglect. Research shows that disproportionately high numbers of female offenders who report histories of abuse and incorporated these finding into theories of female crime and desistance (Richie 2001; Rumgay 2004). Nearly all of the participants had used drugs at some point in their lives, which was not surprising given copious empirical support of a strong link between drug use and criminal behavior (Maruna 2001; Richie 2001; Belenko 1998). All participants in my sample explained that they had been involved with crime for significant periods of time, most of which went undetected by police, a pattern also found in the literature (Maruna 2001).

DATA COLLECTION

McAdams Life History Narrative Questionnaire

Following Maruna (2001), I used McAdams' (1993) life history interview guide with the twenty women in my study. This semi-structured format focuses the discussion on poignant events in the participant's life, while allowing enough room for her to share, in her own words, the thoughts and feelings that make such events stand out. This is an ideal measure for extracting narrative sequences because it prompts participants to talk about salient events that are either negative or positive. The interviewer begins by asking each participant to imagine their life "as if it were a book" with major parts of their lives fitting into eight major "chapters" comprised of the following "key events":

1. *Peak experience:* A high point in the life story; the most wonderful moment in your life.
2. *Nadir experience:* A low point in the life story; the worst moment in your life.
3. *Turning Point:* An episode wherein you underwent a significant change in your understanding of yourself . . .
4. *Earliest memory:* One of the earliest memories you have of an event that is complete with setting, scene, characters, feelings, and thoughts . . .
5. *An important childhood memory:* Any memory from your childhood, positive or negative, that stands out today.
6. *An important adolescent memory:* Any memory from your teenage years that stands out today. Again, it can be either positive or negative.
7. *An important adult memory:* A memory, positive or negative, that stands out from age twenty-one onward.
8. *Other important memory*: One other particular event from your past that stands out. It may be from long ago or recent times. It may be positive or negative.

Following Maruna (2001), I conducted interviews using the McAdams' (1993) life history questionnaire. The structure standardizes the interview for all participants in that all participants are asked to talk about the same number of positive and negative events. This structure was important when analyzing transcripts because all participants were given the same prompts. Therefore, any differences in positive and negative sequences become all the more significant. Additionally, the open-ended structure of the

interview questions provided a space where the participant can reveal the context surrounding an event and the strategies she employed for dealing with said event.

Supplemental Questions

The interview procedure began with general questions about the participant to establish comfort and rapport. Following Maruna (2001), participants were then asked about their experiences during and after their release from prison. Throughout the interview, I used specific probes to identify the dimensions of well-being in the narratives when participants are not immediately forthcoming about such details (e.g. emotional dimension — How did you feel when that happened? Looking back, how do you feel about it now?; psychological dimension — What were you thinking when that happened? Looking back, how do you understand it now?; and social dimension — How would you describe your relationships with others during that time? How would you describe your relationships now?). These probes were important for providing sufficient content and context from which to understand and analyze how dimensions of well-being relate to narrative sequences. There were also direct questions about how the participant defines and understands well-being. These interview questions enabled me to compare women's ideas about well-being with formal measures and definitions given in the literature and to address the question of how narratives are related to subjective well-being. The final section of the interview guide includes a few brief questions on demographic variables including, age, race/ethnicity, education, employment status, and details about prior convictions and incarcerations. The interview closes with a question asking participants about any advice they may want to share with women who are nearing release from prison.

Mental Health Continuum Short Form

In addition to the life history interview guide, I gave participants Keyes' (2006) condensed measure of positive well-being called the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF). Keyes' MHC-SF identifies individuals' levels of emotional, psychological, social, and overall subjective well-being. According to Keyes (2009), "the estimates of internal consistency reliability for each of the three sets of measures—emotional, psychological, and social well-being—in the MHC short and long forms have all been high (> .80; see e.g., Keyes, 2005a)" (1). Given the strong reliability of both the long and short forms, I decided to use the short form in an effort to reduce the amount of participants' time expended. In this questionnaire, participants are asked to indicate how often they feel particular emotions and aspects of their personal and social functioning (0 indicating never and 5 indicating everyday). Within the MHC-SF (see Table 3), a survey response can reveal a diagnosis of *flourishing*, or positive mental health; *languishing,* or a state in which an individual is functioning poorly psychologically or socially and is absent of positive emotion toward life; or in the case that neither of these apply and the responses fall somewhere in the middle, *moderately mentally healthy* (Keyes 2008). I administered the survey after the life history questionnaire and just before asking a few demographic questions (See Table 4 for Interview Protocol).

DATA ANALYSIS

Interviews were transcribed and uploaded into MAXQDA coding and analysis software. Interview data was analyzed using a multi-step coding process that first involved coding redemption and contamination sequences. I use the same coding scheme for narrative sequences as Maruna (2001) in which redemption sequences, can be defined

as "'something good' emerging out of otherwise negative circumstances" and contamination sequences, where "a decidedly good event 'turns sour'" (97). The next step in my analysis involved another round of coding for inductive codes that emerged from the data. These included *relationships, gratitude, religion/spirituality, self-love, rejection, agency, isolation, helping others, dehumanization, purpose in life, prayer, drug addiction, hope*, and *employment.* I then compared narratives of desisting and persisting women along these various codes.

I also applied Keyes' (2003) multi-dimensional construct of well-being to the analysis of life narratives and identifiable narrative sequences. Specifically, I combed through incarcerated women's life narratives for emotional, psychological and social dimensions of well-being and looking for connections with identifiable narrative sequences (see Table 2 for dimensions well-being). In addition, I looked at how women's narratives, including the degree to which they incorporate dimensions of well-being and identifiable narrative sequences, relate to formal measures of women's current well-being. Through these additional codings, I could compare the results from the narrative life histories to the respondent's survey answers.

In coding the survey data, I follow Keyes' (2009) method for analysis in which "a diagnosis of flourishing is made if someone feels 1 of the 3 hedonic well-being symptoms (items 1-3) 'every day' or 'almost every day' and feels 6 of the 11 positive functioning symptoms (items 4-14) "every day" or 'almost every day' in the past month. Languishing is the diagnosis when someone feels 1 of the 3 hedonic well-being symptoms (items 1-3) 'never' or 'once or twice' and feels 6 of the 11 positive functioning symptoms (items 4-8 are indicators of Social well-being and 9-14 are indicators of

Psychological well-being) 'never' or 'once or twice' in the past month. Individuals who are neither 'languishing' nor 'flourishing' are then coded as 'moderately mentally healthy'" (Keyes 2008).

SUMMARY

In sum, my study utilizes both qualitative (life history interviews and open ended questions) and quantitative (survey measure of positive well-being year) methodologies to identify *if* rates of positive well-being are different among desisters and persisters, and if so, *how* and *why* well-being might relate to the content and frequency of narrative sequences as well as the desistance process as a whole. Furthermore, my research employs a mixed-method approach in order to better understand the complexity of formerly incarcerated women's experiences, their mental health, and their offending behavior. In doing so, my study is intended to offer new ways of understanding formerly incarcerated women's movement away from crime.

Table 2. Keyes' Dimensions of Well-Being

Operational Definitions of Symptoms of Mental Health

Positive feelings: emotional well-being	Positive functioning: psychological well-being	Positive functioning: social well-being
Positive affect: Regularly cheerful, in good spirits, happy, calm and peaceful, satisfied, and full of life.	*Self-acceptance*: Positive attitude toward oneself and past life, and concedes and accepts varied aspects of self.	*Social acceptance*: Positive attitude toward others while acknowledging and accepting people's complexity.
Happiness: Feels happiness toward past or about present life overall or in domains of life.[a]	*Personal growth*: Insight into one's potential, sense of development, and open to challenging new experiences.	*Social actualization*: Cares and believes that, collectively, people have potential and society can evolve positively.
Life Satisfaction: Sense of contentment or satisfaction with past or present life overall or in life domains.[a]	*Purpose in life*: Has goals, beliefs that affirm sense of direction in life, and feels life has purpose and meaning.	*Social contribution*: Feels that one's life is useful to society and that one's contributions are valued by others.
	Environmental mastery: Has capability to manage complex environment and can choose or create suitable environs.	*Social coherence*: Has interest in society, feels it's intelligible, somewhat logical, predictable, and meaningful.
	Autonomy: Comfortable with self-direction, has internal standards, resists unsavory social pressures.	*Social integration*: Feels part of, and a sense of belonging to, a community, derives comfort and support from community.
	Positive relations with others: Has warm, satisfying, trusting relationships, and is capable of empathy and intimacy.	

[a]Examples of life domains are employment, marriage, and neighborhood.

Table 3. **The *Mental Health Continuum-Short Form* (MHC-SF) for adults**
(©2008 Corey L. M. Keyes All Rights Reserved; for use without charge in basic scientific research only)

Please answer the following questions are about how you have been feeling and how you have been functioning during <u>the past month</u>. Place a check mark in the box that best represents how often you have experienced or felt the following:

During the past month, how often did you feel …	NEVER	ONCE OR TWICE	ABOUT ONCE A WEEK	ABOUT 2 OR 3 TIMES A WEEK	ALMOST EVERY DAY	EVERY DAY
1. happy						
2. interested in life						
3. satisfied						
4. that you had something important to contribute to society						
5. that you belonged to a community (like a social group, or your neighborhood)						
6. that our society is becoming a better place for people						
7. that people are basically good						
8. that the way our society works makes sense to you						
9. that you liked most parts of your personality						
10. good at managing the responsibilities of your daily life						
11. that you had warm and trusting relationships with others						
12. that you had experiences that challenged you to grow and become a better person						
13. confident to think or express your own ideas and opinions						
14. that your life has a sense of direction or meaning to it						

The *Mental Health Continuum-Short Form* (MHC-SF) for adults

Categorical Diagnosis: a diagnosis of flourishing is made if someone feels 1 of the 3 hedonic well-being symptoms (items 1-3) "every day" or "almost every day" and feels 6 of the 11 positive functioning symptoms (items 4-14) "every day" or "almost every day" in the past month. Languishing is the diagnosis when someone feels 1 of the 3 hedonic well-being symptoms (items 1-3) "never" or "once or twice" and feels 6 of the 11 positive functioning symptoms (items 4-8 are indicators of Social well-being and 9-14 are indicators of Psychological well-being) "never" or "once or twice" in the past month. Individuals who are neither "languishing" nor "flourishing" are then coded as "moderately mentally healthy."

Continuous Assessment: Sum, 0-70 range (use 10 point categories if desired).

Symptom Clusters and Dimensions:

Cluster 1; Items 1-3 = *Hedonic,* Emotional Well-Being
Cluster 2; Items 4-8 = *Eudaimonic,* Social Well-Being
       Item 4 = Social Contribution
       Item 5 = Social Integration
       Item 6 = Social Actualization (i.e., Social Growth)
       Item 7 = Social Acceptance
       Item 8 = Social Coherence (i.e., Social Interest)
Cluster 3; Items 9-14 = *Eudaimonic,* Psychological Well-Being
       Item 9 = Self Acceptance
       Item 10 = Environmental Mastery
       Item 11 = Positive Relations with Others
       Item 12 = Personal Growth
       Item 13 = Autonomy
       Item 14 = Purpose in Life

SPSS Syntax for creating the categories for the categorical diagnosis of mental well-being
*Assumes item responses have been coded as follows: **never=0, once or twice=1, about once a week=2, about 2 or 3 times a week=3, almost every day=4, every day=5**

```
count hiaff=mhc1 mhc2 mhc3(4,5).
count loaff=mhc1 mhc2 mhc3(0,1).
count hifunc=mhc4 mhc5 mhc6 mhc7 mhc8 mhc9 mhc10 mhc11 mhc12 mhc13 mhc14(4,5).
count lofunc=mhc4 mhc5 mhc6 mhc7 mhc8 mhc9 mhc10 mhc11 mhc12 mhc13 mhc14(0,1).
recode hiaff (1,2,3=1) (else=0) into hiaffect.
recode hifunc (6 thru 11=1) (else=0) into hifunct.
recode loaff (1,2,3=1) (else=0) into loaffect.
recode lofunc (6 thru 11=1) (else=0) into lofunct.

if hiaffect=1 and hifunct=1 mhc_dx=2.
if loaffect=1 and lofunct=1 mhc_dx=0.
if hiaffect=1 and hifunct=0 mhc_dx=1.
if loaffect=0 and lofunct=1 mhc_dx=1.

value labels mhc_dx 0 'Languishing' 1 'Moderately Mentally Healthy' 2 'Flourishing'.
compute mhc_total = mhc1 + mhc2 + mhc3 + mhc4 + mhc5 + mhc6 + mhc7 + mhc8 + mhc9 + mhc10 +
mhc11 + mhc12 + mhc13 + mhc14.
```

Table 4. Interview Protocol

I want to start by sharing a little bit about why I am doing these interviews. In a nutshell, I feel like the criminal justice system is so focused on punishment and not concerned with helping women with the real challenges they face before prison, in prison and after prison. I've been volunteering for a year and a half at Metro State Prison with the Alpha and Omega Society, which is a group for women getting ready to be released. At our weekly meetings, I usually hear about at least one woman's internal struggles with wanting to get out but feeling afraid of how she will make a life for herself once she gets out. I am doing this research to hear directly from women about what life is like for them after prison. These interviews will be used in my dissertation, but I also hope that one day they can be published in a book that might help incarcerated women prepare for what's waiting on the outside and also so that anybody who can't relate to your experiences might hear your story and start to see themselves in your shoes.

I want you to know that I am not looking for any right or wrong answers. I just want to hear your story, plain and simple. You may feel pressure to tell me what you think I want to hear, but I want to ask you can not to sugar coat or exaggerate and just tell it like it is. Remember, whatever you tell me will not be tied back to your name in any way. The information will only be useful to women getting ready to be released if it is true to your actual experiences.

Let's begin by learning a little about who you are….

1. Describe yourself. Where do you come from? What is your home like? What do you do on a typical day? How do you feel about the way your life is going right now? How do you feel about your relationships? How do you feel about yourself? What is the meaning or purpose of your life?

Let's go back to the last time you were incarcerated at Metro….

2. Tell me the story of what it was like for you the day you arrived at Metro.

3. Tell me the story of what it was like for you during your last 6 months at Metro. What were some of the challenges you faced? How did you deal with those challenges? Were you involved in any programs or classes? How did you feel? What did you think your life would be like once you got out?

4. What about now that you are out of prison, is your life anything like you thought it would be while you were still at Metro? What are some of the challenges that you face? How do you deal with those challenges? How have people treated you since you've been released from prison? If possible give an example.

For the next part of the interview, I want you to imagine your life as if it were a book with major parts of your life fitting into eight major chapters with the following titles:

1. Chapter one is a high point in your life story. Tell me about the most wonderful moment in your life.

2. Chapter two is a low point in your life story. Tell me about the worst moment in your life.

3. Chapter three is a turning point. Tell me about a time when you experienced a significant change in the way you think and feel about yourself.

4. Chapter four is about your earliest memory. Tell me about one of the earliest memories you have of an event that has a setting, scene, characters, feelings, and thoughts.

5. Chapter five is about an important childhood memory. Describe any memory from your childhood, positive or negative, that stands out today.

6. Chapter six is about an important adolescent memory. Describe any memory from your teenage years that stands out today. Again, it can be either positive or negative.

7. Chapter seven is about an important adult memory. Describe a memory, positive or negative, that stands out from age twenty-one or older.

8. Chapter eight is another important memory. Tell me about one other particular event from your past that stands out. It may be from long ago or recent times. It may be positive or negative.

Now, I'm going to ask you to fill out this brief survey. If you have any questions, let me know. You can turn it over when you are finished. (PI hands participant well-being measure)

Great. Thanks for filling that out.

Now I'm going to ask you to describe in your own words what "doing well" or "well-being" means to you. Do you feel that way now? What would it take for you to be doing well? What would your life be like if you were doing well?

Let's talk a bit about your experience of being happy. Think about the last time that you were feeling happy. What were you doing? What were you thinking and feeling? Do you feel this way often? If not, what is preventing you from feeling happy?

Ok, now let's get some details out of the way.

How many offenses have you been convicted of and did you serve time in jail or prison for these offenses?

When were you most recently released from prison? (month/year)

Without giving details, would you say that you are still involved in criminal activity or have you stopped committing crimes since your last incarceration?

How old are you?

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

How would you classify yourself ethnically?

Are you currently working? If so, what do you do and where?

How would you describe your spiritual or religious beliefs?

During this interview, have you felt pressured to tell me a story you think I wanted to hear? What are some of the things you think I wanted to hear? Would you say that the information you shared is closer to what is true for you or what you thought I wanted to hear?

Are there any questions that I should have asked you, but didn't?

Finally, what advice do you have for women in prison who are preparing for release?

Chapter 4: The Role of Identity-based and Psychological Resilience Strategies in Supporting Desistance

"It wasn't easy. Life wasn't easy, 18 years being incarcerated. And life still not easy but every day you take one day at a time and you grow every day. You learn something new every day. Every person you come in contact with you learn something off of them. Every day, you take that time to learn and keep standing and keep walkin; and keep your head up because guess what? You can make it. You can make it out here. You can."

<div align="right">Rachel, a desister</div>

"[My life] sucks. Pretty much sucks. 'Cause, cause you feel like you're in a trap. Can't really do nothin' about it. I mean, maybe you can...but even for a regular person who doesn't have a record, it's just hard. So like when you already have all that other shit [criminal record], it's like you just get to a point where you're just like fuck it. I'll just take my chance. Fuck it."

<div align="right">Jo, a persister</div>

Introduction

For those who have been incarcerated, joining the "real world" again can be a daunting, if not seemingly impossible task, with challenges at nearly every turn. And as Rachel demonstrates in the above quote, desisting from crime once released from prison is a difficult undertaking that requires a combination of factors, the most important of which just might be, ironically enough, persistence and perhaps even a little bit of luck. Of course, scholars have documented numerous other factors that play a role in whether or not an individual is likely to desist from crime beyond persistence and beyond luck; factors such as identity shifts, along with access to employment opportunities, food stamps, and affordable housing (Alexander 2010; Maruna 2001; Petersilia 2001; Laub and Sampson 2001). While both personal and structural factors are crucial to one's success in the outside world, they are not the only important elements for desisting. In this chapter, I argue that an individual's ability to desist from crime and "make it" in the world outside of prison depends upon their acquisitions and utilization of a set of

resilience strategies as well as the kinds of *social supports* available to them both while incarcerated and once released. Drawing specifically on the work of Maruna, Rumgay, and others, I will outline the ways in which having a specific array of resilience strategies and a variety of social support mechanisms in place greatly affected whether or not the women in my study were equipped for desistence. Put simply, desisters in my study were able to desist from crime because of their use of resilience strategies and the variety of social supports that were offered during their time in prison and strengthened after their release. Persisters, however, did not utilize resilience strategies to the extent that desisters did nor did they have access to the kind of social supports that could have provided them with important resources both in and out of prison. In the next 2 chapters, I will focus on the importance of resilience strategies, what they encompass, how they help with the desistance process and how disadvantageous life can be without them. In the subsequent chapter, I will focus on the importance of social supports, and how resilience strategies and social supports work together to support desistance.

Resilience Strategies

Maruna's (2001) theory of desistance focuses on the importance of a redemptive, prosocial narrative identity—its adoption, maintenance and ultimate acceptance by others. Maruna argues that the process of adopting and enacting a prosocial identity is the major vehicle through which desistance is attempted and maintained over time. A redemptive, prosocial narrative identity allows the desister "to account for and understand their criminal pasts (why they did what they did)" as well as help them "to understand why they are now 'not like that anymore'" (Maruna 2001: 7). In line with my findings, Laub and Sampson (2001) state that identity transformations, coping skills and social

supports are to the desistance process. This is because relationships with conventional others are key to the desistance process as they are the ones who reinforce the ex-offender's conventional identity by believing and accepting it, which creates a strong social bond (Laub and Sampson 2001). Once the ex-offender adopts this newfound identity and develops these social bonds, s/he enacts a redemption narrative script that absolves them of past crimes while further connecting them to a conventional lifestyle (Laub and Sampson 2001; Maruna 2001; Rumgay 2004). These redemptive scripts are conventional problem-solving strategies that can help break down habitual offending patterns when opportunities to offend arise and/or when ex-offenders are faced with a lack of conventional opportunities (Laub and Sampson 2001). Giordano et al. (2007) explain that identity transformations lead to increased agency and improved coping strategies for dealing with the challenges of their past traumas as well as the multiple barriers to reentry. My findings support Giordano et al. (2007) and demonstrate ways in which this process of personal transformation and increased resilience, or an enhanced ability for coping with hardship, is both an individual and social process. My findings extend Giordano et al. (2007) by describing specific coping strategies that women use to overcome hardship and pave the way for a crime-free life.

In addition to the problem-solving and identity strategies highlighted by desistance researchers, the women in my study who were most successful at desisting were those who adopted a series of what I call resilience strategies. Resilience strategies can be defined in this context as coping mechanisms designed to assist women in reframing and rebuilding their lives at both an individual and interpersonal level. Because Maruna's sample was primarily comprised of male participants, his theoretical

understanding lacks attention to the ways in which gender might impact the desistance process. As such, I found Maruna's theory to be limited, given his lack of attention to issues of gender and to the particular circumstances of women's lives. My findings fit well with Rumgay's (2004) theory of female desistance, so I am using her theory to interpret the interview data. I did not design my study using Rumgay as a framework; I discovered Rumgay after collecting my data and looking for theoretical frameworks beyond Maruna to assist me in interpreting the data. Rumgay's (2004) theory not only highlights the importance of narrative scripts and identity for the desistance process, but she also draws on the literature on resilience which is why her theory is the most appropriate framework for understanding the skills and strategies that support desistance.

Although Rumgay introduces the importance of resilience in the desistance process, I offer a new analysis of the importance of resilience strategies in terms of the ways in which they support identity transformation and enable women to cope with the challenges of reentry. My own findings echo the importance of resilience and social supports while also offering additional clues into how the women I interviewed actually employed these strategies in ways that promoted desistance. Specifically, my findings demonstrate *how* a combination of and an accumulation of three types of resilience strategies work together with social supports to help women cope with the challenges of their past, present and future and ultimately, desist from crime. Out of my interviews with desisting women came three specific types of resilience strategies: identity-based, psychological and interpersonal strategies. While not all women expressed utilizing all of these types of resilience strategies, all of the women who were desisting from crime at the

time of the interview discussed the importance of drawing upon multiple aspects of these strategies in their efforts to cease committing crimes.

Part I: Identity Strategies: "I love me. And I want more for me."

Constructing a new identity is a resilience strategy that is important to the desistance process because of its role in minimizing the stress of carrying guilty and shameful feelings, as well as its capacity to ignite feelings of agency (Rumgay 2004). Identity shifts play an important role in terms of strengthening positive feelings about oneself and one's ability to act as an agent in the world. Desistance research consistently shows that identity transformations are critical to the process of moving away from crime, for both women and men (Laub & Sampson 2001; Maruna 2001; Giordano et al. 2002; Rumgay 2004; Farrall 2005; LeBel et al. 2008). My findings support the notion that changes in identity that allow formerly incarcerated women to enact an accessible, conventional script supported them in their efforts to desist.

All of the women in my study, like most formerly incarcerated women, had scores of disempowering, even dehumanizing experiences. The two major types of traumatic experiences included early sexual abuse and the experience of incarceration. 60% of both groups had experienced child sexual abuse, while all of the participants except for one persister described instances of neglect, physical abuse, and verbal abuse during their childhoods. Overcoming the effects of these traumas was very much tied to desistance. In fact, women's healing and repairing the damage of victimization experiences went hand in hand with the desistance process. My findings suggest that for the women in my study, crime and persistence were closely tied to the traumatic effects of past victimizations whereas desistance was the result of women coming to grips with past

victimizations and healing from them. Crucial to this healing process for these women was identity transformation. The women had to expand and transform the lenses through which they saw themselves, moving away from identities of shame (e.g. "criminal," "addict," etc.) towards identities full of honor and redemption (e.g. "disciple" and "saved"). In doing so, they went from being overcome with feelings of shame and self-blame, to becoming empowered agents who accepted and loved themselves. Taken together, the benefits of this newfound identity helped desisters cope with stigmatized pasts and empowered them to move toward leading a conventional life, free of crime. Rumgay theorizes that individual resiliencies can aid in their efforts to embody a conventional identity and withstand the challenges that inevitably come with the desistance process. For Rumgay, personal resilience means a "resourcefulness in coping rather than invulnerability to such hardships" (2004:412). Below, I outline two components of identity strategies—self-love/acceptance and empowerment/agency—that were crucial to desistimg women's ability to cope with hardships, transform their lives, and desist from crime.

Self-love

As stated in the opening paragraph to this section, *all of the participants in my study had experienced some kind of abuse or neglect at some point in their lives*, typically beginning early on in their childhoods. Research on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women has uncovered an intricate web of abuse, challenges and trauma that characterize their early, adolescent and adult lives (Giordano 2010; Richie 2001; Maruna 2001). My sample consisted entirely of women who had been abused which is an important departure from Maruna's (2001) mostly male sample, of which roughly one in

three had been "abused or severely neglected as children" (59). Although many in Maruna's sample also experienced sexual abuse, this experience is *gendered* (Giordano 2010). That is, the meanings attached to sexual abuse and embodied experiences of abuse differ for males and females (Valentine & Feinauer 1993). Research on female survivors of childhood sexual abuse have documented symptoms that tend to plague victims long into adulthood including shame, "negative self-image, depression, anxiety, feelings of isolation and stigma, substance abuse, a tendency towards victimization, and problems in interpersonal relationships" (Valentine & Feinauer 1993:216). A very clear pattern emerged linking early abuse and lack of support or stability with the onset of criminal behavior. Respondents usually described abusive events as pivotal moments, because they precipitated their involvement with crime. These findings are consistent with research that shows a direct connection between early abuse and female crime (Giordano 2010; Richie 1996). For example, women in my study who had been abused at home typically ran away and ended up living on the streets or with an older man. When the abuse was detected, respondents described being placed in inadequate/abusive foster homes. Mary, a desister, describes one of her earliest memories of abuse and being too young to understand what was happening:

> *I think my earliest memories that I can remember were being beaten a lot. That really stood out in my mind. I can remember back, I'd have to say to the age of 3, that's when the serious beating started. When something traumatic like that happens, you'd be surprised at how far back you can remember these things. The beatings and then the confusion of being taken away from my adoptive parents, even though they were beating me and molesting me. Just the confusion and that scared feeling of being pulled away from my adoptive mother's arms, even though they hurt me on a daily basis. I was still terrified. I was scared. I was confused. I couldn't understand why they were taking me away from them and being placed into a foster home.*

Regardless of where these young girls ended up, the pain of their abuse followed them and without resources or social support, they continued to live in conditions that left them susceptible to crime and further trauma. Not surprisingly, the women in my study turned to illegal drugs to self-medicate or to experience a thrill in the midst of painful circumstances. In order to support their drug habits, young families, and themselves, most of the respondents prostituted, sold drugs and/or forged checks. Drug addiction, however, seemed to be the major motivating factor behind most of the other crimes that the women in my sample committed, which is also consistent with statistics surrounding female crime in general (Giordano 2010; Richie 2001). Angela, a desister, demonstrates this connection between early abuse and offending in the following statement:

> *Hmm. I don't have any positive [memories]. I came from a broken home. I was raped at age 7 by my uncle. Um. I've been beaten. I got raped again at the age of 14 by my stepfather who my mother is still married to. I was locked in the basement for several days at a time. The only thing I can think is when I ran away from home because I got tired of being forced to have sex with my stepdad while my mom was in the other room, watching my mom go off to the strip club—my dad was her bouncer—walking downstairs seeing my mom [having sex] with a woman and I'm like okay, great. So it's like, the only thing I can really say is when I ran away from home that's actually the best memory I do have…'cause I was safe and living for myself. If I didn't want to have sex with you, I wasn't going to. I became homeless, prostituting, smoking crack. Started selling crack. Ate out of trash cans. Never really had a life. Never knew what it was like to be a kid. I guess that's why I'm such a big kid. Now every time I see a teddy bear I want, I get it. It's just the little things I missed out on. I had to grow up so fast.*

Not surprisingly, for the women in my study, experiencing repeated abuse was extremely detrimental to their self-concepts. Specifically, respondents talked about hating themselves, feeling ashamed and undeserving. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that female offenders in particular report experiencing "intense shame" (Rumgay 2004:407; see also Leibrich 1996; Sommers et al. 1994). At least half

of the respondents had not only experienced the pain of their abuse but also the trauma of being blamed for the abuse. For example, Dee, a persister, was blamed when her step-father having molested her as a child:

> *One day I woke up and under the covers he was rubbing on me and I told my mama about it and my mama got mad at me—for years I was so mad at her—she looked at me and said, 'Let me tell you somethin' bitch. Shame on – you're gonna go to hell for that or you gonna ask God to forgive you.'*

As if their abuses alone weren't traumatic enough, respondents who experienced adult shaming and blame for their victimization seemed to have experienced enormous damage to their self-worth. More often than not, respondents reported being molested by their fathers, step-fathers, or a male family member, and that their mothers ultimately blamed them for it. As a result, many of the respondents began to feel responsible for their own abuse. Sherice, a desister, describes how being raped and blamed for it was the lowest point in her life because she began to feel "dirty" and "ashamed":

> *Mm God. I know you probably think incarceration was my lowest point, but it wasn't. I was raped when I was 11 and I think that was the lowest point in my life. It took so much from me and it was a point, it was a friend of the family and I didn't tell my mom but she still found out and I got a whooping because that it happened, because I allowed it to happen, but it wasn't like that with me. It was rape. And I know what it was now. I didn't know what it was then. And I held a lot in...and I changed, that changed a lot in me, when I got raped when I was kid. I looked at a lot of things different. I felt dirty. I felt ashamed and embarrassed. And I just felt a lot and that was like my lowest point when I was young (crying.)*

While some respondents suffered the effects of being blamed by others and in turn blaming themselves for their abuse, other respondents recounted that there was nowhere to turn once they had been victimized. For example, Michelle, a persister, had been the victim of unimaginable violence for nearly all of the 50 years she's been alive. At 14, she left home to marry her 21 year old boyfriend. Though he was physically abusive to

her, she found this to be a better alternative to being repeatedly molested by her stepfather at home. She was married two additional times and had four children before she turned 21. Since her first marriage, she began using cocaine heavily and earned money through prostitution. She describes being raped "more times than I can count" and the lack of infrastructure in place to help her when she needed it most:

> *As far as the rape goes, the first time I was raped I tried to get help and it*
> was *like um-- Back then it wasn't like it is nowadays. There wasn't really anything out there for women or girls that got raped. So you kind of had to*
> suck *it up and deal with it and go on. So after getting raped I just sucked it up,*
> dealt *with it and went on with it. I became numb to it.*

Nina, a persister, echoes this sentiment of lacking the appropriate supports when she was molested:

> *I haven't been raped but I've been molested. So things that you go through as a child that can alter your life too. 'Cause it does something to you on the inside. It actually makes you a different person...I really felt like I was alone at that time. I'm cryin' (crying).*

In general, when women talked about being victims of sexual abuse or assault they did not have resources or supports in place to protect or help them with their healing process. The people they were supposed to depend on, in most cases, were the ones inflicting the most harm on them. These abuses inflicted lasting damage on the respondents including internalized blame, displaced anger onto themselves, and shame for being molested.

My finding that women directed the shame of their abuse onto themselves is different from what Giordano (2010) describes as an "anger identity" that develops in victims of abuse in which they continue to perpetuate the violence that affected them (75; see also Giordano et al. 2007; Agnew 1992). I found, however, that the women in my study were more likely to behave self-destructively and desisters were more likely than persisters to express feeling ashamed and guilty about hurting others as a result of their

crimes. Shame, therefore, was not serving as a deterrent to crime for the respondents in my study, as has been articulated by Braithwaite (1989) who focuses on the role of shaming in deterring crime. Instead, my findings demonstrate that desistance was less about changes in the ways women felt about crime and more about changes in the ways women felt about themselves. Giordano et al. (2007) describe shifts in adolescent emotions about crime, where a decrease in positive feelings about crime and an increase in negative feelings about crime can precipitate and promote desistance. Given that persisters in my study described having negative feelings toward crime, yet continued to offend, my findings suggest that feelings about crime may not be the major impetus for desistance. Instead, my findings show that desisters and persisters differed most significantly on the emotions they directed at themselves; desisters described loving themselves as an important transformational experience, while persisters talked about self-directed feelings that were negative and unloving. Giordano et al. (2007) argue that the "human striving for self-realization and a sense of worth or purpose" is likely to play a more significant role in the desistance process than negative feelings, such as shame (1613; see also McAdams et al. 1997). My findings support this assertion by demonstrating that desistance involved directing *loving* feelings toward the self, which helped minimize shameful feelings, convince women that they deserved to have and empowered them to create a conventional life.

Early victimization is important not only in terms of understanding the early lives of offending women, but also especially significant in terms of understanding the types of crimes they commit, are committing or have stopped committing. Explanations of female offending must account for the internalized shame and self-hatred that burrows deep

within victims of violence, lasting long after the incidents themselves. Not unlike the way deep seated feelings of unworthiness and self-hatred were tied to respondents' entrée into offending, my findings indicate that for the women in my study, realizing one's worth and learning to love oneself set the stage for drug rehabilitation and criminal desistance. Desistance mirrored the process of surviving and overcoming sexual abuse documented by behavioral psychologists, Valentine and Feinauer (1993), who found that successful coping with early abuse usually resulted from victims achieving "high self-regard," or positive feelings about themselves, placing blame for their victimization outside of themselves, and feeling empowered and in control of their lives (216-217). Identity shifts among the women in my study resulted in many of the same symptoms exhibited by those who positively cope with early sexual abuse and these factors were instrumental for the desistance process. For example, self-love and empowerment were resilience strategies that helped women repair the damage associated with traumatic pasts, incarceration experiences, and the crimes they committed by relieving them of negative feelings (i.e. shame, stigma, guilt) and enhancing feelings of worthiness. Psychologist Janoff-Bulman (1992) explains that when trauma survivors are able to transform their negative experiences into meaningful ones they typically emphasize "self-worth over self-abatement" (133). Similarly, I found that identity transformations are pivotal in moving formerly incarcerated women away from self-destructive behavior toward self-preserving behavior. These newfound positive self-feelings fueled their decisions to make a better life for themselves and avoid personally harmful or risky behavior. Rachel explains how her self-examination led to a realization that she deserved to have a better life and that drugs and prostitution were not worth jeopardizing that life:

> *I started to become aware of the decisions I'd made and the effects that those decisions had on my life. And I realized that, once living in prison, that's not what I want. That's not how I want to live the rest of my life…it's not worth it in the end, pushing away all the people that you love, your freedom, your health, your sanity. I realized in prison it's not worth all that…I had to make up my mind that I was going to change for myself because if I don't change for myself nobody else is going to change for me. I can either keep on goin' down the road I was on and possibly end up dying at a young age, possibly getting sick with a terminal disease, be in prison for the rest of my life. Or I could get my act together and live the life I always wanted … and yeah, I might have been dealt a shitty hand before, but it doesn't have to be shitty for the rest of my life. I can make my life better.*

In this way, desistance is as much a process of healing, self-discovery and acceptance as it is about moving away from crime. Once women loved themselves, they began to see themselves as deserving of a life without the risk of incarceration, the burden of drug addiction, and the dangers of crime.

Scholars have described desistance as a process that takes place over time, often involving a series of stops and starts (Maruna, 2001). The women's narratives in my study depicted desistance as a long process that was tied to changes in their identities. My findings may also shed light on why identity shifts were so meaningful for them and how they were integral to the desistance process. Specifically, self-love was a state of being that developed over time, enhanced their self-understanding and feelings of deservedness. During her 18 years in prison, Rachel, a desister, describes undergoing this process of self-examination in order to better understand herself and her offenses. Eventually, she gets to a point where she forgives and loves herself:

> *I love myself. (laughs) I feel good about myself. I love myself. I understand myself much more because I had time to really look at me, you know. Sometimes you sugarcoat it. You see the good, you have to see the good but you also have to see the ugly. Right now I see all the good in me. I'm seeing the good, the good that is coming, the good I've been doing and the things that I do, you know. It's just—It's just amazing (crying).*

Similarly, Trina, a desister, gives an account of both the time it took to love herself and how that made her want a conventional life:

> *It took me twenty-five years to find myself, truly find myself, without drugs...I'm very very proud of myself. I'm proud of me. I love me. And I want more for me. I'm trying to go back to school.*

It was after prison that Tanya, another desister, realized that she hated herself for all the mistakes she had made. Once she discovered this, she explains that going to rehab was the first step in loving herself:

> *Oh, I love myself (laughs) and actually this is only happened within the last year and a half. Because when I got out of prison I hated myself. I hated for what I had done. I hated for who I had become. I hated the fact that I was pregnant and had a daughter in prison. I got out and I went into treatment voluntarily. I thought "Okay, well this will help me get back into society." I didn't just parole out to a family member's house or something. Even though I had been clean for two years, it was just like I'm not sure how I can – anything could have set me off and I'd go right back and I didn't want that to happen so I went to treatment...I stayed for nine months and did nine months. I still talk to the staff today. It is actually, I think when you are willing and ready to change, it happens because I wasn't ever ready all those years. I hated who I was. I didn't realize that until, probably when I was in prison, I didn't realize that I hated myself. I was just living. Or surviving should I say. Now I'm living. So, I love who I am.*

For these women, learning to love themselves took place over time and required a lot of effort in order to build self-esteem and put themselves in healthy situations. Their transformations didn't happen instantaneously, and some desisters described the bumpy road to loving themselves. Angela, a desister, left the half-way house she was living in to move in with a boyfriend she met at work. She says that although he began using her as "a punching bag," she stayed with him for several months because she was desperate for love and didn't believe that she deserved better treatment. Then one day, she found the

courage to leave him and return to the halfway house, where she actively works on loving herself:

> *The day I walked back into Open Arms[18], I learned to love myself again. I knew I was beautiful. I know today I'm beautiful and it's like can't nobody tell me I'm not. I don't care if the skinny girl gets the guy's number and I don't, it's okay because someone is gonna love me. Pastor loves me for who I am. God loves me for who I am. Everybody around me loves me. So, it's like I love myself before anybody else can love me. 'Cause if I can't love myself, you can't love me. Two weeks ago, I didn't even think like that. I wanted everybody to love me and I didn't love myself.*

Other desisters were further along in terms of recognizing the importance of self-love and how this necessitated a life away from crime. Tiffany, a desister, explains:

> *And I just look back to where I've been to where I'm at and I know I never want to be the person I was back then. So I just thank God and I continue to try to do the right thing. As much as I miss mink coats, it's not worth it goin' back to prison. So I just tell people, 'Sometimes it's not what you have on that make you. It's what inside of you that make you.' And I tell a lot of my clients, 'I'm a weave fanatic, but don't let the hair make you; you make the hair.' So when you look at yourself you know you got to love yourself more than anything that may cost you your life because my son now is 12. I've missed 10 years of his life... So, you can't get back that time but nothing is ever worth being away from the people that you love and havin' you, havin' some you time. In prison you don't have that. Bein' able to celebrate yourself and say you special and you love yourself. Because in prison they strip you from all that...*

Persistence seemed to be tied to difficulty fully embracing and loving oneself and most closely resembled the narratives of abuse victims who become their own worst enemies by internalizing self-hatred, helplessness, blame and unworthiness. For example, Cindy, a persister, explains:

> *Well, in one aspect, I am always gonna love me 'cause I'm me. But sometimes I feel like I really just messed up and it's over. I just really done messed my life up. And then I don't like myself.*

---

[18] Halfway House pseudonym

Another persister, Michelle, exemplifies this internal battle with blaming herself for her abuse:

> *I beat myself up a lot. My own stupidity for things. I did what I wanted to do as far as the partyin' went and livin' life in the fast lane as they say…I beat myself up because of my own stupidity, of allowing myself to be in abusive relationships. I beat myself up now more than I did then. Then, I didn't know how to get out of it 'cause things then aren't like they are now to where if you said there was abuse or domestic violence, they do something now. Back then, when I called the law, they always made me leave the house. I had to leave my children behind. I couldn't keep them. I couldn't even get my kids. And if I insisted on goin' in the house, I had the option: I could either leave or I could go to jail. Why should I go to jail? I'm not the one doin' the abuse here. I'm the one being abused. So that didn't sit right with me. So it was kind of like I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. What do I do? I really wasn't skilled to do anything. I was young. I had kids. So I was stuck. So I just tolerated it. I put up with it, for years. And my two boys, they lived and went through a lot with me and their father right there at the last—their father threatened to kill me if I ever tried to take them away from him…And the boys they seen the abuse their father did to me, and I hold myself guilty for that because of what they seen. I know it traumatized them somewhat and they still live with it to this day.*

Shame and powerless feelings compromised the desistance process by leading formerly incarcerated women to feel as though it was pointless to try to lead a conventional life and that they didn't deserve the benefits that came with it.

Both groups of women experienced extreme trauma in their childhood and adolescence and started from a place of "self-hate" and self-destructive patterns. The persisters stayed in that place, while the desisters moved into a place of self-love by spending time examining themselves and accepting themselves. Desisting women then realized that they were not responsible for their abuse, were deserving of a better life, one that was devoid of self-destructive patterns and abuse. Often a mentor or chaplain supported women in this process while they were incarcerated by first believing in them and helping women see their worth. Giordano et al. (2007) also find that key

relationships can help individuals discover and embrace a "more 'worthy' self" than the shameful identity they may have carried during the time they were offending (1616). My findings build upon this understanding by adding that, in addition to feelings of worthiness, women explicitly indicated that self-love was a major part of their desistance. For example, self-love was pivotal in the drug rehabilitation process because it motivated women to treat themselves with kindness and health-promoting ways. Desisters in my study didn't frame their desistance in reference to their absence of offending, rather they understood themselves as building a positive, meaningful life. In other words, once women learned to love themselves, they became less interested in criminal behaviors and more invested in building a conventional life.

Empowerment

By its very nature, institutionalization, or becoming indoctrinated to the rules and structure of the prison system, can be especially threatening to women's empowerment and feelings of self-worth (Goffman, 1961). In his analysis of "total institutions" such as prisons, sociologist Erving Goffman (1961) explains how the harsh and strict prison environment is intended to "mortify" and "demoralize" prisoners which allows prison guards to achieve greater control over prisoners' behavior. According to the women I interviewed, it was easy to internalize an inferior status and become dependent on the system, thereby making them more complacent and cooperative with that system. For instance, Mandy, a persister, describes how easy it was for agency to disappear in prison:

> *They [the officers] was talking to everybody ugly. How to stand, how not to open up your mouth. They were your mouth pieces. They did everything for you. They thought for you. They talked for you. They did everything for you. You couldn't do nothing. (Sigh). It was awful.*

Almost without their realizing it, respondents described adapting to the "prison way of life," obeying it's routines and internalizing the constant dehumanizing messages. Long after their release, desisters described a process of shedding the impact of their incarceration. For example, Mary, a desister, explains having to adjust from having no control over her life to gaining complete control:

> *It felt weird comin' out after doin two years locked up because I had already gotten used to the way of life in prison. I didn't know how to act when I got out (laughs). I didn't know what to do. I was so used to being counted four or five times a day. I was so used to having meals at a certain time of day. I was so used to going to bed at a certain time of day, waking up at a certain time of day. These are all things that I didn't have to do anymore and it was big adjustment. It really was. I couldn't believe how much I let myself get used to a prison way of life. I didn't even realize it. It's crazy.*

Because women are conditioned to be totally dependent while they are incarcerated, experiencing an empowering identity change is especially meaningful and transformative. The ways women experienced empowerment had to do with letting go of shame, guilt and frustrations that were weighing them down. Denise, a desister, describes the type of relief she experienced when she became a born-again Christian, which demonstrates the role of newfound identity in terms of coping with negative feelings:

> *The most wonderful moment in my life is when I was incarcerated and we was in the chapel and I became a born-again Christian and I felt so good. All my burdens, all my worriations, all my stress was gone. Because I put it all on the line and I gave my life to Christ, my burdens, everything, I laid it out there. And He delivered me.*

Of course, identity change isn't empowering only because of its ability to relieve negative feelings. Identity shifts can also be empowering because they invigorate women with a sense of agency and purpose. The desisters in my study exemplified what Uggen and Kruttshnitt (1998) refer to as "self-initiated" transformation in which female desisters

behave as "her own change agent" (334-5). In their theory of desistance, Giordano et al. (2002) emphasize the role of women's choice, power and agency in initiating cognitive transformation and desistance. Desistance, according to Maruna (2001), requires an unrealistic sense of one's ability to control the future—without it, as in the case of persisters—it is easy to give up hope and focus on the very real limitations associated with having a criminal record (see also LeBel et al. 2008). Similar experiences were echoed among the persisters in my study, who felt haunted by their pasts and powerless to change their futures. One persister, Jo, demonstrates how feelings of powerlessness were frustrating and led her to return to selling drugs:

> *[My life] sucks. Pretty much sucks. 'Cause, cause you feel like you're in a trap. Can't really do nothin' about it. I mean, maybe you can...but even for a regular person who doesn't have a record, it's just hard. So like when you already have all that other shit [criminal record], it's like you just get to a point where you're just like fuck it. I'll just take my chance. Fuck it.*

Another persister, Rose, describes feeling powerless to change her criminal record. After serving time in prison for a crime that she claims she "took the rap for but did not commit," Rose worked as an elevator operator for nine years until a change in company policy required that all employees with a criminal record be terminated. Several times in the course of the interview, Rose reiterates how damaging her criminal record has been for her and how powerless she is to change her circumstances:

> *What you do once it comes back to haunt you no matter how far back it is. And once you become that person and you try to put stuff back behind you, society won't let you. I had nine years on the job. No absentees, no nothing... And before you knew that - I was out of a job because of that thing [criminal record]. So that's why I say sometimes I straight and sometimes I do [illegal] things...but in the meantime...I know you can only make one mistake and you pay the rest of your life for it.*

According to Rose negative events had been like dominoes in her life leading all the way up to her conviction. She attributed her offense to a string of negative events and was therefore "not entirely guilty":

> *If you take dominoes – you've seen dominoes lined up? You touch the right one, all of them will start falling. But if each one of those dominoes could talk, they'd tell you that they had not decided to fall but the one next to them fell and it made the other one fall.*

Persisters in my study described feeling powerless to change their situation, discouraged by failed attempts at building a conventional life, and hopeless about the future. This finding is consistent with Giordano et al. (2007) who explain that "given the highly disadvantaged positions of many offenders, the idea of completely reshaping their lives appears to some a daunting and potentially demoralizing challenge"—so much so that it can stand in the way of their desistance (1637). In this way, my findings illustrate that without strong feelings of empowerment and a sense of agency, women were much less likely to feel as though they could meet the enormous challenge of building a conventional life.

There is no question that a criminal record limits access to employment, housing and many other resources necessary for leading a conventional life (Alexander 2010; Maruna 2001; Petersilia 2003; Richie 2001). Without minimizing the very real and challenging experiences associated with having a criminal record, some women still managed to desist without having their criminal record expunged or kept hidden. The women who were desisting in my study were also bothered by the way their criminal record siphoned off scores of opportunities; the difference between desisters and persisters was that though both acknowledged the pains of a criminal record, desisters refused to believe that their future would be entirely predicated upon their pasts, a finding

that echoes that of Maruna (2001). Although the structural and social barriers to reentry are real and unforgiving, my findings suggest that unless women feel empowered to change the course of their lives, they will likely return to crime. Take for example, Trina, who has been desisting from crime for over 3 years after more than two decades of selling and using "cocaine, shoplifting, destruction [of property], disturbing the peace, disorderly conduct" among other offenses. Trina has a decorated rap sheet, but doesn't focus on the ways in which her criminal record can hold her back. Instead, her newfound identity allows for a storehouse of strength that she can draw upon in service of her greater life's purpose:

> *I'm strong with God. Without God I would not be here. I'm a disciple now…I know His son saved me and I learned from the disciples that everybody has a purpose…we all have a purpose with God.*

It is clear that Trina is empowered by her "discipleship" and regardless of her past offenses, she knows that her life is meaningful. As in the case of Trina, identity shifts can be seen as strategies for wiping clean crippling pasts while imbuing futures with unencumbered potential.

Trina was among the 60% of desisters in my sample who deepened their religious commitment or experienced a conversion while incarcerated. Desisters described "getting right with God" while in prison which involved "staying in the Bible," attending church services, and prayer. Religious conversions are common in prisons, according to Maruna et al. (2006), who also argue that men who undergo religious identity shifts in prison acquire some of the strategies necessary for desistance upon release. My findings indicate that women who experienced a deepening of faith in prison also continued their faith practices upon release and were also actively desisting. The majority of religious

identity shifts that took place involved a drastic identity change. For one desister, however, shifts in identity were less about adopting a new identity and more about reinventing an existing one. It appears that reclaiming stigmatized identities can lead to similarly empowering results as finding a new identity altogether. For example, Angela, a desister, talked about her ability to accept her past and be at peace with her crimes. She claimed that, even if given the option, "I wouldn't change what I've done because of what I've learned. I'm proud to say I'm a convicted felon because I've learned from what I've done…I can't change the past. I can only change my future." In this excerpt, Angela demonstrates how she reconfigures an otherwise stigmatizing identity into one she can take pride in, and how doing so allows her to feel in control of her future, rather than controlled by her past. Angela's quote illustrates what Giordano et al. (2002) describe as a cognitive transformation in which an individual "fashion[s] an appealing and conventional 'replacement self' that can supplant the marginal one left behind" (1001).

Empowerment and identity transformations involving religion were a common theme in desisters' narratives. My finding that religion played a role in women's identity shifts and desistance is consistent with Giordano et al. (2002) who find that women, more so than men, "consider religious experiences important catalysts for changes they have made" (1036). For Giordano et al. (2002) religion constitutes one of offending women's "hooks for change" and contributes to desistance by fostering "positive development" as well as providing women with a way of life that is "fundamentally incompatible with continued deviation" (1000-1). Desisters in my study describe having deepened their faith in prison, while simultaneously undergoing a major shift in thinking. This finding is consistent with Giordano et al.'s (2002) research in that while desisting women often

attribute their change to their religion or incarceration experience, they also tend to emphasize the ways in which their transformations were dependent on their own agency in the process.

Persisters in my study were much less likely to demonstrate the kind of agency, identity transformations and religious experience evident in desisters' narratives. Though 70% of persisters used religious references in their narratives, only one talked about going to church while in prison, but even she did not continue this practice upon release. While desisters were more likely to incorporate their religion into their identity and way of life, persisters were less likely to incorporate their religion into their identity and were not nearly as committed to their religious practice. In other words, persisters "talked the talk but didn't walk the walk" when it came to living out their religious commitment and/or identity. For example, Anne, a persister makes the following statement about why she doesn't go to church:

> *I believe in God. I don't go to church like that. I don't see the point, really, 'cause it's some experience in church and some people that fake holy ghost and all the shakin' and ooohing and the praying. You don't feel shit. You're just pissing me off sittin' there. I just be sittin' there cussing. Just cussin' in my head like "Stupid bitch over here. Stupid bitch just puttin' on a show." It just makes me sick. It does. But I believe in God. I know the Bible back and forth but not just because I read it when I was locked up. It was because I knew it from way back from when I was growing up...So I do believe in God but unless I find some money I ain't gonna be in no church. I'm not sittin' in the church putting on no front.*

Persisters did not necessarily see a conflict with their avowed religious identity and their continuation in crime. Take for example, Cindy's explanation about why she continues to offend:

> *I'm a Baptist. I go to church. I believe in the Lord. I pray. I read the Bible. I had a grandmother that made sure you read the whole Bible every year. So I read the Bible. When I need understanding I call my grandmother and*

I get understanding. So I'm a very spiritual person. It's just that, I guess it's the dark side (laughs)that makes me do illegal stuff because I just sit around and think, "I wonder how that works and how you can figure out that?" And once you figure it out you can say, "Oh, I'm gonna put this to the test." Then you make money.

Cindy's statement above demonstrates how she can identify as a Christian, while also occasionally giving into her "dark side" by forging checks. In other words, she can still be a Christian *and* commit crimes. In this way, Cindy and other persisters did not exhibit a major shift in identity that made committing crimes incongruent with their understanding of themselves.

In sum, identity shifts were strategies for combating feelings of powerlessness while in prison, as well as for extricating internalized notions of powerlessness upon release. In their place, identity shifts left a sense of agency and feelings of worthiness which were instrumental for desistance in that they provided desisters with confidence in their ability to lead a crime-free lifestyle. Though many of them used religious language and ascribed to religious identities, persister's identities did not undergo dramatic shifts that made offending behavior unacceptable and incongruent with their self-understanding. Persisters narratives also had more evidence of powerlessness and self-hate, both of which can be personal barriers to the desistance process. In the face of multiple structural barriers to reentry along with a likely history of failed attempts at desistance, confidence and worthiness went a long way.

Summary

The women in my study had been victimized countless times as children and adults, leaving them feeling powerless, unworthy, and ashamed. In addition, the women's narratives showed evidence of what Goffman (1961) argues are the effects of spending

time spent in "total institutions" including "loss of self-determination," "personal inefficacy" and "mortification" which jeopardizes their agency and self-worth (44-47). Whether the women I interviewed committed more crimes or fewer crimes once released from prison was directly connected to the ways in which they coped with the negative symptoms of their victimizations and their institutionalization. Empowerment is important because with so many consequences to crime, from structural to social barriers, desistance requires one to feel as though they have the potential to make it anyway. They need an inner source of strength and understanding of their potential that can supersede and override external barriers/limitations, or at least help desisters believe in this possibility. Without this inner agency, they may otherwise be weighed down by the structural obstacles and stigma that come with a criminal record and give up trying to desist. Desistance was less about the cessation of crime than it was about women wanting more for themselves, insisting that they deserved it and believing in their ability to achieve it. Crime, for them, became representative of self-destructive behavior, and as women began to understand their own self-worth, they became less interested in crime and more interested in self-preserving behavior. Desistance was the result of women addressing those negative symptoms and transforming them into feelings of empowerment, worthiness, and self-love.

Identity strategies were important in terms of helping women realize that were not beholden to the circumstances of their pasts and instead, could alter the course of their future. Believing that they deserved a conventional life and feeling empowered to build one for themselves was an important step in the desistance process because it helped women overcome some of the personal barriers to desistance like self-hatred and

powerlessness that persisters continued to struggle with. Overcoming personal barriers is an important and necessary first step but when the road to desistance is paved with numerous obstacles and few opportunities, women needed additional resilience strategies in order to successfully desist. In addition to the identity strategies outlined above, desisters employed psychological strategies that enabled them to endure the everyday challenges of reentry for longer periods of time than persisters who were less likely to use psychological strategies.

Psychological Strategies: "Getting Past the Past"

> *I'm not the person I used to be. I know that. I have so much peace and joy. I don't have time to look on the negative side. I'm just not that wind-up person I used to be. I am so happy. Even though, I'll put it like this: Even though Metro was so hard but you know what? And it's a terrible place, but all in all, it helped me, you understand? It helped me. All the little classes I took I enjoyed them because the teachers they helped me to understand, to want to be something better, to want to do better when you finally get out. And they helped me because I was listening. See, a lot of them go into those classes and not listen because they don't have any hope. But I had hope. I still got hope and I wish my buddies that I left behind get hope so they can come out. It just feels so good to be out.*
>
> -Denise, a desister

Psychological strategies, another component of resilience strategies, were evident in the way desisters narrated their experiences, as in the example of Denise's quote above. Psychological strategies included ways of thinking about, understanding, and reframing events, often invoking religiosity, that help desisters minimize the pain of the event and/or relieve stress associated with negative events (e.g. crime, prison, abuse, illness, and/or death). This resilience strategy helps women cope with challenges in their lives, past and present, and empowers them to move forward in the future, ready to deal with structural challenges (i.e. limited access to employment, housing) that will undoubtedly come their way as a result of having been incarcerated.

According to Maruna (2001), desisters' ability to "make good" was aided by their ability to find the good in bad experiences and believe in *possibilities* greater than *probabilities*, something he referred to as "tragic optimism." In this way, desisters significantly differed from persisters, who were less likely to use this strategy of reframing negative events in a positive light and who tended to be more realistic in terms of their probability for successful desistance. For Rumgay (2004), the idea of resilience offers the most appropriate framework for understanding the psychological strategies that differentiate desisters from persisters. She theorizes that individual resiliencies can aid in women's efforts to embody a conventional identity and withstand the challenges that inevitably come with the desistance process. For her, personal resilience means a "resourcefulness in coping rather than invulnerability to such hardships" (Rumgay 2004:412). My findings support Rumgay's (2004) emphasis on the importance of personal resilience as "strategies for maintaining 'psychological distance' from negative associations" (412). My findings suggest that psychological strategies help women cope with specific post-incaceration challenges, giving them a cumulative advantage while also serving as a way of preventing them from returning to crime when "the going gets tough."

Participants in my study also used psychological strategies to create what Rumgay refers to as "psychological distance" from painful memories, challenging realities, and when projecting out into their futures. Without these psychological strategies, negative experiences can be overwhelming and disheartening, making women feel as though negative experiences have permanently ruined their lives. Rita, a persister, describes how she feels about the way her life is going:

"It's depressing. You know, I know my life can be better than what it is because I   have had things in my life. And you know, dealing with drugs, I have lost it."

Nina, another persister, says, "I'm a little depressed" and "a little upset" because "I just wish my life could have been a whole lot better."   Employing various psychological strategies was crucial to these women's ability to move forward, despite their crime-ridden pasts. For example, Melissa, a desister, assured me that she doesn't "dwell on the past because the past is the past, and I have to get past the past." Keeping in the present moment and not staying focused on the past is part of why Melissa is able to feel optimistic and continue pursuing a conventional life; she believes her future is ripe with potential even if her past felt littered by mistakes.   The psychological strategies used by the women in my study to aid with the desistance process   included the following elements: (1) positive reframing of otherwise negative events, thereby making them meaningful and inspiring; (2) delayed gratification or patience, which bought them time when they were waiting for opportunities to unfold; (3) religious faith coupled with determination, which empowered them with a sense of control in situations where they may have had little to none; (4) gratitude, which helped them feel good while building their lives from scratch; and (5) positive thinking, which allowed them to focus on conventional problem-solving rather than resorting to crime. In the remaineder of this section, I will describe these various components of psychological strategies and outline the ways in which they helped the women in my study with the desistance process.

Positive Reframing

> *"We dwell on such the negative sometimes, or I do and my family is always pointing out the negative, negative, negative. But looking at the happy and the positive things, you know, makes it a little bit, you know,*

better (laughs). It makes the outcome of the negative not so bad."

-Tanya, a desister

Although all of the respondents agreed that they would never want to return to prison as inmates, those who were desisting from crime after incarceration had been able to recast the horrors of their time in prison in a redemptive or positive light as opposed to solely a negative experience. The process of being sentenced to prison and removed from the larger society, not to mention the harsh treatment they experience while incarcerated, had a profoundly negative effect on these women's lives, their psyche, and self-esteem. Desisting from crime, however, required a reconstruction of negative experiences and criminal pasts as *necessary* for certain positive or learning outcomes. That is, while prison was a terrible place to be, women who desist from crime were able to find a way to learn from their experiences and see how positive outcomes can arise from seemingly totally negative situations. According to McAdams (2006) this process of positive reframing is significant because it represents the narrator's ability to transform their negative experiences into positive stories and identities, which ultimately contribute to how they view themselves and behave in the world (89). Finding meaning in their most difficult experiences provided desisters with a storehouse of strength from which to draw when faced with adversity. Maruna (2001) references Frankl's notion of "tragic optimism," the idea that good can come out of suffering, as a way of explaining the redemptive sequences in desisters' narratives (98). According to Frankl (1959), finding meaning in unbearable hardship had the power to make such hardships bearable, stating "suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning, such as the meaning of a sacrifice" (117). One key difference between meaningless and meaningful suffering is the role of the sufferer as either an anonymous victim of circumstances or a meaningful

actor in some larger scheme, respectively. For marginalized and stigmatized groups, specifically formerly incarcerated women, a worldview that affords them an integral place in the larger scheme of life can be especially empowering and redeeming.

Once desisters gave meaning to negative events, they began to interpret those events as necessary and worthwhile experiences, thereby mitigating the shame and pain that they associated with them. One way that desisters found meaning in their incarceration experiences was by framing them as part of "God's will" which shifts the onus of responsibility onto God and away from desisters' original criminal behavior. In doing so, desisters are able to lessen the guilt and shame associated with their crimes and focus instead on their special role in God's larger plan. According to Maruna et al. (2006), religious conversion scripts are one way narrators can transform the otherwise meaningless crisis of incarceration into "a gift or opportunity" that is part of God's larger plan for their lives (175). Several desisters gave accounts of a divine hand being responsible for or allowing negative events for a greater spiritual purpose. Mary, a desister, described how her incarceration was God's way of providing her with the time she needed to sort through her past, figure out what she needed, and change her thought process:

> *He stepped in and he changed it. He sat me down on my butt for two years and He opened my eyes to the reality of what that kind of lifestyle brings. He showed me the minor things that could happen. I could have died. There are several times I could have died. I was raped. I could have had some sort of terminal disease. There are a lot of worse things that could happen, but God just sat me down on my butt and really made me realize that. Time was really what I needed in prison. I think that's what I needed. It changed my whole way of thinking. It really has.*

Another desister, Angela, feels that God not only had a hand in her incarceration, but she also believes that everything negative that transpired in her life was meant to occur and divinely ordained:

> *It's like, if he was a merciful God, if he were a loving God, he wouldn't have let someone rape me at the age of seven and then again at the age of 14. He wouldn't have let me live in abandoned buildings, eat out of trashcans, prostitute to make a living. I mean, I wouldn't have been through that stuff. But I had to learn, because I didn't know God, that's why I went through what I went through. Because I had to get where I am at today.*

Positive reframing was a strategy that helped desisters re-imagine negative events as meaningful and redemptive. In this way, some desisters were able to reimagine their otherwise negative experiences as part of a "God's will" for their lives and/or opportunities for personal growth, which mitigated the pain of that experience and allowed them to find meaning in difficult times. The narratives of female desisters in my study seem to illustrate how this positive meaning-making ability extends beyond their incarceration experiences to include other negative experiences. Rachel, a desister, believes everything that happens to her is part of God's plan for her. She is happy knowing her life is in God's hands even when she faces the everyday challenges of life with a criminal record:

> *Every day. Every day I'm pretty happy. Every day I am satisfied with my life. However, it turned out that day, I'm sure that's how God wanted it to be, and…I just think, "That's the way it was supposed to be."*

When she understands her life as something God ordained, she is able to accept it, feel happy and satisfied, and take on another day. Statements like "this too shall pass," "taking it one day at a time" and "life goes on" are also examples of psychological strategies that helped desisters narrate and cope with hard times.

Persisters were less likely to reframe negative events into positive ones and instead, used negative events as justification for why they continued to offend. Cindy, a persister, describes being robbed while she was on vacation and how the need to replace her stolen furniture was good enough reason for her to forge checks:

> *The last recent thing that happened to me: I went out of town for a family vacation down to Busch Gardens. Left on Thursday. Came back on Monday. And somebody had broken into my house and stolen my entire house. Everything in it. They just stole it. So stuff like that is what makes me want to go back to doin' illegal stuff on a regular basis. But you still have to stay focused. But I did illegal stuff to replace the stuff I had, that they took from me. Literally, my bed, my TVs, bathroom sets, all of that they just took all of my stuff. I got an attitude and said, "I'm just gonna go and get it back again" so I did illegal stuff to replace the stuff they took from the house.*

Rita, a persister, describes turning to prostitution and drugs after losing her home:

> *The worst moment is me losing my house and comin' up here to Atlanta. Husband goin' to jail, leaving me out here on the street and I have to get out here and sell*
> *my ass to get high.*

When negative events befell persisters, as exemplified in Rita's statement above, they were less likely to reframe them into opportunities for growth, learning, or empowerment. Nina, a perister, says that negative things that have happened to her from contracting HIV and getting shot are all a consequence of "karma" which leaves little room for positive reinterpretation. Nina's philosophy on negative experiences is exemplified in the following quote:

> *Say for instance if you go out here God forbid, if you go outside my door and fall on them steps, that's just karma. Shit happens. What goes around comes around. You do something wrong to somebody it's gonna come back. And when it comes back, it's gonna come back 700 times worse. 700 times worse. That's why a lot of stuff I've done in my life, thank God I'm still here. I've done got shot in my leg. I got a plate and 8 screws in my leg right now. That's because I've did so much wrong. Can't blame nobody but myself 'cause I've done so much wrong in my life.*

In this statement, Nina feels like she deserves to be punished for having "done so much wrong" and there is little opportunity for redemption. Without the psychological strategy of positive reframing, persisters were less equipped to handle hardships and in a number of instances described turning to crime as a way of coping with challenges.

Regardless of the event women described, desisters were much better than persisters at employing psychological strategies to minimize the pain and shame of negative events, thereby transforming them into empowering and meaningful experiences. Research has shown the psychological benefits of finding meaning in traumatic experiences (Rumgay 2004; Maruna et al. 2006) and this was also evident in the narratives of desisters in my study. Formerly incarcerated women who utilize this psychological strategy of positive reframing are able to experience a psychological advantage in terms of managing stress and painful experiences. Desisters were much more likely than persisters to reframe negative events in a positive light providing them with a greater psychological advantage to take on the challenges that arise post-incarceration and steer clear of committing crimes in the future.

Delayed Gratification

> *I just knew it would be gradual, the things that I wanted to do…There were some goals that I had. I wanted to have a job within two weeks. It's taken two extra weeks for me to get a job, but now I've got a job. I'm gonna work on gettin' cell phone, getting to school, getting a car. These are goals that I have set for myself. So it's slowly coming together. One step before you take another before another before another. But you know it will get there, I'm confident enough now. I wasn't before when I first got out, but I am confident enough now that things are going to work out.*
> -Mary, a desister

Desistance takes time. With so many structural barriers prohibiting access to housing, employment, education, and other resources, building a conventional life can

take years. Desisters in my study were aware that rebuilding their lives would happen gradually. Delayed gratification and patience were psychological strategies that helped desisters stay motivated throughout the lengthy process of building a conventional life. On the contrary, impatience and anticipating instant gratification, both of which lead to feelings of frustration and ultimate resignation, were ineffective coping strategies for managing challenging long-term situations, such as drug rehabilitation, pursuing a degree, or seeking employment. Persisters described returning to crime as after the pain of rejection or frustration associated with repeated setbacks. Exercising patience and delayed gratification were psychological strategies that desisters used to cope with repeated rejection, allowing them to endure many setbacks until rare opportunities arise.

Desisters learned to cope with delayed gratification and endure long waits associated with assembling together the many pieces of a conventional life. Desisters did not articulate their movement away from crime as a smooth, easy, or immediate transition. In fact, when asked what advice they had to share with women getting ready to be released from prison, desisters like Trina warned against women expecting reentry to be "a walk in the park" and the importance of exercising patience as a way to cope specifically with drug cravings:

> *You got to be ready for rejection. You got to be ready for that. You got to prepare for not everything to be hunky dory when you come out…And guess what? You're gonna have to have patience. If you don't have no patience and you just wanna go back out there and you gonna smoke drugs, you gonna fail your urine test and you're going back to prison…You got to want to stop using drugs. You got to want to stop selling drugs. You got to wanna make it. It's not gonna be easy. It's goin' to be hard. You gonna cry lots of days, lots of nights. It's a struggle. But if you want it, you can have it.*

Trina insists that patience is essential for fighting the urge to use drugs, coping with rejection and for bearing with the struggles of reentry. Mary, a desister, also cautions that life after prison can be "intimidating at first" but that women must be persistent and "stick with it." In the quote at the start of this section and in the quotes below, Mary explains that after years of making quick money and being dependent on illegal drugs, she had to learn how to gradually earn income and wait-out her cravings:

> *Well, the biggest challenge was finding a job. I didn't realize the economy was as bad as it was. I thought, 'I'm just gonna get out there and I'll find a job the first day I get out there.' But reality set in and a lot of people are accepting applications, but…I'm limited to what types of jobs I can work now because of my background, because of my record.*

When asked how she coped with the challenge of not being able to find a job, Mary replied:

> *Very slowly. Very patiently. Patience is something I've never had. I'm use to instant gratification. I think that partly has to do with getting high and the money I used to make, I expected things up front in my hand. Patience, I am learning to have to deal with. And um. I'm not used to it but in the long run I think things will pan out. It has. You know. The Pastor's been tellin' me, 'You've got to exercise patience. Patience, you know. When you start exercising patience, good things come to those who are patient.' I'm like slowly startin' to see that if you are patient enough, things do come along and it just seems like it takes forever. I think patience is the main thing that I am having a challenge with.*

As alluded to in Mary's quote, drug rehabilitation is a key component of desistance, particularly because many of the crimes committed by the women in my study were related to their drug addictions. At the time of the interview, desisters shared in common that they had been "clean" for a period of time, while at least 40% of persisters were still actively using drugs. This finding is consistent with research on female crime in where drug addiction "is clearly associated with criminal continuity" and in cases where women are able to desist, "avoiding drugs is central to their efforts to sustain a more

conforming lifestyle" (Giordano 2010:68-9; see also Uggen & Thompson 2003). Tanya, a desister, said that learning patience was fundamental in helping her get off drugs and desist. One persister, Rita believes that her drug cravings consistently sabotage her attempts to build a conventional life:

> *I thought when I got out I was gonna get off drugs. I was gonna be okay. I thought my life was gonna be better but it's still the same. It hasn't changed. I face, you know, gettin' up every day, tryin' to accomplish something. And you know when I try, things look like they goin' okay for me, then the next things I know, I go a couple of weeks without doing drugs and then here comes this urge to smoke [crack]. That wrecks it, you know. [Bracketed text added for context]*

Patience was something that persisters struggled with both in terms of overcoming drug addictions and finding employment, two areas that desisters were able to use strategies of delaying gratification to help buy them time. Without the strategies that help women cope with repeated rejection and the long wait associated with finding employment, persisters returned to drugs and crime. Jo, a persister, talks about her frustration with not being hired for a job that she believed she was most qualified for:

> *I tried, I went for what they said with the whole like "be honest on the applications" and go for jobs but that shit didn't work out to well for me. I remember going to UPS to try get a job. And I did all, everything that they said – try to look all professional and present yourself a certain way. I did all that and I went and I remember sitting in the waitin' room all these people, all these people who like had their kids there. They had their kids there. They were just so—They so shouldn't have got the job over me. But everybody got hired but me. So at that point I was like, "You know, this shit is definitely not goin' to work." So I was like "Fuck it."*

Put simply, psychological strategies like patience and delayed gratification serve as resilience strategies that help women stave off drug cravings and encourage them to keep trying in the face of setbacks, thereby increasing their chances for successful desistance.

Religious Faith & Determined Action

I know there is a God. I know He loves me. I know He is going to provide for me and I know if I sit around nothing is going to get accomplished because He can only do so much. You got to go out there and do what He says to do in order for Him to show you His grace. If you sit around and say, 'God I want a job. I want a job' but you don't put forth no effort, you aren't gonna get that job. He can open that door but if you don't do the footwork, you're not gonna get it.

-Angela, a desister

Religious faith was of particular importance for all of the participants in my study. All of the desisters in this sample referenced Christian religious themes or going to church at some point during their interview. When asked how they would describe their religious beliefs or spirituality, one referred to herself as "very spiritual" and another said that she believed in "doing what's right", while the remaining eight explicitly stated that they were Christian and that they "believed in God." Most of the persisters referenced Christian religious themes, but few said that they regularly attended church services. Seven persisters explicitly stated that they were Christian and "believed in God." The remaining three described themselves as spiritual. In general, women seemed to be comforted by the belief that God was on their side and would ultimately see them through difficult times.

Maruna et al. (2006) speculated that religious conversion self-narratives developed in prison, if maintained upon release, would aid in the desistance process by empowering ex-offenders and reducing shame. My findings reveal that religious faith alone did not support desistance, but when combined with determined action on the part of women, served as a psychological strategy that helped in the desistance process. In addition, which I will describe in greater depth in the following chapter, religious

narratives also provided women with access to social supports which afforded them relational and material benefits that played a key role in the desistance process.

The interview material suggests that the religious scripts that desisters used were learned from and reinforced by Christian programs, mentors, chaplains, and scriptures, but may have also been reinforced by secular programs offering similar scripts for coping with challenging times (e.g. silver lining, gratitude, hope, faith, etc.). Regardless of their origin, however, it became clear that these scripts were serving multiple functions in terms of empowering women in difficult situations and motivating them to work hard at building a conventional life. Without a doubt, desisters in my study believed their success was predicated upon their faith in God to take care of the challenges that were beyond their control, but they were also aware of the role they, as agents, had to play in meeting the challenges that were within their control. Desistance required determination, persistence and hard work that rarely resulted in any type of payoff.

Calling upon the combined psychological resources of faith and action helps desisters in situations where much effort is needed in order to improve their chances of success. For example, formerly incarcerated women who applied for 30 jobs over a period of time had a greater chance of being hired than those women who only applied for 2 jobs. That is, faith alone does not get a woman a job; applying for jobs, even after rejection, can eventually get a woman a job. For these women in particular, the combination of having faith that God will guide them *and* actually putting in the work of applying for jobs is crucial in their desistence process. Faith and action went hand in hand for women who were successfully desisting and they referred to this combination when

explaining what it took for them to desist. Angela, a desister, offered the following

advice to women getting ready to be released:

> *Find whoever you choose to call your God and just stay focused. Don't give up. Don't get discouraged. It's gonna be hard when you first come home or wherever you have as a home. You're not gonna find a job right away and if you do, just be careful. It's not peaches and cream out here at first but if you just stay focused and you keep trying…you can make it.*

In addition to giving this advice, Angela also practiced what she preached, holding on to

faith and believing that if she kept applying, then she would eventually find the job that

God had set aside for her:

> *There are a lot of other places that won't hire you. They refuse to. Even if you are bonded, they don't care. I say okay thank you and I walk away. I pull off their property and I'll sit there and say God why? Why would you tell me to go there? I follow where he tells me to go and when the door gets shut in my face, I just get so discouraged. But I know when that door and five others close, I know there is one somewhere. I just got to find it. I know there is one out there.*

Tanya, a desister, believes that she was able to find a job because of a combination of her

faith and effort:

> *I never had a job [that] I could remember. It's like, as soon as I had a chance to go out [and apply for jobs], 30 days after the program, I got hired instantly. I guess it was—it was God. But it was also my strong will.*

Desisters described not only relying on faith in times of need, but also contributing

determined effort towards building a conventional life. Faith without action was a

common theme in persisters' narratives. Many described having faith in God's power to

improve their lives, but didn't recognize the role they had to play in building a

conventional life. Nina, a persister, demonstrates this phenomenon of faith without

action:

I do believe in God. I do got God in my life. I do have God in my heart. So I think that one day God gonna make my life a whole lot better. And He got a plan for me…So I thank God, God has brought me this far, but I really do need a job before something else happens or I find myself doin' wrong again because you do need money to live.

Nina believes that God will make her life better and that she needs a job to earn a living, but she fails to mention one key step in making these thoughts a reality. What's missing from her narrative, and other persisters' narratives, was an understanding that desistance would require sustained action on their part and that faith alone wouldn't make jobs appear.

Religious faith helped desisters by distracting them from the reality of limited opportunities and convincing them that God would provide them with all they needed. In contrast, because they didn't give up exerting effort, desisters were more likely to eventually encounter an opportunity. In a way, faith gave these women a reason to keep trying until they ultimately succeeded.

Gratitude

So I thank the good Lord I am still walkin' the walk. And I have no intention of looking back. None. I want to keep goin' forward. Keep goin' forward and bring the whole lot of people on the way. That's what I want to do. That's what I thought when I came out. I said, "Thank you Jesus." I said, "Thank you Lord. Thank you. Thank you. You brought me from a mighty long ways. Thank you." That's what I did. That's what I was thinkin,' that my life's been an uphill journey. I'm comin' up on the rough side of the mountain, but guess what? I'm climbing though. You understand? So that's what I was thinkin' when I came out. Time for me to climb that mountain higher (laughs) and don't look back.

-Denise, a desister

On average, the women in my study experienced myriad disadvantages, including poverty, illness, and abuse. In fact, three desisters and two persisters that I interviewed were unable to recall positive memories because "nothing real good ever

happened" in their lives. Bleak circumstances, combined with few resources and opportunities left women feeling overwhelmed, depressed and discouraged. Given these hardships, it is especially remarkable that what differentiated the two groups wasn't their experiences, but their attitudes towards their past and their hope about the future. One psychological strategy that helped desisters maintain a positive attitude about their painful memories and current challenges was *gratitude*. Feeling grateful helped desisters feel good about their lives by helping them focus on what they had, even if it was relatively very little. In this way, gratitude helped desisters maintain a positive feeling about their circumstances, even excited about the elements they were grateful for, in the midst of lack and limited opportunities. Rebuilding a conventional life (or for some building it for the first time) with nothing but the stain of a criminal record more often than not means having to compromise what a desister wants for what they are realistically able to get. In other words, any job or home would suffice, so long as it provided income and shelter, respectively. Gratitude was a critical psychological strategy for desisters in the early part of their desistance because it helped the women feel content with what little they *actually had*, rather than focusing on how much more they *could have* if they engaged in criminal activities.

When desisters ended stories about negative experiences on a positive note, it was common for the positive finish to involve something they felt optimistic about or grateful for. Desisters described feeling grateful for opportunities, individuals who invested in them and generally about "the little things" in life. In the positive psychological literature, gratitude is understood as positive emotion with numerous emotional, psychological and social benefits including playing a role in "increasing well-being"

(Emmons & McCullough 2003:388). It may well be the case that grateful feelings expressed in desisters' narratives are both reflective of and mutually re-enforcing symptoms of emotional well-being in that they help the women feel happier, more positive, and more satisfied with their lives (Keyes 2003). According to Emmons and McCullough (2003), gratitude "facilitates coping with stress and adversity" (388; see also Aspinwall 1998; Folkman & Moskowitz 2000). It appears as though gratitude was a useful coping strategy at times when the women were experiencing numerous challenges and dealing with limited resources. In addition to these benefits, Emmons and McCullough (2003) highlight the ways in which gratitude contributes positively to social bonds and resources because it "inspires prosocial reciprocity," "altruism" and can help people "to feel loved and cared for by others" (388). Maruna's (2001) desisters talked about feeling grateful that someone "believed in" them and for their newfound empowerment (78). Echoing Maruna's (2001) research, the desisters in my study offer multiple references to feeling grateful which seems to suggest that this is an important emotional resource for them. Gratitude functions as a coping strategy and has the potential to enhance emotional and social well-being; for these reasons, gratitude may serve as a useful resource for desisters.

A number of psychological strategies make up what appears to be an orientation towards gratitude among desisters. Several desisters talked about trying to find happiness in the little things they were glad to have back after their time in prison as well as feeling glad that their experiences, though negative, were not *as bad* as other people's tragedies. Mary, a desister, describes feeling discouraged that she has been out of prison and living in a halfway house for a month and still hasn't found a job. She explains how frustrating

it feels to struggle financially knowing that she could make thousands of dollars if she returned to sex work. In order to live in the halfway house, Mary has to follow strict rules and routines, which is tiresome for her because she has "always been independent." She ultimately redeems these complaints by stating "in the long run, it's all gonna be worth it" and as challenging as it is to live in the halfway house, "I'm very grateful for the opportunity."

Another desister, Tanya, began talking about the things she disliked about her living situation including the fact that she lived in fear for her two small children because her next door neighbor was a registered sex offender. After stating this, however, Tanya shifts her perspective to feeling grateful that she and her family have a place to live:

> *When I first got out, it was--there was just no way. 'How am I going to be able to afford living by myself, living on minimum wage? Well, I live on minimum wage right now. But each day my son always complains, "When are we going to get a house?" I'm like "Connor, right now we just need to be grateful that we have a roof over our heads and that there's plenty of food in the refrigerator.' And that's how I have to look at it sometimes. It could be worse than this. We have A/C . We have a roof. (laughs). We got TV. We got cable (laughs). So, cable, Internet. So I have to look at these things. No we're not driving some fabulous rich car or we're not living in a million dollar home. But I'll get there. I'm not going to say a million dollar home but I'll get to where it's financially comfortable…Now I have a different outlook…We really don't like this place. But, like I said, we're grateful.*

Sometimes, as in the example above, when things are so bad that they struggle with finding things to feel grateful for, desisters feel grateful simply because their situations "could be worse." In order to feel grateful for their circumstances, they envision people who have what they imagine to be worse-off experiences. Tanya, a desister, describes how difficult it is for her to wake up early to get ready for work, but

then plays down the pain of getting out of bed early in the morning by thinking of a friend in a much more painful situation:

> *I had to get up at 4 o'clock this morning to be at work, which is sometimes a struggle but I'm just grateful I can wake up and be healthy and just thinking about my friend's husband just died.*

Melissa, a desister, echoes this sentiment, "You think you're goin' through something but some people have it worse than you." Similarly, Rose, a persister, is "not pleased" with her life, but, she says "when I talk with other people I should be pleased with it because other people are in worst shape than I." Later in the interview, she refers to this type of reasoning again and poses the following somewhat rhetorical question to me, the interviewer:

> *Have you ever been in a situation when you kept thinkin' about it, and thinking about it, and thinkin' about it and you told somebody and you found out they had a worser problem than you? And then your problem got to be a smaller problem because now you're thinkin about 'Dog, all I needed was $20. This woman needs $1000. Oh my God.' Your $20 need just falls into place.*

In this hypothetical situation, Rose describes how knowing of another persons' greater need, makes her feel as though her need "falls into place," meaning it is put into perspective thereby making her need relatively less problematic and therefore more manageable.

Some respondents compared their current state with a time in their own lives that was worse. Some participants would compare the way their life was going with especially challenging parts of their past and feel happy about for how far they had come. Compared to a time in her past when she was living a dangerous lifestyle, Trina, a desister, felt happy and grateful:

I'm so blessed. I'm happy. I thank God for showing me mercy and giving me a second chance, really 101th chance, from all the bullets, for real, from all the guns and different things I was around, the diseases I could have got, this is my 101th chance. He has showed me mercy. I'm just blessed. We are just so blessed.

In this statement, Trina derives satisfaction and gratitude from imagining all the things that could have gone wrong, but didn't. Another desister, Sherice, also feels proud of herself and happy about her life in part because of how far she's come:

I'm proud of myself (laughs) to be honest. I went through a lot and I've overcome a lot and I'm happy where my life is now.

Gratitude is also a useful strategy in terms of helping desisters appreciate aspects of life that are free and therefore, affordable. Being deprived of many freedoms and choices while in prison made the women feel especially content with the simple pleasures of life that exist outside of prison. Desisters talked about never wanting to take the "little things" for granted or lose sight of their rediscovered joy. When focusing on "the little things in life," desisters manage to feel good even in the midst of having very little. Compared to a time in her past when she was living in a house where drugs were being produced and sold, Trina, a desister, feels that she is in a much better place both in terms of her home and emotional well-being:

Little things like that I didn't do before, because there was always people coming in and out after drugs, it was just chaos, and now it's so slow and so peaceful and I'm just so happy like this.

In the positive part of this redemption sequence, Trina describes the "little things" that she was unable to do in the past, but now that she has them, she is especially grateful. Angela, a desister, said that her experience in prison was "terrifying" and felt like she was in "Hell." But her story about prison doesn't end there. She also tells of how prison

helped her realize that she had taken her freedom for granted and as a result, she became more grateful:

> *I learned to appreciate my freedom. I didn't know what it was like to be forced to do something, being told basically when to go to the bathroom, when to go to bed, when to take your medicine, when to eat. And I learned to appreciate it the more I spent at Metro... it's not something I would wish on anybody, but it made me appreciate a lot more things out here in the free world.*

After 18 years in prison, Rachel, a desister, describes how grateful she is to have simple freedoms that were not available to her in prison:

> *It's just so, it's amazing just to sit here, to be able to sit here and just you know, no one to tell me when to get up or go to bed or when I can go into the refrigerator. Something simple, so easy, something that you can lose while you are incarcerated as far as going into the refrigerator and getting an egg out, a piece of bread. When you get ready, and you really really start valuing life and things, you look at things different, really different. So. (laughs) It's amazing when I just sit down sometimes I think I just get very emotional about things.*

In addition to being a way in which to value and appreciate the little things, gratitude was also a psychological strategy that offered these women a way to deal with the pain of past trauma and tragedy. Sherice, a desister, described one of the scariest moments in her childhood, when she sat beside her dying Aunt, following her Aunt' request that Sherice be by her bedside:

> *It was terrifying, actually just being there when a person passed, being by someone who is close to you and now I look at it as she wanted me to be the last person…That meant a lot to me. And it let me know that I had a special place in her heart and I'm just grateful for that. Yep. (crying)*

Desistance and feelings of gratitude were linked even in persisters' narrative accounts. Persisters described feeling grateful less often than desisters, but in those rare instances that they used gratitude as a psychological strategy, persisters' positive emotions were short lived. For example, Anne describes experiencing a tension between

appreciating the "little things" and thinking about how much money she could earn through crime. When she focuses less on the things she is grateful for and instead, devotes her attention to the money she could earn illegally, "stuff goes really wrong" as she states and consequently, she reoffends:

> *I could be happy over little things. I could be happy washing my clothes you know what I mean? That make me happy. The smell of Gain. When I washed my clothes I was stupid happy like it was retarded. You'd never seen somebody smell their clothes so many times. It's the little things. It's the little things. The only thing is (pause) tryin' to make it without fallin' back to quick money. That's the only thing because when I start thinking— stuff goes really wrong when you over think shit. Really does. It goes wrong.*

Somehow, feeling happy or grateful for the little things distracts Anne's thinking away from earning money illegally. When she loses sight of life's simple pleasures, somehow "it goes wrong" and she returns to crime.

Persisters' depictions of brief periods of desistance were also characterized as periods where they felt especially grateful. Importantly, in narratives about their thwarted desistance, persisters simultaneously describe losing touch with grateful feelings and their return to crime. A persister, Jo, describes how happy and grateful she felt when she first got out of prison over the "simple shit." The satisfaction she derived from these simple pleasures, however, is soon contaminated, or wears off, and then "real life kicks back in."

> *Like me, when you're comin' out of prison you start to realize, 'Ah, I should really be appreciative just the fact that I am able to put a straw in this soda. I have a straw now.' When you get out, you're just happy for everything. I have a ketchup packet when I want one, you know what I'm sayin? (laughs) I can use salt on my food. Simple shit. I was like really happy, but then like the shimmer of that newness kind of wears back to almost regular and then like real life kicks back in. So I guess, where that time was good, I had less than I had in any other time in my life. That was probably the best little few months. Until real life kicked back in. For real.*

For Jo, real life kicking back in appeared to involve losing touch with her happiness, no longer feeling grateful for simple things and ultimately, returning to crime. Anne and Jo both described instances in which they were both desisting and feeling grateful, though neither persister was able to maintain these simultaneous states for very long. Both persisters explained experiencing a shift in perspective from feeling very grateful for the simple things in their lives to feeling unsatisfied with simple things and wanting more. Moreover, both persisters responded to these feelings of lack and longing by returning to crimes that would generate the kind of money and lifestyle that they believed would make them happier. Ironically enough, these same persisters described periods of desistance as the happiest times in their lives because they were able to feel grateful even when they had very little in terms of material wealth. When these persisters were feeling most happy and grateful, they happened to be desisting. On the contrary, persisters described returning to crime at times when they also happened to lose touch with their feelings of gratitude.

Positive psychological literature on the benefits of gratitude offers some clues as to why possessing gratitude may have been helpful to persisters when attempting to desist, as well as why a rift in gratitude might have contributed to their persistence. Perhaps it is the case that when gratitude is lost, so too are the social, emotional, and psychological benefits that come with it. Psychologists Emmons and McCullough (2003) report that "an effective approach for maximizing one's contentment is to be consciously grateful for one's blessings" (386). Scholars have found that practicing gratitude can have many psychological, social and spiritual benefits (2003:388). I argue that the benefits of gratitude cited by Emmons and McCullough in terms of "coping with stress

and adversity" appear to be especially useful throughout the desistance process (2003:388; see also Aspinwall 1998; Folkman & Moskowitz 2000).

Desisters seemed to be actively employing gratitude as a coping mechanism, whereas persisters were only temporarily able to maintain states of gratitude during brief periods of desistance. The ability to appreciate the simple things in life is especially useful for desisters who had to learn to live off of a smaller income than they had earned when they were committing crimes. Several desisters in my study, as in Maruna's (2001) LDS sample, expressed "that they had never been as financially poor as they are now that they have gone legit" (101). However, Maruna (2001) did not talk about gratitude as a strategy for coping with trying financial times. In my study, however, it was evident that desisters expressed gratitude for what little they had which helped them feel satisfied with their conventional lifestyle despite it not being particularly lucrative. This is consistent with Rumgay's findings that "resilient women consciously cultivated positive appreciation of their current resources and achievements" (2004:413; see also Brodsky 1999). Persisters in my study, though grateful at certain points in their lives, were more easily distracted by the material wealth they could acquire illegally, which made it difficult for them to feel satisfied with the "little things." This is not to say, of course, that possessing gratitude (or any psychological strategy for that matter) alone is enough to keep some desisting and others persisting at committing crimes. Opportunities and resources or the lack thereof matter to be sure (and such aspects of the desisting process will be covered more in the following chapter). What I am arguing is that it appears as though gratitude, and its role in enhancing symptoms of positive emotional well-being, may be an important coping strategy that contributes positively to the desistance process,

whereas an inability to feel grateful for the "little things" might make it difficult for offenders to live a conventional life with fewer means, a life that many with a criminal record are forced to live, at least temporarily, upon their release. Although Maruna (2001) did not identify gratitude as a useful strategy in the desistance process, this was certainly apparent in my findings and supported by Rumgay (2004) who states that feeling grateful for what little one has is a resilience strategy that is common among desisters who are enacting pro-social identities. My findings both confirm Rumgay's finding that desisting women are more grateful than persisting women and extend her theory by explaining how and why gratitude helps women desist in terms of helping them cope during trying financial times, distracting them from illegal modes of earning money, and encouraging them to feel positively about their meager lifestyle—points that Rumgay does not address.

Positive Thinking: "Keeping a Positive Mind"

Nearly all of the women in my study talked about "staying positive" or "keeping a positive mind" when they talked about coping with challenges. This meant focusing on conventional ways of problem-solving, positive self-statements, ideas about their purpose in life and optimistic thoughts about what was possible in the future. Respondents warned that if their thinking strayed from positive thoughts to negative ones, then they would likely return to crime. Desistance was a matter of as "staying focused on something positive"[19] and coming out of prison "with a positive attitude."[20] My finding is consistent with LeBel et al. (2008), who find that "individual cognitions and meaning systems prior to release from prison" affect their likelihood for desistance upon release

---

[19] Sherice, a desister
[20] Rachel, a desister

because "positive 'mind over matter' helps the individual to triumph over problems and make the best of situations" (155).

Respondents cultivated positive feelings by literally focusing on positive memories that made them feel good, focusing their attention on the goals they wanted to accomplish, and/or following the rules. For Rachel, staying positive meant following prison rules while she was incarcerated and not trying to "buck the system" by "stealing from the dining hall" or "walking in the middle of the sidewalk" when prisoners were supposed to walk on yellow painted lines at all times. Brandy, another desister, describes how her positive thinking in the midst of unemployment relates to her feeling hopeful about her future and confident in her work ethic:

> *I am trying to stay positive and stay focused. Hopefully somebody will give me a chance and see that that was my past. I've been clean for five years. If I could just get somebody to give me a chance, then I know I'm a good worker. I'm a hard worker.*

Tanya, a desister, explained that thinking positively is about living a purposeful life, and without this resilience strategy, it would be easy to commit crime:

> *Just going about day-to-day without a purpose and that's just like food, shelter, a place to sleep and that's just surviving to me and that is meaningless. When you are living life you are actually enjoying who you are and I think that's the biggest thing is that we don't enjoy who we are or we don't like ourselves so we tend to stray to negative things and that's what gets people locked up. If you look at the positive and look at what you can do in society or do for another, I think that happiness or that purpose or that meaningfulness that you have, like "Oh God. I did something meaningful" or "I'm striving to do something that makes a huge outcome. So I always strive to do the best you can. And put God first – always. Always. Makes a big difference.*

Though more commonly referenced in desisters' narratives, the importance of thinking positively wasn't lost on persisters. At 72 years old, Rose, a persister, understands the importance of doing away with negative thinking:

> *I'm tryin' to put all negative thoughts behind me. Because once you've passed fifty, you're on the road down to a death. I don't think that I need to take my last few years and screw them up being miserable.*

In the quote above, Rose, a persister, recognizes that she must "put all the negative thoughts behind" her in order to ensure that she doesn't continue to feeling miserable during her "last few years" of life. But what's missing in Rose's statements is the importance of positive thinking rather than simply the absence of negative thoughts. LeBel et al. (2008) find that "a negative frame of mind leads to drift and defeatism" which make reentry all the more challenging for persisters (155). Cindy, a persister, demonstrates the danger of thinking negatively about the way her life is going:

> *I don't like my life because – I mean, I graduated high school with a 4.0 GPA. I had a promising life. I should of went to college. I opted not to go for reasons I can't explain because I had scholarships and everything. But I just really wasted it away. Now it's time to put it back together and it's just hard. It's not as easy. Like some say, it's all in who you know 'cause I know some people who have gotten out of prison and gotten jobs and they're doin' good. But I just can't seem to get it together. I can't find a job. Everybody wants to do background checks and when they find out you've been in jail for forgery, that's kind of like a hard one. It's easier for people who've been to jail for assault to get out and get a job than it is with me with forgery because that's money fraud transactions.*

Cindy feels that she has "wasted" her life and is sure that the nature of her criminal record makes it harder for her to get a job. Mandy, a persister, also describes not standing a chance with her criminal record:

> *When I first got out I had visions of a job, finding a place again, you know. But it was a fool's dream. Fool's dream. I went everywhere lookin' for a job. I went to a lot of placing looking for a job but it never panned out because they would ask you, "Where were you between this year and this year? What were you doing?" And you have to tell people "I was incarcerated" or tell them what for and once they found out that and see their expression on their faces change. Like when you fill out the application and then there right at the bottom they tell you we do a criminal background check. You know. You know you ain't got a chance. I knew. I knew I didn't have a chance.*

Mandy's take on the challenges of finding employment with a criminal record is an example of the characteristically negative bent which was common in persisters' narratives. Again, both groups had to contend having made mistakes, missing out on positive experiences because they were either on drugs or committing other crimes, and having trouble finding work with a criminal record. What differentiated the two groups was that desisters focused on positive thoughts and reframing negative events, while persisters were more likely to dwell on negative events and feel overwhelmed by them as a result. In sum, positive thinking was a psychological strategy that helped with the desistance process by distracting attention away from the difficult reality they faced that could otherwise make women feel as though they would never be able to build a conventional life and returning crime was their only choice.

Summary

Psychological strategies helped make women more resilient in the desistance process. These strategies allowed desisters to transform nearly every negative aspect of their lives, from past abuse, incarceration and abuse into experiences that were meaningful, growth-promoting and empowering. Psychological strategies served as mental shields by protecting desisters from dwelling on pain, shame and guilt; reinforcing their positive identity shifts; while also empowering them to persevere in the midst of challenges and setbacks. Together with identity strategies, psychological strategies supported desistance by allowing desisters to define who they were and what they were capable of, regardless of stereotypical, stigmatizing and dehumanizing messages, regardless of their past crimes, and regardless of the unlikely probability that they will succeed in building a conventional life. Resilience strategies help women desist anyway.

Chapter Summary

All of women I interviewed recounted pasts were littered with neglect and abuse, with many explanations of offending tied to their painful pasts. Many had internalized self-hatred and shame surrounding their victimization which explained the types of crimes they had committed. For example, many of the women in my study used crime to support their drug habits that, it can be argued, were attempts at self-medicating their pain. Painful experiences were common among all participants, not the least of which included their incarceration. What differentiated the two groups was their effective and frequent use of resilience strategies when coping with painful experiences. Identity-based and psychological strategies helped women recover from traumatic pasts, realize their agency, regain self-love and affection, recover from substance abuse, have faith in the impossible, exercise patience and gratitude, and cope with the challenges of reentry and other obstacles that might come their way. In the next chapter, I will explore the ways in which women exercised interpersonal strategies that balanced both protecting themselves from harmful relationships and allowing themselves to develop positive relationships with individuals who supported their desistance.

Chapter 5: The Role of Interpersonal Resilience Strategies in Supporting Desistance

"I didn't want to be around the type of people [who are using drugs]. You keep hearing this quote all your life "You got to change people, places and things to make it" so I didn't go back to where I came from. I wanted a complete new start along with my life. And I had an excellent, excellent counselor and my counselor helped me. He really pushed me so I went to all my classes, MRT and Successful Living and my NA classes."

-Trina, a desister

"I just deal with myself (laughs). I guess because being in prison, I do not still have the prison mentality, but in a way I do because I don't want to be bothered. I just want to be by myself. So I don't really have relationships like that…I think prison messed that up for me."

-Cindy, a persister

Introduction

Desistance certainly requires great effort on the part of the individual trying to desist, but the desisters in my study didn't do it alone. Successful desistance came about, it seems, because of a network of supportive individuals who were leading conventional lives and had taken the time to believe in and nurture women both in and out of prison. These positive relationships were key to helping women develop identity and psychological resilience strategies, as well as for connecting women to practical resources and conventional opportunities. What differentiated the two groups in terms of their relationships with these key supports was their access to these supports as well as their ability to discern between healthy and unhealthy relationships; specifically, desisters were open to developing positive relationships and stayed away from relationships with offending others while persisters were much more inclined to avoid establishing new relationships and continued relationships with offending others once released from prison. These findings point to a third type of strategy that helped women throughout the desistance process that consisted of interpersonal tactics and discernment. In this chapter,

I will explore the role of interpersonal strategies, particularly openness to positive relationships, as a precondition for accessing social resources to desist from crime. In the next chapter, I will discuss in greater detail the many ways in which social supports assisted women in desisting from crime.

Two ways of enacting "staying to myself"

According to the women I interviewed, the social climate in prison was, at best, a harsh one. During the militaristic diagnostic and intake process, respondents described being harassed by guards and other inmates. In addition, the women I interviewed described having to contend with long-term inmates instigating fights in an effort to tack on more prison time for the inmates serving shorter sentences. There was also nowhere for incarcerated women to go to be alone and collect their thoughts, because they were always either supervised or in their cells with other inmates. Nearly every respondent responded in the same way when asked the question: "How did you deal with the challenges you faced while in prison?" Their answers typically involved some variation of "I stayed to myself" in order to avoid trouble and mentally take time for themselves. What differentiated the two groups was how they enacted this interpersonal resilience strategy and the subsequent results of each approach. The women in my study who were able to desist used interpersonal strategies and accessed certain advantages in doing so. And the relationships that benefitted women on the inside had a positive domino effect, leading to greater opportunities and additional relationships that supported them through the desistance process. Interpersonal strategies were important to the desistance process and, without these strategies, women were more isolated and vulnerable to disadvantages that put them at greater risk for reoffending.

Desisters' versions of staying to themselves were rather nuanced; they were strategic about letting positive people in while keeping potentially harmful others out. This finding is consistent with the literature on female desistance that shows that women must be strategic about their social interactions in order to avoid negative influences. According to Brown and Ross (2010), "women often chose to limit social contact as a strategy for bringing their lives into order and attempting the transition away from offending lifestyles" (42). In their theory of desistance, Giordano et al. (2002) describe women's pride in their independence and deliberate distancing from romantic relationships as one of three interpersonal orientations that desisting women tend to adopt. This theme of avoiding relationships was present among both desisters and persisters in my study, but desisters were much more skilled at screening relationships so as to allow for positive relationships to develop while keeping negative relationships out. My findings add to Giordano et al. (2002) by suggesting that desisting women who focus on their independence from damaging or abusive relationships (particularly with criminal partners) as their primary relational status may also enact an interpersonal strategy that allows them to form relationships that are both healthy and empowering.

One way desisters enact interpersonal strategies was during their time in prison where they avoided and ignored trouble-making peers, and continued this behavioral pattern upon release. Sherice, a desister, explains in the following statement how and why she "kept to myself":

> *I never really placed myself in situations to have a lot of challenges 'cause I was to myself. I went to my detail. Came back. I didn't really hang out with people—people was problems. I mean, I got locked up with people and they were problems so the less people I have in my circle, the better off I'll be. So there were very few people that I did talk to.*

Melissa, a desister, describes staying to herself and intentionally avoiding confrontations with abusive guards and inmates:

> *I basically just stayed to myself. Stayed to myself. Did my chores. Eat when I was supposed to eat. That's it...Really not to place myself in a predicament where they are sayin' anything to me. Depending on the situation, of how bad it was, I stayed away from some people and stuff like that. I really tried not to get into stuff. I don't want to be the middle of things. It just keepin' myself from it...but I'd taken a computer class. While I was in there, I took computer – what is it? Computer Service and Business Technology course. I took that. I got hours for custodial maintenance. I was for human resource. I was in the Alpha Omega and the praise team, I was a career clerk.*

Adjusting to life in prison typically meant self-isolation and in varying degrees, adopting the rules and navigating the often hostile prison landscape. Desisters stayed to themselves in terms of avoiding confrontations with other trouble-making inmates, but this did not mean that they spent the majority of their free time alone or in isolation; what most differentiated the desisters from persisters was their general openness to forming non-romantic positive relationships with mentors, chaplains and officers. Giordano et al. (2002) describe how marital relationships (or the avoidance of such) as well as relationships with children can serve as "powerful catalysts for changes in life direction" among desisting women (1043). Consistent with Giordano et al. (2002), the desisting women in my study describe enacting a great deal of agency in terms of carefully screening their relationships, but references to marriage or romantic partners were not described as important motivators for cognitive transformation, which are commonly cited as motivators for male desistance.

Desisters also described forming positive relationships with inmates who were "trying to do the right thing" and mentors who believed in them. One desister coped by associating herself with other prisoners who were following the rules and committed to

conventional norms. Rachel describes being teased by other prisoners for doing "what was right" in her eyes:

> *Say for instance I'm walkin' down the sidewalk and I got some ladies behind me and we all together, they would call us certain names like, 'Look at the Holy Sisters.' (laughs) You know what I'm sayin? (laughs) They were always sayin' 'The Church Sisters' or 'The Good Sisters.' They would call us something, but they knew that we was tryin,' we strived to do what was right in the prison system. And in the sights of most of the guards, actually, they gave me respect because I respected them. It's all how you carry yourself while you're incarcerated. So they respected me. I very seldom had a guard who didn't respect me and I didn't respect. I respected them regardless of whether they respected me or not. So, I think it made a difference even in their lives.*

Trina, a desister, avoided confrontations with others by limiting her interactions almost exclusively to her "wifey" and as a result developed a deep relationship with her:

> *If I got these 8-11 years that, I'm thinking, I'm gonna have to face, shoot, it was just hard. So I just changed my peoples. I got into institutionalized mode. If I'm gonna be here, I'm just gonna get me a little wifey and...I was not gonna be alone. I can say that I loved her and she loved me...It was just me and her, that was my world. I'd write my family, deal with my kids and all that, but she was my world. She kept me happy in there. I kept her happy...we did everything together. Yard call. Whatever was going on, it was just me and her. That was my partner, my life, everything.*

Denise, a desister, talked about forming relationships with other inmates as well. She wanted to encourage other women who were struggling and be a role model for them:

> *You have to have something to want to live for 'cause a lot of them in there give up hope. I was kind of one of the peoples that would talk to them, you know, would do Bible study with them, would read the Bible with them, would pray with them to help them try to get back that focus because they was giving up. They don't think nobody love them. They don't think nobody was tryin' to help them. They just put them in there and threw away the key...So I was trying to talk to some of my roommates and stuff like that and to people that was bunkin' with me, was trying to give them encourage, telling them "Trouble don't last always."*

Desisters established positive relationships with inmates who were committed to "going straight" and encouraged others to follow a similar path. This finding is consistent with research on female pathways away from crime, in so far as developing "strong pro-social bonds" and "weakening anti-social bonds" were important to women's ability to stop offending (Byrne and Trew 2008:245). Women who spent time in prison with pro-social peers had time to practice conventional norms and continued these habits once they were released.

Desisters stayed to themselves but allowed exceptions for interactions with other inmates who were attempting to go straight as well as for developing meaningful relationships with mentors. The relationships that women developed in prison with officers, chaplains and counselors were critical to their desistance because these interpersonal interactions triggered identity transformations, strengthened their psychological strategies, and improved their access to resources that would help them upon release. I will discuss in greater detail the benefits of these relationships in the next chapter and wish to focus instead on the fact that desisters' strategies of staying to themselves allowed for these positive relationships with mentors. Both Maruna (2001) and Rumgay (2004) acknowledge the importance of having mentors in the desistance process, but the crucial role of mentoring relationships are less prominently emphasized in Giordano et al. (2002). My findings support the notion of mentoring relationships playing a crucial role in motivating cognitive change but in ways that are distinctive from those presented in Giordano et al. (2002). My findings build upon the literature by offering that mentoring relationships can serve as "hooks for change" by fostering and reinforcing cognitive and identity transformations. Giordano et al. (2002) describe how

relationships to children can motivate women to desist, but ultimately women must experience major cognitive shifts in addition to having close bonds with their children. My findings support this notion in that relationships to children, though significant to women's lives and self-understanding, were not described as the prominent reason for women deciding to change their lives. Instead, women described mentors who "believed in me" as the catalyst for a deeper internal transformation, one that was both empowering and healing. My research adds to the literature by describing how non-romantic interpersonal relationships—by stimulating internal transformation *and* fostering deeper self-understanding and a self-love—support desistance. Though my findings suggest that non-romantic relationships supported desistance more than romantic relationships, the elements of these relationships that were helpful to desisters suggest that it is the emotional value and meaning attached to the relationship rather than type of relationship that is most relevant to desistance. Giordano et al. (2007) explain that the emotional aspect of relationships actually plays an integral part in the desistance process in terms of promoting "concrete, positive reflected appraisals that allow the individual to see past the contours of the current self, envisioning at least the broad outline of a more worthy one" and "elicits positive emotions, buffers negative ones, and fosters a more positive sense of self" (1615). The desisters in my study had established meaningful, non-romantic relationships with mentors who empowered them by helping them see their own worthiness and develop a sense of self-love.

My findings also add to the literature by identifying some of the interpersonal strategies that explain why desisters appeared better able to access social supports than persisters. Specifically, desisters appear to be more open to and strategic about making

connections with conventional others, while at the same time, avoiding potentially negative relationships with offending others. Additionally, the positive relationships desisting women formed with mentors and other conventional others not only contributed to their identity transformations, but also provided them with access to practical resources—an advantage not otherwise articulated by Giordano et al. (2002) and Maruna (2001) whose theories focus more on the internal processes that support desistance rather than the external resources that are also necessary when building a conventional life. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how relationships to social supports connect women with key resources that would otherwise be extremely difficult to attain on their own give their disadvantaged social position. In this chapter, however, I will continue to focus on women's interpersonal strategies as the bridge to building essential relationships with others.

Not unlike desisters, when asked how they dealt with the challenges of incarceration, many persisters replied that they chose to stay to themselves to avoid confrontations with other inmates.   Though persisters said they were using the same strategy as desisters, the way the enacted that strategy was much different and as a result, many of them experienced a different outcome—one with greater disadvantage. Persisters' version of staying to themselves was more likely to involve a kind of self-isolation in prison and avoidance of relationships altogether. Anne, a persister, explains how she coped during her time in prison:

> *Just be quiet. Be quiet and stay to yourself 'cause females hold a lot of drama by themselves anyway and you got a whole bunch of females that have time sittin' on time. They don't care. They don't care if you go home before them. They want you to stay with them. Why the hell should you come last and you leave first? What the hell is that shit? They don't like that.   So it's better to stay to yourself. That's what I did and just write.*

Write music…For real. That's what I did. I was workin', right, and the whole time, just stayed to myself. I ain't talk to nobody. Time went by fast.

Another persister, Rita, echoes this strategy of avoiding others:

Mainly I tried to stay to myself. I sit down and watch TV but I don't socialize with a lot of people. I stay to myself.

Jade, a persister, also stayed away from trouble by isolating herself:

I tried to stay to myself basically. But you know. If they up there arguing or something like that, I'd just go back to my room so I wouldn't end up gettin' in trouble.

Cindy, a persister, described how she adapted to the routines of prison and avoided contact with others as much as possible:

I had got accustomed to it, used to the routines and all that, but the women that's there for years and years, they don't like that other women are getting out. Because I only was there 15 months. You know when they know you're about to get out they start doin' stuff so you'd get in trouble and wind up staying longer and stuff…you just got to bite your tongue and go with the flow. You just have to circulate yourself with yourself because people will try to hold you in there. Just like fights. Nit-pickin'. They would nit-pick. Just little stuff like that. Just anything just to get your emotions riled up to get you to argue with them because they ain't goin' nowhere. So just keepin' to myself.

Staying to themselves helped persisters avoid other inmates that they didn't trust who could cause them to have to stay in prison even longer. According to Giordano et al. (2007), it can be especially challenging for formerly incarcerated women to seek out relationships with pro-social others because they fear being shamed or judged, which only compounds the negative feelings that contribute to their feelings of despair and hopelessness. My findings indicate that avoiding relationships with others certainly shielded persisters from potentially harmful interactions while in prison, but this strategy also seems to have kept them from forming relationships with conventional others. *None* of the persisters I interviewed described forming a strong, positive relationship with a

mentor, counselor, or other conventional person in prison or upon release. In fact, persisters talked about how their social experiences in prison continued to affect them upon release. In the quote at the start of the chapter, Cindy, a persister, says her experiences in prison ruined her ability to have meaningful and romantic relationships once she was released because she continued her pattern of staying to herself. Another persister, Anne, shared how her experience in a women's prison made her leery of friendships with women:

> *Females, I don't like females anymore. I don't have no female friends. I*
> *don't care to have any. The nastiness, all of it. Yeah.*

By avoiding relationships altogether, persisters experienced a serious disadvantage in terms of isolating themselves from social supports that could promote the kinds of personal transformations, coping strategies and access to resources that ultimately support desistance.

While persisters missed out on building new healthy relationships after prison, desisters had the opposite experience of continuing to form new healthy relationships after prison. Once they got out, desisters' continued to develop positive relationships and avoid potentially harmful ones. Trina, a desister, explains that she avoided interacting with anyone she used to commit crimes with and instead, surrounded herself by conventional others:

> *You got to change people, places and things to make it so I didn't go back*
> *to where I came from. I wanted a complete new start along with my life.*

She and other desisters said that it was important to surround themselves with others who were committed to living a conventional life. Research shows that social integration can lead to greater social capital, which often translates into increased access to emotional

support, housing and employment opportunities, and other resources (Farrall 2005). The positive relationships desisters formed with mentors in prison also helped them connect to reentry support, in the form of individuals, services, and programs on the outside. In this way, desisters' openness to positive relationships connected them to important resources that they needed in order to desist.

Screening Romantic Relationships

Respondents from both groups were resistant to romantic relationships for a variety of reasons. As stated in previous sections, all of the respondents had bad experiences with abusive relationships and at least half of the respondents in each group described committing crimes with romantic partners or friends. Research shows that these experiences are typical when it comes to female offending in that many "females report engaging in delinquent and criminal behavior as a direct result of their romantic attachments" (Uggen & Kruttschnitt 1998:343; see also Donovan, Jessor, & Costa 1991; Haney 1996). Sampson and Laub (1993) state that, for male offenders, good marriages seem to support desistance. However, Giordano et al. (2002) find that, though it can support desistance in some women and many men, marriage is not a salient factor in promoting desistance for all women. Giordano et al. (2002) explain that some desisting women, unlike their male counterparts, celebrate their independence from relationships and take pride in their power to "make it" without a partner. According to Blokland and van Os' (2010) research on women's life course offending, romantic relationships with certain "partners may just spell 'bad news,' increasing rather than decreasing women's likelihood to engage in criminal behavior" (183; see also Alarid et al. 2000). With that said, my findings add a specific nuance to the relationship between romantic partners and

female crime and desistance. My findings indicate that members of both groups had become disinterested in romantic partnerships, but there was some important variation. Avoiding romantic relationships in most cases benefitted women of both groups in terms of shielding them from potentially harmful relationships that might encourage them to reoffend. However, desisters' approach to romantic relationships involved careful screening and discernment so as to not allow romantic relationships to jeopardize their ability to desist. Persisters' approach to romantic relationships involved less careful screening and may have harmed them in terms of isolating them and contributing to opportunities to reoffend. Furthermore, for those women whose crimes were not closely tied to relationships, their desistance or persistence was less affected by avoiding romantic relationships. For example, some persisters' crimes like using drugs or forgery didn't involve other people, so avoiding romantic partners did not drastically affect their offending behavior.

Some desisters were leery of romantic relationships because they had been introduced to crime and/or been abused by a romantic partner. Some desisters described not wanting to be in a relationship because they could be "hindering" or make them lose their "focus" in their attempts to remain crime free. When asked about her romantic relationships, Sherice, a desister, responds:

> *My focus hadn't really been relationships. I've dated – just called another date—but it's really not my focus. I like dating. I like going out. But as far as—I don't know—for me to trying to be focused on the direction I want to go, relationships, they can be hindering. So, it's not my focus, a relationship.*

Angela, a desister, shares a similar sentiment about relationships interfering with her ability to stay focused. She gives the following advice based on her experiences with relationships:

> *I've got a bad choice in men. Very bad choice. And I'm not ready for no relationship, not for a long time. I'm married to one man – that's God…So that is my advice. Just stay focused. Just be you. That's all I ever want anybody to ever do is just be them and stay focused. And I had to learn the hard way not it's not all about a man or relationship 'cause you can do better by yourself.*

Giving up on romantic relationships with members of the same sex in order to achieve some benefit was a strategy that two desisters exercised. These desisters avoided romantic relationships with other women, not because these might encourage them to reoffend, but because same-sex relationships could jeopardize desisters' bonds with key mentors who happened to be homophobic. Trina, a desister, says she had to choose between having family support and having a "gay life":

> *I was talking to my sister, and she said what do you want to do? I said well I want to get married and all that, and she said well how you gonna do that when you know your kids ain't gonna want to be around you if you stay with a woman. And that was a sacrifice I had to make: Do I want my children or do I want my gay life? And I said I want my children.*

The other desister who avoided same sex relationships, Angela, stayed away from same-sex relationships because she knew that she would jeopardize her relationship with her mentor and would no longer be allowed to stay at the halfway house she was living in.

Desisters acknowledged times in their lives where they chose to avoid romantic relationships but it was important for them not to close off to relationships altogether. Some desisters had formed healthy romantic relationships that supported their desistance and therefore, did not need to avoid romantic relationships. Sherice, a desister, explains that although she struggles with establishing new relationships with people (because she

doesn't want to have to explain her criminal past or incarceration), she is willing to put

herself out there anyway:

> *Some of my own personal things I struggle with is not being as open and trustin' with people. One, because I don't want to – and that reflects back to relationships as well – me not wanting to get real close to people because I don't want to share my past. But I know in relationships it eventually has to come up. So that's been one of my things. Not wanting to—I just want to forget the past... I just want my past to be that, so not really opening myself up, maybe even to opportunities that I may be able to grasp because I don't want my past to run in my face...but I've been steppin' out on a limb in some things. Goin' ahead and do things even though [rejection] might happen, I still go ahead and done it. I don't do it as much as I should. I guess if I do it more, I get used to it. But rejection ain't no good feeling. Just keep pressing forward, putting myself out there. And being me and lettin' people see the person that I am, not the person they may think I am or was.*

Rachel, a desister, also explains that she refuses to let her past negative relationships

stand in the way of her forming new healthy relationships:

> *I could get my act together and live the life I always wanted as a child growing up with stability, with a family that loves me, with all the comforts of a good life. I think that I made that decision for myself just because I never had a family growing up, that might not have been all my fault. But now that I am older and I have a choice in life and I can have that family I never got to have... Yeah, I might have been dealt a shitty hand before, but it doesn't have to be shitty for the rest of my life. I can make my life better. I don't have to keep using my past as a crutch.*

This openness to forming positive relationships reflected in Sherice and Rachel's quotes

was a resilience strategy that benefitted them and other women in the desistance process

because it was a way to increase their support network and feel connection with others.

This finding can be best explained by looking to research on survival strategies among

women with histories of abuse and harmful relationships. According to Valentine and

Feinauer (1993) well-adjusted survivors of sexual abuse exhibited an "ability to find

emotional support" from safe and positive people which they described as an important

resilience factor (218).   Women in my study who were open to forming positive relationships also described experiencing success in forming and benefits from such bonds. A desister, Tanya, talks about changing her "outlook" on men after a serious of negative encounters dating back to her relationship with her father during her childhood helped her find a healthy relationship. In the following statement, Tanya describes some of the benefits she and her children receive as a result of knowing her fiancé:

> *I have a great fiancé. He works. He's stable. He helps with kids. I'm pregnant. This is his first child. He is much older than I am. It's more of team than it is I'm supporting this man and having his child—that's always how it was or I was tied up with drugs and alcohol, selling drugs, using drugs, drinking, partying, the nightlife. So now today, it's been a struggle but I wouldn't change it today because I love him to death and my kids love him, even though that's not their real dad.*

In the midst of avoiding romantic partnerships and friendships with criminal peers, making exceptions for a few healthy relationships offered desisters positive social interactions that also promoted desistance.

Eight of the ten persisters also describe being "fed up" with relationships and preferred to take on the world alone. The experiences persisters had along with the habits and coping mechanisms they developed while in prison had lasting effects on their ability to establish positive relationships both inside and outside. Persisters were not seeking out relationships while in prison or upon release. Dee, a persister, talks about being in a relationship with God as the most important relationship she can have and therefore, does not need a relationship with another person:

> *I have a relationship with God and Jesus. Man? I don't need one. I been down that road, honey, and I mean, all that stuff ain't love. It's lust. God chose you. God is a jealous. Imagine if you had a boyfriend and you and your boyfriend are together. God is jealous of those we love. Hearts and soul, He knows our hearts and soul. You know what I mean? Relationships? I don't have one. Not with a man or a woman. Not with*

> *anybody...put God first. God over relationships. It's God Almighty. It's God all the way, all the way. Number 1.*

Anne, a persister, describes being single because she doesn't believe there are any decent men out there who will treat her right and who can offer her anything worthwhile:

> *I have no relationships. Dudes are retarded. Dudes are retarded because most average dudes think sex when they first see you...You know, just dumb. I don't have no relationship goin on right now because I feel men are retarded....I'm not gonna worry about no relationship 'cause it's not gonna help me get a job.*

The last relationship Michelle, a persister, had with a man was when she contracted HIV and lost her ability to trust men:

> *He lied. So as far as my trust, especially in men, I have none. I have none. None. And sex-wise I could care less if I ever got it again. Period. Don't care for it.*

For most persisters, their past experiences with relationships were so painful that they didn't see the point in putting themselves in a vulnerable position again. They preferred to focus on themselves and stayed away from romantic or intimate relationships. Brandy, a persister, describes experiencing a pivotal moment in her life where she realized that she didn't need to depend on others and that she could make it just fine on her own:

> *I was in the Ridgeway and I was in the household department. And there was this mitten, you know, a mitten for the kitchen. It costed $3.99, which is four dollars with tax. And I only had $10 and I had to buy some groceries. I bought it. It said, "On my own and makin' it." That was the turning point. I carried that mitten in my pocketbook all the time. It was a kitchen mitten. It didn't match my kitchen. It was purple and something but it said "On my own and makin' it." And I have to say what happen is, I married at the age of 14, I had finished the 11th grade. I had never been on my own...That was my turning point. "On my own and makin' it." And I had never been on my own. All through my marriage I could screw up anything I wanted to and he could unscrew it...He could make all my wrongs turn right. We never argued or anything. But the biggest argument of my life was the day he left and all of a sudden there was nobody make my rights. My grandmother was dead. My granddaddy was dead. My brother was in California. So I had nobody. And I was just screwing up*

backwards and forwards. We had been separated for about six months and everything was falling apart, but when I saw that, that was my turning point. "On my own and makin' it." I sit down the first thing and make a budget. And it did not include a Hershey Bar. So that's the way it was. I'd been on my own and makin' it ever since.

Persisters seemed convinced that they didn't need relationships and were better off alone. In this way, they were likely also shielded from some interactions with romantic partners who were offending, but they also missed out on potentially positive relationships with conventional others.

In terms of romantic partners, most persisters preferred to be alone. One area that persisters differed more drastically from desisters was in terms of their continued relationships with offending partners, peers and family members. Though 80% of persisters said they avoided romantic partnerships, many of them reoffended because they were still connected to the friends and family members who provided opportunities for offending. Persisters talked about spending time with the same people they committed crimes with before they got locked up. Anne, a persister, describes not want to hang with the same crowd, but that she still finds herself doing so:

That's the only problem right now: tryin' to get a job without fallin' back into the same crowd even though I still see the crowd and yeah, I still chill with them every now and then but I'm not with them, you know what I mean? You know how you hang with somebody but you don't really hang with them to a certain extent. Like I'll be with you for about an hour or two but I probably won't see you for a couple of days or something? It's like that.

Mandy, a persister, explains that when she got of jail and couldn't find a job, she asked her sister who was a drug dealer to give her a "job" to do:

When I finished [my sentence] I still went back [to my neighborhood]. I still went back and tried to find a job. Then I said "To hell with it." My sister was doin' stuff and, well, when I first got out, I told her, "You can visit me and you can come over and you can do this and we can go places

> *but you can't ever ask me to do something in your world again." She agreed. But this time, this time I came to her. She was reluctant. She had her own little team of illegal stuff she was doin'. She had her own team, but she let me come back. But she would be like an employer and decide what jobs I could have.*

In this quote, Mandy demonstrates how she could turn to her sister when she was unsuccessful at finding a legitimate job and that relationship provided her with illegal opportunities for making a living. Jo, a persister, believes that it is important to stay away from people who are committing crimes when women are trying to desist, but laments about how difficult it is to do so in practice:

> *Man. I guess the best thing I think you could do is especially if you're not strong, I would say for those women to watch what environments they put themselves in. Because it's not easy...So like yeah I would definitely be careful about who I put around in my circle. I would actually go out of my way to put myself in a circle that I knew I didn't almost belong in yet just so I could end up belonging in that type of circle. You know what I mean? 'Cause it's going to be too hard to be around the shit you're used to. It's already gonnna be hard to make it. If you put yourself around the stuff you're used to you're not gonna make it. Yeah. You got to totally change your whole life. The thing about it is, when you come out, how you gonna do that? So. Yeah. But I mean there's-- In some respect, that's just an excuse. I dunno. I struggle with that sometimes...at a certain point you do have to take self- responsibility but I mean it is hard though. That's still the fact. I'm not saying it's impossible but, you know, I don't think it's all that realistic.*

Persisters returned to familiar relationships with offending others because they felt it was too difficult to change their entire social networks. As a result, persiters remained in contact with offending peers who encouraged them to and gave them opportunities for reoffending.

The two persisters who were in romantic relationships talked about offending with their partners, which is consistent with the literature on female offending (Byrne and Trew 2008). What is novel about my findings is that these persisters were also in same-

sex relationships and embodied masculine gender performances. For example, Jo, a persister, who described herself as a "girl who look like a boy" says that her appearance and the way people perceive her works against her in terms of accessing resources and opportunities. She believes that her gender performance and more obvious sexuality make it harder for her to desist than someone who looks like "Susie Homemaker." My findings suggest that non-traditional gender performance and being openly lesbian may make it harder for women to desist because they may be discriminated against in employment or by programs and services that do not tolerate lesbian sexuality. A thorough analysis of the impact of gender performance and sexuality on desistance is beyond the scope of my project but scholars such as Caputo-Levine (2010) have looked at the ways these factors affect women's reentry experience. However, for the purposes of this project, I call attention to the fact that these two persisters said they experienced discrimination because of their sexuality, but they were openly lesbian anyway. This is different from desisters who chose to hide their sexuality in order to remain close to key relationships with family and mentors. In this way, the desisters in my study may have experienced some advantages that were not afforded to the openly lesbian persisters, but disadvantages in terms of having to hide or deny their sexuality. Giordano et al. (2002) find that in the case of heterosexual desisting women, many are likely to enter into traditional relationships with men that in some ways disempower them, but in other ways support their desistance. In other words, these women "appear to have self-consciously *given up* on things (including, in some instances, their own emotional well-being) to *get* a lifestyle that contains these elements of stability and conventionality" (1049). My findings demonstrate that desisting women may also enact a similar kind of strategy

when it comes to *giving up* on relationships with members of the same sex in order to preserve those relationships that are providing precious resources.

As a whole, women who were persisting in crime were less strategic about their interpersonal relationships and as a result, were *more likely to miss out on the potential benefits of healthy relationships*, particularly with those who can provide them with opportunities and resources that can help them desist. As well, persisting women were less discerning about avoiding negative relationships, which made them *more likely to experience consequences of unhealthy relationships and/or be influenced by criminal peers*. Consistent with the literature on the potential influences of deviant peers and partners on female recidivism, my findings demonstrated that persisters stayed connected to deviant social groups, which they said increased their opportunities to reoffend (Byrne & Trew 2008). Self-isolation and cultivating distrust for others are all also coping strategies that may have kept persisters away from social interactions and support which could have helped them in important ways.

Chapter Summary

Interpersonal strategies helped the women in my study avoid harmful relationships and establish positive relationships. Desisters seemed to reap the benefits of straddling social integration and isolation through their version of staying to themselves. Desisters were much more likely to exercise interpersonal strategies in ways that connected them to people who would ultimately help them desist, while shielding them from individuals who would provide them with opportunities to reoffend. Persisters were less likely to use interpersonal strategies in the way desisters were and instead, kept themselves isolated in ways that might have prevented them from developing helpful

relationships while at the same time remaining connected to those who were providing them opportunities to continue offending. The nuances of participants' interpersonal strategies, who they decided to let in to their lives and who they kept out, had an important impact on their opportunities to reoffend and their access to practical benefits and resources, which I will discuss in depth in the subsequent chapter.

Rumgay describes desistance as "a process in which skills and advantages accumulate over time, mutually reinforcing each other and progressively enhancing the offender's capacity to avoid recidivism" (2004, 413). My findings extend Rumgay by explaining *how* a combination of and an accumulation of resilience strategies—identity-based, psychological and interpersonal—work together to help women cope with the challenges of their past, present and future and ultimately, desist from crime. Without these resilience strategies, women were ill equipped to handle the rejection and inevitable setbacks that come with building a conventional life with a criminal record. In sum, resilience strategies helped desisters feel encouraged and empowered, as well as build meaningful relationships, even when living side-by-side with struggle, rejection and uncertainty. Resilience strategies bought time for desisters and made it possible for them to connect with social supports which ultimately improved their chances of building a crime-free life.

Chapter 6: The Role of Social Supports in Supporting Desistance

"If you are getting' ready to be released, come out with a positive attitude and just keep your head up and if you don't have support get into a support system. My family helped support me a lot and like I said I knew a lot of womens when I was in prison that came to do the volunteering they do at the prison and you might get invited to this church or that church and that kept me goin' a lot. So if you got support, family and volunteer support, you won't get involved [with crime]. Get out and do what's right...my advice is don't go back to that same scene anymore. Don't go back around those peoples that you know you got incarcerated with. Don't go back. You can't go back. Don't go back. Just go forward from where you are now, go forward. Hey, you got to apply to get some help. Get some help somewhere and just get a good support system."

<div align="right">-Rachel, a desister</div>

"I think a lot of people want to hear—like the more of a sob story you give them the more help you'll get. The weaker you maybe act like you are, the more people will be willing to help you. I think that's kind of lame. I don't know. I don't think you should be penalized for not being weak. But still the weaker you are, the more help you get... I don't want to be that person just to get some help. So I'm just in the box that I'm in. I guess I put myself there, but I don't know."

<div align="right">-Jo, a persister</div>

Introduction

The resilience strategies outlined in the previous chapters are key in terms of empowering women, combating negative feelings, and keeping women motivated both in and outside of prison. For example, delayed gratification and gratitude help women outlast drug cravings and the challenges of living on very low income, respectively. Psychological and identity-based resilience strategies become especially effective in supporting desistance when they are coupled with a key resource—social support. And interpersonal resilience strategies, in particular, improve the likelihood that women will develop meaningful relationships with social supports. Where the women in my study had similar circumstances, such as the availability of prison chaplains, what differentiated them was that desisters had the interpersonal predispositions to take advantage of these

resources.   In so doing, the desisters in my study demonstrated how resilience strategies and social supports reinforce one another to support desistance.   Both resilience strategies and social supports are necessary because desistance has as much to do with an individual's efforts to lead a conventional life as it has to do with actual gatekeepers giving women a chance to lead a conventional life (e.g. employers, school admissions, landlords, etc.) (Brown & Ross 2010). In the quotes above, Rachel and Jo offer two very different takes on their approaches to getting help from others. Rachel, a desister, is adamant about reaching out for help and getting a support system, while Jo, a persister, describes her unwillingness to appear weak and ask for help. For the women in my study, social supports served as the cornerstone for desistance because, in combination with resilience strategies, they connected women with the practical resources and opportunities necessary for desistance.   Without social supports, women were alone in meeting the challenges of building a conventional life, which for the persisters in my study, put them at a greater disadvantage and increased their likelihood of reoffending. Whereas the resilience strategies outlined in the previous chapters demonstrate the importance of individual efforts in the desistance process, this chapter will explore how external factors, such as relationships and resources, play a crucial role in female desistance.   Specifically, this chapter will illustrate *how* social supports facilitated desistance through linking women with the resources necessary for desistance; explain the ways in which in-prison relationships and programming facilitated desistance; and demonstrate the dynamic and reciprocal relationship between social supports and resilience strategies in supporting desistance.

Social Integration & Belonging

When analyzing the data from this study, the first place I found a noticeable distinction between desisters and persisters was in their responses to Keyes'(2008) well-being measure (*see Table A below*). Social well-being was the only dimension along which the two groups differed substantially. Otherwise, the two groups had similar (and surprisingly high) scores on the other dimensions.[21]
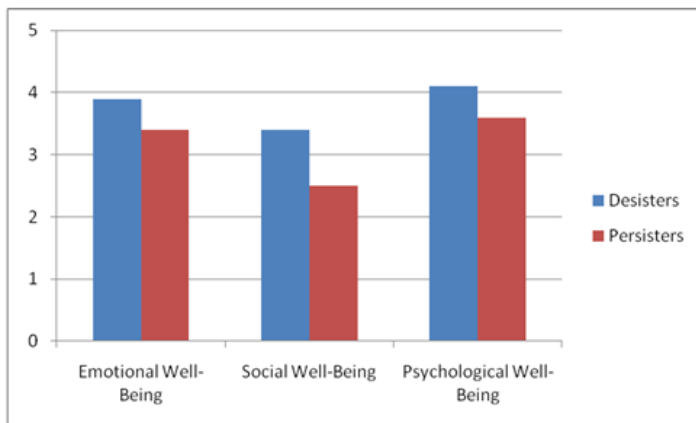

Table A: Comparison of both groups on dimensions of well-being

In particular, the two groups' scores were most divergent along the symptom of *social integration,* which occurs when one "feels part of and a sense of belonging to a community" (Keyes 2003:299). Desisters, on average, responded that they felt connected to a community almost every day in the past month, while persisters, on average, reported feeling that way only or once or twice over the same time period. Furthermore, the two groups' experiences of differing degrees of social integration were also qualitatively evident in their narrative data. Put simply, desisters had a network of social support and persisters did not.

The stigma and shame that comes with labels like "jailbird," "felon" or "criminal," among others, can interfere with formerly incarcerated women's experiences

---

[21] In the next chapter, I will compare respondents' qualitative and quantitative data as they relate to well-being.

of belonging and feeling "valued by others" (Keyes 2003:299). In spite of these barriers to reintegration, desisters develop important social connections and as a result, experience a sense of belonging in conventional society, support for their new pro-social identities and greater access to resources. For these reasons in particular, having social supports and feeling connected to a community are extremely important to the desistance process.

Social well-being appears to be more of a struggle for the women in my sample because it requires that they feel like a meaningful part of society or their communities— neither of which typically welcome former offenders with open arms (Richie 2001; Dodge & Pogrebin 2001). The experience of incarceration both figuratively and literally removes women from society, and thus communicates a clear message to incarcerated women: "You don't belong here." As discussed in Chapter 6, the process of being sentenced to prison and removed from society, not to mention the harsh treatment they experience while incarcerated, can leave formerly incarcerated women still feeling stigmatized (Goffman 1961) long after their release. Dodge and Pogrebin (2001) state that "stigmatizing shaming inhibits reintegration and furthers criminal behavior" (43; see also Giordano et al. 2002; Braithewaite 1989). Cindy, a persister, demonstrates the challenges of a stigmatized identity in the following statement:

> *The people you meet on the streets and don't even know you but know you've been to prison and would shun you. Know nothing about you. Never spoken to you. Don't know you. But somebody say, "Hey, she was in prison" and they shun you.*

Rose, a persister, shares Cindy's experience of other's prejudice toward people who have been incarcerated:

>*There are people that say "Once a jailbird, always a jailbird." I've heard
>people–I've been in people's company and they talk about how they
>wouldn't have nothing to do with jail people, people that been to prison.*

And acceptance is exactly what formerly incarcerated women need in order to find

opportunities, such as employment. The women I interviewed experienced what

Alexander (2010) describes as the serious consequences of "checking the box" on

applications, namely that outing oneself as a former offender immediately eliminates

countless opportunities, including access to public housing, food stamps, and

employment. Nina, a persister, speaks to the way other people's perceptions have the

power to limit her access to employment:

>*Well, you know, as far as like jobs, they treat you like "Oh you've been in
>prison? Oh, you're an animal. You can't get this job because you got this
>[record]."*

Mandy, a persister, echoes this challenge of contending with the stigma of having been

incarcerated and how this keeps her from finding a job:

>*When I first got out I had visions of a job, finding a place again, you
>know. But it was a fool's dream. Fool's dream. I went everywhere lookin'
>for a job. I went to a lot of places looking for a job but it never panned out
>because they would ask you, "Where were you between this year and this
>year? What were you doing?" And you have to tell people "I was
>incarcerated" or tell them what for and once they found out that and see
>their expression on their faces change. Like when you fill out the
>application and then there right at the bottom they tell you we do a
>criminal background check. You know. You know you ain't got a chance. I
>knew. I knew I didn't have a chance.*

My finding that acceptance is key to successful reentry is consistent with the literature on

the challenges women face after jail and prison. Richie (2001) states that formerly

incarcerated women "do not feel embraced by their communities, and they are not

identified as having the right to demand services from it" (383). Richie goes on to say

that "the sense of being marginalized" limits women's access to "educational and legal

income-generating opportunities" (376) and therefore, "has a profound impact on the ability of women to successfully reintegrate" (Richie 2001:383). Though physically re-introduced to society, full reintegration is difficult for formerly incarcerated women, in part because their criminal records restrict them from being equal members of society and limit their access to the resources and opportunities necessary for building a conventional life.

The Power of Social Supports

When women reenter society, they have few resources from which to draw from in order to build a conventional life. *All* of the women in my study felt stigmatized by their incarceration, and all of them encountered barriers to reintegration because of the stigma as "ex-offender." Yet, the women followed 2 very different paths in response to the stigma and disadvantage of their ex-offender status. Desisters took the path that involved developing social support networks, while persisters chose a path that involved remaining isolated from the social connections that could help them reintegrate.

Steffensmeier and Allan (1996) explain that because criminality stands in contrast to social constructions of femininity, "crime is almost always stigmatizing for females, and its potential cost to life chances is much greater than for males" (476). Stigmatized and faced with scarce resources, Brown and Ross (2010) argue that one of the biggest challenges formerly incarcerated women face is "the absence of social connections as a result of offending" because access to social supports—individual(s) who connect women with valuable resources—might arguably be the most potent of all resources (31). Lindquist (2000) agrees that "the stigma attached to being charged with a criminal offense may be more severe for women" and argues that crime is especially damaging for

women by "weakening their social relationships" (435). Respondents from both groups in my study described how being judged, rejected, or stereotyped because of their criminal background or incarceration destroyed some existing relationships and/or made them less eager to explore new relationships.

Social supports become critical to desistance because, as Brown and Ross (2010) explain, of the particular plight formerly incarcerated women face:

> Many women were isolated, not by choice but through the dissolution of key familial and intimate relationships, often related to the women's persistent offending and the chaotic lifestyles, including drug use, that were associated with it. In the absence of friends and family, and with a history of imprisonment that many women wished not to have made public, release from prison left a number of women in a quandary: how does one establish new connections from a position of social isolation? (42)

As it turns out, Brown and Ross (2010) argue that key relationships with mentors can be the "saving grace" for formerly incarcerated women struggling with isolation. Laub and Sampson (2001) also point to social supports as one of the "significant elements to date" in supporting desistance (38). Giordano et al. (2002) find that relationships (particularly with romantic partners) can provide women with important catalysts for cognitive transformations in women. Maruna (2001) also finds that mentors played an important role in the desistance process by believing in desisters and supporting their identity transformations. Consistent with the literature, the desisters in my study fondly described mentors and officers who invested in them, believed in them, and supported them through their discovery of their own worth. Far from passive recipients of external support, Giordano et al. (2007) highlight the important role that desisters play in "making agentic moves in the direction of others who subsequently provide and reinforce" identity transformations (1607; see also Giordano et al. 2002; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994).

What is novel about my findings when compared to both Maruna (2001) and Giordano et al. (2002) is that these mentors not only fostered self-discovery and transformation in women while they were incarcerated, but they also linked women to opportunities, resources, and programming upon release that proved invaluable to their desistance. My findings are consistent with Brown and Ross (2010), who highlight some of the practical benefits of mentors in Australian women's desistance (e.g. helping women gain employment, housing, and child custody via the courts). I build on this literature by offering additional clues as to how and why mentors and social supports help some American women desist. In particular, I found that the length of time women spent incarcerated was key in terms of providing opportunities to participate in programming and form meaningful relationships with mentors; having family support was invaluable in terms of providing women with emotional and material support; and developing relationships with religious mentors connected women with resources and faith communities that gave them an enormous advantage throughout the desistance process.

Sentence Length & Programming

> *That's the main thing I realized, that I needed help, that if I continued the way I was goin', I could get end up with a longer sentence. I wanted a solution. I didn't want to keep feeding into the problem. So I got help and I got my certificates—about one, two, three, four, five, six about six certificates.*
>
> -Mary, a desister

> *I'm not happy about all the stuff they tell you and the places they give you to help you when you get out, supposedly because you have a felony. It's all lies. Temp services—they don't see you on the job right away. Once you go through Job Readiness, they want you to go through a Life Readiness. Why the fuck I'm going through Life Readiness when I'm livin' life? You know what I mean? It's stupid. It's stupid stuff.*
>
> -Anne, a persister

At first glance, it would seem that longer sentences would be related to higher chances of persistence. Longer sentences mean more time within the dehumanizing routines of prison, more time in close quarters with other offenders, and more time disconnected from family and friends—all of which can be linked to a greater likelihood of recidivism (Visher & Travis 2003; LeBel et al. 2008). Yet, my study finds just the opposite. Longer sentences were associated with higher chances of *desistance,* not persistence. Though lengthy sentences came with inevitable challenges, my findings point to some of the unanticipated advantages associated with longer prison sentences that seemed to set the stage for desistance upon release from prison. In terms of my sample, desisters' most recent incarceration averaged 6 years and 8 months compared with persisters whose most recent incarceration lasted, on average, 1 year and 8 months. Desisters had served much longer sentences—roughly six times the length of persisters— which they said gave them many opportunities to interact with volunteers, guards and chaplains who served as mentors, and more chances to take part in programs and classes. In fact, *all* of the desisters participated in programming and, on average, completed between 3 and 6 programs each during their incarceration, compared with 70% of persisters who completed not a single program or class, thereby limiting their opportunities to develop important skills and relationships. My findings reveal that the amount of time women spend in prison can affect their access to the people, programming and resources, and in so doing, either support or curtail the desistance process. Visher and Travis (2003) explain that there are many ways lengthy prison sentences can affect individuals:

> The prison experience is a unique right of passage…We have many journalistic accounts of men and women who credit prison as an opportunity to turn their lives around. For others, time in prison accelerates their attachment to the relationships, attitudes, and mindsets that define the criminal lifestyle…For still others, prison is dehumanizing, leaving the former prisoner bitter and diminished. Just as some never recover from war or trauma, some never recover from prison (107).

Research seeking to explain why one would experience lengthy prison sentences as especially transformative or destructive typically "focuses on the programs offered in prisons, not prison itself as a social institution" (Visher & Travis 2003:107). My findings add to the literature by demonstrating that lengthy sentences certainly provided women with greater access to worthwhile programming and longer periods of time to work details (in-prison jobs). Giordano et al. (2002) argue that programs primarily benefit women by providing them with a "cognitive guide to the change process" (1035). My findings diverge from Giordano et al. (2002) in terms of demonstrating that, for the women in my study, the most beneficial and transformative aspect of in-prison programming and details were the relationships that women developed as a result of their frequent interactions with officers, chaplains, facilitators, and volunteers. I found that, in addition to the benefits of increased skills, education and experience, program participation provided opportunities to connect with key mentors who improved desisters' access to resources both in prison and upon release. In this way, lengthy sentences provide women with greater opportunities to form the kinds of meaningful relationships that support desistance. Still, access to supportive individuals alone doesn't guarantee that a relationship will form. Recall from Chapter 7 that desisters' interpersonal resilience strategies played a significant role in improving the likelihood that they would form healthy relationships with mentors in prison and upon release.

Hence, my findings illustrate that while access to sufficient time to participate in relevant programming is important, women's use of interpersonal resilience strategies along with the quality of their interactions with program leaders/officers/chaplains were especially fundamental in supporting desistance.

Programs and classes were more commonly attended by desisters and helped with desistance by strengthening their skills and connecting them with social supports. When asked if they were involved in programs or classes, desisters consistently responded that they often took part in multiple classes and programs. Tanya, a desister, explains her enthusiasm over in-prison programming opportunities:

> *I was involved in a lot...I never expected that, going to prison, they were going to have all these groups and I never thought that (laughs). That's the one thing I didn't think of. But I loved them. I like to learn and so I thought it was a great, great opportunity. I got that computer certificate or diploma or whatever from the college; Middle Georgia Technical College does that computer/customer service class so I attended it. I took it. I learned about the computer, which was a lot more than I learned before I went in. So I really liked it. I really liked Alpha and Omega because it helped me with my Christian development side. So I really enjoyed that group.*

Program participation provides desisters with training and education as well as access to teachers, counselors and volunteers. Tiffany, a desister, describes how a program instructor reached out to her, which resulted in her earning her cosmetology license in prison:

> *So a little Caucasian lady that ran a cosmetology, she was like "Tiffany, I always hear about you. They say you're real good. But you have to have five years or less to get into cosmetology. So she said when you get to your five year mark, let me know. I'll put you in the class"...[I] became a teacher's aide for like three years. I got my license in cosmetology.*

When Tiffany got out of prison, her license allowed her to immediately begin working in a salon. Programs and classes helped women build skills, gain certifications and credentials to include on their resumes that would otherwise be blank for the period of their incarceration. Once women were released, they stood a better chance of finding work with skills and educational experience that they had gained in prison.

Persisters spent shorter periods of time incarcerated and were less likely to take part in programming opportunities. Persisters generally did not have enough time or motivation to access programming opportunities and some did not find the programming relevant. Two persisters who took part in a few programs and classes said that these experiences were not particularly helpful to them. For example, Jo, a persister, explains:

> *Everyone took the Substance – I don't know if they do it now but everyone did then – the Substance Abuse class. I took that, which I thought was kind of dumb for me to take, but I took that. I took that and took the Arts & Crafts class and I got into Custodial Maintenance. Nothing was really all that beneficial. I don't know. I think people who have a certain education level or certain common sense level, they don't have anything for you in prison to help you. I guess they feel like you should already know. That's what it seemed like to me. I mean I'm not dumb but I'm not the smartest person either. So I was already peaked out. So for someone like me I guess they feel you should already know better or something.*

Jo generally found the programming extraneous to her situation; she didn't need drug rehabilitation programming because her crimes did not involve using drugs and her educational level had surpassed GED level training. The paucity of advanced educational opportunities in prison left Jo feeling bored and unchallenged, even when she was actively enrolled in programs. It was also the case that persisters were not always able to take part in or complete classes because their sentences did not allow them sufficient time. Among the three persisters who took part in programming, one began taking a GED class, but was released before she could complete the class. Being

in prison for a very short period and feeling dissatisfied with program offerings meant that persisters were less likely to experience any potential benefits of the programs themselves and missed out on opportunities for interactions with teachers, volunteers, and other conventional leaders that could help them desist on the outside, including improving access to resources and support. Desisters, however, had greater access to and desire to participate in programming that they found to be relevant and experienced important benefits as a result.

Mentors, Communities & Desistance

> *I'll put it like this: Even though Metro was so hard but you know what? And it's a terrible place but all in all, it helped me, you understand? It helped me. All the little classes I took I enjoyed them because the teachers they helped me to understand, to want to be something better, to want to do better when you finally get out.*
>
> <div align="right">-Denise, a desister</div>

My findings also demonstrate that spending longer periods of time in prison also provided women with greater opportunities to form meaningful relationships with mentors, including officers, volunteers and counselors[22]. Mentors supported women's identity shifts and encouraged women to take advantage of programming and educational opportunities that proved helpful to their desistance. Lindquist (2000) argues that "as length of incarceration increases, internal, rather than external, social ties become more salient" (436). My findings support this notion and extend it by asserting that meaningful relationships developed in prison over time play a major role in the desistance process. For example, Trina talks about having an "excellent counselor" who encouraged her to go

---

[22] Chaplains and pastors also served as mentors and will be discussed separately later in this chapter.

support groups and drug rehabilitation classes, which ultimately led to her getting clean

and desisting:

> *I had an excellent, excellent counselor and my counselor helped me. He really pushed me. So I went to all my classes, MRT and Successful Living and my NA classes.*

Melissa, a desister, describes finding love and support from her therapist and how

meaningful it is to have social supports when reentering society, especially in the absence

of family support:

> *I had a mental health doctor on the women's clinic floor. I would cry my heart out to her. People don't understand—there really is love if you don't get it from your family but it hurts because I would rather have love from my family. It's good to have somebody that can be there for you on the outside, understand you, hear your story, know what you've been through.*

In the quote at the start of this section, Denise, a desister, explains how the teachers she

encountered inspired her to change her life. Desisters, like Denise, talked about gaining

acceptance from key individuals as major turning points because theses mentors helped

and encouraged them to make changes in their lives.

Social supports and mentors also played a critical role in encouraging identity

transformations in desisters in my study, which was another crucial part of the desistance

process. "Some really cool officers" believed in Tiffany, a desister, which helped her to

believe in herself. One officer, she says, "talked to me like I was his daughter" and

"treated me like I was a human being." These experiences touched and humbled her in a

meaningful way, and also inspired her to give up crime for good. Tanya, a desister,

describes her transformative relationship with the officer who supervised her detail:

> *I worked for the best—I mean I loved Officer Broadway. I don't know if it was because she was so sincere and when we worked for her, it was like she would go out of her way to try to help us in any way she could. I worked for her and it made the time go by...I finally realized I can't*

> *change the past. I can only change my future. And I think if it weren't for Ms. Broadway—she put a lot of insight into the way I do things now.*

Tanya credits Officer Broadway with helping her reach a turning point in her life where she decided she wanted to focus on her family and not use drugs any longer. Tanya's turning point reflects a common pattern found among desisters, where the processes of desistance can typically "be triggered by an event or by 'a sudden clarity of insight—seeing an old situation in a new way'" (McIvor et al. 2004:193). Officer Broadway helped Tanya to see her role as a mother in a new way and it was this new insight that helped Tanya desist from crime:

> *I was actually in prison when I had that turning point. It wasn't until Kara was about—she was probably about six months old—and my mother came to visitation with her and my son. And I didn't really see my son that much but they both came and I remember holding her and I was like, 'Wow, this is my daughter' and I remember all these things that my detail officer would always tell me. She knew I had a baby. She knew I had this baby in prison. I had to get out and take care of my children. I was like, "yeah, yeah, yeah, whatever." But sitting in that visitation that day it was just— really I heard Ms. Broadway just talking to me and saying it's time for a change and I think that's when I finally realized that I needed to grow up. So that was probably September of '07. It was almost six months right before I got out of prison that I really realized time's comin' up. I knew my time was coming up and I was going to be out and it was mentally time for a change.*

Tanya's account is consistent with research showing that desistance is often precipitated by a "conscious decision to 'go straight'" (McIvor et al. 2004:193; see also Liebrich, 1996; Maruna 2001). Deciding to "go straight" is an especially personal process, but my findings illustrate that positive relationships with conventional others can help desisters in their decision-making process. Maruna (2001) observed a similar phenomenon in desisters' narratives which he refers to as the "'looking-glass recovery process" where "the individual had no belief in himself or herself, but someone else (often a partner or

social organization) 'believed in' the person and made the ex-offender realize they did in fact have personal value" (96). Rachel, a desister, exemplifies this notion and describes how meaningful it was to interact with volunteers from outside of the prison during her incarceration:

> *I met some real good volunteers that came in that used to encourage me to go on. So it's very important to have volunteers in the prison system. Very. Because people comin' from the outside to see about you on the inside, wow. It just blow your mind. It's mind-blowing for real. And it's encouraging, you know, because without them life would probably be miserable inside. They bring hope on to the inside and I sometimes say that they get hope when they come in to see that you made it, you're making it, you know. So it's just important to always have contact from the outside. It makes you feel even more human. You could be dehumanized, like monsters in there.*

The desisters in my study talked about inspirational counselors, chaplains and volunteers who believed in them, which helped desisters believe in themselves and their ability to change their lives. These mentors seemed to have had such a positive impact on desisters' lives because they convinced desisters that their lives mattered and that they belonged to a larger community. Laub et al. (1998) argue that for someone who is attempting to desist, positive personal relationships can help her stay connected to resources and over the life course, help them desist from crime. My findings support Laub et al.'s (1998) claim that social supports play a key role in women's adopting a conventional identity and therefore, supporting the desistance process.

In addition to the support desisters describe receiving from mentors, four desisters I interviewed report having resilient relationships with family members who stood by them while they were incarcerated and supported them upon release, a finding that is not consistently found in research involving formerly incarcerated women. These desisters have family members who visit them in prison, foster their children, and provide them

with housing and other assistance. Trina, a desister, struggles with maintaining relationships with her two daughters who were also incarcerated, which she believes is because the "apple don't fall far from the tree." In the midst of these challenges, Trina describes having a grandson who serves as a kind of mediator by reducing family tension:

> *My grandson is just like, he's a joy. He's a chain. He links us. He links us together where we would sometimes have a lot of animosity or being going through something, but Joshuah is like that little heart in the middle and we can't do nothing but bring love. He don't understand our arguing or anything negative. You don't curse at him or anything like that because we really kept him out of that. He didn't see none of that. He didn't see none of that world. He only sees it on television. He knows of it and he says "My grandmother used to be a ganster." I'm like, "No, I'm retired. I'm a Christian now. I'm Born-Again." But he knows of my past and like I say, when we goin' though things, it will be Joshuah for some reason, he'll bring us all together and then there's no tension. There's no nothing. There is just love because he's just that kind of kid. He's a big kid. But he's just brought so much joy into our lives and I thank God we got him, you know.*

Maintaining close ties with her daughters is something that Trina tangibly benefits from in terms of being able to reach out to them for help with applying to school:

> *They are trying to get a program to let me in, because I love nursing, I want to complete school, because I was a certified CNA nurses assistant, I love older people. I want to go back into nursing homes and help them. I want to do that again. I don't want to cook forever. I want to manage, go into management or medical assistant. So my daughter is helping me do that so I can go back to school in February.*

Rachel, a desister, says that she would never reoffend because it isn't worth harming her family relationships. She also adds that in addition to her family support, she created a support system of individuals in prison:

> *I had to look at me and examine would I ever do this again or would I ever – you know what I'm saying? And I really took a good look and it's not worth it. It's not worth my life leaving people that I love outside because they did that time with me. You know, it was just as hard on them to lose me from the outside as it was for me to be on the inside and be hard for me. So actually your family is being incarcerated with you, for real. It's a*

> *situation where your family is just as incarcerated as the person that is behind the wires and the bars. Because they can't see you. You see what I'm sayin'? So it's vice versa the impact it had on my family. But it was still love and support there [from my family] and I thank God for that because a lot of people don't have love and support. So it's sort of like you set up a support system on the inside also. People recognize you from the people that you be with actually.*

Some desisters are able to stay with family while going back to school. Having this connection to the outside world while in prison was really important. Sherice, a desister, also stayed connected to her family throughout her incarceration and is currently living with her father rent-free while she completes her degree. Family support was crucial to her coping with prison and provides her with the resources she needs to rebuild her life:

> *I was locked up for 15 years but I seen my kids—at least once a month I'd see my kids. I seen my dad and my mom and kids at least once a month for those 15 years. Metro, they came almost every weekend…So anything else I didn't like about Metro just didn't matter because my family was more important to me…I look at the relationship I have with my kids and I look at some relationships other parents have and I'm blessed with my relationship with my kids. And if wasn't for my parents, it wouldn't be possible that my kids and I would be as close as we are.*

Rachel, a desister, spent nearly two decades behind bars which meant that her reentry process involved adjusting to an entirely different society from the one she remembers before her incarceration. Family support, for her, was crucial for her successful transition into the modern way of life:

> *My son helps me a lot because he make me laugh a lot. And I have one little seven year old granddaughter that keeps me on my toes (laughs). She reminds me, "It doesn't go like that, grandmother." (laughs). One of my challenges also was getting used to the cellular phone, having a cellular phone and trying to learn how to work it and some days now it's still a challenge for me to go in there and do things. But my son help me a lot and the kids they help me a lot with just getting used to life all over again.*

Family support, like other forms of social support, can make a big difference in terms of improving women's access to resources and opportunities for desistance. Sampson and

Laub (1993) argue that marriage was one of the most important factors when explaining male desistance because it strengthened the type of social bonds that increased their "stake in conformity" thereby making deviance less attractive. Various critiques have arisen that call into question the potency of marriage as a pathway away from female crime stating that the quality and subjective valuation of romantic relationships are what matters most (Brown and Ross 2010; Rutter 1996; Uggen 2000). According to Brown and Ross (2010), " in contradistinction to what is known about men's desistance from offending, for example, it was recognized by many women in this study that relationship partners were often part of the problem rather than part of the solution" (42). Giordano (2010) explains that the "traditional respectability package," which includes employment and a stable relationship, "have proven to be elusive, often impossible goals" for many formerly incarcerated women (176). Only one desister had achieved the "traditional respectability package" in my study, which suggests that these factors are not universal components of desistance. Instead, my findings suggest that support from non-romantic relationships were most crucial to the desistance process for all of the women in my study.

My findings also support reentry literature that focuses on the importance of family supports (Naser & La Vigne 2006; Maruna 2001; Petersilia 2003), while also challenging Richie's (2001) assertion that "women of color returning from jail or prison do not feel embraced by their communities" (383). Many of the women of color I interviewed were not ostracized by their families. In fact, 40% of desisters and 50% of persisters I interviewed, which includes women of both races, report that their families did not treat them differently as a result of their having been incarcerated. When asked

why, respondents say that they weren't the first person to be incarcerated in their families. This finding suggests that the effect of mass incarceration, particularly of people of color and socio-economically disadvantaged groups, which has been documented by scholars (Alexander 2010; Richie 2001; and others), may be lessening the stigma associated with a criminal record among families, simply because having incarcerated or formerly incarcerated family members has become commonplace.

Persisters' narratives rarely included experiences where they felt accepted or truly cared for by anyone[23]. For those persisters who had family support, the quality of that support was particularly salient. Two described having family members who supported them emotionally but had little by way of financial resources, and three others had family members who provided them with opportunities to offend. My findings suggest that, in order to promote desistance, the family support should promote a conventional lifestyle, and ideally provide women with emotional support and material resources. That said, persisters did not have the same quality of family support found among desisters. Aside from these accounts of a superficial family support, persisters' narratives did not reference mentors, chaplains or counselors. They feel the stigma of their criminal records and believe their offending pasts prevent them from fully belonging to society ever again. When offering advice to currently incarcerated women, the persisters in my study say that a positive social environment is necessary for desistance, but for various reasons, persisters are unable to take their own advice. According to desistance researchers, surrounding oneself with conventional others and adopting a new lifestyle has been shown to aid in the desistance process (McIvor et al. 2004; Farrall 2004; Laub and

---

[23] Rose talks about her relationship with her dog and disabled grandson as the two most significant relationships in her life. Nina talked about having a boyfriend who accepts and loves her as she is, unlike her husband who treats her poorly.

Sampson 2001; and others). The persisters in my study recognize the importance of social supports, but they struggle in their relationships with conventional others and find it difficult to adopt lifestyle changes, perhaps in part because they were unequipped with the resilience strategies (e.g. empowerment, self-love, openness to positive relationships, etc.) that would have facilitated new or enhanced existing social connections. Jo, a persister, cannot envision how she would be able to change critical aspects about her environment, including her social group, so she ultimately gives up on the idea that she can or will stop offending:

> *You got to totally change your whole life. The thing about it is, when you come out, how you gonna do that?*

Jo doesn't feel that she "belongs" in a social group where individuals are living a conventional life. Cindy, another persister, echoes Jo's perspective on the importance of surrounding oneself with a social group for someone to stop offending, though she doesn't describe actually doing this for herself:

> *Try to put themselves—surround themselves around a different group of people. Change their whole environment. Don't hang around the same people. And that really does help. If you hang around a different group of people – Birds of a feather flock together. So if you hang around with illegal people you're gonna be itchin' to do it. If you hang around people that go to work every day and have a clear, focused mind, then that is what you gonna want to do.*

Later in the interview, when Cindy is asked what advice she has for women nearing release, she reiterates the importance of social groups in helping to maintain desistance:

> *Put yourself around a different breed of people and stay focused. Get with the families, if they have children, surround yourself with your children, your family, your closest friends and just stay focused. And just try to rebuild your life because that's what you have to do when you get out of prison. You have to rebuild your life.*

In terms of her own life, however, Cindy says she resorts to doing "illegal forgery" because "times is hard" and she needs the money to live and pay her rent. Another significant reason some persisters may have had trouble establishing meaningful relationships have to do with their substance abuse problems. Half of the persisters I interviewed admit that they are still using illegal drugs. Two persisters, in particular, experienced emotional outbursts and were at times incoherent during the interview, apparently, it seemed, due to drug withdrawal symptoms. To illustrate this point, below is an excerpt from the interview with Dee, a persister, after being asked to tell the story of a childhood memory:

> *This life God has given me, it's beautiful. Beautiful. I will not complain. Not at all. Not me. No sir. God is good to me. He is good to me. Yes he is. He still amaze me alright. When I give up, it's when he come right on in, you know what I mean? I'd be like, "Thank you God, you put up with me." I get on my own damn nerves. (laughs). How do you put up with me? How you put up with me Lord? Thank you God. Forgive me Jesus. Thank you God. Forgive me Jesus. For real though. On my own – I'm not just sayin – thank you thank you thank you. Man, [inaudible]. Alright. You can't do nothin'. (crying) Why you gonna worry about what's gonna happen tomorrow for tomorrow will take care of those things themselves. Alright? Alright? Give it God. What you do tryin to eat. God gonna feed you everyday. I'm just keepin' it real. He does. He reminds me of those things in the Bible of words. Girl, He read them back to me. I pray "Continue to remind me." When I can reason with my motherfuckin' mind then usually I can't do nothin' in the situation, alright, but make it worse. Make my brain pieces fall out my head. (laughs). God is so good girl...It feels so good sittin' down here God. (crying) Thank you Lord. Thank you Jesus. Next question.*

My findings suggest that serious drug addiction impairs women's ability to communicate and connect with conventional others, which might help to explain why some persisters have few, if any, conventional or supportive relationships. In sum, most persisters seem to understand that belonging to conventional social groups is helpful to desistance, but aspects of their circumstances make it too difficult to form such connections. I argue that

the absence of social supports and overall lack of social integration explain, in part, persisters' continued offending.

Religious Mentors & Desistance

In addition to relationships with guards, teachers and volunteers, desisters describe developing relationships with chaplains and pastors who connected them to reentry programs, faith communities, and other important resources as being particularly beneficial. Recall from Chapter 6 that religious language was apparent in the narratives of both groups, but that desisters practiced their religion differently in terms of attending church services and building relationships with religious leaders. Religious mentors were similarly helpful to desisters as secular mentors, in that they believed in them and encouraged them to change their lifestyles, but were even more common. Recall, as well, from Chapter 6 that religion served as a particular "hook for change" for the women in my sample in terms of cognitive and identity transformations, which is consistent with Giordano et al. (2002). My findings demonstrate another way religion supports desistance, which is by connecting women with religious mentor, communities and faith-based programming—all of which benefit women in both practical and psychological ways. While Giordano (2010) addresses the psychological, emotional and social benefits of religion for desisting women, my findings add to the literature by demonstrating the connection between in prison religious experiences and access to resources upon release; increased access to material resources and other opportunities as a result of being connected to a religious community; and finally, religious affiliation provides access to faith-based programming which is available both in prison and upon release.

While still in prison, many of the desisting respondents said that they deepened their religious commitment and developed meaningful relationships with religious mentors. These mentors provided them with support and resources during their incarceration. Illustrating this point, Tiffany, a desister, describes meeting a chaplain who believed in her and encouraged her to change her life:

> *I had a little white Jewish lady that was crazy about me, I knew her from one prison, Metro – she was real crazy about me. Chaplain Fuller, They used to say she was my white grandmother. Well, she took me under her wing because she was a Jew and I was just a little black girl she said that I had a lot of fire in me...So I would spend my day with her and I would go down there with her and she had this couch. And she would turn the light out and close the door and it would just be me and her. That was like my escape from prison. She just let me cry. I wouldn't have to talk to her. I didn't have to pray. But whatever I was feelin' she would just close the blinds and let me lay on the couch and cry my little eyes out. Days I missed my son so much that was where I'd be...I wasn't one of those holy rollers that went to church every Sunday. I was a bad girl. But that was my granny. My mother, my friend, she was everything in one. And she used to always say, "Tiffany, you are so much more than what I see."*

In this case, the chaplain became a grandmother figure for Tiffany. This pattern was apparent among three desisters in my study, where religious social resources operate as "extended family," (in terms of the way that the relationship is experienced by the respondent) who provide important connections to a wider network of faith-based communities and their resources. This finding is consistent with the criminological literature that demonstrates the importance of "fictive kin" for women in prison and upon release, especially when blood relatives are inaccessible or unable to provide women with certain resources or forms of support (Leverentz 2011; Farrall 2004; Waterson 1996).

Desisters narratives also demonstrate what Rumgay (2004) highlights as the importance of social support networks in enhancing "women's resilience in stressful social environments" (413; see also Werner & Smith 1992). It was in prison that Trina, a

desister, also met a pastor who runs a halfway house for recently released women. She describes how that relationship developed in prison and ultimately led to a critical opportunity once she was released:

> *Pastor came to the prison and when I seen her, I promise you, I told her this too, it was cold, she had this cape on, and she looked at me and I promise you I seen Christ when I seen her, she will tell you, I promise you, I seen Christ when I looked at her. She told me to write her. So I did. I told her everything I been through and that I don't want to go back and do none of those things…So she let me come to her house and she accepted me.*

Farrall (2004) explains that positive relationships generally provide women with countless resources such as emotional and psychological support, access to housing and opportunities for employment, among other potential benefits, that collectively represent "social capital" (Farrall 2004, 65). He goes on to say that the more social capital one has mounted, the greater the chances that they will succeed in their efforts to desist (Farrall 2004; Laub et al. 1998). 80% of desisters in my study formed relationships with religious mentors and it was evident this greater social capital helped them desist. It is likely that this high percentage of religious mentors had to do with the way I identified some of the respondents (e.g. with the help of prison and reentry chaplains). Still, my project is most concerned with the ways in which social resources, religious or otherwise, support desistance.

Relationships that desisters developed with religious mentors while in prison continue to benefit women upon release. Religious mentors connected women with halfway houses, churches, and other faith-based opportunities. Graham and Bowling (1995) argue that the desistance process is intimately tied to whether one feels socially integrated into a conventional environment such as a faith community. Faith

communities provided all of the desisters in my study with some benefit, be they volunteer, housing or employment opportunities, to name a few. Melissa, a desister, has a place to live and food to eat because her faith-based reentry program:

> *God is so great. I thank God for me New Hope[24] program...I have my own property, 30% of my income, no utilities, nothing like that. I stay up there in Gwinnett. And I been here a year now and it's wonderful. It is so wonderful. I have so much peace. And they furnished an apartment for me. And they always givin' me Kroger vouchers.*

Tiffany, a desister describes how her members of her church helped her find housing and employment:

> *Everybody hasn't been nice. That's the truth. Like I went to go find an apartment because I have an armed robbery felony and you ain't movin' in nowhere , but by the grace of God I've met good people with a good church foundation that have helped me and they look back and they say, "Well, we're gonna give you a try." But out of 20 apartments, I only got one. Off the record alone, you're not gonna be able to rent if you are a convicted felon. Jobs—armed robbery–you aren't gonna be around anything with no money. So to be able to be a manager over other girls, I get money every day in my hand, that's a good feeling. So if I find that the good outweigh the bad.*

Tiffany's account demonstrates the tangible benefits of having a supportive faith community when building a conventional life after prison. According to Brown and Ross (2010), successful reentry requires a group effort:

> Gaining employment, for example, requires not simply individual skills, but a network of relationships between the individual and other individuals and their community that link a person into employment and support and sustain them there. It is widely estimated that around 80% of jobs are never advertised. Moreover, even for those that are, networking is commonly a key strategy in making a job seeker competitive: in other words, gaining employment will depend crucially upon an individual's stock of social capital (38).

Johnson et al. (2000) find that church attendance was a particularly helpful factor in deterring at-risk youth from illegal drug-use and other crimes, in part because of the

---

[24] This is a pseudonym for the residential program.

conventional relationships and activities that surrounded religious participation. A similar pattern is apparent in my findings in which religious mentors help women connect with faith-based communities. My findings illustrate that congregations and pastors are providing desisters with access not only to social networks and programming, but also housing, employment and other resources necessary for their desistance.

In addition to providing tangible benefits for desisters, feeling connected to one or many individuals living conventional lives can also help women stop offending because they feel accountable to someone and may even feel pressured to live crime free lives by others (Farrall 2004). Angela, a desister, after living the majority of her life without a sense of belonging, finally feels connected to others through her faith-based half-way house program. There, Angela says, she has found "a family" of "people who love me and surround me with love." This sense of social connection helps her desist, because she feels supported and accountable to the other members of the house, for whom she imagines herself as "a role model." Melissa, a desister, never felt connected to a group or community because she said she was never loved herself. However, once she learned to love herself, she says that the next step in her becoming drug-free was to seek out others who could help her "get to another level." She found that faith communities of recovering addicts provide her with the support and structure she needs in order to stay clean.

Contrary to desisters, persisters in my study do not talk about forming meaningful relationships with religious mentors, nor did they describe being connected to any faith communities or congregations after prison. When asked how she felt about the relationships in her life, Cindy, a persister, replies:

I don't really have none. I just deal with myself (laughs). I guess because being in prison, I do not still have the prison mentality, but in a way I do because I don't want to be bothered. I just want to be by myself. So I don't really have relationships like that.

Anne, a persister, explains that though she believes in God, she does not attend to church:

I believe in God. I don't go to church like that. I don't see the point, really, 'cause it's some experience in church and some people that fake holy ghost and all the shakin' and ooohing and the praying. You don't feel shit. You're just pissing me off sittin' there. I just be sittin' there cussing… I do believe in God but unless I find some money I ain't gonna be in no church. I'm not sittin' in the church putting on no front.

Rose, a persister, explains that the hardest thing about going to prison was that it severed her ties with friends and family, which meant that she faced the challenges of reentry alone:

Who's gonna be there for me? Who gonna really be there for me?...You get to thinkin': "Wait a minute, I'm not gonna have money to buy groceries. I'm going to have to face people, people that you know, know you was in prison." You got your kissin' friends, telephone friends, friends that you went places with and now that you got out of prison, will they be there? They wrote you a letter. They miss you. But the letters got foreign as the days go, as the weeks go. Now that you're waitin' on your turn to get out, for all this time you've been sayin' I'll be glad when I get out of this place…You knew what you left but is that there for you when you come back? I don't mean tangible stuff. Relationships—you have that somebody in life that you can depend on 100%. But now that you went to prison, you're marked. It's there for life…They aren't gonna be there [for you].

Brown and Ross (2010) point out that mentors help formerly incarcerated women "build the social capital necessary to make a successful transition from prison back into the community" (32). In the absence of such mentors, I argue that the persisters experience the disadvantage of having little to no social capital, which make it especially difficult for them to desist. Arguably not all faith communities would be receptive to including and assisting formerly incarcerated women, but the women in my study who were part of

faith communities were able to desist in part because they accessed resources and opportunities from members of their faith communities.

Social Supports & Resilience Strategies

Social supports and resilience strategies were the major factors that contributed to desistance for the women in my study and my findings demonstrate that the two, in addition to working individually, work together in important ways. Social supports include family members and mentors who foster identity shifts and strengthen psychological strategies that ultimately help desisters cope with the challenges of past traumas, incarceration and reentry. While some researchers understand desistance by focusing on the former offender's agency, cognitive processes and motivation for change (Giordano et al. 2002; Maruna 2001; Laub and Sampson 2001; and others), other desistance researchers look to the ways in which individual and social factors work together to support desistance (Lebel et al. 2008; Farrall 2004; Farrall 2005; Rumgay 2004; and others). In his work on desistance, Farrall (2005) points out that individual identity shifts take place in a "wider social world" which involves both internal and external factors working together "symbiotically" to support or curtail desistance (368). For example, LeBel et al. (2008) find that "with an adequate sense of hope, a person may both select into and take advantage of positive social opportunities" (154). Hope, for LeBel et al. (2008) can be understood as "belief in one's ability to 'go straight,' or belief in self-efficacy" which overlaps closely with the resilience strategies of empowerment and self-love. My findings also reveal some of the processes through which pro-social relationships can foster resilience in terms of the ways mentors nurture positive identity transformations and by encouraging women to exercise the psychological strategies

outlined in the previous chapter (e.g. positive thinking, faith, gratitude, patience, etc.). This finding is consistent with Rumgay (2004) who says that strong relationships with pro-social mentors and teachers "encourages the development of resilience" in formerly incarcerated women (414; see also Wandersman & Nation 1998). She goes on to say that "the ability to generate links to resources at a distance is an element in successful coping" and can support female desistance (Rumgay 2004: 414; see also Furstenberg 1993). My findings expand the literature by identifying specific resilience strategies being used by women and illustrating the ways in which these strategies improve access to and are reinforced by social supports, particularly faith-based social resources, to support desistance. On the same token, as was demonstrated in persisters' narrative data, few resilience strategies coupled with minimal social resources further reinforce their disadvantage and make it all the more challenging to build a conventional life.

Persisters in my study had fewer resilience strategies and social supports to draw from in coping with the challenges of abuse, incarceration and reentry. As a result, persisters were less equipped to successfully desist and therefore, continued offending. According to Rumgay (2004), "individual resilience and access to social support networks are mutually reinforcing: low coping competence worsens the ability to seek appropriate support, while increased support improves personal effectiveness at accessing further resources" (414: see also Bybee & Sullivan 2001; Green & Rodgers 2001). The persisters in my study appeared to be caught in this dependent relationship between personal resilience and social supports outlined by Rumgay (2004), in which their limited access to both resources created a web of disadvantage. Thriving in both personal

resilience and social supports, desisters experienced the perfect combination of "mutually reinforcing" coping strategies and resources that proved essential to their desistance.

Summary

Without the support of mentors, family or a community, formerly incarcerated women are faced with the extraordinary challenge of building a conventional life alone. Though not impossible, the chances are incredibly slim that women will be able to desist without the psychological and material benefits that social supports can bring. Members of both groups generally lacked human capital which disadvantages them in the labor market even if they didn't have a criminal record. Farkas (2003) argues that noncognitive traits signal certain messages to potential employers that affect whether or not they see an applicant as employable. For example, having earned a GED and speaking improper English (both of which were common among the women in my sample) signals to employers that the applicant is not as well-qualified as someone who has earned a high school diploma and speaks English properly (Farkas 2003). The women in my study, due to their race, class, gender, and offending status had limited access to the types of human capital that would make it easier for them to gain employment. My findings demonstrate the immense value of social resources for formerly incarcerated women in terms of connecting them with opportunities that would otherwise be inaccessible to them.

Desisters and persisters differed most strongly in terms of their narrative data and well-being measures in the area of social integration. Though both groups experienced discrimination and stigma associated with having a criminal record, desisters describe having support from people who reached out to them, cared for them and helped them

with their desistance, whereas persisters did not have these important connections to social supports. My findings suggest that desisters' longer prison sentences may have provided them with greater opportunities to take part in programming and develop meaningful relationships while in prison. This does not mean, however, that longer sentences are the cause of desistance. Instead, my findings demonstrate just how essential programming is for incarcerated women, and how important it is to ensure (as best as possible) that *all* women have access to programs and are encouraged to take advantage of them. If programming is such an important part of the desistence process- either because it provides the acquisition of skills or acts as a site for developing meaningful relationships- it is imperative that such resources be provided. What this means, of course, is that programming must be changed in some ways to attend to those with short sentences as well modified for those who already possess a certain set of skills and need different or more challenging programs. While not an easily implemented solution, the benefits of providing such programming should be clear.

Social supports include family members, spouses, mentors (e.g. officers, chaplains, volunteers), faith-based and other communities (e.g. support groups, AA, NA) that offered emotional and psychological support, as well as tangible resources that supported desistance (e.g. housing, employment, transportation, volunteer opportunities, financial assistance, social networks, and even early release from prison). My findings build upon the literature that establishes the key role of social supports in female desistance (Brown & Ross 2010; Rumgay 2004; Richie 2001) and add to it by demonstrating how mentors and social supports provide women with important resources

that make it possible for women to desist, as well as highlighting the unique role of religious mentors and faith communities.

Social supports also help women desist by supporting identity transformations, encouraging women to take part in programming, and by connecting them to a larger community, among other benefits. Social supports consistently encourage women to expand their skill set and continue their education, thereby enhancing women's marketability in conventional society and distracting attention away from their criminal record. In addition to helping women's resumes appear more attractive to gatekeepers (e.g. employers, landlords, etc.) who might not otherwise embrace former offenders, social supports also have a hand in actually opening doors for women by vouching for and connecting women with housing, employment, volunteer and educational opportunities that ultimately prove essential to the desistance process.

Access to strong social supports, together with a storehouse of resilience strategies, provide women the important resources that help them cope with the challenges of abuse, incarceration and reentry. My findings affirm literature that points to the "social, cognitive, and emotional processes" involved in desistance, while also shedding new light on the ways in which these processes work together to support desistance (Giordano et al. 2007: 1627; see also Rumgay 2004; Maruna 2001). My research reveals that without the critical resources of resilience strategies and social supports, formerly incarcerated women are far less likely to successfully desist.

Chapter 7: Qualitative and Quantitative Measures of Well-being

"Doing well means to me having peace of mind, a good relationship, family relationships, relationships as a whole, knowing that there is goin' to be differences but having a person that you can depend on. Being comfortable financially. I can't stress [enough] having a peace of mind, that's being well, peace of mind. Um. And enjoying life."

<div align="right">-Sherice, a desister</div>

"Doing well to me means basically you are stable. You have somewhere to live. You have a stable job or a stable income. You have things in your home that makes it home and makes you comfortable to go to after you go to work."

<div align="right">-Cindy, a persister</div>

Introduction

The in-depth interviews revealed that desisters had the psychological attitudes and social relationships in place that should lead to happier, more positive overall well-being. The persisters showed just the opposite–their negative outlooks, high rates of substance abuse and a lack of social support would seem to signal a lack of well-being. The work of Maruna (2001), Rumgay (2004) and other desistance scholars echoes my findings, and clearly demonstrate that   individuals who transition to conventional lifestyles following incarceration generally fare better than those who persist in committing crimes. Yet, I could find no criminological research to date that directly measures positive well-being among formerly incarcerated women. Additionally, the positive psychological literature has not directly addressed the population of formerly incarcerated women, although there has been work on populations that share similar experiences, such as abuse victims and individuals with drug addictions (Coleman et al. 1986; Frazier et al. 2001).

In an effort to understand desistance from multiple methodological and theoretical perspectives and contribute to both these literatures, literatures, I administered Keyes (2008) well-being measure. I could then compare the Keyes instrument with the life

history interviews to explore a possible connection between formerly incarcerated women's levels of well-being and the content of their stories. Surprisingly, I found that desisters and persisters had fairly similar well-being scores, and that these were quite high compared to the national population (see Tables A and B below). The only area that women differed most noticeably was in the social well-being dimension, particularly along the symptom of social integration, which I discussed in Chapter 8.
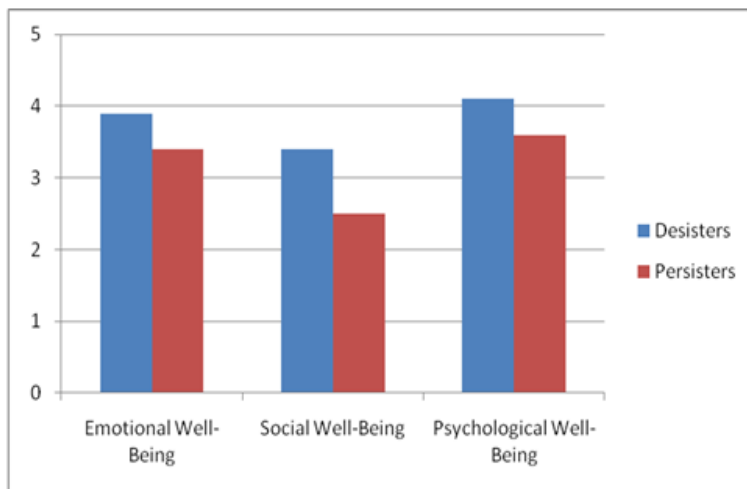

Table A: Comparison of both groups on dimensions of well-being
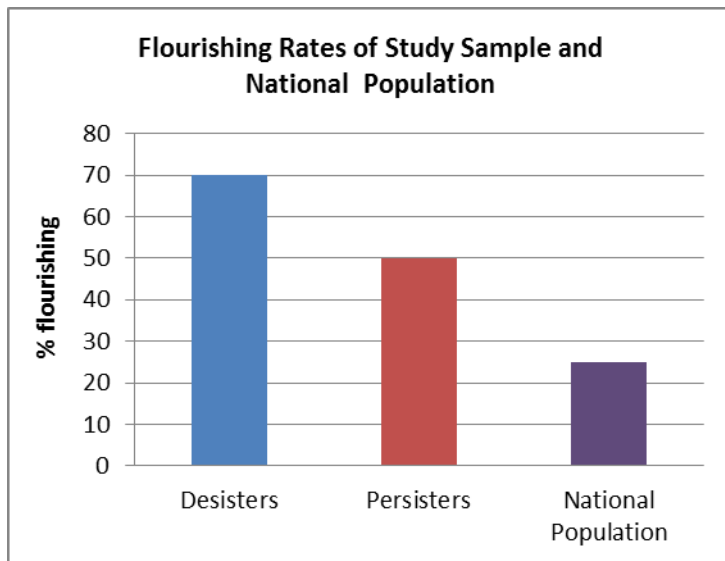

Table B. Flourishing Rates of Study Sample and National Population

The high scores and similarity between persisters and desisters on the Keyes measures seems to contradict the women's narratives. All of these women had suffered abuse in their childhood or adolescence, all of these women described life in prison as dehumanizing and difficult, and all of these women were struggling to meet the basic necessities of their life. The persisters in particular narrated stories of suffering, with many battling addictions.

However, my study allowed me to move beyond raw or aggregate scores and look at how responses to the quantitative measures related to the stories that the women told. In particular, I compared each woman's response on the well-being measure with how she defined well-being and how she qualitatively evaluated her life. Through these close comparisons, I found some important differences between desisters and persisters in how well the scores fit with the qualitative self-assessment and life stories. Specifically, I found that desisters showed greater consistency in terms of their quantitative and qualitative well-being assessments, whereas persisters showed notable inconsistency between their qualitative and quantitative well-being assessments. In this chapter, I will elaborate on these findings and discuss their apparent implications for research on well-being among formerly incarcerated women.

Qualitative and Quantitative Data Comparisons

Positive well-being, according to Keyes (2003), involves flourishing three key dimensions: psychological, emotional and social well-being. For Keyes (2003) someone who is "flourishing in life" experiences a "positive emotion toward life and is functioning well psychologically and socially" (294; see also Keyes 1998; 2002; 2008). *Flourishing* is certainly the ideal mental health state, but is actually experienced by less than a fourth

of adults between 25 and 74 years old (Keyes 2003:294).   With that said, respondents in my study had considerably high scores, with 70% of desisters and 50% of persisters flourishing (refer back to Table B above).[25]   My findings indicated that only one respondent, a persister, was languishing, which is typically more prevalent among adults and is characterized as "a life of quiet despair" (Keyes 2003:294). Respondents earned exceptionally high scores on their well-being measures, but according to my narrative analysis, desisters' accounts appeared to reflect positive mental health while persisters' accounts more closely resembled languishing in mental health.

Desisters' narrative accounts included statements that resembled positive mental health along multiple dimensions, including positive feelings towards life and elements of positive social functioning, which was consistent with their high well-being scores (e.g. 70% flourishing, 30% moderately mentally healthy).   This finding is not entirely surprising given Keyes (2009) finding that blacks had better mental health than whites, despite the fact that they experience greater disadvantage and discrimination. Desisters, also faced with disadvantage, discrimination and resulting stigma, showed evidence of positive mental health in their narratives as well as in their quantitative measures. For example, Sherice, a desister who was moderately mentally healthy, in describing her happiness with life states:

---

[25]Respondents' diagnoses were determined based on their responses to Keyes' MHC-SF questionnaire. I followed Keyes (2009) instructions for interpreting questionnaire responses, which are as follows:
To be diagnosed with flourishing mental health, individuals must experience 'every day' or 'almost every day' at least one of the three signs of hedonic well–being and at least six of the eleven signs of positive functioning during the past month. Individuals who exhibit low levels (i.e., 'never' or 'once or twice' during the past month) on at least one measure of hedonic well–being and low levels on at least six measures of positive functioning are diagnosed with languishing mental health. Individuals who are neither flourishing nor languishing are diagnosed with moderate mental health.

> *Mm, I'm proud of myself (laughs) to be honest. I went through a lot and I've overcome a lot and I'm happy where my life is now. There's more I could be doing. I need to lose weight. And that would be fine (laughs). That is the thing I'm most unhappy about. But um, I feel great. I really do.*

Desisters, as discussed in Chapter 6, looked back on even the most painful moments of their lives with a sense of happiness as many of them reframed hardships into positive experiences. Rachel, a desister who was flourishing, says that she feels satisfied with her life:

> *Every day. Every day I'm pretty happy. Every day I am satisfied with my life. However, it turned out that day…I just think, "That's the way it was supposed to be."*

"Life satisfaction," along with "happiness" and "positive affect," are symptoms of emotional well-being according to Keyes (2003). Desisters' narratives also reflected symptoms of positive psychological functioning, such as "self-acceptance," "personal growth" and "purpose in life," to name a few. In Chapter 6, I described how desisters had learned to love themselves. This involved self-reflection, drug rehabilitation, and generally "taking care of" themselves. All of the desisters in my study articulated that they felt their lives were meaningful and purposeful, oftentimes stating that "God has a plan for me." In terms of positive social functioning, desisters felt "a sense of belonging to a community" and that their "life is useful to society" (Keyes 2003:299). In Chapter 7, I discussed desisters' interpersonal strategies in which they exercised discernment in remaining open to healthy relationships, while avoiding potentially harmful ones. Through their relationships, desisters experienced deep connection, were able to make contributions and saw that others valued them. Overall, desisters' narratives seemed to reflect symptoms of positive well-being, which was consistent with their high well-being scores.

In contrast, persisters' narratives reflected languishing on all three dimensions of well-being in spite of their high well-being scores (e.g. 50% flourishing, 40% moderately mentally healthy, 10% languishing). Rita, a persister who was flourishing, describes how her drug addiction interferes with her ability to create the life she wants, which demonstrates her overall dissatisfaction with her life, and lack of happiness or positive emotion:

> *It's depressing. You know, I know my life can be better than what it is because I have had things in my life. And you know, dealing with drugs, I have lost it...I thought when I got out I was gonna get off drugs. I was gonna be okay. I thought my life was gonna be better but it's still the same. It hasn't changed. I face, you know, gettin' up every day, tryin' to accomplish something. And you know when I try, things look like they goin' okay for me, then the next things I know, I go a couple of weeks without doing drugs and then here comes this urge to smoke [crack]. That wrecks it, you know.*

Nina, a persister who was flourshing, talks about her dissatisfaction with her past and current life and says she feels "depressed" and "upset" because "I just wish my life could have been a whole lot better." Jo, a persister who was moderately mentally healthy, also describes her general unhappiness with her life:

> *[My life] sucks. Pretty much sucks. 'Cause, cause you feel like you're in a trap. Can't really do nothin' about it.*

Michelle, a flourishing persister, says that it is hard to be "happy-go-lucky" because of the many challenges she faces stemming from her crack addiction. Michelle, a flourishing persister, says she is unkind toward and blames herself for her abusive past:

> *I beat myself up because of my own stupidity, of allowing myself to be in abusive relationships. I beat myself up now more than I did then.*

Recall that in Chapter 6, Cindy, a moderately mentally healthy persister, explains that she does not like her life and that she feels defeated:

> *I don't like my life because – I mean, I graduated high school with a 4.0 GPA. I had a promising life. I should of went to college. I opted not to go for reasons I can't explain because I had scholarships and everything. But I just really wasted it away. Now it's time to put it back together and it's just hard. It's not as easy. Like some say, it's all in who you know 'cause I know some people who have gotten out of prison and gotten jobs and they're doin' good. But I just can't seem to get it together.*

Persisters' depictions of their lives seemed much more consistent with Keyes' definition of "languishing." Yet, 90% of persisters scored either flourishing or moderately mentally healthy on the well-being scale. My findings suggest that for at least half of the persisters in my study, serious drug addictions impair their ability to function in the world and fully experience the range of well-being symptoms. For example, one symptom of psychological well-being is experienced when one "resists unsavory social pressures," which for persisters, was made especially difficult to master when their addictions put them in contact with others who used and sold illegal drugs. In sum, persisters' narratives did not reflect symptoms of mental health, which for some of them can be explained in part by their serious drug addictions. In Chapter 8, I elaborated on the lower relative levels of social integration among persisters, which was the one area that persisters' narratives seemed to be most in line with their quantitative scores. Otherwise, their narratives seemed to contrast with their generally high well-being scores.

Persisters' narrative data reflected languishing in well-being which was contrary to their quantitative well-being assessments. When administering the survey measure to persisters, I noticed that some of the respondents appeared eager to complete the task. Persisters who were also addicted to drugs checked boxes all along the far right hand column—responses that also happened to indicate "flourishing" scores on the well-being scale. Research on self-presentation, or falsifying one's true feelings in order to

manipulate others' impressions, has identified a correlation between this type of impression management and risky behaviors, including alcohol and illegal drug use (Leary et al. 1994). Leary et al. (1994) argue that self-presentational concerns can influence one's initial and continued drug use, which may help to explain why those who use illegal drugs may also be inclined to present an inaccurate image of themselves. Davies and Baker (1987) have also found that heroin users gave inconsistent responses depending on the method in which they were asked—by a known interviewer and an unknown interviewer—and recommended that future research with drug-addicted populations should give "greater consideration" to self-presentation factors "wherever data are taken at their face value" (912). Taylor and Brown (1988) explain that individuals with psychopathologies and depression are sometimes more likely to engage a certain degree of self-deception in which they report doing much better than is actually the case. Shedler et al. (1993) also highlight the role of psychological defenses in promoting the illusion of mental health among individuals who are not genuinely mentally healthy, but appear to be so according to standardized measures of mental health. According to Shedler et al. (1993), "*mental health scales assess different things in different people*" and as a result, should be paired with qualitative assessments such as clinical judgment in order to capture a fuller assessment of mental health (1128). The discrepancy between persisters' well-being scores and qualitative data highlight that for formerly incarcerated women who are still addicted to drugs and/or involved with crime, qualitative data should be collected alongside standardized measures of well-being.

Given the aforementioned critiques of high well-being scores, it is plausible that the high flourishing responses among desisters and persisters could be the result of self-

presentation, illusion or self-deception. However, desisters' qualitative and quantitative data are consistent in that both seem to indicate high levels of well-being. Research on resilience among at-risk populations can also shed light on why desisters may exhibit high levels of well-being in spite of the fact that they have experienced many traumas and challenges, and committed a series of crimes. Much like the desisters in my study, Werner (1990) finds that at-risk children who demonstrate the most resilience over time exhibited protective factors such as "internal resources" and "external sources of support" (126). Werner and Smith (1992) describe findings from her longitudinal study of at-risk children in Kauai, Hawaii, in which most of the children developed into responsible citizens by the time they reached their 40's, even if after periods of delinquency. Masten (2001) also looks at the protective factors that enable at-risk youth to overcome adversity which include connections to social supports, the ability to delay gratification, positive sense of self and feelings of worthiness, as well as being motivated to be an active participant in the world—all of which were also evident in the narratives of desisters in my study. Desisters' qualitative and quantitative data are consistent in terms of demonstrating high levels of well-being, resilience, positive coping skills, as well as access to social support. For this reason, I would argue that the MHC-SF assessment is effective at measuring well-being among the desisters in my sample.

With that said, unlike desisters, persisters' qualitative data did not reflect positive mental health and therefore calls into question the accuracy of their high well-being scores. Persisters' high well-being scores might be best explained by a combination of self-presentation bias, illusions of health, defensiveness or denial (Leary et al. 1994; Shedler et al. 1993; Taylor & Brown 1988; Davies & Baker 1987) Nevertheless, without

directly asking the women to qualify their responses, I am unable to discern the key issues surrounding the reasons for the discrepancy. In spite of the chance that some women did not honestly respond to the questionnaire, one area that stood out in terms of Keyes' (2008) well-being measure that was also represented in the narrative data, was social integration—a symptom that desisters' experienced to a much greater extent than persisters. This pattern is especially noteworthy because it indicates that desisters and persisters differ quite strongly in their experience of social integration, which meant respectively greater and lesser access to social resources. My findings suggest that quantitative research with formerly incarcerated women who continue to offend and/or use drugs should include additional qualitative assessments as a supplement to the survey measure.

Two Definitions of Well-Being

In addition to the apparent inconsistencies between persisters' qualitative and quantitative well-being data, I found some important differences in the ways in which desisters and persisters understood well-being. In their work on feminist approaches to community psychology, Cosgrove and McHugh (2000) argue that feminist science is different from other types of research because there is a "goal of empowering women by understanding the world from a woman's perspective" (818). It is out of a feminist commitment to hearing and empowering women's voices that I asked respondents to explain what well-being meant to them and if they felt they were meeting their personal well-being standards. I found that desisters' qualitative assessments of their own well-being were much more compatible with Keyes' (2003) multidimensional concept of well-being, whereas persisters tended to define well-being in terms of meeting basic needs

(e.g. shelter, food, financial independence). Desisters, according to their own definitions and Keyes' measure, were doing exceptionally well, while persisters were not meeting their own standards of well-being (but had high scores of well-being). My findings suggest that desisters, with many of their basic needs met, had more elaborate understandings of well-being while persisters, who were not having basic needs met, tended to understand well-being in solely material terms.

When respondents defined for themselves what well-being meant to them, there was some overlap and divergence between desisters' and persisters' definitions. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter illustrates, desisters defined well-being as a having multiple aspects, including psychological, emotional and social dimensions, and they reported doing well according to their standards for well-being. Desisters and persisters alike mentioned stability, in terms of housing and employment, believing in God, and having control over their lives as markers of well-being. In addition to these markers of well-being, desisters' definitions differed from those of persisters' because they also said that well-being involved sobriety, positive relationships with others, self-love and reflection, setting and meeting goals, thinking positively, and having fulfillment in life. For example, Sherice, a desister who was moderately mentally healthy, defines well-being as multidimensional:

> *Doing well means to me having peace of mind, a good relationship, family relationships, relationships as a whole, knowing that there is goin' to be differences but having a person that you can depend on. Being comfortable financially. I can't stress [enough] having a peace of mind, that's being well, peace of mind. Um. And enjoying life.*

For Sherice, psychological well-being or "peace of mind" is most representative of well-being, but she also recognizes the importance of social well-being in the form of

dependable relationships, financial stability and emotional well-being by way of enjoying life. Angela, a desister who was moderately mentally healthy, also defines well-being as having multiple facets:

> *Staying clean. Staying focused. Being able to sit down and set you some goals and actually doing reasonable goals, something you know you can achieve, like go find a job. If you set a goal–be in my own house – that's unreasonable right now 'cause you got to get a job in order to get there. You've got to save money to get there. I mean set something that's reasonable within standards. Just strive to be better. Strive to do well. And just be yourself. Don't be what people want you to be. Don't act like what you acted like in the street.*

Trina, a desister who was flourishing, says that "staying sober" and "loving myself" are important aspects of well-being, as well as prioritizing her faith by "keeping God first" in her life. Tiffany, a desister who was flourishing, says working on herself by "striving to be better every day" and "looking for room for improvement" is part of well-being. She says that she is constantly in search of "something to achieve" and that she feels "so happy" meeting the goals she sets out for herself.

Desisters were determined not to simply go through the motions of life, but to make the most out of life. Their perspective on well-being meant "livin' the fullest of your life every day," "enjoying life," and "to live each day as if it were your last." Tanya, a flourishing desister, describes well-being as living a purposeful life, as opposed to merely surviving:

> *It's living life all over again and not just survive it. Try living it. Because surviving it you are just going about day-to-day without a purpose. And that's just like food, shelter, a place to sleep and that's just surviving to me and that is meaningless. When you are living life you are actually enjoying who you are and I think that's the biggest thing is that we don't enjoy who we are or we don't like ourselves so we tend to stray to negative things and that's what gets people locked up. If you look at the positive and look at what you can do in society or do for another, I think that happiness or that purpose or that meaningfulness that you have, like*

> *"Oh God. I did something meaningful" or "I'm striving to do something that makes a huge outcome." So I always strive to do the best I can. And put God first – always.*

In this passage, Tanya's perspective is almost identical to what Keyes and Haidt (2003) describe as flourishing, or "truly living rather than merely existing" (6). Overall, desisters define well-being as multidimensional, including aspects such as enjoying life, personal growth, and social connection, while also including sobriety as a necessary component of well-being.

Unlike desisters' multidimensional understandings of well-being, however, persisters' well-being definitions focused on their material reality and meeting basic needs, such as being financially comfortable, having employment and housing, and having control over their lives. Furthermore, persisters reported that they were not doing well according to their definitions of well-being. Persisters' personal definitions of well-being focused on practical needs and being unable to meet them. Rita, a flourishing persister, states:

> *Right now, I don't have a place to stay and if I get a place to stay that means I'm doin' well. If I get a job, that means I'm doin' well. I'm livin' here and there, you know what I'm sayin'? I might go to my daughter's house and then I want to lay down and rest and I can't because this is her place and she's with her friend. Then if I go to my other friend house, at a certain time in the morning I got to get up and leave. I don't like that. I want me a stable place to stay. Then some nights I have to walk the streets all night long. I don't like that.*

Cindy, a moderately mentally healthy persister, also references needing stability in housing and employment in order for her to be doing well:

> *Doing well to me means basically you are stable. You have somewhere to live. You have a stable job or a stable income. You have things in your home that makes it home and makes you comfortable to go to after you go to work.*

Nina, a flourishing persister, explains that "doin' well is me with a job." Being secure

financially is an essential part of well-being for Jo, a moderately mentally healthy

persister, because it would mean she would live an easier and more normal life:

> *Man just bein' able to make it [financially]. Like a regular person, like,*
> *like goin' out and buying a recorder for a hundred dollars and not havin*
> *to like figure out how the fuck you are going to do something as simple as*
> *that.*

For most persisters, employment, housing, and financial stability to meet one's basic

needs signified well-being. With financial security, persisters imagined being able to take

charge of their lives, no longer preoccupied with meeting basic human needs. According

to Rose, a flourishing persiter, "doing well and well-being means to me, 'On my own and

makin' it'" which she qualifies as being in a position to financially "meet all my needs

and part of my wants." Anne, a moderately mentally healthy persister, felt that financial

stability meant that she would have greater flexibility and control over her life:

> *Being stable and having your own. Yeah. That's what it means. And*
> *being stable means having a job and a place. Where it's like "I don't have*
> *to go to work today. I'm kind of good." You know what I mean? What, I*
> *make a $100 a day or some shit like that? If I don't come in, I can miss*
> *that $100 dollars because I'm well. I'm good.*

Anne went on to say that she was not doing well according to her understanding of well-

being and describes what it would take for her to be doing well:

> *Just workin' man. Just gettin' a job. I just need a job and that would make*
> *me happy. That would set it off because I mean I know once I get [a job]*
> *I'm not gonna leave it. [My life would be] better 'cause I could get my*
> *own place and I ain't gotta stay in somebody else's shit.*

Anne is sure that acquiring a job and accumulating wealth will make her happy and give

her the independence and control over her life that she desperately wants. Mandy, a

flourishing persister, also defines well-being as being in control of her life:

> *Well-being means to me that, that you are in control. You control your*
> *own life. You control your own destiny. You do what you want. The end.*
> *And whatever you set out to do or plan doin' there is nothing stopping you*
> *but you.*

Mandy mentions generally how important it is to not let any obstacles get in the way, though she doesn't specify which obstacles. For her and other persisters who were addicted to drugs at the time of the interview, feeling out of control was likely directly related to their addictions. Interestingly, however, none of the persisters specifically mentioned sobriety or drug rehabilitation as a necessary part of well-being.

Persisters' definitions of well-being focused on employment, economic self-sufficiency and having control over their lives. Persisters pointed to their unemployment, in particular, as the reason for their unhappiness, dissatisfaction, and lack of well-being. The focus on employment is not surprising given that none of the persisters were employed at the time of the interview;it is interesting that employment would be thought of as the only thing in the way of their well-being, given that at least half of persisters struggled with drug addictions and that research has shown that drug addiction often prevents individuals from experiencing fulfilling lives (Coleman et al. 1986). By comparison, some desisters also included employment and financial independence as a marker of well-being, but these women still believed they were doing well in spite of the fact that they had not yet achieved such goals (i.e. 50% of desisters were unemployed). It was the case that even unemployed desisters were having their basic needs met through supportive family members, residential programs and their faith communities. Having some material security could explain why desisters were somewhat less concerned with employment and financial stability, and focused on meeting more emotional, psychological, social and existential needs, all of which correlate with positive well-being

(Keyes 2003). Positive psychologists Ryan and Deci (2001) explain that it is important for an individual to move "beyond poverty level (and thus has sustenance and security)" but beyond that, "the attainment of more wealth should add little to well-being, whereas attaining fulfillment of goals more deeply connected with basic psychological needs should directly enhance well-being" (153). Although some persisters expressed not being able to consistently meet basic "sustenance and security" needs, some described living quite comfortably off of money they had made illegally. Even for those persisters who had been able to meet basic needs, they still understood well-being as being tied to financial security. According to Ryan and Deci (2001), focusing on material well-being beyond meeting basic needs correlates with lower levels of well-being. Thus, desisters' higher overall levels of well-being might be explained by their focus on psychological, emotional and social needs more than accumulating wealth.

Given that desisters, in general, were materially much better off than persisters, there may be another way of understanding the two groups' differences in well-being definitions. In his theory of human development, psychologist Abraham Maslow (1954) theorized that human beings go through stages associated with meeting different needs beginning with basic physiological needs (thirst, hunger, shelter), then safety needs (security, protection), followed by social (belonging, acceptance), then esteem (achievement, self-respect, autonomy), and finally, self-actualization, where the individual realizes their highest potential. Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as an analytical framework, it would be difficult for persisters to think beyond meeting survival needs because these are the most foundational of all needs. Once these foundational needs are met, as in the case of desisters, one is then poised to explore needs of a higher

order in the Hierarchy (Maslow 1954) as in the case of desisters, whose well-being definitions referenced positive relationships, self-love, being the best they can be, and meaningfulness, all characteristics of social, esteem and/or self-actualization levels in the Hierarchy (1954) and many of which overlap with symptoms of well-being (Keyes 2003). To a greater extent than did persisters, desisters' experience of well-being includes both an internal process as well as ensuring material stability. This finding is consistent with Ward (2002) who states that in order for men to stop offending, certain internal and external conditions must be met in which he has access to psychological, social and material resources that support desistance and contribute to a "balanced and fulfilling life" (519). My findings are consistent with literature suggesting that even a minimal degree of financial stability and stable employment appear to be a pre-requisite for, and in some cases a more pressing priority than, important to formerly incarcerated women's understanding of and ability to experience well-being fully (Maslow 1954; Ryan & Deci 2001; Ward 2002). Additional research is needed in order to better understand the ways formerly incarcerated women's qualitative and quantitative well-being measures relate to their offending behavior.

Summary

My findings revealed that desisters' qualitative and quantitative well-being data were much more consistent than persisters, who had high scores but appeared to be languishing. My findings suggest that Keyes (2008) measure should be supplemented with qualitative data to help contextualize the quantitative data when administering the questionnaire to formerly incarcerated women—especially those who are addicted to drugs. Desisters' and persisters' definitions of well-being overlapped slightly, but there

were some important differences between the ways the two groups understood well-being. Persisters' definitions tended to center around having control over their lives primarily though stable employment, healthy finances and being able to meet basic needs, like shelter and medical care. Their definitions were also fairly one-dimensional in that they assumed that if they had financial security (that they usually attributed to employment), then they would be doing well. Like persisters, desisters' definitions also made mention of faith, control, employment and stability, but as just some of many factors associated with well-being. Desisters defined well-being as multi-faceted, and though employment and financial stability were important, they believed that well-being also had physiological, psychological, emotional, and social dimensions, including sobriety, self-love, self-improvement, positive relationships with others, setting and meeting goals, a positive mindset, and finding meaning and enjoyment in life. My findings reveal that, as demonstrated by their qualitative and quantitative data, desisters—much more than persisters—referenced and experienced the intangible aspects of well-being that psychologists Guthman and Allen (1993:330) argue make life worthwhile (see also Keyes & Haidt 2003).

Chapter 8: Research Applications and Future Directions

Introduction

Rebuilding a life after prison can be a challenging, nearly impossible task for so many women. In this study, I sought to understand why some women desist from crime when the majority do not. I conducted life-history interviews and administered a well-being measure to 20 formerly incarcerated women in order to identify patterns that differentiated desisters from persisters. My findings suggest that desisting from crime requires a combination of factors, including individual persistence and resilience, as well as access to social supports and other tangible resources.   Researchers have documented numerous factors that support female desistance; factors such as identity shifts, along with access to employment opportunities, food stamps, and affordable housing (Alexander 2010; Maruna 2001; Petersilia 2003; Laub and Sampson 2001). While both personal and structural factors are crucial to one's success in the outside world, they are not the only important elements for desisting. My findings add to the literature by outlining new data about the strategies and resources that help women cope with past traumas and the challenges of reentry by demonstrating how and why these strategies support desistance. My findings also illustrate how the absence of these resources make it difficult to desist from crime, as was demonstrated in persisters' narratives. In addition to these contributions to the desistance literature, my research also makes important contributions to the positive psychological literature.   Specifically, my findings demonstrate the need for both qualitative and quantitative approaches when studying formerly incarcerated women's well-being. In this chapter, I will summarize the key

findings of my study, discuss the weaknesses of my project, as well as offer recommendations for future policy and research.

Key findings relating to female desistance

The research questions that guided my project design were developed as an extension of Maruna's (2001) Liverpool Desistance Study, which produced findings that I found intriguing yet somewhat incomplete. My research design closely mirrored Maruna's (2001) method with the addition of an all-female sample and a measure of well-being. With these modifications, I was able to see if the patterns identified among Maruna's (2001) desisters would also be present among desisting women in Georgia and how well-being might play a role, if at all, in the desistance process. My findings in some ways paralleled Maruna's (2001) in terms of desisters' likelihood of telling redemptive narratives and the importance of identity shifts in the desistance process. However, my findings diverged considerably in a number of ways, revealing a number of circumstances and factors that are specific to formerly incarcerated women's experiences—including how and why they offend as well as desist. That is, my findings support Rumgay (2004), Giordano et al. (2002), Richie (2001), and others who acknowledge that the lives of formerly incarcerated women are gendered and that this uniquely affects their involvement with crime and their pathways away from offending. My research builds upon the female desistance literature as well, by identifying new strategies and resources that help women desist.

My entire sample of formerly incarcerated women narrated traumatizing, stigmatizing and challenging experiences beginning in childhood, occurring during prison and continuing long after release. Where the participants deviated most strongly was in

how they responded to such challenges, either by finding ways to overcome them or by being overcome by them. Desisters overcame hardship by employing various resilience strategies—identity-based, psychological, and interpersonal—which improved their likelihood of building valuable relationships with key mentors and other social supports, who in turn connected them with other crucial resources. Desisters underwent personal transformations that were supported by and in many cases instigated by healthy relationships that they developed while still in prison. Desisters overcame self-hatred, shame, stigma, feelings of powerlessness, isolation and hopelessness. In their place, desisters cultivated self-love, empowerment, agency, deservedness, a sense of belonging, patience, gratitude and hope. These characteristics served desisters well, especially in the day to day challenges associated with a recovering addiction, unemployment, rejection, and subsistence living. Desisters were determined to succeed, fully aware that the odds were stacked high against them. Persisters, however, had come up against too many obstacles and given up on the idea of a conventional life.

All of the women in my sample described having challenging relationships with abusive partners, family members, or offending peers. The groups differed in terms of their approach to relationships—specifically, desisters were able to screen out harmful relationships, while allowing healthy ones to thrive. Persisters, however, were more likely to shut out potentially positive relationships and continued to maintain unhealthy relationships with offending friends and partners. As a result, persisters and desisters differed quite significantly in terms of their support network. Persisters were "on their own" so to speak, while desisters had important relationships with mentors, chaplains, family, and faith communities that they could call upon in times of need. Relationships

provided desisters with emotional and psychological support as well as tangible resources in the form of housing, employment, volunteer opportunities, money, and transportation. Given the multitude of challenges women face upon release, access to social support and resources are fundamental to their ability to build a conventional life.

Resilience strategies and social supports are important to the desistance process as unique assets, but also because these factors reinforce one another. Individuals who adopt a healthy sense of self are also more likely to seek out positive relationships with conventional others. These key individuals in turn reinforce desisters' newfound prosocial identity and support them in their desistance. Desisters, on average, spent longer periods of time incarcerated than persisters, which gave them additional opportunities to form positive relationships and participate in programming. However, my findings demonstrate that access to opportunities alone is not enough. Desisters underwent deep personal transformations in which they realized that they deserved a better life and could ultimately achieve it. In this way, desisters are mentally primed to be open to opportunities (i.e. programming, relationships, etc.) and feel empowered enough to access them. Persisters, on the other hand, struggle with feelings of powerlessness, despair, and self-hate, which can leave them feeling isolated and paralyzed with self-defeat. My findings demonstrate that resilience strategies and social supports can be mutually reinforcing and extremely beneficial, while the absence of both can be especially detrimental to the desistance process.

Key findings related to positive well-being

The in-depth interviews revealed that desisters had the psychological attitudes and social relationships in place that correspond with their being happier and having higher

levels of overall well-being. Persisters' narratives showed just the opposite–their negative outlooks, high rates of substance abuse and absence of positive relationships all signaled a lack of well-being. Researchers such as Maruna (2001), Rumgay (2004) and other desistance scholars have found similar patterns in which individuals who build conventional lives after prison generally appear to fare better than individuals who continue to commit crimes after their incarceration. Despite these common findings, I could find no criminological research to date that explicitly measures positive well-being among women who have been incarcerated. Additionally, the positive psychological literature has not yet looked at the population of formerly incarcerated women, although there has been research on women have been abused and those with substance abuse (Coleman et al. 1986; Frazier et al. 2001).

In an effort to understand desistence from multiple methodological and theoretical perspectives and contribute to both these literatures, I administered Keyes (2008) well-being measure. I found that desisters and persisters had fairly similar well-being scores, and that both groups' scores were quite high when compared to the national population. The only area that women differed most noticeably was in the social well-being dimension, in which persisters scored lower than persisters along the symptom of social integration. I also found that desisters narratives reflected positive mental health, which was consistent with their quantitative well-being assessments, whereas persisters narratives reflected low levels of well-being which was inconsistent with their quantitative well-being scores.

Desisters' qualitative and quantitative data were consistent in terms of demonstrating high levels of well-being, resilience, positive coping skills, as well as

access to social support. For this reason, I would argue that the MHC-SF assessment is effective at measuring well-being among the desisters in my sample. With that said, unlike desisters, persisters' qualitative data did not reflect positive mental health and therefore calls into question the reliability of their high well-being scores. Persisters' high well-being scores might be best explained by a combination of self-presentation bias, illusions of health, defensiveness or denial (Leary et al. 1994; Shedler et al. 1993; Taylor & Brown 1988; Davies & Baker 2006). Nevertheless, since I am unable to have women qualify their responses to the questionnaire, I cannot discern the possible explanations for the inconsistent results. Still, my findings suggest that measuring mental health in formerly incarcerated women who are persisting in crime and have substance abuse issues should involve both qualitative *and* quantitative methods.

My findings also revealed that desisters and persisters had varying definitions of well-being. Both groups gave definitions with similar elements, but there were some clear differences in the ways in which the two groups defined well-being. Both groups referenced faith, having control over their lives, employment, and financial stability as important to their experience of doing well. On the one hand, desisters defined well-being as having multiple components including material or financial stability as well as physiological, psychological, emotional, and social dimensions, including sobriety, self-love, self-improvement, positive relationships with others, setting and meeting goals, a positive mindset, and finding meaning and enjoyment in life. On the other hand, persisters defined well-being as something much more materially focused, referencing employment, financial stability and being able to meet basic needs, like shelter and medical care, as the most critical components to wellness. They also explicitly stated that

they did not believe they were doing well according to their own definitions of well-being and in terms of the ways they described their lives ("depressed," "trapped," "unhappy," "hate myself," etc.). My findings revealed that, as demonstrated by their qualitative and quantitative data, desisters were more likely to be flourishing or exhibiting positive mental health whereas persisters were more likely to be languishing or exhibiting low levels of mental health.

Study Limitations

Some of the major limitations of this study come out of my sampling method and size. In general, pitfalls of a non-random sample include the inability to generalize findings to any population or sub-population. In addition, the targeted nature of this sampling technique in which many of the participants were identified through their connections to chaplains or faith-based programs increases the likelihood that participants would have a religious background. Though this was in fact the case with all of the participants in my study to some degree, this was more likely a result of the context of the Georgia as part of the "Bible belt" in the American South. That is, even those participants who were recruited from flyers in secular places referenced religious language in their narratives. Another consideration is that those individuals who took part in the study were all willing to talk about their experiences and offending behavior with a researcher, which could be an indication of a self-selection bias. Because I did not use official statistics in addition to relying on participants' accounts of their offending, it is possible that some respondents were dishonest in their accounts of desistance and/or persistence. Another limitation of this study relating to sample size is that I was unable

to conduct a thorough analysis of how race, class, and sexuality impacted women's desistance.

Future Research

Research on female desistance should continue to explore possible connections with well-being. When measuring well-being among formerly incarcerated women, it is important to also look at qualitative data to better interpret quantitative scores. Further research should explore whether or not there is a causal relationship between well-being and desistance as well as other ways that the two might be connected. In addition to the researchers' analysis and interpretations of patterns and themes about how and why women desist/persist, I would recommend that future research includes direct questions about offending behavior and allow women to theorize what they imagine it would take for them to desist. Finally, additional research is needed to understand the complexity and intersectionality of factors such as race, sexuality, gender and class that impact every aspect of women's lives, including offending behavior.

Applications for Programming and Policy Implications

Programming and policies geared at promoting female desistance should take into account the three major factors that were found to support desistance for the women in my study. These factors are personal resilience strategies, social supports and tangible resources. Like some of the faith-based programs that participants in my study benefit from, programs and policies should promote and foster the kinds of identity-based, psychological, and interpersonal strategies that help women cope with challenges, seek out positive relationships and avoid harmful ones. These efforts should also encourage important connections with mentors, family, and conventional others who can serve as a

network for formerly incarcerated women. Such networks can help support women in terms of strengthening their personal resources while also providing them with access to tangible opportunities that are vital to their success. Without these key relationships and resources, it is unlikely that formerly incarcerated women will be able to desist from crime.

When I began this study, I was admittedly skeptical of faith-based programs and volunteers. My experience was that these individuals would proselytize and at times make women feel quite shameful about their crimes. After conducting this research, however, I have come to see the true value of faith-based programming. I have seen the benefits that religious perspectives can bring when women are left with very little by way of worldly resources. Spiritual perspectives allow women to have faith in the impossible, which is how rebuilding a life with a criminal record can often seem. When coupled with determined action, faith can inspire women to keep trying even after repeated failure. In addition to these benefits, faith-based programming is often one of the few options for women in prison and those who have been recently released. In this way, some programming is better than no programming at all. Faith-based programs are also beneficial in terms of connecting women with mentors, role models, friends, and communities that offer spiritual, psychological, emotional, and material resources.

Limitations of faith-based programming exist when individuals are either implicitly or explicitly excluded from programs or threatened with loss of access to resources when they do not adhere to all of the beliefs of a particular religious tradition. In this way, there is the possibility that women can be coerced into following a particular religious path in order to access vital resources, which undermines her religious freedom.

In addition, as was the case for some of the women in my study, faith-based programs or leaders who are explicitly homophobic can cause women to hide their sexuality or repress their same-sex desire in an effort to preserve their connection to resources. As a result, I would argue that faith-based programs are most effective when their goal is to support women in their efforts to desist and thrive in life, rather than promoting a particular kind of religious conversion or exclusive doctrine. In doing so, women are allowed to freely choose their religious path without having to compromise access to resources and support that could help them desist.

In addition to faith-based programming options, I believe that more secular programming should be made available that provides similar benefits in terms of psychological, social and material resources. Female desistance and formerly incarcerated women's well-being are interconnected and inextricably linked. Programs that promote desistance should simultaneously promote well-being as a component of successful reintegration. That is because well-being is multi-dimensional and can help women overcome past traumas as well as meet the challenges of reentry. Not only that, well-being comes with distinct advantages that can help this population in particular as well as society as a whole. While I am promoting well-being for its own sake in the lives of women, it is crucial to remember that as mothers, their well-being most intimately impacts the well-being of their children. When women feel empowered and healthy they are more likely to be better mothers, employees, neighbors, and citizens. My findings suggest that formerly incarcerated women who are functioning well emotionally, psychologically, and socially will be better equipped to desist from crime.

Therefore, programs and policies that promote desistance should also promote mental health.

In addition to promoting mental health, there is a real need for programming that addresses women's material needs (substance-abuse treatment, education, employable skills, housing, food, transportation, health care, and other monetary resources). Without these tangible resources, it can be extremely difficult to build a conventional life with a criminal record. Of course, policies and legislation that limit formerly incarcerated women's access to employment, housing, and government assistance desperately need to be overturned. Excluding women from the very resources that support their desistance sets them up for repeated failure and increases the likelihood that they will return to crime. Policies should focus instead on empowering women and equipping them with the skills, strategies and resources they need to build a conventional life after prison.

Conclusion

This project emerged out of a feminist commitment to privileging the perspectives and experiences of women as a way of recognizing and understanding the multiplicity of women's experiences, while highlighting everyday demonstrations of resistance and resilience in the face of challenging circumstances. Women's strengths, resilience, hope, and optimism in the midst of incarceration and the challenges of reentry are not simply remarkable observations, but examples of profound human potential that deserve to be acknowledged. This work recognizes and attempts to restore the complexity, strength and potential of human experience to a group of women fighting to resist the stigmatizing and debilitating effects of incarceration and reentry. Beyond broadening the scope of positive psychological inquiry, understanding how and why some women thrive in

conditions that usually result in continued downfall in life, repetitive and longer bouts of imprisonment, and even, given the dangers associated with criminality, their deaths, informs our understanding of the potential to transcend and transform external circumstances through internal subjective experience and subsequent actions. My research goes beyond an analysis of how to avoid problems to offer insight into how and why certain women achieve successful outcomes and desist. As a subset of the population of formerly incarcerated women, these women have much to contribute to the larger discourse on the population with the potential as well, to convey valuable lessons to the public about human resilience, adaptation and perseverance. Though this research is introductory and exploratory in nature, a strong case can be made for positive well-being as an especially relevant and worthwhile standard for evaluating and promoting quality of life among formerly incarcerated women that moves away from deterring or preventing negative outcomes and instead promotes and nurtures those qualities that lead to a gratifying and crime-free life for women.

Reflection

Sickness, struggle, heartache, failure, rejection, and death are not only unavoidable, but guaranteed conditions of life. Formerly incarcerated women seem to have experienced a disproportionate share of these hardships and face considerable challenges as a result of having a criminal record. The desisters in my study did not find a way to prevent challenges from occurring or eliminating the obstacles they faced. Instead, they found ways to cope with their challenges and overcome near impossible odds by accessing a great deal of inner-strength, resilience, determination and sheer will, while also allowing others to support them in their efforts. To be honest, though I have articulated as thorough an analysis as possible detailing how desisting women managed to desist, there is still something about the strength of their spirit that I cannot put into words. I am simply amazed at their ability to make the most of their circumstances, dream lofty dreams, and exhibit an altogether rare zest for life. There is something inherently special about the desisting women in my study, not just because they are no longer committing crimes, but because their lives are embodiments of the realm of possibility and human potential. I deeply believe that these women, as survivors of trauma and champions of seemingly insurmountable odds, have a great deal to teach us about how to navigate life's inevitable challenges and create unexpected triumphs in our lives. I cannot overstate the depth and complexity of wisdom interwoven in these formerly incarcerated women's life stories. My sincerest hope is that my dissertation honors the courage and dignity with which they live their lives and ultimately celebrates their unwavering commitment to succeed and the many victories they have already achieved.

References

Agnew, Robert. 1992. "Foundation for a General Strain Theory of Crime and
Delinquency." C*riminology* 30(1):47-87.

Alarid, Leanne Fiftal, Velmer S. Burton Jr., and Francis T. Cullen. 2000. "Gender and
Crime among Felony Offenders: Assessing the Generality of Social Control and
Differential Association Theories." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*
37(2):171-199.

Alexander, Michelle. 2010. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of
Colorblindness.* New York: The New Press.

Aspinwall, Lisa G. 1998. "Rethinking the Role of Positive Affect in Self-Regulation."
Motivation and Emotion 22(1):1-32.

Bandura, Albert. 1989. "Social Cognitive Theory." Pp. 1-60 in *Annals of child
development.Vol.6. Six theories of child development,* edited by R. Vasta.
Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Banks, Cyndi. 2003. *Women in Prison: A Reference Handbook*. Santa Barbara, CA: BC-
CLIO.

Bauer, Jack J., Dan P. McAdams, and Jennifer L. Pals. 2008. "Narrative Identity and
Eudamonic Well-being." *Journal of Happiness Studies* 9:81-104.

Beck, Allen J. and Bernard E. Shipley. 1997. "Recidivism of Prisoners Released in
1983.*" Bureau of Justice Statistics: Special Report.* US Department of Justice:
Office of Justice Programs.

Belenko, Stephen. 1998. "Research on Drug Courts: A Critical Review." *National Drug
Court Institute Review* 1(1):1-43.

Belknap, Joanne. 2001. "The Criminal-Processing System: Girls and Women as Victims
and Offenders." Pp. 374-384 in *Gender Mosaics: Social Perspectives*, edited by D.

Vannoy. Cary, NC: Roxbury Press.

Blokland, Arjan and Rianne van Os. 2010. "Life Span Offending Trajectories of
    Convicted Dutch Women." *International Criminal Justice Review* 20(2):169-187.

Bottoms, Anthony E., Joanna Shapland, Andrew Costello, Deborah Holmes, and Grant
    Muir. 2004. "Towards Desistance: Theoretical Underpinnings for an Empirical
    Study." *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 43(4): 368–89.

Bradley, Rebekah G. and Katrina M. Davino. 2002. "Women's Perceptions of the Prison
    Environment: When Prison is 'The saftest place I've ever been.'" *Psychology of
    Women Quarterly* 26(4): 351-359.

Braithwaite, John. 1989. "Criminological Theory and Organizational Crime." *Justice
    Quarterly 6*(3): 333-358.

Brodsky, Anne. 1999. "'Making it': The Components and Process of Resilience Among
    Urban, African-American, Single Mothers. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*
    69:148-160.

Broidy, Lisa M. and Elizabeth Cauffman. 2006. *Understanding the Female Offender.*
    (NCJRS 216615). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice
    Programs, National Institute of Justice.

Brown, Mark and Stuart Ross. 2010. "Mentoring, Social Capital and Desistance: A Study
    of Women Released from Prison." *Australian & New Zealand Journal of
    Criminology* 43(1):31-50.

Burnett, Ros and Shadd Maruna. 2006. "The Kindness of Prisoners: Strengths-based
    Resettlement in Theory and in Action." *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 6(1): 83-
    106.

Bybee, Deborah I. and Cris M. Sullivan. 2002. "The Process through which an Advocacy

Intervention Resulted in Positive Change for Battered Women over Time." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 30(1):103-32.

Byrne, Clare F. and Karen F. Trew. 2008. "Pathways Through Crime: The Development of Crime and Desistance in the Accounts of Men and Women Offenders." *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 47(3): 238-258.

Caputo-Levine, Deirdre. 2010. "Lessons for Prison Re-entry from the Feminist Movement." *Dialectical Anthropology* 34(4):497-500.

Casey-Acevedo, Karen and Tim Bakken. 2001. "The Effects of Visitation on Women in Prison." *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice* 25(1): 46-69.

Clark, John, James Austin and D. Alan Henry. 1997. *Three Strikes and You're Out': A Review of State Legislation..* Washington, DC: National Institute of Justice.

Cobbs, Price M. and Judith L. Turnock. 2003. *Cracking the Corporate Code: The Revealing Success Stories of 32 African-American Executives.* New York: AMACOM.

Coleman, Clive and Jenny Moynihan. 1996. Understanding Crime Data: Haunted by the Dark Figure. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Coleman, Sandra B., J. Doreene Kaplan, and Robert W. Downing. 1986. "Life Cycle and Loss—The Spiritual Vacuum of Heroin Addiction." *Family Process* 25(1):5-23.

Cook, Sarah L., Sharon G. Smith, Chantai Poister Tusher, and Jerris Raiford. 2005. "Self-Reports of Traumatic Events in a Random Sample of Incarcerated Women." *Women & Criminal Justice* 16(1-2):107-126.

Cosgrove, Lisa and Maureen C. McHugh. 2000. "Speaking for Ourselves: Feminist Methods and Community Psychology." *American Journal of Community*

Psychology 28(6):815-838.

Creswell, John W. and Vicki L. Plano Clark. 2007. *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Daly, Kathleen and Lisa Maher. 1998. "Crossroads and Intersections: Building from Feminist Critique." In *Criminology at the Crossroads: Feminist Readings in Crime and Justice* edited by K. Daly and L. Maher. New York: Oxford University Press.

Davies, John Booth and Roger Baker. 2006. "The Impact of Self-Presentation and Interviewer Bias Effects on Self-reported Heroin Use." *British Journal of Addiction* 82(8):907-912.

Deschenes, Elizabeth. P., Barbara Owen, and Jason Crow. 2007. "Recidivism among Female Prisoners: Secondary Analysis of the 1994 BJS Data Set." Retrieved July 20, 2009, from www.ncjrs.gov/App/Publications/abstract.aspx?ID¼238573.

Dodge, Mary and Mark R. Pogrebin. 2001. "Collateral Costs of Imprisonment for Women: Complications of Reintegration." *The Prison Journal* 81(1): 42-54.

Donovan, John E., Richard Jessor, and Frances M. Costa. 1991. "Adolescent Health Behavior and Conventionality-Unconventionality: An Extension of Problem-Behavior Therapy." *Health Psychology* 10(1):52-61.

Edwards, Todd Alan. 2000. "Female Offenders: Special Needs and Southern State Challenges." *A Special Series Report of the Southern Legislative Conference.* Atlanta, GA: The Council Of State Governments.

Emirbayer, Mustafa and Jeff Goodwin. 1994. "Network Analysis, Culture, and the Problem of Agency." *The American Journal of Sociology* 99(6):1411-1454.

Emmons, Robert A. 2003. "Personal Goals, Life Meaning, and Virtue: Wellsprings of a Positive Life." Pp. 105-128 in *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived,* edited by C. L. M. Keyes and J. Haidt. Washington, DC: American

Psychological Association.

Emmons, Robert A. and Michael E. McCullough. 2003. "Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84(2):377-389.

Farkas, George. 2003. "Racial Disparities and Discrimination in Education: What Do We Know, How Do We Know It, and What Do We Need to Know?" *Teachers College Record* 105(6):1119-1146.

Farrall, Stephen. 2004 "Social Capital and Offender Re-integration: Making Probation Desistance Focused." Pp. 57-84 in *After Crime and Punishment: Pathways to Offender Reintegration*, edited by S. Maruna and R. Immarigeon, Cullompton, Devon: Willan.

Farrall, Stephen. 2005. "On the Existential Aspects of Desistance from Crime." *Symbolic Interaction* 28(3):367-386.

Farrall, Stephen and Shadd Maruna. 2004. "Desistance-Focused Criminal Justice Policy Research." *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* 43:358-367.

Ferraro, Kathleen J. and Angela M. Moe. 2003. "Mothering, crime, and incarceration." J*ournal of Contemporary Ethnography* 32(1): 9-40.

Fivush, Robyn and Janine P. Buckner. 2003. "Creating Gender and Identity Through Autobiographical Narratives." Pp. 149-16 8 in *Autobiographical Memory and the Construction of a Narrative Self,* edited by R. Fivush and C. A. Haden. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Folkman, Susan and Moskowitz, Judith Tedlie. 2000. "Positive Affect and the Other Side of Coping." *American Psychologist* 55(6):647-654.

Frank, Arthur W. 2002. "Why Study People's Stories? The Dialogical Ethics of Narrative Analysis." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods,* 1(1):109-117.

Frankl, Viktor Emil. 1959.*Man's Search for Meaning.* New York: Washington Square
  Press.

Frazier, Patricia, Amy Conlon, and Theresa Glaser. 2001. "Positive and Negative Life
  Changes Following Sexual Assault." *Journal of Consulting and Clinical
  Psychology 69:*1048–1055.

Furstenberg, Frank F., Jr. 1993. "How Families Manage Risk and Opportunity in
  Dangerous Neighborhoods." Pp. 231-258 in *Sociology and the Public Agenda,*
  edited by W. J. Wilson. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Gadd, David and Stephen Farrall. 2004. "Criminal Careers, Desistance and Subjectivity:
  Interpreting Men's Narratives of Change." *Theoretical Criminology* 8(2): 123–156.

Georgia Department of Corrections. 2007. *2007 Annual Report: From "Good to Great"
  in a Best Managed State, Part I.* Atlanta, GA: Georgia Correctional Industries.
  *Retrieved from:(*http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/Reports/Annual/AnnualReport.html).

Georgia Department of Corrections. 2008. *Reentry Skills Building Handbook. Retrieved
  from:(*http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/default.html).

Georgia Department of Corrections. 2010. "Facility Information." Retrieved March 4,
  2010 (http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/GDC/FacilityMap/html/metro_state_prison_w.html).

Giordano, Peggy C. 2010. *Legacies of Crime: A Follow-Up of the Children of Highly
  Delinquent Girls and Boys.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Giordano, Peggy C., Stephen A. Cernkovich, and Jennifer L. Rudolph. 2002. "Gender,
  Crime, and Desistance: Toward a Theory of Cognitive Transformation." *American
  Journal of Sociology* 107(4): 990-1064.

Giordano, Peggy C., Ryan D. Shroeder and Stephen A. Cernkovich. 2007. "Emotions and
  Crime Over the Life Course: A Neo-Meadian Perspective on Criminal Continuity
  and Change." *American Journal of Sociology* 112(6): 1603-1661.

Godsoe, Cynthia. 1998. "The Ban on Welfare for Felony Drug Offenders: Giving a New Meaning to 'Life Sentence.'" *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 13: 257.

Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates.* Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.

Graham, John and Ben Bowling. 1995 *Young People and Crime*. Home Office Research Study 145. London: HMSO.

Green, Beth L. and Angela Rogers. 2001. "Determinants of Social Supports Among Low-Income Mothers: A Longitudinal Analysis." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 29(3):419-41.

Greene, Judith and Kevin Pranis. 2004. *Hard hit: The Growth in the Imprisonment of Women,1977- 2004, Part I: Growth trends and recent research.* Women's Prison Association: Institute on Women & Criminal Justice. Retrieved October 20, 2008 from http:www.wpaonline.org/insititute/hardhit/part1.htm.

Greenfeld, Lawrence A. and Tracy L. Snell. 1999. *Women offenders*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.

Grossbaum, Miriam. F. and Glen W. Bates. 2002. "Correlates of Psychological Well-being at Midlife: The Role of Generativity, Agency, Communion, and Narrative Themes." *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 26(2): 120–127.

Guthman, Edwin O. and C. Richard Allen (Eds.). 1993. *RFK: Collected Speeches.* New York: Viking Penguin.

Haney, Lynne. 1996. "Homeboys, Babies, Men in Suits: The State and the Reproduction of Male Dominance." *American Sociological Review* 61(5):759-778.

Henriques, Zelma W. and Norma Manatu-Rupert. 2001. "Living on the Outside: African American Women Before, During, and After Imprisonment." *The Prison Journal* 81(1): 6-19.

Hollin, Clive R. and Emma J. Palmer. 2006. "Criminogenic Need and Women Offenders: A Critique of the Literature." *Legal and Criminological Psychology* 11(2):179-195.

Immarigeon, Russ, and Meda Chesney-Lind. 1992. *Women's prisons: Overcrowded and Ooverused*. San Francisco: National Council on Crime and Delinquency.

Irwin, John. 1970. *The Felon.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Janoff-Bulman, Ronnie. 2004. "Posttraumatic Growth: Three Explanatory Models." *Psychological Inquiry* 15(1):30-34.

Johnson, Byron R., David B. Larson, Spencer De Li, and Sung Joon Jang. 2000. Escaping from the Crime of Inner Cities: Church Attendance and Religious Salience Among Disadvantaged Youth." *Justice Quarterly* 17(2):377-390.

Katz, Rebecca S. 2000. "Explaining Girls' and Women's Crime and Desistance in the Context of Their Victimization Experiences: A Developmental Test of Revised Strain Theory and the Life Course Perspective." *Violence Against Women* 6(6):633-660.

Keyes, Corey L. M. 1998. "Social Well-Being." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 61:121-140.

Keyes, Corey L. M. 2002. "The Mental Health Continuum: From Languishing to Flourishing in Life." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 43:207-222.

Keyes, Corey L. M. 2003. "Complete Mental Health: An Agenda for the 21st Century." Pp. 293-312 in *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived,* edited by C. L. M. Keyes and J. Haidt. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Keyes, Corey L. M. 2004. "The Nexus of Cardiovascular Disease and Depression Revisited: The Complete Mental Health Perspective and the Moderating Role of

Age and Gender." *Aging and Mental Health* 8: 266–274.

Keyes, Corey L. M. 2005. "Chronic Physical Conditions and Aging: Is Mental Health a Potential Protective Factor?" *Ageing International 30:* 88–104.

Keyes, Corey L. M. 2006. "Subjective Well-Being in Mental Health and Human Development Research Worldwide: An Introduction." *Social Indicators Research.* 77:1-10.

Keyes, Corey L. M. 2007. "Promoting and Protecting Mental Health as Flourishing: A Complementary Strategy for Improving National Mental Helath." *American Psychologist* 62(2):95-108.

Keyes, C. L. M. 2009. Atlanta: *Brief description of the mental health continuum short Form (MHC-SF).* Available: http://www.sociology.emory.edu/ckeyes/. [On–line, retrieved 3/12/2012].

Keyes, Corey L. M. 2009. "The Black-White Paradox in Health: Flourishing in the Face of Inequality." *Journal of Personality* 77:1677-1706.

Keyes, Corey L. M. and Jonathan Haidt. 2003. "Introduction: Human Flourishing—The Study of That Which Makes Life Worthwhile." Pp. 3-12 in *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived,* edited by C. L. M. Keyes and J. Haidt. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Kruttschnitt, Candace and Rosemary Gartner. 2003. "Women's Imprisonment." Pp. 55-135 in *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research* edited by M. Tonry. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Laub, John H., Daniel S. Nagin, and Robert J. Sampson. 1998. "Trajectories of Change in Criminal Offending: Good Marriages and the Desistance Process." *American Sociological Review* 63:225–38.

Laub, John. H. and Robert J. Sampson. 2001. "Understanding Desistance from Crime." *Crime and Justice* 28: 1-70.

Laub, John. H. and Robert J. Sampson. 2003. *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Leary, Mark R., Lydia R. Tchividjian, and Brook E. Kraxberger. 1994. "Self-Presentation Can Be Hazardous to Your Health: Impression Management and Health Risk." *Health Psychology* 13(6):461-470.

LeBel, Thomas P., Ros Burnett, Shadd Maruna, and Shawn Bushway. 2008. "The 'Chicken and Egg' of Subjective and Social Factors in Desistance from Crime." *European Journal of Criminology* 5(2):131-159.

Lemert, Edwin. M. 1951. *Social Pathology: A Systemic Approach to the Theory of Sociopathic Behavior.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Leverentz, Andrea. 2011. "Being a Good Daughter and Sister: Families of Origin in the Reentry of African American Female Ex-prisoners." *Feminist Criminology,* 6(4):239-267.

Liebrich, J. 1996. "The Role of Shame in Going Straight: A Study of Former Offenders." Pp. 283-303 in *Restorative Justice: International Perspectives*, edited by B. Galaway and J. Hudson. Monsey, NY: Criminal Justice Press.

Lindquist, Christine H. 2000. "Social Integration and Mental Well-Being Among Jail Inmates." *Sociological Forum* 15(3):431-455.

Marcus-Mendoza, Susan T. and Erin Wright. "Decontextualizing Female Criminality: Treating Abused Women in Prison in the United States." *Feminism Psychology* 14(2): 250-255.

Maruna, Shadd. 1997. "Going Straight: Desistance from Crime and Self-Narratives of Reform." *Narrative Study of Lives* 5:59-97.

Maruna, Shadd. 1999. "Desistance and Development: The Psychosocial Process of 'Going Straight.'" *British Society of Criminology Conference Selected Proceedings* 2:1-25.

Maruna, Shadd. 2001. *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington, D.C: American Psychological Association.

Maruna, Shadd, L. Wilson, and K. Curran. 2006. "Why God is Often Found Behind Bars: Prison Conversion and the Crisis of the Self-Narrative." *Research in Human Development* 3:161-184.

Maslow, Abraham H. 1954. *Motivation and Personality.* New York: Harper.

Masten, Ann S. 2001. "Ordinary magic: Resilience processes in development." *American Psychologist 56:*227-238.

Mazerolle, Paul. 1998. "Gender, General Strain, and Delinquency: An Empirical Examination." *Justice Quarterly* 15(1): 65-91.

McAdams, Dan P. 1985. *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story.* New York: Guilford.

McAdams, Dan P. 1993. *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self.* New York: William Morrow.

McAdams, Dan P. 2001. "The Psychology of Life Stories." *Review of General Psychology* 5:100-122.

McAdams, Dan P. 2006. *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By.* New York: Oxford University Press.

McAdams, Dan P. and Phillip J. Bowman. 2001. "Narrating Life's Turning Points:

Redemption and Contamination." Pp. 3-34 in *Turns in the Road: Narrative Studies of Lives in Transition* edited by D. P. McAdams, R. Josselson, and A. Lieblich. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

McAdams, Dan P., Ann Diamond, Ed de St. Aubin, and Elizabeth Mansfield. 1997. "Stories of Commitment: The Psychosocial Construction of Generative Lives." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 72(3):678-694.

McAdams, Dan P., Jeffrey Reynolds, Martha Lewis, Allison H. Patten, and Phillip J. Bowman. 2001. "When Bad Things Turn Good and Good Things Turn Bad: Sequences of Redemption and Contamination in Life Narrative and Their Relation to Psychosocial Adaptation in Midlife Adults and in Students." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 27(4):474-485.

McIvor, Gill (Ed.). 2004. *Women Who Offend.* Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

McIvor, Gill, Cathy Murray and Janet Jamieson. 2004. "Desistance from Crime: Is it Different For Women and Girls." Pp. 181-197 in *After Crime and Punishment: Pathways to Offender Reintegration,* edited by S. Maruna and R. Immarigeon. London: Willan.

McMahon, Martha. 1995. *Engendering Motherhood: Identity and Self-Transformation in Women's Lives*. New York: Guilford Press.

McNeill, Fargus and Shadd Maruna. 2007. "Giving Up and Giving Back: Desistance, Generativity and Social Work with Offenders." Pp. 224-239 in *Developments in Social Work with Offenders,* edited by G. McIvor and P. Raynor. Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Merton, Robert K. 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure.* New York: Free Press.

Moe, Angela M. and Kathleen J. Ferraro. 2006. "Criminalized Mothers: The Value and
Devaluation of Parenthood Behind Bars." *Women and Therapy* 29:135-164.

Moffitt, Terrie E. 1993. "Adolescence-Limited and Life-Course-Persistent Antisocial
Behavior: A Developmental Taxonomy." *Psychological Review,* 100(4): 674-701.

Morash, Merry and Pamela J. Schram. 2002. *The Prison Experience: Special Issues of
Women in Prison.* Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Muncie, John. 1999. *Youth and Crime: A Critical Introduction.* London: Sage.

Myers, Margaret. 2000. "Qualitative Research and the Generalizability Question:
Standing Firm with Proteus." *The Qualitative Report* 4(1-2). Retrieved December
10, 2011 (http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR41/myers.html).

Naser, Rebecca L., and Nancy G. La Vigne. 2006. "Family Support in the Prisoner
Reentry Process: Expectations and Realities." *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*
43(1): 93–106.

Nakamura, Jeanne and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. 2003. "The Construction of Meaning
Through Vital Engagement." Pp. 83-105 in *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and
the Life Well-lived,* edited by C. L. M. Keyes and J. Haidt. Washington, DC:
American Psychological Association.

O'Brien, Patricia and Nancy Lee. 2006. "Moving from Needs to Self-Efficacy: A Holistic
System for Women in Transition from Prison." *Women & Therapy* 29(3/4): 261-
284.

Pager, Devah. 2003. "The Mark of a Criminal Record." *American Journal of Sociology*
108(5):937-975.

Petersilia, Joan. 2003. *When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Peterson, Christopher and Edward C. Chang. 2003. "Optimism and Flourishing." Pp. 55-80 in *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived,* edited by C. L. M. Keyes and J. Haidt. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Piehl, Anne Morrison and John J. DiLulio, Jr. 1995. "'Does Prison Pay?' Revisited: Returning to the Crime Scene." *The Brookings Review* Winter:21-25.

Richie, Beth E. 1996. *Compelled to Crime: The Gender Entrapment of Battered Black Women.* New York: Routledge.

Richie, Beth E. 2001. "Challenges Incarcerated Women Face as They Return to Their Communities: Findings From Life History Interviews." *Crime and Delinquency* 47(3): 368-389.

Rutter, Michael. 1996. "Transitions and Turning Points in Developmental Psychopathology: As Applied to the Age Span between Child and Mid-adulthood." *Journal of Behavioural Development* 19(3):603-26.

Rumgay, Judith. 2004. "Scripts for survival: Pathways Out of Female Crime." Howard Journal of Criminal Justice 43(4): 405-419.

Ryan, Richard M. and Edward L. Deci. 2001. "On Happiness and Human Potentials: A Review of Research on Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being." *Annual Review of Psychology* 52:141-66.

Ryff, Carol D. and Burton Singer. 2003. "Turning Points as Opportunities for Psychological Growth." Pp. 15-36 in *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-lived,* edited by C. L. M. Keyes and J. Haidt. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Ryff, Carol D., Corey L. M. Keyes, and Diane L. Hughes. 2003. "Status Inequalities, Perceived Discrimination, and Eudaimonic Well-being: Do the Challenges of Minority Life Hone Purpose and Growth?" *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 44:275-291.

Sampson, Robert J. and John H. Laub. 1990. "Crime and Deviance over the Life Course: The Salience of Adult Social Bonds." *American Sociological Review* 55(5):609-627.

Sampson, Robert J. and John H. Laub. 1993. *Crime in the Making Pathways and Turning Points Through Life.* Harvard University Press.

Seligman, Martin. E. P. 1998. *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life.* New York: A. A. Knopf.

Shedler, Jonathan, Martin Mayman, and Melvin Manis. 1993. "The *Illusion* of Mental Health." *American Psychologist* 48(11):1117-1131.

Shover, Neal. 1985. *Aging Criminals.* Beverly Hills: Sage.

Singer, Jefferson A. 2004. "Narrative Identity and Meaning Making Across the Adult Lifespan: An Introduction." *Journal of Personality* 72(3):437-460.

Sommers, Ira, Deborah R. Baskin, and Jeffrey Fagan. 1994. "Getting Out of the Life: Crime Desistance by Female Street Offenders." *Deviant Behavior* 15(2): 125-149.

Steffensmeier, Darrell and Emilie Allan. 1996. "Gender and Crime: Toward a Gendered Theory of Female Offending." *Annual Review of Sociology* 22(1): 459-487.

Sutherland, Edwin H. 1937. *The Professional Thief—by a Professional Thief: Annotated and Interpreted by Edwin Sutherland.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Taylor, Shelley E. and Jonathan D. Brown. 1988. "Illusion and Well-being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health." *Psychological Bulletin* 103:193-210.

Tedeschi, Richard G. and Lawrence G. Calhoun. 1995. *Trauma and Transformation: Growing in the Aftermath of Suffering.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tunnell, Kenneth D. 1990. "Choosing Crime: Close Your Eyes and Take Your Chances." *Justice Quarterly*, 7(4): 673-690.

Uggen, Christopher. 2000. "Work as Turning Point in the Life Course of Criminals: A Duration Model of Age, Employment, and Recidivism." *American Sociological Review* 67:529-46.

Uggen, Christopher and Candace Kruttschnitt. 1998. "Crime in the Breaking: Gender Differences in Desistance." *Law and Society Review* 32(2):401-28.

Uggen, Christopher and Melissa Thompson. 2003. "The Socioeconomic Determinants of Ill-Gotten Gains: Within-Person Changes in Drug Use and Illegal Earnings." *American Journal of Sociology* 109(1):146-185.

Valentine, LaNae and Leslie E. Feinauer. 1993. "Resilience Factors Associated with Female Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse." *The American Journal of Family Therapy* 21(3):216-224.

Visher, Christy A. and Jeremy Travis. 2003. "Transitions from Prison to Community: Understanding Individual Pathways." *Annual Revie of Sociology* 29(29): 89-113.

Wacquant, Loic. 2001. "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh." Pp. 82-120 in *Mass Imprisonment: Social Causes and Consequences* edited by D. Garland. London: Sage Publications.

Ward, Tony. 2002. "Good Lives and the Rehabilitation of Offenders: Promises and Problems." *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 7:513-528.

Waterson, Kathryn. 1996. *Women in Prison: Inside the Concrete Womb.* Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Wandersman, Abraham and Maury Nation. 1998. "Urban Neighborhoods and Mental

Health: Psychological Contributions to Understanding Toxicity, Resilience, and Interventions. *American Psychologist* 53:647-656.

Werner, Emmy E. 1990. "Protective Factors and Individual Resilience." Pp. 97-116 in *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention* edited by S. J. Meisels and J. P. Shonkoff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Werner, Emmy E. and Ruth S. Smith. 1992. *Overcoming the Odds: High-Risk Children from Birth to Adulthood.* New York: Cornell University Press.

Wethington, Elaine. 2003. "Turning Points as Opportunities for Psychological Growth." Pp. 37-54 in *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-lived,* edited by C. L. M. Keyes and J. Haidt. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Wright, Emily M., Emily J. Salisbury, and Patricia Van Voorhis. 2007. "Predicting the Prison Misconducts of Women Offenders: The Importance of Gender-Responsive Needs." *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 23(4): 310-340.

Young, Vernetta D. and Rebecca Y. Reviere. 2006. *Women behind bars: Gender and race in US Prisons*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers.