Perceiving the agentic self

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SUMMARY

In order to examine how the theoretical concept of ‘self-efficacy’ can be incorporated in the ‘hooks for change’- thesis, the focus of this paper has been devoted to wield together this more subjective of agency (or a self-reflective belief of one’s capabilities) with the theoretical understanding of the desistance process, as suggested by Giordano and colleagues (2001). In doing so, I hope to sketch out some of the mechanisms imbued in the integrated relationship between agency and identity. As earlier research has demonstrated, there is a profound difference between wanting to desist and perceiving oneself capable of desisting. The inquiries approaching the material has thus been have why, when given an opportunity (or a ‘hook’) promoting desistance, offenders, at some point in their life, choose to seize that opportunity in order to make that permanent shift in the trajectory – and, equally so, why some choose not to. The material consists of qualitative life-history interviews, previously collected in 2011 in the Stockholm Life Course Project. For this study, I have employed a total of 5 unique life-histories, all of which told by individuals who all have had considerable experience of offending and deviance. Analysing these life-histories from a narrative approach, I have examined the way these men account for the unfolding of their life course in the act of narrating, and in doing so outlining how desistance is construed as a feasible option. This concern has prompted a critical examination of how narrators, by way of construing themselves in the interview situation, account for the way their life course has unfolded. When analysing I have examined 1) how the narrators explain their offending, 2) which opportunities were presented in the participants’ lives and how these were received, and 3) how the narrators portray their past and present selves in order to account for their lives. The main findings of this study suggests that although one’s attitudes towards a conventional lifestyle in itself is a prerequisite for desistance, it means little if the agent does not perceive himself as agentic (to change his life). Despite having ‘hooks’ and expressing a willingness to change, the perception of being capable of changing (self-belief) was often referred to as the main reason why they continued with deviance for much of their adulthood years. This finding suggests that the agent’s self-reflective view of his capacity affects the extent to which he will actively make the efforts needed for change to be realized. In order to come to terms with the desistance process, a reconsideration of the ‘hook-for-change’- thesis to also integrate the notion of ‘self-efficacy’ may be a step in that direction.

Key words: Life course criminology, Desistance, Agency, Hooks for change, Identity, Cognitive transformation, Self-efficacy
TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................................................. 1
   NOTABLE CONCEPTS .............................................................................................................................................. 2
   PERSPECTIVE & THEORETICAL STANDPOINT ........................................................................................................ 3

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS ............................................................................................................................. 4
   DESISTANCE... OR JUST A BREAK? .......................................................................................................................... 5
   HUMAN AGENCY IN THE LIFE COURSE TRADITION .............................................................................................. 6
   IDENTITY & THE SENSE OF SELF .......................................................................................................................... 7
   MERGING TOGETHER THE CONCEPTS .................................................................................................................... 9
   DESISTANCE NARRATIVES .................................................................................................................................... 11

3. THE STOCKHOLM LIFE COURSE PROJECT .......................................................................................................... 12

4. MATERIAL & METHOD ........................................................................................................................................ 13
   DATA & METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH ................................................................................................................ 13
   PROCEDURE ............................................................................................................................................................. 16
   ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS ................................................................................................................................ 17

5. PRESENTING THE MEN ........................................................................................................................................ 18

6. ANALYSIS ............................................................................................................................................................ 23
   EXPLANATIONS: THE WHEREFores? ......................................................................................................................... 23
   OPPORTUNITIES & ‘HOOKS’ .................................................................................................................................. 24
   AGENTIC MOVES & THE SENSE OF SELF ............................................................................................................. 25

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS .................................................................................................................................... 29

REFERENCES ............................................................................................................................................................... 31
1. INTRODUCTION

When conducting their follow-up study on the Glueck men, Sampson and Laub concluded that marriage and stable job employment were salient facets for desistance. These events, or ‘turning points’, presented in these men’s lives (e.g. getting enrolled in a stable relationship) prompted a shift in the trajectory (desistance) by naturally bringing about changes in informal social control and routine activities (Sampson & Laub 2003: 145ff). While these events certainly may bring about changes in the trajectory it has been rightly stated, perhaps most notably by Maruna (2001: 25), that these changes only constitute a turning point in so far as they bring about a shift in the trajectory. Thus, for an event or process to be a turning point there first must be some underlying process that brings about other changes (Carlsson 2011: 3). Although “any account of human action needs to give proper consideration to agency” (King 2013: 318), this has to a large extent been omitted in desistance research (Healy 2013: 557), and especially so in the structural account represented by Sampson & Laub (2003; 2005). For although these events or opportunities admittedly can aid an offender in the desistance process, little recognition is given to the choices made by the individual when presented to these opportunities (Vaughan 2006: 394). By grabbing on to these what Giordano and colleagues (2002: 1000) have named hooks for change, agency can thus be reflected in the individual’s choice to desist from crime. Of course, opportunities alone fail to explain the agent’s attitudes which prompt such agentic processes, why they propose that cognitive shifts underlies these choices. As such, the theoretical concepts of human agency, opportunities and identity are merged together to explain the formation of a new desister identity (see ibid: 1000ff). Although there being a linkage to human agency this account, in my opinion, overlooks the agent’s own perceptions of his capacity to change, which bears effect on these agentic moves. As Hitlin & Elder (2007: 182) observe, human agency in the life course tradition accommodates both a situated form of agency (exercising actions with long-term implications, a capacity possessed by all) and a self-reflective view of one’s capacity to achieve life course goals (i.e. self-efficacy). Similarly, Maruna reports a tendency for persistent offenders to feel non-agentic, as not being in charge of one’s destiny – that is, a weak sense of self-efficacy (see Maruna 2001: 76).

Thus, the aim of this study is to reconceptualise the notion of the desistance processes offered by Giordano and colleagues, by chiselling out the dynamics of the self in human agency when the agent is affronted with opportunities promoting desistance. In doing so, my hope is to broaden the understanding of how identity and agency can be interlinked in the desistance
process. This will be achieved by integrating the *self-efficacy* concept and the theoretical notion of ‘hooks’ (as proposed by Giordano et.al. [2002]). The material I have employed consists of life-history interviews conducted in the *Stockholm Life Course Project* (Carlsson & Sarnecki 2015) with 5 participants from the *Clientele men*. As I will adopt a *modus operandi* largely informed by narrative theory, my main concern is how these men account for the way their life has unfolded. Hence, I approach the material asking how events and opportunities (and how agentic and non-agentic responses to these) are accounted for as a way of construing and explaining in an interview setting. As earlier research suggests (see e.g. Maruna 2001: 74), offenders often *claim* a yearning to desist and yet find themselves unable to, it seems reasonable to ask why some offenders, though assumedly being open to change, yet *choose* not to seize opportunities. I posit here that this is due to a weak sense of agency, that is not feeling agentic or (as in the condemnation scripts, see ibid: 76) not perceiving oneself as in charge of one’s own destiny. In a reconceptualization of the ‘hooks for change’-thesis, this study aims to examine how *agentic responses* to ‘hooks’ promoting change can be (re)considered in relation to the agent’s *perceived capability* of actively changing his life circumstances (i.e. ‘self-efficacy’). As my perspective is much informed by identity-focused theorists such as Maruna, I argue that the *actual capacity* to change one’s life circumstances and the *perception* of being capable to exercise such a change (or ‘feeling agentic’) are two different things and must therefore be held separately. This rather narrow focus on individual-level processes unfortunately dictates that the multitude of other processes, although vital for grasping the desistance process, are effectively overshadowed.

**NOTABLE CONCEPTS**

The theoretical tools that I will apply stems largely from the work of Giordano and colleagues (2002) and Maruna (2001), with both attending to the role of psychosocial processes in behavioural changes without omitting the agentic efforts of the individual. As *human agency* is a tricky concept ingrained with different connotations (see Hitlin & Elder 2007 for an overview), I will use the two-folded definition of agency presented above designed to capture 1) the situated form of agency as the exercising of intentional and purposeful actions, that is, an ‘agentic move’ of some sort to influence one’s life circumstances, as well as 2) *self-efficacy* (the self-reflective, perceived form of agency). With agency being central in this study it seems only appropriate to use a concept which recognizes that purposefulness and intentionality from the actor is needed when accounting for life events. Therefore, I will adopt the *hooks for change*- notion as proposed in Giordano et.al. (2002: 1000), instead of the
‘turning point’. When denoting a series of steps towards a shift in the individual’s identity, Giordano and colleagues adopt the term *cognitive* (see ibid: 1000). In “the sense of self” applied by Maruna, the actor’s view of himself and of his capacity to desist (*self-efficacy*) is effectively integrated with agentic moves facilitating change (Maruna 2001: 85ff) – or, put somewhat differently, the *situated* form of agency in which intentional, purposeful actions are being exercised. As I deem that both of these theoretical tools can be useful when grasping the ambiguous concept of identity I will incorporate both in the analysis. Lastly, when conceiving desistance I will apply Maruna’s view on desistance as a process rather than an event, thereby also accepting the ambiguity inherent when determining *when* an offender can be said to have ‘truly’ desisted. Ultimately, this purports that a subject can be analytically treated as a desister at one point, and as a persister (or intermittent) at another (Maruna 2001: 22f). Thus, in this paper desistance will be conceptualized not solely, or even foremost, as to whether the agent claims that he still commits crime. In line with a narrative approach of inquiry it seems more reasonable to define a desister to the extent that he views himself as a desister.

**PERSPECTIVE & THEORETICAL STANDPOINT**

Though constituting a theory by its own merits, the life course perspective also encompasses a variety of viewpoints based on different premises. Being largely influenced by dynamic theories, I oppose the idea of human behaviour as invariable and impervious to change. In a warning of what he denotes “criminal essentialism”, Maruna warns that any notion of human behaviour as invariable reproduces the idea of offenders being inherently different from non-offenders (Maruna 2001: 4, 6). Akin to this position is a pessimism towards “offender-typologies” in which offenders are divided into subgroups with inferred different causal explanations (Sampson & Laub 2005: 165). Their structural-set position however poses a theoretical problem when grasping psychosocial processes, which Vaughan neatly summarizes: “The fallacy of the structural account is to presume that a force for change such as employment will get its ‘hooks’ into the agent with little or no participation from the individual.” (Vaughan 2006: 394). Thus, I will ascribe human agency a prominent role. All of these concepts derive from symbolic interactionism, a tradition which has also seeped into the domains of narrative criminology (see e.g. Maruna 2001; Järvinen 2000, 2001). Viewing life histories as symbolically reconstructed pasts (Järvinen 2001: 267), the act of narrating provides the narrator with opportunities to account for a ‘wicked’ past self with reference to the ‘good’ self of the present (Presser 2009: 180). As the concept of ‘identity’ constitute one of this essay’s core domains I will adopt this theoretical lens of inquiry.
2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

The pillars of the theoretical framework which defines The Life Course Perspective constitute a mixture of different theoretical approaches, which, integrated and merged together, form a nexus containing multifaceted explanations for criminal behaviour. For a definition of the life course perspective, I refer to Carlsson (2014), as entailing the studying of “continuity and change in criminal offending within individuals over time” and, as the concept of change is eminent within its theoretical framework, it “thus tends to have a temporal dimension built into its questions” (Carlsson 2014: 14f). Among its central tenets concerns the significance of social history and social structure when making sense of life. By holding that lives are embedded in, and shaped by, an outer framework which informs the directions an individual’s life may take, the unfolding of the life course must be interpreted from a contextual standpoint. It also encompasses notions of developmental impacts as dependent upon when they occur in life. Finally, human agency is deemed as significant for choice-making and for construing the life course (Sampson & Laub 2003: 33). In contrast to more traditional works within criminology which tend to focus on specific variables when accounting for differences in criminality, the life course perspective endeavours to also explain patterns of offending at an individual-level. One of its major strengths then, lies in its ability to account for within-individual as well as between-individual differences in offending (Carlsson 2014: 14f).

Contra the life course perspective when explaining patterns of offending, developmental perspectives represents a partly different theoretical framework. Like the former, developmental accounts adopts the life course view when relating changes in criminal behaviour to age in an orderly fashion. It does however diverge from the life course perspective in its exclusive attention to temporal and within-individual changes in behaviour (Piquero et.al. 2007: 29). That being said, it offers little recognition of any events occurring later-on in life. Instead, individual differences are viewed as the key explanation for criminal behaviour across the entire life course. Variables deriving from early-endowed characteristics are accordingly treated as causal explanations behind variations in offending on aggregate level (Sampson & Laub 2003: 24). In contrast, developmental accounts (e.g. Moffitt [1993]) propose that the propensity to display criminal or antisocial tendencies are contingent upon individual traits and predispositions, with the common denominator of viewing criminal, much like all, behaviour as dependent of individual-level mechanisms (Sampson & Laub 2003: 28, see also Maruna 2001: 4-6). With all later offending deriving from early endowed childhood personality traits, this static notion of human behaviour implies that no events later
in life have an effect on offending (Skardhamar 2009: 869). Furthermore such an assertion risks underpinning the notion of criminals being intrinsically different from law-abiders, which promotes what Maruna denotes as a “discourse of criminal essentialism” (Maruna 2001: 4). Dynamic theorists, on the other hand, tend to view behaviour as never fixed or established. Albeit admitted that one’s self is to some extent imprinted with predispositions and early traits, these do not determine the life course (Carlsson 2014: 31).

In order to account for stability and change, some theoretical concepts are usually employed within the life course tradition. To explain the life course theorists may use the notion of a trajectory (pathway), signifying the development over the life span (such as education or criminal behaviour). Changes which inform trajectories are commonly referred to as transitions. These kind of events or ‘processes’ in a person’s life course such as graduation, marriage, first child, an employment, etc. facilitate entry to, and exit from, different social roles. Trajectories, then, indicate the general trend of the life course while transitions constitute smaller social processes which further or alter the progression of the trajectory (Carlsson 2011: 3; 2014: 23). Nevertheless, transitions do not always impose a change in the trajectory. Some transitions merely accentuate certain characteristics rather than facilitating change. When that however is the case researchers distinguish these as turning points, defined as a shift in the trajectory (Sampson & Laub 2003: 40). Accordingly, transitions and turning points may result in a turning point if they bring about a change. That is, whether an event or process constitutes a turning point depends on its outcome (Carlsson 2014: 43). The concept of “stages” also serves as a prominent figure within the life course terminology. Usually it denotes that events influencing offending (e.g. family formation, acquiring stable employment, disintegration of peer groups and identity-transformations) usually appear at specific stages in the life course (Carlsson 2011: 1).

**DESISTANCE... OR JUST A BREAK?**

Despite the well-known “nothing works”- notion, Maruna argues that even the most persistent deviants possess the ability to change their lives and become productive members of society (Maruna 2001: 4ff). This is certainly shown to be true on an aggregate level, with criminal activity tending to decline more or less sharply as the subjects becomes older (Piquero et.al. 2007: 3f; Bottoms et.al 2004: 369). Not only does offending diminish with age, Sampson & Laub states that desistance is the norm and not the exception and that most, if not all, serious delinquents desist at some point in their life (Sampson & Laub 2003: 91). To this, it should be
added that age *in itself* does not cause desistance. Instead, age serves as “an ‘index’ of other processes that affect the involvement in crime, such as maturation or time spent enmeshed in social networks and institutions (e.g. family formation or entering the labour market) (Bottoms et al. 2004: 124). One of the problems contingent in desistance research revolves around the very meaning of desistance, as it commonly refers to “the sustained absence of a certain type of event (in this case, crime)” (Maruna 2001: 17), thus implying that desistance is a permanent shift. Yet, such definition of desistance can be problematic as termination occur constantly (ibid: 22f). Instead Maruna proposes to view desistance as “the long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in persistent patterns of criminal offending.” (ibid: 26). Similarly criminal behaviour should be viewed not as an inherent property but as a sporadic event (ibid: 21). This is similar to the notion of the “drift” in and out of crime during certain periods of life (Matza 1964/1990: 28ff). Researchers typically denote this tendency as *intermittency*, defined as phases in a criminal carrier characterized by a temporal abstinence in offending. Occurring after onset but prior to cessation, an individual can cease for several years only to reassume criminality. Consequently, researchers may have difficulties discerning intermittency from desistance (Carlsson 2014: 45f). A similar issue relates to the analytical tools when applied to reality. According to Maruna, there is no immanent quality in transitions which *by itself* brings about desistance. Attitudes towards the transition, however, *may* promote such changes. Whether desistance is likely to concur with a transition is dependent of the agent’s commitment to the transition. Instead of targeting transitions or changes, researchers should aim their attention at the ex-offender’s ability to uphold that crime-free behaviour even during interferences and frustrations (Maruna 2001: 25f). What is crucial is not solely the initial manoeuvre towards desistance or the *intention* to desist but to *sustain* desistance, which takes more effort than the initial cessation (Bottoms et al. 2004: 375).

**HUMAN AGENCY IN THE LIFE COURSE TRADITION**

Although human agency admittedly is a salient component in the desistance process, it remains a missing link in desistance research (Sampson & Laub 2003: 141). Despite its prominent role the issue on how to define and measure agency is contentious and unsettled among theorists (Healy 2013: 558). Often used without closer inspection, the concept of human agency remains under-theorized and abstruse (Bottoms et al. 2004: 376). That being the case, scholars often adopt different modes of conceptualization (see King 2013 for an overview). As Hitlin and Elder observe, any exposé on the matter should recognize that any
account of human action must incorporate freedom as well as constraint (Hitlin & Elder 2007: 172). Scholars may also benefit from being attentive to the specific social context, within which decision-making occurs (Bottoms et.al. 2004: 376). An emphasis on human agency also per definition entails that the actor is held central (Giordano et. al. 2002: 1003). Yet any standpoint where agency is to be envisaged as free from societal bonds would fail to recognize the coercive pre-established maxims exerted on the macro-level which individuals are subjected to (Carlsson 2014: 22ff). A sole focus on the actor’s immediate social world, which characterizes the traditional domains of symbolic interactionism, omits the broader social forces which gives shape and form to the interactions of the actor and his social reality (Giordano et al. 2002: 1003). Within the life course tradition, human agency is conceived of as involving peoples’ actions and choices which influence circumstances in the present and the durable and long-term impact that agency pertains on the trajectory. Life course agency has two domains: 1) “a situated form of agency” (the agent’s exercising of actions with consequences in the long haul), 2) a ‘self-reflective belief’ of one’s capacity. Thus, agency does not only contain the abilities an individual possess to affect his future but also self-efficacy, i.e. the agent’s perceptions of what he is capable in order to affect his trajectory (Hitlin & Elder 2007: 177, 182). Therefore, any researcher addressing the topic of human agency must necessarily consider the actor’s own self-understanding of his or her actions (Bottoms et.al. 2004: 374). As Hitlin and Elder observe, previous work suggest that self-concepts plays a significant role in the ability to prospectively plan one’s life with long-term goals as well as to endure setbacks in the process. Research also evince that among individuals who perceive more agency there is also a higher endurance when facing problems or setbacks (Hitlin & Elder 2007: 182). When reviewing previous research on the subject matter, Farrall and Calverley (2006: 6) contend that desistance is more probable among research participants stating that they wish to stop offending and felt capable to do so, than among those reporting that they were unsure whether or not they wished to cease offending.

IDENTITY & THE SENSE OF SELF
The theoretical underpinnings of identity in both Maruna (2001) and Giordano et.al. (2002) are inspired by George Herbert Mead and symbolic interactionism. The self in Mead-tradition consists of an ‘I’ and a ‘Me’. The ‘I’ represents the self as a subject, the self who acts and make choices. The “known, observed and blamed” part of the self is designated by the ‘Me’, the self as object (Maruna 2001: 93). This conception of the self has later-on been extended to encompass actions which, instead of being attributed to the agentic exercise of actions, are
viewed to have an outside, external source. The ‘It’ instead of the ‘I’ is responsible for behaviour which are viewed as unintentional and unpredictable. When designating some actions to have an external cause beyond the person’s control, the self cannot be held responsible for these actions. Instead, actions come to be experienced as something that happens to the agent, rather than something that he does and thereby is considered to not represent the ‘real me’ (ibid: 93ff).

Similarly influenced by a neo-Meadian perspective, Giordano and colleagues assume a reciprocal interconnection between behavioural changes and cognitive shifts. They propose four separate, yet closely interlinked, processes towards a change in the identity, which they name “cognitive transformations”. For desistance to be realized, they argue that the first step is the susceptibility to the outlook of a non-offending life. This initial stage in the transformation process involves “a shift in the actor’s basic openness to change” (Giordano et.al. 2002: 1000). Although a necessity to disentangle behavioural patterns, they argue that this tentative reconsideration alone is not sufficient to bring about and sustain stable, enduring changes. What is also required is the exposure of an event, situation or ‘opportunity’ of some kind (such as getting more involved with a spouse, get a job or a promotion) to bolster this cognitive transformation process. The second type of cognitive transformation, then, occurs as the individual is provided with opportunities promoting change (i.e. ‘hooks’). Opportunities, or ‘hooks’, alone however are not sufficient for change to occur. The actor’s attitude towards a hook is an equally significant aspect of the changing process. Not only must the offender view the opportunity as a positive development, but he needs to also define this new situation as incongruent with criminality. The third type of cognitive transformation relates more directly to the self as the actor begins to envisage and design a more appealing and conventional self to replace their ‘deviant identity’ with. The offender starts to realize that his past actions are wrong or unsuitable and that these actions do not represent who he is and the person he wishes he were, with the hooks providing an important facet when forming a new identity. In the fourth and final step, these shifts culminate into a turnover of the way the actor views the deviant lifestyle in itself. When the meaning of criminality has changed to the point that it no longer involves positive connotations ascribed to that particular lifestyle, the transformation process can be viewed as more or less complete. At this point, they argue, criminal behaviour is no longer perceived of as positive, feasible or personally relevant by the actor (Giordano et.al. 2002: 1001ff). In a development of their theoretical framework, they suggest that emotions constitute a key dimension in the desistance process. Accordingly, it is
argued that an understanding of offending patterns should also include the notion of “emotional processes” (Giordano et.al. 2007: 1607f).

MERGING TOGETHER THE CONCEPTS

The recognition of the desistance process as interlinked with intentionality and free will is depicted in phrases such as “going straight” or “going legit”, a device which signifies desistance as a purposeful and agentic ongoing process (Maruna 2001: 26). Admittedly, Sampson & Laub delineate human agency as an important component in understanding changes in offending Sampson & Laub 2003: 141). Nevertheless their structural approach has been reproached for disregarding the role of the individual subject (Vaughan 2006: 391). In their theoretical framework they accredit informal social control in adulthood as the primary reason for changes in criminal behaviour over the life span, regardless of individual differences in criminal propensity earlier in life (Sampson & Laub 2005: 167). Desistance is conceived more as a side effect as the offender becomes involved in a stable relationship, gets a job, and the alike. These events, or turning points, involves routine activities and social control which in turn facilitate desistance. Institutions, such as marriage, employment and the military service, help the individual to “knife off” from his criminal past by severing the individual from criminogenic environments and by providing him with opportunities to invest in socially supportive relationships. Moreover, these institutions put the actor under direct or indirect control and engage him in conventional activities. Desistance accordingly, is theorized as a matter of routine activities and informal social control and comes about often without the individual realizing it (ibid: 278f). In an expostulation of this view Vaughan maintains that a sole emphasis on routine activities and structural forces omits the role of human agency. Left unaccounted for is that people actually choose to ‘get settled’, i.e. get married, take a job, and more so that people choose to remain within these institutions (Vaughan 2007: 391f). In a similar vein, Maruna suggests that “sustained” desistance requires a fundamental and intentional shift in a person’s sense of self. Further he argues that ex-offenders are in need of a cohesive and conceivable self-story to explain the discrepancy between their past ‘criminal’ and their new and ‘reformed’ self (Maruna 2001: 17). When comparing narratives from offenders and ex-offenders Maruna found notable differences in the self-narratives. A prominent feature in the narratives of the ex-offenders is the enunciation of the ‘reformed I’. This “redemption script” is centred at plot devices which serves to make the ‘desister narrative’ coherent and convincing, thereby establishing the narrator as different from his past self. An often featuring element in the recovery stories is the portrayal of past
offending as being largely a result of societal forces and ensnarement into deviant labelling. Through a distancing-process the ex-offender can make his identity as a ‘true desister’ known and credible by rejecting the notion of the self as ‘bad’ and narrator invoking a story of ‘the real me’, who is essentially good in nature (ibid: 87ff). In contrast to ex-offenders the narratives of offenders, the “condemnation scripts” are imbued with a weak sense of ‘self-efficacy’. Though still claiming to have a clear picture of the “good life” and stating a wish to desist, the persistent offender feels that he has no control nor any other choice – the criminal lifestyle being the only life he knows. This idea of being “doomed to deviance” fosters the imagery of the offender’s life scripts as long ago pre-written and accompanying this feeling of helplessness is a weak sense of capacity to change. Viewing life as a series of chance event, persisters fail to establish a causal relationship between intentional actions and outcomes, resulting in an escape from the burden of choice (ibid: 74ff). The link between agency and desistance can thus be fathomed as the conscious decisions to change made by the ‘true’ desister (see Bottoms et.al. 2004: 376). Similarly, Vaughan argues that desistance can only be grasped in the light of “the agent’s ultimate concerns – the commitments that matters most and dictate the means by which he or she lives.” (Vaughan 2007: 390).

As mentioned before a structural-oriented thesis with little regard to agentic processes bears with it a theoretical implication. The assumption that opportunities or events leading to desistance without any active involvement from the agent entails that transitions will naturally bring about desistance, and by that also an automatic change in the individual’s identity (see ibid: 394). For a more feasible way to approach the role of human agency in the desistance process one might instead turn to the notion of “hooks for change” proposed by Giordano et.al. (2002). A behavioural change (such as in offending) can be realized by opportunities supplemented in the environment, i.e. “potentially prosocial features of the environment” or “hooks for change”, which much like a turning point can be a new relationship or a job-offer. Unlike the turning point however the concept of the ‘hook’ implicates the need for an agentic move if change is to be realized. This choice or intentional effort from the individual is what fundamentally may bring about changes as the individual is “latching onto opportunities” (Giordano et.al. 2002: 999f). Much like ‘transitions’ or events in their own do not bring about changes (see Maruna 2001: 25), these ‘hooks’ in their own merit are not sufficient to change one’s identity. Thus, they argue that a theoretical framework allowing for an integration of agency and identity (cognitive transformations) may be much more meaningful when explaining changes in offending behaviour. As such, it gives due recognition to both
opportunities and to the actor’s attitudes in the desistance process. While cognitions admittedly do inspire and direct behaviour, the interlinkage between actions and agency needs to be understood (Giordano et.al. 2002: 1001ff).

**DESISTANCE NARRATIVES**

As the interviews which will form the base of this study consists of autobiographical narratives, I find it fitting to – like other scholars (see e.g. Järvinen 2004) – approach the material by employing a narrative analysis grounded in the works of Mead. The narrative turn in social science is influenced by a credo which defies the possibilities to find any ‘true self’ or objective past ingrained in a biography, thereby standing in discord to the subjectivist tradition (Järvinen 2004: 46f). Reviewing the position in criminology that the narrative currently possesses, Presser states that although narrative criminology has gained increasing notice the very concept of the narrative is viewed differently. The account of the narrative as a document of ‘what really happened’ is what Presser denotes as the *narrative as record*. Adjacent to this view is the narrative as a guide to unravelling how individuals perceive their world. The view of the narrative as an *interpretation* is compelling when considering that people’s actions are influenced by their apprehensions (Presser 2009: 179ff). Although criminologists have learned much about the causes of criminality by reviewing in-depth life stories, viewing narratives as a testimony of ‘what really happened’ nonetheless conceals that the act of narrating shapes the narrator in the process (ibid: 191). Instead Presser proposes to view experience as always known and acted upon. This “*constitutive view of narrative*” (ibid: 184, italics in original) is set from a post-positivistic standpoint which abrogates the boundaries between the narrative and experiences, with the narrative constituting “a vehicle for self-understanding and as such an instigator to action.” (Presser 2009: 191).

When narrating, the turmoil, uncertainties and incongruities of life are forced into a coherent, logical and straightforward story. Circumscribed by a mutual objective to create a convincing life-history, the agents involved co-operate by linking life events together into a comprehensive, casual chain where certain events are delineated as particularly meaningful (Järvinen 2000: 372). Contra the positivistic notion of interviews as situations where knowledge is “collected” by the researcher, knowledge is regarded as a contextually dependent product, generated in a collaboration between the interviewee and the interviewer (ibid: 371). As the concepts used by the interviewer are often resumed by the narrator and applied in the constructing of the narrative, narratives cannot uncritically be viewed as reports
of people’s lives. Instead the narrative epitomizes a story of the self, in which some experiences are highlighted, whereas others remain attenuated. With it being far from possible for the narrator to cover every lived experience this asymmetry is central for the narrator to make his point. Despite its referencing to the past imbued in the life story, it is also a linkage to the present, and especially to the situation where the narrative is construed (Presser 2009: 179). A biography is told by a narrator, who is no longer the same person constituting that narrative’s protagonist (Järvinen 2004: 63). By distancing himself, the narrator can harmonize the past with the present and the future in the narrative, in which the narrators ‘present I’ assumes the role as the other, different from ‘past me’ (Vaughan 2006: 391). Through construing “multiple selves” the offender accommodates his criminal past (‘the bad guy’) with the good, law-abiding ‘me’ of today. As such, the narrative functions as an avenue where the narrator can separate himself from his past wrong-doings (Presser 2009: 180). In doing so “the past can be excused by reference to a better present” (Järvinen 2004: 63). Having usually made many attempts to desist in the past, the narrator needs a believable story to convince others in his surroundings. But the narrative also serves to assure the narrator that the change is real (Maruna 2001: 85f). With some acts requiring explanations, the narrator submits motives which do not necessarily represent an objective cause of these acts (Järvinen 2000: 373). Similarly put, “we should not assume that the actor’s own account is all that there is to say by way of explanation” (Bottoms et. al. 2004: 375). When narrating, the agent offers reasons for his actions as a way of sense-making, in order to appear reasonable to an, real or imaginary, audience, in which he also constitutes a part (Presser 2009: 180).

3. THE STOCKHOLM LIFE COURSE PROJECT
Up to the end of the 70s, researchers have paid considerably more attention to the onset of offending rather than its termination (thereafter, the interest in desistance has experienced a dramatic upsurge). Two of its pioneers in desistance studies, Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, however began conducting research as early as the 1930s (Farall & Caverley 2006: 3). During a 25-year-period, the Gluecks collected data on what was originally a sample of 500 delinquent boys and an equally large control group, aged 10-17 (Sampson & Laub 2003: 61). In Stockholm, at about the same time as the Gluecks conducted their study, a large study named The 1956 Clientele Study of Juvenile Delinquents was launched by The Swedish parliament seeking to explain the sources of delinquency. The research subjects originally consisted of 287 males born in Stockholm in the years 1943-1951 (between 11 and 15 years
of age at the time). Among these 287 participants, 192 were registered by the Stockholm’s Police Department for a non-trivial offence, whereas the other 95 subjects constituted the control group (Carlsson & Sarnecki, 2015). In the 1980s, a follow-up was conducted by Sarnecki (1985: 12ff) on the same research subjects with the main purpose of studying the effects of social exclusion on criminal behaviour. Sarnecki collected register data on health, employment and education history, drug use and criminal history of these men who were now in their middle adulthood (ibid: 17ff, see also Carlsson & Sarnecki: 2015). The 192 participants who had been classified as ‘delinquent’ in the initial study were now divided into two groups based on the level of involvement in criminal activity. The first subset, named D1, composed of boys being known by the police to have committed one criminal offense before reaching the age of 15. The other group, D2, contained all subjects who before age 15 had at least two registered offences (Carlsson 2012, 5f). The study found a correlation between “social maladjustment” and prior criminal behaviour. Among the boys who had only been registered by the police for one offense before age 15 (D1), 55 percent were living well-adjusted lives. In the D2- group not even a third (30 percent) was considered well-adjusted or very well-adjusted in their adulthood. There were also evidence of substantial continuity in problem-behaviour over time. Apart from the register data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 199 of the original 287 men. In 2010 a new follow-up of the Clientele men was launched (now ensued under the label The Stockholm Life Course Project). A subset of the 199 men (a total of 30) from each group were interviewed using a life-history method (Carlsson & Sarnecki, 2015). Thus, on these 30 research subjects, data has been collected at three separate occasions; in childhood and adolescence, middle adulthood and late adulthood.

4. MATERIAL & METHOD

DATA & METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The material which will form the basis of the study consists of qualitative, in-depth interviews conducted during the latest follow-up in the Stockholm Life Course Project. For the purpose of this essay a total of 6 qualitative interviews will be employed, all of whom drawn from the original Clientele men in the experiment group (one of the participants were interviewed on to separate occasions). All 5 participants are born in the 40s and they have all lived and/or been born in Stockholm. More importantly, all of these men have been registered by the Stockholm police in their adolescence in the 1950s and they have all been convicted of offenses subsequently. Perhaps to no surprise, all the narrators in the material provide accounts of
prison stays and substance use. Besides criminal behaviour each subject has at some point in their childhood and/or adolescent years spent time at a boy’s home, a juvenile corrective schools or similar institutions due to deviant/antisocial behaviour. By the time of the interview the men in question were all seniors, having reached their late adulthood and age of retirement. A clear advantage of acquiring narratives told by research subjects in their ‘golden years’ is that they, as a natural consequence of their age, simply has more to tell about how their lives have unfolded and what have been the results of certain decisions. A down-side to it concerns the participants’ ability to recall events. This may in particular be true when considering the age of the subjects. The subject can forget or confound situations, or reconstruct certain parts of their experiences to be more consistent with their sentiments. Indeed, as Bottoms and colleagues warn, people, and perhaps offenders in particular, usually feel a need to present themselves as coherent beings and to rationalise their behaviour. For the study of desistance, cross-sectional or retrospective studies fall short when dealing with cognitive dissonance (Bottoms et.al. 2004: 382). As this notion is a built-in aspect in narrative theory, my own analysis of offender accounts will adhere to the warning that what is said in the men’s narratives does not necessarily constitute a record of what has actually happened in their lives, but rather as a means of presenting themselves. This critical approach may also bear effect on the validity of this study. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2014: 300f) argue, when employing qualitative interviews, the act of questioning is also a method for validating.

The narratives figuring in this material are told retrospectively, covering the whole life course, from childhood to late adulthood. As such, the interviews also provide the researcher with opportunities to capture the participant’s reflections regarding life events during the lion part of the life course. But also, and perhaps most importantly, old age may also entail that the participants easier come to realization about who they are now as old by comparing themselves with who they were as younger. If so, it can also be presumed that this body of material can elucidate in what way these men narrate and present themselves and how they account for experiences lived – a presumption which also constitute one of the central tenets in narrative theory (see Järvinen 2004: 63). The feasibleness in the narrative approach relates to its attentiveness to the agent’s own appraisal of the meaning and weight of different life events (Giordano et.al. 2002: 998). People ascribe meaning to their life experiences, the essence of which can be grasped by considering their reactions to various events, what significance these hold and how such experiences inform agentic processes later on in life. Such in-depth and meticulous inquiries can help break down seemingly obscure phenomena
and dissect complex patterns of continuity and change over the life course (Sampson & Laub 2003: 58). My aim being to disclose processes involved in the agent’s sense of himself and his capacities, a narrative method may be fruitful for such purposes.

When considering what choice of method is appropriate in life course criminology, Ulmer and Spencer conclude that both quantitative and qualitative approaches are needed to grasp social processes, definitions of situations, decision-making processes, etc. Qualitative works nonetheless more effectively captures contextualized processes (e.g. interpretations, decision and activities), which easily get eclipsed in quantitative models (Ulmer & Spencer 1999: 106f). A clear advantage in the qualitative design lies in its flexibility when entering a field. This virtue was also of much use in the latest follow-up in the SLCP (Carlsson 2014: 65), in which the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured design. When applying a life-history method the interview subjects were given the opportunity to discuss the facets of their life history that might be crucial in explaining the turns and directions that their life course at various stages of their lives (Pettersson & Carlsson 2012: 7). The interviewer(s) used an interview guide covering a multitude of different themes such as education, housing, employment, economy, health, social relations, experiences of crime, imprisonment, drug use, etc. (Carlsson 2014: 66). The interviews did not however contain any notions of ‘turning points’. As argued in Carlsson (2011), the interviews conducted by Sampson and Laub prompted a methodological problem when the interview participants were asked if they had any important turning points in their life. As “you often ‘get what you ask for’” when interviewing, the interviews in SLCP contains no theoretical concepts such as turning points, transitions, etc. (Carlsson 2011: 2, 6f). Such methodological inquiries bears effect on the validity of the interview-accounts and has as such been taking into consideration when designing the interview guide in the SLCP. The narrative, or life-history, approach in the interviews in SLCP (as well as in Sampson & Laub [2003] and in Giordano et.al. [2002]) also involves other benefits for dealing with offending-stories. The life-history approach allows the researcher to analyse the processes involved in the enrolment in, and disentanglement from, criminality and deviance. Furthermore, these processes are recognized as framed within a given socio-historical context which influences the weight of both choices and constraints. Hence, life chances and the agent’s own perception of his opportunities to affect these exigencies are variable to historical conditions and the individual’s social position. Such contingencies in turn are theorized to impinge the rational calculus imbedded in decision making (Sampson & Laub 2003: 58f). Thus there is a dialectic relationship between choice
and constraint inherent in human behaviour, although novel agentic moves is also a possibility present in life (Ulmer & Spencer 1999: 105). These outlined strengths positions the life-history- and narrative approaches as a suitable option for understanding psychosocial processes of desistance. As Maruna notes, one of the best ways to understand a particular group is to listen to the stories told by its members. By doing so the researcher can also understand why some actions were made possible or deemed suitable as internal self-narratives direct and organize our behaviour (Maruna 2001: 39). One central premise underlining the interactionist perspective is the assumption that human beings confront situations and apply their definitions of these situations when exercising agency. To understand how people define situations one must turn to their biographies and prior behavioural repertoires (Ulmer & Spencer 1999: 107). But another quality present in life history studies is the prospect of unveiling the human being in an offending narrative, which diminishes the likelihood of assigning pathology to the offender (Sampson & Laub 2003: 59).

It should be noted however that these methodological choices are not without their faults. As with all qualitative studies the small data set does not allow for generalization. As with regard to the material it poses some problems when applied in this context. As the material derives from a project which I have not had any part of, the focus of the interviews are contingent upon other research inquiries and may therefore not be relevant or even fitting for my own research questions. Not only may this predicament compromise the possibility of acquiring adequate answers to the research questions posed, but more importantly is the risk of the material being adjusted to fit the purpose (rather than reveres). Such an eventuality could be hazardous for the validity of the conclusions drawn from an analysis of the interviews.

**PROCEDURE**

For the material of this study, I was offered a total of 8 different life history interviews with men from the 1956- study previously conducted in the SLCP. As 2 of these did not contain accounts of consistent offending in adolescence as well as in adulthood, and thus did not fit my purposes, these were discarded. Of the remained 6, I choose 5 on a random basis. The data then consists of five unique life histories, or narratives, with all participants deriving from the original Clientele men. Half of these men were interviewed by a sole interviewer, while the remaining three were interviewed by two interviewers. As the interviews were conducted in Swedish I have translated the quotations used in this work. When doing so, I have tried to give representative translations to mirror the prose of the narrators. Although the life events told in these narratives are interesting in their own merit, my main interest concerns the ‘how’
rather than the ‘what’ (that is how the narrators account for their life course). For such inquiries it may be fruitful to consider the specific context of the interview in which the narrative was construed. Because criminality usually denotes deviance and non-conventionality, the narrator may feel an urge to, in the context of interview, give reasons for and explain his past life style in order to legitimize or rationalize past behaviour because it is incongruent with his present self. Another approach is to distance oneself from past behaviour (i.e. ‘the past me’) as not representing the true me (see Maruna 2001: 88f). As the results are to be related to theoretical concepts which require rendering from my side, it is essential for the validity of this paper that the connection between theory and empirics are made clear to the reader. Of course, these concepts also serve as tools in the analytic processes. When coding, I have split these theoretical umbrellas down to lower-order concepts. My concern in doing so was to simplify and easing the process of analytically separating these concepts from each other as they sometimes can be hard to distinguish from each other. For the analysis I have chosen quotations from the narratives which will serve to highlight how the narrators construe their lives in the interview setting. As a first step I have, in line with a narrative approach, critically examined the explanations offered by the narrators when accounting for the way their lives have unfolded, with the implication that the explanations offered are viewed as part of the construing act. Thereafter, I have scanned the narratives for accounts of ‘opportunities’ or ‘hooks’, and considered how these are described as well as how the narrator accounts for his response towards an opportunity. In the third and final step I have related this agentic effort to latch onto a ‘hook’ with the narrator’s perceptions of himself and his capabilities to change (‘self-efficacy’). When wielding together the theoretical constructs of agency, identity and ‘hooks’, I attempt to explain why change was considered viable option for only some men and not for others and why only desistance was maintained in in some circumstances and at some point at the life course.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Owing to the nature of the subjects which are being touched upon in the interviews with the Clientele men, some queries on the matter deserves recognition. The interviews which will be subject for analysis here not only touch upon but dig into the personal lives of individuals. The themes which the interviews dwell upon concerns sensitive and, indubitable, highly personal topics (Carlsson 2014: 63). Some examples which are unveiled in these life histories are accounts of painful memories, traumatic experiences, criminal behaviour and feelings of devastation, angst and remorse. The interview participants did however give their consent to
participating and were also told that they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time. Furthermore the project has been tried at Regionala etikprövningsnämnden för forskning. To ensure confidentiality all names have been changed and only such statements which cannot be used to recognize the individual have been used for the results. Although the interview subjects were, at the time of the interviewed, told that a few other researchers would have access to the material, they were not informed that I specifically would take part of the interviews (in audio and in written form). Nor have they been informed of this on a later occasion and thus been given the ability to give their consent to me listening. It can furthermore be argued that the interviewees probably did not at moment of consent presume that the interviews would be scrutinized by a bachelor student. When adhering to the ethical guidelines prescribed by the Scientific Council of Sweden (see Vetenskapsrådet: 7ff) two requirements are only being partly met. Firstly, research participant must be informed of all relevant aspects of the study and eventual consequences resulting from participating. This of course has implications for the participants’ ability to give consent – for if not properly informed, consent is both arbitrary and devoid of meaning!

5. PRESENTING THE MEN

“[S]omewhere I have lived and life has run away from me.” This quotation is taken from the narrative of Thomas, who has abused alcohol and narcotics (mainly amphetamine and hash) on and off for most of his adult years. Having been in jail on three separate occasions, Thomas’ crimes have predominantly revolved around his substance abuse, i.e. selling and dealing to maintain his deviant lifestyle. Born in Stockholm in the advent of the 1950s, Thomas was raised in a household with “academic” parents. During his school years Thomas describes himself as a problematic child, “worried and restless”. By fourth grade Thomas was put in a special class, which in his recount was “among the stupidest they could have done at all”. When asked why he argued that he felt a need to “live up to the reputation [of being bad]”. In his adolescent years after quitting school, Thomas started using hash because he “was curious”. Not long afterwards he started to sell to make due and to get drugs for free. His social life during these period is described as not having much friends yet “being out almost all the time” as his “occupation [drug use] demanded it to make it work”. When asked if he remembers much from this time of his life, Thomas states he has suppressed much of it: “It was a way to survive, I guess.” Thomas’ substance abuse lasted well into the years during

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1 An ethical council for research projects in Sweden.
which “people started a family and career and all that.” Not until he was 40 years of age Thomas claimed that he “woke up” but by that time “it was too late” to get married and have children. Thomas has had few long-lasting relationships in his life and portrays himself as not being particularly good or ‘smooth’ with women. Despite having a substance abuse, Thomas managed to combine employment with drug use, stating that “you have to be clean at work”. Thomas delineates having had employment for the majority of his adult life as a reason for not abusing as much as he would have done, were he unemployed. Already early in his ‘substance career’, Thomas allegedly wanted to stop using. “Some say the first years are like a crush almost. Then you have really fun. But later on it just gets troublesome.” For about 20 years he tried staying clean but always went back and forth between abuse and non-abuse, sometimes it could go weeks between, at other occasions several years could pass. For most of his life Thomas has lived alone and single but he has pets for company, which he claims is “a good reason [to stay clean]” and also travels frequently. By the time of the interview Thomas had not used drugs for 10-15 years and had not had a drink for 7 or 8 years.

Next we will examine the case of Martin who, much like Thomas, has a rigorous history of substance abuse and prison terms. Martin was born 1946 into a working class household in Stockholm but at a young age the family moved to a little rural town in Skåne. Moving back to Stockholm as a ten year old he quickly started to befriend deviant peers in school to avoid getting bullied, although emphasising that he and his deviant friends “weren’t the kind of persons that like [...] wrecked or bullied.” He quit school after eight grade (at the time ninth grade wasn’t compulsory) and shortly afterwards started taking and selling drugs (amphetamine and heroin) in the early 70s. His father, a heavy drinker, moved out of the household and cared little for what Martin was doing and, according to the interviewee, never taught him “to be an adult”, which apparently resulted in him living much “like a teenager” during his adulthood. After some years of work in his adolescent years, Martin stopped working as he didn’t enjoy it, stating that “my life was a constant vacation”. By the time he was 21 he was sent to juvenile corrective school, stating that he enjoyed his stay but also claiming that the tenure did little to ‘straighten’ him up as he wasn’t “receptive” to interventions. After undergoing care for his substance abuse at a treatment facility he started working as an attendant because he had by that time “matured”. Martin has been in and out of prison, how frequently and when however remains unclear. Unlike in Thomas’ narrative, prison is construed as a positive event when Martin claims that “it was just good to end up in prison, it was food and job and the boundaries were crystal clear.” Interestingly, when
accounting for his substance abuse, Martin still describes as heroin as “so God damn wonderful” although admitting that “if I take a relapse then it’s not as fun”. During his active years as a heroin user, Martin stared in a documentary on the subject matter. Seeing the documentary however, and especially a scene in which he inserts heroin, he described as a hard blow against his view of himself, “I was shocked to see myself from the outside. [...] I had an identity crisis, I was nothing.” When asked about the effects it had had on him he states that the documentary had been an “eye opener” and made him “more willing to fight harder to get away from it”. This however was apparently not an easy task for as he goes on to say “But I realized that I like couldn’t. I had used my entire life, my entire adult life right. So I applied for methadone then, and uhm... yeah, I got it then.” This, the interviewee says, happened in 1987. At the time of the interview Martin uses drugs very seldom (“maybe once a year”) and also claims that he commits no crimes and that he lives “a socially accepted life”.

Robert may have been the narrator serving most prison sentences, naming at least a dozen different prison institutions where he has stayed. Born -48 in Stockholm to parents involved in a deviant lifestyle, Robert gives an account of early signs of criminal and maladaptive behaviour. His mother had served a prison sentence prior to his birth for prostitution and his father was “criminal” and “a thief”. His parents did not object against his deviant lifestyle, it can even be assumed (from Robert’s narrative) that they were incremental to Robert’s criminality. Because of his parents’ deviance Robert was brought to an orphanage as well as to a boy’s home. As a child Robert was also sent to several foster homes where he was made to labour under circumstances which (at least by today’s measurements) would be deemed as highly unfit for a child at that age. In his adolescence Robert started using drugs and went on to serve multiple prison sentences. In the late 60s, when Robert was 21, he became a first-time father and some years after that he had another child. Robert’s son was “born a heroin addict” and is allegedly a substance abuser with whom Robert has little contact. During this period he continued to commit a variety of different criminal acts such as burglaries, thefts, “smash and grabs”, and handling. In the 80s Robert’s life changed when he meet a woman (also involved in deviant activities) with who he fell in love. During this time Robert used his criminal skills to impress her and she used to accompany him on his “stealing tours”. After some time both were sent to prison and upon being released Robert made a pause in his offending and they were married. Having had very little education before Robert started studying to achieve an elementary school diploma and was thereafter being accepted to an education which would allow him to become a carpenter. After 8 years of marriage however, his wife at the time
asked for a divorce, which Robert describes as unexpected and shocking. He attributes this event as the reason why he “made another turn [into prison]” and receded into drug use. Shortly afterwards he met another woman whom he married and, as a result of which, stopped with both criminality and drugs. Today Robert is still married an early retiree. He is also involved in an association helping criminals and also has a seat in the City Council of Stockholm. As a politician he feels that he can use some characteristics which he relates to ADHD (e.g. being “fast thinking” and “quick on the feet”). Despite the fact that Robert now lives a conventional life he hesitates to define himself as a ‘true’ desister. When asked by one of the interviewer if he could set the date for when he stopped his offending he answers: “I don’t have that date as of today, I don’t see that I quit with the drugs”. Despite this there is optimism in his story when reviewing his past and present life: “I’m sitting in a co-op apartment, I have a healthy wife, uhm, since 20, 25 years back [...] and I sit and work with politics now and that, so uhm I have no reason to look back, on my life.”

Perhaps the most interesting story we find when considering John, being the only interviewee claiming to still commit crimes. John’s narrative is suffused by accounts of robbery, larceny and car theft, offenses which he preferably committed alone. From his story it appears that he started to evince tendencies of antisocial behaviour in early childhood. In his adolescent years he was sent to a juvenile corrective school but he eloped on a continuous basis. After having struck a police officer down when apprehended for truancy at 15 years of age, John was sentenced to serve 1 year in adult prison because he was “too young for juvenile prison” and the juvenile corrective school no longer wished to have him because of his mischiefs. Since then John has been sent to prison on many occasions for various crimes, among which he highlights robberies and breaking into vaults. Claiming that his criminal behaviour constituted an identity “means that this thing with criminality it’s my vocation, it’s my job”. This also entailed that he abstained from drugs “because then I couldn’t work as a criminal, it disturbed the whole thing”. He did however hold a job at a treatment facility for 11 years, got a high school diploma and would subsequently educate himself as a programmer. He held an employment for a few years but would later on quit with a severance pay due to conflicts with his bosses. During this period John had also settled down, got married and had children. He lived a crime-free life for 19 years and claims to have been happy and content during these years. After he had separated from his wife John got together with some of his old friends and almost immediately started to offend. John’s children knew little about his antisocial propensities or his criminal history until in he got caught in 1994 and was sent to jail, at a
time when his children were in high school. At the end of the 90s John also started selling drugs and started using narcotics combined with alcohol. He does however also claim that he has never been drunk as he is very afraid of “losing it”. He used drugs to stay alert and in control when consuming alcohol yet also stating that he cannot control his drinking. At the time of the interviewed John has restricted his offending to economic crimes solely, as a side income apart from his retirement income.

Finally, we will regard Erik’s narrative, which is also filled with accounts of criminality and drug use, but also pervaded by bitterness when reconsidering his past. Unlike the other accounts, Erik’s deviance allegedly started as he reached adolescence. Born in Stockholm into a ‘broken household’, Erik was raised mainly by his mother and grandmother. Erik has no idea who his father is, despite expressing a deep desire to know. Although he suspects that his mother may have known it was a subject never addressed in his childhood, something that he expresses grievance for: “I think, fuck not even that you are worth. So I guess I was something unwanted.” His mother used to bring home different men: “Alcoholics who used to come in and decide how I should live.” During his childhood Erik moved a lot and changed schools “virtually every semester”. His school years he recollects with a sting of bitterness, stating that he remembers it: “With very mixed feelings. Very messy, and a lot of anger is there. Uhm, especially against the people that were supposed to take care of me.” Maybe it is because of the bullying that Erik on many occasions tried befriending peers by pulling pranks, to “show off as tough”. This propensity was exacerbated during his adolescent years (in the end of the 50s) when he started to “hang out with the worst kind. [...] Then you got water over the mill, like finally you were seen. [...] Suddenly you were all famous too, then started with this all getting caught on and off.” As a way of reacting to Erik’s deviance, he claims that he was beaten by his mother and his grandmother (the latter allegedly used to hit Erik with brooms and, at one occasion, with a cane). When he was 18 he made a girl pregnant and had a son, whom he had little contact with. At the age of 24 he started using and injecting drugs while working at the same time. Due to his deviance girls flocked around him which is shown in the many accounts of relationships, with one ended in marriage and a subsequent one resulting in two more children. Despite being married and a father Erik did not quit his drug use and also states that he still “had all kinds of jobs”. After that he had new relationships and stayed clean at least a few years at the time. Despite heavy drug use Erik has only been sent to prison on two occasions. He has also been treated for his substance abuse at a treatment facility, where he met a reverend who Erik describes as a catalyst by helping him “admitting and accepting”
his substance abuse. At the turn of the 20th century, he relapsed into substance abuse. When interviewed Erik states that although feeling that “this time has passed” there is nothing that he yearns for more than drugs. Concurrently, Erik is yet to get retired and works with machine- and construction work, claiming to be “very multi competent”.

6. ANALYSIS

EXPLANATIONS: THE WHEREFORES?

“I got no help from the parents really to mature and grow up to a young man, instead I’m still an irresponsible boy.” This quotation I have borrowed from the narrative of Martin as it serves to illustrate the explanation by the narrator when presenting and construing the way his life has unfolded. Much like Martin, Erik points to childhood experiences and inadequate upbringing as an explanation for the way his life turned out. Accounts of his mother and grandmother are on numerous occasions used for this purpose, hinting that they did not take care of him properly “and neither of them could keep any guys, so no wonder that you are the way you are and have the life you have.” And again, much like in Martin’s account, Erik cast himself like an outsider, which is also here used as the motive behind him starting to befriend delinquent peers and to engage in delinquent activities (“finally you were being seen”). Similar explanations are handed in Thomas’ story as being put into special class made him feel that he was deviant, which was also used to motivate further deviance (“Then I was supposed to live up to that reputation.”). Thomas did however eventually quit, which he claims being due to the negative effects of aging. Martin attributes maturation as the most important factor, with the documentary constituting something of a ‘wake-up call’ for Martin. Erik doesn’t give much reasons to him desisting. From his story it is unclear whether or not he views himself as a desister. The reasons for his inability to ‘go legit’ can be rendered as being due to low self-esteem and feelings of unworthiness which he explains by invoking childhood experiences. Seeking explanations in external factors is also exemplified when Erik is accounting for his past heavy drinking (i.e. alcohol-use as an escape from a dismal reality).

Despite being raised in a home with alcoholic parents, John claims that his upbringing had nothing to do with his deviance. Instead he outlines himself as being “broken in another way”, arguing that he lacks empathy and that he feels uncomfortable when being “too close” to others. His early offending he describes in terms of “job” and “occupation”. In John’s narrative criminal behaviour such as assault, burglaries and robberies is for the most part construed as ethically unproblematic. According to John, he has always committed crimes as
a way of earning money. With this chief concern in mind, past actions then (even accounts of severe violence) come to be explained in rational, means-end terms. During his married years John’s absence from deviance is not particularly elaborated, and therefore it is hard to determine why marriage made him stop offend. Regarding his present criminality, although restricted to occupational crimes, he explicitly states having no moral considerations whatsoever. Similar to John’s story, marriage and divorce are held central in Robert’s account of his intermittent offending pattern. Being “up to the ears in love” with a woman is described as a motivating force for Robert to quit his substance abuse and to start studying. His relapse is explained as due to a divorce. It may thus come to no surprise that he attributes his now crime-free life to meeting another woman and being remarried since over two decades back. Overall Robert’s story is suffused with the importance of women in his life (not just wives) as significant catalysts to change. Besides these events, Robert’s explanation can be related to a diminishing thrill (i.e. the pay-offs didn’t surmount the costs): “If you start when you are 17 years old, 17, 18 years with something as intensive as drugs and crimes are right, and then, you go in and out like this all the time […] it’s a fucking donkeywork”. A second reason relates to the effects of aging which can be exemplified: “You just aren’t up for it, you don’t have the stamina to run from the police”. Interestingly, both John’s and Robert’s narratives have these rational, calculating, means-end explanations in common when accounting for, in the case of John, deviance and, for Robert, desistance.

OPPORTUNITIES & ‘HOOKS’

When seeking to ask which ‘hooks’ have been presented in the narrator’s lives I will begin with discussing Robert and Erik who are the narrators who seems to have had the largest varieties of different ‘hooks’. The difference of these two is that while the former claims to having gladly grabbed the hooks presented (such as education and marriage), the latter could not resist the lure of drugs. Besides being a married father of two, having employment and a high school diploma, Erik states that “the drugs were still such enjoyment for me but I made do mostly.” Despite this, Erik claims that he wanted to stop using several times in his life. Thomas, as can be recalled, has been single for the greater part of his adult life. Although always having employment, Thomas’ depicts his weak enrolment in relationships as a missing ingredient for him being able to live a meaningful life. Nor is the element of an important friend or family member salient in his story. This lack of social network might be conceived of as a lack of ‘hooks’ for Thomas. Acquiring opportunities to mature out of deviance may in Thomas’ case have been what was needed. These opportunities which might have helped
Thomas to mature out of deviance are construed as impossible. Because he had been involved in substance abuse during the stage of middle adulthood where people settles down it was “too late” for him to start in his 40s. The prospect of family formation are construed as an impossibility as he being “pretty tired and worn down” no woman would “find any enjoyment in it”. The idea of a childless marriage is never once addressed by the narrator in the interview nor does he provide any other explanation for him not being in a relationship. Furthermore, a touch of ambivalence in Thomas’ story is illustrated with the follow quotation: “It’s about finding, finding good reasons to refrain [...] Many years I spent wishing. Wanting that I wanted [to stop].” It can be questioned whether Thomas at the time truly wanted to quit his substance abuse and offending, meaning that a basic openness to change (as proposed by Giordano et.al. [2002: 1000]) may have been the reason why Thomas continued using drugs even during those few period in his life when opportunities were present. Desistance for Thomas was allegedly wished for and maintained by having pets, which he describes as his only family. In comparison, the narratives of both Martin and Erik implies what seems an abundance of opportunities. Like Erik, Martin give accounts of many relationships during his adulthood. On some occasions Martin had also made girlfriends pregnant, who wished to keep the baby, which suggests that family formation was not far from Martin’s reach. Instead what seems to be lacking is the willingness to have children and settle down, as well as the wish to stop using drugs. Lastly, John’s story is interesting in that being divergent from the rest of the participants. Despite 19 years of being married and living a crime-free life, he resumed his criminal career after the separation with his wife. Perhaps getting married provided a hook for desisting just as much as getting divorced gave him a different set of hooks, namely opportunities to reoffend. As there is not much in John’s accounts which sheds light on if, and how, he changed during these transitions, his story remains an enigma.

AGENTIC MOVES & THE SENSE OF SELF
When analysing Thomas’ story, the quotation: “somewhere I have lived and life has ran away from me” suggests that Thomas has not perceived himself as in charge of his own destiny. This sense of incapacity to change he apparently experienced in his 40s when he actually wanted to change (“it was too late”) echoes a perception of being powerless to change his life course, much like the “condemnation scripts” (Maruna 2001: 77ff). As Thomas accounts for the period of his life as a substance abuser, his statements suggest that he really did not want to live that kind of life (even by the time he lived he it). For example, Thomas’ claims of having had to supress memories from that period implies that he wanted some change in his
lifestyle. In terms of cognitive transformations Thomas’ story evinces a ‘basic openness to change’, a change in attitudes towards deviance and the outlook of a conventional life as more appealing (see Giordano et. al 2002: 1000f). Yet the road to a conventional life was apparently not a straight one, as it took Thomas many years to quit. Instead this case demonstrates that wanting to desist is not the same as feeling able to change. This lack of self-efficacy and a sense of hopelessness evident in Thomas’ narrative may serve to explain this discrepancy.

Similarly, when reviewing Martin’s narrative, a profound lack of agency is recognizable. When accounting for his deviant lifestyle, Martin invokes external reasons such as not receiving the proper training needed to act like an adult, thereby explaining why he, for much of his young adulthood, acted “like a teenager”. Not having to take responsibility and therefore “escaping the burden of choice” (see Maruna 2001: 77), Martin uses this sense of a weak self-efficacy to explain away decisions and actions which do not promote desistance or change. Besides this tendency of being non-agentic, Martin’s account of his early adulthood suggests that his strong pro-deviant attitudes were incremental to abate changes (even when opportunities were practically forced upon him). When giving an account of his reasons for not working (“it wasn’t my melody”) and not getting involved in family formation even after making girls pregnant, Martin’s story implies that a willingness to change (take responsibility, act as an adult, etc.) was not present at the time. As a result of being treated for his substance abuse he claims to have matured and thereafter started viewing work a bit differently. Being checked into a treatment facility may thus be conceived of as a step towards a cognitive transformation, in which his attitudes changed. Another important facet for change can be traced back to him viewing a documentary of himself injecting heroin, which may have sparked that initial willingness to change and eventually starting to view his deviant lifestyle differently. Unlike Thomas, Martin has been presented with many opportunities to ‘get settled’, but his lack of agentic effort is acutely expressed in the following quotation: “I have knocked girls up. I have said ‘hell no I can’t take the responsibility’. Perceiving himself not to be mature enough to take responsibility for his actions, this lack of self-efficacy may also hold some explanations to why Martin choose not to grab that ‘hook’. In Martin’s account on his choices not to be a father, although stating that he “misses having children” he also feels that he made the right choice: “Because you can’t have kids and believe that kids are gonna save you from the drugs. […] It will only end with the kids growing up in a damn tragic, broken environment”. Although seemingly realistic, this statement largely omits any
intentionality on Martin’s behalf to change these circumstances. Also apparent in both of these narratives is a fundamental lack of a set goal or a vision for the future. In Martin’s narrative the goal instead seems to continue using drugs, even if there are – much like in Thomas’ case – an envision of a drug- and crime-free life. When comparing these two narratives with the case of Erik some similarities can be detected.

Much like with Thomas, feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness to change are detectable in Erik’s story (although providing different explanations for why that is the case). Yet, similar to Martin’s story, numerous ‘hooks’ were presented to Erik which he choose not to grab. Like the former, this weak sense of self-efficacy seems to be explained with regard to attitudes: “I don’t trust anyone, I am always convinced that I will get betrayed. I don’t have trust by any means. No matter what relationship you have, I am ready every day to get left.”

Both Martin and Erik then have an explanation for not having to act agentic (whether it’s ignorance and immaturity or insecurity in close relationships). Although Erik once states in the interview that he on several occasions wanted to stop using he also states at another time that he did not wanted to stop because he enjoyed using. This suggests an ambivalence of not knowing what one wants and it can therefore be questioned whether Erik really experienced a basic willingness to change. What is also striking in Erik’s story is his sense of self as “a broken person on the inside” and always trying to ruining the relationship, which is used when explaining why his many relationships failed. Taken together, these three narratives imply that ‘hooks’ and a wish to change are insufficient if the agent perceives himself to be lacking the necessarily capabilities to change. Interestingly, this dismal view of the self as being unable or incompetent to change is also adopted as an explanation for not having to be agentic – and in doing so succeed in “avoiding the burden of responsibility that accompanies free choice” (see Maruna 2001: 78). In contrast, Robert’s narrative suggests both a firm willingness to change and a propensity to seize any opportunities whenever presented to him. Such an opportunity constituted being accepted to an education program that allegedly was considerably difficult to get admitted into and succeeding with this allowed Robert to fulfil his dream of becoming a carpenter. His account of this event are also pervaded with notions of an active striving and persistent efforts to get enrolled in the program. This decisiveness and grit implies that Robert felt that he actively could change his life circumstances. Along with his claim that he started to view criminality as unenjoyable, tiresome and unrewarding indicates a change in his attitudes against criminal activity to the extent of it being viewed as meaningless and irrelevant in his life. But what also makes Robert’s story fascinating is that
he, unlike the other narrators, states that he has been making something good of his past ill-doings. When stating that he is active in an association aimed to help people who are in prison, Robert’s account is much akin to the “redemption scripts” where the narrator expresses a wish to ‘make good’ and ‘give back to society’ (see Maruna 2001: 87). This also implies that a fundamental shift in Robert’s identity has taken place. Robert is also the only one in the material who expresses a clear, unequivocal wish to change and ‘do better’ alongside with the aspiration to ‘make good’. In this act of narrating, Robert construes his wicked past self as fundamentally different from the person he is now, and does so with reference to the ‘different me’ which he is today.

Finally, I will again turn to the deviant case of John. John’s story is both distinguished and ambiguous due to a retrogression of his trajectory (following an intermittent pattern) as well as a professed lack of identity change. In his adolescence and adulthood criminality was purportedly his profession and a vital part of his identity, describing a role as a criminal which he had assumed. Yet despite this, and although allegedly first opposing the idea of starting to care about someone, John got married. To the eye this might appear as some form of attitude change had taken form along with opportunities to promote a shift in his trajectory. Curiously, he also claims having no problems separating himself from his deviant lifestyle. Considering this, John’s revertigo to crime may seem strangely out-of-character or, indeed, deviant. What made recidivism possible? As Giordano & co posit, a basic openness to change along with opportunities is not sufficient to bring about any enduring change. The agent needs to change his attitudes towards criminality in itself as well as towards his ‘deviant self’ by construing a new ‘conventional self’ (Giordano et.al. 2002: 1000f). When considering his 19 years of marriage, John concludes: “I had not been affected at all during these 19 years, that’s kinda funny.” In John’s view then he is in fact the same as before, thereby not construing his ‘present’ self as particularly different from his ‘past self’. Likewise claiming to have “no moral considerations whatsoever” and having virtually no empathy yet being happily married for almost two decades appears as confounding statements. These conflicting statements imply that John uses the narrative to explain his past and present self by merging them together. It is by construing himself as inherently ‘bad’, a natural born criminal (much akin to the “condemnation script” in Maruna [2001: 77ff]) that John manages to obscure and camouflage all the contradictories of his lived experiences in order to create a convincing life-history. By providing a reasonable, believable story for him making no ‘real’, substantial change in his underlying identity, John also manages to explain why desistance is
unattainable. Thus, when construing ‘present criminal John’, the narrator invokes his past to serve as a reference, not to distance himself from but, rather, to assimilate with.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Up to this point, my endeavour has been to examine 1) how the men construe their past and present in the act of narrating, 2) what opportunities they claim to have had and what their responses were to these, and 3) their perceptions of their capacity to actively affect their life circumstances. By critically scrutinizing how the participants account for their past and present lives in the act of narrating, I have reviewed the effects of perceived agency for desistance. In this enterprise I hope to have shown how the agent’s perception of himself and his capacities can be recognized as one of the facets involved in the purposeful and intentional efforts needed to realize opportunities which promote change. On a more theoretical level, I have sought to knit together the concepts of identity and agency more tightly in a reconceptualization of the ‘hooks for change’- thesis. The narratives above have served to demonstrate that opportunities and changes in the agent’s attitudes provide vital clues in our understanding of why some life events are the centrepiece of the offender story, while others are but specks on the canvas. Being provided with opportunities and having pro-conventional attitudes however, may not be enough to realize a change. Instead the findings of this study suggest that ‘self-efficacy’ (or perceived agency) may be a missing link in this framework. Even more so, the results imply that a weak sense of self-efficacy is further invoked by the narrators as an explanation for being unable to change, and thereby not having to do anything differently. In this alleged state of incapacitation were change is an impossible feat, the narrators can find excuses for not having to respond in an agentic manner to opportunities. On the other hand, our deviant case John is a paradox as his story implies that agency and a high sense of self-efficacy may lead to even more offending. John’s case also suggests that feeling agentic alone is insufficient for desistance, which only tells us that the importance of attitudes cannot be discarded. By applying a narrative approach we can hopefully broaden our understanding of the agent’s sense of themselves. It also serves to illustrate how the narrator can explain and account for the way his life course has unfolded. When considering the case of John, pro-deviant attitudes and not wishing to live a crime-free life were called upon to explain the similarities – rather than the differences – between John’s past and present self. Thus, one may argue that his past ‘offending identity’ may have functioned as a point of reference for him when accounting for the agentic choice to reoffend. And, like with the case
of Martin, Erik and Thomas, John’s narrative demonstrates how the construing of identity – whether that of a natural-born thug, an immature urchin or a victim of circumstances – can be used to ‘explain away’ why desistance evidently was an unfeasible option, similar to the ‘condemnation script’ suggested by Maruna. Our ‘success story’ Robert, on the other hand, echoes the ‘redemption script’ as the vices of past days are explained with reference to the good, righteous and virtuous present ‘self’. In doing so, Robert succeeds in merging past and present in his desistance process. Despite having the most prison sentences and (assumedly) the most traumatic childhood background, Robert still managed to ‘make good from the bad’.

With the scope of this essay being veritably limited, my focus has been specifically on the juxtaposition between identity and agency in the desistance process with the implication that other noteworthy aspects (especially those working on the macro-level) are left unaddressed. Individual choices, although pertaining a strong influence upon the life course, social structures nonetheless “constrain, modify, and limit” these choices (Sampson & Laub 2003: 282). If we were to consider the desistance process accordingly, with its choices and constraints, reviews of offender’s lives would be even richer – especially so if human agency were to be given a more prominent role than what has previously been the case. In my own amendments to this neglect I have focused on the agent’s perception of himself and of his ability to change as related to the agentic exercising of opportunities in order to bring about change. But trying to fill that little gap of knowledge has given rise to further inquiries. In the lives of the narrators, drug abuse is a common denominator and a salient factor in their deviant lifestyle. Its importance for self-efficacy however has been largely unaccounted for in the analysis, why such inquiries may be a fruitful endeavour for further research on the micro-level processes of desistance. When reviewing the narratives, the role of age and maturation was depicted as important component for the men when finally making the decision to change. Considering the weight given to the role of maturation and age within the life course tradition (see Sampson & Laub 2003: 26), it seems only reasonable to, if continuing along this road, examine what the effect of age bears on the way opportunities are perceived and received by the agent. This may be especially true given the prominent role of stages with its age-expected structural forces in the life course tradition (see Carlsson 2014: 22ff). Finally it should be noted that, although explaining some of the dynamics of agency when desisting from crime, this essay touches but briefly on the agentic moves to persist in crime. If different life courses are to be meaningfully understood within the same theoretical framework, we need also adhere to stability – or the absent of the change – in patterns of offending.
REFERENCES


