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# **Emotions, Future Selves, and the Process of Desistance**

**Ben Hunter and Stephen Farrall**

## **ABSTRACT**

Desistance research emphasizes that offenders identify a future self that aids desistance efforts. However, it is unclear how future selves operate when offending opportunities arise. To explore this we employ qualitative accounts of instances when offenders and ex-offenders abstained from offending, and the emotions this evoked. Offending was avoided to preserve aspects of offenders' lives or avoid negative consequences but, for some, avoiding offending brought frustration. Finally, those who had made the most progress towards desistance were less likely to identify opportunities for offending. These findings suggest future selves inform the desistance process, highlighting particular ways to be. However, time is needed to build up valued aspects of the life that may be feared lost if engaging in crime. Before the benefits of abstaining are recognized, there may be a tension between the future and current self.

Key words: Desistance, Future selves, Emotions, Identity

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Herein, we explore the relevance of a future, non-offending self for efforts to avoid offending. We throw further light on how abstaining from crime ‘feels’. The role of such future selves has been highlighted within existing work (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Vaughan, 2007). However, identifying how future selves operate at moments when individuals could offend but do not has yet to be attempted, leaving an understanding of their contribution to desistance underdeveloped. Similarly, the assumption has been that abstaining from offending ought to ‘feel good’ for those attempting to desist, providing vital feedback that they are on the ‘right path’ in leaving crime behind and, therefore, that a particular future self is worth pursuing (Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Giordano, Schroeder and Cernkovich, 2007). Once again though, we have little understanding of how making a commitment to desistance feels.

Such an understanding is important as part of continuing efforts to explore desistance. Although the importance of future selves and emotions for desistance has been argued, a more precise exposition of their operation is underdeveloped. We explore these issues through qualitative data, focusing on particular moments when individuals could have offended but did not. In order to more clearly situate their accounts within a desistance framework, we draw upon a dynamic model of desistance (Farrall et al, 2014), locating specific opportunities for offending as part of localized contexts that must be negotiated by desisters.

We proceed by outlining the role of future selves in desistance, noting how a conception of oneself as a non-offender assists efforts to refrain from offending. We then consider the role of emotions, noting that current conceptualizations of these in desistance suggest that avoiding offending is a pleasant experience. We then outline our sample before considering moments when they could have offended but abstained. These accounts suggest that while conceptions of future selves are utilised at the

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Deirdre Healy, Ray Paternoster and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on a draft of this article.

moment when offending could occur, the way they are invoked may differ depending on whether or not the offender's life has progressed to the point that they have 'something'<sup>2</sup> to lose through further offending. Many of our interviewees found abstaining a positive experience. However, several reported discomfort at avoiding crime; we concentrate on this group to explore why this might have been. We conclude that an important determinant of noticing opportunities – and therefore employing a future, non-offending self – is the progress that has been made towards desist. Once desistance has been established, opportunities to offend may no longer be recognized as such. It would appear that ex-offenders no longer spot offending opportunities . The implication of these findings for conceptualizations of desistance is discussed.

### **RECENT THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO DESISTANCE**

As important for the process of desistance as are the various external processes (e.g. life transitions that provide structure and support for efforts to change), of equal importance are the 'narrative' aspects of desistance (Maruna, 2001). These are the ways the move from offender to ex-offender is articulated to form a coherent 'life-story'. Rather than denying they took place or separating them from the life now lived, deviant pasts are dealt with through a reconstruction of what they mean, potentially to resolve any dissonance presented by a commitment to desistance (Farrall et al, 2014; Maruna, 2001; Vaughan, 2007). Reconciling a deviant past with a non-offending future is therefore an important part of constructing an identity as an ex-offender.

For all the importance placed on the past, the future self is an even more vital part of the nascent ex-offender identity. Lives are lived into the future and the past is interpreted (in part) by who we wish to be(come) (Hunter, 2010; 2015; Hunter and Farrall, 2015). A growing body of work has explored the future that offenders imagine for themselves, a consistent theme being that desistance is a process

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<sup>2</sup> By which we mean a relationship, investments or actual objects.

that benefits greatly from the conceptualization of a future (non-offending) self (Giordano et al, 2002; Healy, 2014; King, 2013; Laws and Ward, 2011; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Vaughan, 2007). The future is not simply about “what I do” (or do not do), however. It is about “who I am” or, perhaps more accurately, “who I will be”, making this an important aspect of attempts to construct an identity that will buttress desistance. As Butler suggests (2004:44), when individuals embarking on change request recognition it is recognition of their ability to change which they seek. Any future self will be quite specific to the individual, but such a self is also likely to be unfinished, uncertain and liable to be reworked. Therefore, although offenders may express an indication of whom they wish to become, at no point is such a self likely to be fully formed and realised (Hunter and Farrall, 2015). Nevertheless, a ‘blue-print’ of a non-offending future self assists desistance by providing a goal towards which the individual can work (Giordano et al 2002; Hunter, 2010), providing stability and coherence to actions (Paternoster, forthcoming). Such a conceptualization assists because images of future selves suggest particular ways of thinking and acting in order that behavior aligns with what ‘that sort of person’ would do. In short, “people choose, however consciously or unconsciously, to invest in a range of different, often contradictory discursive (and hence historically constituted) positions” (Gadd and Farrall, 2004:129). Therefore attempts to theorize how a concern for the future informs desistance focus on the ability to envision a particular future self and live a life concomitant with this. However, “the processes through which identity is constructed is constantly formed, revised, consolidated and (importantly) undermined – in relation to others, real and imagined” (Gadd and Farrall 2004:130) has received scant attention.

Several theoretical accounts attempt to identify the role of future selves in the desistance process. These accounts emphasize the necessity of individuals recognizing the potential of different situations in order to act in accordance with longer term, desistance-focused, goals (Giordano et al; Vaughan, 2007). This reflection upon specific situations and the best course of action to take is greatly aided by an idea of who one wants to become (Hunter and Farrall, 2015; Paternoster and

Bushway, 2009). Not only does an idea of a future (non-offending) self help make offenders aware of the possibility of change, thereby inducing a sensitivity to desistance-focused opportunities as they occur (Giordano et al, 2002), it also helps offenders navigate situations in which opportunities to offend or to demonstrate that change is taking place present themselves. In this role, the future self provides a set of guidelines, steering the actor towards behavior in keeping with their desired self (Giordano et al, 2002; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). The need to identify the ‘desistance-friendly’ route through a particular situation may not be obvious, and the specific nature of a future self may shift as desistance progresses (Gadd and Farrall, 2004). Early in the process, deliberation over the ‘correct’ course of action may be explicit, as offenders struggle to overcome entrenched patterns of thinking and behavior (Vaughan, 2007). It has also been suggested that, initially, who one wants to become is not as powerful a driver of pro-social behavior as who one fears becoming (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009).

The explication of the role of future selves in the desistance process is part of a more general trend that aims to outline the role of agency in efforts to desist and construct environments that support these efforts (Farrall, 2005; Giordano et al, 2002; and Maruna, 2001). This contrasts with what Bushway and Paternoster (2014) identify as the overly-deterministic explanation for desistance given by Laub and Sampson (2003),<sup>3</sup> whereby offenders encounter institutions or individuals that exert social control on them. A more agentic account of desistance has offenders actively seeking opportunities and attempting to make the most of them in order to live the lives they wish to, particularly with regards to the structural constraints within which offenders live. This is not least because, as Maruna (2001:23-24) observes, explaining desistance as a result of rational choice

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<sup>3</sup> Laub and Sampson (2003: 9) acknowledge their original (1993) theory lacked an adequate account of agency in the desistance process. However, their more recent work has attempted to outline the role of agency vis-à-vis ‘external’ controls (2005). Nevertheless, the contribution of the work of Bushway, Paternoster and others allows for a more explicit understanding of how decisions to desist can pre-empt any meaningful engagement with the social controls traditionally associated with desistance from crime.

ignores the potentially more interesting question of how such choice operates, particularly in situations of extreme disadvantage (Giordano et al, 2002).

The above suggests how concerns for the future, who one may become, and who one is trying to avoid becoming can influence choices to offend,<sup>4</sup> potentially altering the trajectory of a criminal career. The difficulty from an empirical point of view, however, is assessing how (and, indeed, whether) conceptions of the self actually influence offenders' decisions to offend or not at the moment they make them. While the above frameworks all usefully conceptualize how future selves may impact upon offending, there is little understanding of how any notion of a future self operates when individuals are presented with an opportunity to offend. Understanding this will help unpack the role of agency in efforts to avoid offending. It is generally agreed that neither human agency nor social structures wholly explain routes out of offending (Laub and Sampson, 2003; LeBel et al, 2008). Instead, the role of agency is likely to be most important when particular opportunities to offend are identified, implying recognition of the dilemma facing the individual (i.e. to offend or not). Investigating the role of future selves 'in the moment' is one of the objectives we set ourselves, and we return to this after considering another important aspect of desistance from crime: how avoiding offending feels.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EMOTIONS IN EFFORTS TO ABSTAIN FROM OFFENDING

Desistance research has increasingly recognized the emotional aspects of refraining from crime, following a more general consideration of crime and emotions (De Haan and Loader, 2002; Karstedt, Loader and Strang, 2011). One of our aims is to explore the usefulness of emotions in helping to understand efforts to desist. The commitment to a future self is likely to be an uncertain endeavor.

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<sup>4</sup> We follow Gadd and Farrall (2004:129) and Weaver and McNeill (2016:103) in recognising that choices can be consciously or unconsciously motivated. Similarly, although we describe some as 'making decisions', this does not imply that we assume that these are rational or even given terribly much thought at the time they were made.

Future selves are by their nature unfinished constructs, and success in achieving them is far from guaranteed (Gadd and Farrall, 2004:139). In committing to a future self, offenders are therefore likely to be sensitive to whether attempted change is ‘working’ (Burnett, 2004; Healy and O’Donnell, 2008). One source of information in determining this is to acknowledge how attempts to desist ‘feel’, making emotions a pivotal source of feedback about both the present and the future. The importance of shame in this regard has been attended to (Ahmed et al, 2001; Leibrich, 1996, Scheff, 1994), but so too have other feelings; ex-offenders note pride in abstaining from offending, the boost to their self-esteem from successfully leaving crime behind and disgust at their previous behaviour (Farrall et al, 2014).

To return to the work on future selves cited above, Giordano et al make little mention of emotions within their framework, although they do suggest that identifying the positive aspects of a particular future self may make that person more likely to desist (2002:1041). They also assert that positive emotions explain attempts to engage in prosocial behaviour (Giordano, et al, 2007:1614), while, feelings such as anger and depression can perpetuate criminality. They further suggest that part of the desistance process involves the development of an emotional self, and this can happen independently of the sort of life transitions much desistance work has traditionally emphasized (e.g. Laub and Sampson, 2003). One way this emotional self develops is that the positive emotions associated with criminal activity diminish (Giordano, et al 2007:1624-1626).

Within Vaughan’s framework, emotions operate prior to action and provide the necessary ‘signals’ as to appropriate courses of action via anticipation of how behavior might make one feel (2007:393). This “emotional commentary” (2007:394) is of importance for determining how appropriate a course of action is. The assumption is that anticipating positive feelings as a result of a course of action increases the chance it will occur (and indeed, reoccur). For Paternoster and Bushway, the emotional work involved in desistance is in part based upon dissatisfaction at offending, the negative possible selves that result from its continuation and anticipation of how engagement with more prosocial roles



will make one feel (2009:1120). Positive future selves, when envisioned, are sources of esteem, even if they do not directly lead to behavior change (2009:1114). Additionally, recognition from others that one is 'savable' enables the would-be desister to start to imagine that a better future is possible (Gadd, 2006:193, Farrall, 2005).

Weaver and McNeill (2015:96), in some ways echoing Gadd (Gadd, 2006, Gadd and Farrall, 2004), draw our attention to the role of relationships and desistance beyond marriage (Sampson and Laub, 1993). Noting that people change in order to sustain relationships they value, they argue that relationships motivate people to change behaviour. Additionally, such relationships may enable would-be desisters a chance to imagine a new future (Farrall, 2005). The desire to be recognized (as 'existing', or as having changed) generated constraints in the lives of the men Weaver interviewed (p102), bringing a sense of 'we-ness' to their lives. Hence the investments desisters made in relationships drove them away from offending, as this became incompatible with these relationships (p104). As both Gadd and Weaver and McNeill note (following Farrall, 1995:56) many of these relationships are not with those working in the criminal justice system.

This attention to the role of emotions in the desistance process is important, although desistance theories would benefit from closer attention to the emotions involved in the transition to ex-offender (as Healy, 2010 notes). Nevertheless, the above accounts imply that, as an emotional journey, the transition from offender to ex-offender is a positive one. Desistance from crime, or even the envisioning of an ex-offender identity, is invariably supposed to 'feel good'. LeBel, et al (2008) and Giordano et al (2007) draw attention to the link between negative emotions and continued offending. For those attempting to desist, the expectation is that negative emotions will accompany any further offending.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, maintaining the positive path that one is on is expected to feel good. We do not deny that this can be one part of the desistance experience (e.g. Farrall and Calverley, 2006;

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<sup>5</sup> We acknowledge that offending can be 'fun' (Katz, 1988). However, when efforts are being made to stop offending, it seems plausible that feelings of satisfaction and pleasure will be derived from avoiding crime.

Farrall et al, 2014). However, when ex-offenders discuss the pride they feel at having desisted, talk about their satisfaction with their lives or the pleasure they derive from prosocial roles such as parenthood instead of activities based around offending (Farrall et al, 2014: Chapter 6), they frequently do so from a point in time quite far removed from their criminal activity. As such, these accounts are retrospective, often reported when desistance has been secured. In as much as desistance from crime represents a transition from one self to another and the establishing of a different set of desires, priorities and preferences, we do not expect that transition to be straightforward or easy. On the contrary, copious evidence suggests it is not, characterized instead by frequent backsliding, such that even trajectories that end in desistance from crime are best described by a 'zig zag' as individuals have crime free periods punctuated by offending (Baker, Metcalfe and Piquero, 2014; Carlsson, 2013; and Metcalfe and Baker, 2015). This being the case, it is necessary to consider when the positive feelings associated with avoiding offending occur and, more specifically, whether avoiding offending feels good at the time.

In sum then, while existing work has much to say about the operation of future selves and the role of emotions in the desistance process, there has been little investigation of how these aspects of the desistance process play out when opportunities to offend present themselves. We attempt to work towards rectifying this by considering the accounts of a group of offenders of specific moments when they came close to offending, but ultimately abstained. Our aim is to develop our understanding of the ways in which 'decisions' not to commit particular offences are realised. In so doing, we locate our analysis within one model of how and why people stop offending. This model attempts to take account of the different factors that operate on offenders or provide the context for their lives (and hence their efforts to desist). The model is explained in detail elsewhere (Farrall et al, 2014:43-48). Our concern here is with what Farrall et al identify as 'situational contexts.' These are specific moments, circumstances and events in people's lives and the relative weight put on them as they relate to efforts to desist from crime. These contexts can be defined in broad terms, such as the

context provided by a particular relationship, place of living or employment situation. Equally though, they may be defined narrowly, with context provided by a micro level interactions. It is this latter conception of situational context that we focus on here. Specifically, the situational context of an identified opportunity to offend.

We draw upon a qualitative data set to explore these contexts. We ask; What did our sample experience when they had opportunities to offend but did not?; Why did they refrain from offending?; and how did abstaining from offending feel to them (both at the time and when interviewed)? These are the ‘inner workings’ of the situational contexts referred to by Farrall et al 2014. These are (amongst other things) the specific situations in which people find themselves and are required to make moral choices and take action.

## **METHOD**

The data we employ are drawn from a 15-year qualitative longitudinal study of desistance (see Farrall et al 2014 for a full description of the study). In 1997/8, 199 offenders were interviewed while serving a probation order in England and subsequently re-interviewed between one to four times. The most recent interviews were undertaken during 2010-2012. The sample members had been convicted of commonplace offences, with theft/handling, violent and drug offences featuring prominently in their accounts. We asked interviewees about their lives, their offending and the impact of their probation orders on their efforts to desist. Of importance for our purposes here, interviewees were asked to describe moments when they could have offended but refrained from doing so, with other questions designed to explore why they abstained and how abstaining felt both at the time and subsequently. Below we present data from the most recent sweep of fieldwork, at which 105 of the

original sample were traced and interviewed.<sup>6</sup> Of these, 54 of our interviewees identified situations when they identified an opportunity to offend but abstained from offending, while 30 said they had not had such an opportunity.<sup>7</sup> The analysis focused on identifying both the commonalities and differences across our interviewees' accounts.

The data represent a rich source of accounts on offending and desistance from crime. Nevertheless, we note that they are not without problems. Our interviewees were sometimes recalling incidents that were several years prior to the interview, with all the attendant issues of memory concomitant with this. It is possible therefore that their recollections of their reasons for abstaining represent an after the fact narrative reconstruction of their actions rather than their 'true' account (Maruna, 2001). Although this is possible, we see little easy way to overcome this given the nature of our investigation and the focus of our enquiry. We cannot ask offenders about their efforts to abstain as they are making them, so some delay between incident and recall is inevitable. Notwithstanding this, we hope that this potential difficulty with participants' recall might be mitigated through asking participants to focus on specific situations, rather than recalling criminal opportunities in general. Below, we first identify some examples of situations interviewees described before considering why they did not take these opportunities to offend. We then discuss the uncertain and often negative feelings elicited by abstaining. Finally, we bring in those of our sample who had not identified opportunities to offend and consider our participants' progress towards desistance as a means of explaining the differences in recognition of opportunities to offend.

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<sup>6</sup> At sweep five, we were able to maintain a sample that was still broadly representative of the sample originally drawn in 1997/98. See Farrall et al 2014: 90.

<sup>7</sup> The remaining 21 were not asked the question. This was normally due to time constraints placed upon the interview, such as when an interview was conducted in prison.

## FUTURE SELVES AND ABSTENTION

We concern ourselves first with the 54 sample members who had identified opportunities to offend but abstained from taking them. These interviewees all wanted to desist from crime at the time they could have offended, in keeping with observations that even persistent offenders do not hold an ‘offender’ identity (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011). Their accounts therefore suggested that all were trying to refrain from offending, and indeed it appears many had subsequently desisted from crime. Nevertheless, they were readily able to recall and recount moments when they had identified an opportunity to offend but not acted upon it. The responses below were typical:

Christian: I remember at least on one occasion [uncle] did come here and he bought some stolen stuff with him, and I said to him, “It’s not staying in this place”.

Harry: There’s been a couple of times in the past like two years, like the boys asked me if I would go and pick some [stolen goods] up for them, and it’s like, “No, I won’t do that”.

Tom: There were some lads wanting me to take some phones out fraudulently out of a phone shop. . . And they said “We’ve got a credit card here but it’s”, they were two Asian lads, they said “it’s in a white man’s name”, and they’ve seen me, [and they have said] “Can you go in and get phones?” [And I replied] “No, you’re alright”.

Interviewees could recall incidents several years after they had happened. For example, Tom estimated that his experience occurred four or five years ago. Of perhaps more interest were the reasons our sample gave for not participating in offending. When asked why they did not offend, two themes emerged.

## ‘TOO MUCH TO LOSE’ OR ‘JUST NOT WORTH IT’?

The notion of their ‘future self’ is notable in the accounts our interviewees gave of their reasons for abstaining. Two broad themes (not necessarily mutually exclusive) stood out; some felt that they had moved so far on from when they had been offending that they now had too much to lose by re-offending. Others, despite the fact that they had not yet developed a clear sense of what they wanted for their futures, nevertheless felt that the risks were ‘not worth it’. When asked why they refrained from offending, eleven interviewees identified the aspects of their lives that would be put in jeopardy if they were to take opportunities to offend. Consider the following:

Will: [I was thinking] I don’t want to lose . . . my flat and my business, and my daughter.

Dylan: I’ve got too much to lose. Got way too much to lose. I’ve got my missus, got my kids.  
I’ve just got too much...

These concerns speak to particular goals that offenders held (see Gadd and Farrall, 2004:148 on defenses against pain, loneliness, fear etc.). The maintenance of the positive directions that they had established for themselves and the preservation of valued relationships and resources was paramount for some at particular moments when offending opportunities presented themselves. Such a focus speaks to particular aspects of the self that offenders valued and to this extent also had a forward-looking element to them, inasmuch as our interviewees feared losing these things in the future. The assets they referenced speak to the particular roles they envisioned for themselves (as successful business owner, partner and parent). We think it relevant though that all were referring to positives that they had achieved and that they subsequently feared losing, a point we return to below. In contrast to those quoted above, seven gave reasons for abstaining that were more concerned with avoiding the negative consequences that offending would attract. These offenders were less clear on

what they wanted for their future but, equally, were certain of what they wanted to avoid (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). For example:

Al: Maybe it's the thought that I think I can't be arsed going to, going to court or I can't be arsed doing more community service or...

Don: I mean, actually, when [the police] actually catch you, it's a lot more scary than the consequences and going to prison.

Steve: ...and I'll think, that property is empty, but is it worth it, is it worth going to prison, er, being banged up 24/7?

These accounts are in keeping with the notion that repeated contact with the criminal justice system, experienced by many of our sample had, prompts an increasing weariness with punishment (Cusson and Pinnsonneault, 1986; Shover, 1996). The desire to avoid the negative consequences of offending manifests as particular disenchantment with the effort involved in crime, relative to the rewards one may receive. Once again though, we do not want to suggest that such a weighing of the costs and benefits of offending was explicit.

Considering these two different explanations for avoiding offending, we are reminded of the rather fragile identities that offenders hold, particularly as this applies to who one may become and contextualized by a broad desire to stop offending. The transition to ex-offender is one that takes time, but the identification of valued goods that might be put at risk by an engagement with offending and the desire to preserve them suggests the understanding that they may be lost. Simultaneously, these can be invoked in order to provide the motivation not to offend. However, what is relevant in considering that some who abstained had 'too much lose' is that the relationships and roles that

desisters come to value and feel are incompatible with further offending need to be invested in and built up over time (Gadd and Farrall, 2004); that is, they accrue in number, significance and value. Before this build up has occurred, roles such as ‘good’ parent or business owner might be imagined, but the risk of losing them is negligible if little progress has been made towards their achievement, or if the commitment to them wanes. In such instances, it is perhaps easier for offenders to focus upon what they wish to avoid rather than maintaining what they have or focusing on what they want. Paternoster and Bushway, in their conceptualization of future selves in the desistance process, suggest that a feared self (i.e. who one wishes to avoid becoming) is a more powerful motivator for abstaining from offending when the process is in its infancy (2009:1116). Our interviewees’ responses suggest the opposite may be true however; a feared self is more readily identified when one has something to lose. The role of the feared self here is that envisioning failing at a relationship or some other endeavor also means to envision who one has become; a failure.

#### HOW DOES IT FEEL TO ABSTAIN?

As we note above, there is implicit in much desistance research the notion that abstaining from offending should ‘feel good’. Offenders may find it difficult to avoid crime and criminal opportunities, but are rewarded when they do so by an increase in feelings of self-esteem that comes from doing the ‘right thing’ or positive reactions from others. This in turn increases the chance that such abstinence will be repeated in the future, creating a virtuous cycle out of crime. This was the case for some of our interviewees, with twenty-four reporting that they were pleased that they had avoided succumbing to opportunities to offend, citing the positive feelings abstaining elicited.

Others were more ambivalent about how abstaining from offending had felt, however. We focus in some detail on these more negative feelings because, as we note above, the virtue of not offending is supposedly that it is its own (emotional) reward. Forty-three (47%) of those asked reported that



avoiding offending was not necessarily a positive experience at the time. Consider Derek's account of his decision not to steal some clothes from a shop:

Int Okay, so there's a situation where you could have taken the stuff but you didn't, how did you feel about not doing it?

Derek Er, mixed feelings. Good and bad.

Int Okay, what were the bad feelings?

Derek I could have got away with it, I had a nice little tick on, but I didn't coz my mum was there, so...

Int So this was three weeks ago, but looking back how do you feel now about not having done it?

Derek Honestly, I feel like going back up there. Before Christmas, I keep thinking. But I'm not. . . Coz I want Christmas out with my mum.

Derek's decision was something he kept returning to in his mind ('I keep thinking ...') and does sound like it was something which he deliberated on, choosing in the end that Christmas with his mother was more important to him (see Gadd and Farrall, 2004:130-1 on identification, and Bottoms 2006 on diachronic self-control). Similarly, Bernard was frustrated when he chose not to respond to a situation as he was used to doing:

Bernard: My missus was getting some grief down the school off these other people down there, so went down there, sort of sorted it out, but that could of went the other way, do you know what I mean. . .before we would have steamed in and sorted it out, through violence or something like that, but [this time] it goes through different channels. She'd go to like the headmistress or something like that and sort it out really the way that you should sort it out, rather than going in there full steam ahead...

Int So instead of using violence then you went and...

Bernard Well sort of verbally sorted it out yeah.

Int Okay. And how did that feel, so the sorting it out through talking?

Bernard To be honest it didn't feel that good. . .Because I sort of thought to myself that they, they deserved more than just a talking to. Cause my missus was, my missus was pregnant with little un actually at the time like, and she had a bad back and these, this woman, pair of women jumped out of the car and was threatening to hit my missus and that. I don't know, I thought really they deserved a lot more than just a talking to. But my missus was like, no, no, we'll sort this out, sort it out the proper way. And that just, it was a lot calmer. Whereas before I wouldn't have even listened to anything, I would have just flew in there and sorted it out, you know what I mean.

Int Yeah. So at the time it was perhaps a bit, it was fair to say, frustrating, having to deal with it...

Bernard Oh very yeah. . .But I never dealt with things like that before. I always dealt with them, boom, get in there, sort it out, stuff the consequences.

John also reported frustration, when turning down an opportunity from a friend to participate in a robbery, and later to transport what John assumed were stolen goods:

Int: So how do you feel about having not done it, as it were, I mean how did it feel to phone that bloke up or to see him and say...

John I felt shit, I felt like I was letting a mate down in a way. I must have said 'Sorry' to him about 10 times. I felt a bit shit cause I felt like I was letting a mate down. And

then it was like the fact of, well do they think I'm a nobhead cause I'm not doing it?

But I think more than anything I felt shit cause I was letting a mate down.

Burnett highlights that a state of ambivalence characterizes the accounts of many property offenders who were trying to desist (2004). Ambivalence represented neither a wholesale rejection of offending, nor a complete adoption of 'conventional' values, but rather vacillation between the two; the push and pull and of goals that are incompatible with one another (Burnett, 2004:168). We identify some elements of this ambivalence in our offenders' accounts. Derek, clearly struggled with his competing emotions over his decision to abstain, and did so for several weeks after the incident. While identifying the positive aspects of not offending (spending Christmas with his mother) he recognized what he was giving up in order to refrain from an easy opportunity.

In Bernard we see not ambivalence towards abstaining so much as feelings of discomfort, particularly 'in the moment.' Bernard's frustration at not resorting to violence was grounded in his attempts to learn a new way to resolve difficult situations and avoid offending, thereby realizing a particular future self he had identified. We also note the challenge to his self-concept as a man who 'needed' to protect his pregnant partner (see Graham and Wells, 2003:556 on the link between violence and 'macho' values). Bernard was therefore still torn between the way he was used to dealing with difficult situations and his desire to avoid trouble. Indeed, during the interview, more than three years after the incident, Bernard was still unsure that avoiding violence had been right, noting equivocally that it was "...probably the best thing to do..."

For John, saying "no" left him feeling "like shit" because it challenged his own self-conception of what a good friend should do (render assistance when it is requested). This ambivalence and the negative feelings abstaining elicited can be located within efforts to achieve different future selves. These accounts therefore emphasize the competing urges within those who are trying to desist. Derek

was conflicted, wanting to resort to an established behavior that he knew well and understood he could benefit from, and attempting to realize the sort of person he wanted to be. For Bernard and John, not taking criminal opportunities was at odds with their self-concept and established patterns of behavior. What we think most noteworthy here is that refraining from offending was not a positive experience. Saying no to opportunities, especially when the benefits to be gained by doing so were perhaps not immediately obvious, felt 'bad.' Nevertheless, we note their ability to delay (or perhaps more accurately, give up altogether) gratification for the promise of a particular future self. These observations are important because they remind us that, although we might hold a particular future self in mind, our emotions can challenge this particular project (Halsey, Armstrong and Wright, 2016).

#### FUTURE SELVES, EMOTIONS, AND THE PROGRESSION OF THE DESISTANCE PROCESS

To this point we have said nothing of those in our sample (n=30) who reported that they had not encountered situations where they could have offended. We bring them in at this point to understand the difference between the accounts in our sample and to advance an understanding of how abstaining from offending might sit within a broader process of desistance.

Above, we argue that the idea of who one might become can encourage abstinence from offending in specific circumstances (a key aspect of desistance over a longer period). Equally, desire to avoid the negative consequences associated with arrest were found for other interviewees. We have also argued that abstaining from offending, frequently fails to be a positive experience. In seeking to understand these observations we follow examples of earlier work (Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Farrall et al, 2014) which has attempted to identify progression towards desistance, while avoiding a desister/persister dichotomy to identify how far along the path to desistance individuals were. This led us to identify those of our sample who were still offending (the persisters) and then separating

those who were making efforts to desist as either ‘early’ or ‘established’ desisters. Identifying when desistance has occurred is notoriously difficult to accomplish (Laub and Sampson, 2001). Notwithstanding this, we drew upon our sample’s descriptions of their efforts to desist from crime. We identified as ‘early’ desisters, those who felt they had made progress in desisting, but who were still rather uncertain in their attempts and unsure about how successful they would ultimately be. In this group were those whose last conviction was quite recent (although none had offended in the last six months), but also those who had managed a more sustained period of time without offending, albeit following periods of frequent criminal activity. The ‘established’ desisters were those who we were confident they had ‘turned a corner’ on their offending and could cite significant periods of time that were free of criminal activity. Ultimately, the distinction between early and established desisters was not governed by the length of time individuals had avoided offending, although this did play a part. Instead it was a distinction based on how interviewees talked about their lives, their efforts to leave crime behind and their success in this endeavor. This distinction left us with three groups of interviewees: 20 persisters, 28 early desisters and 36 established desisters.

Approaching our sample this way allows us to explore the observations we make above in more detail. Table 1 shows whether the persisters and the two groups of desisters we identify above had come close to offending but then abstained. While 16 of 20 (80%) of persisters and 23 of 28 (82%) of early desisters had come close to offending, only 42% of the established desisters had. 72% (39 of the 54) who had come close to offending were either persisters or early desisters. Conversely, 21 of the 30 (70%) who could not identify a time when they came close to offending were established desisters.

**[Table 1]**

Table 1 suggests that established desisters were far less likely than either persisters or early desisters to have identified/recalled opportunities to offend. We argue that this indicates that as people desist from crime, they change their priorities and focus (see also Farrall et al, 2014: Chapter 6). What our data suggest is that a key part of this shift is that offenders become less likely to identify opportunities to commit crime. When attempts to desist are in their infancy, opportunities may be frequently spotted. Carl (an early desister) demonstrated his awareness of the occasions when he could have offended:

“Um, the opportunities have been there, they are every day, you walk down the road, there is a person at the side, you could quite easily take [their possessions], charity boxes everywhere, you could quite easily take those...”

Without asserting that everyone enjoys exactly the same opportunities to commit crime, Carl’s account reflects that the majority of people regularly encounter situations that present them with opportunities to offend. We are not in a position to adequately chart changes in frequency of opportunities or the types of crimes available to our sample. However, if criminal opportunities are indeed more or less ubiquitous, then what appears to distinguish our three groups is whether or not they identified them as such. In this regard, the early desisters are little different to the persisters, with the majority of each group spotting opportunities to offend, even if they did not take them. This suggests that there is a point in the desistance process at which individuals stop identifying opportunities to offend. It also suggests that, early on in the process, a conscious effort is required to avoid taking advantage of opportunities that are spotted, until such time as they are no longer recognized. Al, a persister, described his awareness of his environment and the opportunities it might provide for offending:

“...even going into a shop to buy something, first thing I do look at all the staff, look at the floor and look for the cameras, I do it automatically, it’s the first thing I do when I walk in a

shop, you know, walk down and I mean I know – I know everything will be camera'd in [town], I know – I know every – it's like and every store detective, I know every shop assistant, I know every shop, I know it off by heart..." (emphasis added)

It is at this early point in the desistance process that a future self, employed in order to guide one's actions and speak to who one wants to become, may be most pertinent (see also Healy, 2014). It is also at this point that an understanding of the consequences of further offending, whether expressed in terms of what one might lose or the attracting of further criminal justice sanctions, might be most keenly attended to. However, this formulation somewhat begs the question of what is responsible for this shift in awareness of opportunities. Although such is difficult to identify from our interviewees' responses, we offer some suggestions.

The first is that, as opportunities to offend are avoided, the benefits of desisting gradually become recognizable, even if (as in Bernard's case) only grudgingly. For example offenders may witness their peers being apprehended, convicted or otherwise inconvenienced by criminal justice apparatus. Although we have focused here on the negative emotions that abstaining from offending might elicit, we also note that avoiding offending can make offenders feel good about themselves. Recognizing the benefits of a particular approach to avoiding offending increases the chance it may be employed again. As non-offending responses to situations become more frequently used they may become normalized and consequently the offending potential of situations is no longer recognized.

A further possibility is that avoiding offending weakens criminogenic social networks that offenders have access to. Consider John's concern about letting his friends down by refusing to offend with them. If John's friends did indeed feel let down this may decrease the chance that John will be invited to participate in future criminal activity. This in turn may serve to aid John's commitment to a pro-social future self. This example also highlights the interplay of John's agency within the wider structural apparatus of his life.

Although we cannot be certain how it occurs, what the above indicates is that once offenders have progressed to a certain point in their desistance they no longer recognize offending opportunities. At this point, a non-offending future self is therefore of limited use, because it cannot be invoked to avoid an opportunity that is not recognized. Indeed, once desistance is firmly established the future self that is identified may be focused around more positive goals than simply not being an offender.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

We have attempted to focus on the impact that a future, non-offending, self has on efforts to desist when opportunities for offending are presented, and also on the emotions that abstaining from offending elicited. Explanations for desistance frequently draw attention to the future aspects of offenders' lives and the non-offending self they wish to become. These future selves are suggested as helping with desistance by providing a goal to be striven for and a guide to behavior. The accounts of our sample indicate that, for many, concerns about who they might become were foremost in their mind when opportunities to offend presented themselves. In citing worries over what might be lost if offending occurred, individuals commit themselves to certain futures and, in the process, certain selves. Paternoster and Bushway suggest that, when it comes to envisioning the future, who one fears becoming is a more powerful force for promoting pro social behavior than any desired self one might have (2009). We suggest additionally that fearing what one might lose is a more powerful motivational force for desistance the further one travels along the desistance path. This is perhaps because early in the desistance process (indeed, Paternoster and Bushway suggest this) there is little opportunity to conceive what may be achieved as a benefit of desistance, and that would be jeopardized by offending. This may go some way to accounting for what Halsey and colleagues refer to as 'fuck it' moments, when efforts to desist are abandoned in the face of seemingly over-whelming odds (Halsey, et al 2016). We cited Derek, for example, who was concerned to take life "one day at a



time” because he could not envision how else to proceed with his life. Derek still wanted to return to the store and steal and he was not certain he would avoid doing so in the future. If repeatedly thwarted in his attempts to desist, Derek may abandon this project and offend again. Conversely, once a number of ‘goods’ have been accumulated (e.g. employment has been gained, contact has been made with family members who were previously estranged) then it is easier to envision a feared self. The feared self becomes ‘the offender’ once the individual becomes far enough removed from their offending, and can be invoked in order to avoid losing what has been gained. We have also shown, however, that what characterizes the latter stages of the process of desistance is that, rather than opportunities for offending being resisted, they are not even identified. As such two types of feared self exist; who one might become if action is not taken (in line with Paternoster and Bushway, 2009), and who one might return to if one does not avoid some actions.

A general assumption in efforts to help offenders to desist from crime is that, quite apart from the benefits that might accrue to those who make efforts to desist, offenders are meant to avoid offending because it is the ‘right thing to do.’ The corollary of this is that avoiding offending should feel good in and of itself (Giordano, et al, 2007). The accounts we present here suggest this is perhaps a little unrealistic. Where offenders are involved in crime, or associate with those who are, abstaining can put them at odds with their prevailing self-concept. Their working self, that panoply of preferences, conceptions and understandings about who they are can be challenged (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Few of our sample held an ‘offender’ working self but, as John indicates above, refraining from offending can challenge other values or indeed working selves such as those based around helping one’s friends when asked. These experiences serve as an important reminder that at times emotions can be in conflict with particular identities and particular projects. To this extent, they can obstruct efforts to desist from crime by providing negative feedback relating to a specific course of action.

These observations allow for a greater understanding of desistance as a dynamic process. Before desistance is established, a conscious effort may be needed to avoid taking advantage of opportunities to offend (Paternoster (forthcoming) explores the importance of intentionality in efforts to desist). Eventually, the benefits of avoiding offending become apparent, such that offending risks jeopardizing valued goods that have been built up. There is an emotional component to this, however. That avoiding offending can feel ‘bad’ highlights the transition of the would-be desister’s identity, where offending is not compatible with a future self, but where abstaining is at odds with the current, working self. In other words, the struggle for some who are trying to desist is that they know they should not be offending, but feel as though they should. Recall Bernard, who although unhappy that his situation had been dealt with “verbally” rather than with violence also recognized that it was “...really the way that you should sort it out.” This emotional uncertainty requires us to consider in more detail how emotions inform processes of desistance. Emotions may provide impetus to avoid offending in some situations, perhaps particularly when the benefits of doing so, maintenance of valued relationships for example, are recognized. Conversely, and perhaps during the initial process of desistance, emotional impulses may have to be resisted if efforts to avoid offending are to be successful. Identifying at what point (or indeed if) emotions shift from being a hindrance to desistance to a help is an important part of unpacking this dynamic.

Part of desisting from crime is about learning new ways to ‘be’, and the development of a self able to manage potentially criminal situations without offending is part of this. As new competencies and expertise are developed, these are added to individuals’ slowly evolving sense of self (Fontana, 2002). The experiences that offenders have as they resist opportunities to offend and the emotions such resistance elicits help to solidify (or perhaps weaken) a desister identity as a desired future self.

We think this conceptualization of desistance and the possibility of ‘relapse’ in the process better takes account of the difficulty of committing to a route away from crime. It suggests that not identifying opportunities to offend may be a consequence of desistance from crime rather than a

cause. To suggest the reverse would seem to indicate that the ability to identify opportunities is just ‘turned off’ at a certain point, this running counter to what we know of desistance as a drawn out process in which changes in identity happen gradually. Even engagement in the routine activities associated with prosocial changes that are associated with desistance (such as employment for example) does not preclude opportunities for offending. As Carl and Al attested, everyday situations such as walking down the street or going into a shop present numerous chances to commit crime if you are attuned to the possibility of them.

Our work further suggests that we may be asking a great deal of offenders to just enjoy having stopped offending. Efforts to assist offenders with their desistance should perhaps do more to recognize the effort involved, the counter intuitive feelings that accompany abstaining from offending and the uncertainty that is part and parcel of not knowing if desistance from crime will ever be achieved. Positive emotions may assist offenders in their efforts to ‘cross over’ into prosocial territory (Giordano, et al, 2007), but the accounts we present above suggest that avoiding offending can be a far more ambivalent, or even negative, experience. If avoiding offending does not even feel good (at least initially), then the benefits of doing so are likely to be much harder to identify. This actually emphasizes the importance of agency in the desistance process, in order to commit to not offending even when there may not be an obvious benefit to doing so.

Farrall et al (2014) introduce a model of how people desist from crime, and suggest that opportunities to offend could be conceptualized as ‘situational contexts’ that are at play in processes of desistance. What then is the role of these contexts? First and foremost, situational contexts provide a testing ground for the viability of a non-offending future self. The contexts we have focused on here, particular moments when opportunities to offend were identified, might be best thought of as micro level tests of whether this self was achievable. Of course, situational contexts interact with other important contexts such as influence of policies or changes in values. No two situational contexts are likely to be the same, perhaps explaining why opportunities to offend may be taken at some times but

not others. This highlights the second point we wish to make about situational contexts for desisting: they relate to the other areas of the life in an iterative fashion. For example, an opportunity to offend that is not taken might reduce the chance of further opportunities (as we describe above for John), while changes in values and attitudes might mean that offending opportunities are not spotted as frequently, as we contend is the case for our established desisters. Finally, and notwithstanding our previous point, we note that situational contexts stand in isolation to the extent that, despite their pasts, offenders may choose in particular contexts to offend or not. They are, therefore, not wholly determined by what has come before. It might be that a future self is the mechanism by which offenders can transcend situations of significant disadvantage that might favor further offending, even if only briefly. This indicates the importance of agency in particular moments when offending might occur, and even given conditions otherwise characterized by disadvantage. It is vital, therefore, that explanations of desistance do not attempt a ‘one size fits all’ approach to account for routes away from crime. For some offenders desistance may seem almost inevitable as they come under prosocial influences that lead them away from offending without much planning (Laub and Sampson, 2003). For others, conscious efforts are needed to recognize potential opportunities that might assist with desistance efforts and to take advantage of them (Paternoster and Bushway, 2014; Paternoster, unpublished). The resources that offenders have access to may mediate where they fall on this happenstance/agency continuum (Giordano, et al also make this point, 2002:1026), but the nature of the criminal career, not least the offences offenders are involved with, may also determine in part the way it is exited.

Our goal here has been to advance a more nuanced account of the emotional dynamics of desistance. Paying attention to what happens in the moments when people refrain from offending helps us understand the often tentative early processes of desistance and the difficulties involved. We perhaps expect refraining from offending to feel good, ignoring the dissonance that abstaining may present for an identity that is in transition. These moments of desistance are important because they

demonstrate the ways that different perceptions of self preclude offending. They also, through a consideration of groups of offenders at different stages of the desistance process, illustrate the progression of desistance and the transition to an identity no longer predicated on avoiding offending, but instead focused more firmly on the future.

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**Table 1. Persisters and desisters and whether they had ever come close to offending**

	Ever come close to offending?		Total
	Yes	No	
<b>Persisters</b>	16 (80%)	4 (20%)	20
<b>Early desisters</b>	23 (82%)	5 (18%)	28
<b>Established desisters</b>	15 (42%)	21 (58%)	36
<b>Total</b>	54	30	84