

Narrative Identity Development and Desistance from Illegal Behavior among Substance-Using Female Criminal Offenders: Implications for Narrative Therapy and Creating Opportunity

Merry Morash, Rebecca Stone, Kayla Hoskins, Deborah A. Kashy, Jennifer E. Cobbina

Why Use Narrative Identity Theory to Examine Desistance from Crime?

- In Narrative identity theory, people’s descriptions of the events that they consider to be meaningful or important in their life stories reflect how they make sense of the world and reveal how they see themselves – in other words, reveal their identity.
- How people see themselves – their identity – influences how they behave.
- When ex-offenders experience **redemption** by “making good” of past negative experiences, such as living a criminal lifestyle, they are more likely to stop breaking the law. An example of “making good” is using one’s prior drug abuse to help others.
- When people who have broken the law see a past negative experience as spoiling or **contaminating** everything that came after, they are more likely to keep breaking the law.
- Probation and parole agents are in a position to support redemption either through their direct comments or by making referrals to counselors and therapists who use “narrative therapy.” They also can discourage “contamination thinking” through their comments and the referrals they make.

Research Questions

1. What types of negative experiences do women offenders incorporate into their stories of how they made something good out of past bad experiences?
2. What are the common and uncommon negative experiences that women find a silver lining in?
3. Do desisting women describe redemption scenes that differ from the scenes described by women who persist in illegal behavior?

The Sample

Between 2011 and 2013, we sampled 402 women for a study of women on probation and parole. The women had all been convicted of a felony and had a history of substance misuse. They had been on probation and parole for about three months when we first interviewed them.

Between 2015 and 2017, we took a subsampled 118 of these women for a second study. The subsample included women with at least five prior convictions before they began the first study.

Procedure and Measures

To collect life stories, interviewers met face to face for one to three hours with each woman. They first asked women to recall and briefly describe key “chapters” in their lives, for example, childhood, time on the streets, time in drug treatment. Once women had the chapters of their lives in mind, interviewers asked them to identify and describe key points, such as turning points, negative experiences in childhood and adulthood, and positive experiences in these stages of life.

To measure desistance, we checked official records for time in prison, arrests, and convictions for the year before we asked women to tell us their life stories, and for the years after they told us their life stories. Any women with an indication of a new conviction, incarceration for a new offense, or of being absconded during the year before and the time after the life story interview was classified as

persisting in criminal activity. The remaining women were classified as “desisters.” Violations of conditions of supervision did not result in classification of a subject as persisting in crime.

Examples of “Making Good” and Contaminating Events

Type of Key Scene, Definitions, and Examples of Redemption and Contamination Sequences

Type of account and definitions	Example quotes
<p><i>Redemption increases communion (80 women or 68% of the 118)</i> Participant explains how she “made good” of a negative event or episode in a way that increased her relationships with others.</p>	<p>“I’ve helped people as far as talking to people that were younger than me going through the same thing now that I went through. I’ve gave a lot of good advice to people ‘cause I’m actually a very smart girl considering all that I have been through.”</p>
<p><i>Redemption increases agency (86 or 73%)</i> Participant explains how she “made good” of a negative event or episode in a way that gave her strength, insight, and other positive attributes.</p>	<p>“My sister is on kidney dialysis, and she has had three open heart surgeries. My sister said only I could take care of her. This was a strength for me and it made me realize that I need to stay focused and not fight while in prison. I realized I need to care less about what people in prison say. I feel confident that I can do it and make it through prison without fights, and that I can make it through the programs.”</p>
<p><i>Redemption increases spirituality (42 or 35.6%)</i> Participant explains how she “made good” of a negative event or episode in a way that gave her increased spirituality or connection to an external force.</p>	<p>“When I was incarcerated, I got closer to God, which a lot of people do, but He took me step by step through the time that I was there and gave me mental stability. From being away from my kids I knew that I had an out date, you know, and I just prayed to Him that I didn’t do anything to jeopardize that while I was there. I do have strong faith in God and that God will get you through whatever you’re going through.”</p>
<p><i>Contamination (49 or 41.5%)</i> Participant describes a negative event that led to a long lasting, even continuing series of negative events, often characterized by a “downward spiral.”</p>	<p>Describing a negative childhood memory: “Probably the step mother issue. She didn’t want children and we were emotionally and physically abused since I was like four years old ‘til about 15. [I was] afraid and scared. I pretty much hid, that’s all I could do. I was always afraid and scared for the whole childhood.”</p>

Identity and Desistance

Very few women described positive identity development in educational and work settings. This finding points to the marginalization of many women in the justice system from consistent and positive experiences in these areas. There is a need to develop increased work and educational opportunities.

Being distressed or traumatized, being a mother, and breaking the law were common negative experiences that women drew on to see themselves in a positive light, that is, as acting with agency, expanding their relationships with others, and growing spiritually. However, these identity changes were not connected to desistance for all women.

Women who desisted described strong motivations to change themselves. They noted such thoughts as: helping others who broke the law reminded them of where they did “not want to be;” there are very negative realities of drug use and criminal behavior (it’s “like hell”). They made extreme efforts to obtain

substance-abuse treatment (“begging” the supervising agent for it). They had prosocial roles that they felt were age- and gender-appropriate and that they wanted to fill.

Women who desisted distanced their current from their past selves, and they steered a process of self-change. They came to see valuable prosocial qualities in themselves.

Women who continued breaking the law discounted illegal behavior by reasoning, for example, that lawbreaking did not reflect “who they really were” or that extensive drug use did not affect the quality of their parenting.

Overcoming challenges of motherhood was not consistently related to desistance, because some women reasoned that they could be “good mothers” even if they continued to break the law and use drugs.

Policy and Program Implications

In our study, women who have broken the law appeared to lack of opportunity to develop prosocial identities in work and employment settings. As a result, their prosocial roles were often limited to performance as a mother.

Women may benefit from referrals to programs that help them create life stories in which they come to see drug-using lifestyles in a negative light, revise their self-images, and provide a coherent, convincing explanation of recovery. Such programs engage people in telling, retelling, and revising their stories.

Given the importance of motivation to desistance, women may benefit from referrals to clinicians who support autonomy by providing meaningful rationales for why a certain action would be good for the client, acknowledge the client’s perspective and feelings, and offer choices, nurture inner motivational resources, and avoid using controlling language. Motivational interviewing is highly consistent with this approach.