



Insulation from loss: Exploring the impact of changing relationships in the liminal period between reoffending and desistance, and substance misuse and recovery

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Abstract

This article focuses on changes to relationships during the transition to desistance. This is important as liminality in offending behaviour is well-established meaning that people may move forward and backward through the offending cycle. Research on the nature of relationships as people move towards desistance is thus essential to understand the impact of change for individuals during a period of transition. This article explores the impact of change to relationships for both men and women contributing to gendered understandings of transitions to desistance. Based on interviews with 18 men and 10 women completing probation, two themes emerged to describe the impact of change, which were loss and gain, and rebuilding. These themes explain how changes to relationships can hinder or encourage desistance in the liminal period from reoffending to desistance.

Keywords

Desistance, gender, liminal, relationships, reoffending

Introduction

Recent figures on recidivism in Ireland show that 60% of women and 61% of men released from custody in 2017 reoffended within 3 years (Central Statistics Office, 2023). Alongside many factors such as penal policy, types and lengths of sentences, and breach

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processes, reoffending can contribute to rising prison populations, which in Ireland are currently at an all-time high. There were 4623 people in prison as on 21 August 2023 compared to 4176 in prison in August 2022 and 3904 in prison in August 2019 before COVID-19 (Irish Prison Service, 2023). This article focuses on the changing nature of relationships as men and women transition from reoffending to desistance in Ireland to shed light on the progress of desistance and recovery at an early stage.

This research is necessary for two reasons, first the changing nature of relationships in the transition period has not been extensively explored and second, gendered experiences of transitions are significantly under researched (Rodermond et al., 2016). Instead, there has been a great deal of research on the impact of relationships for men in reoffending and separately in desistance. This article will, therefore, first examine existing literature on the role of relationships in the reoffending and desistance stages separately before presenting qualitative research analysing the impact of relationships in the liminal period between reoffending and desistance for men and women.

Liminality in offending

Jewkes and Laws (2021) use Turner's explanation of liminality that highlights the idea of being no longer, while also being not yet. Similarly, liminality is the experience of being in between exclusion and inclusion, which has been applied in various contexts including prisons, criminal sanctions in general and desistance (Todd-Kvam, 2019). In an offending cycle context, liminality means that people occupy a point where they are no longer offending but have not quite yet desisted, meaning that people are essentially at a crossroads whereby they revert to crime or work towards desistance (Healy, 2010; King, 2013).

Liminality in desistance has been characterised as desiring a future crime-free self but perceiving that goal as unachievable due to wider circumstances (Healy, 2014). Occupying a middle position means that people cannot always control their circumstances, and the perception that goals are unobtainable can lead to frustration whereby people return to offending behaviour (Halsey et al., 2016).

In addition, act, identity and relational desistance are three separate dimensions of desistance and people can engage in a liminal way with each dimension (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). In no particular order, change occurs within the individual, in relationships and in how a person perceives and is perceived by wider society, which a person cannot always control indicating that there is no guarantee that desistance will always result in an end to offending. Thus, liminality due to moving from reoffending to desistance results in a person occupying an in-between position between a criminal and desisting lifestyle.

Act desistance describes the process of reducing offending but not stopping completely (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). In other words, the initial motivation to move away from offending and past social networks and behaviours can sustain desistance temporarily but people may not yet have a recovery or desistance focused identity, which hampers progress (Kay and Monaghan, 2019). This is particularly important as participants in this research indicated that they had reduced their offending but were struggling with identity change and recognition of change by others.

For men in particular, relationships have been documented as imperative for maintaining desistance (Laub and Sampson, 2001; Rodermond et al., 2016). Whereas women's experiences of relationships supporting desistance are more mixed as relationships can result in co-offending and pathways into crime (Rodermond et al., 2016). It is therefore crucial to understand the impact of changes to relationships as men and women move from reoffending to desistance to shed light on barriers in the transition period.

Examining the impact of changing relationships in the liminal position between reoffending and desistance is worthwhile as changes to relationships may significantly influence a person's frustration with the desistance journey leading to reoffending or they may encourage progress with desistance. Second, the impact of relationships in desistance has been extensively researched but the impact of changing relationships in the transition from offending to desistance is less well-known. Finally, research on the impact of changing relationships for men and women in the liminal position between reoffending and desistance is rare and understanding gendered experiences of liminality are important to support desistance.

Liminality in recovery

Desistance and recovery are linked as both are considered a process of change (Marsh, 2011; Albertson et al., 2015; Best et al., 2017; Kay and Monaghan, 2019). Liminality in offending can last a long time and this is especially true for people with drug dependencies (Honeywell, 2020 [2019]). Important to both processes is the idea of recovery capital that involves social, cultural and economic capital (Kay and Monaghan, 2019). This article focuses on social capital specifically, on the changing nature of relationships as people move through the liminal period in offending and recovery.

There is a complex relationship between drug use and crime; specific knowledge of desistance in people with substance misuse issues is underexplored (Van Roeyen et al., 2017). This is relevant as most participants in this research abused substances in their lives, which impacted their relationships and offending behaviour. Desistance and recovery from drug use means that people occupy an in-between position from an offending to desistance lifestyle and an addiction to recovery lifestyle making change doubly challenging.

Addiction is linked to stigma defined as 'when elements of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold' (Link and Phelan, 2001: 365). Stigma is experienced by both men and women who misuse substances but women are often labelled as twice as deviant for breaking the norms of society and the stereotypical female role (Barr, 2023; Camilleri and Clark, 2023). Stigma thus serves as a significant barrier to recovery and desistance and this is especially true for women. In terms of relationships, stigma can result in individuals anticipating rejection meaning that re-entry to conventional society can be exceedingly difficult, in these circumstances reoffending and substance misuse may appear an easier option (Moore et al., 2013).

Moreover, illicit drug use is one of the most stigmatised conditions and resulting exclusion means that people have less chances to build pro-social ties (Best et al., 2017). In a constrained context of stigma and exclusion in the liminal period, people may return

to familiar habitual behaviour (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011). On the contrary, relationships may support recovery and desistance processes (De Seranno and Colman, 2022).

Ultimately, relationships are important when it comes to supporting or hindering change for people who misuse substances (Van Roeyen et al., 2017). Van Roeyen et al. (2017) reviewed research on desistance and addiction and found that new relationships have a positive influence on desistance. This is emphasised by Best et al. (2008) who highlighted that the role of support from pro-social friends was key in explaining how people moved away from crime. The impact of relationships on desistance may be gendered as relationships and family support for women are considered especially important in supporting the recovery process (Andersson et al., 2021). In addition, women are more likely to lose custody of their children compared to men and failure to regain custody of their children can cause long-lasting harm, which acts as a significant barrier to recovery (Andersson et al., 2021).

This article examines progress towards desistance in the liminal period before new relationships are formed whereby people have moved away from negative relationships but may not yet have rebuilt or formed new relationships. Addiction is particularly relevant to this research as drug use can help people to avoid negative states that liminal positions may emphasise (Frisher and Beckett, 2006). This is particularly true for women who tend to use drugs to escape previous trauma (Leverentz, 2014; Osterman, 2021 [2018]). Substance abuse is often a more significant obstacle to desistance for women compared to men (McConaghy and Levy, 2016). The liminal period between reoffending and desistance, therefore, may be markedly challenging for those with substance problems.

Gendered experiences of relationships while reoffending

Relationships are an important factor that have been studied separately in reoffending and desistance research. The study of the changing nature of relationships in the transition from reoffending to desistance for men and women is not as thoroughly researched. Similarly, women's experiences of relationships are underexplored in both reoffending and desistance meaning that women's problematic relationships go unrecognised (Barr and Christian, 2019). Understanding the impact of changes to relationships while a person transitions towards desistance and recovery can shed light on continuity and change through the offending process.

Research on reoffending has stressed the importance of peer relationships and obtaining respect from peers for men (Lindegaard and Jacques, 2013; Mercan, 2020). Gaining respect sustains reoffending as it is linked to financial gain and provides status. On the contrary, successful transitions to desistance are linked to knifing off (Laub and Sampson, 2001). In the liminal period, knifing off may thus be associated with a temporary loss of respect, friendship and sense of status or identity.

Women also emphasise the importance of respect in relationships but subtle differences exist as women prioritised being treated with respect, which often results in reoffending out of a desire to avoid victimisation rather than being linked to status (Batchelor, 2005). Barlow and Weare (2019) also highlight that co-offending with men is a central

pathway into offending for women, which can intersect with wider issues such as addiction and socio-economic status. In this context, relationships highlight the constraint that women experience, which may encourage offending as an escape from relationships or wider issues (Osterman, 2021 [2018]).

Men and women who reoffend often do so in a context of constraint from conventional society (Farrall, 2019; King, 2013). This constraint is likely experienced before first encountering the criminal justice system in forms such as an adverse developmental history (Moffitt, 1993), lack of education and living in deprived neighbourhoods (O'Donnell et al., 2008). The addition of a criminal record enhances that constraint and new relationships formed while reoffending may insulate people from wider exclusion. People's understandings of their circumstances and exclusion can influence decisions to reoffend, so isolation in the transition period may drive a person towards reoffending (De Coster and Heimer, 2017).

Reoffending behaviour and addiction usually result in a loss of relationships for men and women whether that loss is desired or not as the behaviour and addiction pushes people away (Kreis et al., 2016). At the same time, new friendships can be developed and men are more likely to continue offending if they have ties to anti-social peers (Cobbina et al., 2012). As reoffending continues, men become more and more embroiled in a criminal lifestyle and the consequences of such is that they likely lose ties with family and other pro-social relationships (Cobbina et al., 2012; McCarthy and Hagan, 2001).

Familial relationships are considered stronger for women (Giordano et al., 2002) which means that the loss of these relationships may impact women more significantly. Women face stigma in relation to their criminal record and addiction, which is emphasised in a context of patriarchal expectations that women should prioritise their identity as a mother and place in the home (Barr, 2023). In this context, women may struggle to rebuild relationships with their children.

In addition, stigma affects women who are mothers as the ideal of motherhood highlights how a mother should and should not behave, this can lead women who have been in prison to feel that they have failed as mothers (Baldwin, 2017). Changes to relationships due to imprisonment can result in ongoing trauma from being separated from children while feeling permanently stigmatised by their prison experience (Baldwin, 2020). Feelings of hopelessness or failure due to the struggle to reintegrate into families following release from prison can trigger a return to substance misuse (Baldwin, 2020). At the same time, knifing off from past relationships for women can lead to unintended consequences such as increased drug use (Barr and Christian, 2019). This highlights the complex nature of transitions and emphasises how the in-between stage can present barriers that encourage reoffending and/or further drug use.

Changes to relationships in the move towards desistance may have different implications for men and women's journeys. This is because there are pains associated with desistance that specifically link to relationships. The first of these is isolation and loneliness as a person knifes off from previous anti-social relationships and attempts to repair relationships with family or forge new relationships resulting in a transition period characterised by isolation (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). The second of which is dealing with stigma, which may be particularly salient for women (Barr, 2023; Kreis et al., 2016). Furthermore, barriers such as stigma and feelings of isolation and loneliness can result in

a sense of fatalism whereby people give up on the desistance process as the pains associated with change are too difficult to overcome.

Wider constrained circumstances thus impact relationships for men and women. Similarities between men and women in linking respect and relationships together while reoffending suggests that in breaking away from relationships, people also lose a mechanism for gaining respect or avoiding victimisation encouraging reoffending. This article will examine the impact of changing relationships in the transition to desistance and address the question of whether losses in desistance are experienced more significantly than the losses of relationships when reoffending while using substances to insulate against loss? The next section will further explore relationships in the desistance period.

Gendered experiences of relationships in the desistance stage

Relationships have been commonly identified for men as an important factor in desistance in aligning a person with a conventional lifestyle (Weaver, 2019). In particular, romantic relationships have been identified as significant in initiating or maintaining desistance for men (Laub and Sampson, 2001, 2003). This is linked to the process of knifing off from anti-social relationships and forming pro-social romantic relationships, which can exert pro-social control over an individual's behaviour (Warr, 1998). In this sense, it is unclear whether it is the knifing off from anti-social relationships or the formation of new pro-social relationships that acts as a turning point for desistance. In the liminal period in which new relationships are not yet formed, the loss of relationships gained during reoffending may be particularly isolating for men.

Research on intimate relationships and desistance for women reveal more mixed results (Rodermond et al., 2016). Intimate relationships for women may be more likely to initiate or maintain reoffending instead of desistance (Barlow, 2016; Barlow and Weare, 2019; Barr and Christian, 2019). Women are more likely to be exposed to sexual victimisation or disruptions in social relationships, which can lead to reoffending and they are more likely to experience victimisation into adulthood (Blaauw et al., 2020). This suggests that desistance for women may be best supported by independence as moving away from certain peer groups, violent relationships and communities can help to sustain desistance (Osterman, 2021 [2018]).

On the contrary, marriage is linked to reductions in reoffending for both men and women (Bersani et al., 2009). This may be principally important for women with feelings of shame and stigmatisation as positive relationships can contest these feelings aiding desistance from crime (Rutter and Barr, 2021). Family conflicts can further stigmatise women and take an emotional toll serving as a barrier to desistance (Osterman, 2021 [2018]). Women therefore may be vulnerable in the liminal period towards desistance if they have lost positive relationships in their lives (Andersson et al., 2021).

Rodermond et al. (2016) identified no significant differences between men and women's experiences of desistance. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that some factors are specific to women's desistance as stigma and social capital building may have a greater relevance for women (Osterman, 2021 [2018]). Women may experience more loneliness and isolation in giving up crime linked to stigma and the severing of relationships that may encourage reoffending (Baldry, 2010). This is often in a wider context of trying to

rebuild positive relationships to support desistance. In addition, women are working to recreate their social identities and a primary goal in doing this is often regaining custody of children (Leverentz, 2014). The liminal period is especially challenging given that recreated social identities may not yet be recognised by others indicating that goals are difficult to meet.

This article explores the impact of changes to relationships in term of progress to the desistance journey. This is necessary as social contact can hinder and enable desistance (Van Roeyen et al., 2017; Martí et al., 2021; De Seranno and Colman, 2022). It is important to create meaningful relationships while at the same time knifing off from relationships that do not support desistance but this period may leave people feeling isolated and lonely impacting desistance (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016).

Methods

Following approval from the university ethics committee, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 men and 10 women who were serving probation or completing courses linked to probation in Ireland. Interviews lasted an average of 50 minutes, and the median age range of participants was 35–45 years old.

Probation officers ensured that all but 2 participants had committed 2 or more offences and self-report data classified 22 participants as having 10 convictions or more. About 82% of the sample (7 women and 16 men) reported being dependent on substances at some point in their lives. All participants reported a decline in their drug use at the time of interview: 3 participants were still using but reported a significant decrease in how often they used; 4 participants were taking methadone (heroin substitute) and the remaining 17 participants were sober. As a result, most of the reoffending reported in this article was linked to selling and acquiring drugs.

The aim of this article is to understand the impact of changes to relationships in terms of hindering or supporting desistance. Interviews were designed to elicit responses about why people continued with or returned to crime after a crime-free period. To gain a more contextualised understanding of people's reasons, the interviews first asked about experiences of growing up before moving onto offending and desistance. This clarified the impact of changes to relationships as interviews charted the different stages of the offending cycle.

Interviews took place in different locations through Ireland, which was necessary as pre-arranged interviews scheduled after an appointment with a probation officer often resulted in no shows. Attending projects linked to probation had a higher success of recruiting willing participants and thus most people interviewed for this research were engaging with act desistance.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher, except for two interviews with participants who preferred notes to be taken over a recording. Once all interviews were transcribed, they were uploaded to MAXQDA where they were analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006) and Attride-Stirling (2001).

Coding was done in two ways, first transcripts were searched for pre-identified factors emphasised in wider reoffending and desistance research (e.g. addiction or relationships). Second, unexpected or interesting features were noted (e.g. impact of liminality, emotions).

The codes were then collated into themes and themes were collated into organising themes. This article discusses the organising theme of dealing with change focusing specifically on changes to relationships in terms of loss and gain of relationships while reoffending and rebuilding relationships in the move towards desistance.

Results

Analysis will be presented by comparing men and women's experiences of loss and gain of relationships while reoffending. Second, rebuilding relationships while men and women transitioned towards desistance will be analysed to understand the impact of the changing nature of relationships. To do this, data will be presented and attributed to pseudonyms that participants choose themselves.

Relationships while reoffending: Loss and gain

This research emphasises that loss of relationships heightens isolation in a vulnerable transitional time in a person's life (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). Importantly, loss of relationships is often first experienced during reoffending but it is argued that a person is insulated from that loss as offending and/or addiction becomes a person's primary focus.

While reoffending, men and women had similar experiences of loss and gain in their relationships. Loss of relationships with family members was common and linked to ongoing addiction problems (Kreis et al., 2016). Drugs allowed men and women to self-soothe and self-comfort (Khantzian, 2012), which meant that the loss of relationships was temporarily nullified. Steve recounted how he was asked to leave the family home to protect his siblings.

So he (Father) never actually said the words 'Steve I'm kicking you out of the house'. He said 'me and your Mother need to put your younger siblings first therefore . . .' and I said 'Ok can you give me a night?'. . . I was on heroin. It spiralled quickly, it spiralled very quickly, very quickly. (Steve)

Similarly, Marie was asked to leave the family home by her partner to protect their daughter.

And I was using (heroin), my daughter had never seen me use. And now I was after being thrown out of the home with her Dad, he threw me out because he is in recovery himself so he was like enough is enough, he was trying to protect her and protect himself. (Marie)

What is salient is that escalating drug use facilitated an escape from loss (Bishop and Almquist, 2020). Reoffending is linked to an avoidant coping style (LaCourse et al., 2019) meaning that people reoffended to support a drug using lifestyle that provided escape from loss. In the midst of the reoffending stage, loss of relationships was therefore secondary to the pursuit of substances and offending behaviour.

This is emphasised by people's discussion of their goals, which were primarily focused on reoffending to secure substances rather than repairing relationships. Mary

and Joseph highlight how their lives began to revolve around using substances which subsequently meant withdrawing from family and spending time offending to fund that substance use.

I thought this (first experience of heroin) is fucking great, stoned out of me head, lovely, relaxed so that just, that was it . . . just the gear (heroin) just whoof took me and took me bad . . . I wanted it every night. (Mary)

It (heroin) blanked everything out you see. But I didn't take it to get stoned, I took it to forget things. (Joseph)

Offending to acquire substances was a reactive behaviour based on short-term needs that facilitated an escape (Bowen et al., 2018). Mary withdrew from her children as her addiction spiralled and provided an escape from that reality. Joseph escalated his substance use to forget the treatment of his children in care. Avoiding reality provided motivation to continue using substances allowing for the consequences of loss of relationships with family to be temporarily forgotten.

While people lost ties with family due to addiction and behaviour, they also gained new friendships as their lifestyle orientated towards offending and drug use. These new relationships were perceived as supportive and facilitated the avoidance of loss of other previous relationships (Foster and Spencer, 2013). These new relationships were often devoid of stigma as new friends were also engaged in offending to finance substance use.

They(addicts) have, they're diamonds. I swear to God. They have hearts of gold because they know what's it like to be out on the street, they know what it's like to be cold, they know what it's like to be homeless, they know what abuse is like they know. You name it, they know it. You name it, they know where to get it. They're very intelligent. (Mamie)

Mamie highlighted the empathy and understanding that could be gained from new friendships in the reoffending stage, which is in stark contrast to stigma that women as drug users tend to experience (Camilleri and Clark, 2023). Similarly, Nidge reflected positively on the consequences of offending behaviour, which resulted in friendships formed in prison with people all over the country.

Like the friends that I had you wouldn't believe man every town you can think of I have friends cause for all the years being locked up I met these people through the years so I can go to any town, Limerick, Dublin, Cork, Belfast you name it I can go anywhere I want there's people that I know in every place. (Nidge)

Although men and women often gain from offending behaviour in different ways (Caputo and King, 2015), this research shows that men and women both gained new meaningful friendships linked to a reoffending and substance use lifestyle. Importantly as these new friendships were gained during reoffending and substance use, they were devoid of stigma or judgement and provided people with social support during reoffending. The meaning placed in those friendships may be subtly gendered in that women sought empathy and understanding from friendships, while men sought security.

Alongside addiction, new friendships formed during reoffending and substance use helped to insulate people from loss of familial relationships and maintain offending (Brezina and Azimi, 2018; Foster and Spencer, 2013). Thus, reoffending to acquire substances is characterised by loss and gain of relationships and importantly, losses can be temporarily ignored as using the acquired substances becomes a coping mechanism. This is crucial as when transitioning to desistance and recovery, people must deal with the losses to relationships they accrued while offending and knife off from new friendships gained during reoffending and substance use.

Rebuilding relationships while moving towards desistance

When transitioning to desistance, people knife off relationships made during reoffending, while at the same time experience the impact of initial losses already accrued to reoffending. This results in a double loss as people were faced with the reality of their actions representing a significant barrier to desistance. A focus on short-term needs and avoidance is common during addiction especially for people who have experienced trauma (Bowen et al., 2018; Gielen et al., 2016). As a result, the consequences of people's behaviour were mostly realised in the liminal period. Nidge and Pat emphasise this:

I carried the dirt (stigma) from my side (offending) onto this (desistance) but I didn't give a fuck about it cause I didn't think, no one came up and told me about what was going to happen in chapter two (Nidge).

Never considered consequences. Never, never once. Didn't care, so what? (Pat)

While reoffending, the consequences of reoffending such as losing relationships were not considered as substances acted as a coping mechanism against isolation. In transitioning to desistance, Nidge highlighted how it was necessary to rebuild those relationships while also realising that the stigma of his behaviour did not just reflect upon him but upon his entire family.

'Her Father (referring to Nidge) spent a lot of time in prison, he's a drug dealer, he's a robber'. Like that's another consequence like I've affected my daughter like I can't describe that to you man. (Nidge)

Rebuilding relationships was thus made more difficult in a context of realising the harm caused to relationships due to offending behaviour while also knifing off from relationships formed when reoffending (De Seranno and Colman, 2021).

While desisting, people must often cope with the consequences of their behaviour while caught in a cycle of addiction and offending. Thomas reflected on the consequences of introducing his friend group to heroin.

And then when I think back then like there's like, there's about 5 of them (friends) who are still alive that still on methadone and I always wonder like was that my starting off with all them starting on the heroin like. Cause out of us all like, I was the first one like well me and me mate

like but it was in me house where I gave two people a shot and they went from there like and then it just went on there. So sometimes I do wonder like did I ruin their lives do you know what I mean like? (Thomas)

During offending and addiction, substances provide an avenue of escape. In transitioning to desistance, Thomas had to cope with isolation from friends who are still misusing substances while also reflecting on his role in introducing those friends to substances leading to dual pain and loss. Dual pain comes in the form of dealing with past losses experienced during reoffending while also dealing with loss of friendships during desistance which makes desistance more challenging. This is partially due to exclusion as a result of substance use, which limits people's chances to build pro-social ties (Best et al., 2017).

Moreover, both men and women faced the reality of trying to rebuild relationships while knifing off from other relationships, which enhanced their sense of isolation and loneliness (Van Roeyen et al., 2017).

It's just that right now I'm too vulnerable to be around those people so. It's too easy to go back to that like so I just have to be careful. (Claire)

Similarly, Thomas reflected on the isolation and loneliness experienced in the transition to desistance.

It's hard too cause I'm stuck in me house on me own like in me mothers do you know what I mean? And there's no one really the only ones I can talk to is say me sisters' husbands and do you know what I mean but they never took drugs in their life and they never robbed in their life so it's a bit hard like you know to juggle with them like. (Thomas)

In the process of change, people have yet to rebuild or form new relationships that support desistance. This is linked to the reoffending and addiction phase whereby stigma and exclusion limits people's ability to form pro-social ties (Best et al., 2017).

For women, repairing relationships with children represented a significant challenge.

It's (change) very hard. It was easier in a sense while I was screwed up on drink and drugs ya know. But now, it's just, reality kinda kicks in now like. It always hurt that they (children) weren't with me but I'm glad they weren't now because they would've witnessed a lot worse than what they had originally witnessed. But it's so devastated now like ya know my youngest daughter she got her first tooth this morning and it just broke my heart that I wasn't there ya know but I know I can get all these back. Like I can make up to the kids ya know. Like I don't have doubt in that way ya know. (Claire)

Repairing relationships with children is especially challenging and is enhanced when women have experienced violence and stigma that hinders their ability to reconnect with conventional society (Barr, 2023; Gålnander, 2019). The loss of children therefore may have a more significant impact in the desistance stage compared to the initial loss while

reoffending, as when reoffending women used substances to temporarily cope with and/or escape from that loss (Kreis et al., 2016).

Given that people are insulated from loss during reoffending, this article argues that men and women suffer loss of anti-social relationships during desistance harder than they suffer the initial loss of familial relationships during reoffending. This is because in the liminal period between reoffending and desistance, people have yet to rebuild or form new relationships while coping with the consequences of prior damage to relationships. This occurs alongside their current reality whereby they break ties with relationships previously perceived as supportive (Kay and Monaghan, 2019; Van Roeyen et al., 2017). For men and women, dual loss as relationships change while transitioning towards desistance represents a significant barrier to desistance.

It is worth noting that for some, relational turning points further encouraged desistance progression as opposed to reoffending.

Thank God the grandchildren came along man that's after completely changing my whole world but getting out of the game that I was in ah it was the hardest thing I've ever had to do, it was like fighting addiction cause there's nothing out there for the people there's nothing like if someone wants to stop. (Nidge)

The arrival of Nidge's grandchildren acted as a turning point encouraging desistance (Giordano et al., 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2001). This turning point provided purpose to a conventional lifestyle.

Women also spoke about relational turning points which often took the form of gaining independence from abusive relationships.

He was a bully, he was, there was domestic violence, there eh was you know belittling, psychological you know? Emotional shit and he said to me I said 'I'll take you to court' and he was like 'ah you wouldn't, you don't have the bottle, you don't have the bollix' and I was already after going over to the court house and I had took a picture of the thing (summons) to send to me oldest daughter to prove that I had taken him to court.

In this sense, knifing off from abusive ex-partner acted as turning point (Barr and Christian, 2019). Taking legal action as a form of protection resulted in empowerment in gaining independence and protecting children from an abusive ex-partner. This act also resulted in Rosaleen growing closer to her children, which acted as a turning point in building family support (Barr, 2023). Gaining independence and working towards regaining custody of children can cement the move towards desistance (Barr and Christian, 2019; Osterman, 2021 [2018]).

Changes to relationships in the transition period can therefore encourage reoffending and/or relapse or they can provide an incentive for further progress with desistance (De Seranno and Colman, 2022; Van Roeyen et al., 2017). These experiences may have gendered elements whereby women need support with their independence to maintain desistance and men likely need support with rebuilding relationships orientated towards desistance.

Discussion and conclusion

This article examined the impact of changing relationships as men and women transitioned towards desistance and recovery to understand how relationships may hinder or support desistance.

While reoffending, drug dependency provided people with a mechanism to cope with initial loss of relationships (Kreis et al., 2016; LaCourse et al., 2019). Gaining new friendships in this time with people also misusing substances and offending further served to insulate people from loss (Foster and Spencer, 2013).

While transitioning to desistance, rebuilding relationships was associated with the transition towards recovery in which people also isolated themselves from friendships formed during drug dependency. Change in this context meant that people felt lonely, often had to deal with stigma due to addiction and temporarily lacked ways to deal with the reality of former lost or damaged relationships (Best et al., 2017).

Therefore, relationships can hinder desistance when people are trying to break away from anti-social ties and rebuild damaged relationships. In this constrained context, people experience the pains of isolation while dealing with the consequences of their behaviour, which damaged ties to pro-social others (De Seranno and Colman, 2022). Second, relationships can support desistance by providing hooks for change (Giordano et al., 2002). This article demonstrates that romantic or familial relationships are likely hooks for change for men and gaining independence by separating from abusive romantic partners is a likely hook for change for women. Social capital can therefore encourage both desistance and recovery (Kay and Monaghan, 2019).

Examining the impact of changing nature of relationships for men and women was important as there is a substantive body of research on desistance and relationships for men (Farrall, 2019; Laub and Sampson, 2001; Warr, 1998). In comparison, there is a mixed body of research in terms of the impact of relationships on desistance for women (Barr and Christian, 2019; Rodermond et al., 2016). There is even less research examining relationships in the liminal space between reoffending and desistance. This article shows that changing relationships when moving towards desistance result in dual pain and are equally challenging for men and women. The impact of these changes can act as a barrier to desistance making change feel momentous, potentially resulting in a return to crime or they can act as a turning point further encouraging desistance.

Ultimately the changing nature of relationships affect men and women in three ways as they move towards desistance. First, when offending people are temporarily insulated from the loss of old relationships as people gain new relationships linked to an offending lifestyle and find escape from loss through substances and offending. Second, when desisting people's experiences of knifing off are harder than the initial loss of relationships experienced during reoffending. This is because during the liminal period between reoffending and desistance, the coping mechanism of using substances and offending is removed. Finally, when desisting, people must attempt to rebuild relationships while coping with the full emotional experience of loss of relationships experienced during reoffending. This is alongside knifing off from friendships formed during reoffending, dealing with stigma and dealing with the consequences of past offending behaviour.

These findings emphasise the need to pay greater attention to social support in early desistance and recovery. Carlsson (2012) stresses that people's ability to take advantage of turning points is highly dependent on their location in equality. Substance abuse along with offending excludes people from society meaning that opportunities to build pro-social capital in the liminal period are rare. There is a role for professional services, community organisations and social enterprises in promoting access to community resources and strengthening people's skills to take advantage of opportunities to develop pro-social capital. Work on combatting stigma that reduces people's ability to form pro-social ties is crucial, particularly so for women, as is supporting women's independence. In addition, support in filling the liminal period with routine and assistance in achieving small daily goals is important for men and women while rebuilding or forming new pro-social ties. This may help to counteract the desire to use substances, exclusion and isolation experienced in that time.

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