Tertiary or relational desistance: contested belonging

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Abstract

In this paper, we aim to review and elaborate the concept of tertiary (or relational) desistance and to set an agenda for further research on how and with what consequences criminalised people experience, or fail to experience, belonging. Borrowing the language of migration scholars, we suggest that both crime and punishment produce an array of problems associated with 'contested belonging' (Davis, Ghorashi and Smets, 2018). The ongoing development and increasing application of the concepts of tertiary and relational desistance has helped to expose the importance of analysing these problems, and of seeking solutions to them. While criminological work in this area remains at a comparatively early stage, it already seems obvious that we can neither properly understand nor effectively support desistance without carefully attending to questions of belonging.

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Introduction

In this paper, we aim to review and elaborate the concept of tertiary (or relational) desistance. That concept highlights the role of recognition by others and of the development of 'belonging' in the processes by which people move away from offending and towards social integration.

The contribution of this paper rests mainly in setting an agenda for further research on how and with what consequences criminalised people experience, or fail to experience, belonging. Borrowing the language of migration scholars, we suggest that both crime and punishment produce an array of problems associated with 'contested belonging' (Davis, Ghorashi and Smets, 2018). The ongoing development and increasing application of the concepts of tertiary and relational desistance has helped to expose the importance of analysing these problems, and of seeking solutions to them. While criminological work in this area remains at a comparatively early stage, it already seems obvious that we can neither properly understand nor effectively support desistance without carefully attending to questions of belonging.

We begin, in the next section, by elaborating the emergence of the idea of tertiary desistance, rooting it in earlier work that drew a distinction between primary and secondary desistance. We also discuss Nugent and Schinkel's (2016) clarification and refinement of these terms as act, identity and relational desistance. Next, we review a range of empirical studies that have employed the concept of tertiary desistance in making sense of research findings in different settings and with different populations. Our intention here is not to provide a comprehensive review of empirical evidence about the importance (or not) of tertiary desistance but rather to use these studies to help us elaborate and clarify the concept. We then proceed to discuss findings from and analyses of our own research (conducted independently of each other) which, we think, offer further important clues about the struggle for belonging and its place in desistance processes. In our concluding discussion, we draw these threads together and consider the implications for the development of the concept of tertiary or relational desistance, and for how we might further

explore the importance and experience of belonging for people who have been criminalised.

The three forms of desistance

Twenty years ago, drawing on the work of Lemert (1948), Maruna and Farrall (2004) were the first to draw an important distinction between primary and secondary desistance: the former relates merely to behaviour, the latter implies a related shift in identity. They posited that shifts in identity and self-concept matter in securing longer-term, sustained changes in behaviour as opposed to mere lulls in offending:

> '…secondary desistance [means]… the movement from the behavior of non-offending to the assumption of a role or identity of a non-offender or "changed person". In secondary desistance, crime not only stops, but "existing roles become disrupted" and a "reorganization based upon a new role or roles will occur" (Lemert 1951: 76)' (Maruna and Farrall, 2004: 175).

As they also noted, secondary desistance is likely to be especially important for people who have been heavily involved in crime and criminalisation, with all of the attendant implications for the internalisation of stigmatised identities.

Almost a decade ago, one of us went on to propose the concept of 'tertiary desistance' (McNeill, 2014; 2015), referring 'not just to shifts in behaviour or identity but to shifts in one's sense of belonging to a (moral and political) community' (McNeill, 2015: 201). The argument, based on a range of influential desistance studies (for example, Maruna, 2001; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Bottoms and Shapland, 2011; Weaver, 2013) was that:

> '…since identity is socially constructed and negotiated, securing long-term change depends on how one sees oneself, on

how one is seen by others (Maruna and Farrall, 2004) and on how one sees one's place in society. Putting it more simply, desistance is a social and political process as much as a personal one.' (McNeill, 2015: 201)

As this initial definition makes clear, questions of identity and of belonging (that is, questions of secondary and tertiary desistance) are intimately connected, in that both are fundamentally and profoundly connected to the nature of our social relationships (Weaver, 2015). Indeed, while those who study desistance from crime have differed in terms of the priority given to individual and structural aspects of the process, few seriously dispute the importance of social bonds, social capital and social relations in the process. Moreover, if we are at all interested in the outcomes of desistance processes, in securing long-term desistance, or in the question of *what people desist into*, then we must be concerned with *social* integration (see Kirkwood and McNeill, 2015).

Of course, this line of thinking has long been apparent in that sub-strand of desistance theories that stands in the control theory tradition, most notably Sampson and Laub's (1993) theory of informal social control which linked the development of desistance in early adulthood to age-related opportunities for attachment to social institutions (primarily via education, work and/or family formation).

Over the last decade or so, several desistance studies have also highlighted what happens when desistance is attempted in the absence of such attachments. For example, Bottoms (2013) argued that some people in the Sheffield study (of young adults involved in persistent offending) desisted through a form of extreme 'situational self-binding' and social isolation. Although this outcome was relatively rare in the Sheffield study, evidence from other studies might suggest that, for a significant sub-set of people attempting desistance, isolation (or detachment) and not integration (or attachment) is the outcome. For example, Calverley's (2009) exploration of ethnicity and desistance suggested that the Black and Dual Heritage men he

interviewed in the London borough where his study was located faced the greatest structural and cultural obstacles to desistance -- and that they tried to sustain desistance through self-isolation.

Nugent and Schinkel (2016) discussed similarly bleak findings from their (independent) studies of two quite different populations in Scotland. Whereas Schinkel had explored the experiences of adult men during and after serving long sentences, Nugent had examined the attempts of young people in trouble and at risk of detention. In both studies, participants aspired to a life beyond crime and criminalisation, and made efforts to secure it, but they suffered what Nugent and Schinkel (2016) termed 'the pains of desistance'; namely, isolation, the failure to achieve their goals, and resulting hopelessness. In light of these findings, they argued that structural and cultural barriers to desistance must be addressed (see also McNeill, 2016); otherwise promoting hope and supporting *personal* transformation may be nothing short of cruel.

This illustration from their paper drives home the point:

> '[Kevin] struggled to name anyone he could rely on after he had left [the youth service]. He tried desperately to make something of himself and to prove to his family that he was worthy of a second chance. However, unable to get a job and being repeatedly confronted with his lack of education and prospects, his attempts at act-desistance in a relational vacuum eventually became too much for too little, and he cracked. By the final interview he had re-offended and had committed his most serious offence to date. His exasperation with his mere existence was exposed as he said the night of the offence he had had enough and went 'looking for a fight' and took his chance when he got it.

> Interviewer: Is there anything you fear losing if you went to prison?

> Kevin: Nothing.
> Interviewer: Nothing?
> Kevin: Nothing.' (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016: 578-9).

Nugent and Schinkel (2016) went on to develop an alternative conceptualisation of the three forms of desistance:

> '[W]e propose using the terms 'act-desistance' for nonoffending, 'identity desistance' for the internalization of a non-offending identity and 'relational desistance' for recognition of change by others. We argue that this terminology describes and differentiates between the different aspects of desistance better than 'primary', 'secondary' and 'tertiary' desistance, as it does not suggest sequencing in time or importance'[1] (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016: 3).

They also differentiate between three sub-levels of relational (or tertiary) desistance; 'the micro-level refers to the individual's immediate social setting; the meso-level to their wider community and the macro-level to society as a whole' (p3). They found that, while some participants had access to tertiary desistance on the micro-level, through family members who believed in them, there was little hope of this on the meso- and macro-levels. Nugent and Schinkel (2016: 12) summed up their argument as follows: 'maintaining act desistance can lead to the pain of isolation, while the need to achieve identity desistance in the face of a lack of relational desistance or social capital leads to the pain of goal failure'. Crucially, Nugent and Schinkel (2016: 3) stress that although act desistance and identity desistance may often involve others, individuals can and do achieve both forms of desistance for themselves. By contrast, relational (or tertiary) desistance is, by definition, not in their hands; rather, it depends on social reaction to their change efforts. As McNeill (2015) had said initially of tertiary desistance, it is a social and a political process.

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1   It's worth noting that, while Maruna and Farrall (2004) did conceive of primary and secondary desistance as phases, they did not insist on a straightforwardly sequential relationship between them. They did lay particular stress on the importance of secondary desistance. With respect to tertiary desistance, McNeill (2014, 2015) described these as aspects and not as (sequential) stages of desistance.

Studies of tertiary or relational desistance

Since their introduction into the literature, the concepts of tertiary or relational desistance have been applied and developed in studies from a wide range of settings and with quite different populations.

Villeneuve, Dufour and Farrall (2020) draw on the findings of a scoping review on 'Assisted Desistance in Formal Settings' to argue that the notion of tertiary desistance may help us understand the criminal justice practice mechanisms that can help to sustain change efforts:

> 'Positive feedback in the form of staying committed, encouraging change, acknowledging successes, working with, seeing would-be desisters as 'citizens' (not offenders), all emerge as components of assisted desistance. Those components are consistent with the definition of tertiary desistance proposed by McNeill (2014, 2016). Such practices give desisters opportunities to feel like active members of society, and help them overcome obstacles to their social integration. Formal change agents can help would-be desisters rebuild meaningful intra- and inter-personal ties thus contributing to bridge the gaps between 'offenders' and wider society' (Villeneuve, et al., 2022: 96).

So, while professional helpers may not themselves be in a position to provide the belonging and social acceptance required for tertiary desistance, they may play an important role at the micro-level in supporting and sustaining change and in helping people move towards social integration.

In a Dutch study of 23 men's experiences of parole supervision, Doekhie, et al., (2018) arrived at somewhat similar conclusions. Eleven of the men interviewed reported receiving some form of recognition for their desistance efforts. While for 3 men this recognition came from family members or partners, for 8 men it came from their parole supervisor; and this recognition could be powerful. As one respondent reported:

'Isaac: She [PO] is the only person who believed in me. (..) She showed me she was not just a PO, but a person. And that's what is [important] to me, you know. You have to be able to forget your job sometimes and just experience it together with this person.

JD: What did she mean to you?

Isaac: She gave me confidence not to do stupid things. Because I will make it on my own, but it's hard to believe it yourself. You have a label, so relapsing is easy. Hanging in there is the hard part. And she motivated me 'don't blow it! Think about what you want and what you want is what you are going to do!' […] She says that the way I think [about myself], that is how I have to present myself in life, so I can move on' (Doekhie, et al., 2018: 509).

Here, as the authors note, the parole officer's recognition of Isaac's potential and of his efforts to change helps him to recognise and to trust himself to become the person he aspires to be, thereby also strengthening his identity desistance. Sadly, such positive experiences were not the norm: most parolees in the study experienced supervision as being mainly surveillance-oriented and not very helpful for desistance, but where officers like Isaac's were seen as 'mentors… [who] used their discretionary power to adjust conditions, creating space for trial and error' (Doekhie, et al., 2018: 491), their influence was notable.

Ugelvik (2022) also examines the role of correctional staff and others in supporting tertiary desistance, drawing on findings from the Oslo Re-Entry Study (ORES); a longitudinal qualitative project which follows 14 male participants, all of whom had been involved in repeated offending (mainly related to drugs and violence) and most of whom were in their 30s or 40s at first interview. They were purposively selected as 'critical cases', having been identified by correctional staff as people trying to make significant life changes. Most of the men had also spent years in prison; many had been in and out for a decade or more.

Ugelvik's (2022: 629) analysis focuses in particular on the 'transformative power of trust', particularly within the context of risk-oriented penal institutions that tend to construct people as untrustworthy. Drawing on several examples, he concludes that:

> 'mutual trust relationships in prisons may work as the foundation for what King (2013b) has described as 'early desistance narratives' and for what Hunter and Farrall (2018: 306) have called a 'testing ground' for the viability of a non-offending future self… The experience of being trusted can lead to hope and the belief that a better future is possible, post-release. Trust that is acted upon can therefore be seen as a practical and specific way for individuals to experience being recognized as fellow human beings, and not just as offenders. From such a perspective, trust can be an important part of the process leading to tertiary desistance' (Ugelvik, 2022: 635).

Here, trust can also be characterised as a key feature of relational desistance at the micro-level; and it also seems important in aiding the development of primary and secondary desistance. Drawing on Farrall, et al. (2014), Ugelvik (2022: 635) suggests that trusting relationships not just with professionals, but also with family, friends and (new) colleagues are built slowly through the desistance process in an active process of 'negotiation between desisters and their social environments'. This negotiation of trust stands in stark contrast to more common experiences of distrust and misrecognition. The potency of trust in supporting desistance may arise at least partly because criminalised people so rarely receive the recognition that trust confers.

Gålnander's (2020) Swedish respondents fared less well. His was a prospective longitudinal study that followed the desistance processes of 10 women, involving four interviews carried out over the course of two years (2016-2018). The women were aged between 23 and 53 and self-identified as being in the early stages of desistance at the outset of the study (notably unlike

Ugelvik's participants). All had long histories of involvement with street crime related to substance use issues. As Gålnander (2020: 1307) notes, '[a]ll ten women had spent decades as outsiders, segregated and excluded from mainstream society'. Most had grown up in poverty; many had been in the care of the state as children and/or had been imprisoned. They had little experience of education or employment. Most had post-traumatic stress disorders; in five cases this was related to repeated violent victimisation by intimate partners.

In other words, at the outset of the study, these women were a long way from experiencing a sense of belonging in mainstream society. As one woman put it: 'I feel like I don't even know how to be – I mean, what do they talk about, normal people?' (Gålnander, 2020: 1307). Yet, they were compelled to attempt to move in that direction, making stigma management a major concern. As Gålnander (2020: 1307) notes:

> 'With strained or even severed relations to their families, the women sought recognition primarily from acquaintances or strangers. As they started to approach mainstream society, they were actively aware of their need to cope with discreditable information about their pasts'.

One of the main ways the women tackled this problem was by keeping secrets; by avoiding discussions of their pasts. Such was the gendered stigmatisation that they had experienced (and that they feared) that they were unable to mobilise their recovery or desistance as an asset in finding a community in which they might be accepted or even celebrated as a 'wounded healer' (McNeill and Maruna, 2007).

Ultimately, Gålnander (2020: 1316) concludes that:

> '…anticipation of further stigma stemming from internalization of multidimensional stigma in relation to their pasts restricted or even prohibited some of the women from interacting with mainstream society… the women were

convinced that little to no good could come of displaying discreditable information when approaching conventional society. This made them avoid socializing, thereby isolating themselves from mainstream society.'

Gålnander's work helps us understand why and how the gendered (and therefore structural) dynamics of stigmatisation create major obstacles to even attempting (far less securing) belonging within a new community. For the women in his study, tertiary desistance seemed a remote prospect.

Rutter and Barr (2021) draw similar conclusions from a comparison of their two independent narrative studies of women's experiences of desistance in northern England. Rutter's (2019, 2020) study involved 13 women, aged between 18-58, attending a women's centre (run by a Community Rehabilitation Company then providing probation services) and focused on the role of relational networks in the women's desistance processes. Barr's (2019) research involved 16 criminalised women aged between 23-60 attending a similar centre. Through the comparison of their findings, Rutter and Barr (2021) argue that the stigmatisation of criminalised women as offenders as 'bad' women and 'bad' mothers *and* as victims meant that it was difficult for them to see themselves and be seen in any other way, limiting the extent to which they could achieve tertiary or relational desistance.

Barr and Hart (2022) take these arguments further, suggesting that 're/integration' into conventional society is often neither desirable nor possible for criminalised women. In particular, they contest the sometimes uncritical promotion of tertiary or relational desistance in ways which effectively responsibilize women (for changing themselves, their social relations and their lives) while denying them the structural support they need and deserve. They also criticise desistance scholars for failing to adequately critique the ways in which both imprisonment in particular and the criminal justice system more generally often frustrate and obstruct desistance (an important theme to which we return at some length in the next section).

Similar arguments about the importance of structural contexts emerge

from Gormally's (2015) research on Glaswegian youth gangs. She stresses how important it is for young people's 'retirement' from gang membership to be recognised by those around them, and for them to have access to other identities and roles within the local community. From her analysis of 37 interviews (15 with young people, 12 with community residents and the rest with staff in services or organisations engaging with the young people), she highlights how the macro-level of relational desistance is important in shaping people's journeys – arguing that policy makers should be careful not to label all groups of young people socializing together as 'gangs' and that there should be greater investment in youth services, intergenerational programmes and opportunities for education and employment. Giving people access to alternative sources of identity at a younger age might allow for earlier desistance from street fighting – the type of offending behaviour most associated with these gangs.

In a very different context and with a very different population, Fox (2015) describes what is possible in terms of community inclusion, even for acutely stigmatised people, when community members and criminal justice agencies are willing to be play an active part in creating the right conditions for reentry. Researching Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) in Vermont, USA, Fox interviewed 57 volunteers, 9 'reentry coordinators' and 20 'core-members'. Core members of CoSA are usually people still under supervision in the community, typically as part of sentences imposed for committing sexual offences. She found that volunteers, by being willing to help with practical needs, by providing feedback and by sharing their own struggles, were able to help the core members see themselves beyond their offence, thereby counteracting the punitive and negative messages that exist on the macro-level of society and that produce and reinforce stigmatised identities. As one core-member said:

> 'They kind of like helped me to see that there's more than just . . . the way that I see myself or the way that I see that the world sees me because it's not all there is' (Fox, 2015: 90).

Importantly, sharing moral space also led to accountability, rather than a risk-based focus on control, and there was a sense of self-fulfilling prophecy that core members could become a force for good in their communities.

This notion – of progressively enabling criminalized people to become community assets – also recurs in Albertson and Hall's (2019) study. They apply a social capital lens to tertiary desistance, examining how a project for military veterans in recovery from addictions allowed them to build relationships and have positive impacts beyond their immediate group. Twenty-three veterans aged between 33 and 70 took part in their study. While the basis for the project's work was building relationships with people in a similar situation, gradated opportunities built upon this foundation. For example, participants could become involved in reaching out to other agencies to give talks, in other forms of civic engagement, in volunteering with other groups and in representing the group at community events. They could also become involved in seeking to influence decision-making at a local and national level. These were all described as steps towards generativity (Maruna, 2001) and the restoration of the veterans' citizenship. In later work based on the same research (Albertson and Albertson 2023), similar steps towards developing greater social capital are mapped against the different levels of relational desistance (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016): from the micro (relationships between group members), to the meso (linking with other services and volunteering in the community) to the macro (input into regional and national service delivery decision making).

Taken together, these studies highlight a number of issues in relation to tertiary or relational desistance. In different ways, they reveal not just the complex relationships between identity change and social reaction, but also the dynamic interactions between micro-level acceptance and recognition, much rarer meso-level opportunities for and experiences of community engagement, and macro-level structures that either generate or, more commonly, frustrate these opportunities. Crucially, they also suggest how structure and agency interact in these processes, creating different relational possibilities for differently situated people (cf. Farrall and Bowling, 1999). For example, the women in Gålnander's (2020) study seem to have

internalised their gendered stigmatisation in a way that makes the building of new social relationships an inherently risky project and one from which they tend to shy away. In effect, they have been relationally disabled or incapacitated by the gendered violence they have experienced; not just interpersonal violence at the hands of men, but also the symbolic and systemic violence attendant on their criminalisation *as women*. The experiences of the men in Ugelvik's (2022) study, by contrast, are very differently gendered. Buoyed by the development of trusting relationships with correctional staff, they are prepared for and enabled to take on these relational risks (for example in seeking, securing and sustaining employment). Indeed, in many cases, they enjoy the rewards of disclosing a criminalised past: crucially, a past that others are willing to consign *to the past*. In Fox's (2015) study, even those convicted of sexual offences – a highly stigmatised and excluded group – find inside the structures of CoSA a safe space to negotiate both relational connection and the identity change that it enables, even within a wider social climate of hostility and rejection.

In sum, while all of these studies attest to the importance of recognition, trust, acceptance and belonging within processes of desistance, taken together, they also reveal just how diverse desisting people's experiences may be. Their prospects are shaped not just by their own personal and institutional histories but also by social structures and by cultural and community dynamics that play out very differently for different people in different contexts. It is also notable that many of the interventions and interactions discussed in these studies focus on the micro-level of recognition by other individuals, with attempts to intervene on the meso- and macro-level much less common.

With this in mind, in the next section of the paper, we turn to our own (independent) work in an effort to dig deeper into the possibilities and impossibilities of belonging for criminalised people; and into attempts to engage with the meso- and macro-level aspects of these processes.

The im/possibilities of belonging

The Lives Sentenced study (Schinkel)

The ESRC-funded 'Lives Sentenced' research, conducted by the second author, examined the experiences and perspectives of people who had received multiple sentences over a relatively long period (10 years for men, 5 years for women), including multiple short-term prison sentences. Between 2014 and 2019, 63 interviews were conducted with 37 individuals in three rounds, which were about two years apart. Most interviews took place in prison. While the participants did not see any of their short prison sentences as being very meaningful by themselves, looking back, the most common meaning given to their accumulation was as 'a waste of life'. A recent paper (Schinkel & Lives Sentenced participants, 2021) discusses how participants felt that they belonged in prison, highlighting how repeated imprisonment in fact counteracts the possibility of tertiary desistance.

The different elements at play were examined using Antonsich's (2010) theoretical lens on belonging. First, for some, the *feeling of belonging* in prison was immediate – those they were imprisoned with were very like them, which even made first-time imprisonment an enjoyable experience for some:

> I bounced in... bounced about like a Y[oung] O[ffender],
> took tae it like a duck to water. Bad. Didnae bother me at all.
> And it's got tae the point now where if I'm outside, I don't feel
> that I belong anywhere, but I feel like I belong here. (Eve)

As Eve noted herself, this feeling of being in her element -- taking to it 'like a duck to water' -- was, indeed, bad. It was certainly bad for her. Eve returned to prison again and again before dying from an overdose. But it also reflects badly on society in highlighting how excluded some people feel in society. For most of the participants, any sense of belonging in childhood and youth had been disrupted through frequent moves between places and caregivers, through being excluded from education and, in Eve's case, through

adoption and rejection by her adoptive mother.

In prison, the participants found that their fellow prisoners shared both similar histories and participation in similar cultures (Antonsich, 2010); they used similar language (including the term 'bouncing about') and shared backgrounds of disruption and trauma. But as Eve illustrated in the quote above, the second element in creating a sense of belonging in prison was *time*: when someone had spent more time in prison than outside over a period of years, their sense of belonging on the outside was eroded ('it's got to the point now where if I'm outside I don't feel that I belong anywhere').

They formed relationships and autobiographic memories (Antonsich, 2010) inside, while connections with people outside weakened and life experiences outside went unlived, which undermined their sense of belonging and of being 'home' (ibid) in any place outside the prison. Material belongings, like homes, clothes and other items, were also repeatedly lost to imprisonment, making life outside increasingly unrooted (or perhaps uprooted) in material terms.

These factors were exacerbated by institutionalisation. Adaptation to the prison regime made people feel ill-equipped to live independently in the community (Goffman, 1961; Haney, 2003). Antonsich (2010) notes that having the necessary resources at one's disposal to deal with *risks* in one's environment is a part of belonging; participants felt undermined in their ability to deal with the outside environment even in its everyday guise (e.g. dealing with bills, structuring their own time).

In relation to the im/possibilities of belonging and integration then, there is no neutral or equal starting point. For the participants in *Lives Sentenced*, a sense of not belonging in the outside world predated criminal justice involvement, even if that involvement exacerbated it. Sered (2020) has highlighted how the criminalised poor not only suffer from 'carceral citizenship' (Miller & Stuart, 2017), which means their rights (to benefits, accommodation, full citizenship) are curtailed for the rest of their lives, but also from *diminished citizenship*, where these rights (and the protection of the state) were never extended to them from the start.

The same is true of belonging. The *Lives Sentenced* participants overwhelmingly had never felt they belonged in society at large. Their sense of belonging in a place of punishment, which they entered at the behest of detached and remote authorities, without any say from the community of people already inside, pushed them further away rather than closer to the type of belonging that is part of, and goes beyond, tertiary desistance. This also highlights again how tertiary (or relational) desistance and secondary (or identity) desistance are inextricably linked; that is, in the interactions – for better or (in this case) worse – between recognition (or misrecognition) by others and how we see ourselves. Belonging cannot develop unless, to some extent at least, there is alignment between social recognition and self-recognition.

The Distant Voices project (McNeill)

The ESRC/AHRC-funded *Distant Voices: Coming Home* project, which between 2017 and 2021 was led by the first author. While it was not designed as a study of desistance, it is relevant here partly because it was motivated by an awareness, largely derived from desistance research, that cultural climates and social reaction play a key role in the success or failure of rehabilitation.

The project aimed to explore, understand and practice reintegration after state punishment (McNeill and Urie, 2020; Urie et al., 2017). Blurring the boundaries between practice, research, knowledge exchange and public engagement, the fieldwork involved 21 two- or three-day workshops which took place between July 2017 and July 2019[2]. Thirteen of these took place in Scottish prisons (one open and three closed institutions which, between them, held men and women and adults and young people) and eight in community settings in Glasgow and in Inverness. In these workshops (called 'Vox Sessions'), collaborative songwriting practices were used to support a range of differently situated people (all with experience of the criminal justice system) to explore questions of punishment and reintegration. In total, 153 people were supported to produce 150 original songs. Many of the songs (and

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2　For more extensive discussions of these workshop and the project design see (Urie et al., 2019; McNeill and Urie, 2020; Crockett Thomas et al., 2020).

aspects of the stories of their co-writers) were shared in a range of performances in settings that ranged from music festivals, to criminal justice sector events, to more intimate 'house gigs'. Songs were also broadcast on radio and the project was discussed in TV news programmes and in newspaper articles.

Importantly, *Distant Voices* was guided by a 'Core Group' of about 16 people with direct experience of the justice system as prisoners and/or supervisees, family members or practitioners, or from related academic, creative and/or community projects. Discussions within the Core Group informed the evolving design and conduct of the research, and the approach to analysis.

In two papers, the project team examined how and why songs written within the project acted as 'problem-solving devices'; attending both to the relational problems that punishment creates or exacerbates (Crockett Thomas et al, 2020) and to the problematic narratives that punishment imposes on its subjects, with significant and deleterious implications for how they see themselves (Crockett Thomas et al, 2021). In light of the preceding discussion, these papers might also be read as relevant to both the identity work and to the development of social relations discussed above.

However, noting certain similarities with the *Lives Sentenced* project, we focus here instead on a third paper from the project (McNeill et al, 2022) which discusses themes of time and temporality that emerged strongly in the project, revealing that reintegration is not just about finding places *to belong in* and people *to belong with*. Reintegration, particularly for those who have served longer prison sentences (and, on the analysis above, repeated prison sentences) also requires the negotiation of three temporal 'travails' or struggles. The first of these relates to 'desynchrony' between prison time and outside time and the challenges of 're-sychrony' that imprisonment and release therefore entail. Clearly, this echoes Eve's story and her experience. The second concerns the contestation of 'readiness' for progression and release, in which the prisoner's sense of who s/he is now (a changed person) may be at odds with the system's preoccupation with who s/he has been (an offender) and who s/he might be in the future (a re-offender). The third concerns 'enduring temporariness'; a term that refers to the precarity and vulnerability associated with the 'afterlife' of incarceration (Miller, 2021).

One workshop participant, Adam, had written a song about a fading rockstar, which included the lines:

'Looking in the mirror, I don't recognize the face
As the world keeps moving, I can't seem to keep my place'

While, at first sight, the content of the song seemed to bear little relation to Adam's situation as a relatively young man not long since released from a long prison sentence, in conversation, Adam made the connection in this way:

'…a lot of people come out, like myself, and I was happy for the first couple of days, like oh… result, I'm out, great, I'll go and see everybody, and after a couple of days I was lost. It was like everybody has moved on with their life, they've got families and stuff and I just felt I was in a stagnant position of just my life hasn't changed, I've not progressed as a person, everybody I know is different because obviously they've done different things, so I found that very hard and I'm still adjusting'.

Adam's sense of de-synchrony and of the enduring temporariness that it caused him was acute. About 15 months after writing the song, he died by suicide. As McNeill et al. (2022) note, while it is not possible to assess the extent to which the forms of temporal suffering articulated in their paper contributed to his death, there is no shortage of evidence that rates of suicide (and, more generally, of early death) in and after prison far exceed those in the general population (Armstrong and McGhee, 2019). It might be reasonable therefore to claim that tertiary desistance is, at least for some people like Eve and Adam, a matter of life and death. In the absence of recognition, trust, acceptance and belonging, it is not just desistance from crime that remains at risk. There is very much more at stake.

Fortunately, as well as vividly illustrating how challenging reintegration can be, the *Distant Voices* project also gathered a great deal of evidence about how a sense of community can be nurtured between diverse people, including those with substantial experience of the justice system. Indeed, the project's

learning about 'The Art of Bridging' is summed up in a six-part podcast series[3] (and in an accompanying set of interactive learning resources[4]) that begins with an investigation of the void created by criminalisation and penalisation before examining how relational bridges can be built across it.

Conclusion: Aspects and dynamics of belonging

The liminality experienced by many criminalised people, as they seek to shift not just their personal dispositions but also their social positions, has, of course, been noted by many other desistance scholars. Indeed, Deirdre Healy (2010, 2014) first coined the term 'liminal desistance' and David Honeywell (2019) has used it to explore 'stagnation' in desistance processes, drawing on his experiences of and research into the relationship between higher education and 'transformation of the self' by prisoners and ex-prisoners.

As Honeywell notes, 'transformation of the self' is a much broader (and deeper) concept than secondary or identity desistance. We would argue for similar reasons that 'belonging' is a much broader and deeper concept than tertiary or relational desistance. Studies in the adjacent field of immigration and asylum studies, like Antonsich's (2010), attest to its complexity. There, it has been argued, for example, that to be able to secure integration and belonging, asylum seekers need not just legal citizenship, but also safety and security, linguistic and cultural competence, and a range of social connections (Ager and Strang, 2004, 2008; see also Kirkwood and McNeill, 2015). But the evidence indicates that not only are they are often denied these foundational resources for integration, they are also often locked out of its 'means and markers': employment, education, health care and housing. Many remain in civic, temporal, and social limbo, until and unless they can secure 'settled status' (see, e.g., Bhatia and Canning, 2020).

Criminalised people may be in a different legal and social position to

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3   HYPERLINK "https://www.voxliminis.co.uk/the-art-of-bridging/"https://www.voxliminis.co.uk/the-art-of-bridging/ [accessed 26th January 2024]

4   https://www.voxliminis.co.uk/the-art-of-bridging-learning-resources/ [accessed 26th January 2024]

asylum seekers and other migrants, but they also endure what sociologists and anthropologists of migration have termed 'contested belonging'. As Davis et al. (2018) put it, '[b]elonging becomes a kind of Goffmanian stage where identities are performed and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion are enacted' (p1-2). They note that belonging is both *multi-scalar* (meaning that contradictory positionings -- as included or excluded -- can co-exist in the same environment) and *multi-locational* (meaning that a person can identify with many different communities and identities at the same time). Whereas dominant discourses often promote simplistic (and nationalistic) sources and sites of belonging, our late-modern age is characterised by liquidity and fluidity (cf. Bauman, 2000). Rejecting the 'sedentary logic' of dominant discourses, migration scholars have come to recognise and to study 'emplacement practices' that evolve in pursuit of belonging. These are, in an important sense, 'practices of home-making' (Blunt and Dowling, 2006: 196). As we have already argued, feeling safe, stably located and in control of the direction of one's own life matter greatly in these processes. Indeed, safety, stability and control may matter more than any sense of historic rootedness in a place. With these insights in mind, Davis et al. (2018) go on to suggest an examination of three dimensions of belonging: belonging as *space*, as *practice*, and as *biography*.

There seems to us to be much to be gained from exploring multi-scalar and multi-dimensional aspects of belonging for criminalised people; in particular, from further exploration of their experiences of belonging (and non-belonging) in space, as practice and as biography, as well as in time. Reflecting on the criminological literature we have discussed in this paper, on our research experiences and our personal experiences, we would also suggest the value of exploring belonging from further angles, including as an *affective* state; one that involves feeling at ease with people, with a place, with a situation. Equally, we should consider the extent to which and circumstances in which belonging is also *elective*. Both the affective and the elective, and the temporal and dynamic, aspects of belonging may suggest an 'organic' quality, in the sense that it is something that occurs 'naturally'. But this perhaps obscures the reality that, even if it develops organically, it requires careful cultivation at times (cf. the discussion of Fox's [2015] paper). What does seem

clear is that belonging is also *effective*: for better or worse, its absence or presence has profound effects not just on our behaviour, but also on the quality and indeed even the survivability of our lives.

We might also explore different *depths, debts and durability of belonging*. In some contexts, we may feel that we belong, but are also aware that this may change relatively quickly. For example, we may feel we belong to our neighbourhood, having created strong bonds with our neighbours through looking after each other's children and being the first port of call in a practical or emotional crisis. But this may be a belonging of less depth than our family bonds, perhaps partly because it is dependent on place: when we move, it ends. For some, particularly those whose lives are more mobile, neighbourhood belonging may therefore be shallow; for others, it may be very deep. As we have seen, these varieties of depth and indebtedness may work in complex ways for people who have experienced imprisonment, producing greater or lesser *durability of belonging*. We summarise these various aspects and dynamics of belonging in Figure 1 below.
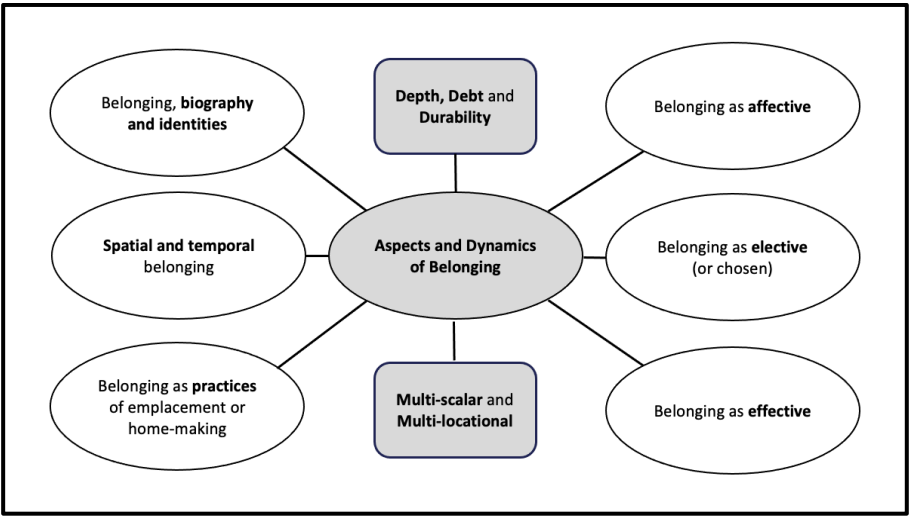

Figure 1: Aspects and dynamics of belonging

Of course, whatever else its dimensions, belonging is rarely completely symmetrical. When others think we belong and welcome us as if we do, this might make us feel like we do, however briefly. Conversely, and perhaps crucially for people who have been criminalised and penalised, the opposite of belonging is rejection from people who should accept you, like your family, perhaps because in their eyes you have broken those bonds. If they no longer want to know you, then there may be no route back to belonging with them. This is an experience of banishment rather than belonging.

Ultimately then, both crime and punishment pose obvious and complex relational challenges and, to borrow the language of migration scholars, produce an array of problems associated with 'contested belonging'. The development of the concepts of tertiary and relational desistance has, we hope, helped to expose the importance of analysing these problems, and of seeking solutions to them. While criminological work in this area remains at a comparatively early stage, it already seems obvious that we can neither properly understand nor effectively support desistance without attending to these questions.

Even this preliminary scoping out of how such scholarship might develop also makes clear that there is much more at stake here than desistance from crime. As with so much of the desistance literature, when we follow the lines of enquiry generated by our engagements with people's experiences of the process, we find that neither 'offending behaviour' nor its cessation can be understood without an analysis of its socio-structural, cultural and relational contexts, and that the harms occasioned by criminalisation and penalisation often require as much remediation as the harms occasioned by crime itself. Before we alienate people through punishment, we might first ask: Are we making future belonging more or less possible? And, if so, with what consequences?

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