Desistance narratives of men convicted of sexual offences

Lucile de Kruijff and Lidewyde Berckmoes
Nederlands Studiecentrum Criminaliteit en Rechtshandhaving, Amsterdam

• An important theory about desistance of general offenders is the theory of Maruna

• Individuals strive for a coherent self-narrative
  ▪ Desisting offenders need to bridge the gap between their criminal past and their current self
  ▪ Convince themselves and others that they now can be trusted
  ▪ In this theory identity change is important

• Desistance is linked to a Redemption narrative among general offenders
  ▪ Personal control over one’s destiny (agency)
  ▪ Rewrite shameful past as necessary prelude to a worthy live (identity change)
  ▪ Desire to give something back to society (generativity)
Desistance among sex offenders

- To what extent do results from studies on general offenders generalize to specific sub-populations, like sex offenders?

- Small, but growing, literature on the role of agency and identity change in the desistance process of men convicted for sexual offenses.
  - Thus far, extant research findings among sex offenders are inconclusive

- Current research question:
  How do men convicted of sex offenses narrate their desistance?
Methodology and Sample

• 4 Rehabilitation centres

• Selection criteria:
  ▪ Convicted of a sexual offense
  ▪ Conditionally released
  ▪ Not living in a residential setting
  ▪ In the community for at least one year

• In-depth interviews at their homes (3-6 hours)

• Written impression (observation)

• Deductive and inductive analysis of these interviews
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Alias)</th>
<th>Age (at interview)</th>
<th>Victim sex</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Time in Residential Treatment</th>
<th>Time in community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arthur</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briek</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI+TBS</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyriel</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>TBS</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emiel</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fons</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI+TBS</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gust</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobias</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>ET+TBS</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamiel</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>ET</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lowie</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marijn</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>ET+VI</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neel</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pepijn</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thieu</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI+TBS</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valère</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI+TBS</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>ET+TBS</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jef</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI+TBS</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boris</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI+TBS</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cesar</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>VI</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernest</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Child</td>
<td>ET+VI</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average time in residential treatment: 24 months
Average time in the community: 35 months
How do sex offenders narrate their desistance?

Boris:

• ‘I choose the residential approach to limit my chances of relapsing. Therapy has been a great help in that. Especially the offense chain helps a lot, because you recognize the steps, that happened in the past, and you know ‘Oh, I have to be careful here, here I have to take action, to take another direction’

• ‘Also, I have decided not to want to do it actually ... I cannot say 100%, you can never say that, but I can say 85%. There is always a chance that you again will do ... You can never say that you will never do something wrong.’

• ‘Right now I only think about my family ... I take care of my family and my family is number one’

• ‘As long as my family is there to support me, it will be allright’
How do sex offenders narrate their desistance?

Marijn:

- ‘Because in my head it is clear, that I am not really attracted to children, that alone comforts me. Thus, ehh, thus in that way I am not like that. I am not a core pedophile.’

- ‘I have kept all newspaper clippings, because, well ... I will never want to really close it, because I ... don’t want it ever to happen again. ... I cannot forget this. ... I mean, ... this is a backpack [burden] that you carry with you.’

- ‘I don’t allow myself to be alone with youths’

- ‘My biggest advantage is that I have much stronger friendships ... likely because the many therapies that I took, I am able to speak more easily and be more open. Also about my feelings and I can do that with them. And ... at least one of the two, knows me so well that even if I text her, she can almost read between the lines whether I am doing alright or not’
Focus on behavior and agency

• Respondents’ desisting narratives are about behavior: recognizing signals and how to respond to these signals
  - Boris: ‘because you recognize the steps, that happened in the past, and you know ‘Oh, I have to be careful here, here I have to take action, to take another direction’
  - ‘You have a setback, alarm bells go off, it is built in ... like, ‘oh, beware’
  - ‘You learn to arm yourself against it’
  - ‘The head knows what to do and what not to do’

• In their narratives respondents emphasize agency
  - Boris: ‘I have decided not to want to do it ’
  - ‘ So ... that’s what I told myself ... I will not set the fox to keep the geese.’

• Their agency is related to behavior -> chose to behave differently
Self raised Barriers

- Respondents **raise barriers** to prevent relapse
  - Marijn: ‘I don’t allow myself to be alone with youths’
  - ‘I distance myself from anything that is youths at this point, ... children I keep away from them.’
  - ‘I don’t go to the swimmingpool on Wednesday afternoon’
  - ‘I won’t play Santa Claus’
  - ‘If children entered the bus, I would hop off immediately. And then take another bus.’
  - ‘if a child fell on the street, I would leave it lying there’

- Sometimes these barriers even have a physical component:
  - Marijn: Newspaperclipping
  - Necklace: ‘the red is to warn me, like ... think of your future and, ..yeah, it it is ... blood and and danger and and ... It symbolizes a lot. It is really my final resort’
  - Pasword: ‘That you know, that is where you came from, right. ‘Beware!’
No focus on identity, yet continuity in risk

- Respondents don’t mention identity change
- They reject the pedophile identity
  - Marijn: *that I am not really attracted to children, that alone comforts me. Thus, ehh, thus in that way I am not like that. I am not a core pedophile*’
  - ‘I am not a pedophile’
- Clear distinction between identity and behavior
  - ‘I am certainly not a pedophile, I only committed sexual offences’
- However, they voice that they have to stay alert to signals
  - ‘That what happened, it will remain ajar, for everyone.’
  - ‘I must always stay alert’
  - ‘Never say never’
  - Boris: ‘I cannot say 100%, you can never say that, but I can say 85%.'
Explaining the behavioral script

• Therapy talk?

• Perhaps, but deeply internalized
  ▪ Embraced by all
  ▪ Even after several hours of interviewing
  ▪ Not only positive about therapy itself
Explaining the behavioral script

- **Why focus on behavior instead of identity?**
  - Moral distance between child molester and conventional identity
  - The gap to be bridged is too wide
  - Belgian context – the Dutroux case
  - Social exclusion

- **Why focus on staying alert to signals?**
  - Desire for social inclusion
  - They stress they stay alert to prevent relapse
  - And invite others to stay alert with them
  - This increases the credibility of their desistance narrative
Questions

LdeKruijff@nsr.nl

ABlokland@nsr.nl