

# Desistance narratives of men convicted of sexual offences

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# Maruna (2001): Making Good

- **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 life (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

|    | Name<br>(Alias) | Age<br>(at<br>interview) | Victim sex<br>offense | Measure | Time in<br>Residential<br>Treatment | Time in<br>community |
|----|-----------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------|-------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1  | Arthur          | 60                       | Child                 | VI      | 21                                  | 19                   |
| 2  | Briek           | 56                       | Child                 | VI+TBS  | 24                                  | 95                   |
| 3  | Cyriel          | 52                       | Child                 | TBS     | -                                   | 34                   |
| 4  | Emiel           | 71                       | Child                 | VI      | 27                                  | 28                   |
| 5  | Fons            | 62                       | Child                 | VI+TBS  | 26                                  | 30                   |
| 6  | Gust            | 56                       | Child                 | VI      | 25                                  | 34                   |
| 7  | Tobias          | 51                       | Child                 | ET+TBS  | 34                                  | 15                   |
| 8  | Kamiel          | 48                       | Child                 | ET      | -                                   | 40                   |
| 9  | Lowie           | 46                       | Child                 | VI      | 21                                  | 11                   |
| 10 | Marijn          | 52                       | Child                 | ET+VI   | 12                                  | 36                   |
| 11 | Neel            | 46                       | Child                 | VI      | 20                                  | 22                   |
| 12 | Pepijn          | 62                       | Child                 | VI      | 20                                  | 7                    |
| 13 | Thieu           | 56                       | Child                 | VI+TBS  | 24                                  | 28                   |
| 14 | Valère          | 47                       | Child                 | VI+TBS  | 30                                  | 49                   |
| 15 | Xavier          | 62                       | Child                 | ET+TBS  | -                                   | 55                   |
| 16 | Jef             | 50                       | Child                 | VI+TBS  | 28                                  | 47                   |
| 17 | Boris           | 45                       | Child                 | VI+TBS  | 24                                  | 19                   |
| 18 | Cesar           | 45                       | Child                 | VI      | 20                                  | 42                   |
| 19 | Ernest          | 59                       | Child                 | ET+VI   | -                                   | 61                   |

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 alright'*

# 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'*
  - Password: *'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

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