

At a Loss for Words



SOCIETY LACKS LANGUAGE FOR DESISTANCE FROM SEX OFFENDING

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What is Desistance Research?



Learning from success stories.

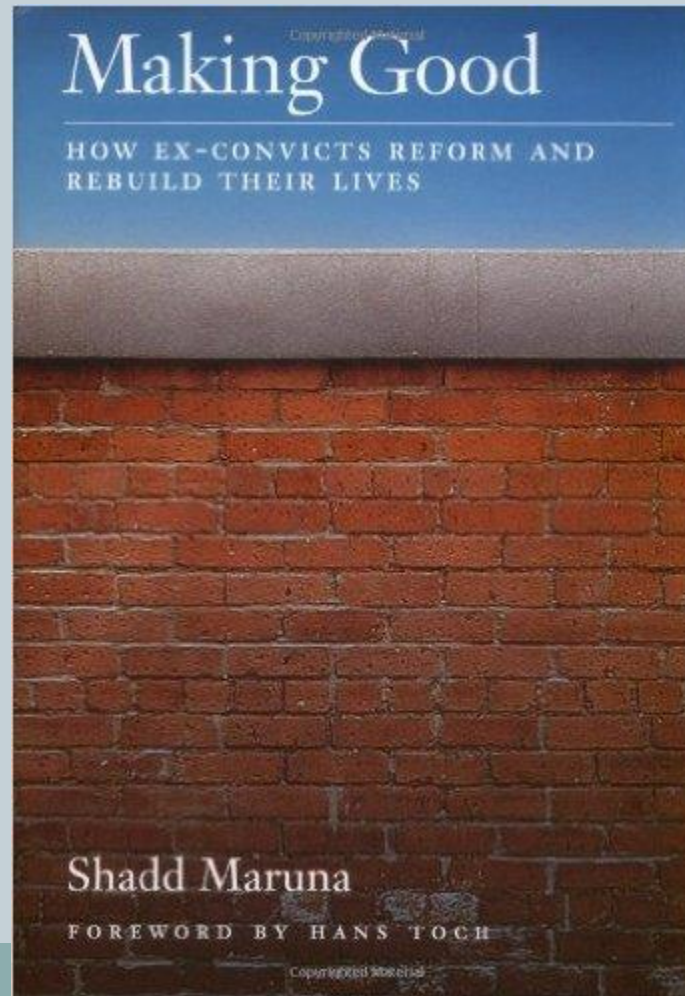
Understanding how and why people can leave
criminal behaviours behind

“Life course” research based on longitudinal or
retrospective studies of lives over time.

Redemption Scripts



”



Narrative Research on Desistance from S.O.



- **Farmer/McAlinden** – *Adult men convicted of sex offenses against children*
- **Danielle Harris** - *Men convicted of serious contact sexual offenses, civilly committed, and released from custody.*
- **Simon Hackett** - *Adults who had previously been identified in childhood as displaying harmful sexual behaviours*
- **Kim Kras** - *Adult male convicted of sex offences*
- **Stephanie Kewley** – *Persons with at least one conviction for a sexual offence*
- **Joanne Hulley** – *Adult males convicted of child sex offences*
- **Rebecca Milner** – *Adult males convicted of sex offences*

Study Design



- **Farmer/McAlinden/Maruna** – *Narrative interview analysis (n=32 qual)*
- **Harris** – *Mixed (qual-quant) design (inc. risk assessment, official criminal records, computerized inventory, interview, file analysis) (n=250 quant, 27 qual)*
- **Hackett** - *Mixed methods; quantitative analysis of case file data, followed by qualitative narrative interview (n=700 quant, 69 qual)*
- **Kras** - *Longitudinal qualitative research design (Interviews + official records) (n=29 qual)*
- **Kewley** – *Mixed Method (Qual interviews + Risk assessment analysis) (n=217 quant, 16 qual)*
- **Hulley** – *Qualitative (interviews) (n=15 qual)*
- **Milner** – *Qualitative interviews*

ESRC Understanding Desistance project



Desisting Group

- Previously **convicted** of child SOs committed **at least 3-5 years** previously, during which no further charges/investigations/convictions. (n=25)

Comparison Group

- **Convicted** for child SO **more than once**, where the **most recent** offence was **within the last year** (therefore, not in 'stable' state of desistance) (n=6)

Aims of the Study



- In-depth 'life story' interviews – (e.g. McAdams, 1993 ; Maruna, 2001)
- Relationship between participants' own understanding of their lives and desistance from sexual crime
- Seeking out patterns in the internal identity scripts that help to sustain and support desistance from crime.

Enduring Challenges



1) “Not Making Any Excuses, But...”:

Therapeutic interventions can hinder the development of narrative self-understandings

2) “Traditional Scripts Do Not Apply”:

Sex offending does not fit normative desistance pattern

3) “At a Loss for Words”:

Society lacks language for desistance from sex offending

Not Making Any Excuses



BUT...

Excuses as Cognitive Distortion



Many offenders admit the actual behaviours... but deny responsibility for them... as when an offender attributes the abusive behaviour to alcohol... Blame is placed on their wife's nagging, their own problems at work, lack of attention and care from the world in general...and on their own emotional loneliness. Such offenders find numerous excuses for their behaviour, mostly external but *also frequently internal*. These excuses have the cumulative effect of reducing offender responsibility

(Salter, 1984, pp107-108).

Situational Explanations



- ❖ *‘It was at this period of time that I committed the offence ... there was **a lot of problems** ... I felt as if I was left out, **I didn’t feel any love and arguments had been building up** ... obviously I offended ... there’s no doubt about that ... but I wanted basically, I was looking for someone to emotionally cheat with’ (D18)*
- ❖ *‘then **my girlfriend split up with me** and I felt **lonely** again and ... I was **feeling quite low** so yeah I think that’s why I started again’ (P25)*
- ❖ *‘a lot of roller coasters going on ‘ (D12)*

Depression, Addiction and Offending



A14: I was in a relationship, erm, I got injured, I was on painkillers and on the painkillers that I was on forced me into a little bit of depression. I was on antidepressants, erm, I was feeling very low. I alienated my family, I alienated my (children). I became a little bit reclusive in one way because I didn't . . . I came out of my career and I was, well, on the dole [unemployment]

Depression as Stigma Management



- A12: I think I was suffering from depression...
- A41: I was on the tablets, I was on the anti-depressants, I was in a low place, people do stupid things when they're on low places.
- A2: The reason I committed the offence, I was not myself, smoked a lot of cannabis, I was depressed, depression played a big thing in it, I felt unloved . . . I mean loneliness come to think of it was a big thing.

Identify and Confront Excuses



The purpose of treatment then is “to identify and confront cognitive distortions, rationalisations and excuses for offending” (Salter, 1988, p. 114).

Interviewees were exceedingly, painstakingly aware that they could not make any excuses or minimise their offences in any way.

Traditional Scripts Do Not Apply



**SEX OFFENDING DOES NOT FIT
NORMATIVE DESISTANCE
PATTERN**

Normative Desistance Script



- Informal social controls (Laub & Sampson, 2003)
- “A steady job and the love of a good woman”
- “Aging out of crime”
- Normative changes in the life course

Importance of work: Self



- ❖ *'I was more **give me a job to do, I'd do it and I'd do it to the best of ability**' (D20)*
- ❖ *'**I've always been a grafter ... I love my work ... It keeps me very busy**, it gives me a lot of pleasure and the end product when I know it's been good then I suppose it **gives me quite a buzz**' (D14)*
- ❖ *'[W]ork ... was a foundation and it's still **a foundation to my life, my whole life**, because work will give you **something to get up in the morning for**' (D28)*
- ❖ *'... the best thing that every happened to me' (D19)/ **'I live for work and work lives for me'** (D7)*

Traditional Gender Roles Re: Work



- ❖ *‘[M]y wife cooks all the meals, she does all the housework, ... and **I go out and earn the money, old school**, you know how it used to be.’
(D9)*
- ❖ *‘[I had] 3 children and it had really progressed and I was happy because I felt I was able to provide for them and that was a good feeling’
(D39)*
- ❖ *‘[It was] all about money because I had a family’
(D42)*

But Little Chronological Relationship to Desistance



- **Careers prior to offending**
- **Little evidence of work as ‘informal social control’** as with non-sexual crime (Sampson and Laub, 1993)
- **Reaction of employers** - rejection v support
- **Resigned to fact of unemployment** (but unrelated to their desistance)
- **Innovative forms of self-employment** (eg painting and decorating, gardening, courier etc)

Barriers to Employment



- ❖ *‘[C]onstant nos ... a lot of interviewers would say something like, thanks for telling me I appreciate it but it won’t be taken into account blah blah, but I **never got the job**, whether it was that or not, I don’t know.’ (D17)*
- ❖ *‘They mark you down and **nobody’s going to employ you with that sort of crime** so that’s another downside of it. That gets me depressed sometimes ... I can’t see me overcoming the work one.’ (D42)*
- ❖ *‘I could have applied for some jobs but what they’re offering isn’t worth coming off unemployment benefits, that sounds really bad but that’s the truth.’ (P24)*

Social Bonds: High Points and Low Pts



MF: What would you say is the high point of your life?

R: My marriage, definitely my marriage, without a doubt you know (A66).

MF: What would you say was the low point of your adult life?

R: My divorce probably.

MF: So, that's actually worse than being convicted and being sent to prison?

R: I would say so, yes (A612).

(Sometimes) Saved by a Life Partner



- ❖ *‘I thought I’ve been a fool, I could’ve lost her, you know, if anything had have happened, if it had of gone further, **I couldn’t have lost her after all this time. And that brought me to my senses ... We’re really close, it’s brought us closer in fact.**’ (D15)*
- ❖ *‘The people that know, they’ve supported me, ... **That means a lot to me. I mean, my partner’s support is the main one. She knows, she says she knows the person now, not the person then.**’ (D44)*

Just as often: Isolation



- ❖ *‘I don’t have contact much with friends ... family. They don’t agree with what I’ve done in the past but I’m still their brother and my sister and stuff ... **They don’t come down now.**’ (P24)*
- ❖ *My sister doesn’t hardly speak to me ... when I first got out of prison ... I phoned my mom up and [she] said **“I don’t want to know you”** and **she just put the phone down. And that was 3 years ago** I phoned up again but ... my stepdad answered, ... and he goes well she’s asleep at the minute and she never got back to me, so **I’ll try again in 3 years.** (D2)*

Loss of Relationships



- ❖ *'I went from having loads of friends to no friends ... my dad said Oh I need to talk to the family, I'll get in touch with you, I didn't hear off him again for 2 years. So I lost my friends, I lost my dad, I lost brother and sister's, my step mom, all my friends ... all my colleagues that I'd amassed ... So it affected me a lot because I lost everybody, the only person that stood by me was my mom.'* (D17) ...
- ❖ *'I've spoilt a good family unit that was really working. I was happy in there and I miss my 2 boys, ... and I can't see them until they're 18 ... That's the biggest regret, spoiling the family.'* (D2)

Risks of Relationships



- ❖ *‘I’m starting to build my life back up and if I was to get into a relationship I’d have to have the disclosure talk and I haven’t had that with anybody other than an employer at the minute and **that could take me right back**, ... that person could then tell other people, I could then lose everything ... ‘ (D17)*
- ❖ *‘I’ve said I wouldn’t want to get into a relationship ... because like, you’re always going to be scared of if you do go to the next stage, **they could turn round and say he did this to me** and that and you’d be back to square one.’ (D8)*

Fears re forming relationships

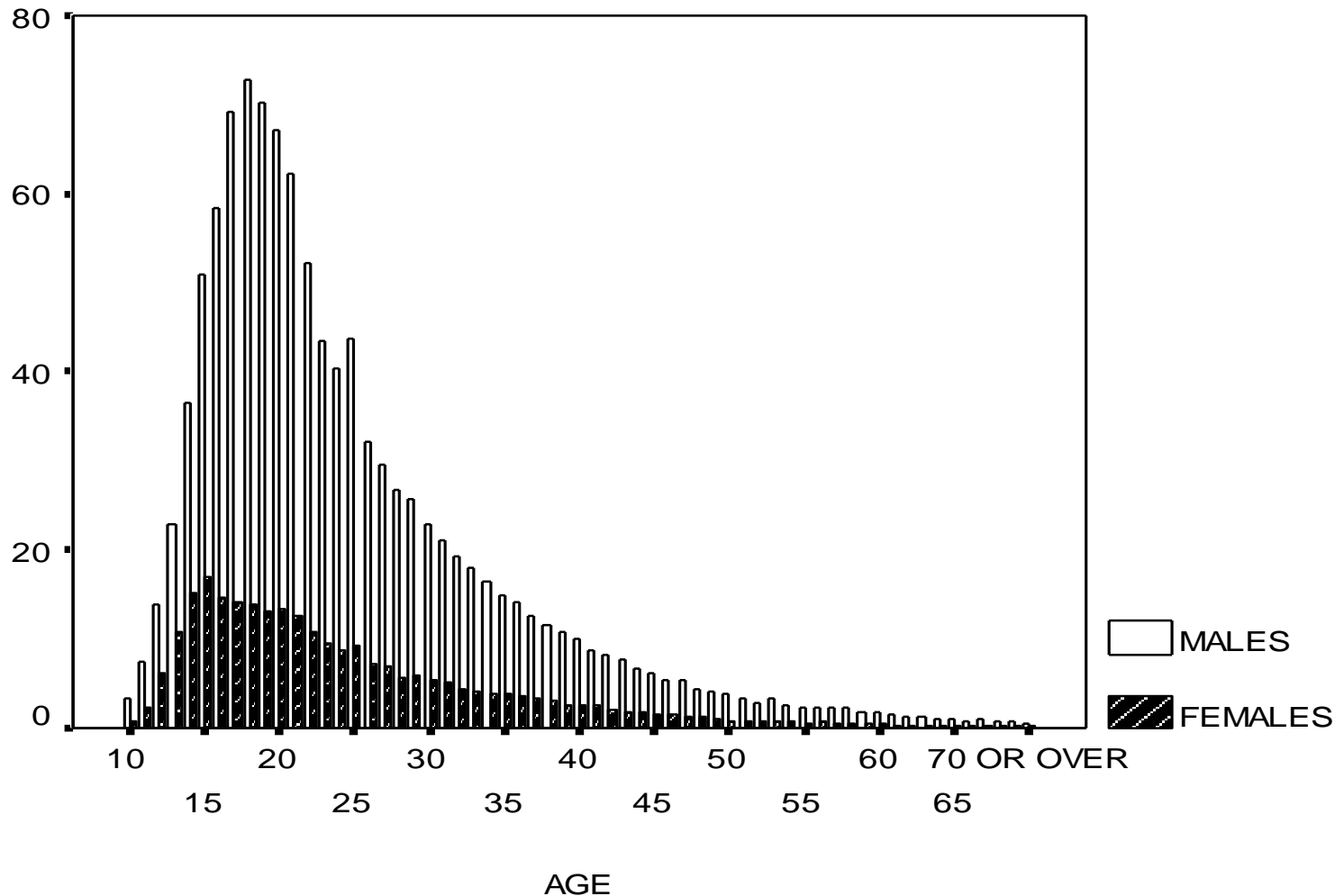


- ❖ *Since I've been on probation I've had one girlfriend who had 4 children, **the pressure of social services got too much for her** ... when's the best time to like disclose ... even with work ... when's the best time to disclose ... about your offence or whether you've got a criminal conviction' (D8)*
- ❖ *'I'm not looking for love at the minute because I think **I'm a bit scared actually of getting a girlfriend** because I'd have to tell them. **If they'd got kids I don't want to know** ... I'm looking for someone who hasn't got kids.'* (D2)

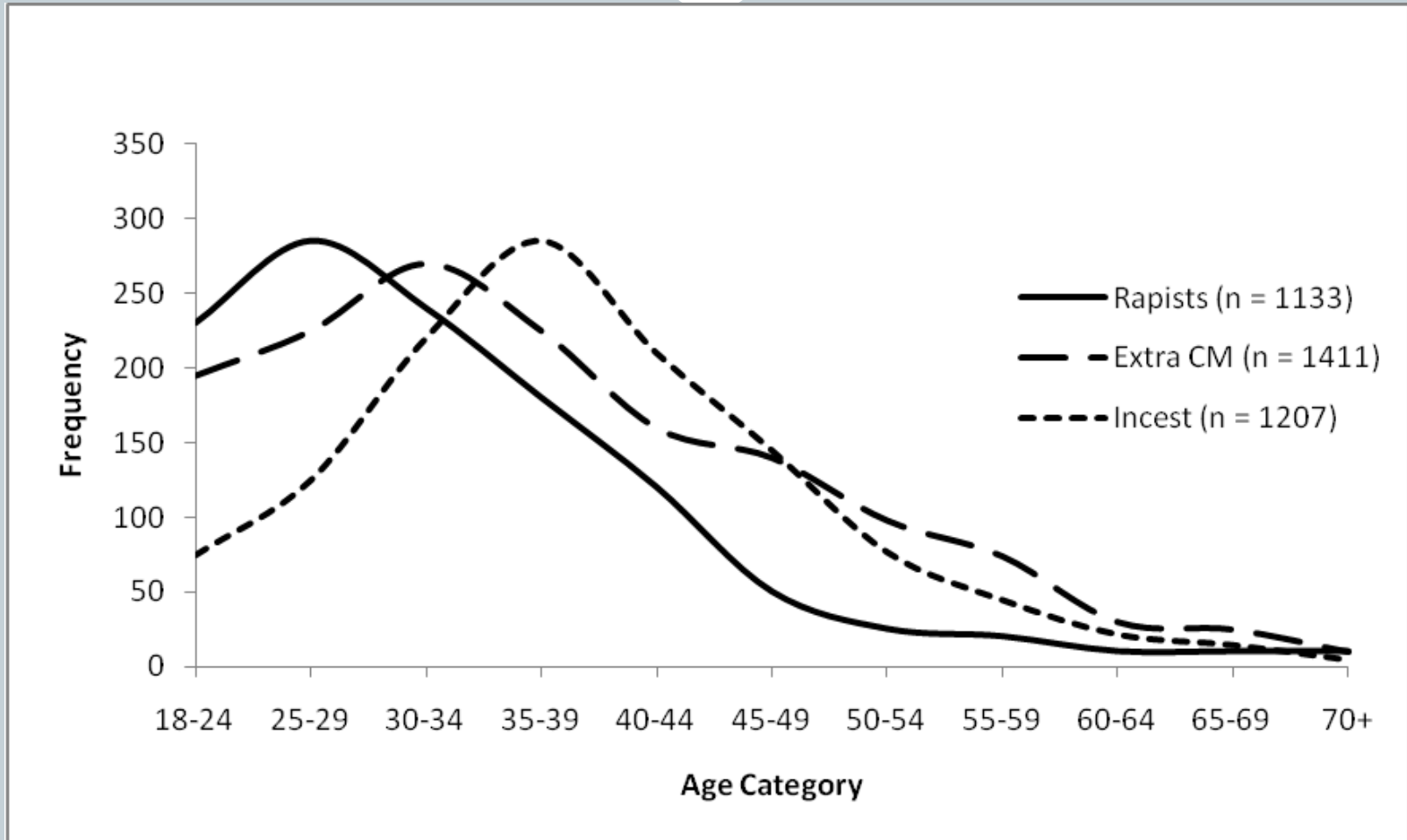
The Age-Crime Curve



Figure 1 Recorded Offender Rates per 1.000 Relevant Population by Age-year and Sex. England and Wales. 2000



Age-Sex Crime Curve



Aging Out and Sex Offending



- The risk of recidivism in adult sex offenders **drops by about 2-4% for every 1-year increase in age** (Barbaree, Blanchard, Langton, 2003).
- Offenders past age 40 have lower recidivism rates (Lussier & Healey, 2009; Wollert, 2006).
- High-rate chronic sex offenders made up only about 8% of a sample of Canadian sex offenders (Lussier et al, 2010)
- Lussier & Healey (2009) found that “desistance was the norm in spite of the age at which offender starts their criminal career”.

Society Doesn't Want to Believe Sex Offending Can Change



**“REDEEMABILITY BELIEFS” MAY
BE THE MOST IMPORTANT
CHALLENGE OF ALL**

Belief in Redeemability

(Scale items)



Do you agree that...

“Most offenders can go on to lead productive lives with help and hard work”

“Even the worst offenders can grow out of criminal behaviour”.

Or that...

“Most offenders really have little hope of changing for the better”

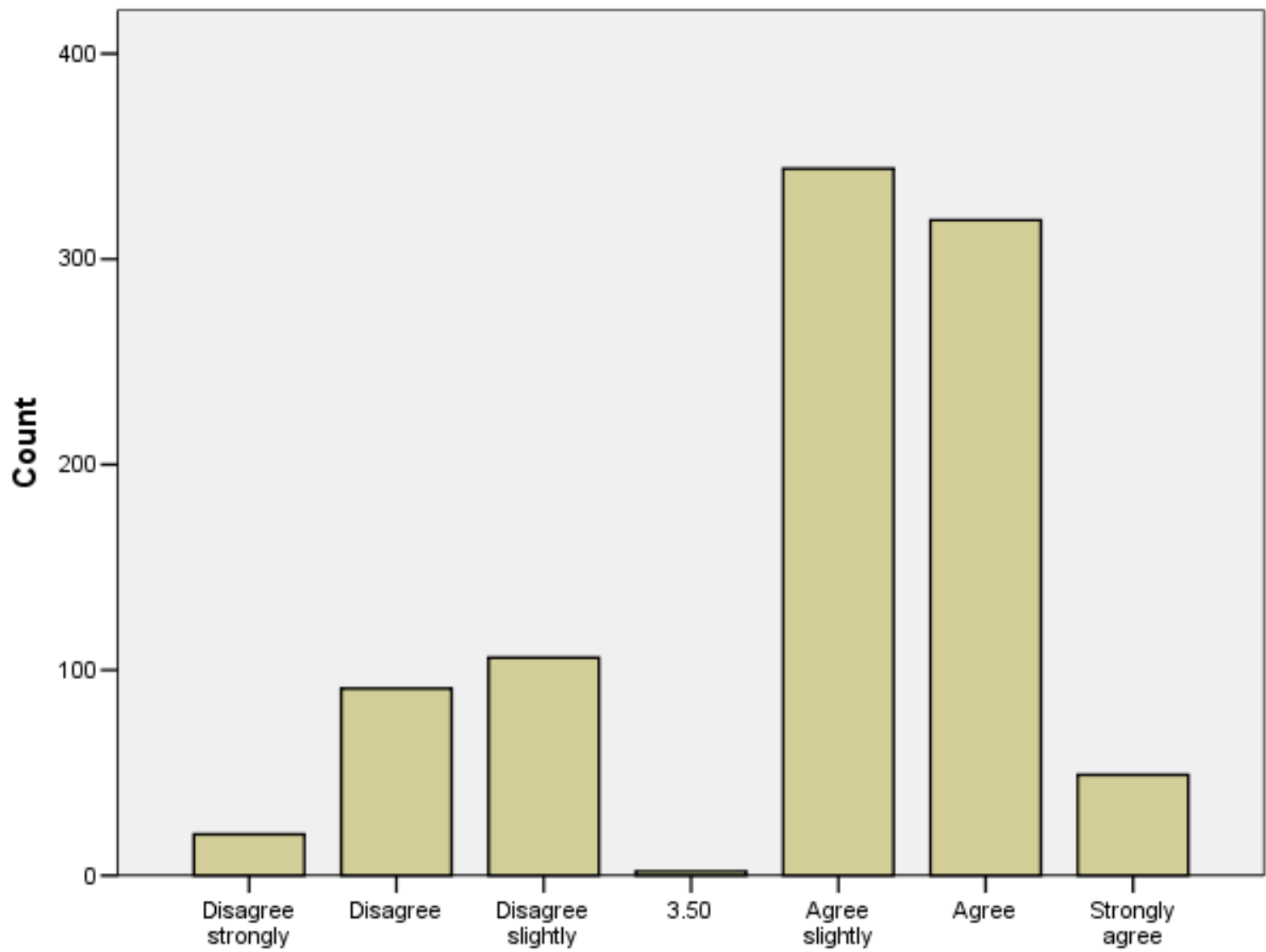
Redeemability Beliefs in Middle England



86% agree that “Most offenders can go on to lead productive lives with help and hard work”

77% agree that “Even the worst offenders can grow out of criminal behaviour”.

68% **Dis**agree that “Most offenders really have little hope of changing for the better”



Even the worst young offenders can grow out of criminal behaviour.

Redeemability Beliefs for Sex Offenders



- **23%** agreed that ‘Most people who commit sexual offences against **adults** can go on to live law abiding lives’
- **16%** agreed that ‘Most people who commit sexual offences against **children** can go on to live law abiding lives’
- **66%** guessed that recidivism rates for child sex offenders were over 40%

(From Anne-Marie McAlinden, 2006; see also Brown, 1999; Katz, et al, 2008; Craun & Theriot, 2009)

Sex Offender Treatment and the Public

Support for treatment

- 95% agreed that persons convicted of sex crime should receive therapy (Brown, 1999).
- 39-49% agreed that ‘Society has an obligation to assist sex offenders released into the community to live better lives’ (McAlinden)

...but not in their back yards

- 64% would oppose the locating of a treatment centre in their neighbourhood (Brown, 1999)

...and it probably doesn't work

- 29-35% agreed that ‘Treatment programmes can help sex offenders to stop re-offending’
- (see also Katz, et al, 2008; Craun & Theriot, 2009)

Two Views of the Moral Transgressor



- **Moral Essentialism**: Entity theory, lay dispositionalism, “Criminology of the Other”
Behavior is due to fixed, unalterable dispositions, traits -- a symptom of who they “really are”.
“Moral Strangers” (Ward & Maruna, 2007)
- **Moral Redeemability**: Incremental theory, situational/social causality, “plasticity” of the self
Individuals who have done bad things can ‘make good’ and become a “new person”.
“People Like Us” (Laws and Ward, 2010)

Sex Offending and Essentialism



- “Sex offenders receive remarkable levels of attention from populist groups, media and governments, especially in the English-speaking West. Such signifiers as ‘animals’ or ‘monsters’ have been attached to these offenders. ... **The sex offender is an aberration: the irredeemable subject.** ... They are the **rigid, unchangeable pariah** in such a system, depicted as being gripped by a nature or biology that is completely depraved and thus, intolerable” (Spencer, 2009).

Irredeemable Policy Making



- “Consequently, severe measures must be taken at state and local levels to regulate their movements and existence. Such actions have led to the **overturning of penal values that have been held sacred since the Enlightenment** – no double jeopardy and fixed and finite punishments – with little to no resistance to such developments in the USA, Canada and Britain” (Spencer, 2009).

Rejecting the Label



“I don’t think I was a sex offender, I mean, I know by definition and by what’s happened since it makes me one. I think the law and the dealing of those sort of cases, erm, I think it’s a – for the government, for the legislation, legislative body to actually deal with those sort of situations” (A79).

Conclusions:



**NARRATIVES ARE WRITTEN IN
DIALOGUE NOT ISOLATION**

Little Silver Trays in the Microwave



“I wanted a life and I wanted to be able to associate with people and to be, erm, hopefully have somebody special in my life. I didn’t want to be going home and cooking, you know, little silver trays in the microwave every night and sitting there watching the sport every weekend. ... I wanted to be more involved in life and to be more active and to be more part of a partnership and I felt I had something to contribute in that respect.”

The Need for Communication



“There was a lot of talk on the course about intimacy and I suspect they were probably talking about intimacy of a physical nature, but I kept pointing out that intimacy can be many different kinds to me: the intimacy of mind and words and comfort and support is just as valuable. ... I don't feel the physical need for intimacy, but it's nice to know you can talk to people, you can get an answer, you can get told you're being stupid if you're being stupid, you get respectful, you get answers from people you respect” (A662)

Select Audiences



- “Erm, obviously, I haven’t told that many people, my direct family... they know and obviously they were shocked by what had happened and I think deep down they know what was going on in my life at the time did have a big factors in what happened and they know me as a person, they know I’m not squeaky clean, they know I’ve done some bad things in my life, but they know I’m not a sexual predator” (A416)

Changing the Narrative



- “Once I’m off licence, I want to see my kids and explain to them that I’m not as bad as people are making out. I don’t want to put the offending under a line or to make it sound good, but people do make people look worse than they are” (A63).

That's the way my partner looks at it, and that's the way it is



“I got a fiancée, she knows the wrongs I’ve done in my life, but she doesn’t look at that, she looks at me as an individual, me as what I am now, erm, and the person I am. ... She says... in relation to the offence, it was a blip, it was something that shouldn’t have happened, it was a junction, wrong turned ... that’s the way, you know, my partner looks at it, you know, and that’s the way it is.” (A610).

A Rare Glimpse of an Explanation



“It was a form of expression, a form of -- what does the shrink say? Exhibitionism. I wanted to be noticed, plain and simple, because I felt about this big [makes gesture with finger and thumb], about miniscule and erm, no self-respect at all. I was just a dogsbody around the house (A613).

Note who is credited with that insight!

Praise for the Bonds of Group Therapy



“One thing I’ll say, you know the [name] course, fucking brilliant, and I think everybody should go on that whether they’ve been an offender or not” (A76).

“It changed me as a person because when I went in, I had no confidence, I had no sight to see where the future was, but now I’ve got all those things.” (A77).

“I turned around since I went on the group. ... It helped me a lot ... by talking about it to people, yeah, and having tactics as well you know” (A73).

Not Moral Strangers



Research finds that those professionals with the most contact with individuals convicted of sex offences were the least likely to report feelings of disgust/hatred toward such individuals (Hogue, 1993) -- consistent with the literature on stereotyping out-groups in general (Allport, 1954).

Thanks



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