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## Co-authoring desistance narratives

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**Title:** Co-authoring desistance narratives: Analysing interactions in groupwork for addressing sexual offending

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**Abstract**

Research and theory suggest desistance narratives and pro-social identities are key to the process of desistance from crime. However, little research has examined how desistance narratives and related identities are produced in contexts other than research interviews or how core correctional skills intersect with the development of these narratives or identities. This study applies discourse analysis and conversation analysis to transcripts of 12 video-recordings of groupwork sessions for addressing sexual offending, examining how desistance narratives and identities are produced, and how practitioner skills and conversational styles intersect with their production. The analysis illustrates how criminal

justice practitioners help to co-author desistance narratives through subtle and explicit aspects of interaction, although certain orientations to risk may limit this potential.

Key words: desistance, probation, narrative, conversation analysis

## **Introduction**

To desist from offending, research suggests individuals need to construct a non-offending identity, one incompatible with offending behaviour and consistent with future prosocial aspirations, which coherently accounts for past offending (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Rocque, Posick, & Paternoster, 2016). Identity change, or 'secondary desistance', supports maintained abstinence from offending, rather than a temporary behavioural lapse (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna & Farrall, 2004). Using life story interviews, several studies revealed characteristics of narrative identities of people desisting from offending (e.g. Gadd & Farrall, 2004; Giordano et al., 2002; King, 2013; Maruna, 2001).

But where do desistance narratives and non-offending identities come from? Given narratives and identities are social in nature, they are likely formed, at least partly, through social interaction. Desistance is influenced by how people's identity change is recognised and reflected back to them by others, including people close to them (micro-level), their community (meso-level) and societal institutions (macro-level) (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). However, it is not evident how interactions at a conversational level shape these narratives. Criminal justice interventions, i.e. probation supervision and structured programmes,

provide interactional spaces for people to 're-story' their identities and life stories. As such they may contribute to the formation, shaping or reinforcement of desistance narratives and non-offending identities. This article explores how interactions during sessions of a groupwork programme for addressing sexual offending contribute to constructing the identity characteristics evident in desistance narratives, discussing the implications for practice, theory and research.

### *Desistance narratives*

Narrative identity refers to how identity is formed through peoples' stories about their lives, where past experiences are coherently intertwined with current circumstances and future goals (Maruna, 2015; McAdams & McLean, 2013; Vaughan, 2007). These narratives are shaped, edited and refined through interactions with others. This active and interactive process is self-constituted and impacted by wider social and discursive influences (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Narrative approaches have greatly influenced the treatment and conceptualisation of identity in criminological literature about desistance (e.g. Gadd & Farrall, 2004; Harris, 2014; Maruna, 2001; Vaughan, 2007). Using life story interviews, Maruna's (2001) seminal work highlighted people desisting from general offending developed a 'redemption script', where they learned from their past mistakes and were agentic in moving away from offending, often with a generative purpose; e.g., giving back to the community. Those persistent in offending presented themselves as victims of circumstance, destined to live a troubled life.

Central to the redemption script is the presentation of a true 'core self' characterised by an enduring positive identity, separate from offending behaviour. Maruna (2004) noted the explanatory style of those desisting contributed to this characterisation. Desisters attributed positive life events to stable, internal and global factors (e.g., 'I got the job because I'm a hard worker') and negative life events to unstable, external and specific factors (e.g., 'I failed that exam because I was sick'); and vice versa for persisters. As such, desisters separated their true 'core self' from their previous offending behaviour, attributing offending behaviour to situational rather than dispositional factors.

Subsequent research notes narrative as central for building a non-offending identity. Gadd and Farrall (2004) found their male respondents narrated their offending and desistance in line with gendered norms by drawing on social discourses of masculinity (e.g., rebellious, troubled youth). This distanced their present self from their past, whilst maintaining coherence in their self-narrative. Presser (2004) showed men in her study used discourses of masculinity and morality to situate their behaviour, presenting themselves as moral. Vaughan (2007) argued narratives must morally reassess past behaviours to support desistance, not simply reconstruct past events. King (2013) proposed a sense of moral agency in their early desistance narratives allowed her participants to identify future, non-offending identities. Changes in self-identity or how people view themselves is considered necessary for desistance (Rocque, Posick, & Paternoster, 2016).

Most research concerns desistance from general offending; less is known about the narratives of those desisting from sexual offending. Farmer, Mcalinden, and Maruna (2016)

analysed narratives of men convicted of child sexual abuse, demonstrating the separation of behaviours from the 'core self' also distinguished between those desisting or persisting in sexual offending. The 'desisters' presented situational rather than internal factors as primary causes for their offending and rejected the label 'sex offender' (Farmer et al, 2016; McAlinden et al., 2016). Farmer et al. (2016) highlighted this explanation of offending enables individuals to manage their shame and develop a non-offending identity.

Farmer et al.'s (2016) participants were performing self-presentation, not merely rejecting the label 'sexual offender' but guiding others to the same assessment by constructing their behaviour as situational. People manage how they present themselves, to influence others' impressions of them and pursue particular aims (Goffman, 1959). Situational explanations of behaviour perform moral self-presentation (e.g. justifying lateness because of heavy traffic, rather than personal tardiness) and fulfil a range of social functions (e.g. excusing, legitimising). Hulley (2016) found respondents' 'neutralizations' (Sykes & Matza, 1957), e.g. blaming offending on mental health issues, presented an acceptable moral identity separate from their sexual offending. Similarly, research on sexual offending highlights denial may function to maintain a person's self-presentation so they are not ostracised (Blagden, Winder, Gregson, & Thorne, 2014). Understood in this way, accounting for behaviours can be treated as building blocks of a broader narrative identity, a way of constructing a person's character.

Situational explanations of offending behaviour are consistent with normative excuse-making behaviour (Maruna & Copes, 2005), where people give situational accounts for their

misdeeds, and dispositional accounts for those of others. Maruna and Mann (2006) question if criminology and criminal justice interventions unduly pathologise 'excuses' of people who offend, conflating these with offence supportive attitudes. Situational accounts for offending are often labelled justifications, excuses or cognitive distortions<sup>1</sup> and targeted in criminal justice interventions to reduce reoffending, despite insufficient evidence (Blagden et al., 2014; Maruna & Mann, 2006; Ware & Mann, 2012), particularly in relation to sexual offending (Beech & Mann, 2002; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005).

In sexual offending treatment programmes, a tension exists between the participants' narratives, possibly situational accounts consistent with desistance narratives, and institutional requirements for people to take full responsibility for their offences; e.g. avoiding minimisation and 'excuses' including situational factors (Kras & Blasko, 2016; Waldram, 2010; Ware & Mann, 2012). Programmes are called to be future-focussed, developing desistance narratives, and less focussed on clients accepting full responsibility for their past offending, which potentially hinders the desistance process (Blagden et al., 2014; Farmer et al., 2016; Maruna & Copes, 2005). However, little research has looked at how 'excuses' are dealt with during interactions between practitioners and participants of criminal justice interventions, instead relying on retrospective interviews (e.g. Blagden et al., 2014; Bullock & Condry, 2013) and assessments of practice/ programmes (e.g. Beech, Fisher, & Beckett, 1999; Marshall & Serran, 2004). A more detailed examination of how people account for their offending behaviour in the context of criminal justice interventions

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<sup>1</sup> 'Cognitive distortions' are attitudes and beliefs used to justify, minimise and rationalise offending behaviour. The concept is problematic in definition and application (cf. Maruna & Mann, 2006).



and how this is responded to by practitioners will improve understanding of the construction of desistance narratives (Kirkwood, 2016).

### *Narrative as interactionally contingent*

Although Maruna (2001: 8) acknowledges that 'self-narratives are developed through social interaction', much narrative criminological research fails to address the interviewer's role in narrative construction, as their contributions are often omitted or under-analysed (Kirkwood, 2016). As with any setting, the research interview is itself a site of identity construction because it 'sets parameters and asks informants to respond within those parameters' (Presser, 2004: 38). For instance, Presser (2004) noted her participants tailored their accounts to her gender and status as researcher. Carlsson (2012) emphasised imposing analysts' categories, such as turning points, will bias participants' responses, possibly distorting their importance. The stake and interest of conversational participants differs between contexts and influences the accounts that are produced (Potter & Hepburn, 2005), raising questions about the ecological validity, or generalisability beyond the interview context, of desistance research based on interviews. As identities are contextually performed, analysis of narrative identity should consider the interactional context (Korobov, 2014).

In criminal justice interventions accounts are bound by the context and constitute social actions. For instance, Waldram (2010) notes practitioners use the concept of cognitive distortions to construct client identities to fit with treatment programme aims, contrasting

clients' autobiographical narratives. People arrange their narratives to manage responsibility for their offending behaviour, consistent with desistance narratives (Auburn & Lea, 2003). Auburn (2005; Auburn & Lea, 2003) demonstrated clients of a groupwork programme for sexual offending skilfully weave their stories to avoid negative attributions; e.g., that they are minimising their offence, whilst maintaining a separation between their present 'true' self and past behaviour. More recently, Kirkwood (2016) argued analysing criminal justice interactions between social workers and clients allows access to the 'black box' of practice. Using discursive psychology, he demonstrated how identities are presented, negotiated, and rejected in the talk between facilitators and clients of a groupwork session addressing domestic abuse. The discursive context is therefore central to the interactive negotiation of narrative identity.

As narrative identities are contingent on context, it is important to explore how narratives are constructed within interaction. This is especially relevant in examining how primarily talk-based criminal justice interventions can influence desistance through encouraging certain narrative identities. As such the following assumptions underpin this study: 1) desistance narratives are key to the process of desistance; 2) narrative identities are shaped through interaction; 3) accounts of events and behaviours constitute building blocks of narrative identity; 4) accounts produce and are sensitive to local interactional contexts; 5) in criminal justice interventions accounts of offending behaviour are elicited, offered and responded to. Therefore, interaction in criminal justice interventions is fertile ground for examining how desistance narratives are cultivated. Discursive psychology and conversation analysis methodologies examine how interaction functions, making them suitable tools for

exploring the construction of desistance narratives. How the talk-in-interaction during a groupwork programme addressing sexual offending may contribute to the construction of desistance narratives, posited by previous research, has not been examined. Our analysis explores how narratives of a 'core self' and situational accounts for offending, consistent with desistance narratives found in research interviews, are constructed in interactions during a groupwork programme addressing sexual offending.

## **Methodology**

This study focuses on interactions within the Scottish groupwork programme for addressing sexual offending, 'Moving Forward: Making Changes'. This rolling programme, run in the community by local authority criminal justice social work services, works with adult men (18+) convicted of sexual offences who are Court mandated to attend. It is influenced by the Good Lives Model (GLM), a strengths-based model positing there are universal goals all humans seek, e.g. happiness, relatedness (see Ward & Maruna, 2007), and offending behaviour functions to achieve these goals, albeit harmfully. The GLM proposes clients should be supported to identify and achieve their goals prosocially, building on and developing their strengths and capacities. Clients are encouraged to consider their offending in the wider context of their lives, i.e. what were they trying to achieve, identifying what life goals are important to them, e.g. peace of mind, relatedness, and developing appropriate ways to achieve their goals. Ward and Marshall (2007) highlight the construction of a prosocial narrative identity is central to this process and a core component of the GLM. As such, developing a new, prosocial identity is considered central in this programme (Scottish Government, 2014).

Research participants gave informed consent and identifying features were anonymised. The authors' university and relevant local authority gave ethical approval. The first author watched twelve video-recorded groupwork sessions repeatedly, approximately 28 hours, transcribing these orthographically. The local authority routinely video records the groupwork sessions for internal quality assurance. Recordings were selected for this study on practical grounds, i.e. best visual and audio quality. Each group had two facilitators and four to six men convicted of sexual offences, eighteen men in total. Their offences included accessing indecent images of children, rape of adults, and child sexual abuse. The facilitator team involved two men and three women, resulting in mixed and same gender facilitator variation per session.

The first author identified extracts relevant for analysing the development of desistance narratives by coding for interactions broadly featuring characteristics of such narratives; e.g. situational accounts for offending, speaking about giving back, passive references to offending, presenting a 'core self'. Coded extracts were then transcribed in greater phonological detail (Jefferson, 2004) and closely analysed, exploring how talk relating to desistance and identity arose. The second author checked for accuracy of transcription and interpretation against the video-recordings. The presented extracts, chosen for their clarity and brevity, are representative of a larger sample of similar identified patterns in that they are examples of how such interactions unfolded. The extracts are presented verbatim allowing the reader to judge the validity of the interpretation themselves, as is convention with these methods (Liddicoat, 2011).

To examine the talk-in-interaction, conversation analysis and discursive psychology (i.e. McKinlay & McVittie, 2008; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) were applied. These methods examine the micro-level utterance by utterance sequence of talk, looking at how people make sense of their conversations and what they are doing in their talk; for example, encouraging or censuring. They have been used to analyse interactions in GP consultations (Heritage & Robinson, 2011), child protection helpline conversations (Hepburn & Potter 2007), and mediation intake calls (Stokoe, 2013). Here language is treated as actively constructing social reality and accomplishing social functions (Liddicoat, 2011; McKinlay & McVittie, 2008). For example, Kirkwood (2016) noted clients of a domestic abuse programme demonstrated ambivalence to pro-social identities, and practitioners responded to this resistance, encouraging acceptance of these identities. How narrative identity is conferred, contested and constructed is therefore visible within interaction. This article examines how accounts and narratives are offered up and responded to in the context of the interactions in this groupwork programme.

### **Analysis and findings**

As outlined, attributing offending behaviour to situational, external and specific factors is consistent with desistance narratives (Maruna, 2001; 2004). Previous research implies such attributions originate in the speaker, rather than through interaction with others in specific contexts. However, for example, a young person accused of assault may give a different account speaking to their friend than to the police. The person being told the 'story' influences its shape, through their status, the context and their questions and responses

(Drew, 2012). Specifically when interaction is bound in institutional talk, such as criminal justice social work settings, there are constraints on what contributions are allowable or relevant to achieve the institutional business (Heritage, 2005). Extract 1 highlights how subtle shifts in the facilitator's language can encourage a situational account for offending, separating the self from the behaviour. In this extract Brian is asked to reflect on the links between his broader life experiences and his offending. G# denotes group facilitators; all other names are clients.

*Extract 1*

- 1 G2: We've got to know you a bit. It sounds like Evan's kind of drilling down a wee  
2 bit here though. What's- I mean what's relevant cause this is not just about  
3 saying what was your childhood like it's like it's about working out what's  
4 relevant to kind of >how you how you< <why you're here  
5 [°somehow°>
- 6 Dale: [wh what what made you basically offend
- 7 Evan: Because-
- 8 Dale: OR be in a situation that [you got done for-
- 9 Brian: [eh::::
- 10 Dale: you got charged as an offender or something [like that.

11 Evan: [yeah because you are  
12 an intelligent person and you've got a good head on your shoulders.

13 Brian: hmm

G2's question (ll.1-5) highlights the institutional business at hand: requesting a narrative account to which Brian has access. Here, G2 avoids the interrogative 'how' instead repairing to 'why' (l.4). What does this repair achieve? 'How' questions are commonly answered by describing the means by which something occurs (Hayano, 2013), possibly implying an expectation that the client provides the formal account of his offence (Waldram, 2007). 'Why' questions can be more challenging, for instance suggesting the situation does not accord with common sense, requiring respondents to justify their behaviour, with related social difficulties for the interaction (Bolden & Robinson, 2011); in this case, Brian is invited to provide an evaluative account that explains and perhaps justifies his 'being here' (i.e., why he offended). However, stating 'why you're here' (l.4), rather than using more explicit statements (e.g., 'why you committed a sexual offence'), moderates the challenging tone of the question by drawing on the group's shared understanding of the 'problem'.

Demonstrating empathy, G2 treats the topic as sensitive by hedging her questions ('kind of' l.4), softening her statement through the utterance 'somehow' (l.5), and speaking more slowly and quietly. 'Somehow' (l.5) also implies a lack of agency, that Brian attending a programme for addressing sexual offending may be accidental. As such, the design of G2's question, given her institutional status, enables an account focussing on situational factors (Heritage, 2005).

Conversation analysis is primarily concerned with what conversation participants do in interaction, rather than analyst categories; i.e., how participants treat and make sense of each other's talk (next turn proof procedure; Edwards, 2004). Here Dale's development of G2's question evidences it is heard as permitting, even encouraging, a situational account. He makes the topic explicit (I.6), re-formulating the question in a manner that downplays Brian's agency in offending and highlights the situational (II.6, 8, 10). Line 6 could be requesting a situational cause for offending; something that *made* Brian offend. However, it is ambiguous; Brian could disclose he's sexually attracted to children, a more stable, internal attribute. By re-formulating this to 'be in a situation' (I.8), the request for a situational account is made explicit. Finally, Dale's self-correction from 'you got done for-' (I.8) to 'you got charged as' (I.10) reduces agency and accountability by placing Brian as a passive actor in his arrest and subsequent conviction. Getting charged as an offender rather than *being* an offender or committing an offence allows deniability of the characteristics and predicates of the category 'offender'. Brian is not labelled a 'sexual offender', a category which implies stable, internal traits of deviance and intractability (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007). Evan's dispositional description of Brian as intelligent with a 'good head' (II.11-12), presents Brian's character or 'core self' as positive, positioning his offending behaviour as an aberration. The request for Brian's account of 'why [he's] here', constructed between the facilitator and the other group members, invites a situational account for his offending behaviour, separate from his 'core self'. As such, normative excuse-making behaviour is enabled, alongside the maintenance or development of a prosocial identity, as Brian is positioned as someone 'who should know better'.



The concept of a moral 'core self' was a common theme in the groupwork sessions. In positioning the offending behaviour as situational, and out of character, the 'core self' is protected from negative moral implications. Clients here commonly used the passive voice to distance their 'core self' from their offending behaviour; i.e., 'it just happened', like Maruna's (2001) observation. By using the passive voice, however, clients risk being seen to be minimising their offending behaviours. This could be problematic in a groupwork programme addressing sexual offending given the emphasis on people taking responsibility for their offences (Waldram, 2007; Ware & Mann, 2012). Here, through delicate discursive work, clients place offending behaviour as external to their self without being censured for minimising their offences, as demonstrated in Extract 2 below as Carl deliberates about disclosing his offending history to his girlfriend, a requirement of his licence conditions.

*Extract 2*

- 1 Carl: And I and I think the fact which I'm not (.) agreeing and I'm not saying that it's  
2 any worse or any less than anything else
- 3 G4: uh hm
- 4 Carl: but the fact that like I was fourteen fifteen at the time
- 5 G4: uh hm [I remember you saying
- 6 Carl: [<I don't know if that would be>
- 7 G4: ((clears throat))
- 8 Carl: like eh more like accepting of it or if it would be worse the fact that
- 9 G4: hmmm

- 10 Carl: she's got a seventeen year old son which (.) she could be thinking well when  
11 he was like fourteen would he have made that same mistake how can  
12 [he make that mistake=  
13 G4: [hmm  
14 Carl: =or sh she she could look at it people make mistakes I don't know (.) but I've  
15 (1)  
16 G4: Right eh certainly what I'm getting out eh a sense of here C is that your  
17 relationship is very important for [you.  
18 Carl: [yeah  
19 G4: You you have a long longer term view of [this  
20 Carl: [yeah yeah

Through narrative reflexivity, providing a here and now commentary within the course of the narrative (Auburn, 2005), Carl manages the risk of being seen to minimise his offences: 'which I'm not agreeing and I'm not saying that it's any worse or less than anything else' (ll.1-2). He places his offending as specific to when he was a teenager (l.4), providing temporal distance between his past and present. G4 aligns with Carl's stance: 'I remember you saying' (l.5). Reference to the category 'teenager' also highlights associated stereotypical characteristics; i.e., impulsive, irresponsible, risk taking and, importantly, a stage which one grows out of (Silverman, 1998). The passive use of the word 'it' (l.8) (Maruna, 2001) and referring to his offending as a 'mistake' (l.11, l.12, l.14) further separates the behaviour from the self, implying it was an error, not intentional, and as such situational, external and specific. By referring to his girlfriend's possible evaluation (l.14), Carl reports her possible reaction rather than his beliefs, further mitigating against being

assessed as minimising. Carl's lengthy and tentative construction of his offending behaviour is said with hedged explanations, possibly seeking indications the facilitators or other group members accept this narrative account, or in expectation of challenge. His account however is not challenged or problematized, instead G4 contextualises the importance of this relationship for Carl. G4's minimal tokens (e.g., 'hmmm') align with Carl's account, encouraging him to continue his story without endorsing it (Stivers, 2008). No direct challenge or rejection implies Carl's account is accepted, institutionally reinforcing his story (Heritage, 2005). In doing such delicate discursive work clients can present as accountable whilst also attributing causes to external factors. Furthermore, these accounts are not merely given and received, but tentatively presented to the group for evaluation and adaptation.

At times, passive positioning is oriented to by the facilitators and other group members. In Extract 3 below, Frank outlines his goals for the programme under the Good Lives Model domains, specifically 'Knowledge: Learning and Knowing' (see Ward & Maruna, 2007).

*Extract 3*

- 1 Frank: Well learn from my past (.) mistakes I've made °my offending°.
- 2 (5)
- 3 how it come to be .hh ((small shrug)) (.) hh
- 4 G5: Because Frank you were saying just:: at the break just before coming into
- 5 this that actually (.) .hh that's what keeps you going at the moment
- 6 Frank: yeah

7 G5: is a real motivator for you is wanting a bet-

8 Frank: >yeah that's right<

9 G5: better understanding of? °can you,°

10 Frank: °why it all come to that yeah°

11 (3)

12 G5: So a better understanding of why you came to offend.

Like Carl in Extract 2, Frank refers here to his offending behaviour as 'mistakes' (l.1), again implying his offending behaviours were errors, situational and specific. Here, however, he is presented as agentic ('learn from my past'; 'mistakes I've made'), actively referencing his offending through use of the possessive pronoun 'my', although it is whispered (l.1). Whispering can indicate upset, and is associated with crying (Hepburn, 2004). On line 3, Frank provides a more passive account ('how it come to be'), one he echoes at line 10. Referring to offending behaviour as 'it' passively happening or arising, i.e., 'come to be', again serves to separate the offending from the person. Frank's passive account, which places his behaviour as external to himself, is not directly challenged, however the facilitator modifies it through lexical substitution (Rae, 2008). Echoing Frank's passive verb use, this modification aligns with Frank's situational account while the pronoun 'you' places him as an active and accountable agent – 'why you came to offend' (l.12). Frank can distance himself from his offending behaviour, providing an opportunity to develop or maintain a positive 'core self', potentially facilitating the development of a desistance narrative, while still being held accountable for his behaviour.

Clients were also explicitly encouraged by facilitators and other group members to accept a narrative of having a good 'core self' separate from their offending behaviours. However, as Kirkwood (2016) noted, clients may demonstrate ambivalence to accepting prosocial identities, an ambivalence facilitators orient to, highlighting positive aspects of self to enable narratives of change inherent in 'secondary desistance' (Maruna & Farrall, 2004). This encouragement is evident in Extract 4. Fred outlines his goals for the treatment programme, under the goal 'Happiness'. Twice G1 points towards previous comments recorded on a flipchart visible to the group to highlight his point.

*Extract 4*

- 1 Fred: To look at myself in the mirror and say I am a good person  
2 (1)  
3 G1: hmm  
4 Fred: (be happy then) where now I'm looking in the mirror thinking 'nah' not  
5 doing it for me  
6 (3)  
7 (that's what I get/ just full of guilt)  
8 G1: So so your goal in terms of happiness what I'm picking up from that is  
9 that (.) eh eh eh something about (.) this ((points to flipchart)) I wonder  
10 if it's connecting to this again. You know you want to tell yourself that  
11 (.) you're (.) and this (.) ((points to flipchart)) that you're you're not  
12 someone who's defined by your offences that Brian said you know that  
13 you're someone else (.) you're a good person

14 Fred: yeah 'aye'

The comparison Fred makes between his future hope (I.1) and current experience (II.4&5) implies he considers himself a bad person because of his offending behaviour, thus offering a global, general and negative assessment of his character. Orienting to this, G1 reformulates Fred's statement, portraying the offending behaviour as part of Fred's history not the totality of it (II.11-13). G1 proposes separating the behaviour from self, rejecting categorisation as a 'sex offender' and offers a moral 'core self' – 'you're a good person' (I.13). Fred agrees with this characterisation (I.14). Referencing other group members' contributions, by referring to the flipchart and Brian's statement, strengthens G1's formulation. Furthermore, the group members' responses socially ratify this way of constructing the narrative, to separate the behaviour from a positive 'core self' as Maruna (2001) proposed desisters do.

Promoting narratives that separate offending behaviour from the person, highlight a positive 'core self' and place offending behaviour as external, specific and situational is constrained by priorities of risk management and public protection. That is, although these narratives are constructed in the talk-in-interaction during sessions of this groupwork programme, they are tempered and constricted by risk discourse. With extract 5 we present a 'deviant case analysis' (Edwards, 2004), illustrating practitioner responses do not always simply accept external, specific, situational accounts of offending. Here, Evan is introduced to the module called 'Relationship Skills', which explores individuals' risks, needs and

strengths for developing and maintaining successful relationships. Evan is asked to consider what has been problematic for him in relationships, in relation to his offending.

*Extract 5*

1 G2: What links do you make Evan between relationships in your life and how you  
2 came to offend an- and the situation that you did that?

3 Evan: Just trying to be close with someone (that's all really)

4 G2: Okay okay

5 Evan: I shouldn't- someone showing me a little bit of eh (.) maybe not kindness but  
6 interest.

7 G4 [hmm

8 G4: [mh hmm

9 Evan: I didn't know the person at the time you know I will go into more detail at  
10 the time who it was.

11 G4: mh hmm

12 Evan: Em (.) I shouldn't have got close but they got close with me first and I took  
13 that one step closer and I shouldn't have done that one step [closer.

14 G4: [hmm

15 Evan: I never started anything I know that for a [start

- 16 G4: [hmm
- 17 G2: But that area though of (.) being close feeling close=
- 18 Evan: yeah
- 19 G2: =is an area which you can link to your offending >which is linked to
- 20 relationship=
- 21 Evan: Yeah [yeah
- 22 G2: [=styles< and an-
- 23 Evan: It's like jumping into one relationship from the shop
- 24 G2 ah hah

Like Extract 1, saying 'how you came to offend' and 'the situation you did that' (I.2) implies circumstantial reasons for Evan's offending behaviour whilst also placing him as accountable through repeated use of the pronoun 'you'. However, questioning the association between Evan's relationships and his offending behaviour also allows for wider, global attributions, including possible dispositional ones (e.g., his attachment style or view of women). G2's formulation of Evan's account (II.17-22) strengthens the implication Evan's offending is linked to more enduring traits. Formulation is when a version of events is proposed that follows from another's own account but introduces a transformation (Antaki, 2008). G2 interrupts Evan's justifying account by extending his sentence, 'but that' (I.17). This technique can adjust the focus of a previous speaker's statements in a non-challenging way, appearing as a mere continuation of their talk (Peräkylä, 2008; Vehviläinen, 2008). Avoiding



direct challenge, G2's formulation sidesteps Evan's justifications and minimisations ('I didn't know the person' l.9; 'they got close with me first' l.12; 'I never started anything' l.15) and makes 'being close feeling close' (l.17) relevant to his offending. This refocuses to the topic of the exercise and identifies an area of need for Evan, having intimacy in relationships, which he may have pursued in a harmful manner through his offending behaviour, as theorised by the GLM.

G2's orientation to relationship styles (ll.20-22) dismisses a purely situational account for Evan's offending, implying it was also a function of his learned and enduring relational behaviours which may indicate areas of risk; e.g., hostility towards women, sex as emotional coping (Hanson, Harris, Scott, & Helmus, 2007). This balance of accounting for offending behaviour and being accountable for offending behaviour is central throughout the data as the personal and institutional narratives meet, echoing Waldram's (2007; 2010) observations. However, contrary to Waldram, the personal and institutional narratives here do not appear to clash, even if they may be in tension. Instead, as these are brought into interaction, they appear to shape stories that incorporate both change and risk, as different elements are oriented to by the interlocutors and thus made relevant to the overall narrative.

## **Discussion**

Through detailed analysis of interaction in a criminal justice setting, this study illustrates how criminal justice practitioners shape desistance narratives through subtle and explicit

aspects of their talk. Facilitators and other group members ask questions in ways that invite situational accounts (extract 1). This is evident in how speakers repair and reword their contributions to tone down the agency implied by questions about offending behaviour. They can also affirm a moral 'core self', which further reinforces a situational account, as it suggests the individual is characteristically disposed to acting morally and their offending behaviour is an aberration.

The specific way in which people refer to their offences, e.g. 'mistakes' (extracts 2 & 3), can emphasise the aberrant nature of their offending behaviour. However, in the context of criminal justice interventions, people orient to the problematic potential for such accounts to be seen as 'minimising' or 'excusing' their behaviour. In this instance, people use 'narrative reflexivity' (Auburn, 2005) in explicitly commenting on their accounts and managing these problematic interpretations. This demonstrates their moral awareness and heads off trouble. The clients also manage potential problems in their accounts by emphasising the potential learning from their past offending behaviour. Past harmful acts are reconstrued positively as an opportunity to learn and improve, while clients are held accountable. This is particularly evident where groupworkers distinguish between harmful past acts and a morally good 'core self', affirming the individual is not defined by his offences, reinforcing hope and the potential and commitment to change (extract 4). Emphasising learning from past behaviour as a vehicle for change echoes Maruna's (2001) findings, where desisters' highlighted their experiences of offending as central to making them who they are today.

However, given the dominant concern with risk in criminal justice interventions, accounts emphasising situational explanations for past offences and a positive 'core self' are not permitted to be produced unregulated. At times, facilitators orient to aspects of accounts suggesting continuing patterns of behaviour that may sustain future offending (extract 5). In these cases, practitioners withhold affirmation of the accounts (e.g., through minimal responses such as 'hmm'), instead emphasising the problematic nature of such patterns of behaviour possibly linked to ongoing risk of offending. Narratives of desistance and narratives of risk can be in tension in this context, where there is an institutional responsibility to assess and manage risk.

This analysis illustrates how criminal justice practitioners are actively involved in the process of re-storying people's narrative identities. In Cavarero's (2014) terms, a person is the protagonist for their life story, but not necessarily its narrator; rather, multiple voices tell the narrative. Using a different metaphor, we suggest that the co-construction of desistance narratives can be understood as a form of sculpting, as the individual, practitioners and peers are working with the same materials (the individual's past behaviour, present intentions and future aspirations), collaboratively crafting an institutionally, socially and personally acceptable narrative. Rather than considering secondary / identity desistance and tertiary / relational desistance (Maruna & Farrall, 2004a; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016) as separate, although intertwined, processes, here it is evident desistance identities are shaped in relational contexts, through dialogue and interaction. The analysis of identity in interaction provides an understanding of how interactions shape or reinforce identities, which offer ways of making meaning and directing behaviour. Practitioners translate macro-

level discourse regarding risk and offending behaviour into the micro-level interaction.

Whereas others have suggested individuals' autobiographical narratives come into conflict with the institutional narratives (Waldram, 2007), this study demonstrates collaborative interactional work shaping a narrative that is acceptable to the individual and the institution, providing a recognisable self that reflects societal norms and mitigates risk.

Our research supports previous work critiquing the notion of cognitive distortions (Auburn, 2010; Auburn & Lea, 2003; Maruna & Mann, 2006), further illustrating situational accounts are not necessarily pathological, but rather normative, and potentially support the creation of liveable self-identities as the foundation for desistance narratives. However, criminal justice contexts where the risk paradigm predominates may be unsupportive of desistance narratives, instead reinforcing self-identities predicated on continuous risk of offending (McNeill, 2016). The need for risk assessment and management is not negated, but corresponding balanced engagement with narratives of change and desistance is necessary. Moreover, desistance narratives are probably unsustainable when society and other institutions treat risk as ever-present and people convicted of sexual offences as intractable, as is common-place (Harris, 2017; Levenson, 2018). As we've argued elsewhere (Kirkwood, 2016), narrative reconstruction alone is not sufficient for desistance; behavioural change, skills development and pro-social opportunities are also necessary (McNeill, 2006). While recent research suggests identity change plays a causal role in desistance (Rocque, Posick & Paternoster, 2016), further longitudinal research is required to examine the impact of interactional aspects of criminal justice practice on desistance.

Besides demonstrating the GLM's strengths-based focus and intention to foster pro-social identities (Ward & Marshall, 2007), the interactional style evident in this setting reflects Braithwaite's (1989) model of reintegrative shaming, which condemns the harmful act, emphasising the moral goodness of the individual and supporting them with positive change. It also reflects core social work skills, such as active listening, demonstrating empathy, and encouraging self-efficacy (Raynor & Vanstone, 2015). Interestingly, other group members also displayed these skills. They were possibly socialised into pro-social ways of responding or demonstrating modes of interacting common in everyday interaction where people show alignment, warmth and support. Further research could explore interactional styles in different criminal justice settings with different client groups and connections with desistance narratives. Effective social work skills are likely to support desistance narratives, in being non-stigmatising, empowering and working with people's own understanding of themselves. Moreover, everyday interaction can support desistance narratives where it affirms people's essential goodness whilst censuring their harmful behaviour, supporting their potential to change.

## Appendix

Transcription notation adapted from Jefferson (2004):

(.)	Micro pause
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(0.2)	Timed pause
[ ]	Speech overlapping
> <	Pace of speech quickens
< >	Pace of the speech slows
( )	Unclear section
(( ))	An action
°word°	Whisper or reduced volume speech
:::	Stretched sound
=	Latched speech, continuation of talk
.hh	In-breath
hh	out-breath

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