

Identity changes during the double transition from adolescence to adulthood and from criminal involvement to desistance: A qualitative analysis

Marie-Pierre Villeneuve, Ph. D.
Professor, Université de Sherbrooke

Isabelle F.-Dufour, Ph. D.
Full Professor, Université Laval



Context

- Sustaining the initial **move away from crime** is a **painful process**
 - Feeling ambivalent, caught between two worlds
 - Judicialized **emerging adults** are particularly **challenged**:
 - Limited access to or lack of personal and social resources
 - Multiple transitions happening at the same time
 - **Internal changes** abound during emerging adulthood, which could be especially **favorable to desistance**.
- *What are the mechanisms involved in identity changes in the liminal stages of desistance?*

Identity theory of desistance (ITD)

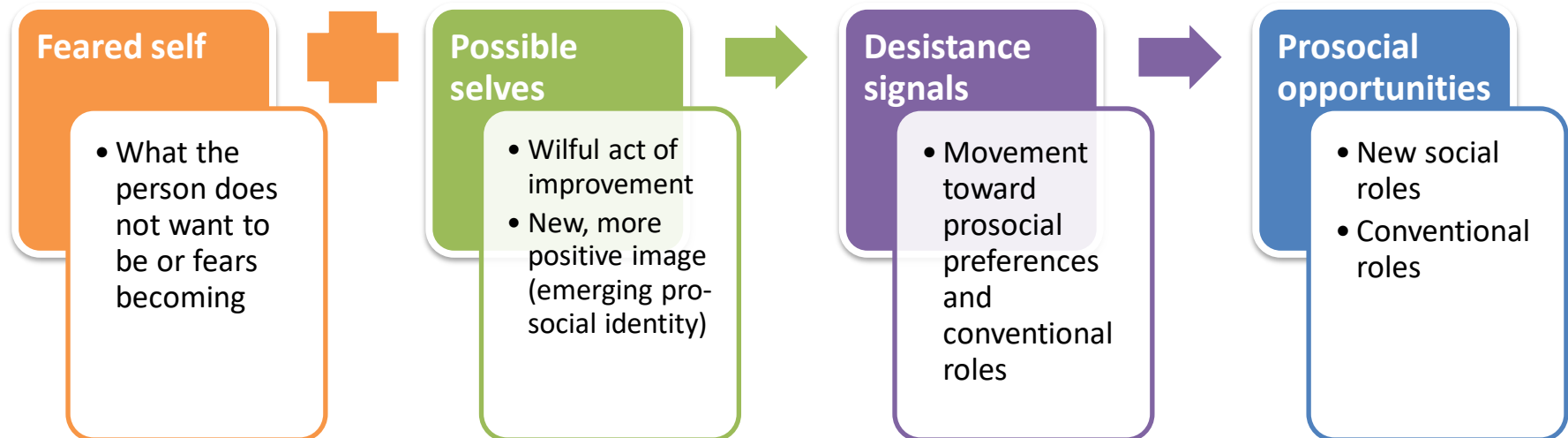
(Paternoster et al., 2015; Paternoster et Bushway, 2009)

- The ITD combines both a **social realist** and a **rational choice** perspective.
- Desistance is defined as an **agentic** process based on **identity changes**, taking place in a **social context**.
 - Actions are purposeful and forethought i.e., guided and motivated by goals and plans for the future
 - People have the ability to reflect on their decisions and actions, and the power to act to produce a desired outcome
- An “offender” **working identity** will guide actions as long as its perceived benefits are greater than its costs.
 - Self-serving bias
- For desistance to occur, perceived **failures** and dissatisfactions in one’s life must be **connected** to offending and with **anticipated** future failures.
 - “Crystallization of discontent”

Identity Theory of Desistance (ITD)

(Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Paternoster et al., 2015)

- Identity changes come **first** and initiate changes in preferences and social roles.



Methods

- Qualitative **interviews** with judicialized young adults
- **Thematic** analysis
 - Sense of self
 - Perceptions of crime (costs and benefits)
- **Semi-open coding** (Miles *et al.*, 2018)
 - 1st cycle: key concepts of the ITD and the desistance literature (e.g., working self, feared self, prosocial opportunities), and inductive coding (e.g., past self, adverse life events)
 - 2nd cycle: similarities and differences in participants' accounts

Sample ($n=56$)

	<i>N</i>	%
Gender		
Male	39	69,6
Female	16	28,6
Non-binary	1	1,8
Age		
16-18	19	33,9
19-25	12	21,4
26-35	25	44,6
Occupational status		
Unemployed	35	62,5
Minimum wage	16	28,6
Part-time	5	8,9
Under judicial control	18	32,1

Cumulated disadvantage and the feared self

- Most participants gave meaning to their current situation by **looking back on past selves** and how they were shaped by life adversities
- **Three mechanisms** underlying the initial move toward a “feared self”
 - **Introspection**, an integral part of the liminal stages of desistance (Healy, 2012), helped some participants make sense of how their troubled past contributed to their current issues.

*“I’m asking myself a lot of questions. **Why am I who I am?** When I was young, we didn’t have a lot of money and my mom stole to feed us. **That stuck with me.** If you want something, steal it. At 15, I had lost my whole family. **Our family had a lot of issues:** drug abuse, a lot of alcohol abuse, unhealthy relationships. **Because I didn’t know anything else, I thought it was ok.** You experience traumas. Having to separate your parents at 4 am because they are fighting and there’s blood everywhere. **You have to learn that you don’t have to follow the same path** as they did, that **you can overcome this.**” (Ariane, W, 28)*

Cumulated disadvantage and the feared self

- **Three mechanisms** underlying the initial move toward a “feared self”
 - A **growing sense of dissatisfaction with one’s actions** and the **realization** of their ramifications also bring participants to question an ‘offending lifestyle’:

*“I was **tired** of always being **arrested**, getting **tickets**, spending weekends in **jail**, **detained** at the police station. I was **tired** of the streets. Living on the streets is **hard**.”*
(Bruno, M, 30)

*“I sold PCP. **I destroyed lives**. I see people I sold to, and they are almost in psychiatric care all year long. Me, I’m still here. It **weighs on your shoulders**.”* (Leonard, M, 32)

Cumulated disadvantage and the feared self

- **Three mechanisms** underlying the initial move toward a “feared self”
 - **Milestones** and significant live **events** can also act as “turning points”, prompting some participants to question their past selves:

*“I was stabbed by one of my clients for \$10. It shook me. It made me realize **I could have died for \$10**. If you sell drugs, you can make money, but **you can also lose your life as easily as you made your money**.” (Claude, M, 22)*

*“The stupid things I did, I did all in my early 20s. **Now I’m 30**. I’m at a place in my life where **I want to settle down** with someone. I want to be in a stable, long-term relationship. I’m trying to **stay out of trouble**. I **don’t want any more problems**. The night I spent in jail, it was really... jail is really something that I don’t ever ever ever wanna do again.” (Leon, M, 30)*

Cumulated disadvantage and the feared self

- Past selves play an important part in reorienting values, beliefs, and preferences.
- They can also have a “**narrowing effect**”, factoring in the cost-benefits analysis of future actions by shaping orientations and time horizon:

*“For the past three years, I’ve tried to get out of the criminal world. Drugs always bring me back to it. I end up having debts and going back to committing crimes to reimburse them or whatever... **It’s a vicious cycle.** I’m trying the best that I can, **one small step at a time.** [...] I don’t have big plans. **I forgot my dreams a long time ago.**” (Axel, M, 21)*

- The perceived costs of change can act as a barrier to the actualization of new interests and preferences which could, in turn, serve as desistance signals.

Cumulated disadvantage and the feared self

***"I don't have a lot of hobbies.** I'd like to take up snowboarding again, but **I don't have the money.** I'd like to be a soccer coach for kids, like I once was. With a criminal record, I was told it would be **impossible**, even though my crimes have nothing to do with kids. I'd like to go to the gym. I thought about it a lot, but I've got to use my money for other things. I have debts. **I need to buy things, pay my bills:** phone, rent, driver's license, car, furniture. **I have a really hard time to pay for hobbies. I find it really hard. I get discouraged. I'm like fu** off.** I'll end up relapsing and telling myself: Enjoy!"* (Adrien, M,

A possible but uncertain prosocial self: is change possible without a replacement self?

- In the liminal stages of desistance, replacement selves (i.e., possible prosocial selves) are oftentimes fragile:

*"I don't picture myself in the future. It's not good to see yourself in the future. You must live in the present. **Why make plans?** What if they don't amount to anything? **I live in the present.** I never lived in the future. That's what I learned in therapy. **Tomorrow, I could be dead.** I don't know." (Yvan, M, 30)*

- Most participants talked about their desire to adopt 'conventional' roles and achieve 'conventional' goals:

*"**I don't know where** I see myself, but **I know what I want to have.** I wish to keep **working** where I'm at, having more responsibilities, my own **apartment.** That's what I see. I don't need anything complicated. I want to have **my routine,** my **weekends,** going to see my **family, travel.**" (Aline, W, 34)*

A possible but uncertain prosocial self: is change possible without a replacement self?

- Many were cautious, talking in uncertain terms considering life's unpredictability, adopting a "day-to-day" outlook on life.
- Even though they do not know what or who they want to desist into, many were clear on what they did not want their life to look like in the future:

"I don't know yet what I want to do. I know I want a dog soon. I know I will go back home. I would like to not start selling drugs again, I would like not to start using again. I'm still afraid of starting to use again. I used 2/3 of my life. All of that makes me uncertain about my future." (Helen, W, 27)

A possible but uncertain prosocial self: is change possible without a replacement self?

- Available prosocial selves can cause a shift in the salience of identities.
- Changes in life circumstances can trigger the reordering of one's social identities:

*"Since I got **pregnant**, I'm much calmer. Instead of telling someone 'I will beat you up', I walk away. I **didn't have a choice**. I'm calmer. I have a **routine**. I'm at home, cleaning up. Having a kid is a **source of motivation** because I will have **someone to look after and care for**. I won't care for people trying to ruin my life. I **won't waste my time** and my energy with people trying to destroy me." (Isabelle, W, 17)*

- Future actions are weighed against behaviors perceived as coherent with this newly salient social identity.

A possible but uncertain prosocial self: is change possible without a replacement self?

- Embracing a new prosocial identity can have a beneficial impact on desistance processes.
- It has a protective effect on perceived obstacles, given that replacement selves provide a blueprint guiding future actions:

*“Now I can better assess long-term consequences. If I revert to my old self, **will it bring me closer** to my little girl? No. Will it bring be closer to who I was before: violent, aggressive, manipulative, arrogant, completely lost? Yes. It reminds me of **who I don’t want to be and where I want to be**. Now when I get up in the morning, I’m excited. I realize **my own potential**. Because I didn’t have a mother when I grew up doesn’t mean I have to inflict the same thing on my kid.” (Chantal, W, 35)*

The “offender” identity as a barrier to the possible selves

- The lingering effect of an “offender” identity – self-endorsed or a result of labelling processes – may:
 - Increase the costs of change
 - Interfere with the crafting of a possible self
 - Increase the amount of efforts to put in
 - Require greater internal and external resources

*“Someone who isn’t on probation can’t breach probation. If I breach the conditions of my probation... let’s say keep the peace. If I get arrested because I’m high or something, it could be an **infraction**. So yes, **I’m more at risk** to commit another crime than others. I’m motivated to comply with my conditions, but I often breached them during other probations.” (Damien, M, 17)*

*“I’m on a good path. Things are looking up. I have a job, a new girlfriend, money. Everything is going right. I find that **by always bringing up the past, my problems stop my progression toward something that could be better.**” (Jerome, M, 29)*

The case of deflected and restricted agency

- Deflected agency is a recurring theme when talking about past struggles
 - e.g., crimes were committed “because of drugs” or “under the influence of peers”
- A restricted sense of agency may be a cost of crime:
 - Revoked driver’s license = limited job opportunities, fewer possibilities to get a promotion, job loss
 - Financial pressure (debts, legal fees, fines) = revert to committing lucrative crimes
 - Judicial sanctions = conformity vs desired self

*“I’ve been in the youth center for a year. I want to get out of here and stop doing stupid things **not because I want to stop, but because I want to get out of there.**”*

(Mathias, M, 16)

*“I’m in the process of community re-entry and **they do not see me 100% as a citizen** yet. When my **record is cleared** in 5-6 years, **maybe then I’ll consider myself a citizen.** Successful re-entry is to continue doing what I’m doing now.”* (Charles, M, 32).

The case of deflected and restricted agency

- For many participants, complying with the court is a choice – their choice.
- They have an intention, a sense of purpose, which help monitor and regulate their behaviors so they are consistent with possible selves.

*"I can **count on myself**. I am **motivated**. I don't plan on giving up because it's going **better and better since I'm putting the efforts** to change. Because it's going well, it **motivates me to keep doing the same things**, so it keeps going well. [Interviewer: What would you like to keep in your life going forward?] The ties I have with my family. My state of mind. Keep doing the right things." (David, M, 25)*

- Just as discontent with an "offender" working identity is a catalyst for change, so is content with a "desister" working identity.

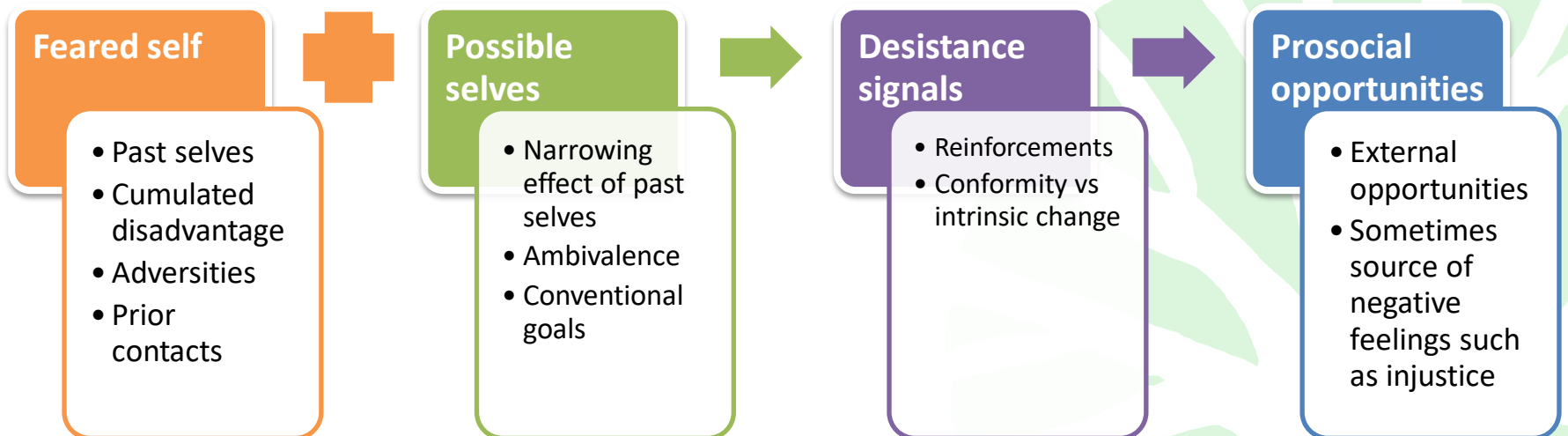
Identity changes, agency, and prosocial opportunities

- Offering opportunities to turn one's life around are not always seized when people are not ready for change.
- They can become a “source of frustration”, contributing to a sense of “unfairness”, “injustice”, even “oppression”.
- These feelings do not always translate in a greater awareness of the costs of crime – they sometimes justify further offending.

*“I had an intense feeling of **injustice**. I ended up **pleading guilty to things I didn't do**. When I got out of jail, **I got my revenge**. I ended up going back in **jail**. When you're in, you never get out. **It changes you**. You have to survive, protect yourself. Either you live, you survive, or you die. I did certain things to assert my authority. The more you commit crime, the more you become addicted to this lifestyle. **I came to like it, to consider it normal to go to jail, get out, get back in.**” (Emile, M, 24)*

Discussion

- Three important mechanisms: introspection, growing dissatisfaction, milestones/turning points



Discussion

- Most participants do **not** have a **clear sense of self**, they rather juggle with both a negative and a positive self-perception
 - Effect of cumulated disadvantage – adverse life experiences and with the criminal justice system
- Giving the opportunity to recount their life experience enabled many of them to **take a reflective and introspective look** on their past, current, and future situations
 - Integrate impactful life events, reframe, and reconcile
- A **deflected** sense of **agency** emerged when referring to past **criminal activities**, but **desistance** is perceived as a result of one's **actions**
- **Criminal sanctions** could make it **harder to project oneself** in the future, especially when constantly reminded of past actions.
 - Also: limit possibilities to forge positive self-perceptions

Implications

- Devise policies and implement practices **mindful of labeling processes**
- Focus as much as possible on forging a **positive outlook** on life – while taking care of the narrowing effect of cumulated disadvantage
- **Prosocial opportunities** can be offered in the context of correctional services – give a sense of what could be lost if crime continues – but they can not be forced
- **External forces** can contribute to a shift in how people think about themselves and whether crime still pays
- A broad **range of services** must be put in place to foster hope that change is possible and support identity changes
 - Take care of traumas, help build/develop individual and social resources, foster agency
- More **research** is needed to better understand the interaction between prosocial opportunities and the feared self
 - Can they contribute to the change process before identity changes take place?
 - Can conformity/compliance morph into intrinsic motivation?

Thank you!

- For more information, please feel free to contact me:
 - marie-pierre.Villeneuve@usherbrooke.ca
- To know more about (RE)SO 16-35 and our upcoming publication:
 - Reso1635.ca

