

‘IT WAS A SAFE PLACE FOR ME TO BE’: ACCOUNTS OF ATTENDING WOMEN’S COMMUNITY SERVICES AND MOVING BEYOND THE OFFENDER IDENTITY

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Based on qualitative analysis of interviews with women attending Women’s Community Services (WCSs) in England and Wales, the paper highlights narrative strategies through which women refute the offender identity. Accounts suggest that relationships with key workers and peers and the education and employment opportunities available at the WCSs are crucial in supporting desistance from offending. In addition, the accounts demonstrate an awareness of the social structural disadvantage in which offending is embedded on the part of staff and women attending the services. The implication of the critique of Gender Responsive Programming for our findings is discussed. In the face of a renewed emphasis by the Ministry of Justice on the robustness of community sentences and uncertainty of funding for WCSs in the newly marketized probation provision, the paper argues that WCSs have provided decriminalizing and desistance opportunities for women.

Key Words: community sentences, Women’s Community Services, desistance, offender identity, gender, stigma

Introduction

It’s good to have someone to listen to me, to let me cry whenever I need to,
People around me who care. Everybody needs to have that one special place,
that comfortable place to go, just to be themselves.
Everybody needs special people around them who simply take us as they find us.
Everybody needs to feel that anything is possible and they can overcome the hurdles
that we face in life at times.
That place for me is here,
I have people who believe in me and people who care and that matters
(Poem about a Women’s Community Service by Lydia 44 years)

This is an extract of a poem that its author read out in the course of a research interview. The ‘Special Place’ that is referred to is a Women’s Community Service (WCS), a centre where low-risk women offenders can see their probation officer as an alternative to attending the probation office, receive individual case work support, attend a range of group activities and where education, training and employment opportunities may also be available. These centres were developed in England and Wales in tandem with the policy impetus to reduce women’s imprisonment, but they were also the result of long-term advocacy from charities and campaigning organizations as well as academic

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research that has consistently underlined the inadequacies or inappropriateness for women of most conventional criminal justice interventions (Gelsthorpe et al. 2007; Worrall and Gelsthorpe 2009; Hedderman 2010; Corcoran 2011).

There are two models for understanding how offenders can be effectively rehabilitated in the community and to understand what it is that is effective about WCSs. The first is the orthodox Risk, Need, Responsivity model where offenders are provided with interventions according to their level of risk and ‘criminogenic need’ and that focuses on changing thought patterns and attitudes addressed through cognitive behavioural programmes. The second approach is the desistance model (Maruna 2001; Farrall 2002). In the Risk, Needs, Responsivity model, there is a relationship between assessed risk and the levels and types of services offered, so low-risk offenders are provided with fewer services and less intensive interventions. The notion of Responsivity suggests that interventions are responsive to individual offender’s learning styles as well as to the factors that might interfere with learning such as anxiety. In practice, however, interventions tend to be standardized programmes designed for and delivered to groups of mainly male offenders (Worrall 2002; Gelsthorpe et al. 2007). Commentators have argued indeed that the Risk, Need, Responsivity or ‘what works’ model of offender rehabilitation adopted by the England and Wales probation service and elsewhere does not sufficiently account for the differences in the characteristics of the female offender population and is indeed far from responsive to the needs of women offenders (Gelsthorpe 2001; Carlen 2002). Gender responsive programming emerged (particularly in North America) as part of a concern that women offenders’ complex *needs* were not acknowledged by apparently gender neutral assessment and in programmes designed to address offending behaviour (Bloom 1999; Worrall 2002). Official recognition that different factors predict reoffending for men and women (see, e.g. Bewley 2012 for a recent England and Wales example of this technology), critics argue, mean that gender responsivity can only be a *myth* (Hannah-Moffat 2008) since women’s health and welfare needs are converted into indicators of *risk* in assessment technologies. Carlen and Tombs (2006) more broadly contested the claims by the *reintegration industries* that punishment and rehabilitation can be delivered for poor and marginalized women offenders either in custodial settings or their community alternatives. In a similar vein, Sharpe (2015) has argued in relation to gendered responsive criminal justice programming for young women that the focus of delivering an individual therapeutic, criminal justice response inevitably displaces the social and structural conditions and constraints that shape the lives of multiply disadvantaged young women. Improved knowledge of the gendered risk factors, Sharpe argues, provides evidence-based legitimacy for their punishment. We will revisit these arguments in discussing our findings. We argue, via women’s accounts, that while the version of gendered responsive community services we describe is not without discursive contradictions, WCSs nevertheless provided innovative opportunity for desistance in *collective* therapeutic environments.

The desistance model for understanding how offenders can be effectively rehabilitated has focused on how positive changes in one’s personal identity or sense of self can be achieved. This can include the strengthening of social bonds through establishing stable and supportive relationships, or by gaining employment, education or volunteering opportunities, all of which can help reinforce a greater alignment to ‘conventional’ society. Such changes, alongside the natural ageing process, can combine to produce *desistance* from crime (Sampson and Laub 1993; Maruna 2001; Giordano et al. 2002). In our analysis of accounts given by women attending WCSs, we discuss how the desistance

perspective may provide the best way of understanding what is effective about these services and the opportunities they provide women to move out of offending. We identify narrative strategies through which women refuse an offender identity and we explore the factors that make such narrative strategies possible. The poem above refers to 'special people...who simply take us as they find us' and 'people who believe in me and people who care'. In conducting interviews with women attending WCS, we found women for whom the offender identity was a source of particular shame and whose lives were characterized by a remarkable absence of 'people who care'. We argue that both the *normal smithing*¹ (Lofland 1969) relationships with key workers and peers and the opportunities for volunteering, mentoring and work made available at the WCSs are key in enabling women to resist the stigmatized offender identity.

Following narrative identity theory, we assume that personal narratives are a primary mechanism in the construction and maintenance of identity and sense of self (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). The analysis of offenders' narrative strategies has a long history in criminology. Sykes and Matza (1957) argued that the juvenile delinquents whose accounts they analysed shared a moral code with law abiding citizens. They identified verbal techniques deployed by the young men they interviewed that they argued rationalized the young men's offending behaviour and thus mitigated the moral force of such deviance. Sykes and Matza's analysis suggested a reflexive relationship between how action is 'framed' and the process by which the identity associated with such action is assumed. Learning to account for or justify behaviour may thus be inseparable from learning that behaviour itself (Maruna and Copes 2005). In his study of desistance accounts, Maruna (2001) argued that in order to accomplish the transition from the irredeemable identity of offender, an ex-offender must both construct a new prosocial identity that contradicts a past lifestyle and demonstrate the ability to learn from and overcome the circumstances that explained their past offending behaviour. The redemptive narratives that Maruna identified enabled ex-offenders to reconsider their past and tell new stories of their future selves as good citizens. The premise of Goffman's concept of *stigma* (1963) is based, like Sykes and Matza's and Maruna's work, upon the values and 'scripts' that the *deviant* shares with society. Stigma is in Goffman's terms 'an attribute that is significantly discrediting', which, in the eyes of society, serves to reduce its incumbent. As we describe, in their interview accounts the women we interviewed were very often managing a spoiled identity associated with offending.

Commentators have highlighted how central employment and family relationships are in helping (male) offenders and substance misusers desist from criminal behaviour and recover from substance misuse (Granfield and Cloud 2001; Maruna 2001; Farrall 2002; 2004); the winning combination for male desisters that Maruna has dubbed as 'employment and the love of a good woman' (2001). Our interview data confirm research findings (Giordano et al. 2002) that for women offenders, intimate and family relationships frequently do **not** have a protective effect on supporting desistance, in fact quite the reverse since all too often male partners have not played a supportive, prosocial role (Leverentz 2007; Brown and Ross 2010; Malloch and McIvor 2011). In addition to shaping experiences of offending, studies have increasingly begun to examine how relations of gender, class and ethnicity shape narratives of desistance (Opsal

¹ Lofland (1969) used this term to describe how offenders could be ascribed a 'normal' rather than 'deviant' identity to emphasize their capacity for a prosocial identity.

2012; Rajah et al. 2014). In their interviews with young men at three points in time in their journeys from prison to the community, Rajah et al. identified three different overlapping desistance narratives, moving from hegemonic to subversive scripts as the young men are confronted with social structural barriers to community re-entry, that frustrated their redemptive intent. Opsal (2012) describes the range of gendered narrative strategies used by women ex-prisoners to disrupt the stigmatized identity of the parolee, key among which was the assertion of the role of the good mother. There is thus a complex interplay between decisions to change, often dubbed as motivation, narratives of self-change, transformations in identity and the social structural limits and possibilities for such change.

The qualitative data we draw upon in this paper derive from 50 interviews carried out with 30 women attending six WCSs between April 2011 and 2012. The research was conducted for an evaluation that was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and commissioned by the Corston Independent Funders Coalition in order to capture good practice in WCSs (Radcliffe and Hunter 2013). In the following section, we describe the background to the development of WCSs in England and Wales. We then outline our research methods and the sample before turning to an analysis of respondents' accounts.

Women's Community Services

The WCSs established in 2009 in England and Wales were based on a model of 'one-stop-shop', integrated services for women serving community sentences. This model had been pioneered by a number of England and Wales probation and women's centre partnerships (Gelsthorpe et al. 2007) and had been recommended by Jean Corston in her influential *Review of Women with Particular Vulnerabilities in the Criminal Justice System* (2007). A joint funding initiative between the Ministry of Justice and a group of charities whose work had focused on the diversion of women from custody resulted in the establishment of a network of 33 WCSs in England and Wales between 2009 and 2012 (Hedderman 2010 and see Kaufmann 2011 for a discussion of this initiative). Changes in the organization of the probation service and the contracting out of services for medium- to low-risk offenders (Ministry of Justice 2013a) mean there is now considerable uncertainty concerning the future status and funding of these services (Clark 2014).

The services that took part in our study offered a range of support to women offenders in partnerships of statutory and non-statutory agencies. Women could be referred into these services at all points throughout the criminal justice system (CJS): as a condition of arrest referral, prior to sentence, as part of a community sentence, as a condition of a suspended sentence and as part of post-custody, licence conditions. All services provided women with intensive, one-to-one support based on a tailored plan, 'drop-in', social and peer support groups and some level of education and training. The large majority of those attending the services that took part in our study were defined as current CJS clients and had been referred via probation and/or courts. This was reflected in our qualitative sample, all but one of whom were attending the WCS as part of a community sentence. Though few had been diverted from custody for their offence, nearly half of the women we interviewed had longer offending histories that were frequently linked to substance misuse.

Methods

Our aim was to interview five service users from each of the six WCSs twice in the course of our study. A convenience sample of women was recruited via caseworkers who suggested women for interview who they considered were sufficiently 'stable' in their substance misuse and/or in their lives more generally to take part in the research. The approach to recruiting women for interview thus skewed the sample towards those who had engaged with and benefited from the services (Rungay 2004b). While the women interviewed were not at their most 'chaotic', a number were continuing to struggle with substance misuse or unstable housing or were experiencing violent relationships. Interviews were halted on two occasions when the respondents became upset while discussing their experiences. Women reported involvement with mental health services, problem drug and alcohol use, histories of physical abuse and sexual violence and were thus broadly representative of the female offending population as a whole (Corston 2007; Gelsthorpe et al. 2007; All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System 2011; Ministry of Justice 2012; Segrave and Carlton 2013).

The initial interviews took place at different stages of the respondents' involvement in the services: some had been referred fairly recently, while others were well on in their involvement. A semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect background information on the women's offending histories and experience of the CJS, how they had come to be referred to the WCSs and what their experience of the service had been. In the second interviews, when women had often reached the end of their contact with the service, they were asked what had happened since we had first spoken to them. First interviews lasted between 45 and 100 minutes and took place in counselling and teaching rooms at WCSs, in women's homes and, on one occasion, in a hostel. Second interviews—conducted with 20 of the 30 women we had initially interviewed—were shorter, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. Where possible we collected some information about the situation of the 10 women who we failed to re-interview. Three women had reportedly disengaged from the service because of increasing problems with substance misuse, three were working and no longer attending the service and two had moved out of the area. One woman had reoffended and returned to custody and the whereabouts of another was unknown.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and allocated pseudonyms. Transcripts were entered into Nvivo 9 Software and content coding was carried out by Radcliffe. This coding was supplemented by close reading and thematic coding of the transcripts by both authors. As well as coding the transcripts for themes, we distinguished types of narratives. More specifically, we paid attention to the techniques by which women presented non-offender identities in the stories they told. These included, for example, giving accounts of finding the probation office and its other clients upsetting and alien and emphasizing the distinction between themselves and other offenders. In other types of accounts, women presented their contact with the WCSs in terms of a 'turning point' narrative, through which they were able to gain support from staff, other service users and via education, volunteering and mentoring to *become* non-offenders. As described in our analysis, gender identity is also made pertinent in the distinctions that women made between themselves and other probation clients and in establishing their non-offender identities in terms of normative femininity.

In addition to the women service users, we interviewed 24 staff and managers across the six WCSs. Although these interviews are not dealt with in any detail here, they provided a staff perspective on the profile and needs of the women with whom they were working.

Profile of sample

Three of the 30 women interviewed were of mixed heritage; three were African Caribbean; two were South Asian; one was Southeast Asian; and 22 were White British. The mean age of the women interviewed was 37 years. Only two had post-18 education, and two others had post-16 education. Many of the remaining 26 women spoke of having had little or no school attendance after the age of 13 or 14 years. The two women with post-18 education had pursued professional careers. Where the women in the sample had been employed, this had very often been on short-term contracts and included working in take-away restaurants, supermarkets and in cleaning jobs. Others described having worked as hairdressers, serving in bars and factory work. Two women had been sex workers and one had had her own business.

Twenty-nine of the women interviewed had been referred to the WCS via the CJS either as a condition of a community or suspended sentence, as a condition of a 'licence' for those released from custody to serve their sentence in the community, or as a referral from a Criminal Justice Intervention Team.² One woman, who was considered to be at risk of domestic violence from her partner, was referred from an alcohol detoxification treatment service (having previously been sacked from her job because of a drink-driving offence). Substance misuse, most commonly alcohol misuse, was reported to be involved in the offending or to have contributed to the risk of offending for 18, or nearly two-thirds, of the women interviewed. In interview, 17 of the 30 disclosed past or ongoing experiences of violent relationships and/or having been sexually abused or raped as children. Twenty described experiencing depressive or other mental illness. Seven women disclosed that they had lost children to local authority care.

Table 1 shows the offences that occasioned the referrals to the WCS for the women interviewed. In the case of indictable motoring offences, these were drink-driving incidents that were all second or third offences. Of the six women who had been convicted of a violent offence, three had assaulted a police officer. The two cases of fraud involved benefit fraud.

TABLE 1 *Interviewees' offence profile*

Indictable motoring offence	5
Public order offence	1
Violent offence (including possession of offensive weapon)	6
Theft and handling offences	6
Fraud	2
Anti-social behaviour order ³ (loitering)	2
Criminal damage	3
Intent to supply/importation of drugs	4
Total number	29

² Criminal Justice Interventions Teams are made up of caseworkers who operate in some areas as part of the Ministry of Justice, Drugs Intervention Programme and are focused on reducing offending that is considered to be linked to drug use.

³ An anti-social behaviour order (ASBO) is not an offence but a civil order.

The work of accomplishing a non-offender identity

As has long been noted, women offenders are viewed not only to have broken the law but in addition to have broken a gender contract (Worrall 1990; Opsal 2012). McIvor et al. (2004) suggested that in comparison with male offenders, in their study of young people's desistance, women reported being more ashamed of their offending. Such shame seems to shape both women's accounts of offending and of their desire to move away from an association with an offender identity. For a number of the women interviewed for our study, their shame was linked as much to becoming the subject of criminal justice sanction and particularly in relation to the experience of attending the probation office. Women were often keen to distinguish themselves from other probation clients. Frequently this involved reinforcing commonly held stigmatizing attitudes towards offenders as they narratively distanced themselves from the offender identity. Probation clients they took to be drug users were often singled out as a group with whom a number of women wanted to make clear they did not belong and with whom they did not want to be associated.

I mean there's drug addicts and all sorts of people sitting there you know, they're all sort of major criminals and stuff. They're chatting about it thinking it's all great, you know, it's not somewhere that makes me feel comfortable. (Lara, 36)

When I go to probation sometimes I have to wait and the people that come in, it really puts me off. It's because I've never been in trouble before, I just don't feel like I belong and I don't feel I should be there. (Rosie, 43)

You can walk into the probation office where I've met [worker] before and you kind of almost don't want to walk in the door... It can be quite intimidating when you walk in there and you see all different characters in the waiting room. (Iris, 42)

Many of the women interviewed reported feeling ashamed about what they assumed others would think of them should they be seen entering probation premises (and see Katz 1999: 149), in the same way as was reported by the young women desisters interviewed by McIvor et al. (2004). In comparison, the WCSs were not associated with such shame, particularly those services that were located within more generic women's centres that provided a range of women-only classes and facilities open to all women:

When you come here no-one knows what you come for because there's so much things to do, whereas C street they know it's probation. (Samantha, 29)

Although these narratives were situated in and occasioned by the interview in which they were being invited to reflect upon their experience of WCS as compared to attending probation, we suggest that the respondents' resistance to the offender identity was not simply an artefact of the interview setting but more broadly linked to a social awareness and anxiety concerning the potentially spoiling status of offender (Goffman 1963).

For some women, this was not their first experience of a criminal justice sanction; indeed, a number had multiple convictions very often linked to long-term and sometimes ongoing addiction problems—for example: 'I have to openly admit that I've never been arrested sober'. These women acknowledged the benefit of attending a WCS in order to avoid the *temptation* that might ensue on meeting former associates at the probation office:

You meet like loads of people you knew from ages ago and that, you start talking and you don't really want to mix with them sort of people. (Janet, 23)

I choose to see her [probation officer] here because the office where she works there's still a lot of people that go there that are using, and I find it really difficult because it's people that I used to use with and it'll only take me to be having a bad day and I could use again. (Jackie, 34)

Here, women reflect on the vulnerability of their status as recently 'clean' from alcohol and drug use, a status that they report is protected by their attending the WCS as opposed to the probation office. In comparison to the WCSs, probation offices are reported to be saturated with the identity of drug user and offender. For these women, the WCSs they attend are presented as places in which they can consolidate existing motivation to avoid substance misuse, enabling their move into a secondary phase of desistance (Maruna 2001). For Lydia, the women's centre represented a place of refuge and a return to sobriety after a weekend of relapsed drinking:

I came in because it was a safe place for me to be. To sit here to talk to other women, to have cups of tea and smoke fags all day, than me be at home on my own. Because I knew I'd pick up another drink. (Lydia, 44)

With names such as Inspire, Women's Turnaround, Changes, Women Ahead, Tomorrow's Women, WCSs' signage and premises both signal services' aspiration to make positive change in women's lives as well as their role as providers of services for women rather than as correctional facilities for offenders. Thus, the non-offender identity of those using the services is reinforced (Gelsthorpe et al. 2007). For many of the women we interviewed, the significance of WCSs' status as women-only services was not limited to the inspiring name and the non-stigmatizing label on the door. Many reported a well-founded fear of male violence in their own relationships. The 'safe', women-only environment of the centre was frequently contrasted with the male-dominated probation office:

I'm very nervous around men because I've been abused most of my life... and I find it hard to associate with men like. When I was on probation I didn't want to sit in there because men are around. (Georgina, 43)

It's just nice to be around women rather than men because I feel quite shut down around men at the moment; they make me feel quite sick. (Ruby, 47)

I've got problems with men. I've been abused and used by men you know. I've been raped, everything. It's good with just women yeah. (Margaret, 46)

There's just too many people there [at probation] and you don't really get many women there. So I do feel quite alone and it's quite daunting sometimes, especially with my background of the violence and stuff. (Janet, 23)

Others described unwanted male attention at the probation office:

When I walked out of there, I'm getting like a lot of guys coming up and stopping and my mind was everywhere and I didn't like it. (Isha, 27)

Women were therefore not only keen to disassociate themselves from offenders at the probation office in order to sustain an emerging non-offender identity; they often had good reasons to feel uncomfortable and sometimes afraid and intimidated in such a

setting. As was observed—‘They’re chatting about it, thinking it’s all great’—waiting rooms and the environs of mixed gender, probation offices may consolidate offender networks. As well as being sometimes intimidatingly male dominated, probation office waiting rooms can provide ideal venues for the exchange of information related to offending among probation clients, making them a hostile setting for those wishing to remove themselves from an offender identity.

The experience of being officially judged to be guilty of a crime in court and, by implication, *morally* judged, is one source of shame from which many women interviewed were keen to move beyond (Braithwaite 1989). As a counterpoint to the shameful offender identity, women frequently referred to WCS staff and other service users as *non-judgemental*. The absence of *value* judgement from other users of services as well as from staff was a commonly commented upon characteristic of WCSs that women referred to in interviews:

...As soon as I walked in here, I knew that it was all right to feel what I was feeling because I wasn't the only one. Obviously there's lot of women that come in here with all different types of situations and you're not going to get judged or, you know. And I felt that as soon as I walked in. I could feel the calmness and I was comfortable where I was and I knew that where I was, I was alright. (Philippa, 30)

As soon as I come here I felt so welcomed and I met some people here and they just don't judge you. (Cerys, 23)

It's just like a drop-in centre and nobody knows me or says 'why are you there?' you're not going to get judged which is really good as well. (Shara, 25)

In these accounts, women describe WCSs as places where staff and other service users provide non-judgemental acceptance. Lofland has argued that ‘normal smiths’ are individuals who impute a ‘normal’ identity to offenders (Lofland 1969). Our findings support Rumgay's (2004a) observation of the *normal smithing* role of staff in WCSs. Notwithstanding the offenders' self-perceptions and evidence to the contrary, normal smiths are able to assert ‘a core of being that is normal, despite [the offender's] deviant acts, however many there may have been’ (Lofland 1969: 213). Women offenders' perceptions of ‘acceptance’ by those in supervisory roles are also emphasized in the work of Malloch and McIvor (2011) as being central to the development of positive (and in turn more effective) relationships between offender and probation officer. The importance of official recognition of women's underlying moral worth—sometimes despite repeat offending—is underlined in these accounts:

Because it's like she [key worker] says, ‘Look, there's nowt I can say to you because you know you're not a criminal, you are a good person, I can talk to you and we can chat’ but she doesn't need to reform me because I'm not going to offend again you know. (Tamsin, 45)

And they [police] knew that I wasn't an alcoholic, they knew I didn't have a gambling problem. They knew I had three kids at home that were cared for and looked after, so they couldn't understand. They kept saying to me in interview rooms, ‘Why are you doing this. You don't need to do it. Why are you taking all these convictions? Why are you shoplifting?’ (Philippa, 30)

Such reporting of the supportive response of professionals serves to endorse the non-offender identity of the speaker, in the first case as a ‘good person’; in the second, not as a gambler, not as an alcoholic but as a good mother (Opsal 2012). A mother of three children, Philippa, reported having received numerous community sentences and being electronically tagged following repeated convictions for shoplifting, reportedly carried

out in order to fund her husband's drug use. Having been told by a magistrate that her next conviction would result in a prison sentence, Philippa reported being assaulted by her husband after she had refused to continue to shoplift on his behalf. Women are not only more stigmatized (Malloch and McIvor 2011; Sharpe 2015) by the social identity of offender but, in addition, involvement with the CJS and imprisonment in particular can jeopardize their role as carers for their children. As well as expressing her moral worth, we are reminded that for women who have been the subject of the CJS, there is also a practical necessity to present oneself as a good mother. Philippa thus explicitly refutes any suggestion that her good motherhood might have been in doubt. As Messerschmidt (2000; 2004) has argued gender both constitutes **and** structures social practice; femininity is simultaneously enacted and normatively evaluated. Assertion of a police officer's endorsement of her status as a good mother—*three kids at home that were cared for and looked after*—asserts a version of femininity that is both a counterpoint to and undermines the identity of offender. Thus, although Maruna (2001) argues that effective narratives of desistance require acknowledgement of offending and its effects, we suggest that what is being refused by women in these interviews is not so much the offence but the offender identity, via, in this case, the claim to good motherhood. Reference to confirmation from criminal justice and WCS professionals that they were not 'a criminal' was part of the identity *work* in the context of, but not simply as an artefact of the interview. A narrative presupposes a moral self in the narrating present (Presser 2009). Women's location of themselves as *other* from an offender identity was thus part of the work of presenting that moral self and of managing a *spoiled identity* (Goffman 1963)

Community

While we have described women's desire to distance and disassociate themselves from the offender identity, this was more difficult for women who had had a longer history of offending, imprisonment and substance misuse. Similarly to those who had briefer criminal careers, these women referred to the importance of acceptance by their peer group:

You know if you go somewhere else they think oh gosh they're you know, you been like arrested or you've got a suspended sentence or you've been in prison. They judge you. In here everyone like's just makes you feel at home. Because everyone's just like you, you know. So no-one's looking down their nose at you. (Cerys, 23)

The belonging, trust and reciprocity that peer group membership gave rise to, is presented in the interview accounts as central to the development of self-esteem for women who have felt stigmatized by the offender identity. Women's relationships to WCS case-workers and to peers were, in some cases, reported to be the first supportive relationship they had experienced in many years:

I'd see the bad picture for everything... I wouldn't see that there is something better at the end of it I'd just see the negative all the time. And coming here every week and talking to [Staff] and to the other girls that are here, because it's quite relaxed where you can sit, you know. There's like DIY courses where you just sit around and you can just say, 'Well you know what I'm feeling pretty crap today because...' And then maybe another girl's felt it six or seven weeks ago and she said, 'Well

you know what I felt that and this is how I dealt with it. It might not work for you but give it a try'. (Philippa, 30)

While a few women described being part of close networks of family and of friends, as discussed above, family and intimate partners were often not protective factors. Most reported that substance misuse and offending had taken their toll on their family and community relationships and often, indeed, offending and substance misuse appeared to have arisen from the abuse of childhood and fractured, violent relationships of later life (Giordano et al. 2002). Women thus regularly described lives that were isolated and remarkably unanchored from families and neighbourhoods and in which domestic abuse had frequently exacerbated such isolation:

I've got no family here, all my family are in [City] so I'm really on my own. So this [WCS] is like my socialising place, my learning place - it's everything to me do you know what I mean, under one roof is everything that I need (Jackie, 34)

I was nervous and scared because I didn't know, like I hadn't really communicated with any other people, if you see what I mean. I was very on my own for a long time. But now attending the actual centre, it's helped me to build my confidence and do things for myself (Shara, 25)

I wasn't getting out much; I was always in the house. I wasn't doing nothing. I didn't see none of me friends no more (Harriet, 21)

The social bonds of family support that Sampson and Laub (1993) argued were so important in providing 'turning points' for the male offenders they studied and that encouraged continued desistance from offending, would appear to be replaced for the women in our study by relationships with staff and peers at WCSs. Our interview data suggest that peer support can provide women with a community, representing a transformative alternative to the isolation and shame of the offender identity. Rumgay (2004a) has also emphasized the importance of prosocial networks for sustaining desistance and for gaining access to important community resources. Support from staff, from peers and the confidence that women suggested it had led to may, at times, be a prerequisite for their engagement with education, training and volunteering opportunities within and beyond the WCSs.

It is important to note though that a minority of women stated clearly that they were not comfortable in groups of other women and did not want to share their experiences of domestic abuse, substance misuse and offending, particularly when these issues remained unresolved. This was the case with Freya, a woman who reported having had a history of opioid use and domestic abuse and whose one-to-one sessions at the WCS had ended by the time of the second interview. She reported having recently been moved into an unfurnished flat some miles away from where her children were living with her mother and described herself as isolated and very depressed.

My psychiatrist did say to me 'just go to the drop-in' but I thought 'I don't just want to go and drop-in and sit with other women who I don't know, that's not what I want'. I can't do it, I don't like it you know. I don't want to commit a crime so I can get a one-to-one, you know? (Freya, 38)

While for some women, supportive relationships may come from peers, for others, the prospect of joining a 'drop-in' at a women's centre, a session to which any woman can come, is simply too daunting. For women like Freya, such groups may not be adequate in the face of acute distress. In her account, Freya asserts the need for skilled, one-to-one

support (Burnett and McNeill 2005), of the sort she had received from the WCS key worker; the only route back to which is, she suggests, to commit a crime. Such women, whose needs may be intractably complex, may thus require access to specialist services as well as more open-ended support from skilled staff and the opportunity to return to services in times of crisis (Gelsthorpe et al. 2007).

Moving beyond the service

As well as providing peer group and professional support, WCSs can provide basic skills courses, peer mentoring training and volunteer work placements. By volunteering at the WCS itself and mentoring other women, a number of the women interviewed reported that they were pleased to be able to ‘give back’ to the women’s centre that had supported them and also, more broadly, to be able to draw on their own experiences in providing help to others.

I’m their support now cos I’m actually mentoring one lady at the moment. The tables have turned a little bit, if you understand what I mean? I’ve become more of the supporter - than needing supporting. (Jackie, 34)

The role of mentor involves ex-offenders, drawing upon their former offender identity as a resource in the support of others (Maruna 2001). Being seen as a role model can itself provide a strong form of social control, preventing desisters from returning to offending (Maruna 2001; Carlsson 2013). As was clear from a number of our second interviews, becoming a mentor to other women, whether formally or informally, highlighted the extent to which a woman had moved beyond the shame of offending:

So I pop in most days and Thursdays and Fridays are my days. On a Thursday I do 10 until 12 p.m. and I have lunch with the girls and on a Friday I do one until three p.m. That’s a DIY group and I’m helping with a DSS [Department of Social Security] appeal next week, so I feel I’m giving back to the Women’s Centre what they gave me. (Lydia, 44)

Voluntary work and involvement in mentoring other women thus may provide redemptive *bridges* between the WCS, paid employment and a more normalized identity. As well as providing activity that helps to structure their time (Farrall 2002)—very often filling the gap left when substance misuse ceases—accredited courses offer women access to mainstream adult education.

I’m doing maths and English at the library at the moment but doing the courses at the women’s centre give me the confidence to do the courses at the library. I didn’t have any confidence at all until I went to the women’s centre. I was just alone and drinking [laughs], feeling sorry for myself. (Georgina, 43)

A service user who was first interviewed soon after she had accessed the service, and who had previously been a long-term user of heroin with a history of street prostitution, described in her second interview her recent educational achievements and future goals that involved moving beyond the opportunities available for her at the WCS:

So obviously I’ve gained my level 1 and 2 in English now so educational wise, there’s nothing really left for me at the women’s centre. Once I’ve done the mentoring, I’ve accessed everything I can access at the Women’s Centre and then obviously what Service’s plan is, eventually to integrate you back

into mainstream college or education or employment. And obviously I need more qualifications to do what I want to do so the route for me is college. (Jackie, 34)

The perception of the 'distance travelled' from the offender identity was discussed by women in a number of our second interviews. For example, Philippa who, as described above, had many convictions for theft and was a victim of domestic violence, compared her relatively stable situation at the time of her second interview with the emotional 'mess' she felt she was on first attending the WCS:

After so many years and months of that and sitting there and crying and nobody coming to you, you think to yourself hold on. .. I think I've just stood up and sort of like given myself a shake and said 'you know what, maybe I am better than all this and I can do it'. And obviously now, this time last year I was a mess and now I've come so far that I can't even believe it myself to be honest. (Philippa, 30)

And Georgina who described herself as never really having worked due to her ill health and lack of confidence, discussed her recent voluntary placement as helping her to get her confidence back:

I've only just got the confidence to do a volunteering job at the moment. I'm volunteering at a second hand shop... Well [worker] took me to the volunteer centre and because of my past history I can only work in a second-hand shop for now. I went there at 10am and I had a volunteer job by 11am (Georgina, 43)

Basic skills classes and work placements are presented as providing women with both skills and confidence that may enable them to access more mainstream education, volunteering and employment opportunities and to pass on their experiences as mentors. Such opportunities facilitate narratives of transformation in which women can invoke changed selves.

A caveat may be required here, lest an impression be given of smoothly transformed identities and neat narratives of transitions out of offending. In interviews, staff who work with women in the CJS, both in voluntary sector women-only settings and in the statutory sector, very often express 'dissonant discourses' (Corcoran and Fox 2013) about the experiences of the women with whom they work and the gender-based social injustices that they have encountered. WCS staff in our study frequently stated in interviews, for example, that 'there is always a man behind a women's offending'. Like the staff running the programme described in Rajeh et al.'s (2014) research and the WCS staff interviewed by Corcoran and Fox (2013), at the same time as endorsing a dominant narrative of personal responsibility (Bosworth 2007), WCS staff also described the complexity of women's experiences of gendered violence, poverty, addiction and isolation. Women service users' accounts also combined individualized redemptive scripts with an understanding of how their experience of offending and of the CJS had been shaped by social structural disadvantage. The woman who had received a community order on the third occasion of being caught stealing meat from a supermarket described her offence as arising from a need to feed her family after a debt incurred from a fine had been deducted from her welfare benefits. A woman who had narrowly avoided a custodial sentence, having been convicted of benefit fraud, reported that the criminal justice response had been excessively punitive both to her and her children. Several women located their offending in the context of substance misuse, domestic abuse and the 'bad luck' of getting caught. Women thus also reflected upon the implications of

their criminal justice sanction for their social status, accomplishing a respectability that was in opposition to the dominant narrative of *just deserts* (and see Skeggs 1997 for a discussion of working class women's reflective accounts). Without denying their offences, women's *neutralizing* accounts of their offending (Matza and Sykes 1957) were thus both protective of their underlying identities and demonstrating a recognition of the social structural organization of the stigma linked to offending (Parker and Aggleton 2003).

Conclusions

Those who work in the WCSs may not have explicitly described their work with women offenders in terms of the desistance perspective; however, it seems clear from our analysis that these centres can be effective in fostering women's non-offender identities and, importantly, providing them with alternative prosocial opportunities in a safe, women-only setting. Our findings, like others (Easton and Matthews 2010; Malloch and McIvor 2011), highlight the potentially stigmatizing experience of attending mixed gender probation offices for women offenders serving sentences in the community. WCSs in comparison are not saturated with the offender identity and indeed provide women with a range of opportunities to move beyond their offending and the offender identity. Gender shapes the processes of self-definition as it does the social structural disadvantages that have shaped women's lives. In interview accounts, women provided narrative strategies and accomplished a normative non-offender identity through distancing themselves from the offender identity. In these accounts, they presented themselves as not like male offenders or not *really* offenders at all. They were often all too aware of the social structural disadvantage in which their offending was embedded, providing accounts of selves that were transformed by the supportive relationships and opportunities available at WCSs. As Worrall (2002) has argued, it is often not cognitive deficits that drive women to offend but the complexities and the lack of other feasible choices in their lives. While in their own narratives, women's offending is frequently linked to such a lack of choice, the new sense of worth, purpose and self-esteem fostered by WCSs in those attending the services, may also bring the gradual acquisition of a new sense of agency.

The break-up and contracting out of probation service provision in England and Wales for offenders categorized as low to medium risk as part of the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda has brought further uncertainty concerning the future of these services (Clark 2014 and see Gelsthorpe and Hedderman 2012) that were funded until the end of March 2015 by the National Offender Management Service. At the time of writing, continuing lack of clarity remains as to what sorts of provision for women the new Community Rehabilitation Companies will make available in the long term (House of Commons Justice Committee 2015). Commercial confidentiality means furthermore that it is difficult to get information about the content of contracts between the Ministry of Justice and Community Rehabilitation Companies, making less transparent the process of commissioning of services. The network of WCSs undoubtedly do represent a hybrid, criminal justice/gendered responsive means to address the needs *and risks* of women serving sentencing in the community (Corcoran and Fox 2013). Corcoran and Fox described the WCS they studied, as 'a bit neo-liberal, a bit Fabien' (2013); in that the staff reinforced women's individual responsibility for engagement and compliance

at the same time as the service addressed social injustice by enabling access to a range of welfare services and support. As described, Corcoran and Fox's analysis of staff's *dissonant discourse* parallels our own findings regarding staff's understanding of the adversity and complex personal relationships that had frequently led women to offending. As Corcoran and Fox also describe, assessment tools in the service they studied were born both of therapeutic, social work rationales and oriented to adjusting women's 'risky' behaviour. One might thus argue that 'what works' in WCSs is their ability to *tutor* women in techniques of compliance and self-governance. Consistent reports that service users value the non-judgemental, emotional support and befriending offered by WCS staff (Rubus 2010; Paget 2011; Women's Work Derby 2011) considered vital to building trusting relationships and self-esteem (Rungay 2004b; Corcoran et al. 2010; 2011; Rice et al. 2011) cannot in our view be wholly disregarded however. As we have argued, as well as support from staff, women we interviewed also referred to the support and new sense of agency they acquired from other service users in formal and informal peer support networks. While we accept the contradictory character of staff discourse (Corcoran and Fox 2013), our interview data indicate that women with complex needs can derive enormous support from a collective peer experience. As work with sex offenders (Reeves 2013) has also noted, the influence and informal support from peers may have been underestimated in the desistance process. Perhaps inevitably such findings may have fed concern on the part of the Ministry of Justice that community orders are not sufficiently punitive, signalling renewed enforcement (Robinson and Ugwu-dike 2012) in newly marketized community sentences. Ministry of Justice policy for women in the CJS in the context of the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda has stated that a *special case* should not be made for women offenders and emphasized the need for 'credible, robust sentencing options in the community' that include a 'punitive element' in all community orders (Ministry of Justice 2013b). And while more recently policy has apparently endorsed the availability of female staff for women offenders and women-only services, this is couched in terms of 'Robust and effective sentencing options' (Ministry of Justice 2014), suggesting that community sentences must be means by which women *benefit* from punitive treatment (Shaylor 2008; Carlton and Segrave 2011).

We started this paper with an extract from a woman's poem describing WCSs as *Special Places*; our findings emphasize the importance of these gender-specific, supportive places in developing women's desistance from offending. Our study confirms research indicating that correctionalist policy and practice is likely to undermine not to encourage the process of desistance (McNeill 2012). Though we may have witnessed the opening and closing of a policy window in the development of innovative models for meeting the complex needs of women offenders, there is evidence none the less that women's voluntary sector community organizations, whose mission is very often explicitly that of social inclusion and support to marginalized women, are likely to remain involved in community sentence provision (House of Commons Justice Committee 2015; Women's Breakout 2015). We agree that many of the women receiving community and custodial sentences should **not** be there, and the new supervisory powers post-custody are likely to bring more not fewer women into the CJS (All Party Parliamentary Group on Women in the Penal System 2015). Further, we agree that the focus of criminological analysis should increasingly be on how upstream education and social care services may have failed such women (Sharpe 2015) as well as the need to lobby for the development of services for women outside the CJS (Kendall 2013). While we are thus under no illusion

of the project of the CJS to punish, yet we hope that our research has demonstrated that the tension between support and enforcement of community sentences for women offenders is a false one; the WCSs in our study have played an important role in promoting desistance as well as *decriminalizing* women, precisely by providing them with access to services, to supportive relationships with staff and to informal support from other women.

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