# A Critical Reflection on Being a Lived Experience Researcher

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**Summary:** The terminology used for individuals who have lived experience varies across research studies, disciplines and sectors. For example, service-users, peer researchers, PPIs (patient and public involvement) – all have lived experiences of some kind, which is much sought after within academic and clinical research settings and can include individuals with lived experience of the mental health system and/or the criminal justice system. The interviews I have shared in this article highlight the complexities of the lived-experience positionality. While there are many different lived-experience biographies, one thing they all share is their unique insight. To demonstrate these complexities, I have shared several interviews I conducted in 2015 with ex-prisoners who had all entered higher education through a process of self-transformation. I have merged these with my own personal narrative as a lived experience practitioner who also entered higher education to transform my life.
**Keywords:** Lived experience, prison research, service-user, criminal justice, desistance, patient public involvement.

## Background

My first publication about the lived-experience narrative was during my early career when I published an article, 'Living with lifers', about my time spent with life-sentenced prisoners during my terms in prison. What struck me about these individuals was how different they were in comparison to the rest of the prison population and how completely out of touch the public are in their thoughts of what lifers are actually like (see Honeywell, 2015). As this became my most cited article, I realised the powerful impact lived-experience accounts can have in academia and the third sector. Since then, I have written two monographs, both of which are underpinned by the lived-experience narrative, *The Ambiguities of Desistance*, which draws on several key ambiguous desistance themes from my PhD study about ex-prisoners and the

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transformation of self through higher education (HE). Although my key research question was how HE transforms an ex-prisoner's sense of self, desistance became the core framework. Therefore, I decided to focus on the more diverse aspects of desistance that are not discussed to the same extent in mainstream desistance theories. For example, 'prisons and desistance', 'institutional ambiguities', 'the pains of desistance', 'shared narratives' and 'negotiating identities' all provide a rich and nuanced narrative of the desistance experience. Such ambiguities were a result of unusual themes of ex-prisoners being interviewed by an ex-prisoner. Several of these interviewees were convict criminologists, and from their interviews it was clear that their pasts informed their present and future academic work. My most recent book, *Living with Desistance: Breaking the Cycle* (2023), is autobiographical and theoretical and based on my own desistance trajectory. This article reflects on content from both of these publications.

## Methodology: The insider/outsider dichotomy

The methodology is a critical reflection of the insider/outsider positionality which comes from two studies. The first study, between 2013 and 2018, was about ex-prisoners in higher education. For it, I conducted 24 semi-structured face-to-face interviews with individuals who were transforming their lives through higher education (Honeywell, 2018). The second study is part of an ongoing large-scale study. In its early stages, I conducted twelve semi-structured telephone interviews, which focused on conversations around the development of resources to help engage suicidal prisoners with therapy intervention. I am unable to share any data from this project, which is still ongoing and has yet to publish its findings, but the key theme of this paper is the complexities of the lived-experience position and inconsistencies that exist within academic and research settings. My PhD findings showed that HE could open doors for people with criminal records and, although some had smoother passages than others, everyone I interviewed had benefited in some way. My own experience was the same and I am now a criminology lecturer. However, there still remain limitations within certain sectors.

## The complexities of the lived-experience trajectory

The self-transformation process can take a lifetime, going through many stages – often more zigzag than in any set order – and one of the most important stages includes casting off one's past offender identity through gradually

developing a new identity (Maruna, 2001; Giordano *et al.*, 2002). However, while this notion is pertinent to the majority of those transforming their lives, it does not apply to all. In Honeywell (2021), I refer to these nuances as 'ambiguities of desistance' because of the many complexities and nuances that exist within the process of transforming one's life away from criminal associations (i.e. desistance). The notion of separating one's past identity from one's present identity does not fall within the trajectory of those with lived experience who present an essential, yet complex, dynamic, which we will see in the forthcoming interviews.

## An insider reflection of the lived-experience researcher

The use of individuals with 'lived experience' as ex-service-users within research studies, as practitioners within the criminal justice system, and in the third sector as counsellors and support workers, has become widespread in recent years. For example, patient and public involvement (PPI), also termed 'service-user involvement', in research is now accepted as highly desirable and even mandatory in order to obtain funding from national bodies such as the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR) (see INVOLVE, 2019; Greenwood *et al.*, 2021). However, despite the growing desire for the assistance of those with backgrounds as mental health patients and prisoners, there are nuances to PPI involvement that need further exploration and crucial change (Honeywell, forthcoming). The lived-experience identity spans several disciplines and is particularly sought after from clinical-based research studies. Gupta *et al.* (2023) highlight the complexities for the lived-experience researcher, and it was being a researcher with a criminal record that was the most challenging experience within my academic career. In 2019, I became a co-applicant for a prestigious four-year research project on prison suicide, so I was also involved in discussions between the funders and the team about the need for service-user or patient and public involvement.

   As part of the funding application process, the sponsors requested that someone with 'lived experience' be recruited, as this gives authenticity, with a novel insight which acts as a voice for others who have also been in that position. It provides a formal platform for those whose voices in the past have been muted by the establishment. In recent years, there has been movement by medical and psychological research sponsors to insist that individuals with lived experience be included in research studies. These individuals, who are actively involved in research projects and research organisations, are referred to as service-users or PPIs (patient and public involvement). Their identities

are always anonymised, so it is rare for a service-user to become a researcher themselves in a psychology-based study without needing to be anonymised. In 2019, I officially became a full-time paid member of the research team as a research assistant, alongside my role as a co-investigator. I felt that my educational journey was continuing to open doors towards a place I could never have imagined – particularly as part of the research would include going back to one of the prisons where I had served my last prison sentence and where I gained my university entrance qualifications.

I knew that, for me, gaining permission to work inside a prison long term could never be straightforward. Even before that stage, it was a worry whether I could even bypass the initial university recruitment process and be accepted into this prestigious institution. I was honoured when I crossed that bridge, but there was still the next stage – to gain access to prisons which will be the bane of my life forever because of the indelible stain (Earle, 2016) they have put on my character. A DBS[1] check was the initial stage of our prison vetting process. Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, this led to my application to work in prison being rejected. Higher education had previously enabled me to rise above all this, but now it became a catch-22 situation where, although I was employed by the university, because of my back-ground, I was unable to fulfil my role as a prison researcher. Later in this article, it will be seen from some of the interviews I conducted with other ex-prisoners how they used HE towards self-transformation. There remains a question, however, regarding whether there is a limit on how far we are allowed go. Will there always be certain areas of teaching and research that will close their doors to people with criminal records?

Perhaps the issue lies within the type of research ex-prisoners are allowed to gain access to conduct, which if it is particularly sensitive then causes concern. This might be the case, but there is no system for discussions on this to take place, which leaves many more questions than answers. But these are questions that do need to be addressed. My key argument, therefore, is that there needs to be a seamless process in place for prison researchers with criminal records, who are invested in helping with the advancement of new research while drawing on their insight of having been in prison, to conduct research.

Bagley *et al.* (2016) argue that funders of research increasingly require research projects to involve patients, the public and ex-prisoners in their research. We already know that former prisoners have been able to conduct

1 In England and Wales, employers can check the criminal record of a person applying for a role by seeking a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. See https://www.gov.uk/request-copy-criminal-record

criminology-based prison research in the UK (Earle, 2014; Davies, 2015; Aresti *et al.*, 2010) but not so much as part of a large-scale psychological study, in particular one that includes a clinical trial.

PPI in research can potentially help researchers to ensure that the design of their research is relevant, that it is participant-friendly and that it is ethically sound. Awenat (2016) argues that, when it comes to clinical based research, other than 'those who either work in, or have been incarcerated in, a prison, few have any authoritative "lived experience" of the realities of prison life' (p. 101). In other words, only those with first-hand experience of imprisonment can understand what it is like to be in prison and, therefore, there needs to be more scope for PPIs to take a more hands-on role within research studies where they are included in the design and study. Those with lived experience make considerable invaluable contributions to research, teaching and the third sector. Below are some examples of individuals who have done that.

## Being a lived experience practitioner

The narratives in this section are from an assortment of lived experience practitioners, including individuals who at the time were working in academia and the third sector. Some were university students who have since gone on to become PhD students and beyond. Those who teach and conduct research in a university setting develop the unique skill of working with a dual identity, as their present academic identity is informed by their past criminal identity (see Mobley as cited in Jones *et al.*, 2009; Tietjen, 2019). The interviewee names cited here are pseudonyms.

Gerry, 36, is one of most persistent offenders I have interviewed. He had spent many years as a career criminal, mainly drug dealing, but after a lengthy criminal history, he began to try and make changes to his life. When Gerry was shown a little trust, it became a major 'turning point' in his transformation, where he began to forge a new identity (Laub and Sampson, 2003). This is how he recalls the events around this period of this life:

> 'I started volunteering with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) through another fantastic bloke called Ben who worked with PCT at the time. He took me under his wing – invited me to their offices. I remember the first time I went into their office, it was an open office […] I was walking past desks and I passed people where there were purses. There were wallets! There were handbags! Mobiles and laptops! Thinking to myself, 'How the f--k is

this guy trusting me with all this around me?' Just left me on a computer with all this around me! I think that was one of the biggest things. That trust someone put in me to sit next to a purse that wasn't mine and trusted me not to take it or touch it. I will always, always, remember that … always remember that. That was the biggest thing in my recovery … that someone gave me the trust.'

(Gerry)

This symbolic gesture of trust was the catalyst in Gerry's transformation as it forced him to re-evaluate and question his identity. He began to evaluate how he had had the opportunity to steal money while at the same time questioning why someone who knew of his past had trusted him to be left alone in an office surrounded by unattended handbags and purses. Gerry became very emotional when recalling the trust that was shown to him, and here we begin to see an emerging pattern of how newly formed social interactions and social bonds through acceptance can influence self-transformation:

'Like within the drug-treatment places you'd do your service-user involvement thing and you'd be facilitating drugs, or you'd be pro-facilitating, but you were never allowed in the staff part. Now at PCT they allowed me in. As I say … gave me that trust and I felt really good. Every time I left that building, I never touched anything. I wanted to succeed at that point. I wanted to get involved with that. I felt important, I never touched it. I felt good every time I left that building. Always had the thought, 'I'll just take twenty out, she won't notice', but never ever did. From that point on, I wouldn't say I never offended, but I never stole anything.'

(Gerry)

Gerry was adamant that being trusted gave him the desire to turn his life around, but although Gerry had stopped stealing, he did not completely abstain from offending (McNeill and Weaver, 2007). This was because the trust he had been shown linked directly to his workplace, as opposed to his involvement with other types of offending. Although Gerry makes a very strong argument that the trust shown in him was enough to stop him stealing, he still needed to believe in himself. We can see how Gerry starts to believe in himself as he begins to reassess his own views of deviant behaviours:

'At that point in time, I don't think I would know [whether to accept legitimate employment]. I think, for argument's sake, if it was a thousand pound a week I was bringing home, I still think there would have been some form of offending. Whether that would have been dealing; whether it would have gone bigger where my funds could take me, within organisational crime or whatever, I don't know. I don't think any amount of money at that point would have stopped me offending.'

(Gerry)

Gerry admits that he would never have accepted a legitimate job had there been an opportunity for one, because a 'criminal status' was most important to him. However, as we can see in his narrative above, he began to evolve within his workplace where he was able to hold down legitimate employment. This gave him not only a legitimate source of financial stability, but also a transformed sense of self and new identity. Gerry began to 'cast off' (Maruna, 2001) his deviant identity, which had once defined who he was, and to aspire towards developing a renewed identity as a legitimate employee and work colleague (Giordano *et al.*, 2002). As time passed, he started to progress up the employment ladder, alongside entering higher education, and eventually he would make one of the most remarkable transformations of all the interviewees.

Charlie, on the other hand, was unlike Gerry in that he was not a persistent offender. However, like Gerry, his catalyst for change was being shown belief and trust. Charlie was euphoric when he was offered employment, but he continued to internalise shame about his offending and still felt he deserved the stigma. Leibrich (1993) found shame to be a major factor in her participants' decisions to move away from crime. But before Charlie was shown any trust, he experienced several difficult periods from day one of leaving prison:

'When I came out of prison, I had to change doctors because my mum worked at a doctor's surgery. They asked me if I could change doctors, just because she had been so traumatised by having her son in prison and all that. So, I did, and a doctor said: "What do you want to do"? and I said, "I might try and go into teaching one day or go back to social working", and he said, "No, you won't!" and that really hurt me, and I thought – 'f--k you'! […] I made a determined effort that I would prove him wrong. My case went to the Department of Education, and they said I could become a teacher if I wanted to, so I would like to think that if I ever

want to go down the social-work line, that they would have the attitude that this person could offer.'

(Charlie)

Charlie internalised this derogatory comment from his doctor, which challenged his sense of identity, but used it as a springboard to overcome his inevitable anxieties. Considering that such a bigoted remark came from someone in a position of authority in a caring profession, as with some of my other interviewees, Charlie was able to utilise it to strengthen his resilience and determination. We can see this process when Charlie tells of being offered employment:

'I didn't think that I would succeed. Then I started volunteering for NACRO [National Association for the Rehabilitation of Offenders] in about January 2006 […] then they offered me a job, and then I went home and was very emotional because I thought, Wow! Somebody believes in me. I can begin again. Then when the doctor said that sort of thing, I thought, well, I could go one of two ways: I can either implode and be crushed by this or I can use it and fight and be determined.'

(Charlie)

The negative comments from Charlie's doctor seemed to trigger a determination to succeed and prove himself, and the belief and trust afforded to both Gerry and Charlie ignited a passion to triumph. Through their own self-determination and through forging new alliances, they developed a new resilience that enabled them to overcome negative experiences and obstacles.

Sid explained how his past and present merge to create a stronger criminologist profile:

'How could it not inform everything I do? How could it not inform everything … the stuff that I lecture about? The stuff I write about? Everything I write about? […] that old identity has to be part of it! It's like my old identity and my new identity have merged together. I guess what I am saying now […] my identity now is a combination of some of the positive of the past experience and what I have achieved now and what I do now.'

(Sid)

Sid views his successful academic identity as having been forged through a combination of past and present identities, as discussed above, and believes that the criminology route was the most relevant, given his past, and that his new status of being a criminology lecturer (i.e. possessing a privileged knowledge) gives him a sense of identity that embraces his past and present identities.

## The impact of discrimination, stigma and spoiled identities

Despite developing pro-social identities through the transformative process of higher education, the participants still encountered barriers which included further stigmatisation. Goffman (1963) uses the term 'spoiled identity' to refer to the stigmatised individual as being outcast, but often the participants unwittingly created this problem themselves. For example, over-disclosing can create stigmatisation not only by other individuals but also by universities, resulting in participants having their applications rejected because of their criminal backgrounds, despite their convictions being 'spent' (not required by law to be disclosed). This happened because some of the applicants had not understood what the terms 'spent' and 'unspent' meant.

This ambiguity can be further understood in the language of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Acts, 1974 and 2014 (Unlock, 2018). Such misunderstanding has led to several participants being unfairly rejected by universities (Prisoners Education Trust, 2017), although the reason they disclosed their past convictions was that they did not want to be dishonest. For some, just the thought of being judged again for their past crimes was so distressing that they did not disclose convictions through fear of rejection and undergoing further scrutiny, which is explained in Debbie's narrative below:

'I went and applied for my PGCE [Postgraduate Certificate in Education] and it's the hardest thing I've ever done but I stayed on and did that. When they found out about my criminal record for that and it was in the same university centre, that was a little bit tougher […] I had to get a letter from Sarah who is the CEO [of her current employment], explaining that I'd been here for four and a half years. It's my past and it's not a problem, Sarah had to write me a thing saying, "She excelled at all"!'

(Debbie)

Debbie attempted to overcome the barriers of entering HE by withholding her past. However, her past came to light when, having completed her degree, she decided to enrol on a teacher-training course. Despite having gained her university degree, and her proven commitment to study and achievement, her past was scrutinised by a panel. She claims that it was as though she was being judged again for her past demeanours when all she wanted to do is move forward with her life:

> 'I felt very much like I'd been judged because of that. I got pulled into the office with the head and three people while they scrutinised me. I get it, if I was going to be working with vulnerable people; they needed to be sure who they were putting there.'
>
> (Debbie)

There is no question that for certain courses, such as teaching, where adults are coming into direct contact with children and vulnerable people, a full disclosure of one's criminal background is imperative, but perhaps the problem here is not so much about policy as about how individual cases, such as Debbie's, are handled by those making the judgements. Once the university eventually accepted Debbie's application, she successfully completed the PGCE, an achievement which the university has since used as an example for other students to aspire to:

> 'I felt like I was under the spotlight at that moment in time. Having to rationalise why, what and why I wanted to do … but they allowed me to [study the PGCE] and didn't find any fault […] They now use my files to show me round to everybody else, so there you go.'
>
> (Debbie)

Debbie's employers saw her as an asset to their organisation, which led to increased self-confidence, self-respect and financial stability, and although she has had to face some hurdles at university, she didn't have to endure total rejection, which is what happened in Melody's case.

Melody, was, at the time, a 44-year-old student. She had a most serious offending background, yet through studying in prison, she proved that she was serious about changing her life, and thus began her self-transformation. Despite this, she was initially rejected by the first university of her choice:

'I had done my "A" Level. I had done my GCSEs in jail. Started the "A" Levels, got released and my Probation Officer was really good, took me to college. Got "A" Levels in psychology, sociology and law, which I thought would be enough to get me in, and I was just classed, being 25, as mature. Applied for a DipSW [Diploma in Social Work] and it was "NO"! "Someone with an extensive criminal record like yours will never, ever, get in any university in England or Wales." I've still got the letter. I've put it away for when I do get the degree.'

(Melody)

Along with the research by the Prisoners' Education Trust in 2017, Melody's narrative offered further empirical data demonstrating discriminatory practices by universities, which continue to be an area of contention. The university, in this case, was more concerned about Melody's convictions than her academic abilities and achievements.

Ruby believed that she was rejected by five universities because of her criminal record. There was no evidence to support this, but it is usual for those with criminal convictions to make this assumption based on their experiences of stigma and rejection. Ruby was 40 years old, had been involved in the sex industry and was a drug-user in her previous life. At the time of writing, she had become a substance-abuse worker, supporting others with substance-abuse issues. It was essential for Ruby to demonstrate her independence and gain a degree in criminology and sustain successful employment:

'Got rejected from five universities because I've a criminal conviction. I applied for social work and the reason I applied for social work was purely financial, because the pay is amazing. [The first] university wanted to know more about my convictions, but they'd already lost my UCAS [Universities and Colleges Admissions Service] form so there was no way I was sending a DBS [background information on convictions] through the post to the university. I ended up with a proper snotty woman asking me my convictions, which, clearly, I'm not going to share. Didn't get a place. The second university didn't even acknowledge my application.'

(Ruby)

The common denominator between Melody and Ruby's examples of being rejected by universities is that they both applied to study social work, which

requires background checks. Melody and Ruby then both enrolled on criminology degrees and had no issues. It could be argued that this is perhaps why students with criminal records often gravitate towards social sciences, where there are fewer restrictions and rather more opportunities.

This does fit with my own experiences of working as a researcher, suggesting that there are only some sectors where people with convictions will be allowed to flourish, such as teaching criminology and working in the third sector. Melody and Ruby's experiences need to be further explored, together with those of others with similar experiences. Although Melody and Ruby have criminal convictions, why should this mean that they cannot be social workers? The universities that rejected them because of their convictions are surely suggesting that the industry is off bounds to them. We know that Probation Services, for example, do employ people with convictions. Since Ruby was rejected by the university admissions team to study a social science degree, and after her interview with me, she has gone on to work in a prison and, since then, the Probation Service. This directly identifies universities as being particularly discriminatory. While they are rejecting individuals to study on degree programmes relating to specific industries, because of criminal convictions, they are most certainly employing others, such as myself, to teach criminology.

In some instances, these individuals were treated with disrespect rather than being offered guidance, such as in Melody's case where she was told that, with her extensive criminal record, she would 'never' get into any university in England or Wales. She proved them wrong because this rejection just made her more determined:

> 'I went and got wrecked [drunk]. Inside? I felt "f--k you!" I felt like going to rob someone, or shoot someone, you know? […] I would have probably hit someone before I burst into tears in them days. I've never been a crier. My anger would come out as violence instead of "boo hoo". Sadness – I would probably internalise it then become aggressive.'
>
> (Melody)

As well as being told that she would never be accepted into any university because of her extensive criminal history, shortly after this, Melody was rejected for a job application:

'I applied for a job at the local drug alcohol service. I think I got down out of sixty people, got to the last eight but didn't get that. I thought "Bollocks to this! I'm going back to crime!"'

(Melody)

Ultimately this experience led Melody to consider reoffending, which is a common reaction to continual rejection, although (as with Ruby) there is no indication that she was unsuccessful in her application for the job because of her criminal record. In fact, considering that they were both shortlisted in the first instance, it would suggest that criminal records were not an immediate contributing factor, at least. An important theme here is the language that is being used by others towards these vulnerable individuals. Some individuals appear ill-equipped to deal with people who have criminal convictions. Their responses can be recognised as disrespectful, harmful, discriminative, unprofessional and potentially damaging.

## Finding redemption and generativity through the 'lived experience'

Some of the interviewees found that working in the third sector as lived-experience practitioners enriched their lives through a sense of 'giving back' – redemption and generativity. Maruna (2001) also found this in his study of ex-prisoners 'making good', which developed his notion of the 'wounded healer'. This idea of making amends for past wrongdoings through good work as counsellors and advisors resonated with Arthur Frank's (1995) writing of the 'wounded storyteller', which discusses many poignant accounts of personal struggles with trauma, substance abuse, alcohol and relationships. Individuals with lived experience feel that they should be able to contribute something meaningful to society and leave a legacy. It is yet another example of how past biographies can feed into future identities channelled through the work they do to help others at risk of going down the same path as they once did.

Yet, as Maruna (2001) rightly argues, this 'redemptive self' concept is barely acknowledged within mainstream society. He argues that people with convictions should be allowed the chance to redeem themselves through employment, education and generally making amends. The focus is often on negative and bad publicity, yet lived experience practitioners do still rise above the stigma to achieve impressive goals for themselves, the organisations they work for and the individuals they help.

Gemma, who was 34 when I interviewed her, had been a habitual drug-user and was stigmatised by her local community. She had later found work with a church and, later again, as a senior substance-abuse practitioner:

'I started volunteering in church's drugs project [...] at the moment, it does all the food, homeless, like a soup kitchen for the homeless. I started volunteering for them because I started thinking I wanted work in this field. As a lot of people do when they are in recovery and think I want to work in the drugs field. I say to a lot of them now, go and try something else first because it is hard.'

(Gemma)

Gemma claims that many recovering addicts choose to work in the same field to help others. Her claim is supported by the work of Brown (1991), who coined the term, 'professional exes'. Like Maruna's 'wounded healers', these are individuals who have 'exited their deviant careers by replacing them with occupations in professional counselling. During their transformation, professional exes utilise vestiges of their deviant identity to legitimate their past deviance and generate new careers as counsellors' (Brown, 1991, p. 219).

Debbie also became involved in working with those she was able to identify with, who were suffering from addictions. She found her work very rewarding and has been given very encouraging support to succeed:

'I have worked with people, and I can see their journeys changing and it's the best thing ever [...] You do it because it's rewarding genuinely helping people and you know you're making a difference [...] It's not about the high salaries or ... it's continuing to make sure that these centres stay open and that the women get the help. Even the men get the help they need and get advice that they need. We do offer counselling. We're very much a one-stop-shop so there are therapeutic services here as well. The practical and the emotional side, they get that help.'

(Debbie)

It is clear from these narratives that although employment is an essential bridge towards developing a new self, it is just as much about helping others to get back on track with their lives. The people they support are a mirror image of their own former selves, such as Carla, who at the time was working with one of the largest charities in the northeast of England, helping those

who had drug and alcohol dependency with housing. Carla had previously had issues with drugs and alcohol herself and drew on her experiences to enhance her work.

> 'We deliver drug and alcohol contracts integrated with end of manage-
> ment. Housing – all sorts. We are a social enterprise.'

> (Carla)

Carla was proud to be working in this area and spoke highly of her employers. Kavanagh and Borrill (2013) highlight how people like my interviewees report strong feelings about turning their lives around and being in a professional position where they are respected amongst their peers and colleagues. This creates a new and rewarding identity. Tariq is a good example of this.

Tariq was a one-off offender and had committed a serious offence, but he had worked hard to distance himself from his past. He became committed to working with families who were experiencing substance and alcohol abuse and, at the time of writing, was even involved in a voluntary group at his local police station:

> 'I work with families who are affected by substance misuse and alcohol
> abuse. So, I don't work with the person misusing substance or alcohol, I
> work with their family. That's my main job, and the other time I've got a
> second job. One of my dad's mates for a bit of extra cash. You'll find this
> interesting: I'm an independent advisory group at the local police station.'

> (Tariq)

Tariq had re-entered education, as had some of the others, which had enabled him to transform his life, yet despite Tariq's hard work and huge transformation, he continued to feel that he needed do more to redeem himself:

> 'I'm still trying to prove myself. I don't need to, but I feel I have to. I feel
> I have to and now I've got my master's [degree] it does make me feel a
> lot better.'

> (Tariq)

Although Tariq could not be described as a persistent offender, he put his experiences of prison and the criminal justice system to good use and was

very appreciative of the strong family support he had, and which enabled him to make a smoother passage into employment than some of the others. His transition was smoother than most, but it has not been without difficulties. Tariq is from a Pakistani family and though his family were all very supportive, their close-knit community was not always as forgiving:

> 'When the incident occurred, people came around and they were quite sympathetic towards my family. No one ever said anything. They don't generally tend to say things to your face. It will be a case of later on they will be talking about so-and-so's son is in prison, did you hear about so-and-so's son, he did a bit of time. That carries a lot of weight in our culture because, not to say that shame isn't an issue in every culture, but it carries a lot of weight in our culture. It's really important and people attach a lot of value to it.'

> (Tariq)

Again, 'shame' was a significant factor in Tariq's transition. As discussed earlier in relation to Charlie, it had a significant impact. Tariq explained that convictions carry a lot of weight in the Pakistani culture because of the shame people attach to them, and redemption is an expectation where great emphasis is placed upon 'giving back'.

Adam Calverley's (2013) sample of Indian desisters differed from Maruna's (2001) sample, who wanted to take on the role of 'wounded healers' (Maruna, 2001, p. 102). Calverley's were more focused on 'giving back' to their close relatives, such as their parents, who had helped and shielded them. Calverley argues that there is pressure on these families to uphold a level of respectability in the aftermath of their sons' criminality. Although Tariq is Pakistani, as for Indian desisters, it is usual in his community for those convicted to be afforded family backing, which gives them a lot of love and support, but this also comes with certain expectations. What was of particular interest was what Calverley describes as an absence of labelling (Becker, 1963) and stigmatisation (Goffman, 1963) in Indian families.

## Conclusion

My appointment at the University of Manchester in the Psychology Department broke new ground, and although I was not able to gain access to the prison estate, much has been learned about the important contributions service-

users can make (Greenwood *et al.,* 2021). My appointment has also high-lighted aspects of the vetting system that need to be reviewed when it comes to service-users gaining access to prisons to conduct research (Honeywell, forthcoming). In addition, it has been an important landmark for future service-users who wish to follow the same path as myself and want to conduct clinically based prison research.

Not being given access to prisons evoked feelings of stigma and a re-opening of old wounds, which gave me a sense that as far as the criminal justice system is concerned, no matter what you do to redeem yourself, the system will always see you as a risk or a liability. It challenges the whole idea of rehabilitation and desistance theory and demonstrates how the criminal justice system does not always acknowledge this theory, despite one's achievements.

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