

“F*ck It!”: Matza and the Mood of Fatalism in the Desistance Process

Introduction

For nearly two decades there has been concerted interest in desistance from crime (Maruna 2001; Giordano et al 2002; Maruna & Immarigeon 2004; Laub & Sampson 2006; McNeill 2006; King 2013a) with the conditions that spark and sustain it the subject of ongoing debate (e.g. Bushway et al 2003; Burnett & McNeill 2005; Barry 2013). Evidence suggests that even for those who have ‘made it’, re-building one’s life after being convicted of a criminal offence frequently involves minor and more serious setbacks (Bottoms & Shapland, 2011; Farrall 2002a; Bereswill 2010; Halsey & Deegan 2015; Wright 2015). In this article, we demonstrate that giving up crime is indeed a fragile project (Halsey 2007) but that the implications of fragility in the desistance process are rarely integrated into pre- and post-release planning and support strategies. In more specific terms, we argue that fragility – *the omni-present threat of the derailment of desistance* – is especially pronounced for people evincing serious and lengthy custodial and release histories (see our respective datasets, below). Unlike, say, the airline pilot whose capacity to cope with major turbulence typically increases with each flying hour, the ‘battle-hardened’ would-be desister often becomes overwhelmed by circumstances in spite of having ‘been there’ many times before. Rather than viewing such relapses as entirely the result of individual shortcomings, we show this unraveling to be linked to bureaucratic (in)action over the legitimate fears and concerns of those struggling to desist. Our contention, therefore, is that the phenomenological foreground (Katz 1988) of relapse and reoffending has been under-examined in desistance research (but see Gadd & Farrall 2004; Agnew & Messner, 2015), and that such knowledge is central for breaking the cycle of crime and reincarceration.

Our analysis of setbacks (and recovery) in the desistance process focuses on people who are *trying* to desist, but who nonetheless reoffend. Uniquely, we apply Matza’s (1990 [1964]) concept of the ‘mood of fatalism’ to would-be desisters’ lives and examine the sense of social and economic isolation that can quickly set in following release from custody. With a particular focus on the relationship between *desperation* and *infraction*, we show how Matza’s work enriches our understanding of why people temporarily and sometimes spectacularly give up the quest to desist from crime. In the parlance of those interviewed, we offer a detailed analysis of the situations where people subjected to criminal justice supervision reach a critical limit and simply decide, “fuck it”.¹ Our ideas unfold through three sections. In the first, we briefly summarise the international datasets informing our work and the approach taken to the field in each study. Next, we closely examine the subjective factors leading to frustration in the desistance process and describe how the emergence

¹ This phrase is not employed to offend readers’ sensibilities nor as some rhetorical flourish. Instead, it is an expression frequently used by interviewees. For them (as for us) it functions as a declarative marker of the fatalistic attitude arising from the intolerable circumstances apt to undermine desistance. For reason of style, we use the phrase without speech marks in the main body of our prose.

of fuck it episodes – often perceived by outsiders as heat of the moment and highly irrational events – are in fact more typically the outcome of *cumulative* setbacks and perceived injustices. We argue that such moments arise *not* from individuals' intentions to cause more harm, but from the lack of effective channels for resolving difficulties in the struggle to desist.

In the final section, we engage more purposefully with Matza's ideas to untangle the aetiology of events arising from fatalism in the desistance process. Adopting a 'Matza Plus' approach, we consider how the lived experiences in our participant cohorts both confirm and expand the concept of fatalism as originally formulated in *Delinquency and Drift*. In keeping with a soft determinist approach, we argue there *are* moments where things could have turned out differently for those in our research. We show that the key antidote to fatalism (i.e. *real* options for avoiding repeat criminal conduct) is the availability of mechanisms to restore a sense of humanism at the point when it is most vulnerable to compromise (see King 2013b). Our contention is that research on desistance can help shape responses to early infractions in ways that nurture more positive forms of selfhood.

1. Fieldwork / Project Data

Data for this article is qualitative and drawn from distinct interview cohorts in three countries: Australia (AU), the United States (US), and the United Kingdom (ENG).² The Australian sample focuses on 14 young men (aged 25 to 29 years at final interview) interviewed repeatedly from 2003 to 2013 to better understand progressions and setbacks in the desistance process (n=135 interviews) (see Halsey & Deegan 2015). By end 2013, the 14 participants had collectively served around 33,000 custodial days with the majority first admitted to custody prior to age 13. This small but significant group had at least 10 – but sometimes more than 30 – custodial release episodes to age 18, and were convicted of a wide range of offences to age 29 including violent, property, and drug offences. Experience of foster care, homelessness, drug (ab)use, poor schooling / low literacy levels, mental health problems, and chronic unemployment were prominent elements in their lives. Twelve of the young men identified as Caucasian, one as Aboriginal, and one as Asian.

The U.S.A. data stems from an ethnographic study of 48 men who were initially interviewed in 2007 just prior to release from prison, at two weeks post-release (n=45), and then an average of eight months from their release date (n=36) with weekly phone-calls and regular informal interactions. The aim was to understand the realities of life after prison and to capture the emergent factors that support and strengthen desistance journeys, with a specific focus on the role of faith and faith communities. Nearly 90 per cent of participants self-reported previous convictions, with an average of 10 prior arrests. Most participants had previously served time in prison (79%) and nearly two thirds were first incarcerated before age 18. The cohort had a mean age of 40 (at first interview

² All projects were approved by the relevant ethics committees of each University.

the youngest was aged 23 and the eldest 64). The majority were in prison for an index offence that was violent or drugs-related. Other offences included property crime, several forms of drink-driving, and one firearms possession. Alongside self-report data, official reconviction data was analysed for each participant two years post-release.³

The UK sample includes 12 women who were interviewed in one of two closed prisons in England, between May and November 2011. All except two described their ethnicity as White-British (Alex self-identified as Black British, and Mary as White-Irish). Six of the 12 women had been officially identified as 'Prolific and other Priority Offenders' (PPOs) (see Dawson, 2005, for an overview and initial report into the impetus and implementation of this initiative). The remaining six met the criteria for 'persistent' offenders (POs) with six or more convictions. The women ranged in age from 23 to 62 years (mean=34 years), although the PPOs were on average 7.5 years younger than the POs in the sample. Nine of the twelve women were serving time for serious property and violent offences, or drug possession/supply, with the remainder convicted or remanded in custody for robbery, theft, and breach of an anti-social behavior order (alcohol related). Seven of the twelve women were mothers. Life history interviews explored the relationship between long-term persistent offending and periods of prolific offending extant within the women's so-called 'criminal careers'. In addition, interviewees were also asked to narrate the effects of various criminal justice interventions on their lives – in particular, whether and how such interventions assisted or 'frustrated' the women's struggles to desist from crime

Consistent with a grounded approach (Glaser 1992), interview transcripts were coded and analysed for key emergent themes with a specific focus on the subjective, social, and administrative contexts of fuck it events. While fuck it episodes might appear to reduce to little more than a rhetorical device for justifying 'failure' in the desistance process, we think this seriously underplays the complexity of the situation. Instead, we find participants employed the 'fuck it' phraseology not to excuse their behavior, but to *explain* their actions and to take ownership over 'their' mistakes. We therefore use this international multi-site data to offer an instructive glimpse into the derailing of desistance across different cohorts of participants.

2. "Fuck It" in Action

At the heart of our analysis is Matza's concept of fatalism. He writes:

The delinquent is subject to frequent oscillation between sensing himself as cause – humanism – and seeing himself as effect – fatalism. Everyone experiences this oscillation. However, the delinquent may experience it somewhat more intensely because the precepts of his [sic] subculture are receptive to the older, traditional notions of fatalism (Matza 1990: 88).

³ For a convincing discussion of the importance and "validity" of self-report re-offending data see the recent work of Farrington and Ttofi (2014).

By “older, traditional notions”, we take Matza to mean the more direct and sometimes brutal forms of control and discipline experienced by young people (“delinquents”) and those who occupy the bottom strata of the social heap (Schutz 2004). It is the sense of being done *to* instead of being done *with*. In response to these situations, Matza (1990: 189) contends that some individuals become overwhelmed by a state of *desperation* – they feel themselves becoming “unhinged” from the mainstream world with no (lawful) way back. Similar to Katz’s (1988) writings on the logics of humiliation and rage, Matza’s concept of desperation implies a fleeting if powerful moment that necessarily transforms into some other emotional and physical situation. As he contends:

Subcultural delinquents experience desperation when caught in the mood of fatalism. Naturally enough, they seek to undo or cast away so unpleasant and undesired a state of being. They seek, in other words, to restore the mood of humanism in which the self is experienced as cause – the state in which man himself makes things happen (Matza 1990: 189).

And he continues:

This understandable, even laudable, human desire leads to a remarkable and ironic turn of events. The restoration of the humanistic mood – and incidentally the restoration of the moral bind that is implicit in the responsible character of the humanistic mood – may be accomplished by the commission of infraction. The delinquent is rejoined to the moral order by the commission of crime! (Matza 1990: 189).

In order to engage with the prescient nature of Matza’s ideas, we commence with an extended interview excerpt.⁴ Following this, we will show how the elements of desistance derailment extant in this excerpt, recur throughout the broader range of our participants’ experiences. We then proceed to discuss Matza’s concepts of desperation and infraction in light of our data. Dylan⁵, aged 34 years, was serving 10 years for robbery and associated offences, committed while on parole. As with all our participants, he said he was trying to desist from crime, but was facing serious adversity:

[My parole officer] wasn’t taking me seriously. I’d had a couple of occasions where I’d used drugs over that first six weeks but ... I kept a grip on it. ... [But] because of them couple of times ... that’s why I started pleading for the help. [I said], “I need counselling. [Things are] starting to affect me,” when really what I wanted to say to her was, “I’ve started to use drugs again.” But I didn’t want to say that to my parole officer because she would have breached me [and] locked me up. And my partner’s pregnant [and it] would have left her with all the bills, And if I started to get that counselling it probably would have come out that ... the drugs are an issue again. But I didn’t want to say it straight away because I didn’t want them to breach me. ... I wanted them to understand that I’m starting to fall down a bit, [that] I’ve used drugs a couple of times, [and] these are the reasons I’ve used drugs. And hopefully they’ll understand and not breach me straight away, [and] get me the help [I need to] get back on track.
What did the parole officer say?

⁴ This interview formed part of the [author identifier removed].

⁵ All names used in the article are pseudonyms.

Well ... as soon as I asked for help [that became a problem]. ... I'd go into the parole office and I've got tears [in my eyes] and I'm shaking. ... And my partner's in tears saying "Help him" like, "He wants some help." And [my parole officer's] basically told us ... that, "It's come down to money, funding. You [two] are both working. If this is what you need, it's your responsibility to pay for the counselling yourself." And I said ..., "Look, I'm not in a position where I can pay \$100 [or] \$200 for [an] hour and a half [counselling] session." We owe everything. We got car payments and petrol to get to work and we're paying our own rent. It's just me and [my girlfriend] paying \$320 [per week] rent. ... I said, "I'm asking for your help. It shouldn't come down to money. I need counselling. I need help." And they wouldn't do it. So then I got angry and thought, "You fucking cunts." Like, "I'm asking for help." ... It was hard to do that. ... I'd never done it before. So it was a big thing for me to go, "Right, I want to do the right thing. ... I need help." ... Like, a *man* needs counselling, ... just that in itself [is a big thing to admit]. And then to be told, "No. It's all about money, funding, and you got to do it yourself." I got angry and thought, "Fuck youse. Like, this is bullshit." I kept doing the right thing [for a while] but eventually it just sort of snowballed. I started taking days off ... [and then] got on the gear this one day before work. ... [Later that day] I went into a veterinary clinic. No one was at the front counter. [My] old ways kicked in. "Right, we need money. We're in debt." Top drawer, stack of \$50 notes, went to walk out - someone goes, "Excuse me," "What?" ... Jumped in my car. I then evaded them and took off. It becomes a robbery. ... Now I'm on the run [and] haven't reported for parole. ... [In] three or four months [I've racked up] another 20 charges. And you know, six-and-a-half years [non-parole], basically. So that's ... where I'm at. (Dylan, AU)

This scenario captures the multifarious elements of derailment in the desistance process – specifically, the rising tide of desperate circumstances, a succession of insurmountable obstacles, and the ensuing mood of fatalism. It demonstrates that fuck it moments are *not* solely reducible to the foibles and deficits of the offender (parolee). The de-escalation tactics employed by Dylan were wide-ranging: he asked his girlfriend to corroborate his precarious circumstance; he pleaded for counseling; he explained that he could not possibly afford to pay for psychological help out of his own pocket; and he told repeatedly of being on the cusp of breaking down. What Dylan did not do was to openly admit to his parole officer that he was using illicit drugs as a means of combatting the mounting stresses in his life. Dylan's story reflects the four dimensions of fuck it episodes running through our data:

1. An inability to achieve and sustain success, often related to the number and complexity of conditions imposed by authorities post-release;
2. Serious communication breakdowns between parole/probation services and their clients;
3. A lack of institutional responsiveness when difficulties are communicated; and
4. Self-sabotage as the response to mounting obstacles on the path to desistance.

We now explain how these four themes materialized in our different cohorts, and then consider what these episodes suggest for how we might de-escalate derailment of desistance.

Inability to achieve and sustain 'success'

Participants explained how sustaining success was closely linked to earning an income, with failure aligned to receiving handouts, or worse, no income at all:

The most difficult things are being able to have the money that I need to support my family and being able to get a job, you know, a good paying job that I can feel comfortable in. I think that's the most difficult thing. It's not drugs or alcohol or whatever. ... But sometimes, ... you just maybe fall back, and maybe get involved in that kind of stuff. ...

And the times when you fall back, what do you think leads to that, what do you think leads to people falling back?

Not being able to support yourself in the way you really want to be supported. ... I think that's the biggest thing. ... Just maybe getting frustrated and not having ... opportunities that *should* be out there. ... I think that's the big [reason] for falling [back]. (Eli, USA)

Eli worked four different casual jobs over the first six months of his release, but things started to go downhill when he and his family were evicted from their social housing because of his prior drugs conviction. He subsequently lost his job and his drugs conviction then also barred him from receiving food stamps. Eli was eventually found drunk at the side of the road in his car and re-imprisoned. Jerome told a similar story. He got out determined to desist, found a job, and also enrolled on a course to get his truck-driving license. But shortly after earning his license, his rented house was foreclosed and he and his family were given 48 hours to move. No refund on rent was paid and they ended up living on the floor at his mother-in-law's house. Shortly after, Jerome was laid off from work. At interview he expressed the frustration of not being able to lead the life he desired:

[Life after prison hasn't been as good as I expected] because of financial situations – not being able to do the things that I really want to do, not being able to buy that home for my wife that she really wants. ... [S]ometimes [I don't] know which way to ... turn. But through it all [I'm] ... still pretty much focused. But ... I'm not comfortable because really I like to be able to have my own money to be able to do what I choose to do. (Jerome, USA)

Both Eli and Jerome located their frustrations in their inability to experience themselves as cause – to be the men they wanted to be, to provide for their families, and for themselves. For both, this led to their demise. For Eli, it was a low-level marijuana possession case that saw his parole revoked and he was returned to prison. Jerome headed to the streets to make money and to survive. A year later he was murdered. For the women, fuck it scenarios more frequently manifested as emotion-centered responses to seemingly unworkable situations. Their mood of fatalism often resulted in 'inward-facing' infractions. Most often, this meant an immediate and deliberate relapse to their substance of choice⁶ as a means of coping with (or suppressing the pain of) overwhelming circumstances:

⁶ All of the women in the English sample reported having an alcohol and/or drug addiction. This fits with findings from a systematic review of data from across the United States, the United Kingdom and Ireland, and New Zealand (Fazel, Bains & Doll 2006: 187) that identified the higher prevalence of drug and alcohol use and dependence among women in prison as of "particular concern."

I was clean for about five years? And then I had ... a daughter, a year after my son, and ... I had post-natal depression. And ... my partner was cheating on me and I just broke down. I thought 'Fuck this'. And I relapsed. (Savannah, ENG)

Since drug use was frequently a breach of their licence conditions, relapse as the chosen method of coping *ipso facto* placed women's chances of achieving success in severe jeopardy. Rarely did they have an individual to whom they could turn in such times of trouble meaning their paths to desistance *and* relapse were starkly solitary in nature.

Perceptions that community supervision acts to thwart rather than support desistance was a common precursor to fuck it moments:

[I returned a dirty urine while on parole so they gave me extra conditions]. I said [to my parole officer], "I'm working, how am I going to do this course, ... this Ending Offending program you want me to do?" And I sort of thought, "Well, *I am ending my offending*. I haven't stolen anything. ... I've been working, doing alright, and now you want to jack me up with this," ... [And then I was refused permission to travel interstate for the funeral of a family member]. ... They flatly denied it. ... That's another reason why I sort of [thought], "Well, I'm [over] doing the right thing". (Jack, AU)

The signs of fatalism ("You want to jack me up with this"; "I'm over doing the right thing") are writ large here. Too often, the system of community supervision – when calculating success – fails to ascribe sufficient weight to client reductions in severity and frequency of offending. From a public safety perspective, this makes little sense. Arguably, if desistance *as process* were properly understood, most communities would tolerate technical breaches committed in the context of *overall* improvement in the desistance journey.

Communication breakdown regarding difficulties encountered

Sometimes being supervised after release can provide structure and support to people as they transition from prison to the wider community (Farrall et al., 2014). But for many parolees in our datasets, supervision rarely paralleled 'support'. As Alex explained, "All I really want is just some *support* from them. ... I don't want to feel like they've got control of my life? 'Cos like when they've got you on licence, really and truly, you're still a prisoner" (Alex, ENG). Meeting the plethora of parole conditions is just one aspect of desisting from crime. The hardest part is knowing when and whether to speak up about emerging problems. In an era where community correctional officers privilege the compliance aspects of their role over and above the therapeutic dimension (i.e. the giving of encouragement and practical support), prisoners and parolees have learned that confessions of 'weakness' or intimations of setbacks (especially drug use) are likely to be used against them. This created a difficult situation for many of our interviewees, whereby honesty was rarely the best policy.

For many months prior to his release from prison, Matt was looking forward to living with his mother and starting a job. But in the days prior to his release,

Matt's mother (who had a long and established history of alcoholism, clinical depression, and serious self-harm) lost her sister to a heroin overdose. As a result, she stopped attending work, subsequently lost her job (at the very place her son was due to start employment), and moved out of her house to live with a new partner. This left Matt unable to pay the rent and associated bills in his licensed place of residence. The thought of trying to explain the complexities of this situation to his parole officer was out of the question: "[S]he's fucking part of Corrections, they're always backstabbers". Matt was fearful of being breached for living between two residences – his parole address and his mother's new abode. Worse, he was worried about implicating his mother in her sister's death. As Matt recalled, "I [was] so worried about [my mum] so I kept fucking off from my [approved place of residence] to [where she was living] to check on her. And they done a check at my house, a curfew check, and I wasn't there". His initial sense of hope was quickly overshadowed by a fatalistic mood. In his words, "I just got fed up and thought, 'Fuck it, I'm not going to just breach my bail, I'm going to do something else' ... and that's what made me go on the run" (Matt, AU).

The courage it takes to speak up about problems faced post-release can have life-changing (negative) consequences. Instead of strengths being acknowledged and built upon, deficits are too often mined⁷ such that many find themselves subject to further restrictive controls or fast-tracked back to custody. Here, the dead hand of risk aversion strangles any semblance of progress in desisting from crime. This is arguably why many would-be desisters refuse to recount openly (and in a timely way) to state employees what is *actually* occurring during their period on parole (or similar order). In the USA, David, a repeat offender with 16 custodial sentences (served during four periods of imprisonment),⁸ explained how his repeated drug use led him to stop reporting, and to reoffend: "They have so many clients they ain't trying to help nobody. ... I had one dirty UA [urine analysis] and I sought help ... They didn't care if I didn't come. Revoke. I was going to be off the streets" (David, USA). Although he initially went to parole for help, it was not forthcoming. Getting into rehab required a change of address and David's parole officer was reluctant to complete the paperwork. When he repeated his relapse he just stopped reporting. His perception that parole's main aim was to get him "off the streets", rather than off drugs, is an apt if troubling example of how the mood of fatalism winds its way through the desistance journey.⁹

These communication breakdowns between criminal justice professionals and clients were not purely the result of individuals being *unable* to tell parole and probation services about particular problems. Indeed, across all three datasets, it was the *lack of responsiveness* from such services when a problem *had* been communicated that ramped up feelings of frustration and sowed the fatalistic seeds of fuck it moments. However, in the USA data set, there was evidence among those who reoffended that when parole officers responded to infractions

⁷ For further corroboration of this dimension, see the excerpt from case 065 in Farrall (2002b: 274).

⁸ Some of David's prison sentences ran concurrently.

⁹ For an exposition of the way (ex)prisoners are viewed as objects to be managed instead of people in need of carefully calibrated support, see Feeley & Simon (1992).

with a light hand – mandating rehabilitation rather than recall – this could pull people back from the brink and help them regain hope, reengage with their desire to desist and reinvest their efforts in the struggle this involved.

Lack of institutional responsiveness when difficulties are communicated

Asking for help is remarkably difficult for people leaving prison (Haney 2003). This is especially likely to be the case when would-be desisters are unable to find others who believe in them, or when people who *could* help remain unresponsive in the face of confessions about ‘not coping’. Time and again, we heard how women and men (like Dylan, quoted earlier), who *had* summoned the courage to communicate difficulties, were met with an absence of support. As Badger remarked, “[I] thought [Probation] were gonna help. ... But when I come out of jail last time, they put me [a recovering heroin addict] into a hostel *full* of drug users, *full* of dealers. And they kept me in there even though I begged them, ‘You gotta get me out of here’” (Badger, ENG).

Those in the USA sample would often place more hope in faith-based communities and aftercare services to support them in ways that traditional correctional services might not. Unfortunately, this only resulted in similarly fatalistic responses when they too were found to be unresponsive. Terrance recounted the all-too-familiar narrative of mounting difficulties coupled with a disappointing response from those he believed would help him:

I had the idea that your mentor was someone you could talk to ... [and] who would kinda help you along the way, not just financially but just through conversation or encouragement. Mine didn't. ... When I ... told him that I needed to get some [financial] help to get through at least to next week, he called [the mentor coordinator] who told him, “Don't give him nothing”... I asked him about a job and he wouldn't give me a job. And that was a let-down right there. ... I was saying, “I'm not asking you for money. ... You pay the rent, let me work it off, let me try to get myself back together.” But he said, “I just can't do it”. So then I talked to a preacher. He told me, “I went through this once before, the Church can't do it, I can't do it, ...” And that just collapsed everything. I figured these are two people that I needed to talk to the most, and both of them turned me down so, I thought OK, well I'll just try to do it the best way I can. And I messed up. (Terrance, USA)

It was in these types of scenarios – where obstacles began mounting, and where having worked up the courage to confide in an individual or organisation, a distinct lack of responsiveness ensued – that fatalistic and self-sabotaging reactions were most likely to occur. For Chris, his pleas to be kept busy from his first day of release fell on deaf ears: “I was on parole and ... the condition was that I had to do these programs. ... But they ... wouldn't give me no programs to do. ... For three weeks ... I was doing the right thing ... going in, and reporting in. ... I even went to the Parole Board [and] they said that I had to do programs ... But they left it for so long ... and I still didn't get a phone call saying, ‘You have to go to do your program.’... And things went [downhill] from there” (Chris, AU). Faced with this fateful period of uncertainty and unstructured time, Chris went

on a crime spree that would make news headlines and result in a 16 year sentence.

Cathrine similarly told of a lack of appropriate responsiveness from key agencies during her moment of crisis. Instead of rewarding her substantive achievements in battling heroin addiction, she felt that child protection workers repeatedly moved the goalposts. This led her to fear she might never regain custody of her daughter:

We tried comin' off the gear [heroin]. We was on 120ml of methadone,¹⁰ we'd reduced right down. It took us almost a year to reduce ... down to like 5ml or something like that. And then ... Social Services told me that, like, even though I'd come off my methadone, I'd have to be off my methadone for a *further* year before they'd even *think* of givin' [my daughter] back to me. So ... I just thought, 'Oh my god, they're *never* gonna give her back to me', so I just went straight back on the drugs again. (Cathrine, ENG)

While such acts of 'self-sabotage' may not always make sense to the outsider, our data suggests they are manifestations of the pain and angst experienced by ex-prisoners who feel the need to repress the real dimensions of their struggles. However, these complex emotions do not quietly fade away. Instead, they are channeled into and through particular actions. Our contention is that fuck it moments are concrete demonstrations of people attempting – through crime – to temporarily overturn the precariousness of their situation through returning to a realm in which their agency can be actioned.

Self-sabotage as expression of the pains of transition

Fuck it scenarios do not only happen when lives are unravelling. Indeed, one of the most complex and least understood aspects of the derailment process is how things can turn bad even when people tell of having received 'everything they need' to start again (income, house, intimate relationship, support to manage drug addiction, etc.). Counter-intuitively, our data suggests that *progress can be highly unsettling* for some would-be desisters who reinterpret their improved position as inevitably short-lived. Here, the pall of "internalized blame and self-abuse" or "self-punishment" (Ramsey 1988: 100) can set in as people begin to consciously (and subconsciously) undermine positive developments in their lives, particularly where someone feels their good (better/improved) fortune is 'undeserved'. James' experience provides a clear case in point.

I just got out [and] I was at home with my kids, like every time something bad happened, I looked around and thought to myself, "I've got everything I want." ... [S]o I kind of just put everything bad that happened ... to the back of my mind. ... [But] it kind of ... built up and built up. ... At the time I thought ... "Fuck it, I give up. ... I'm going to accept that I'm a scumbag and [that] I'm going to be in and out of gaol for the rest of my life, and [so] see you later ... I'll go steal a car." [But then] I'll think to myself, "Nah, nah, nah, that's bloody stupid. Yeah, [I may have] already fucked up, I've already ran away from [home detention] so I've got a warrant. ... But I love [my girlfriend], I love the kids, I've got the life that I want,

¹⁰ A synthetic substitute used in the medical management of the symptoms of withdrawal from heroin.

I've got everything I need, so I'll ...I'll hand myself in." ... But at that initial point ... just before I run away ... the initial thought in my mind [is], "I give up. I'm just going to accept my past is going to be my future and give up. ..." And then I realise that's not what I want. ... I don't want anything more but to have a good life with my family. (James, AU)

James had incredible difficulty growing into the fatherhood and intimate partner identities. He struggled, in other words, to make the *transition* from "offender" to "non-offender" and to genuinely inhabit the new roles that were required of him as a "changed person" (cf. Maruna, Immarigeon & LeBel 2004: 19). He felt overwhelmed by the fragility of the realities of life beyond prison walls. The subsequent self-sabotaging is not reducible to cognitive distortion or psychological malady but instead stems from participants' careful weighing up of their circumstances ('On all previous occasions I've not been successful in desisting, so why should I think I will be successful *this* time around'). *Stability and fragility in the desistance process go hand in hand*. Importantly, Maruna (2001) has shown that deciding to desist is only part of the project of becoming a (free) citizen. Another key dimension involves the wider community *believing* that fundamental personal change has occurred and responding with practical options for would-be desisters to cement their progress. Labelling theory shows that if one cannot conceive oneself as a legitimate citizen, then one is very unlikely to engage the values and behaviours associated with such status (Becker 1963; Uggen & Blahnik 2016). In this context, the stigma of being a probationer or parolee plays directly into fuck it moments.

In the lives of our participants, the self-sabotaging response related to a sense of isolation despite modest success in putting some of the key building blocks for desistance in place. In the USA, David had a relatively well-paid job in a recycling plant. His boss was also flexible and responsive to the difficulties of David's struggles with addiction. Despite this, David felt an overwhelming loneliness (he felt socially disconnected from his workmates) and would often hang out with prostitutes and street folk. This led him eventually back to using drugs. He said, quite simply, "I turn to drugs mostly [...] because I think something's missing in my life". In seeking to explain this, participants expressed a desire to feel a sense of belonging (in Roberto's words, "people on the streets like me feel like this. We get love from each other"), and they gravitated towards the spaces and places in society where this sense of community was achievable. As Matza insightfully suggested, the fatalism that leads to criminal infraction is not just a move away *from* but also a movement *towards* a moral universe. If this universe is difficult to authentically engage with in conventional ('straight') society, it is immediately available on the streets, however transient.

3. Theorising "Fuck It"

Across each of the studies drawn on in this article (in spite of their distinct designs), we found that relapse and/or reoffending in the desistance process had more to do with resolving participants' fatalistic moods and much less to do with wanting to harm others or the community generally. We also found that fuck it scenarios unfurled in similar fashion, with each participant:

- 1) Expressing the *desire* to desist from crime (or, at very least, the desire to significantly reduce the frequency and severity of offending);
- 2) Telling of moments where they felt themselves 'sliding toward old ways' (i.e. there was an 'in situ' as well as retrospective recognition of one's dilemma);
- 3) Remarking on their *inability* to find timely and effective support in the early and later stages of 'going off the rails' (with efforts to 'reach out' often being met with castigation, stigmatization, alienation and where it involved infraction, being breached, and/or reincarcerated); and
- 4) Conceiving of subsequent fuck it moments as ill-preferred responses to unworkable situations (involving their relationship to self, others and future).

Without doubt, fuck it moments have material (and sometimes tragic) consequences. The important task, though, is to explain why these events happen. Conceptually, and drawing again on Matza's insights, we believe fuck it moments arise from the mood of fatalism and are actualized (i.e. given concrete effect) between the points of *desperation* and *infraction*. However, we contend that fuck it moments are *not* commensurate with the infraction. This means the movement from desperation to fuck it does not need to result in more crime. There is no *telos* at play here. It is this imminent instability (Matza's soft determinism) that has implications for de-escalation strategies (see further below). Having said this, our participants unquestionably attested to feeling *boxed in* with few options for escape. Commensurate with Matza's original formulation, they also described crime (reoffending) as restoring order in their lives – even where such order equated to immersion in the well-worn routines of (re)arrest, charge, remand, court, and sentencing. There is a sense in which being 'out of control' (actioning a fuck it moment) allowed participants to achieve (some) degree of command within their lives. Indeed, the personal agency required to action a fuck it moment *is*, we would argue, an unacknowledged form of self-control. Where succeeding in terms of imposed parameters appeared impossible, failing on one's own terms was actionable. The real tragedy is that the prison cell frequently emerged as the only device capable of ending the "stark and frightening isolation" experienced by those on the cusp of becoming (once again) criminal (Matza 1990: 89).

It is also important to understand that the infraction – buoyed by the energy of the fuck it moment – was not *in itself* wanton or malicious among our cohorts. Instead, the infraction (which in some cases simply meant failing to report to one's parole officer) became the most effective, indeed often the only, means to restore the "sense of active mastery over one's environment" (Matza 1990: 189). As Matza (1990: 190) observes, "An infraction is among the few acts that immediately and demonstrably make things happen". For our participants, the infraction brought 'pleasure' (an end to the angst of desperation and sense of helplessness) and 'pain' (more harm to family, friends, to self, and to one's future). The injection of some stability and certainty into otherwise fragile and unstable lives somehow made the fuck it gamble worthwhile.

Although, in *Delinquency and Drift*, Matza was writing with a particular eye on juvenile crime, we find that his concepts (challenges to manhood, mood of

fatalism, desperation, infraction, restoration to a moral order) are equally applicable and productive when applied to the experience of adult offenders. However, we would propose an extension of Matza's original thinking – a 'Matza Plus' approach – that can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of derailment in the desistance process in three key areas. First, while Matza (1990: 183) sought to determine "how, why, or when the will to crime becomes activated", our work suggests that questions should focus less on "the will to crime" and more upon factors which undermine *the will to desist*. That is, instead of being about a movement *into* crime, our contention is that fuck it scenarios (and by extension, the infraction) might be more appropriately viewed as episodes of '*frustrated desistance*' (Wright 2015). Such a reimagining turns the perceived motivation for offending on its head and specifically acknowledges that most people (parolees, probationers, etc.), given appropriate opportunities, aim to live in a broadly conventional law-abiding fashion (Bottoms 2013). In short, fuck it moments signify the loss of the practical and emotional capacity to continue to desist from crime rather than the will to reoffend.

Secondly, the experiences of women in our work necessarily have implications for thinking through the salience of Matza's ideas. *Delinquency and Drift* was written with specific regard to the lives of delinquent boys. Indeed, females are mentioned literally only a handful of times in the entire work and only then in the passive register (for example, as someone to marry (p. 56), or as objects to "annoy" and "exploit" (p. 167)). But how might Matza's ideas play out beyond the realm of crises of masculinity and into the domain of women's experiences of imprisonment and release? After all, we know that the stresses and strains women bear are qualitatively distinct to those of men, and that as a group, female (ex)prisoners have a disproportionately harder time reintegrating into the community (Halsey and Deegan 2014; McIvor et al. 2009; Carlen 2002; Uggen and Kruttschnitt 1998). It therefore makes sense to think that women's experiences of the mood of fatalism, of becoming desperate, and of actioning a fuck it moment, might *also* play out in distinct fashion. Perhaps, therefore, instead of examining "masculinity anxiety" (Matza 1990: 53), it might be equally appropriate to speak of and explore *femininity anxiety*.

Our work shows that the derailment process differs in accordance with gender. For women, fatalistic thinking is imbued with the 'failures' of femininity and particularly of motherhood. In the Australian data, *men* often spoke of snowballing from breaching in minor ways (e.g. failure to report) to committing more major crime (e.g. armed robbery), and that this transition involved, quite literally, the phrase fuck it (or one its variations) as a declarative and concrete marker of impending offending. In the USA data, the will to belong and to survive underpinned low level offending that precipitated high level consequences, either through recall to prison or further involvement in street life exposing participants to the potential of lethal violence as both victims and perpetrators. In the English sample, not only was such major snowballing less apparent, but the precursive events to fuck it moments presented in different ways. Women's transitions from desperation to the infraction tended to be triggered by threats to *relational* and *emotional* stability (e.g. as a partner, as a mother, as a daughter). In contrast, men's triggers toward the infraction tended to involve

threats to economic stability (e.g. as being a competent ‘bread winner’ and provider). This builds on very recent work (Baldry 2014; Wright 2015) that shows how desistance (and, by default, relapse into crime) is gendered and how for women it is often based around the ‘experiential avoidance’¹¹ (Hayes et al 1999, cit. in Nolen-Hoeksema 2012) afforded by substance abuse (self-medication). This is not to say that the fuck it trajectories of men in the Australian and USA samples were immune from drug and alcohol abuse. However, there was a distinctly more introverted and emotive dimension to women’s fuck it experiences. At minimum, this suggests there are very powerful socio-cultural scripts governing how men and women are ‘permitted’ to unravel, or to give voice to the desperate circumstances overwhelming them.

Our third point relates again to the role of the infraction. Matza (1990: 189) conceived of the infraction as a means for “delinquents” to “rejoin [...] the moral order”. We detected something different in our work. Our participants were often scathing of the mainstream moral order – an order that sought their *compliance* over and above their inclusion in social, economic and cultural life. For them, there was more ‘morality’ in the cut and thrust of the street and criminal life. The infraction, therefore, was not an attempt to reclaim their place in a *desired* moral world so much as a device for taking control of their exclusion from it, thereby ending their current turmoil. This is one reason why those well down the desistance path sometimes self-sabotage their hard won success and return to what they know best.

De-escalating derailment

Prior to concluding, we think it essential to say something about how potential fuck it scenarios might be prevented, or at the very least de-escalated. In short, how might those caught between desperation and infraction manage to escape this double bind? Our simple answer is that people need to be convinced (by someone or something) that *not* committing crime is absolutely commensurate with *immediate* improvement in their circumstance. Solutions have to rival the instant relief obtained through going on the run, illicit drug taking/chemical oblivion, a police pursuit, or like. In short, there has to be sufficient reason for ‘putting skin’ in the compliance and (re)integration game. Clearly, the threat of more prison time cannot continually be used as that reason, as it is well established that repeat offenders typically do not fear going back to prison (Burnett and Maruna 2004; Halsey 2006; Halsey and Deegan 2015). As one of the women remarked, “[The justice system sees prison] as a form of punishment but it’s not. It’s away from all the madness outside – time to just relax, chill, get your head back together, [and] then just go back out and start all over again!” (Badger, ENG). This, though, is very different to saying most people would *prefer* to do more time.

We believe a better response is to ensure that each ex-prisoner (whether a parolee, probationer, or those who ‘max out’ and serve their entire sentence in

¹¹ A form of emotion regulation – which can be achieved through recourse to mind-altering substances – used to suppress or avoid unwanted ‘thoughts, emotions, sensations, memories and urges’ (Hayes et al 1999, cit. in Nolen-Hoeksema 2012:164).

prison) is surrounded with a dedicated network of people who can be contacted around the clock (literally 24/7) about issues weighing heavily on them. These problems need to be dealt with openly, fully, and in ways that validate good intentions and progress, even where this involves apparent failures. We are not advocating that people should be ‘smothered’ with support options. Instead we would replace the mantra of ‘wrap-around services’ with the phrase or philosophy of *truly responsive services*. And we would remind that such services, at the end of the day, are reducible to the skills and relationships among people. This means investing in, and taking the time to build, lines of *trust* and *legitimacy* with those juggling the multi-faceted challenges of desistance. Most importantly, it means giving real and practical force to the concept of *throughcare*. Alliances need to be built up between would-be desisters and would-be support people (whether remunerated or volunteers) well prior to release (i.e. over months rather than mere days or a few weeks, or – worse – literally ‘at the gate’). The following excerpt – drawn from an 18-month action-oriented evaluation of a mentoring program (called Step Out) for young males within six months of release from custody – gives some clue as to the value of having a trusted neutral source of support at the point when things start to come unstuck:

So what do you know now about having a mentor that you didn't know before you commenced with Step Out?

Just that there's people out there in the community in general that are gonna help you no matter what, ... even if ... you fuck up, or you do something wrong, and you think, “Well, I'm fucked. I'm going back ... to gaol [...] I don't know what I'm gonna do.” And then all of a sudden you get this phone call [from Step Out] and it just feels like all your worries have just gone. You know, they sit there and they talk and they say, “It's not the end of the world. Here's a taxi I'm gonna call [so you can] come into the office [and] we'll sit down [and] we'll talk about it.” And you ... just feel like a big weight's been lifted off your shoulders straight away. *Like, you feel like you've ... mess[ed] up, so you might as well go hard with all the crime and things. ... Then all of a sudden you get this phone call and everything's alright and it's just magically fixed* like, you know, it helps so much 'cos you think, “Well, ... I'm going back anyway, I might as well just commit more crime”, and then you get this phone call and then afterwards you think, “Fuck, that would have been a stupid decision because it wasn't even nothing to worry over.” (Mike, AU)

A review of a ‘Together Women’ project in England and Wales – a community-based initiative designed to reduce women's contact with the criminal justice system – similarly underscored the importance of responsive practitioners in de-escalating potential threats to desistance. Here, Pat describes how support from the project enabled her to stay on track following a period of derailment:

Yeah. I've been in trouble with the law again, actually, but that was through me alcohol and through me partner, but I would've possibly been in more trouble had I not had this place. And possibly ... done things, possibly ... tried to harm meself. You know, if I didn't have this place to come to, I would've just totally gave up, I think, a couple of times, you know. But instead, I've got myself up and come here instead, and it's helped me. (Hedderman, Gunby & Shelton 2011: 14)

Respect – permitting people to maintain their dignity at the times when they are falling apart – is an incredibly powerful social tool (Halsey 2008; Hulley et al., 2012). We think it is crucial to the success or otherwise of the parolee/professional relationship. The following excerpt shows how acknowledgement of progress – respect for the hard yards one has done – can defuse potentially dangerous situations. A supportive partner, a good word from a Parole Officer, sensible use of judicial discretion, can all change things for the better:

[When I got back to my house] there was cop cars out the front. ... I took off. ... I [went] to [the shop] and bought some screwdrivers and I was going to go steal a car and leave [town] because I thought I was going to get locked up. But I didn't. ... I rode to my girlfriend's house and told her what happened and she said, "Look, just go speak to them". And so the next day we went and spoke to the [police]. ... And then I went to court and the Judge said, "Look, because you've been out of trouble for so long, you're doing well, I'll just give you a \$400 fine." ... I [also] had a good parole officer [who] wrote to the Parole Board [of South Australia] and told 'em [what happened]. And they said, "Look, nah. We'll just give you a warning. We're not gonna lock you up now cos it will just wreck everything". Cos *I reckon if I would have got locked up that would have changed my whole mind frame again*. I would have been thinking, "Fuck this". I probably would have only done three months, but then I would have got out and thought "Fuck it, I'm gonna run amok again". ... [But] the Judge said, "I'm not gonna lock you up over something so petty cos you've been out of trouble now for something like five years". (Charlie, AU)

The key point here is that formal recognition of efforts to succeed, even in the face of failure, can help to neutralise fatalism and reignite hope. In our research, people who had been on the cusp of reoffending (or who reoffended) had managed to reconnect with desistance when their parole officers and others supported them. This bolstered the confidence and skills of those who wrestled with setbacks by allowing them to experience themselves as the cause of their success. Morris, for example, had a difficult relationship with his parole officer. When he came up dirty on a urine analysis, she wanted to send him to a closed rehab programme which would have caused him to lose his job. Ultimately, he took matters into his own hands and checked himself in at an open rehab so he could continue to work:

This time I didn't run.
And how did that go down?
Great. ... I mean they [i.e. parole, were] a little upset – they sent me to that class and I finished it, and if I don't do it again, I'm OK. And like I said, the reason that I was doing it [i.e. taking drugs] ... was because of companionship, the loneliness. Now I'm not lonely no more. I've got a home to go to, [my girlfriend and I] eat ... I buy her roses, set bubble baths, we watch movies together. I'm content. (Morris, USA)

Risking a revocation to retain employment paid off for Morris – while his parole officer was not pleased, she decided *not* to violate him, and he met his girlfriend at work. Of course, we can never know how fine the line was for Morris between running or reporting, or how fine the line was for his parole officer between

revoking or supporting, or what might have happened if he had chosen fight or flight over reaching out. The take home message here is that potential fuck it scenarios need not play out in predictable and destructive fashion. Most importantly, though, positive outcomes require a *collective* effort. Encountering understanding and responsive support can restore a sense of humanism in the face of deep shame. It can provide a pathway to being trusted and becoming trustworthy (Armstrong 2014; Armstrong 2013), and it can reignite subjective ownership of the reformation process (Werth 2011). By refusing to punish offenders for honesty and openness, practitioners are in prime position to tip the balance back towards 'hope' and to lessen the quantum of destructive moments in would-be desisters' lives.

Concluding Remarks

In this article we have examined a critically important dimension of the desistance process using key concepts from Matza's *Delinquency and Drift*. We have argued that the lived experiences of those positioned between desperation and infraction, are key to understanding derailment (and recovery) in desistance. We characterized these experiences as fuck it scenarios. They might more eloquently be called moments of *intolerable vexation* – moments when life's challenges obscure avenues of possibility other than the infraction. But more than this, and in keeping with Matza's (1990: 29) seminal concept of drift, we have shown that it *is* possible for people to escape the double bind of desperation and the infraction without resort to further (serious) offending. This is rarely down to individual 'will' alone, and almost always involves the quality and timeliness of social interventions and support capable of dissipating the fatalistic mood in desistance journeying (Farrall 2016). Moreover, we have shown the centrality of the *relational* to this experience: specifically that probation and parole officers (and supportive people generally) who appear more meaningfully attuned, and provide consistent engagement and encouragement, *can* positively impact the volatile space between desperation and infraction (see Farrall 2002a).

In contemporary terms, our work responds in part to the challenge laid down by Carlsson (2012) on turning points in the life course. The criminal justice system operates on the basis that each bail agreement, prison sentence, or further period of probation or parole equate to opportunities for personal change. Occasionally they do. Most often though, the more profound turning points – the one's that stick and give rise to an iron resolve – are those which emerge in the complex mix of personal and therapeutic alliances assembled around each person that can withstand setbacks. We therefore see fuck it moments less as turning points than 'returning points' – as moments were people in crisis revert to the familiar and desert their desires for something different.

Our research is also broadly consistent with Agnew and Messner's (2015: 575 and 572) claim that "individuals subjectively assess and cognitively simplify their world before acting" and often conclude (quite rightly) that "their bond to conventional society has been severed irreparably, their prospects for success

are nonexistent, or they live in a harsh and unjust world". We think fuck it moments are concrete examples of the types of critical "thresholds" or "Gestalt-like judgments about the life situation of individuals" that Agnew and Messner (2015: 572) touch upon. In this sense, fuck it moments should not be viewed as part of a larger "resignation script" (Maruna 2001) since most, if not all our participants, were hopeful about their chances of desisting. Certainly, they had periods of absolute resignation, but their lives were not completely structured by a defeatist script. In fact, the repeated ways in which they sought to avoid fuck it moments, are testimony to participants' resilient belief in "redemption".

Equally, our work connects with Giordano and colleagues (2002) – conceptualisations of the psycho-social dimensions of desistance. For us, fuck it moments are contiguous with crises in the construction of the "replacement self". All of our interviewees were open to change (wanted to change) and were fairly adept at distinguishing *real* assistance (jobs, education, new suburb to reside in, resolution of mental health and drug and alcohol problems) from 'hollow' opportunities (criminogenic programs and 'tick a box' assessments of 'progress') for desisting from crime. Fuck it moments are reactions to blockages on the road to building and sustaining a replacement self. Such moments cut through the complexity and messiness of the cognitive and behavioural effort required to cement desistance. This again has important implications for thinking about the nature and timing of support extended to ex-prisoners. Critically, it points directly to the importance of building clients' strengths (McNeill 2006), but also to the idea that the replacement self is a fragile project in need of constant attention. Those who support people released from prison need, at minimum, to be cognizant of the sociology of stigma and the difficulties of rebuilding a legitimate and socially lauded self. Without this element, fuck it moments will likely continue to derail efforts to desist.

In our view, then, Matza connects well with current debates on desistance and offers a productive means for thinking about the phenomenology of breaching and reoffending. We have suggested, though, that the phenomenon in need of explanation is not a 'will to crime' or 'chronic reoffending' but rather, dissipation of the will to desist, grounded in a sense of moral exclusion. Within this, it is essential to integrate the experiences of females when discussing the mood of fatalism and the challenges of staying out of prison. Of course, it is also important not to lose sight of the common humanity shared by all. Whether juvenile or adult, male or female, never incarcerated or repeatedly incarcerated, we are all capable of engaging the power and the destruction of fuck it moments. The decisive point, as Matza (1990: 27) reminds us, is that "some ... are freer than others" to pull back from such moments or to defuse their negative dimensions. Neutralising the destructive power of the mood of fatalism requires, we contend, more sensitive support for the day-to-day practice of freedom, and a criminal justice system that is more grounded in the fact that most people try to and do desist from crime. Understanding relapse as frustrated desistance could help to forestall fatalism.

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