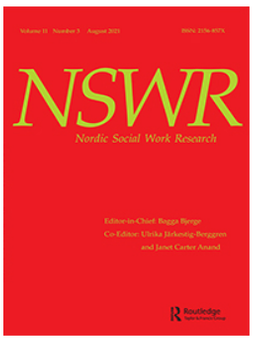

Nordic Social Work Research

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rnsw20

Meanings of a client-employee relationship in social work: clients' perspectives on desisting from crime

Eeva Järveläinen, Teemu Rantanen & Timo Toikko

To cite this article: Eeva Järveläinen, Teemu Rantanen & Timo Toikko (2021): Meanings of a client-employee relationship in social work: clients' perspectives on desisting from crime, Nordic Social Work Research, DOI: 10.1080/2156857X.2021.1981984

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2021.1981984

Published online: 23 Sep 2021.

NORDIC SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH
https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2021.1981984

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Meanings of a client-employee relationship in social work: clients' perspectives on desisting from crime

Eeva Järveläinen [a], Teemu Rantanen [a] and Timo Toikko [b]

[a]Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Vantaa, Finland; [b]Department of Social Sciences, Social Work, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio, Finland

ABSTRACT

In the context of social work, the importance of social interaction and the client-employee relationship in helping the client and supporting their desistance from crime are highlighted issues. Disengagement from crime requires self-motivation, as well as social support provided by social work professionals, NGOs and peers. This article asks what meanings people with a history of crime give to social interaction and the client-employee relationship from the perspective of desistance in different social work settings. The analytical starting point of the study is based on moderate social constructionism and Billig's rhetorical analysis. The research data was collected by interviewing 26 people with a history of crime. The results showed that social work was seen differently in various social work settings. Social interaction was talked about from the perspectives of municipal social work and multiagency support, as well as a personal encounter that crosses the conventional practices of social work. An employees' respectful and determined interaction, and the holistic support of NGOs as a community and peers was seen as significant in supporting desistance from crime. On the other hand, distant and formal encounters appeared to be challenging in the data. As a conclusion, desisting from crime is seen as a long-term and challenging process for the client, and thus, the aspects of continuity and genuine encountering in the client-employee relationship play a key role.

KEYWORDS

Social welfare; casework; criminality; interaction studies

Introduction

In the context of social work, the importance of social interaction and the client-employee relationship has been highlighted. Particularly, Ruch, Turney, and Ward (2018) define social work as a relationship-based and interpersonal practice. According to Juhila, Mäkitalo, and Noordegraaf (2014), this relationship-based work is built on the basis of conversations carried out through encounters between the client and the social worker. In addition, Juhila and Abrams (2011) state that social worker and client encounters and discussions are institutional conversations that reflect different positions such as alignment, resistance and power. Simultaneously, the identities of both the professionals and clients are constructed and negotiated, and contextually embedded.

People with a history of crime form a group of clients in social work that requires comprehensive support in reforming. In order for a person to sustain their reform, this also requires the support of the state, municipality, NGO's and peers in regard to individual work, substance abuse rehabilitation, and various other services (e.g. Kaufman 2015; Weaver and McNeill 2012). Through material assistance and social support, social work seeks to secure the basic conditions of clients' lives

CONTACT Eeva Järveläinen eeva.jarvelainen@laurea.fi

(Toikko 2009). However, Finnish social work has faced major structural changes in recent years, when the responsibility for granting social assistance was transferred from the municipal social work system to the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela). These changes have had a significant impact on social work practices, as well as individual social work.

Supporting desistance from crime emphasizes interaction, a rehabilitative approach, and the case management of employees which allows professionals to motivate the client towards independent agency and change, and helps them to create a new identity (Weaver and McNeill 2012; Turner 2010). A client-employee relationship involves tensions of support and control when working with people with a history of crime (Shapland et al. 2012). Hence, these tensions also have an effect on building a confidential interaction relationship between the client and the social worker (Jokinen 2016; Croft, Beresford, and Wulff-Cochrane 2004; Simmonds 2018).

Healy (2010) sees detachment from crime as being multi-level, and involving a gradual reduction in criminal behaviour. Desistance from crime is seen as a slow and uneven individual process, which requires people's self-motivation and agency (Laub and Sampson 2001; Shapland et al. 2012). In addition, Weaver and McNeill (2012) argue that change is very difficult, especially giving up crime, which requires people to acquire a new lifestyle and friendship groups as well as changing their own values and beliefs. This requires a person's self-motivation, which has a significant effect on their desire to change. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) view that both cognitive shifts and agentic moves are related to a constant change in behaviour. Furthermore, peer support has proven to be a key factor in desisting from crime and integrating into society (Bagnall et al. 2015; Fletcher and Batty 2012).

This article describes the experiences and views of social work clients with a history of crime, how they perceive the role of social work professionals in different contexts of social work, such as those found in municipal social work, Criminal Sanctions Agency (CSA), and NGO contexts. In particular, this study analyses what meanings people with a history of crime give to interaction and the client-employee relationship in regard to the process of desistance in different social work settings in Finland.

Theoretical framework

Starting points related to desisting from crime and enabling change

Desisting from crime is a challenging process that requires a person's desire for change, new social relations and living environments, and the adoption of new lifestyles (Weaver and McNeill 2012). According to Kazemian (2007), desistance can be seen as a progressive process which often involves a shift from a state of offending to a state of nonoffending, and its maintenance. Individual sudden events (Farrall and Calverley 2006) or a procedural chains of events (Laub and Sampson 2001) can be catalysing in breaking away from crime. Significant events in the person's life such as marriage, having a child, employment, study, and the new roles associated with these events, contribute to a new identity and the upkeep of a crime-free lifestyle (Weaver and McNeill 2012). These events are associated with external and internal turning points, but can also be seen as structural and subjective changes in a person's life (McNeill and Weaver 2010). Ageing and maturity are seen to have an effect on detachment from crime, and changing a client's social contexts such as their social structures, culture and specific situations are key in helping them desist from crime (Bottoms et al. 2004). In addition, the emphasis in the social process is on strengthening people's agency, social relationships, experientiality, self-confidence and identity, and in helping them learn a new way of life (LeBel et al. 2008; Bottoms et al. 2004; King 2013).

Shapland et al.'s (2012) literature review notes that major practical obstacles for desisting are obtaining suitable accommodation, education, and employment. In order to live a non-offending life in society, people with a history of crime need financial assistance related to housing, rehabilitation related to substance abuse, and education appropriate to their abilities. Therefore, employees

should promote people's strengths and resources in order to raise their self-esteem, maintain their motivation and hope in sustaining change, and support the client's own problem-solving skills. However, in order for change processes to occur, clients need a '*motivation* to change, *capacity* to be and to act differently and *opportunities* to do so' (Shapland et al. 2012, 24). According to Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002), a person's own desire is the starting point of change. External factors such as employment and interpersonal relationships can act as hooks which catalyse their change. Thus, both internal motivation and external factors play a key role in the desistance process.

The complex client-employee relationship in social work

The client's relationship with social work professionals in the context of criminal justice social work and municipal social work plays a major role in pushing for change in the client's social relations, and in reducing recidivism (Burnett and McNeill 2005; McNeill, Bracken, and Clarke 2010). Rollins (2020) stresses the centrality of the social worker–client relationship in achieving clients' outcomes and enabling their change. Discussion, listening and motivation in an employee–client relationship are means to influence people's social problem solving (McCulloch 2005; McNeill, Bracken, and Clarke 2010). According to McNeill and Weaver (2010, 29–30), a 'therapeutic' approach can help support the client's desistance from crime, in which trust, motivation, support, warmth and humour play an important role in the interaction situation. Employee-client relationship discussions also contain negotiations on boundaries, in order to engage and motivate the person to achieve their goals. Turner (2010) argues that a consistent, continuous, committed and mutually positive employee-client relationship is the basis for effective case management in community corrections. In the criminal justice social work context, the employee's work orientation relies not only on rehabilitation and support, but also control and daily interaction (Järveläinen and Rantanen 2019).

According to Jokinen (2016), social work requires dialogue, partnership and co-operation between the client and the social worker, in which the client sets his or her own goals and objectives. A central role for social work is to identify and overcome barriers, and to support the client's individual empowerment and self-advocacy (Croft, Beresford, and Wulff-Cochrane 2004; Toikko 2009). The societal function of social work is fundamentally contradictory, and involves different levels of tension in support and control (Rollins 2020). At worst, the client-employee interaction relationship appears from the client's point of view to be an administrative or bureaucratic activity and form of control (Hansen and Natland 2017), which can also include dominant and submissive features (Simmonds 2018). According to Juhila (2006), a social work client-employee relationship can be built in different ways, and identities are negotiated on a situational basis. The social worker profession involves various roles, obligations and responsibilities, and this requires the social worker to act situationally, maintain several different roles at the same time, and to overcome potential conflicts. Turney (2018) highlights that in order to build trust in a client relationship, a social worker must build interactions and a relationship based on reciprocity, warmth, kindness, and genuineness. However, these factors do not eliminate the existence of a professional's obligations. As a friendly professional, the social worker must maintain a balance between intimacy and distance. Furthermore, Alexander and Charles (2009) emphasize that the social worker-client relationship involves caring, mutuality and reciprocity, where the social worker has different roles and facets. Thus, in some cases, the social worker can simultaneously be in a professional role, and still fulfil other roles such as being a friend.

Reamer (2003) stresses boundary and ethical issues in social work, where social workers manage a diverse range of complex relationships with a client, which feature central themes such as intimacy, the pursuit of personal benefit, emotional and dependency need, altruistic gestures, and responses to unanticipated circumstances. To a degree, social workers' boundary crossings are justified when these relationships are helpful or therapeutically useful to the client. Everyday encounters can normalize and strengthen the social worker-client relationship and improve the

client's self-esteem. However, relationships should not have negative consequences for a client or colleagues (Reamer 2003), or be an obstacle to possible interventions (Turney 2018). Ultimately, in managing boundary issues and to avoid professional negligence, social workers need to develop a clear understanding of the issues involved in ethical and unethical dual relationships (Reamer 2003), and follow professional social worker guidelines (Alexander and Charles, 2009).

Multiagency social work in supporting desistance from crime

In addition to the relationship between the client and the social care professional, NGOs, communities and peers play a key role in supporting the client's desistance from crime and their re-entry into society. According to McNeill, Bracken, and Clarke (2010), criminal justice social work has shifted from casework to multiagency work, where the role of NGOs and peers has been underlined. Shapland et al. (2012) argue that social work's aim is to help clients overcome various barriers and support their change, as well as to refer them to other assisting authorities or NGO services. Thus, various NGOs act as a rehabilitative community, providing various services as well as peer support (Kaufman 2015). Furthermore, communities play a relevant role when changing the client's social situation (Bottoms et al. 2004). Using a liaison in different services would help to handle client matters more flexibly (Shapland et al. 2012), and both individual counselling and social advocacy should be provided (Burnett and McNeill 2005; McCulloch 2005). However, the role of NGOs as service providers alongside municipal and state services varies in different countries. At its best, different organizations, communities and volunteers hold a role in promoting citizenship, and supporting the client to achieve social redemption and re-enter society (Weaver and McNeill 2012; Kaufman 2015).

Shapland et al. (2012) argue that the desistance process accentuates not only the significance of social work and NGOs, but also the importance of interactions with individuals, families, and peer groups. Significant supportive relationships and new social ties contribute to achieving desistance in clients' lives, and peer associations, non-criminal friends and significant others are seen as the most important factors in people's desistance (Sampson and Laub 2003; Farrall 2004; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). When peers provide support, information, and mentoring, this has a positive impact on the well-being and behaviour of incarcerated people (Bagnall et al. 2015). Furthermore, Fletcher and Batty (2012) stress that upon release, peers can be effective 'identity models' for people with a history of crime, by offering an example that turning away from crime is possible and so reinforcing their potential for change. In different encounters, peers can mitigate people's attitudes towards authority, and support their re-entry into society. Thus, social work with people with a history of crime can be seen as a multiagency entity, in which the support received from social work professionals is combined with the support of close people, peers and communities.

Methods

Methodological approach and research question

The methodological starting points of this research are focused on social constructionism and the discursive approach (Berger and Luckman 1966; Billig 1987). According to Berger and Luckman (1966), reality is seen to be constructed through language in interaction, which describes and constructs social reality. From a discursive perspective, the analysis of language use focuses on how social reality is produced in different social practices. The methodological starting point of the study and the analysis of the interview data utilize Billig's (1987) rhetorical discourse analysis, and a qualitative attitude research approach (Vesala and Rantanen 2007) based on it, which examines the use of language as an argumentation that includes the presentation and justification of statements. However, speech is also assumed to reflect

individuals' experiences of real interaction situations in different social work contexts. In this sense, the study can also be seen as being positioned in moderate social constructionism, in which the views constructed in speech are thought to be closely linked to reality. Through the examination of interview data, this study asks what meanings people with a history of crime give to interaction and the client-employee relationship in terms of impacting on the process of desistance in different social work settings.

Data

This study focuses on people that were due to be released or had recently been released from prison with supervised probationary freedom (SPF). In Finland, incarcerated people have the opportunity to serve their sentence in SPF for the last six months outside the prison under electronic surveillance, and it requires sobriety and following a prescribed implementation plan (The Probationary Liberty under Supervision Act 629/2013). The interviewees were contacted through the Criminal Sanctions Agency's (CSA) release unit, open prisons, and three NGOs assisting formerly and currently incarcerated people. In addition, open interview invitations were distributed throughout the authors' research-related networks. The interviews were conducted at the interviewees' rehabilitation facility, workplace (NGOs, foundations, projects, etc.), open prison, release unit, or on university premises during the fall of 2019. The interview duration varied between 28–90 minutes (with an average duration of 52 minutes).

Twenty-six interviewees were recruited from different parts of Finland in order to gain a diverse understanding of CSA and municipal social work practices from the point of view of clients with a history of crime. Twenty-two men and four women participated in the interviews. Their age varied from 24–67 years old. Each interviewee had completed primary school, and twelve had completed vocational education (e.g. social and health care, IT, catering, construction, gardening, etc.). Three were currently studying, and three had suspended vocational training. One of the interviewees had a master's degree and one had a doctoral degree. In addition, six interviewees had completed expert-by-experience training to give peer support to people with a history of crime and substance abuse.

Seventeen interviewees had completed their SPF and nine were in the process of completing it, and three were currently serving a prison sentence in a release unit. The interviewees had served from one to seventeen criminal sentences. The interviewees' offences were related to, among other things, narcotics, robbery, embezzlement, or crimes against life and health. Nineteen interviewees had participated in substance abuse rehabilitation or peer groups (NA, AA) as part of their SPF. At the time of interview, four interviewees were in vocational training. Twelve were in waged work in NGOs, foundations or projects, where they worked as a peer instructor, mentor, supervisor, job coach, project worker or project manager, and one worked as an entrepreneur. Three were on a work trial, two were unemployed, two were retired, and one was in intoxicant rehabilitation. Twenty of the interviewees had from one to three children.

Instrument

Consistent with the qualitative attitude approach (Vesala and Rantanen 2007; Peltola and Vesala 2013; Pyysiäinen and Vesala 2013), attitude statements were used as stimuli in the interview situation. This method seeks to identify and interpret what people value when commenting on ordinary or controversial statements that are presented to them. The focus is on how and under what conditions justifications are made from different roles or positions, and what they are about. The interview is progressed by the interviewer asking spontaneous additional questions to the interviewee.

A total of nine statements were presented to the interviewees which were related to incarcerated peoples' expertise in planning activities during SPF, client-employee interaction, digital services in prison, the relationship between support and control in SPF, and the effectiveness of SPF. This particular study focuses on the following three statements: (1) The social interaction between the client and the CSA's employee is relevant to the incarcerated person's desistance from crime in SPF; (2) The social interaction between the client and the social worker is relevant to the incarcerated person's desistance from crime in an SPF; and (3) Desistance from crime depends solely and exclusively on the incarcerated person themself.

Analysis

The research data was analysed in accordance with the qualitative attitude approach (Vesala and Rantanen 2007; Peltola and Vesala 2013; Pyysiäinen and Vesala 2013). The analysis proceeded through two phases of classification and interpretation. In the classification phase, statements are systematically reviewed, and attention is paid to the positions and justifications presented. Consistent with rhetorical discourse analysis (Billig 1987), the analyses focused on the speech produced by the interviewees and highlighted their different speech resources.

For statements 1 and 2 which emphasize the importance of interaction between the client and different social work professionals (municipal social work, CSA, NGOs), the interviewees' positions were divided into those who fully or with some reservations supported the statement, and those who opposed the statement. In the justifications, positive interaction with the social work professionals was seen as supporting their desistance from crime, while negative encounters at worst drove them back towards crime. The reserving justifications brought out the impact of one's own attitude and motivation on interaction situations. In statement 3, the justifications were divided into rejecting and supporting arguments. Justifications were focused on the importance of one's own motivation in desisting from crime, and also the need for support from social work professionals, peers and relatives.

In the interpretive analysis, attention was paid to different contexts of social work, and to how social work appeared in the data. The interpretation was based on aspects which were repeated in several statement justifications. Through this, three categories of interpretation were constructed. Social interaction was talked about from the perspectives of municipal social welfare, casework, and multiagency support. In each perspective, client-employee interaction was also differently defined. The interviewees also described real encounters with various social work professionals in different social work settings. In the analysis, we looked at these through the interpretations of the interviewees.

Although the interpretive categories appeared clearly in the data, they were not clearly delineated and there was some overlap between them. For example, interviewees talked about individual social workers in municipal social welfare who were strongly committed to supporting clients, yet at the same time crossed the boundaries of their professional practice.

Research ethics

The study followed the principles of research ethics and good scientific practices (The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity 2012; The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity 2019). Research permission was granted from the CSA and the three NGOs involved. Participation in the study was voluntary and interviewees had the opportunity to suspend their participation at any point. Interviewees gave their individual written consent to take part. In the interview situation, participants were informed about the study's content, aims, scope, and the role of the researcher. The interviewees' dignity and right to self-determination were respected. During the analysis phase, the data was anonymized, and participants' names were pseudonymised. The interview data was stored on a secure server.

Analysis and findings

Municipal social welfare as an occasional setting for formal encounters

The interviews constructed a multi-level picture of social work. First, social work was talked about from the perspective of social welfare, as municipal social work defined through legislation. In particular, in statements 1 and 2, negative justifications strongly emphasized factors such as financial assistance processing, administrative decision-making, and submissive power relations. Social welfare focused on managing client matters such as financial assistance, housing and living issues, and dealing with these issues was seen to be important and supported integration into society.

Financial assistance and having your own apartment were described as very important. If financial support was available after the release, the person did not have to be left empty-handed and therefore raise money by criminal means, or end up in a dormitory instead of having their own home. Some of the interviewees pointed out that it was impossible to get an apartment due to a lack of credit information and rent arrears. Interviewees stressed the importance of comprehensive and timely support in the planning and preparation stage of the release, and also the help of peers. Often at the release stage, the client's reality was different when free housing was not available. In following interview excerpt, a prison social worker was able to provide a dormitory, which was not the desired option for the interviewee because she was married. As a consequence, the rejection of the dormitory option led to homelessness, and an active substance abuse problem drove her to use drugs after her release:

> "The last time I left prison, for example, there was a husband at the gate waiting for me with drugs, and from there it immediately went down that track. There was no place to go, only just some dormitory." (Elli, woman, 28 years)

Furthermore, in the interviews, municipal social work was seen to have only a minor role. As many as fourteen of the interviewees did not have their own designated social worker during SPF, or any contact with a social worker. In addition, some of the interviewees had had negative client experiences due to their child protection background, which resulted in them being reluctant to interact with a social worker.

Municipal social workers mostly appeared as authority figures, making the client encounter seem quite formal and bureaucratic. The interviewees also highlighted a lack of understanding and tensions related to their encounters with the social worker. The interviewees did not always agree with social workers, for example, when it came to payment arrears related to rent and child protection issues. Due to shortcomings in client records and employee turnovers, information about client successes was not passed on to the new social worker, which caused tensions in subsequent client-social worker encounters.

The interviewees pointed out that some social workers had prejudices against people with a criminal and substance abuse background, which was reflected as an 'offensive' attitude and linked to rejected decisions related to granting assistance. According to the interviewees' descriptions, their meetings largely focused on income and expenditure mapping, and not so much on discussions related to the client's recovery or life change. It was also pointed out that it was difficult to get an appointment with social workers, in which case help was not available. This led to frustration and a sense of not being heard, and further increased the client's reluctance to cooperate with social services.

The interviewees also pinpointed their own role in building a positive working relationship with social workers. If you went to the meeting sober, behaved appropriately, and showed evidence of being drug-free, then the employee's attitude was often sympathetic.

> "First, you fit your life story into 45 minutes. Then you try to convince the person that you really want to change your life. So it was 'shaky' that first time. But, when I showed her some evidence, all of the housing benefits and everything were granted. The first time doesn't always go so smoothly. Of course, there are the prejudices and doubts social workers usually tend to have towards us. We just go there talking. But since then, everything has worked." (Veera, woman, 39 years)

One interviewee pointed out that if, despite their own appropriate behaviour and shown evidence, the social worker was attitudinal rather than '*accepting and motivating*' (Heini, woman, 33 years), this did not help to support change in any way. Furthermore, when the interaction with the social worker did not work, clients with a history of crime had to ask for a support person or sponsor to attend network or social worker meetings.

> "I had to get an employee from here (NGO) to come with me, because he knows me. He could tell the social worker a little bit about my situation, because I am at the beginning of my change. So how else can I convince the social worker that she should invest in me now, and continue to go forward in supporting me?" (Seppo, man, 37 years)

Another interviewee described that in order to contact the child welfare social worker, they had had to rely on the support of the NGO's family workers to establish contact with their own child. Overall, municipal social work appeared to be a narrow yet inevitable support, and a necessary service in starting a new phase of life. However, in this setting, client-employee interactions appeared as a formal encounter and an administrative or directive activity, and these encounters were also associated with significant tensions.

The importance of determined and committed social work professionals

Secondly, the interviewees talked about social work as casework, emphasizing the social work professionals' work orientation, and the interaction between the client and the employee. In this case, social work was understood as a mutual encounter between the client and the social worker professional, instead of with the social care system or communities. In particular, a perspective which highlights casework emerged in the interviewees' positive justifications related to statements 1 and 2. Interviewees mentioned several social work professionals from municipal social work, CSA and NGOs, who played a significant role in supporting their desistance, and acted as advocates in network meetings. The interviewees pointed out that these employees treated them as human beings and provided versatile support at different stages of the client's life, staying by their side.

> "Yes, I feel it has a huge impact on that. The way they treated me, and the way I treated them. (. . .) (CSA employee's name) offered me solutions that 'you should go there because . . . '. If she had not recognized me as a human being . . . . But she was extremely nice. We went for coffee in her own time, and she came with me to a child protection meeting. Yes, it was huge." (Hannu, man, 38 years)

The excerpt above highlights the diversity of the role of a social work professional. On one hand, the employee appears to be in the role of a professional, but on the other hand, they are also a kind of close person who is committed to supporting the client in his daily life.

Interviewees spoke of social work professionals as role models whose respectful interactions built positive encounters with other people. When social work professionals encountered them as equals and as humans, not as prisoners, it had a big impact on them building a new identity. These encounters helped the interviewees to see themselves as human, as well as someone in pursuit of a crime-free and drug-free life. In particular, individual meetings and their long-standing clientship with social work professionals were described as significant aspects in the changing of one's own thinking.

The importance of the interaction with significant municipal social workers, prison and NGO social work professionals was raised in several interviews. These social work professionals were described as determined boundary setters, as well as outspoken 'voices of reason' who challenged them in a good way to think of things differently. For example, the municipal social worker's straightforward talk, confidence and encouragement was seen as significant in supporting their change.

> "Half a year before the release, a plan was made for my release. She (the municipal social worker) said that she would make an appointment for me in the rehabilitation community, where I'll go for six months. I'll need to show her that I know how to be a citizen without drugs and survive. Then I'll get my own apartment. I'll go (to rehabilitation) straight from the closed prison. She doesn't force me to anything. I'll march out that gate as a citizen and then I need to think about where I'm going. Will I go to the former apartment, to my former wife, and continue to use drugs? Or will I choose a rehabilitation community?" (Lare, man, 64 years)

The previous excerpt highlighted how interviewees emphasized their appreciation of the social worker's motivating and persistent actions, within which they set clear boundaries and incentives for receiving benefits. Setting boundaries and straightforward interactions with a social worker were seen as a much more effective way of dealing with people with a history of crime, rather than patronizing or piteous words.

> "They (former prisoners) are 'street people' who have grown up on the street, so you can't patronize and pity them all the time. If they survive street life, then yes they can stand straightforward talk. That is my opinion. (. . .) All the other guys say she is a ****** annoying social worker, but I thought she was the best social worker when she set limits for me." (Lare, man, 64 years)

For many of the interviewees, social work professionals had become important to them, and people with whom contact had been maintained even after the end of their client relationship. Employees were described as having a 'big heart' and 'acting selflessly' to help them. Contrary to the usual practices of municipal and criminal justice social work, the interviewees also described situations where social work professionals had e.g. attended a client's housewarming party to celebrate the client's successes, met them for a follow-up after the client relationship ended, and were even friends on Facebook.

> "These people (open prison social worker, municipal social worker), they have a big heart, and they don't have any hidden agenda and tell you the facts. And all of these people have visited my home, for example, when I got my own apartment, then they came to my housewarming party." (Kape, man, 58 years)

> "(NGO employee's name) is nice and she has always been a good person in my opinion. When she was my probation officer, she supported me a lot. I'm still in contact with her. If I had some love sorrows or something, I could imagine she would be that kind of person that I can talk to. Then sometimes she comes up with rather good advice [laughs]." (Jake, man, 29 years)

As the above excerpts point out, interviewees felt that it was easy to call on these important social work professionals if there were troubles in their day-to-day life or with other authorities. Several of the interviewees had relied on these significant employees at different stages of their lives.

The interviewees' comments built a contradictory picture of social work as individual level work, and the findings highlighted equal and interactive 'human to human' encounters which were seen as an important starting point for being heard. However, instead of a dialogical understanding, the interviewees underlined the social work professional's determination and directness. Occasionally, the social work professional's two-fold role tested the usual professional practice boundaries in pursuit of supporting the client, but overall, the study emphasized the importance of employee interaction and personal support.

Multiagency social work in support of personal change and desistance

As a third perspective, social work was discussed as part of a multiagency entity that included NGOs, peer communities, and experts by experience. Taking a holistic view of the role of different actors in supporting one's own change was seen as important for all the statements, but especially in the commentary given on statement 3. In particular, the interviewees highlighted the client's own motivation, personal recovery, and rehabilitation.

In the interviews, the assistance and aftercare of NGOs, foundations and project employees was highlighted, especially during the release phase. For many people, cooperation was often built through the SPF, where NGOs acted as the venue for the SPF's implementation. The interviewees stressed the importance of NGOs' comprehensive support role as a community which focused on housing, rehabilitation, peer support, employment, training, and strengthening family relationships.

> "NGOs community rehabilitation is a good place to stop and conduct your SPF. That's where you get success. During the SPF, your desire for change increases. When you get an operating fee of 300 € a month, then you start to realize that even with that money you'll get by when you don't use drugs, so you don't have to commit crimes. Your mind-set is changing. It takes the many people here to show you a direction that you can be something else. (. . .) Change is not just about your own decision. I had no desire at all when I came here. But now my dream is that I want to die clean and sober. Everything else will be okay as long as you stay sober. (. . .) You need motivation and a little 'kick' from them to move forward. That's why this NGO is a good place to get that." (Veera, women, 39 years)

The interviewees impressed their own willingness to change. Here, change meant giving up drugs and drug using friends, or even moving to a different area or another country. Change was by no means easy, and reflected a process that took years, and included relapses. However, the interviewees also highlighted different situations when their own decision-making was not sufficient, and that change required humbly accepting help and support from others.

> "You need support for change. You have to be ready to change your whole life, otherwise it will not work. Detachment can take years, but at some point, you will fall back (into crime). I was no longer connected to my old friends. When I saw them on the street, I just said 'Hi' and continued my journey. I have changed my way of thinking, everything, even if it is very difficult." (Kape, man, 58 years)

The desire to reform was described as arising in many ways which should be pursued for the person's own sake, and not for the sake of relatives. While imprisoned, being separated from children brought out a desire for change. The criminal lifestyle and the constant repetition of one's own mistakes was described as consuming, especially when '*the law is panting down your neck*' and you have a '*constant vigilance*' (Susa, woman, 56 years). According to many interviewees, intoxicants and a criminal life did not tend to bring happiness, and a spouse's death, years of drug use or relapses, boredom in a chosen lifestyle, as well as ageing were described as crime-stopping factors. Additionally, committing to study, getting your own home, or having a new relationship or friends were described as bringing new content to life. Especially, new successful experiences built a new identity, and also strengthened low self-esteem.

In different community settings, interviewees stressed the key importance of a confidential and reciprocal employee relationship in supporting change. In particular, social work professionals challenged and encouraged their clients to do new things in life that they had not done before, which built a good platform for reform. One interviewee described his own role in building the interaction as '*you reap what you sow*'. The process of reform required honest behaviour towards oneself and others, as well as giving up the shame associated with being a former prisoner, and the abandonment of opposition to authority. In this following excerpt, examples of equal encounters with social work professionals and peers, and demonstrations of trust were described as having a key impact in building one's own new identity.

> "Of course, the prisoner makes the decision that he wants to change, but he needs a lot of help. Indeed, that (old) identity must be destroyed and crushed. You need to replace it with a new one. But where do you get a new one if you don't have an idea of anything new, or who you could be? So that's where the really important

> role of employees who act as a bit of a role model. Of course, peers and experts by experience have made it (the change). It's unbelievable to even imagine that a whole identity can be changed. So who can you change into, if someone doesn't give you an example or tell you how to act?" (Sami, man, 33 years)

As the excerpt above illustrates, the key role of employees, peers, and experts by experience in supporting change was highlighted. Interviewees described an attachment to groups and finding new drug-free friends as significant factors in their desistance. The interviewees also pointed out that old criminal friends could have a negative impact, if they put social pressure or even intimidation on them to return to criminal life. At worst, such pressure undermined their own decision to remain drug- or crime-free. For this reason, finding a new social circle of friends was crucial for their desistance, and with peers support, their shared life experiences, and an attachment to the peer community, the interviewees found themselves able to build new working ways and adopt a 'normal' and honest lifestyle.

> "In those peer groups, I meet former users and criminals who have got out of crime and stopped all 'adjustments' (committing crimes), and started living a normal life. Through their experiences, I now adopt this into my own life. If I have any problems or difficulties, I bring them up or listen to their stuff, and how they have survived. So then I realize that okay, you can cope with these things too." (Osku, man, 53 years)

When talking about change, social work appeared as a complex entity in which social work professionals, communities and peers played an important role. Overall, one's own decision to change was seen as a priority, but the change also required a confidential and reciprocal employee relationship. The comprehensive unconditional support provided by the NGO's social work professionals was perceived as a significant element in the pursuit of a new crime- and drug-free life. Specifically, the NGOs' community-based rehabilitative activities and peer support were seen as key factors in desisting from crime.

Discussion

This study has examined what meanings people with a history of crime give to interactions and client-employee relationships from the perspective of desistance in different social work settings. The study reveals that social work appeared differently in different social work settings, as did the interactions between the client and employee. Municipal social work appeared as an administrative measure in relation to providing financial support, employee encountering was formal, and their attitudes towards clients with a criminal history were at times prejudiced. On the other hand, a client-employee relationship in which social work manifested itself as interactional work, and where the employee's determined and straightforward talk was appreciated. In addition to municipal social welfare, social work appeared in different settings where social work professionals from the CSA and various NGOs acted as the supporters of change.

Municipal social welfare appeared to be occasional but necessary. Mainly, meetings with a municipal social worker focused on securing livelihoods and appeared as formal encounters, and the pursuit of a crime-free lifestyle did not come up in discussions. However, financial assistance and housing can be seen as important issues in securing a crime-free life (Shapland et al. 2012). In this study, the client work was mainly focused on the elimination of barriers (see Croft, Beresford, and Wulff-Cochrane 2004; Shapland et al. 2012). The study revealed the effects of the structural change that has taken place in the Finnish social assistance system on client work. When the responsibility for granting social assistance was transferred from the municipal social work sector to the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela) in 2017, the primary contact with a municipal social worker vanished. If the client had a need for supplementary or preventive financial support, only then did they find their way to municipal social work support. In addition, elements of control in social welfare included the role of the social worker as an authority (see Jokinen 2016; Shapland et al. 2012; Croft, Beresford, and Wulff-Cochrane 2004), which was reflected in this study as being perceived as a bureaucratic activity of the social worker and as

administrative decisions based on legislation, which added tensions to encounters. The interviews revealed numerous examples that in order to receive social work services, a client had to show evidence of a substance abuse and crime free life. But in order to accommodate this, the client needed an employee of the NGO or CSA as an advocate in municipal social worker meetings, so showing the complexity of social work encounters.

The research results strongly highlighted the key importance of client-employee encounters and the relationship-based nature of social work (see Ruch, Turney, and Ward 2018). The positive experiences of the interviewees are related to encounters with committed social work professionals from municipal social work, CSA and different NGOs, where an emphasis is placed on equality, selflessness, and providing comprehensive support. In these encounters, the interactional relationship was built through genuine caring and the encounter of 'human to human' in everyday interactions (see Järveläinen and Rantanen 2019). In an ideal situation, in social work, the client's change requires dialogue between the client and the employee, as well as partnership and co-operation in which the client sets his or her own goals and objectives (Jokinen 2016). Furthermore, a helping relationship between the social worker and a client can contribute to a client's change (Rollins 2020). McNeill and Weaver (2010) have further underlined the effectiveness of an employee's active and 'therapeutic' role in supporting client change. Notably, the study did not so much emphasize the features of a dialogic encounter, but rather the importance of the social work professionals' committed and determined role in supporting the client's desistance from crime. Setting boundaries and speaking directly was seen to support client change, thus, the employees' control could in fact be interpreted as showing care and commitment (see Simmonds 2018; King 2013; Weaver and McNeill 2012; Jokinen 2016). Boundaries were also negotiated in client-employee interactions (see Weaver and McNeill 2012), and as Juhila (2006) has stated, social work client relationships and identities are constructed and related to the connection and control established, the care and partnership demonstrated, and built on interaction.

The debate on the professionalism of social work has highlighted the fundamental difference between a professional encounter and a friendship (Ruch, Turney, and Ward 2018). However, the findings highlighted a two-fold role of social work professionals, in which the employee acted both as a professional, and in certain situations, as a close person to the client. As Alexander and Charles (2009) and Reamer (2003) have pointed out, these two-fold relationships can be seen to have a normalizing effect on the relationship, which strengthens trust between the client and the employee. The boundary crossings in these informal relationships may increase both connectedness and self-confidence between the social worker and the client, and importantly were not seen as harmful to the client (Reamer 2003). Desisting from crime is really challenging, and the needs for help are focused on financial, psychological and social support. In this study, social work professionals occasionally had to cross social work's conventional boundaries to meet their clients' diverse needs. Furthermore, Turney (2018) highlights that despite being a friendly professional, a balance between intimacy and distance must be maintained. This study revealed that as a gesture of genuine caring and kindness, committed social work professionals participated occasionally in their client's life events and followed-up on their clients' successes in life. The findings further showed that despite the social work professionals' two-fold role, they managed to maintain their professionalism and showed respect to their clients.

The study revealed the central role of multiagency social work, which emphasized the support provided by NGOs, foundations and peer communities (see Kaufman 2015). In desistance theories, the importance of the employees' motivating approach and interaction has often been highlighted (Kazemian 2007; Farrall and Calverley 2006; Laub and Sampson 2001), and in addition to communities and peers, the holistic support received from NGO social work professionals has proved to be a significant factor for a client's desisting from crime (see Burnett and McNeill 2005; Turner 2010). Client work has so far focused on supporting the client's everyday management, change, agency and detachment from crime (Shapland et al. 2012). However,

internal and external shifts in a person's life are types of 'hooks for change', and generate cognitive transformation (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002) where the change in social context is also highlighted (Bottoms et al. 2004). While the client's own decision was seen as a starting point in desistance; in line with previous studies (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Bagnall et al. 2015; Fletcher and Batty 2012), the findings of this study reinforce that the support of professionals, communities, relatives and peers is also considered to be important (Bottoms et al. 2004; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002).

Limitations

In this study, the studied sample was limited to only 26 people with a history of crime, so the generalizability of the study results should be treated with caution. Furthermore, the structural changes that have taken place in Finland in relation to the nature and methods of social work should be taken into account, and partly explains a certain invisibility of municipal social work in this national context. As a further observation, the importance of NGOs and peer support was strongly emphasized in the findings, due to the interviewees acting as peer workers in different NGOs at the time of the interviews.

Conclusions

The study has highlighted the importance of developing client-employee interactions, and the different tensions of support and control related to social work and pursuing a crime-free life. In principle, a respectful interaction and holistic support were seen to support the client's desistance. The importance of peer groups, NGO support, and role models at different stages of life was also seen as an important element. The focus in employees' professional interactions was on determined and direct interaction. But occasionally, the social work professional carried out a two-fold role, combining the role of bureaucratic authority on one hand, and the role of a caring and committed professional on the other. Related to the bureaucratic role of municipal social work, formal or distant interaction did not seem to support change. Furthermore, people with a criminal history are situated at the margins of society, and the support for their change process requires timely and genuine encounters. Given that desisting from crime is a long-term process, the continuity of the client-employee relationship is therefore a key aspect.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

Research data collection was conducted as a part of Towards socially inclusive digital society: transforming service culture Project (DigiIN) [grant number 327169/327145], and it was funded by the Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland.

ORCID

Eeva Järveläinen http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6047-4206
Teemu Rantanen http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7114-7913
Timo Toikko http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9452-8022

References

Alexander, C., and G. Charles. 2009. "Caring, Mutuality and Reciprocity in Social Worker–Client Relationships: Rethinking Principles of Practice." *Journal of Social Work* 9 (1): 5–22. doi:10.1177/1468017308098420.

Bagnall, A., J. South, C. Hulme, J. Woodall, K. Vinall-Collier, G. Raine, K. Kinsella, R. Dixey, L. Harris, and N. M. J. Wright. 2015. "A Systematic Review of the Effectiveness and Cost-effectiveness of Peer Education and Peer Support in Prisons." *BMC Public Health* 15 (290): 2–30. doi:10.1186/s12889-015-1584-x.

Berger, P. L., and T. Luckman. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City: Anchor Books.

Billig, M. 1987. *Arguing and Thinking. A Rhetorical Approach to Social Psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bottoms, A., J. Shapland, A. Costello, D. Holmes, and G. Muir. 2004. "Towards Desistance: Theoretical Underpinnings for an Empirical Study." *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* 43 (4): 368–389. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2311.2004.00336.x.

Burnett, R., and F. McNeill. 2005. "The Place of the Officer–Offender Relationship in Assisting Offenders to Desist from Crime." *Probation Journal* 52 (3): 221–242. doi:10.1177/0264550505055112.

Croft, S., P. Beresford, and E. Wulff-Cochrane. 2004. "The Future of Social Work." In *Managing Front Line Practice in Social Care* (Research Highlights in Social Work), edited by D. Statham, 25–46. New York: Kingsley Publishers.

Farrall, S. 2004. "Social Capital and Offender Reintegration: Making Probation Desistance Focused." In *After Crime and Punishment: Pathways to Offender Reintegration*, edited by S. Maruna and R. Immarigeon, 57–84. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

Farrall, S., and A. Calverley. 2006. *Understanding Desistance from Crime: Emerging Theoretical Directions in Resettlement and Rehabilitation*. Maidenhead, Berkshire, England: Open University Press.

Fletcher, D. R., and E. Batty. 2012. "Offender Peer Interventions: What Do We Know?" Centre for regional Economic and Social Research. Sheffield Hallam University. Accessed 9 July 2020. https://www4.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/offender-peer-interventions.pdf

Giordano, P. C., S. A. Cernkovich, and J. L. Rudolph. 2002. *Gender, Crime, and Desistance: Toward a Theory of Cognitive Transformation*. Vol. 1, 990–1064. Sociology Faculty Publications. University of Chicago Press. doi:10.1086/343191.

Hansen, H. C., and S. Natland. 2017. "The Working Relationship between Social Worker and Service User in an Activation Policy Context." *Nordic Social Work Research* 7 (2): 101–114. doi:10.1080/2156857X.2016.1221850.

Healy, D. 2010. *The Dynamics of Desistance: Charting Pathways Through Change*. Devon: Willan.

Jokinen, A. 2016. "Asiakkaan ja Sosiaalityöntekijän Välinen Suhde [Relationship between a Client and a Social Worker]." In *Vastavuoroinen Sosiaalityö*, [Reciprocal Social Work], edited by M. Törrönen, K. Hänninen, P. Jouttimäki, T. Lehto-Lundén, P. Salovaara, and M. Veistilä, 138–147. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.

Juhila, K. 2006. *Sosiaalityöntekijöinä ja Asiakkaina. Sosiaalityön Yhteiskunnalliset Tehtävät ja Paikat* [As Social Workers and Clients. The Societal Functions and Places of Social Work]. Tampere: Vastapaino.

Juhila, K., Å. Mäkitalo, and M. Noordegraaf. 2014. "Analysing Social Work Interaction: Premises and Approaches." In *Analysing Social Work Communication: Discourse in Practice*, edited by C. Hall, K. Juhila, M. Matarese, and C. Van Nijnatten, 9–24. London: Routledge.

Juhila, K., and L. Abrams. 2011. "Special Issue Editorial: Constructing Identities in Social Work Settings." *Qualitative Social Work* 10 (3): 277–292. doi:10.1177/1473325011409480.

Järveläinen, E., and T. Rantanen. 2019. "Social Interaction between Employee and Offender in Supervised Probationary Freedom in Finland." *Nordic Journal of Criminology*, 20 (2): 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/2578983X.2019.1637093

Kaufman, N. 2015. "Prisoner Incorporation: The Work of the State and Non-governmental Organizations." *Theoretical Criminology* 19 (4): 534–553. doi:10.1177/1362480614567172.

Kazemian, L. 2007. "Desistance from Crime. Theoretical, Empirical, Methodological and Policy Considerations." *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice* 23 (1): 5–27. doi:10.1177/1043986206298940.

King, S. 2013. "Assisted Desistance and Experiences of Probation Supervision." *Probation Journal* 60 (2): 136–151. doi:10.1177/0264550513478320.

Laub, J., and R. Sampson. 2001. "Understanding Desistance from Crime." *Crime and Justice* 28: 1–69. doi:10.1086/652208.

LeBel, T. P., R. Burnett, S. Maruna, and S. Bushway. 2008. "The `Chicken and Egg' of Subjective and Social Factors in Desistance from Crime." *European Journal of Criminology* 5 (2): 131–159. doi:10.1177/1477370807087640.

McCulloch, T. 2005. "Probation, Social Context and Desistance: Retracing the Relationship." *Probation Journal. The Journal of Community and Criminal Justice* 52 (1): 8–22. doi:10.1177/0264550505050623.

McNeill, F., D. Bracken, and A. Clarke. 2010. "Social Work in Criminal Justice." In *The SAGE Handbook of Social Work Research*, edited by I. Shaw, K. Briar-Lawson, J. Orme, and R. Ruckdeschel, 447–462. London: SAGE Publications.

McNeill, F., and B. Weaver. 2010. "Changing Lives? Desistance Research and Offender Management." Research Report No. 3/2010. Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice. Accessed 8 July 2020. https://www.sccjr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Report_2010_03_-_Changing_Lives.pdf

Peltola, S., and K. M. Vesala. 2013. "Constructing Entrepreneurial Orientation in a Selling Context: The Qualitative Attitude Approach." *Poznan University of Economics Review* 13 (1): 26–47. Accessed 8 July 2020. https://www.ebr.edu.pl/pub/2013126.pdf.http://www.puereview.ue.poznan.pl/pdf/12-57.pdf

Pyysiäinen, J., and K. M. Vesala. 2013. "Activating Farmers. Uses of Entrepreneurship Discourse in the Rhetoric of Policy Implementers." *Discourse & Communication* 7 (1): 55–73. doi:10.1177/1750481312466475.

Reamer, F. G. 2003. "Boundary Issues in Social Work: Managing Dual Relationships." *Social Work* 48 (1): 121–133. doi:10.1093/sw/48.1.121.

Rollins, W.2020. "Social Worker–client Relationships: Social Worker Perspectives." *Australian Social Work* 73 (4): 395–407. doi:10.1080/0312407X.2019.1669687.

Ruch, G., D. Turney, and A. Ward, Eds. 2018. *Relationship-based Social Work: Getting to the Heart of Practice*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Sampson, R. J., and J. H. Laub. 2003. "Desistance from Crime over the Life Course." In *Handbook of the Life Course. Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research*, edited by J. T. Mortimer and M. J. Shanahan, 295–310. New York: Springer.

Shapland, J., A. Bottoms, S. Farrall, F. McNeill, C. Priede, and G. Robinson. 2012. "Quality of Probation Supervision – A Literature Review." Occasional Paper 3. Centre for Criminological Research. University of Sheffield. Accessed 8 July 2020. https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.159010!/file/QualityofProbationSupervision.pdf

Simmonds, J. 2018. "Relating and Relationships in Supervision. Supportive and Companionable or Dominant and Submissive?" In *Relationship-based Social Work: Getting to the Heart of Practice*, edited by G. Ruch, D. Turney, and A. Ward, 221–236. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

The Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK). 2012. "Responsible Conduct of Research and Procedures for Handling Allegations of Misconduct in Finland." Accessed 8 July 2020.https://www.tenk.fi/sites/tenk.fi/files/HTK_ohje_2012.pdf

The Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK).2019. "The Ethical Principles of Research with Human Participants and Ethical Review in the Human Sciences in Finland." *Finnish National Board on Research Integrity guidelines*, 3/2019. Accessed 8 July 2020. https://www.tenk.fi/sites/tenk.fi/files/Ihmistieteiden_eettisen_ennakkoarvioinnin_ohje_2019.pdf

Toikko, T. 2009. "Tapauskohtainen Sosiaalityö [Case Work]." In *Sosiaalityö ja Teoria* [Social Work and Theory], edited by M. Mäntysaari, A. Pohjola, and T. Pösö, 271–291. Jyväskylä: PS-kustannus.

Turner, S. 2010. "Case Management in Corrections: Evidence, Issues and Challenges." In *Offender Supervision New Directions in Theory, Research and Practice*, edited by F. McNeill, P. Raynor, and C. Trotter, 344–366. New York: William Publishing.

Turney, D. 2018. "Sustaining Relationships: Working with Strong Feelings." In *Relationship-based Social Work: Getting to the Heart of Practice*, edited by G. Ruch, D. Turney, and A. Ward, 129–145. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

The Probationary Liberty under Supervision Act (629/2013). Finlex. 2013

Vesala, K. M., and T. Rantanen. 2007. "Laadullinen Asennetutkimus: Lähtökohtia, Periaatteita, Mahdollisuuksia [Qualitative Attitude Approach: Departure Points, Principles, Possibilities]." In *Argumentaatio ja Tulkinta: Laadullisen Asennetutkimuksen Lähestymistapa*[Argumentation and Interpretation: Qualitative Attitude Approach], edited by K. M. Vesala and T. Rantanen, 11–61. Helsinki: Gaudeamus

Weaver, B., and F. McNeill. 2012. "Managing Cases or Supporting Change? Some Implications of Desistance Research for Case Management". *EuroVista: Probation and Community Justice* 2 (2): 97–108. Accessed 8 July 2020. https://www.cep-probation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/VOL-2.2-Managing-cases-or-supporting-change-Some-implications-of-desistance-research-for-case-management.pdf