Review Article

JSW

Journal of Social Work
1–19


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DOI: 10.1177/14680173231222611
journals.sagepub.com/home/jsw


Narratives of experts by experience: A journey from criminal to expert

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Abstract

- *Summary:* This study focuses on the narratives of participants of a long-term expert-by-experience training programme for people with a history of crime about their past, and how they use their life experience in their work as experts by experience. The research data was collected during interviews of respondents with a history of crime (N=19). The interviews were analysed using a narrative identity framework, and the data further examined in light of various studies focused on a desistance from crime.
- *Findings:* The transformation process from service user or client to expert by experience provided people with a history of crime with a chance to come to terms with their past, and to and gain a sense of closure. Expertise by experience gave their difficult life experiences a new meaning, and thus promoted their overall rehabilitation and offered them opportunities through which they could gain the appreciation and acceptance of other people. The new relationships presented to them as experts by experience also paved the way to a new kind of self-concept that strengthened the desister's self-confidence and optimistic outlook on the future.
- *Applications:* This study offers perspectives on how people with a history of crime can re-enter society. Through their survival stories and their journey to become experts by

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experience, desisters can earn the acceptance and approval of others and gain a more positive perception of themselves. The new identities of people with a history of crime are dependent on society's approval as they continue to desist from crime and re-enter mainstream society.

Keywords
Social work, experts by experience, narrative identity, desistance from crime

The involvement of social service users in the planning, delivery, and development of services has been actively discussed in recent years. Service user involvement not only provides opportunities for the client's voice to be heard, but it also supports democracy and participation (Matthies, 2014). The accreditation of an individual's subjective experiential knowledge is at the core of user involvement (Beresford, 2020). On a personal level, involvement in the co-production of services impacts positively on one's identity (Mayer & McKenzie, 2017). According to McLaughlin (2009, p. 1111), the term *Expert by Experience* is an important reclassification of the social worker and service user relationship 'because it makes a claim for a specialist knowledge base rooted in an individual's experience of using services'. Based on their experiences as former users of services or as social care clients, experts by experience can act, for example, as consultants, lecturers, or evaluators of services, participate in the co-production of services, and provide peer support (Meriluoto, 2019).

Foster et al. (2022) point out that in order to capture the diversity of individuals and the wide range of human experiences, public involvement needs to be sufficiently inclusive. Therefore, we also need the knowledge of those who have experienced marginalisation. According to Matthews (2021), anyone who has been incarcerated knows the feelings of powerlessness and loss related to the experience. Matthews (2021, p. 16) emphasises that people with a history of crime 'know how to overcome the systemic barriers while managing the private and unique pains of incarceration'. These people have personally felt the stigma and discrimination associated with their criminal background.

People with a history of crime face various obstacles that make it difficult for them to integrate into society after their release, including for example, homelessness, lack of education, unemployment, financial challenges, and difficulties in accessing drug rehabilitation (Shapland et al., 2012). People released from prison are often put in a challenging social position, and an individual in a vulnerable or disadvantaged position is not necessarily able to transform their life on their own. Therefore, professional and peer support is required in the process.

This study focuses on the stories that people who have participated in long-term expert-by-experience training for people with a history of crime tell about their past, and how they use their life experiences in their work as experts by experience. Becoming an expert by experience can provide an individual with the opportunity to reflect on their identity in terms of who they were, who they are now, and who they can become. Their

narratives are interesting not only because of what they tell us about their past, but first and foremost, because of what they can say about their future (Maruna & Liem, 2021).

Desistance from crime in light of desistance theories

In recent years, there has been a growing interest not only in the causes of crime, but also in how and why people desist from crime (Paternoster et al., 2016; Bersani & Doherty, 2018). Desistance should not be seen as an event or a state of being, but rather as a process or an ongoing work in progress (McNeill & Maruna, 2008). McNeill and Maruna (2008) state that *desistance from crime* is a fairly straightforward concept, but it has been difficult to use in the context of criminology research, as 'to cease and desist' something means giving it up permanently and not engaging in it ever again. For this reason, the terms *primary desistance* and *secondary desistance* have been introduced. The first is used to talk about short-term periods of a crime-free life, while the latter refers to a life without crime in the long run – a process in which the ex-offender builds a new identity as a non-offender (Farrall & Calverley, 2006).

A person's perception of themselves and of others is built through their interaction with other people. It is difficult to adapt to a society that does not offer a new chance to those committed to change. Successful desistance requires the support, and also an acceptance of the environment. This is called *tertiary desistance* (McNeill, 2015). According to McNeill and Maruna (2008, p. 224), desistance research provides rich insights into social work practice with people with a history of crime, as we seek to explore and understand the processes through which people stop committing crime.

The decisive moment leading to desistance is usually described as *a critical moment* or *a turning point* in one's life (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Maruna, 2001). Turning points can be driven by both individual and social factors, and the decision to give up a life of crime can be induced by personal motivation or a desire to change one's life. External factors may also influence one's decision to abandon crime. However, in general, both the individual's own willingness to change and active social support are needed to make a successful exit from a life of crime (Maruna & Farrall, 2004).

Laub and Sampson (2001) maintain that desistance from crime is a lengthy and comprehensive transformation process involving various events in the offender's life. They have developed an age-graded theory that emphasises the importance of social bonds across all age groups. The idea of *informal social control* central to their theory means that attachments such as employment and marriage can provide social control that restricts the opportunities for crime. For example, finding a new partner or getting a job at a critical moment can give a person's life a new meaning that is different from the world of crime, and may steer them away from the criminal path (Laub & Sampson, 2001).

Maruna (2001) and Giordano et al. (2002) discuss cognitive processes as part of one's decision to quit crime. Giordano et al. (2002) argue that there are four specific types of cognitive transformation in the process of desisting from crime: 1) openness to change; 2) exposure to (potential) 'hooks for change'; 3) a shift in how the person sees themselves; and 4) a change in how the person views deviant behaviour. Copp

et al. (2020) point out that in addition to cognitive processes, support from one's parents and peers is important in the transformation process. Additionally, research in the field has also brought to light the roles of spirituality and social relationships in supporting desistance (Giordano et al., 2008; Paternoster et al., 2016).

Desistance research offers interesting perspectives on identity. In Maruna's (2001; 2004) desistance theory, identity plays a key role, and Maruna claims that 'making good' enables ex-offenders to see themselves in a more positive light. Studies by Maruna and Farrall (2004) and Maruna and Roy (2007) also emphasise the central role of identity in the desistance process, as well as the attempts of people with a history of crime to re-interpret their past in their present context. Giordano et al. (2007) discuss the changes that take place in one's identity after various life transitions, and the new roles and 'hooks for change' they make available. Paternoster and Bushway (2009) have formulated an identity theory of criminal desistance (ITD) that involves a conscious change of self. Particularly, it claims that people with a history of crime hold on to their 'working self' for as long as they feel that there are more advantages than disadvantages to committing crime. However, Bushway and Paternoster (2014) claim that changes in identity need to take place before entrance into conventional institutions such as marriage and jobs.

Identity in narrative research

Identity is a concept that has been approached from many different angles and disciplinary perspectives in previous research. Over the past two decades, the idea that people create their identities by constructing narratives of their lives has emerged as a broadly integrative concept in the social sciences (McAdams, 2001). In this study, identity is examined from the narrative perspective. As identity is seen as being constituted through stories, it is also linked to the temporal and spatial context of the individual. *The self* includes both one's life story and self-concept, which is defined as 'conscious beliefs about the self that are descriptive or evaluative' (McLean et al., 2007, p. 263). McLean et al. (2007) claim that self-concept and the life story are naturally connected, because some elements of self-concept are reflected in the life story as a result of autobiographical reasoning. Thus, one's narrative identity includes at least some aspects of one's self-understanding through how it is manifested in one's constructed life story.

McAdams and McLean (2013) argue that people are natural storytellers who construct and share stories about themselves and certain periods in their lives, and what they mean to them. Personal identities or micro-level life stories are also believed to reflect the culture in which they have been created and told (McAdams, 2001). McAdams and McLean (2013) state that people use narrative identities to communicate to themselves and to others who they are, how they came to be, and what they think about their lives in the future. Following this line of reasoning, to understand someone is to understand their story. McAdams's (2001) narrative identity represents the consensus reached by the individual in relation to the surrounding contexts, and the narratives that are constructed reflect the individual's efforts to align their perceptions of themselves with the surrounding social contexts. Thus, 'Narrative identity reconstructs the autobiographical

past and imagines the future in such a way as to provide a person's life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning' (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233).

Research methods

Methodology

This study focuses on the respondent narratives about their identity, and the stories are interpreted using the narrative identity framework that McAdams and McLean (2013) have compiled, based on various theories. The main focus is on the narratives that experts by experience with a history of crime and substance abuse tell about their identities as experts by experience. The chosen framework allows for a versatile analysis of the detailed events in their stories, and their meanings from a narrative identity perspective.

The study examines two research questions: 1) How do experts by experience with a history of crime describe themselves as experts by experience?; 2) How do they interpret their past in its present context?

The research data was generated between August 2019 and February 2020 through semi-structured thematic interviews. In many studies, researchers ask participants to tell extended stories about scenes or episodes in their lives, which are then coded for various dimensions and features (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The interview questions in this study were also designed with broad descriptive narratives in mind. A group of experts by experience that had undergone or were undergoing expert-by-experience training (N = 19) were interviewed in two different locations in Finland. The data was gathered either during the expert-by-experience training (N = 4) or about 6–18 months after the end of the training (N = 15). The age of the respondents ranged from 23 to 53. Five of the interviewees were women, fourteen were men. The interviewees volunteered to participate in the study upon learning about it.

The expert-by-experience training was organised either in a university setting or at an organisation's facilities, and consisted of three months of full-time study and a three-month work placement period. The main objective of the training was to develop an educational model that would promote employment based on expertise by experience and its professional utilisation. After the training, the interviewees worked in various positions in social services.

The interviewees' accounts were intertwined with their so-called primary stories or the life stories that they formed during their studies and later told to others while working as experts by experience. These primary stories were not the actual object of this study, but the interview data include references to these life stories and how they were told to others in different contexts.

The majority of the interviewees had received more than one prison sentence. Only one participant had no convictions, and one had served a conversion sentence (unpaid fine converted to imprisonment). Many also had a history of substance abuse. When applying for the expert-by-experience training, the participants had been desisting from crime and rehabilitating for one or more years. At the time of the interviews, some

interviewees were in supervised probationary freedom. This means that, on certain conditions, a prisoner may be placed outside the prison on probationary freedom under supervision effected by technical and other means, before conditional release (parole).

In the analysis of the data, McAdams and McLean's (2013) model of the different structures of narrative identity was applied (agency, communion, redemption, contamination, meaning making, exploratory narrative processing, coherent positive resolution). First, the narratives were coded based on the model. Second, the data was analysed using thematic analysis and the identified themes counted. The analysis was carried out by one researcher, but the findings and process were discussed among all of the researchers in the group, and alternative perspectives on some of the interpretations were introduced. As a third stage, the data was also examined in light of different studies on the topic of desistance from crime. As a crucial element, research on desistance from crime emphasises the importance of a transformation narrative where the individual replaces the old 'criminal' self with a new 'law-abiding' self (Liem & Richardson, 2014).

Ethical issues

One of the researchers of this study worked as a trainer in the expert-by-experience training programme, which helped them build a close and trusting relationship with the interviewees. The dual role required careful self-reflection throughout the research process. Reflexivity is important in a world of multiple voices, where the impact of prejudices and inequalities cannot be ignored or controlled. However, it needs to serve the research agenda and the focus must remain on the people or phenomena being studied (Probst & Berenson, 2014).

Researchers must always consider how the interpretations they make through their scholarly lens affect the subjects that they study (Smythe & Murray, 2000). The starting point for this study was the respondents' narrated accounts and what they communicated about working as experts by experience. As a key contribution of the work, the study brings out the seldom heard voices of people with a criminal background, and their stories are used to illustrate how personal transformation processes can give access to socially significant work as experts by experience.

The necessary research permits were acquired from the main organiser of the training, as well as the Criminal Sanctions Agency. The study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of responsible conduct of research and ethical principles defined by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity, TENK (2012; 2019). Special attention was paid to the participants' anonymity and the results are reported in such a way that the participants cannot be identified.

Life-story constructs of experts by experience with a history of crime from a narrative identity perspective

The constructs used to code the narrative accounts are presented in the left column in Table 1 (appendix). They are: *agency, communion, redemption, contamination,*

Table 1. Coding of the data (following McAdams & McLean, 2013), themes, and numbers.

Coding construct	Themes	Number of interviewees
Agency	**Supporters and advocates for peers with a history of crime and substance abuse as well as experts working with professionals** –helping people with a history of crime and substance abuse, advocating their cause within the service system and society at large alongside professionals –sharing expertise with professionals	**19**
Communion	**Sense of belonging with peers** –shared 'peerness' with recovered people promoting one's ability to cope at work and creating a sense of belonging with people encountered at work –a special bond among people with history of crime –elements of 'peerness': understanding, openness, trust	**19**
Redemption	**Difficult past experiences at work** –processing the past, acceptance and trust for the future –processing one's crimes and analysing the causes and effects –distancing oneself from the experiences, professional approach to the past and authorities	**19**
Contamination	**Stories of contamination in the service system** –subordinate status in relation to educated professionals in the service system	**11**
Meaning making	**Reparation for criminal acts as a productive citizen** –helping as a means to make up for past wrongs and earn appreciation –status as a productive member of society through work –cooperation with professionals and a positive relationship with them	**9**
Exploratory narrative processing	**Being accepted and redefining stigmas** –the past as a strength, stigma are one's own insecurities –feedback and appreciation for the work and a sense of being accepted	**19**
Coherent positive resolution	**Transformation from a client to an expert**: –self-respect for survival	**14**

meaning making, exploratory narrative processing, and *coherent positive resolution* (see McAdams & McLean, 2013). The middle column displays the themes related to them, and the right column shows the number of interviewees that raised each theme.

Agency as peer supporters, advocates, and experts working with professionals

Agency bears a resemblance to advocacy, which is a way to change one's own life or the life of others or society at large. The interviews paint a picture of the experts by experience with a history of crime and substance abuse as *supporters* and *advocates* for their peers, as well as *experts* working in teams with professionals. The various forms of their agency are manifested in the interactions between the experts by experience, their peers, and the professionals.

All of the interviewees describe how they, as experts by experience, help their peers who are still in the early stages of recovery or a desistance from crime. In addition, they gain agency as advocates by seeking to promote the position of people with a history of crime and substance abuse within the service system and in society at large, when sharing their survival stories in public.

> We become visible, and we make visible the fact that ex-offenders and ex-substance abusers belong to society just like everybody else. And in fact, we have somehow made ourselves even more visible by, in a way, giving a voice to our people and trying to normalise that and create some sort of equality and cooperation. So, the most important thing is that if and when you get to be part of developing services and such, you get to make a difference. (Mark)

Mark describes how the survivor stories told by the experts by experience give a voice to people with a history of crime and promote their equality. The stories change people's perception of those with a history of crime in particular, but also of those with a history of substance abuse. The survivor stories with their various adversities enable people to grasp these experiences on an emotional level and form a more humane view of people with a history of crime. Mark also mentions the prospect of being able to participate in developing social services from the perspective of people with a history of crime. Thus, expertise by experience built up from their past can offer them the opportunity to collaborate with professionals and engage in meaningful work.

> I mean something, I can be meaningful in this society. I would've never believed that I'd have any importance in this society or that I could be useful in some way. I've been in those kinds of situations, [and] I could've never believed that people would ask me about how I've experienced something, that professionals would ask me, and that I would be valued for my past. (Mary)

Mary talks about how she felt her past was meaningful when she was able to share her experiences with professionals, and thus, be useful to them. She also recognised her own importance from a social perspective.

The interviewees' accounts reveal that their agency as experts is realised in collaboration with different professionals. Central to this agency is the sharing of one's own experiential knowledge to facilitate clients' access to services and promote a mutual understanding between clients and professionals.

Communion – relationships with peers

Communion refers to how people experience interpersonal connection and belongingness. The interviewees' accounts suggest that a sense of solidarity among people with similar pasts is embedded in expertise by experience. One interviewee characterises that they are united by a similar language of suffering. The interviewees talk about how the 'peerness' that is formed through their work entails positioning themselves in client relationships as human beings to human beings. Understanding, openness, and trust are key elements in their relationship with each other. In these relationships, no one is judged by their past or the mistakes they have made. In this, the accounts highlight a special bond between peers with a criminal history.

> I personally feel that I get more support from people who have also been deep in the world of crime – we speak the same language. (William)

William says that peers who have a criminal record and who have been deeply involved in the world of crime share the same language. For the experts by experience with a criminal record, life change has not only involved recovery, but also a disengagement from crime. Most of the interviewees had been imprisoned for years. For them, the time spent in prison as well as the process of giving up crime are special experiences, and only those who have lived through something similar can grasp their deeper meaning. Their criminal past creates a sense of belonging to the desisters, and gives them a more profound understanding of the stages and experiences involved in the desistance process.

The interviewees speak about how the 'peerness' or the sense of having a shared background and experiences is particularly important both for their own wellbeing and also their ability to cope at work.

> Peer support (in groups) is strongly linked to working and being an expert by experience. Without peers, I couldn't hold it together. (Mick)

'Peerness' is seen as therapeutic when facing different kinds of difficult circumstances. Peer-to-peer support creates a sense of belonging and a feeling of acceptance. Peers who continue with the old lifestyle are excluded from their private relationships, although they are encountered at work. The respondents' accounts further reveal that interaction with ordinary people who do not share the same past experiences is marked by a perceived otherness, which adds to the difficulties faced when looking to desist from a life of crime or substance abuse.

Redemption and contamination – difficult past experiences at work and the Status of experts by experience in the service system

Redemption reflects a perception that bad or negative circumstances eventually lead to positive circumstances or situations that are emotionally perceived as such. Conversely, contamination refers to a state where positive circumstances or situations perceived as such turn out to be negative. The interviewees describe how they have reflected on their past in the experts-by-experience training, and then used their experiences in their work. Sharing their own past has helped them to understand the causes and consequences of the difficult events they have experienced.

> You talk about yourself and your experiences that have somehow been so normal to you, and then you suddenly start looking at your story from an outsider's perspective and realise that it isn't such a normal story after all, and that normal people don't have to go through the kind of stuff that I'd been forced to deal with since I was a kid. This realisation hit hard at first. (Jack)

Jack talks about how reflecting on his difficult childhood experiences with others has given him a new perspective and helped him understand how hard his situation was as a child. Understanding his difficult childhood circumstances has made him realise the fact that one's survival as a child is often dependent on the adults in one's life, but in his case, the adults were the ones causing all the distress. Dealing with one's difficult past and building a better future for oneself were important aspects of becoming experts by experience.

> It has been a long process to get here, and has also meant accepting your actions and making amends. After that, it has been much easier to start a new life and set out on new paths, and [you feel that] you've come to terms with your past in a completely new way (Dennis)

Dennis describes reconciling with his past and explains how he's been able to move forward with his new life. He has been able to understand and accept what he has left behind, and also what he can achieve in the future.

The interviewees' narratives indicate that re-examining their life stories has made them perceive their past criminal behaviour as wrong, and they now understand the consequences of their own choices and have felt guilty about them. By committing to a new way of life, they have also been able to forgive themselves.

The narratives suggest that the adoption of the kind of occupational identity learned in expert-by-experience training also requires the adoption of a certain kind of work self. It entails distancing oneself from one's own experiences on one hand, and using them as resources on the other. Creating a space between one's work and one's past is important as it promotes the person's ability to cope at work when encountering people in various difficult situations. The interviewees also talk about how their past experiences are relevant, because they enable an emotional connection with the clients. The interviewees describe how clients want to be encountered as people, and first and foremost, *by* people. In their narratives, the professional approach of an expert by experience to their past and to

authorities (such as the judicial and social service systems) means accepting their past as part of their life, and shifting from an anti-authoritarian attitude to an authority-accepting way of looking at life. The respondents report that society's appreciation towards experts by experience becomes apparent in encounters with people, and by identifying themselves as experts by experience, the interviewees have strengthened their professional self-esteem.

There are also elements of contamination present in the respondents' narratives, such as instances where some of them having managed to achieve a certain position and responsibility in the service system as experts by experience, but then realise that their possibilities to make a difference are limited, and the organisation's official views are at odds with their experiential knowledge. The interviewees describe instances when professionals have given substance abusers and people with criminal record recommendations and advice that are impossible to implement. In addition, the experts by experience talk about how some professionals fail to see them as skilled workers per se. Their accounts include detailed descriptions of encounters that reveal professionals' prejudices against experts by experience, and where the position of experts by experience in organisations was not perceived as equal to that of the professionals involved.

> When you owe a debt to society, it's hard to say no to anything and then you end up running around doing unpaid work. It shouldn't be like that… There should be some kind of a chart that when you go and tell your story, then this is what it's worth… (Charles)

Charles's description shows how experts by experience may end up working for no pay at all, and often they feel obliged by their past to do so.

Meaning making – reparation of criminal acts

Meaning making refers to understanding and learning from experiences. Some interviewees describe how helping others as experts by experience alongside professionals has meant paying back society for the harm they have caused with their criminal acts.

George talks about making amends for the damage he caused to society when he was still engaged in criminal activities and substance abuse.

> One of my biggest goals is to be a productive member of society. I want to bring more to the table than I take from it. Study cooperation and working with the authorities during the training is about giving back to society. All the shit that I have caused and the high price tags, for me to work in cooperation with the authorities and future professionals to prevent the next kid from getting as far and creating bills as large as I did – that already does it. And it builds your new identity. It's such a nice word, to be a productive member of society – it sounds so much nicer – but to actually get to do it. It's fucking awesome. And just to pay taxes and stuff. It's all part of it. Just to be able to give back. (George)

George feels that he is compensating for his past mistakes when he helps others as an expert by experience. At the same time, he is also creating opportunities for himself to

be involved in society and build an identity as a taxpayer and a productive member of society. When working as an expert by experience, he is able to draw on his past experiences and help professionals in their work. But the past also gave the opportunity to help peers.

> When I was handing out work [in the group] for the first time, I saw an old friend who asked me, 'What are you doing on that side of the table?' I said 'Don't you think it's better that I'm on this side of the table?' and they said 'Yeah, it is.' So it's a pretty good feeling when you get to help all those people who are in the same situation you've been in. And it's nice that soon I won't have to apply for welfare anymore. (Susy)

Susy describes how her own past experiences have led her to help people with drug addiction. Through this paid work, she can move on to live independently without government assistance.

Exploratory narrative processing – being accepted and redefining stigma

Exploratory narrative processing means self-exploration. Many interviewees see the initial phase of disengaging from a life of crime as a transitional stage in which one's perception of self is still incomplete and in progress. Some interviewees talk about having been in a good position in the criminal world in the past. In the transitional stage, however, people feel that they no longer belong to the criminal way of life, but they also feel inferior to so-called 'ordinary people' because of their past. Many interviewees also describe a sense of insecurity about their own position in the new social context presented to them through their new way of life. The fear of rejection is a central theme. Through their work as experts by experience, the interviewees were able to connect with ordinary people, which shaped their identity and made them more similar to these 'decent people'. The social relationships that came available through a crime-free and substance-free lifestyle reinforced the process of desisting from crime and the construction of a new identity.

The new self-image of the people with a history of crime and substance abuse that was built through becoming experts by experience meant being accepted regardless of their past, having the courage to be and freely state who they are, and having the possibility to use one's own difficult life experiences for the good of others. The stigma associated with the past was dispelled because their past was a prerequisite for becoming an expert by experience.

> I don't know about the stigma, though it has been a problem for me at some point. But the problem is more inside your head. As long as you see yourself as an ex-offender or an offender, you are an offender. You're constantly thinking about why people are looking at you. People walking out there know nothing. It doesn't really matter that much in the end. (Tom)

Tom's account shows how self-perception is seen as a significant element in the process of shedding one's criminal identity. Giving up the identity of an offender is about

changing one's own perceptions, and these perceptions are also reflected in the way one is encountered by other people. Views on stigma have changed, and they are mainly seen as one's personal thoughts related to one's insecurities. But the professionals they had encountered also recognised the positive change, and offered feedback on it.

> One of the prison screws and then another one, an old screw from an open prison – when they saw me, they said it's somehow really surreal to see me. But in a positive way, that they can see I have really made a fresh start. It's not possible for everyone, or at least it doesn't happen too often. (Simon)

In Simon's description, the prison guards are amazed at the change in him, which he recognises as a sign of moving forward in his life; something that he knows is extremely challenging for many.

Coherent positive resolution – from client to expert

Coherent positive resolution is about how resolving different tensions brings closure and positive endings. For the interviewees, coherent positive resolution has meant transforming from a client to an expert. The interviewees describe how the expert-by-experience training and subsequent work opportunities enable them to fully accept themselves, and grow into a new lifestyle where the past is left behind and they are moving on. In this context, difficult past experiences are used as resources, and this has earned the respondents the position of expert by experience.

The interviewees talk about how important it is for them to process their past and get a sense of closure. The stories of their past are strongly linked to their position on the margins of society, from which they have now escaped. Particularly, getting closure for their past has meant giving up their role as a client, which is something social service workers also appreciate.

> I saw my substance abuse social worker when I was working at the substance abuse centre, and they said that a lot of water has gone under the bridge to have me sit at the other side of the table. And the fact that we have moved to the other side of the table is the most baffling thing about my new life. I can't stop wondering about it and I am still extremely grateful for it. It also boosts my self-esteem that in such a simple way and by doing some thinking, you can see the big picture and how much you have worked to improve your life. (Jennifer)

Jennifer's words describe how transferring from a client to an expert by experience is seen as a positive change that strengthens one's self esteem. It is about getting rid of a stage in one's life that has been dictated by substance dependency and an involvement in crime, where one's own efforts have been fundamental in the transformation process. In the words of one interviewee:

> It's funny to move to the other side of the table. It's half a step, but what a fucking journey. (Susy)

Susy's quote illustrates how the physical distance from one side of the table to the other is a short one, but the transition from the street to a position of expert by experience is an enormous process. Becoming an expert by experience requires going through the process of one's own rehabilitation and disengagement from crime, as well as turning one's difficult experiences into resources for one's own expertise.

Discussion

This study focuses on how experts by experience with a history of crime talk about their socially meaningful position as experts by experience. Their expertise is built on past experiences that are used as a resource and a strength in their work. Interpersonal relationships among the experts by experience have given rise to a new identity that has reinforced the desisters' self-confidence, supported an optimistic outlook for the future, and helped them transform from clients into professionals.

McAdams and McLean (2013, p. 233) say that storytellers 'who find redemptive meanings in suffering and adversity, and who construct life stories that feature themes of personal agency and exploration, tend to enjoy higher levels of mental health, well-being, and maturity.' In this study, the interviewees also point out how processing their past and engaging in self-examination have been important and have contributed to the construction of a more positive self-understanding. In accordance with the study of Pals (2006, p. 1080), 'the integration of exploratory narrative processing and coherent positive resolution predicted positive self-transformation within narratives of difficult experiences.' The fact that the people with a history of crime and substance abuse have been able to use their difficult past experiences as a resource in their peer-to-peer support work has helped them continue on with their lives.

Various studies have pointed out that working as an expert by experience can help build a new identity when people transform from service users or clients into professionals (Cooke et al. 2015; Mayer & McKenzie, 2017; Fox, 2020). Becoming an expert by experience may also support an individual's own rehabilitation (Toikko, 2016). Working in peer support as an expert by experience can act as a 'crafty plot' that makes those in the process of desisting from crime behave according to society's norms. Taking part in expert-by-experience training and working as an expert by experience form a kind of *fake-it-till-you-make-it* process. They enable people to let go of their offender's identity and learn to desist until a new kind of self and a new way of life are fully adopted.

Paternoster et al. (2015) discuss how in desistance research, it is important to recognise the role of identity and agency in the desisting process, including the aspects of identity theory (Paternoster & Bushway 2009). In addition, we need structural influences that can support a desistance from crime (Laub & Sampson, 2001). In this study, the desisters who had taken part in the expert-by-experience training have strengthened their new pro-social identities in their work, and the training and work opportunities have given them structural support for desisting from crime. F.-Dufour et al. (2015) argue that desistance depends on multiple factors that arise in the process of an individual's journey toward a new social context, such as employment. These social contexts affect an individual's identity in a way that lets new behaviour models and new roles take over (Giordano et al., 2002). Maruna

(2001) asks whether changes take place in a person's self-story with a causal effect before desisting, or if disengagement from crime simply makes one change their identity story. A narrative about desistance from crime and substance abuse has been a fitting context for the experts by experience of this study, and their survivor stories have afforded them access to society and enabled them to build relationships with both peers and professionals.

The 'peerness' of experts by experience in relation to the clients is a special resource that qualifies them for the social sector, and is something that professionals assumedly do not have. This study challenges social workers to think about how to develop the structure of the service system so that experts by experience do not have to *defend* the clients, but can rather focus on the potential of their *peer-based* expertise to help. A teamwork model between professionals and experts by experience is one way to strengthen the position of both experts and clients within the system. The results of this study concerning the special 'peerness' between people with history of crime also raise the question as to whether we should be offering desistance support groups to those trying to abandon a criminal life, much in the same way that we have support groups for recovering addicts.

This research shows that expertise by experience reforms, reshapes, and makes sense of lived lives and self-concepts by re-evaluating the past of the desisting experts by experience, and thus contributes to the creation of a new self. Through their survival stories and their journey to become experts by experience, desisters can earn the acceptance and approval of others and gain a more positive perception of themselves. The new identities of people with a history of crime are dependent on society's approval as they continue to desist from crime and re-enter mainstream society.

Limitations of the study

The main limitations of this study are the small size of the data and its theoretical approach, as well as the study's restriction to a specific country and to a specific expert-by-experience project, where one of the researchers of this study was a trainer. Consequently, there is a need for a deeper longitudinal study to further examine the desistance of experts by experience in more detail, as well as further studies undertaken in different geo-cultural contexts. The main focus of this study was on the narratives of the interviewees and how they were changed through the process of becoming experts by experience. To enlarge on this study, further work is needed on positioning experts by experience in the service system, and their cooperation with professionals.

Conclusion

Maruna (2001, p. 166) states that societies get the kind of criminals they deserve, and that 'societies that do not believe that offenders can change will get offenders who do not believe that they can change'. However, experts by experience who have a history of crime have proved that change is possible. Seeing ex-offenders from a strengths-based perspective is an integral part of an ex-offender's transition back into society (Nixon, 2020), and recovery, desistance, and rehabilitation regarding crime can be viewed as strengths in this light.

This research challenges us to re-evaluate the status of experts by experience related to social work. The concept of experts by experience is associated with the idea of redefining the relationship between the social worker and the service user (McLaughlin, 2009). Drawing from the study, social work practitioners need to engage in a more inclusive dialogue in order to find alternative methodologies for experts by experience who practice social work.

Pettican et al. (2023) argue that addressing power imbalances can help engage marginalised people in processes of knowledge production, and enable social justice. Glasby and Beresford (2006, p. 268) state that 'knowledge-based practice' acknowledges that the lived experience of service users can be just as valid a way of knowing the world as formal research. However, a key question is who is allowed to participate, and whose experiences do we want to use.

Research ethics

This research complies with the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity. The necessary research permits were acquired from the Valo-Valmennus Association and The Criminal Sanctions Agency in Spring 2019.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was funded by the Ministry of Education and Culture (project: Empowering People towards Socially Inclusive Society). Opetus- ja Kulttuuriministeriö,

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s)

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