

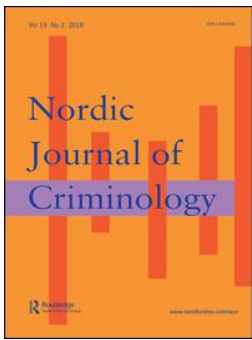
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Survival stories as access to society. People with history of a crime as experts by experience

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, experts by experience have participated in the practices of social work and policy-making in increasing numbers. At the core of expert-by-experience training is the idea of constructing a story based on one's own experiences. This study looks at how empowerment is manifested in the descriptions experts by experience with a history of crime and substance abuse give of their narratives and what kind of relationship to society is constructed in them. For the purpose of this study, 19 individuals who had undergone the expert-by-experience educational programme aimed at ex-offenders and recovering addicts were interviewed. The results show that one's own narrative was identified as an empowerment resource and, by sharing their story, people became part of social networks and gained a better understanding of their situation. Their relationship to society was constructed in both individual processes and encounters with professionals. The participants' attitudes towards authorities became more positive. The shared narratives revealed gaps in the social welfare system and this increased the participants' critical consciousness of society's ability to take care of its most vulnerable. Authorized by their background, the participants were able to represent their reference groups on a broader scale and remove stigma attached to them.

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Introduction

User participation has become an object of increasing interest in the field of social welfare in recent years (Barnes & Cotterell, 2012; Meriluoto, 2018). In addition, various peer support groups, such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA), are well established in the substance abuse service system. In Finland, service users have been participating in the planning, provision, and assessment of various rehabilitation services since the 2000s, especially in mental health and substance abuse services (Meriluoto, 2018; Rissanen, 2015).

In the field of correctional services, with an increased emphasis on rehabilitation and desistance in different units and organizations, a need has arisen to take into account the perspective of the clients, that is, the offenders, when developing the services. The term 'desistance' refers to moving away from criminal behaviour as well as the processual nature of this change (Maruna & LeBel, 2010). In particular, some of the help organizations

offering services to those with a criminal background have hired ex-offenders and recovering addicts to work in peer counselling and service development. The experts by experience working for these organizations have also had the chance to work in substance-free prison units where they run peer support groups, provided that enough time has passed since their release. Various organizations that work with correctional services clients and employ ex-offenders have also been working towards improving the social status of people with a criminal past.

Becoming an expert by experience requires personal experience with offences and substance abuse, and, in particular, the ability to distance oneself from these past experiences. Expert-by-experience training is regarded as an essential means to create distance between a person and their experiences. At the core of the expert-by-experience training is constructing a narrative of one's past experiences. These personal stories will then become an important resource for experts by experience. In recent years, expert-by-experience training has become more widespread. For example, there has been plenty of training for those recovering from mental health problems or substance addiction (Hirschovits-Gerz et al., 2019). However, there has been no expert-by-experience training for ex-offenders in Finland before, even though there are various experiences that are specific to the criminal way of life and the corrections system that differ substantially from the experiences of other service users.

This article is based on a long-term expert-by-experience educational programme created for people with a background in crime and substance abuse. The training took place either in a university environment or in a non-governmental organization providing social and training services, and it included practical training either in the form of a work placement period or paid work in one of the various services. The idea for the training was obtained from an expert by experience and the participants were allowed to develop the training throughout the process together with the education providers. Some of those who completed the training also participated in the training of new experts by experience. In this article, we look at how empowerment manifests in the way the trainees describe expertise by experience and what kind of relationship to society is constructed in their accounts.

When we talk about people with a history of addiction and crime, recovering addicts and ex-offenders, we mean individuals who have been convicted of crimes and have engaged in substance abuse in the past. They have experiential knowledge of criminal convictions and substance dependence. In addition, they can be expected to have knowledge of desistance and abstinence from substances and an idea about what has helped them in this transformation process.

Experts by experience

The aim of involving service users and utilizing their experiences has been to solve issues related to using these services (Barnes & Cotterell, 2012; Carey, 2009; Muurinen, 2019; Newman et al., 2009). Having experts by experience participate in the planning and delivery of social services enables responsibilities related to providing the services to be shared out, which means that one aim has also been to improve efficiency and gain savings (Barnes, 2009, 219–220; Newman et al., 2009, p. 49; Flanagan, 2020). It has also been suggested that social policy and social work research requires the perspective of the

service users and clients in order to produce new information (Beresford, 2013, p. 139; Killington et al., 2019).

Various terms referring to clients as service users, developer clients and experts represent their various roles and their relationship to the service providers (McLaughlin H, 2009). According to Barnes (2009), the service system is an integral part of the social structure. In this sense, clientship is about actions that aim at influencing society. For this reason, service users' advocacy can be seen as justified. The idea of user involvement is realized by including service users in the planning, delivery, development and evaluation of services (Healy, 2000). Timo Toikko (2012) describes there being three dimensions to expert by experience involvement, each entailing a different way of influencing. Firstly, insights and opinions of experts by experience may be taken into account at different client forums in which clients participate in planning and evaluating services. Secondly, an expert by experience may co-work with a professional or as a member of the work community in the role of client developer. Thirdly, experts by experience may engage in those decision-making processes in which resources are divided.

There are varying views concerning the ways experience can be turned into expertise. The key elements are the individual's own experiences and sharing them. Toikko (2016) describes four themes related to the individual and collective learning processes of those who have used mental health services in the past. Becoming an expert by experience can be seen as a process in which a person creates emotional distance from their personal experiences, shares their experiences with other service users, combines their troublesome past experiences with their existing personal competences and practices acting as an expert by experience.

According to Buck (2019), service user involvement is also an aspiration in the field of criminal justice, although there are particular challenges to participatory work within punitive contexts. These challenges are related to security considerations when people with a history of crime operate in correctional environments. Peers who have personal experience with situations similar to those encountered by people living a life of drugs and crime can offer unique support to these people. Loeffler & Bovaird (2020) point out that one of the keyways in which co-production – that is contributions that are jointly made by experts by experience and professionals – has a lowering impact on crime is that it encourages desistance. Buck (2017) argues that in addition to a person's maturation, self-concept and social opportunities, their desire for what others see desirable may trigger desistance from crime. In this process, peer mentors play a significant role as they are often respected by the service users who may also imitate their desires (Buck, 2017). Narratives of desistance from crime and substances can also be used as a pedagogical resource in teaching criminology (Nixon, 2020a) and social work (Loughran et al.'s, 2020). According to Best et al. (2016), there has been an increasing focus in research on recovery that is based on the idea of substance user empowerment and self-determination, in connection to which the metaphor of a 'journey' has been used. Previous research has suggested that identity change processes are of great importance, as through such processes, the internalized stigma and status of an 'addict identity' is replaced by a new identity (Best et al., 2016). Rosenberg et al.'s (2018) study results confirm the positive influence of having contact with peer support workers on service users.

According to Beresford (2002; 2013), the knowledge service users have might be questioned because people's experiences about different problems are not 'neutral', 'objective' or 'distant'. Therefore, some consider experiential knowledge to be less reliable. H. McLaughlin (2009) raises the question of what kind of service-related experiential knowledge is regarded as the right kind. Meriluoto (2018) takes a critical look at the idea that the 'expertise' of an expert by experience is defined as an ability to produce neutral and objective information. There are current and former service users who are 'recruited' to represent service users and to cooperate with employees (Noorani, 2013, p. 52). According to Lakeman et al. (2007), there have also been issues concerning the legitimization of clients' roles as experts by experience related to their status, possibilities to make decisions, and employment. In addition, it has been pointed out that an expert by experience can sometimes be reduced into a sort of 'mascot' who is not listened to and whose experiential knowledge has no importance. (Rissanen, 2015, p. 209.) When service users participate they should not be treated as the followers who only assist and help implement the tasks assigned by social workers (Kam, 2020). Beresford (2001) has examined client-oriented service development critically as it may include unidirectional client involvement and activation.

Empowerment

In research literature, empowerment is seen as autonomy and self-determination; individuals' capacity to gain control of their circumstances and achieve their goals. Empowerment incorporates the idea of both individual and collective power (Adams, 2008; Miley et al., 2009). According to Siitonen (1999), empowerment theory sees people as active, creative, and free agents who set goals for themselves (aspirations, hopes, intentions and desires). Beliefs about oneself are constructed in social processes. The process of empowerment is affected by other people, circumstances, and structures (Siitonen, 1999, pp. 117–118). According to Adams (2008), the empowerment perspective is a personal and social process that increases awareness and is related to identifying social problems and injustices. Empowerment can be seen as a necessity to those in society who have the least power and are treated unjustly (Adams, 2008). According to Rappaport (1981), empowerment means helping those with little power to understand their conditions and gain more power. Zimmerman (2000) says that empowerment helps people acquire the resources they need to change their circumstances and look at their social environments critically. Freire (2004), in turn, mentions increasing the awareness of oppressed people about various failures in society.

Empowerment as a concept is associated with social work practices and different socio-political efforts (McLaughlin K, 2014, p. 205). Robert Adams (2008, p. 23) states that empowerment is an essential part of the theory and practice of social work. It aims at enabling individuals and groups to improve their quality of life and also influence social structures and activities. At the same time, it means siding with certain groups and acting to erase various flaws in society. Payne (2013) emphasizes that social justice and empowering people to take responsibility of their lives and increasing their awareness are essential ideas of empowerment. From this perspective, people themselves have the best knowledge of their situation. For instance, service users' views and evaluations should thus be taken into account in social work practices.

Empowerment requires social work professionals and service users to use power together and share it (Charnley et al., 2009, p. 199). Fetterman (2019, p. 148) underlines the significance of empowerment evaluation, an essential principle of which is people's democratic participation. This perspective also includes independence, autonomy and collective learning. Within empowerment evaluation, empowerment can also mean increased participation, opportunities to influence, self-efficacy and motivation of those involved (Kivipelto & Kotiranta, 2011, p. 123). Beresford and Croft (2001, p. 309) point out that increasing people's abilities to influence and improve their conditions is also emphasized in service user discourse. Changing the status of the service user in society requires sustaining their rights, choices and opportunities in the collective activities delivered in cooperation with professionals (Beresford & Croft, 2001). According to Healy (2000), service users' involvement in the planning and delivery of social work empowers them and promotes possibilities for them to take responsibility over their own lives.

Criticism over empowerment underlines the various paradoxes of helping. Practices endorsing empowerment may contain employee orientation and top-down processes (Adams, 2008, p. 5). Taina Meriluoto (2019) points out that governance-driven and participatory social policy may strive to empower citizens but the mechanisms of empowerment are controlled and defined from the outside. Ostensibly straightforward user participation may conceal a complex and elusive network of power balances that affects different people differently in different circumstances (Leppo et al., 2009).

Research question, data and analysis

This study looks at expertise by experience through the life stories of people with a history of substance abuse and crime. The study focuses on the self-images of these experts by experience that are formed in the narratives constructed in social interaction with others. How is empowerment manifested in the experts' descriptions of their stories and what kind of relationship to society (e.g., critical, consensus-oriented) is formed in these accounts?

The methodology of this study lies somewhere between socio-constructivism and critical realism. Burr (2003, pp. 2–5) states that while different socio-constructivist approaches differ from one another, they share a criticism towards axioms, a belief in the idea of historical and cultural relativism of thinking, and the idea that knowledge is understood as something that develops in social processes and is closely connected to action. Fletcher (2017, p. 191) points out that critical realists seek to explain and critique social conditions to produce concrete policy recommendations and specific claims for action on social problems. The narrative approach emphasizes the interpretative and relativist nature of information and sees life's circumstances as changing stories that can be re-interpreted (Hänninen, 2004). Narrativity in the context of this study covers the collected research data, the way it is analysed, and the way the participants' stories are transmitted in a narrative form. The narratives composed temporal descriptions that included the storyteller's own interpretation, their experience. Narrative research highlights the fact that as long as there have been people, there have been stories by and about people (Moore et al., 2012, p. 262). Life stories transformed into narratives are something that are told over and over again to different audiences from different perspectives, including to oneself (Maunula, 2016, p. 72; McAdams, 2008). McAdams

(2008) points out that the self comes to terms with society through narrative identity. In other words, constructed stories make sense of people's lives and reconcile who they image they were, are, and might be in their heads and bodies, and in different social contexts (McAdams, 2008, p. 242). Autobiographical reasoning is an exercise in personal integration where putting things together into a narrative pattern affirms life's meaning and purpose (McAdams, 2008, p. 245).

The narratives collected in the interviews are intertwined with the life stories of the experts by experience, and they are now re-interpreted in this study (see Hänninen, 2004). Data collection at the individual level is focusing on the discovery of main themes and range of variation in the experiences, beliefs, norms, and practices of individuals (Winston, 2012, p. 122). A primary story about recovery and desistance from crime was the starting point for the expertise by experience. However, this primary story was not the actual object of this study but it formed a basis through which the narrative about expertise by experience obtained its meaning.

The research data were produced by interviewing a group of experts by experience that had undergone or were undergoing expert-by-experience training (N = 19) in two different locations that can be described as large Finnish cities. Anyone interested in taking part in the study and with relevant work experience was allowed to participate. The interviewees formed a coherent group of individuals from six different trainings organized by two different organizations. Some people were interviewed during the training and some afterwards, but their perspectives did not differ from one another. Conducting the interviews at different stages was believed to provide us with more descriptive material.

People with a history of substance abuse and crime participated in an educational programme comprising full-time study and work placement, each component for three months. These training programs were organized biannually on average, in two different cities. Applicants were admitted based on their interviews. They were required to have completed their own recovery and to have the motivation and interest to work as an expert by experience.

Training themes comprised expertise by experience and 'peerness', basics of criminology and criminal sanctions, interaction and professional methods, professionalism and reflection, work-related skills, as well as project work and multi-professional networking. The main objective was to develop an educational model that would promote employment based on expertise by experience and its professional use.

Those attending this expert-by-experience training were informed of the possibility to participate in this research. Interviewees were chosen based on their work experience related to peer support and expertise by experience. These semi-structured individual interviews were made during August 2019 and February 2020 in the two different locations and units providing the training. The data was gathered during the expert-by-experience training (N = 4) or about 6–18 months after the training programme (N = 15). Almost all participants had a criminal record and been convicted of offences in the past. Most participants had had multiple prison sentences. One participant had no convictions, and one had served a conversion sentence (in lieu of an unpaid fine). At the time of the interviews, two interviewees were in supervised probationary freedom. That is, on certain conditions, a prisoner may be placed outside the prison in probationary liberty under supervision effected by technical and other means before conditional release. All participants had a history of substance abuse. However, trainees had to be drug-free. At the

interview, many had been sober 1–3 years. Of the interviewees, five were women; 14 were men. Their age ranged from 23 to 53.

After this expert-by-experience training, trainees applied for jobs in the open labour market and started working in various positions related to peer support counselling, service development, and advocacy. Their places of employment included municipal substance abuse services (N = 2), housing services (N = 2), as well as substance abuse treatment- and peer support-providing organizations (N = 7). The rest were placed in child welfare services (N = 1), a university (N = 1), and a private substance abuse treatment housing unit (N = 1). One interviewee did a temporary job sharing his life story in various peer support work contexts. For a summary of the interviewees' employing organizations and employment statuses, see [Table 1](#). Some participants (N = 4) had earlier work experience related to peer work; some had work related to expertise by experience outside the training venue but during the training. Their employers operated in fields including housing services, child welfare, substance abuse services, education, as well as research and development. Some others were operators of services and projects aimed at those with a history of crime and substance abuse. A quarter of the interviewees worked in a team with a social work professional.

Of the interviewees, some were doing a work placement (N = 7) or apprenticeship (N = 3); some were employed (N = 5). Monthly, those in a work placement worked about 120 hours; the others worked about 150 hours. In these, participants' paid but temporary job, they shared their life stories at educational institutions or child welfare units. Alternatively, they participated in different service user panels aimed to develop services; some made public appearances where they raised awareness about expertise by experience. Prior to this expert-by-experience training, some had work experience. This work experience was related to peer support counselling at substance abuse rehabilitation or third-sector services for ex-offenders. At the end of their training, participants applied for jobs in the open labour market. About 80 people attended the entire training; of these, 38% obtained employment after the training and 9% started studying at a vocational education institution or University of Applied Sciences.

The interviews averaged 48 min; duration varied from 26 to 93. The entire interview material was 244 pages (line space 1.5, font size 12 Calibri). The interviewees have pseudonyms in this article.

The theme interviews covered the following topics:

Table 1. Interviewees' employing organizations and employment statuses.

Employing organization	Employment status
municipal substance abuse services	apprenticeship (N = 1) employed (N = 1)
child welfare services	work placement (N = 1)
university (expert-by-experience training)	work placement (N = 1)
private substance abuse treatment housing unit	apprenticeship (N = 1)
housing services	employed (N = 2)
substance abuse treatment- and peer support-providing organizations	work placement (N = 5) apprenticeship (N = 1) employed (N = 1)
various employers (peer work)	temporarily employed worker (N = 1) prior experience (N = 4)

- disengaging from crime, abstaining from substances and interest in expertise-by-experience training;
- the identity and growth of an expert by experience in expertise-by-experience training;
- being an expert by experience in peer support counselling, service development, and positions of advocacy;
- teamwork between an expert by experience and a professional and tensions related to such teamwork; and
- expertise by experience from the viewpoint of empowerment (rehabilitation, delivery of services in cooperation with professionals, active citizenship)

The data collected in the interviews was analysed using narrative analysis. The narrative approach becomes apparent in the narrative form of the research material: based on the data, a main story is constructed that starts by examining how the ex-offenders and recovering substance abusers access the expert-by-experience training and then covers their training to become experts by experience and their employment after the training. The analysis then proceeds to thematization, which consists of searching the material for themes and topics concerning how the participants described their individual processes when training to become experts by experience and exploring their positions and possibilities as experts by experience. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 6), thematic analysis can also be a 'contextualist' method that sits between essentialism and constructionism and is characterized by theories such as critical realism, which recognizes individuals' ways of constructing meanings from their experiences in social contexts.

In the last phase of the analysis, these themes were interpreted as stories of empowerment, individual processes, and in relation to society. A conclusion of the findings is found in [Table A1](#).

Ethical issues

One of the two writers of this article worked as a trainer in the expert-by-experience training programme and also participated in conducting the interviews. The dual role required constant self-reflection of the researcher's own perceptions. In situations like this, researchers need to identify their position/status within the research and its potential influence on the environment and participants when collecting and interpreting data (see Berger, 2015, p. 220). Working as a trainer helped build a close and trusting relationship with the interviewees. Information related to the work of experts by experience gained from the interviewees' stories formed the starting point for interpreting the research data. The data were analysed after the researcher's role as a trainer was over, which helped the researcher to distance themselves from this role. Researchers are expected to make visible their own role as researchers as well as the vulnerability of their position (Fouché & Chubb, 2017). However, the dual-role challenges researchers to reflect on the objectivity of the research and examine how subjectivity may affect the study (cf. Greene, 2014, p. 13). The expert-by-experience training may have influenced the participants' mindsets and their ideas about co-operating with professionals.

The study was conducted adhering to the guidelines of responsible conduct of research and ethical principles of research involve in human participants defined by the

Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK, 2019). The research permits were acquired from the Criminal Sanctions Agency and the main organizer of the training. Both organizations also confirmed our assessment of the ethical considerations of the study, but a separate ethical review was not conducted as the research did not contain any of the elements requiring ethical review detailed by TENK (2012). Special attention was paid to the participants' anonymity and the results are reported in such a way that the participants cannot be identified.

The principles of research integrity were taken into account in the research process and the participants were treated with respect. The participants were made aware of their right to participate, to refuse to participate, and to discontinue their participation in the study. The participants were given a consent form that was reviewed together with them, and it was emphasized that not taking part in the research would not affect their position in the training programme.

Stories

To higher education with the life stories of ex-offenders and recovering addicts

The interviewees had a background of substance use and crime. Many of them had spent several years in prison and substance abuse had been part of their lives. Some of the interviewees had also experienced homelessness. When applying for the expert-by-experience training, the interviewees had been recovering and desisting from crime for one to several years. This meant that they also knew what had helped them to recover and how they had managed to disengage from crime. Some had received help with their recovery in the form of community rehabilitation during their incarceration, while others had received abstinence support after their release. One interviewee said they had isolated themselves in their home to quit their addiction. At the time of the interviews, two interviewees were in supervised probationary freedom, and they were supported in their effort to quit addiction and crime as part of their sentence. Many interviewees still regularly attended various peer support groups where they had found sober social connections and received support for their abstinence from substances.

The interviewees' reasons for attending the expert-by-experience training were manifold. The participants shared a background of crime and substance abuse – which was a pre-requisite for attending the training – as well as an interest in becoming experts by experience. Some had already worked in different peer counselling positions while still in rehabilitation. This experience with peer support work had ignited their interest in expertise by experience. Some interviewees had benefitted from peer support themselves which had made them think of ways to support others in recovery by using their own experiences. Some had applied to the educational program after being encouraged by friends or advised by employees or officials they had met on various occasions. Some of the interviewees also knew others who had undergone the same training and recommended it to them. Some became interested in the training when they saw an announcement about it or after participating in an info session concerning the training.

Attending this training and thus becoming part of the higher education community was considered meaningful by all participants. The training offered them opportunities to meet people and deal with their past as well as the emotions related to their various

difficulties. The interviewees had previously felt excluded and had faced prejudice because of their background. The interviewees revealed that when they had still been using, they had avoided people and had not wanted to deal with their past. Through the expert-by-experience training, however, the interviewees were able to confront and discuss their past experiences and turn them into stories they could then share with others.

What is it like to be someone who doesn't fit in, who feels left out and inferior to others and who uses violence, crime and drugs as ways to cope with themselves and the rest of the world (...) When you tell your story, it somehow becomes meaningful. It also creates a connection with other people. Every time it makes me feel that I belong to this world, that this is my place. Jim

The interviewees described that by telling stories about their lives they were given an opportunity to find a connection to others. Sharing them made the stories meaningful. Many of the interviewees also reported that when sharing their stories, they themselves also gained a better understanding of their past, problems, and the various reasons that had resulted in a life of crime and substance abuse.

Sharing their stories and reflecting on them with professionals helped the interviewees create a more positive attitude towards professionals and various officials. Encounters with professionals working in criminal sanctions and the police had a particularly positive influence on the participants' perception of authorities. According to the interviewees, their stories as well as the discussions about them also helped professionals change their preconceptions about ex-offenders and recovering addicts.

I think that someone who can talk about those things constructively and openly can change someone else's prejudices about ex-offenders and recovering addicts or people who have lived a certain kind of life. That they can also break down stereotypes and reduce stigma. I think that, for many, these things have been sort of new and upsetting, but combined with what they see, the contrast to the person talking about them who is doing just fine, then that can be a thing that knocks down some walls. Both for me and them. Jennifer

Many of the interviewees stated that the stories had a positive effect on how professionals see ex-offenders and recovering addicts and how they perceive these people's abilities to transform their lives.

If a guard understands something new and especially if he then feels that an inmate can change, then that clearly affects the way he does his work. And when he gets back to work, he remembers that oh yeah, that guy changed, so maybe this next guy can change, too. Jack

The stories of change that these experts by experience shared had a positive effect on the attitudes of professionals as well as the way they encounter clients. According to the interviewees, after hearing these stories, professionals placed more trust in their clients' ability to change.

Being yourself in the expert-by-experience training

Being able to participate in the training group for people with a history of crime and substance abuse was a source of pride for the participants. First and foremost, they told

that being part of the training group made them feel that they were now accepted as human beings. The fact that all participants had a similar kind of background meant that they could genuinely be who they are and have open and honest conversations about their past with their peers. The interviewees stated that examining their past with the group was an experience of reconciliation that improved their self-knowledge.

Being part of the training group boosted my self-esteem and made me better identify with society. I gained a future on the grounds of my past. Peter

Being part of the expert-by-experience training group strengthened the interviewees' self-esteem and gave them a sense of belonging to the society they live in. The expertise by experience at which the training aimed placed a new kind of value on the interviewees' past experiences as stories that can be shared with others.

I've begun to see my own past as a sort of resource and not as a horrible lump of twenty years, a dark lump inside me. Something that was shitty but something that I can now use in this thing. It has become a kind of asset to me, maybe everything went as it was meant to go and I can now share things with others. The way I see my past has changed a lot. Susy

The mutual sharing of experiences among those taking part in the training built up their trust in the idea that difficulties can be overcome.

I have had some positive thoughts about people being able to survive surprisingly hard phases in their lives ... I've got such a group of people here around me. I have to say that they are such a supportive lot. They've taught me so much about myself. Mark

Sharing their stories reinforced the interviewees' positive ideas about themselves and allowed them to identify their mental resources. The interviewees got both positive feedback and critique from their peers which enabled them to reflect on their recovery and desistance from crime. Some said that they were critical of the stories told by others. They felt that some of the stories were the kind of tall tales that you might hear in prisons in which something is deliberately left out and something is told the way the storyteller wants. Thus, the peer group also acted as a mirror for the participants in their efforts to abandon their criminal identity and reflect on their own ways of thinking. The interviewees stated that, as peers, they expected honesty from each other as they considered it to be a key quality to being an expert by experience.

Cooperating with their peers, sharing their stories, and reflecting on their thoughts increased the participants' understanding of the fact that no one will ever be perfect in this world. The shared stories also shed some light on the ways in which social safety nets had failed, as they made the participants realize that surprisingly many of them had been left to struggle on their own, trying to deal with their difficulties, with no help available at an early enough stage.

Stories told by those experts by experience who had already undergone the training and who were now working were perceived as empowering by many of the interviewees. The stories were well structured and they illustrated the kind of difficulties the people had encountered in the past, the way they had overcome these difficulties as well as the present situation of the people in which meaningful work gained through expertise by experience was essential.

At work as a good citizen and advocate through stories

After the expert-by-experience training, the interviewees took on work placements. For many of the interviewees, this was the first time in their lives that they were actually working. Being experts by experience offered the interviewees, new kinds of opportunities which allowed them to utilize their past. Employment was seen as something meaningful and many of the interviewees were genuinely surprised that people were interested in their stories and that they were employed because of them. Some interviewees felt that working meant paying back society for their crimes.

Being an expert by experience was seen as meaningful and important because it gave people confidence in their own abilities to make a difference. The interviewees talked about influencing other people's attitudes with their stories. They described how affecting professionals' views helped change the way professionals operate and contributed to making services more client-oriented. The interviewees believed that their stories could have a preventive effect on young people's substance use. Also, people currently using substances were influenced by showing them that change is possible which gave them hope. Many interviewees mentioned that their stories influenced decision-making processes, provided that the stories were heard by those making the decisions.

Many of the interviewees felt that, for the first time in their lives, they were of use to society when employed. Working a steady job and paying one's taxes reinforced many interviewees' view of themselves as good citizens.

Well, I have a job, I pay my taxes, my rent, I have an apartment, a relationship. My days follow a routine, I do the same things that are important to me, there are specific times when I do things and so on, and all that keeps me away from misdeeds and other crazy stuff. Ben

The ordinary everyday life and regular routines that come with having a job supported the interviewees' abstinence from crime and substances.

Many of the interviewees brought up the idea that their rough past and reputation among those still addicted boosted their street credibility as experts by experience and added to their ability to work as experts by experience with a history of crime and substance abuse. To those still addicted or at an early stage of recovery, the fact that people like them had been able to change the course of their lives set a good example, something to strive for.

The expert-by-experience training gave ex-offenders and recovering addicts possibilities to become employed in various positions in peer support, service development, or advocacy. Many of the interviewees got jobs at different organizations, developing new forms of services in child welfare or homeless- and women-specific social work. In addition, interviewees worked in services aimed at substance abusers. Many felt that a teamwork model between a professional and an expert by experience was the best way to do this kind of work, as it combines assets from both sides – the theoretical knowledge of the professional and the practical knowledge of the expert by experience.

Many of the interviewees said that, at its best, the teamwork model involved mutual reflection that led to new approaches. According to the interviewees, learning together, mutual knowledge and trust were emphasized in the teamwork model. Functional cooperation with professionals increased the interviewees' confidence in their own abilities to work as experts by experience.

When working with clients, the interviewees perceived themselves as peers, having experienced problems similar to those faced by the service users. The challenges that they had faced in the past had increased their understanding of what kind of things could contribute to client rehabilitation. The interviewees described various situations in which they acted as advocates for their clients, looking out for their best interest. The clients were mostly defended in situations where professionals interpreted various rules in a narrow and rigid manner without taking into account the individual circumstances or needs of the client.

The interviewees also mentioned various faults concerning the status of experts by experience at work.

I've heard about people being asked to come and just praise something, and that is exploitation, because then you won't hear anything real but just some praise and that is not real expertise by experience. And then the pay side of it, that they take you on as a volunteer and recycle those nine-euro allowances [paid by the Employment Service]. Tom

The fact that various organizations only took on experts by experience on trial periods that do not come with a decent wage was seen as a pay-related defect. Also, some interviewees felt that there were flaws concerning the status of experts by experience. In larger organizations, in particular, some experts by experience felt that their responsibilities and tasks were unclear and that they had few opportunities to affect anything. One respondent described how hard it is to influence the way the Criminal Sanctions Agency works. Interviewees also stated that, due to its current popularity, expertise by experience was being taken advantage of in different project applications without actually incorporating it into the project itself. Also, experts by experience were used as special attractions at seminars where they were given only short speaking slots with strict limitations.

With regard to the teamwork model, the interviewees reported that, in worst-case scenarios, professionals would steamroll the experts by experience in what was supposed to be cooperation.

I had been running the groups all alone for the whole summer and was wondering what was wrong because it didn't feel quite right. Then I realised that my working partner had been away for the whole summer and that I had been running the groups on my own, and now that we're back at the situation where one person speaks and tells others how things work while others listen and try to follow what is being said. The language of the professional and the understanding of the street guy don't meet. John

In this situation, the professional's interaction was unilateral and it was hard to understand from the client's point of view.

Future possibilities for being an advocate for marginalized people

Many of the interviewees described that they were deemed hopeless, lost causes, as addicts and criminals in the past, and therefore their recovery was now considered a miracle. Having overcome past difficulties, the interviewees regarded their future possibilities as experts by experience as almost endless.

When you are fairly good at speaking to people and you can convey your thoughts and you are experienced, you can increase the awareness of the public on what this is about, that we are just people. Our possibilities are endless, you can't know what the future will bring but we'll find out. Mick

The interviewees had confidence in the variety of possibilities that expertise by experience would bring them. Many said that, when sharing their stories, the trained experts by experience represent socially excluded or stigmatized people in a broader sense.

The fact that someone with a history of crime is given a face and a voice. That mental and physical change. Disengaging from crime is such a concrete thing to happen that, in my case, people say that they would have never guessed. And those people somehow stand up and are given a face and a voice and they speak on behalf of all outcasts and marginalised people and labelled people, so if that is not change, then what is? A while ago, a decade ago, no one would have even listened. And now half of society is listening if you just talk loud enough. And that makes people believe in themselves again and in their lives. That they have a right to be here. That they are somehow human beings again, and that is the real change that is taking place here. I don't know if there's more that can be changed, as [institute's name] keeps pushing out groups of people who have found this kind of human dignity. They carry on with their lives and tell people that their life used to be like that and now it is like this.

Jennifer

The interviewees stated that the stories of ex-offenders were heard and that these stories were used to strengthen people's confidence in themselves and their ability to change. Becoming an expert by experience gave people the chance to gain human dignity and become accepted and heard in society.

Autobiographies were also considered a potential opportunity among the experts by experience. One interviewee said that books by experts by experience are socially useful if they are written from the perspective of desistance. Becoming experts by experience presented some of the interviewees with a new phase in their lives when studying social work offered them the opportunity to desist from crime.

Summary and conclusion

Empowerment was manifested in the experts' descriptions about their stories as individual and communal processes in which one's own story was identified as an empowerment resource, and by sharing their stories they became part of the social nets that promote change. By telling their stories and reflecting on them together, the ex-offenders and recovering addicts became more aware of their own situation (see Adams, 2008; Cornwall & Brock, 2005). In the narratives, individual recovery, desistance from crime, and the new kinds of opportunities that came along with being an expert by experience were part of their personal empowerment process (see Rissanen, 2015). With the support of the peer group formed by those participating in the expert-by-experience training, the people with a history of crime and abuse gained more confidence in their ability to recover and a better understanding of the possibilities of agency that come with being an expert by experience (see Miley et al., 2009; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988)

The ex-offenders' and recovering addicts' relationship to society was constructed in individual processes and encounters with professionals. The personal narratives of the experts by experience revealed gaps in society's service system which raised their critical awareness of society and its ability to take care of those who are the most vulnerable. In the expert-by-experience training, they formed a strong belief in the idea that survival stories can change the world and the status of those with a history of crime and addiction. Rabeharisoa et al. (2014) describe experiential knowledge as evidence-based activism. The

experts by experience with a history of crime and substance abuse believed that they can influence clients, professionals, services, and policymakers with their survival stories. Corresponding to what Buck argues (2019), they had transformed their past experiences from limitations into unique support to these people. Moreover, desistance narratives may show offenders in a more humane light and can therefore change people's perceptions of ex-offenders (Nixon, 2020a, p. 485).

The attitudes of the ex-offenders and recovering substance abusers towards various authorities became more positive. The narratives told by the experts by experience influenced the professionals' opinions about people with a history of crime and addiction. With their survival stories, these experts by experience reinforced the professionals' trust in the possibility of change. The stories also shed light on the things that service users had found helpful in pulling through. However, this viewpoint always entails the possibility that, because the usability of these stories is evaluated by professionals from the perspective of the service system and authorities, only consensus-oriented accounts are deemed usable (see Meriluoto, 2018). According to Russo and Beresford (2015), professionals such as researchers, academics, social and political commentators may also help prove service users' experience valid and legitimate by lending their authority to it.

Meriluoto (2018) has stated that projects often seek to produce experts by experience who collaborate in a consensus-oriented manner. They see expertise as an ability to produce neutral information and not so much as an ability to act as a change agent helping organizations to become more client-oriented. In this expert-by-experience training, however, the participants' understanding of society and its systems increased while the people retained a strong view of themselves as defenders of the weak.

Authorized by their background, the ex-offenders and recovering addicts were allowed to represent all people with a history of crime and substance abuse in our society on a broader scale and reduce stigma attached to them. Peter Beresford (2020) points out that prisoners are one of the identified key groups of people as service users who are excluded. That is the reason why we need to hear these stories of people with a history of crime. Service users are not only speaking for themselves but for all clients (Beresford et al., 2008). Closely attached to this is the idea of taking apart various oppressive and stigmatizing social structures (Freire, 2004; Rose & Black, 1985). And taking down these structures is also connected with involving the service users (McLaughlin H, 2009; Sweeney, 2009). The stigma of offenders must be reduced in broader society to support the return of previously incarcerated people into the community (Evans et al., 2018, p. 273).

The people with a history of crime and substance abuse in this study were critical about their status as experts by experience and they identified various imbalances in the power relationships in the service system. To avoid conflict, however, they did not bring up these flaws. It is hard to criticize the service system and the professionals working in it when holding a fixed-term position in circumstances where the power is still in the hands of those professionals.

Experts by experience with a history of crime and substance abuse have important experiential knowledge about desistance from crime and substance abuse. Their personal experience-based information benefits professionals and peers alike (see Buck, 2017; Nixon, 2020b). In their new capacity as experts by experience, the ex-offenders and recovering substance abusers embodied exactly what is called for in the strategic talks

of the criminal sanctions field. They were empowered and worked as ‘decent citizens’ in various social positions while retaining a positive attitude towards authorities. However, it is possible that service users are only heard if they are consensus-seeking (Meriluoto, 2018). We need to make sure that when inviting people with a history of crime and substance abuse to share their stories, we actually *listen to* what they are saying, because otherwise expertise by experience becomes only an empowerment bubble.

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Table A1: Summary of results.

Narratives shared with professionals	
<p>Individual level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -possibility to engage, encounter and be heard -reflecting on one's own story with others and seeing one's story as meaningful -examining one's past made one feel more whole, increased one's understanding, and enabled one to deal with one's emotions 	<p>Social level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -anti-authoritative attitudes towards professionals and officials became more positive -representing people with a history of crime and substance abuse and reducing prejudice and stigma -influencing professionals' attitudes and change processes
Narratives shared with expert-by-experience trainees with a history of crime and substance abuse	
<p>Individual level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -being accepted as oneself -increased self-knowledge -feeling of being part of the group and pride over it -strengthened belief in one's own and others' abilities to overcome difficulties -identifying one's strengths -mutual reflection on one's recovery, desistance and criminal identity and accepting one's incompleteness 	<p>Social level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -identifying new possibilities that come with being an expert by experience -recognizing the failures of society's safety nets in the past
Narratives as tools for advocacy	
<p>Individual level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -work that is perceived as meaningful -increased credibility brought on by having had a tough past -feeling of being a good citizen through employment -functioning teamwork with a professional increased confidence in one's abilities to act as an expert by experience -trust in almost limitless influencing opportunities 	<p>Social level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -client's advocate in the service system -influencing professionals' attitudes, services and policymaking -awareness of flaws concerning the status of experts by experience -paying back to society for one's crimes -acting as an example of survival, entitled to represent marginalized people
Vocational education offers the possibility to give up the status of oneself as an expert by experience	