

**Title:** Restoring Identity: The use of religion as a mechanism to transition between an identity of sexual offending to a non-offending identity

**Abstract:** This study examines the unique experience of participants who during their reintegration back into the community, following a conviction for sexual offending, re-engaged with religious and spiritual communities. To explore meaning Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted. Four in-depth interviews of men convicted for sexual crimes were undertaken and analysed. Findings indicate that through religious affiliation participants were: exposed to new prosocial networks; provided opportunities to seek forgiveness; felt a sense of belonging and affiliation; and were psychologically comforted. However, the study also found that the process of identity transition from ‘offender’ to ‘non-offender’ was not seamless or straightforward for those with an innate sexual deviancy towards children, caution is therefore advised.

**Keywords:** sexual offender; desistance; community reintegration

**Final Word Count:** 6896 (excluding references and tables)

**Authors:**

Corresponding Author:

**Dr. Stephanie Kewley**

School of Social Sciences

Birmingham City University

Curzon Building

Birmingham

B4 7BD

Tel: 0121 331 6540

Email: [Stephanie.kewley@bcu.ac.uk](mailto:Stephanie.kewley@bcu.ac.uk)

**Dr Michael Larkin**

School of Psychology

University of Birmingham

Edgbaston

Birmingham

B15 2TT

Tel: 0121 414 6036

Email: [m.larkin@bham.ac.uk](mailto:m.larkin@bham.ac.uk)

**Dr. Leigh Harkins**

University of Ontario Institute of Technology

Faculty of Social Science and Humanities

2000 Simcoe Street North

Oshawa

ON L1H 7K4, Canada

Tel: 905 721 8668 ext.5591

Email: [Leigh.Harkins@uoit.ca](mailto:Leigh.Harkins@uoit.ca)

**Professor Anthony R Beech**

School of Psychology

University of Birmingham

Edgbaston

Birmingham

B15 2TT

Tel: 0121 414 7215

Email: [a.r.beech@bham.ac.uk](mailto:a.r.beech@bham.ac.uk)

## **Biographies**

Dr Stephanie Kewley is a Criminologist at Birmingham City University. Areas of research interest includes: desistance, rehabilitation and reintegration of people with sexual convictions.

Dr Michael Larkin is a Senior Lecturer in Clinical Psychology with interest in qualitative research methods that explore experiences of psychological distress, recovery, relatedness and caring.

Dr Leigh Harkins is an Assistant Professor at University of Ontario and has experience of working with sex offender groups at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and with the Correctional Service of Canada. She has also been involved in offender assessment work in the UK.

Professor Anthony Beech is Head of the Centre for Forensic and Criminological Psychology at the University of Birmingham, UK. He has authored over 180 peer-reviewed articles, 50 book chapters and six books in the area of forensic science/criminal justice.

## **Introduction**

Almost all of those incarcerated for sexual offending are eventually released back into the community. In spite of the inevitability of this return, society struggles to accept these individuals back. Given the highly emotive and sensitive nature of the sexual violence this is perhaps unsurprising. Yet, the perception of risk is often distorted and exaggerated by the media, in particular the tabloid press (McCartan, 2010) causing a 'moral panic' (Silverman & Wilson, 2002). Challenging inaccurate and distorted information about the profile and risk such people present (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007) is difficult. In response to this panic, governments develop legislation that controls and restricts people which to date has had some unintended consequences causing more harm than good (Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Levenson & D'Amora, 2007).

As a result, those returning to the community anticipate hostility and rejection (Russell, Seymour, & Lambie, 2013). Rebuked by family members who also fear the consequences of association (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009), people with sexual convictions often choose to withdraw themselves from potential situations where relationships might develop (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008). For those few who do have family or friends, registration or notification requirements can impede opportunities for relationships to be maintained (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). This in turn jeopardizes opportunities to engage in a process of desistance of which the establishment and maintenance of meaningful relationships is crucial (Weaver & McNeill, 2015).

In a recent study which examined the experiences of those incarcerated for sexual offending, several factors known to promote the desistance process appeared to have been supported through participants' affiliations with a religious community within prison (Kewley, Larkin, Harkins & Beech, in press). Participants reported experiencing the development of new non-offending identities; were exposed to greater social capital

opportunities; reported improved social status; and described a range of psychological benefits such as having hope for the future and a greater sense of belonging.

There are a number of reasons why in light of these findings, it is worth exploring whether the experiences of those incarcerated for sexual offending can also be experienced by a population living in the community. First, the experience of the desistance process for those convicted for sexual offending are rarely examined. Likewise, little is known of how a religious context out in the community might help or hinder the process for this group (Kewley, Beech, & Harkins, 2015). Second, intimacy deficits, feelings of loneliness, social isolation and fear, are not only psychologically harmful to the individual, they may also have the potential to contribute to further sexual offending (Craig, Browne, & Beech, 2008). This study therefore looks to examine the individual experiences of a group of people attempting to reintegrate back into the community following a conviction for sexual offending, while affiliated with a religious community.

## **Method**

To best understand the meanings made by participants, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was deemed an appropriate approach for this study. IPA is theoretically grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It is a method used to understand how from first-person experience, a person makes sense of a particular phenomenon, but from the analyst's third-person perspective. IPA is an idiographic approach, which aims to develop in-depth accounts of specific phenomena. This way of working encourages the analyst to focus on detail, and to interpret accounts of particular experiences in particular contexts (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006), rather than striving to produce generalizable theory (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995). Thus, in-depth qualitative data collection is conducted with small samples of participants, who share a

common experience and context. The role of the researcher is a critical element to this process and worth mentioning briefly here. IPA requires the researcher to engage in an active role throughout the data collection and analysis process (Smith & Osborne, 2008). While on the one hand the meaning made by participants as they reflect on their experiences are important, it is acknowledged that these experiences cannot be fully understood by the researcher, but rather interpreted through their own lens.

### **Context**

Participants in this study were living in the community following release from prison or were due to receive a non-custodial community sentence. All four participants resided in Wales. All participants while under license and community order requirements were obliged to engage in regular supervision sessions with their probation officer. All had participated in community-delivered accredited offending behavior programmes. Three of the men had completed the Northumbria Sex Offender Programme (NSOG) and one had completed the Internet Sex Offender Treatment Programme (ISOTP).

### **Sampling**

Purposive sampling was used to select participants, allowing participants to be approached who share specific characteristics (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). By doing this, the likelihood of collecting rich data from a homogenous sample was maximized. Thus, participants all held a conviction of at least one sexual offence, and all had current experience of engaging with religion or spirituality.

### **The Sample**

Although not prescriptive, between four and ten interviews are advised for an IPA study (Smith et al., 2009). This sample consisted of four adult males, all religiously active at the

time of interview. The range of religions which participants identified with included: Christianity (Catholic and Anglican) and Jehovah's Witness.

The mean age at the time of interview was 58 years (range 50-68 years, SD 7.58). At the point of offending, the mean age had been approximately 45 years (range 25-64 years, SD 16.9). Two participants had no previous records of offending and two had previous convictions for sexual offending; these are detailed in Table 1. The names listed in the table are pseudonyms.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

### **Data collection procedures**

As noted by Smith et al., (2009), the nature of IPA interviews is best described as conversational, allowing the participant to tell their story. A semi structured interview schedule was developed for use as a guide. The schedule consisted of general introductory questions with the aim of putting the participant at ease. These then moved to open and prompting questions about participants' religious or spiritual affiliations, and what these meant to them; how they experienced religion or spirituality; what role religion or spiritual communities played during periods of non-offending, offending, detection and (where appropriate) while in custody and while living in the community. All interviews ended with questions about how participants viewed their future.

All interviews were conducted one to one, by the first author, in a private interview room. These were on probation premises, apart from one interview which was carried out at the participant's home. All interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes, and were digitally recorded and transcribed, verbatim.

## **Data analysis procedures**

The analytical process as detailed by Osborn and Smith (1998) was followed. Each of the four steps is briefly described in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

To ensure the validity and rigor of the analysis, regular audit checks were undertaken by the second author (ML). This process was cyclical, with feedback, discussion, and further analysis regularly taking place. The second author would read over the transcripts and discuss the emerging interpretations developed by the first author (SK), to ensure that analysis remained close to the text. The first author would then respond to ideas by further analyzing the data and generating further interpretations. Analysis was complete when all data had been included and developed into relevant clusters and themes.

## **Results**

Presented in Table 3 are three themes which emerged from the analysis.

[Insert table 3 about here]

In order that the narratives of participants' experiences are presented in a coherent manner, results are presented in two distinct parts. The first part demonstrates the conflict which participants experienced when attempting to manage both religious and sexual offending identities. The second part highlights the experiences of participants disengaging with a sexual offending identity while drawing on religious affiliation during periods of reintegration.

### **Part One: The Personal Conflict of Being Affiliated with a Religious Community While Sexually Offending**

**'I am not a sex offender and I won't reoffend' but risk factors persist.**



Within this theme, the conflicting nature of a key narrative is presented. On the one hand, participants do not associate themselves, in the present tense at least, with the identity of someone likely to commit further sexual offences. Instead they present themselves as changed, religious, and devout. However, a latent narrative presents an identity of risk and uncertainty regarding future offending. This theme featured to varying degrees in all four participants' narratives. To illustrate the theme, selected extracts from Ryan's and Norman's accounts are discussed.

Although Ryan's account of his Catholicism implies an element of indoctrination, (it was "inbred into me"), his religion was a core part of him that could not be denied ("I could never deny the faith"). He believed his connection with Catholicism was predetermined. As a child he would: "remember you used to have to kneel on the kitchen floor saying the rosary at night, you know, prayers before meals and I knew I was destined to go [*to the monastery*]". Affiliation to a physical community was central to his sense of being a Catholic, but at the time of interview Ryan was disconnected in a physical sense from his faith community: "I fell in love with the place [*the abbey*] fell in love with the life - I still crave for it, you know, it's a thing [*that*] never goes away". To Ryan, his faith is a key feature of who he is and although his faith fluctuates, it is central to his core self. Articulating the strength of his faith he uses an analogy of a gas flame: "It's on gas mark 5...once I get sorted out with the priest it will go up (yeah) it won't go to 10 again if goes up to 10 then I've got wings".

In conflict with this religious self, Ryan was mindful of unaddressed issues, directly linked to his sexual offending. He identified with having a sexual orientation towards a specific type of child: "an altar boy...the criteria blue eyed blonde hair". This risk clearly linked to his religious identity and a religious context: "I went and picked him [*the first victim*] up...on the pretext of taking him to church I had me [*sic*] dog collar on and everything". Indeed, Ryan recalls his earliest sexual interest in children being triggered at a

monastery: “It really was triggered when I actually went to the monastery because there was a prep school there...I had to supervise the boys’ showers and things and getting changed...the eroticism and things began”. Ryan will no longer place himself in a church environment because of the risk he is aware of, yet his religious needs still remain: “it’s just too risky erm I still have me [*sic*] own prayer book and things”. Indeed, Ryan’s sense of self is shrouded by terms linked with risk and danger, where his sexual orientation towards children is the source of this problem. He nonchalantly describes himself as a ‘danger’, ‘risk’, ‘MAPPA level’ and ‘frightening’:

“I don’t know what MAPPA level erm I am, I think I’m two now...we used to say in prison that we had been de-noned...I know I am a danger...I don’t want to become frightened of children (no) they’re the ones that should be frightened of me...but I don’t want to become a leper er like I said that would raise my risk levels”.

The same dichotomy of identity narrative is presented by Norman. His sense of self is strongly affiliated with his faith, so much so that he cannot see meaning in his own life without being a Jehovah’s Witness: “I can’t divorce my life from my religion, you see I just can’t”. Indeed, he could not contemplate any other life: “It means everything (being a Jehovah Witness) it’s it’s it’s it’s the truth the world we’re living in is utterly artificial totally artificial”. He promotes his sense of self as one deeply entrenched with religiousness (“when I was in prison I got thrown out of HMP X (mmm) for preaching”) and that nothing would come between him and his choice to live as a devout Witness:

“I mean you know if every congregation on earth disappeared would I change you know nothing well no I wouldn’t change because what I’ve chosen you know I don’t swear I don’t tell dirty jokes...I avoid certain things certain things really offend me you know I I wouldn’t be I’ve had a I’ve got a friend at the moment a lady but from the beginning I’ve said to her look there’s no way we’re getting together”

Yet Norman also identifies with the idea of having an ingrained sexual attraction to children: “I don’t deny that I have had problems with pedophilia since I came of age [at] 13,14.”. Norman perceives his sexual attraction as being innate and integral to his sense of self, he views the condition as biological (“it’s an illness”) and possibly genetic: “why did I get this problem and you [brothers] didn’t, you see (mmm), now whether there’s a genetic erm side to this or not, I just do not know”. Either way, the idea that Norman is a pedophile (although not clinically diagnosed) is an important one to his identity and explaining his sexual offending. While Norman claims to be in control of his “problem” he describes how the pull to act on his sexual interests can be very strong. He is adamant he never acted on any desires, but describes a constant motivation to return to this innate sexual orientation. He uses a useful analogy to describe the challenge he faces:

“It’s a thing that is almost elastic that you can, you know, you can pull away from it and it can come back and you’ve got to pull away from it again, its its [sic] you know it’s a problem you know its its [sic] a problem”.

The findings in this first theme highlight the conflict participants experienced between their religious and offending identities. Participants wrangle with a self strongly connected with sexual offending behaviors, but equally ground their struggles in sense of self which resonates with a religious identity.

**During periods of offending, religious practice was ‘just going through the motions,’ coupled with feelings of pain, guilt and shame.**

Three of the four participants (Norman, Ryan and Stuart) were engaged in religious practice during periods of their offending. All three men were active members of their churches, with responsibilities such as leading religious services and preaching to congregations. None of the participants were able to reconcile their offending behaviors with their faith. Indeed, each

participant described how, during periods of offending, the personal worship and duties carried out during these times became meaningless. It should also be noted here that two of the participants did not offend as a result of their church connections; victims were separate and distinct from this context. However, Ryan used his position within the church to groom children, in order that he could sexually assault them.

Ryan described his experiences by explaining how he would externally display the symbols of a religiously devout person (“the uniform”) attend services and go through religious routines. However, on the inside this was all empty gesticulation as during periods of offending, all activities associated with religion became purely superficial. To describe the strength of his religious commitment, during periods of offending, the idea of his faith being represented by a flame appears again. The strength of the flame represented the strength of his religious commitment. During periods of offending, the flame became a “glowing cinder”, almost fully extinguished. While Ryan maintained that his religious commitment was not fully lost as there remained a “glow” inside of him, he observed how to others, he would have appeared engaged. Externally, to others, he believed he appeared devout:

“I was wearing the uniform (right), I was going through the motions, erm but no I was going through the hours as we call them (mmm), going to mass every day but somehow the flame inside me had gone down to a cinder (right), a glowing cinder”

As for Stuart, during periods of offending, preaching to others “got very hard towards the end, with this guilty secret behind me”. In keeping with Ryan’s experience, the internal commitment to religion diminished, but the external symbols served as a mask to others. For Stuart, religious symbols such as robes and cassocks were important, providing a layer of protection between his offending self and his religious self. Although Stuart describes the

wearing of robes as a source of authority, they also acted as a mechanism to conceal himself and his “guilty secret” from others:

“One of the reason for wearing robes, cassock and surplus or whatever, is it doesn’t hide the person...but it gives you that, a bit of authority that’s it’s not you that’s saying it, it’s coming from the church, the Bible or God or whatever...erm”

The availability of external symbols provided him the confidence to deliver the services to the congregation; when wearing the robes, the messages were God’s and not his. This is likely to have provided Stuart with some temporary comfort. However, like Ryan, Stuart’s religious commitment also diminished; he too was not able to fully engage with God in any meaningful way. He became somewhat removed (“I’d become stale, I’d been doing it for 25 years”) and as his offending behavior increased, this conflicted with his religious commitment which soon became unbearable: “I came to the point where I couldn’t really do it anymore... I didn’t want to be up there, dressed in robes...everybody thinks you’re whiter than white”.

Norman uses the analogy of ‘physical pain’, to give an account of how he experienced attending religious meetings during periods of offending:

“I couldn’t sit in a meeting without my heart being ripped in two, you know the hypocrisy from me, you know (right), I mean I could be choked you know sat in a meeting, I couldn’t just switch from one to another and just sit in a meeting and feel free, and you know (right), my heart was in a knot (right), my mind was in a knot (ok), you know the freedom, you know, I just felt awful (right), you know, I felt awful about it.”

This use of a physical analogy helped him to demonstrate the strength of feelings experienced during this time. In addition to physical pain, he was emotionally (“heart being ripped out”) and mentally (“mind was in a knot”) affected by his guilt.

Norman described why he experienced such pain. He articulated that the feelings of sexual attraction he felt towards children were not feelings he wanted to encounter. Instead, these left him feeling out of his control, trapped and imprisoned by his disorder (pedophilia). Describing the experience in this way might help provide support to Norman's belief that his behaviors were not his own choosing and were a result of his "problem". By articulating his experiences in this way, he conveys how painful the contradiction of offending and attending church was, for him. Indeed, it allowed him to present the humanity within him. Norman, like Stuart and Ryan, realized that others would not have observed this internal conflict. Yet, he notes that while he was able to fool people within his meetings, he knew he was not able to fool God: "because you can kid people but you can't kid ya God anything". This knowledge however, only exacerbated his feelings of pain and dread, because Norman knew he had not only broken human laws, but broken God's law too. For Norman this carried a far greater consequence.

Following periods where Norman would access images of child abuse, and then attend religious services, he would feel "terrible, absolutely terrible if I'd done something wrong, I'd been looking at pornography of any sort, which was my problem, if I'd been looking at pornography of any sort". The only way he appeared to cope with this experience was by separating out his offending self from his religious self. Norman articulated this as like living a double life. However, he found switching between the two personas difficult. Norman reported being unable to stop his offending behaviors, not because he did not want to, or had not tried, but because he believed he was unable to: "you know I was leading this double life, and its one to, how do you break free from it (mmm) because of [*sic*]I tried trust me". Presenting the experience of being in a trap, unable to break free or escape his condition, allowed Norman to reinforce his belief that his sexual offending behaviors were innate and not his fault.

It is interesting to observe from this theme that as participants sexually offended they also experienced unsatisfactory religious and spiritual experiences, whereas during periods of non-sexual offending, religious experiences were rewarding. It is likely that for these participants their religious identity was incongruent with their offending selves. To overcome internal barriers and to rationalize sexual motivators, participants were required to moderate their religious activity and engagement to facilitate sexual offending.

## **Part Two: Experiences of Religion and Spirituality to Support Reintegration**

In this next section, participants' narratives move from an active offender identity to a more religious identity. Participants reported how, as they attempted to reintegrate back into the community, they were provided with comfort and hope through exposure to religious experiences. This process is however, not without its challenges.

### **Seeking forgiveness brings psychological benefit.**

Forgiveness was a fundamental aspect of each participant's faith. For example, if Norman could be forgiven by God, he had hope that he would achieve everlasting life: "If I'm forgiven...my problem you know cos this won't exist in the new system that's coming you know after Armageddon". But participants sought forgiveness from a range of people, and while the act of seeking forgiveness brought some psychological benefits, receiving forgiveness was sometimes a challenge.

Ryan reported the desire to seek forgiveness from God, his victims and his church peers. Forgiveness from his peers was important as it allowed him to retain a place in his religious community. He received this forgiveness and they committed to supporting him: "We will never close the door (mmm right) and I thought 'There is family,' you know fair enough I've voluntarily excluded myself (mmm) erm but they're still there". This brought comfort and reassurance to Ryan because, in spite of his offences, he was able to continue to

receive love and support from his religious community. But Ryan also sought to repair the damage he had caused to victims of his offences. Forgiveness was clearly linked to reparation for Ryan, although he recognized that seeking this was futile: “I’ve got to ask forgiveness from three other people (mmm) but it will never come”. In response to the notion that seeking forgiveness in this instance might be motivated by his own self-interest he stated:

“I want to try to explain why I did it (right) you know [*sigh*] I don’t think they would forgive me erm but maybe it could put some of their pain at rest (mmm) I don’t think it would it would probably open up old wounds, erm yes I see where you are coming from, yes it would, be selfish but, I just feel there is something missing (right), erm and we haven’t been able in any shape or form to make atonement”.

Ryan appeared unable to move forward without having the opportunity to repair the relationship with his victims. While God and his religious community had forgiven him, he was unable to fully repent and make atonement without repairing the relationship with the victims. This frustrated Ryan because being able to repair the damage he caused was an important part of reintegrating back into the community.

The issue of forgiveness was pertinent to Edward too. Edward however, accepted he could never seek or receive forgiveness from his victims and so sought forgiveness in an indirect way:

“They will forgive you when you forgive yourself, will you (right) and to me it’s become a matter of courage to say ‘Yes, ultimately, with repentance (mmm), I have to repent.’ Will I keep walking away? And as I walk away say, ‘I can forget that,’ cos forgiving is also forgetting (right), it’s putting it behind you”.

Edward first forgives himself; he stops carrying the burden of guilt and allows himself to put the offences behind him. To do this he compartmentalizes the incidents as being in the past,



they do not define the person he is today. It is important to Edward that this process helps him move forward: “You can’t move forward erm you can’t live in harmony and peace, you can’t live [inaudible] if you’re not forgiven”.

Finally, Stuart struggles to accept how and why people and God are able to forgive him. Stuart’s self-worth was low; he did not think he had the right to be forgiven or treated as an equal amongst others. He was amazed when an individual from the church forgave him (“Here’s a young woman...knows what I’ve done and has forgiven me and I thought, ‘This is just mind blowing’”) the people in his new church were so warm and welcoming (“We don’t mind what you’ve done or who you are, you are part of Christ’s family and Christ forgives”) and that God forgave him: “Funnily enough it’s strengthened erm...although I’ve let God down and his church down in a very visible way...I’ve had to accept the forgiveness of God”. Stuart, in spite of his initial shock at being forgiven, felt fully integrated and accepted by his new church.

Interestingly, Stuart highlighted the lack of opportunity to seek and receive forgiveness, from the legal system or those in the wider society:

“I’ve seen the forgiveness of people, my partner, well my wife, my family, friends, you wouldn’t believe, people I would have thought would have been just totally virulent against me, haven’t been, and others have, you know, and there was this huge divide between people and the law and God’s forgiveness, and reconciling those two, is still very difficult for me”.

Even though Stuart had served his sentence, been punished, forgiven, and accepted back into his family and community, he was not able to be fully restored back to a position prior to offending, because legal and social restraints prevented this: “church and Christ forgives, the law and society doesn’t”.

### **Religious practice brings comfort.**

A further experience which participants reported as being of significance was the practice of religious or spiritual activities. Such activities were important in two ways; first, they represented important rituals that were to being affiliated to their specific religion e.g. taking communion, meditating, praying, reading biblical texts etc. By engaging in such activities participants were able to signal to others and identify themselves as being part of a group with a shared set of values, beliefs and practices. Second, the process of engaging in the religious activity brought many psychological comforts to participants, including the desire to disclose (where safe to do so) and present themselves with integrity and honesty.

It was noted that being able to worship together with others of a shared faith was important to both Ryan and Stuart; they likened this to being part of a family. Engaging in activities together brought a sense of closeness and bonded them to others:

“I like the ceremonial- I love the community spirit is- there (mmm), especially at the X, you know the brothers together, I miss being close to God (right), you know to go into a church and look at the tabernacle where the blessed sacraments are kept, and just have 15 minutes of your own time, I miss little things (mmm) like that” (Ryan).

“It was a focus point of the sacrifice of Jesus...and it was something you came to do together to do as a congregation, as a family, something like Sunday to receive the bread and wine, the body and blood...there’s also the erm, what’s the word I’m looking for, the...the erm ritual of it, the robes, the vestments and that sort of thing...” (Stuart).

While Ryan was unable to engage in the fellowship of his church, he maintained certain rituals. He stated that this was because doing them brought him comfort, because they were so engrained in his life. Ryan claimed to have “kept the old monastic hours”. Likewise Stuart recalled and recited creeds and evening collects, by way of bringing comfort: “I can still say

the evening collect we said and the grace that we said in my school days [*laughs*]...they become kind of a comforting thing that's always there"

Meditation and prayer was used to communicate with God and help participants focus on specific ideas, but also to bring additional psychological benefits. For Edward, prayer helped him gain insight ("it gives you a perspective") in light of his poor mental health. This was critical in assisting him in maintaining good wellbeing and general health. Likewise where he was unable to deal with a situation or problem, by discussing this with God, even giving up the problem to God, through prayer, he was able to receive guidance and focus. In essence, he felt that prayer helped him to problem-solve:

"I've been thinking about I can't get this out of my head, you know what is it what's really going on, show me Lord, show me, shine a light, show what's going on [Edward claps his hands with each word]".

For Ryan, meditation and prayer served to help him relax: "I'll just chill (right) and it puts me not always but most of the time into the right frame of mind".

In addition to psychological comforts, by re-establishing religious values, participants appeared motivated to present openly to others. There was a sense that by being open, and by disclosing offending histories to others, participants felt a sense of freedom and liberty. Notably, both Ryan and Edward experienced a significant sense of wellbeing and satisfaction in their life as a result of being able to fully disclose secrets they had maintained for many years.

Ryan faced significant physical challenges and was taking a lot of medication, as a result of several distinct chronic health problems. Despite this, he stated that he was the happiest he had ever been. Ryan puts this down to the fact that he was no longer in denial to others or himself about his sexuality and his offending past:

“I found myself (ok) I’m happy with who I am (right ok), I know my limitations now see I was living in denial about being gay...I’d been deceiving people and myself for years (mmm) and I’m not prepared to do it anymore”.

The opportunity to disclose to others about his offending brought him relief:

“...after I get to know them I will disclose, like Jason erm in X Town he was one of the first people I ever disclosed to (mmm), and he was fine, you know he said thank you (mmm), and that was a weight off my shoulders”

For Edward, disclosure offered the opportunity to take responsibility for his offending. He felt strongly about his recent religious conversion and at the point of arrest made no effort to minimize or reduce culpability: “I pleaded guilty erm because I was”. He wanted to shoulder the full blame for his offending self: “I take all of the blame for my offending myself”. Being able to take responsibility and disclose fully, meant he was able to move forward with his life. Edward provided an analogy to describe his experience; he used a religious analogy of ‘light’; another religious concept. Edward explained that moving through a process of disclosure and honesty was frightening because the light shone or highlighted things that he did not want to consider about himself. However with the truth, there could be no more lies:

“Shining the light, it is a light in the darkness, (right) shines the light in the darkness and some lights that are shone in the darkness you don’t like what’s in the corner...so the light comes on there’s nowhere anymore that isn’t light”.

It is interesting that this new light also enabled him to see others differently too:

“Faith does, it gives you a new light to look with as well...the old view was light comes out of your eyes then you see by the light it is a bit like that that...I don’t look at people

being miserable to each other I see them happy and positive and brave and courageous (right), you see literally do see the good in people (mm) even your enemies”.

These findings suggest that for those with a history of sexual offending, religious activity and affiliation provides some psychological comfort along with a mechanism to engage in a forgiveness-seeking process, which in and of itself appears to bring about feelings of hope for the future. The findings do also highlight how the process of change is complex. For those with a sexual interest in children, a faith environment might be a problematic and inappropriate environment. Ryan for example, abused the position of trust he held within the community by grooming and sexually abusing children within his church. He maintained a strong sexual attraction to children. For Ryan, release into a religious community, even with appropriate safeguarding disclosures and controls, would still be inappropriate. However, access to managed support from appropriate church affiliates/leaders (post disclosure) might provide opportunities for him to engage in religious rituals which would still provide significant exposure to factors that support the desistance process.

## **Discussion**

Within this study, the religious and spiritual experiences of four men convicted of sexual offending, while attempting to reintegrate back into the community, were explored. Findings show that for those religiously inclined, the process of reintegrating back into the community following a conviction for sexual offending might be supported and enhanced by engaging with a religious or spiritual community. However, findings also highlight that some caution is needed. The psychological transition from ‘offender’ to ‘non-offender’ is not a seamless or straightforward process.

One of the most important outcomes of any effective reintegration process is that people desist from crime. For those sexually orientated towards children, helping them to

develop the capacity to cope and avoid acting on their sexual interests is important to reduce the risk of further sexual reoffending (Ward, Mann and Gannon, 2007). Yet other factors are at play in the process of reintegration and in the absence of an integrated theory of rehabilitation, we must draw on what is already known in the desistance and rehabilitation literature. We know for example that the process of desistance includes: an ageing out or maturation effect (Sampson and Laub, 2005); the requirement of meaningful social bonds and institutional affiliation (Giordano, et al., 2008; Weaver and McNeill, 2015); narrative and social identity transformation (Maruna, 2001); the promotion of human goods and development of good life plans (Ward and Stewart, 2003); while avoiding risks and addressing needs (Bonta and Andrews, 2007). Outside of the maturation effect, each of these domains featured to some degree in participants accounts in this study. This present discussion first turns to the notion of cognitive or identity transformation.

It is argued that offenders must begin to develop a more acceptable and non-offending narrative identity in order that they can live and re-create themselves in a more pro-socially acceptable way (Maruna, 2001; Ward and Marshall, 2007). Yet, one of the particularly interesting findings in this study was the lack of clarity in participants' identity. Religion failed to provide an adequate mechanism to help transform the identity across all participants. Unlike Maruna's (2001) Liverpool Desistance study where 'desisters' or 'persisters' were readily classified, here it was difficult to distinguish between those desisting from, or persisting to, sexual offending. On the one hand, by presenting clear and well-defined desisting religious identities, participants appeared to formulate 'redemption scripts' (Maruna, 2001). Their religious or spiritual self was presented as their 'core self', someone who deep down was good and honest. Yet, on the other hand, 'condemnation scripts' or offending narratives permeated participants' sense of self. This was most notable in two participants; Norman and Ryan. Aspects of their offending selves governed their narratives

and at times conflicted with their religious identities. They presented offending identities in past, present and future tenses; and experienced feeling out of control and fearful of the presence of factors associated with their sexual offending behavior. Indeed in keeping with condemnation type scripts, both participants presented themselves as victims of circumstances as well as victims of the system. So while they articulated a commitment not to offend in the future, they also expressed concerns regarding the persistence of high risk conditions such as pedophilia and alcoholism.

Such narratives are of course forms of story-telling which help people present an interpretation of their life experience. By their very nature they are therefore dynamic, inevitably changing over time in response to events and situations (Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 2001). Perhaps it is to be expected that as people struggle or are unable to make sense of their experiences or even own behavior, it is plausible for such narratives might be presented with some incongruence. Participants in this study identify strongly with a motivation not to sexually offend versus a conflicting identity that maintains a sexual attraction to children. While these findings reveal a concerning indication that two participants appear at risk of further offending, they also capture a process of personal transformation or at an in-between point known as intermittency (Piquero, 2004). Without longitudinal or recidivism data, the desisting status of these particular participants cannot be corroborated. Therefore, for these two participants at least, we cannot be confident religion or a religious identity has helped facilitate genuine identity transformation, it may also be possible that their conflicting narratives expose deceit while attempting to avoid detection and intent on sexually offending.

On the other hand, findings demonstrate aspects of the literature that support the desistance process, such as by providing an opportunity to seek forgiveness and to a larger degree, feel psychologically comforted. This was found as participants were provided with the opportunity to signal change to others (be that to people or God), through a religious

experience of redemption and forgiveness. Having the opportunity to signal a transformed self to others, especially to those outside of the criminal justice system (as was experienced by all participants) is likely to initiate a process of de-labelling (Maruna, 2012, p. 76). Because of the stigma associated with sexual offending, the opportunity to signal this type of change is rare for this population. Instead, it is more commonplace for people to remain stigmatized, to face formal disintegrative shaming sanctions, and to be prevented from fully reintegrating back into society (Robbers, 2009; Maruna, 2011). The opportunity to seek forgiveness was one that participants took during their engagement with their religious community. In navigating the forgiveness-seeking process, participants gained an immense sense of peace, restoration and comfort. While there is a great deal of literature detailing and evidencing both the processes, and the health and well-being benefits of forgiving others (for a useful reviews of the literature see Exline, Worthington, Hill & McCullough, 2003; McCullough & Witvliet, 2002), much less is known of the components required, and the experiences of those seeking, receiving and feeling forgiven (Ashby, 2003; Krause & Ellison, 2003).

It is worth noting however that unlike the findings of a similar study of men incarcerated for sexual offending (Kewley et al., in press); improved levels of social capital and social status were not reported by this group. This is of course a concern, because the literature clearly indicates that to help people move to a more desistance motivated stance, positive social bonds must be established and maintained (Weaver & McNeill, 2015). It was only Stuart (who had not experienced imprisonment) who was able to re-gain access into a religious community where he reported the benefits of developing new social bonds. The remaining three relied on individual religious practice and commitment to sustain their new non-offending identities. It would appear that for those living in the community with a desire to access a religious community, greater support is perhaps needed to help facilitate this



access. Of course as already noted, for people such as Norman, access to a religious community would be highly inappropriate.

There are few studies that explore the process of reintegration for those convicted of sexual offending (Farmer, McAlinden & Mauna, 2015) and in particular the role of non-criminal justice agencies in supporting this process (Kewley et al., 2015). While this study looked to examine the experiences of participants from within a religious context, there are of course many other non-secular communities that might provide the same support and opportunity to the factors known to promote desistance. Further exploration of these would be of interest for future research. Likewise, while the process of desistance itself is unlikely to be any different between that of a general offending population and those convicted of sexual offending, the experience of those with sexual convictions might be. It is therefore important that we explore and attempt to understand how factors that are required to promote the desistance process for this group might be fostered when they are living in the community. It is hoped that the findings in this study promotes discussion, further research and provides some preliminary insight into this highly stigmatized population.

## References

- Ashby, H. U., Jr. (2003). Being forgiven: Toward a thicker description of forgiveness. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 57(2), 143-152. doi: 10.1177/154230500305700205
- Bonta, J., & Andrews, D. A. (2007). *Risk-need-responsivity model for offender assessment and rehabilitation*. Public Safety Canada. Accessed from: <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/rsk-nd-rspnsvty/rsk-nd-rspnsvty-eng.pdf>
- Burchfield, K. B., & Mingus, W. (2008). Not in my neighborhood: Assessing registered sex offenders' experiences with local social capital and social control. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 35(3), 356-374. doi: 10.1177/0093854807311375
- Craig, L. A., Browne, K. D., & Beech, A. R. (2008). *Assessing risk in sex offenders: A practitioner's guide*. Chichester, England: John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Exline, J. J., Worthington, J. E. L., Hill, P., & McCullough, M. E. (2003). Forgiveness and justice: A research agenda for social and personality psychology. *Personality & Social Psychology Review*, 7(4), 337-348. doi: 10.1207/S15327957PSPR0704\_06
- Farmer, M., McAlinden, A.-M., & Maruna, S. (2015). Understanding desistance from sexual offending. A thematic review of research findings. *Probation Journal*, 62(4), 320-335. doi: 10.1177/0264550515600545
- Giordano, P. C., Longmore, M. A., Schroeder, R. D., & Seffrin, P. M. (2008). A life-course perspective on spirituality and desistance from crime. *Criminology*, 46(1), 99-132. doi: 10.1111/j.1745-9125.2008.00104.x

- Kewley, S., Beech, A. R., & Harkins, L. (2015). Examining the role of faith community groups with sexual offenders: A systematic review. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 25, 142-149. doi: 10.1016/j.avb.2015.07.016
- Kewley, S., Larkin, M., Harkins, L., & Beech, A. R. (in press). The meaning made of religious and spiritual affiliation for those incarcerated for sexual offending.
- Krause, N., & Ellison, C. G. (2003). Forgiveness by God, forgiveness of others, and psychological well-being in late life. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42(1), 77-93. doi: 10.1111/1468-5906.00162
- Larkin, M., Watts, S., & Clifton, E. (2006). Giving voice and making sense in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 102-120. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp062oa
- Levenson, J., D'Amora, D., & Hern, A. (2007). Megan's Law and its impact on community re-entry for sex offenders. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 25(4), 587-602. doi: 10.1002/bsl.770
- Levenson, J. S., Brannon, Y. N., Fortney, T., & Baker, J. (2007). Public perceptions about sex offenders and community protection policies. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 7(1), 137-161. doi: 10.1111/j.1530-2415.2007.00119.x
- Levenson, J. S., & Cotter, L. P. (2005). The effect of Megan's Law on sex offender reintegration. *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 21(1), 49-66. doi: 10.1177/1043986204271676
- Levenson, J. S., & D'Amora, D. A. (2007). Social policies designed to prevent sexual violence: The emperor's new clothes? *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, 18(2), 168-199. doi: 10.1177/0887403406295309

- Levenson, J. S., & Tewksbury, R. (2009). Collateral damage: Family members of registered sex offenders. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 34(1), 54-68. Doi: 10.1007/s12103-008-9055-x
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-offenders reform and reclaim their lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Maruna, S. (2011). Reentry as a rite of passage. *Punishment & Society*, 13(1), 3-28. doi:10.1177/1462474510385641
- Maruna, S. (2012). Elements of successful desistance signaling. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 11(1), 73-86. doi: 10.1111/j.1745-9133.2012.00789.x
- McAdams, D. P. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(2), 100-122. doi: 10.1037/1089-2680.5.2.100
- McNeill, F. (2012). Four forms of ‘offender’ rehabilitation: Towards an interdisciplinary perspective. *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 17(1), 18-36. doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8333.2011.02039.x
- McCartan, K. (2010). Media constructions and reactions to, paedophilia in modern society. In K. Harrison (Ed.), *Managing high-risk sex offenders in the community* (pp. 249-268). Devon, UK: Willan.
- McCullough, M. E., & Witvliet, C. V. (2002). The psychology of forgiveness. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 446-458). NY, US: Oxford University Press.

- Osborn, M., & Smith, J. A. (1998). The personal experience of chronic benign lower back pain: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 3(1), 65-83. doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8287.1998.tb00556.x
- Piquero, A. (2004). Somewhere between persistence and desistance. In S. Maruna & R. Immarigeon (Eds.), *After crime and punishment: Pathways to offender reintegration* (pp. 102-128). Devon, UK: Willan Publishing.
- Robbers, M. L. P. (2009). Lifers on the outside: Sex offenders and disintegrative shaming. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 53(1), 5-28. doi: 10.1177/0306624X07312953
- Russell, G., Seymour, F., & Lambie, I. (2013). Community reintegration of sex offenders of children in New Zealand. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 57(1), 55-70. doi: 10.1177/0306624X11426132
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (2005). A life-course view of the development of crime. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 602(1), 12-45. doi: 10.1177/0002716205280075
- Silverman, J., & Wilson, D. C. (2002). *Innocence betrayed: Paedophilia, the media and society*. Cambridge, UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, method and research*. London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Smith, J. A., Harré, R., & Van Langenhove, L. (1995). *Rethinking psychology*. London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd.

- Smith, J., & Osborne, M. (2008). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Smith, JA (Ed.) *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*. (pp. 53-79): London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Teddlie, C., & Yu, F. (2007). Mixed methods sampling a typology with examples. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1(1), 77-100. doi: 10.1177/2345678906292430
- Ward, T., Mann, R. E., & Gannon, T. A. (2007). The good lives model of offender rehabilitation: Clinical implications. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 12(1), 87-107. doi:10.1016/j.avb.2006.03.004
- Ward, T., & Marshall, B. (2007). Narrative identity and offender rehabilitation. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 51(3), 279-297. doi: 10.1177/0306624X06291461
- Weaver, B., & McNeill, F. (2015). Lifelines: Desistance, social relations, and reciprocity. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 42(1), 95-107. doi: 10.1177/0093854814550031
- Ward, T., & Stewart, C. A. (2003). The treatment of sex offenders: Risk management and good lives. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 34(4), 353-360. doi: 10.1037/0735-7028.34.4.353

Table 1. Description of Community Sample

Participant	Approximate Age at point of Interview	Approximate age at point of Offending	Offence	Previous Offending history	Religion as described by Participants
Ryan	50	25	Indecent assault male child under 13 years	Indecent assault x 2 male children under 13 years	Christian/Catholic
Norman	58	53	Attempted abduction female girl age 5 years and breach of SOPO	Attempted abduction and indecent assault female child 6 years old possession of indecent images of children	Jehovah Witness
Edward	55	39	Indecent assault male and female children between ages of 1-15 years	No previous	Christian
Stuart	68	64	Possession of indecent images of children	No previous	Christian/Anglican

Table 2. Interpretation of Osborn and Smith's (1998) four step analysis process

Step	Summary
Step One – familiarization of transcripts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transcripts are first read and then re-read, while listening to the audio of the interview</li> <li>• This first step allows for the re-familiarization of the participant and their narrative</li> <li>• Initial thoughts were documented to the right hand side of the text</li> </ul>
Step Two – Line by line analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Step two requires a close line by line analysis of the text</li> <li>• More detailed notes and comments are made to the right of the page (the 'comments' facility in Microsoft Word was used to collect notes and link researchers interpretation directly to participants narrative)</li> <li>• Notes included commentary on conceptual observations, the linguistic style of the participant (e.g. pauses, repetition, tone and laughter), insightful descriptions provided by the participants, and commentary that was important and relevant to them personally</li> <li>• This step was repeated to ensure all text and narrative was analysed and interpretation documented</li> <li>• A summary overview of each interview, participant and key observations was then made</li> </ul>
Step Three – Shift from analysis to interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Here a shift from observation to interpretation occurred through the emergence of clusters or themes. This involved drawing together commentary and interpretations, and then mapping these into meaningful clusters on a separate document and table</li> <li>• As clusters developed a title and description of the cluster also emerged</li> <li>• Moving chronologically through the interview transcript, data was added to existing clusters and where appropriate new clusters identified. This stage was repeated for each of the transcripts</li> <li>• To ensure emerging clusters remained close to the participant's narrative, quotations or phrases spoken by the participant was selected to represent each interpretation. Page and line numbers were also recorded to provide a clear audit trail and ease of access</li> </ul>
Step Four – Theme development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• With all transcripts individually analysed, clusters from each transcript are drawn together into larger and more concrete themes</li> <li>• This process was iterative and so required continued re-visitation of original transcripts and at times deeper interpretation of narratives</li> <li>• When themes were complete, a label or title for each theme was developed, representing both the essence of participants' narrative and researcher interpretation</li> </ul>



Table 3. Summary of Themes from Community Study

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
'I am not a Sex Offender and I Won't Reoffend' but Risk Factors Persist	Offender and religious identity
	Denial
	Risk
The Changeable Nature of Faith	Rejection is felt at the loss of religious networks
	Difficulty accessing new faith networks in the community
	Religious affiliation provides humanity in a harsh context; in prison it is essential for survival, this is not replicated in the community.
	During periods of offending, religious practice was just going through the motions coupled with feelings of pain, guilt and shame.
Engaging in Faith Provides Comfort, Hope and Protection Following Sexual Conviction	Seeking forgiveness brings psychological benefit.
	Religious practice brings comfort.