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THE NARRATIVE STUDY OF LIVES

Volume 5

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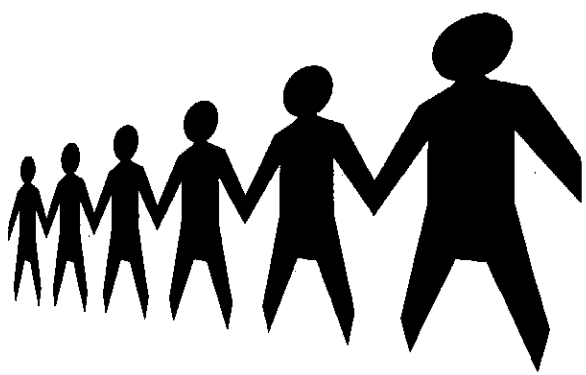
The Narrative Study of Lives



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Going Straight

Desistance From Crime and Life Narratives of Reform

Shadd Maruna

Charlie McGregor says, "My life is evidence that mental growth can take place anywhere. I lived in jail—one of the worst kinds of ghettos there is—but it didn't keep me from becoming an educated man" (p. 489).[1] A gang member and a drug dealer through his adolescence and young adulthood, McGregor detailed the failures, successes, and metamorphoses of his tumultuous life in his 1978 autobiography, *Up From the Walking Dead.* The following rough schematic of his book provides the gist of this history:

> McGregor was born in Harlem, to a single mother who beat him terribly because she thought he was less intelligent and less attractive than his lighter-skinned older brother. He became involved in gangs and drugs as a means of achieving a sense of power and self-respect amid a powerless ghetto existence. His young adulthood, however, was largely spent behind bars. Although he found a "family" of sorts in prison, he longed for female intimacy and material success. Each time he was released, however, he found that these goals were unattainable through legal means, so he returned to criminal behavior.

> Finally, in prison for the last time, he was exposed to a social service organization called Reality House, run by former Harlem gang members like himself, but who had achieved respectability in mainstream society. After seeing the respectful way prison officials treated the counselors from the organization, McGregor agreed to go along to the group's meetings. He soon found that this "new family" was a far more peaceful and understanding group than his incarcerated peers. Upon his release from prison, he approached the agency to find a job, so he could be like one of the counselors he so admired. Although the process was anything but easy, several years later, Charlie McGregor became a licensed drug therapist, public speaker, and minor celebrity, who used his new position to help young people avoid making the mistakes he made.

McGregor's story is unique in many ways, but the transition away from delinquent behavior he describes is a surprisingly common social phenomenon. Colloquially labeled "going straight," this transition is referred to as *desistance from crime* in criminological literature. Little is known about this reform process except that it tends to take place for most delinquents in their late teens or early twenties (Farrington, 1986). In fact, Moffitt (1993) calls the "mysterious" relationship between age and crime "at once the most robust and least understood empirical observation in the field of criminology" (p. 675).

In one of the most thorough analyses of the topic, Rand (1987) suggests "the phenomenon of desistance has received no specific theoretical or empirical attention" (p. 134). Although this is overstated (see Greenberg, 1981, or Trasler, 1979), studies of desistance do tend to be difficult to locate and seem to exist in relative isolation from one another. In their 639-page definitive study of the causes of crime, for instance, Wilson and Herrnstein (1985) say that the linkage of age and crime "resists explanation" (p. 145). Shover (1985) writes, "Although it is conventional wisdom that most offenders eventually desist from criminal behavior, criminology textbooks have little or nothing to say about this process" (p. 15). Mulvey and LaRosa (1986) conclude, "In short, we know that many youth 'grow out' of delinquent activity, but we know very little about why" (p. 213).

In this exploratory study, I employ the methodology and insight of narrative psychology to try to better understand the psychological processes involved in the transition away from antisocial behavior. Following McAdams (1985, 1993), I content-analyze 20 published autobiographies, written by successfully reintegrated ex-convicts for similarities in theme, plot structure, and character—not simply the historical "facts" usually studied in sociological analysis (see Bennett, 1981). The goal of this project is to identify a type of subjective self-understanding expressed in narrative that seems to support desistance from crime.

Autobiography and Criminology: A Rationale

Criminology has had a long tradition of using life-history data, especially in the Chicago School of sociology during the first part of the century. Discussing life histories, such as *The Jack-Roller*, for instance, Shaw (1929) writes, "So far as we have been able to determine as yet, the best way to investigate the inner world of the person is through a study of himself through a life history" (p. 6). Scott and Lyman (1968) even argue that stories are intimately connected to behavior such as crime that is outside of socially approved boundaries: "Since it is with respect to deviant behavior that we call for accounts, the study of deviance and the study of accounts are intrinsically related, and a clarification of accounts will constitute a clarification of deviant phenomena" (p. 62; see also Hartung, 1965).

Nonetheless, the marriage of oral histories and criminology has been rocky, and the method has been all but abandoned by criminologists today (Thomas, 1983). Lewis and Maruna (1995) argue that this is largely because criminologists have traditionally viewed these documents as purely sociological rather than psychosocial data. Bennett (1981) writes that despite the numerous oral histories collected by criminologists over the last century, delinquent narratives have never been explicitly analyzed as explorations of "somatic, psychiatric, and psychological regions" of human identity (p. 236). He argues that the small amount of nonsociological commentary that was included in the life-story research in this time was merely "inserted to placate the

psychologists who headed the institute for Juvenile Research" (p. 190). Finestone (1976) similarly points out, "Shaw made no attempt to pursue the implications of the Jack-Roller's idiosyncratic point of view for an understanding of his involvement in delinquent conduct" (p. 101).

Although life narratives provide valuable historical and social information for sociologists, McAdams (1985, 1993) also argues that narratives should be viewed as a psychosocial construction of a person's identity. According to this view, the modern adult defines him- or herself in society by fashioning an internalized and dynamic life story, or personal myth, that provides life with unity, purpose, and meaning. The construction and reconstruction of this internal narrative integrating one's perceived past, present, and anticipated future is itself the process of identity development in adulthood (McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, in press). According to Giddens (1991), in modern society, "a person's identity is not to be found in behavior, nor—important though this is—in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going" (p. 54). I take this as my beginning point in analyzing the narratives of reformed ex-convicts.

Most often, these subjective interpretations of one's history are obtained through autobiographical interviewing or ethnographic research (Canter, 1994; Denzin, 1987, 1989; Katz, 1988; Toch, 1987). Verbal and written life histories are *not* identity myths themselves, but they "hold the outlines" of these internal narratives and can be hermeneutically mined for clues to individuals' self-understandings (McAdams, 1993). A large, untapped archive of this life-story data exists in public libraries, where "personal documents" (Allport, 1937) such as autobiographies have long been a staple. Discussing William James's (1902/1985) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Bakan (1996) argues that using published, and therefore public, autobiographic data also allows researchers to avoid the ethical problems of harming interview subjects by publishing sensitive information about their personal and inner lives. He writes, "I suspect that the library contains great narrative ore for much more psychological mining" (p. 6). The issue of privacy is of particular ethical concern when

dealing with populations such as ex-offenders, so I exclusively employ published autobiographies in this study.

Still, the use of published data raises other important issues for psychological researchers. For instance, the data in this sample may be inappropriately shaped by literary demands. The content might reflect what is "publishable" under the pressures of the lucrative "true crime" publishing market rather than historical or personal truth. As Katz (1988), who also analyzes published accounts of offenders, writes, "It is reasonable to worry that the ubiquitous presence of . . . 'sensational' themes in life histories says more about the criteria of publishing than about robbers' lives in general" (p. 347).

Although this concern is real, the data are probably no more contaminated than oral histories collected by sociologists. Whenever people relate their life story, audience expectations will influence the tone or content. Sutherland (1932), for instance, suggests that the guidance of the social scientist during the interview process "is likely to result in some selection of material in a sense that the relative amounts of material on different topics are influenced by the interests and hypotheses of the investigator." Especially when dealing with the subject of deviant behavior, one is likely to hear a considerable amount of false rhetoric, regardless of the situation of the telling (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Still, although the "sustaining story" of reform may be an imaginatively distorted version of "reality," personality researchers argue that this fiction is meaningful (Adler, 1927). Rouse (1978) suggests our autobiographical tales are "much embellished but truthful even so, for truth is not simply what happened but how we felt about it when it was happening, and how we feel about it now" (cited in McAdams, 1994b, p. 721).

In this sense, committing one's life story to print may even make the work more personally meaningful. Josselson (1996) writes, "Written events gain a substantiality above that carried by memory or speech" (p. 60). Presumably, autobiographical authors are aware that many of the people close to them will be able to read the book (and verify its accuracy). Therefore, they probably have *more* incentive than the individual talking to a researcher in a laboratory setting to be honest and consistent in their self-exploration. At the least, published

autobiographies more directly reflect what individuals want significant others to know about them than do anonymous interviews.

Finally, published autobiographies also represent *public* stories as well as *private* stories. American literature, media, and cinema have a long-standing obsession with stories of crime and criminals, from Al Capone to the Crips and Bloods. The number of criminal offenders portrayed on prime-time television on any given night is wildly out of proportion to the number of offenders in "real life," for instance. All of these public stories directly or indirectly influence voters and lawmakers in their opinions of key crime policies from "three strikes" legislation to the death penalty (see Leps, 1992). Positive stories of the ex-con who "makes good" and turns his life around, from Hugo's (1862/1963) *Les Miserables* to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) magnify the notion of the unlimited potential and plasticity of the human being. Negative public stories of the incorrigible ex-offender, such as George Bush's Willie Horton commercials, on the other hand, support the competing notion of "once a criminal, always a criminal."

Public stories about criminality also affect young people who are in the process of finding their own identities. Adolescents' stories will reflect the influence of the countless public stories the young person has been exposed to, from television programs to religious parables. The stories in this sample, therefore, not only reflect public mythology, but because the stories themselves are published, they too become mythological artifacts (Denzin, 1989). The story of "going straight" is a staple in Western fiction that serves a culturally relevant function. Like the story of the child of poverty who becomes president, the story of the ex-offender who becomes a community leader serves as a testament to human plasticity and the potential for adaptation and change (Brown, 1988). Understanding the key elements of these reform stories may be helpful in understanding desistance from crime.

The Desistance Literature

One of the first social scientists to address the question of reform was Adolphe Quetelet (1833). Like other students of criminal behavior in this period, Quetelet takes a biological approach to delinquency.

He argues that the penchant for crime "seems to develop by reason of the intensity of man's physical vitality and passions." Criminality peaks when physical development has "almost been completed," then "diminishes still later due to the enfeeblement of physical vitality and the passions" (cited in Brown & Miller, 1988, p. 13). Glueck and Glueck (1940) develop this into their theory of *maturational reform*. They argue that criminality naturally declines after the age of 25. With the "sheer passage of time," juvenile delinquents "grow out" of this transitory phase and change their life goals. Glueck and Glueck find that "aging is the only factor which emerges as significant in the reformative process" (p. 105). Specifically, young adults "burn out" physiologically and can no longer maintain the type of energy and aggressiveness needed in delinquency.

Although Glueck and Glueck (1940) explicitly urged future researchers to "dissect maturation into its components" (p. 270), Shover (1985) correctly asserts that criminology's "explanatory efforts have not progressed appreciably beyond (the Gluecks') work" (p. 77). Maturational reform continues to be one of the most influential theories of desistance in criminology. For instance, Wilson and Herrnstein (1985) argue that none of the possible correlates of age, such as employment, peers or family circumstances, explain crime as well as the variable of age itself. "That is to say, an older person is likely to have a lower propensity for crime than a younger person, even after they have been matched in demographic variables," they argue (p. 145). Similarly, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) write, "We are left with the conclusion that (desistance) is due to the inexorable aging of the organism" rather than any social variables (p. 141).

According to each theory, age "causes" desistance. Yet, as Sutton (1994) suggests, "To say that age influences everything is to say nothing" (p. 228). Could anyone imagine, after all, social scientists saying the same thing about crime itself: "Criminal behavior peaks at age 17; therefore, crime is caused by turning 17." Developmental psychologists are increasingly beginning to view biological age as an ambiguous and irrelevant variable, with little meaning except that which is socially attached to it (Neugarten & Neugarten, 1986; Rutter, 1989). Criminologists need to "unpack" the meaning of age, according to Sampson and Laub (1992). After all, a simple notion like burning out,

as Matza (1964) writes, "merely reiterates the occurrence of maturational reform—it hardly explains it" (p. 24; see also Wooton, 1959). If we accept the seriousness of antisocial behavior, as nearly all criminology texts insist we should, then "going straight" must be an immense change, worthy of problematizing beyond a label such as maturation.

Elsewhere (Maruna, 1995a), I have argued that the most important reason that desistance has remained an unexplained process is criminology's reliance on measures of dispositional traits to understand the "delinquent personality." McAdams (1994a) would call this the "psychology of the stranger," or precisely the types of attributes one knows about the person one knows relatively little about. Although traits are critically important for understanding behavior, they do not constitute the "whole person" (Murray, 1938). Moreover, personality traits, which by definition are largely stable over time, cannot explain how an individual is able to radically change his or her behavior (Matza, 1964; Moffitt, 1993). To understand desistance, research is needed that goes beyond the level of dispositional traits and explores personal identities and stories.

Methodology

I randomly selected 25 autobiographical accounts from Briscoe's (1982) *Bibliography of American Autobiography*. Briscoe's useful volume, one of the only comprehensive indexes of published autobiographical material, categorizes published life histories based on the occupations and achievements of the authors. The index includes a listing of books by artists, architects, and academics, as well as books concerning travel, teaching, or psychology, for instance. I randomly selected 25 titles from the categories *criminals*, *prisoners*, *crime*, and *prison*, and I ordered the books through an interlibrary loan system. After reviewing these 25 works, 5 were discarded, because the narrators did not seem to experience significant changes in their behavior or outlooks toward crime by the end of the autobiographies.

The 20 autobiographies in the final sample range from 120 to 490 pages in length, and all but two meet Allport's (1937) criteria for

comprehensive autobiographies (see Table 4.1 for a list that includes publication information). The writing ranges from literary to passably literate, and most of the books were published by small, reasonably accessible houses, rather than major presses. A few of the narrators, in fact, did not write their story at all, but rather provided an oral history for a ghost writer to compose (which may be problematic to some narrative analysts).

Other criminological studies have taken advantage of the rich data provided in several of these published life stories (Jolin, 1985; Katz, 1988; Shover, 1985), but there has been no previous attempt, to my knowledge, to systematically study a random sampling of these personal documents. Although I use random selection of cases from the Briscoe bibliography, in no sense is this a random or representative sample of ex-offenders. There may be a strong selection bias based on the fact that these were the "types" of ex-offenders who were willing to and capable of authoring or co-authoring an autobiography.

Nonetheless, the basic demographics of the sample match up fairly well with large-scale research on offenders: The narrators in this sample are overwhelmingly poor, urban, and male. According to their stories, all of the individuals would have at one point met the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV;* American Psychiatric Association, 1994) criteria for people with *antisocial personality disorder*, and all could be described as "career criminals" (Blumstein & Cohen, 1987). They are not individuals who, in a fit of passion or adventure, broke the law once or twice or even a half dozen times. All 20 individuals were solid members of the "underground economy" and admit to regularly engaging in illegal behavior.

To a certain degree, the authors vary in the types of crimes in which they had previously engaged. Yet, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1995) argue,

> With trivial exceptions, research has failed to discover specialists in particular types of crime. As a consequence, theories and programs that identify offenders as robbers, auto thieves, or drug users and see each type as being the product of distinct causal forces must be wrong. (p. 31)

TABLE 4.1 Autobiographical Sample

Author	*Date of Publication*	*Title*	*Publisher*
Atkins, Susan	1977	*Child of Satan, Child of God*	New York: Logos International
Baker, Albie	1973	*Stolen Sweets*	New York: E. P. Dutton
Braly, Malcolm	1976	*False Starts*	Boston: Little, Brown
Brown, Jack, as told to Allen Groff	1971	*Monkey Off My Back*	Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan
Coss, Richard	1977	*Wanted*	San Diego: Beta Books
Duke, Harry	1977	*Neutral Territory*	Philadelphia: Dorrance
Erwin, John	1978	*The Man Who Keeps Going to Jail*	Elgin, IL: Cook
Geraway, William	1976	*There's $50,000 on My Head*	Hicksville, NY: Exposition Press
Howard, Mattie	1963	*Pathway of Mattie Howard: To and From Prison*	New York: Pageant Press
Howland, Larry	1979	*Going Straight*	Irvine, CA: Harvest House
Hyatt, Henry	1949	*Alias Jimmy Valentine Himself, By Himself*	Philadelphia: Dorrance
Karpis, Alvin	1971	*The Alvin Karpis Story*	New York: Cloward, McCann and Geoghegan
King, Harry	1972	*Box Man: A Professional Thief's Journey*	New York: Harper & Row
Krist, Gary	1972	*Life, the Man who Kidnapped Barbara Mackle*	New York: Olympia Press
McGregor, Charles	1978	*Up From the Walking Dead: The Charles McGregor Story*	Garden City, NY: Doubleday
Morris, Ed	1974	*Born to Lose*	New York: Mason & Lipscombe
Murphy, Frank	1968	*The Frank Murphy Story: His Years in Florida Prisons, His Rehabilitation, and His Conquest of Alcohol*	New York: Dodd, Mead
Rogers, Kenneth Paul	1974	*For One Sweet Grape*	Chicago: Playboy Press.
Torok, Lou	1974	*Straight Talk From Prison*	New York: Human Sciences Press.
Vaus, James	1974	*The Devil Loves a Shining Mark*	Waco, TX: Word Books.

Like Kaplan (1980), they suggest that drug use, theft, assault, and other delinquent behaviors are products of a common underlying tendency. I also make the assumption that the desistance processes from these disparate behaviors could be considered together.

My procedure for analyzing these autobiographies resembled a grounded theory approach, although my structured readings of the texts were guided by McAdams's (1985, 1993) conceptual framework for understanding narratives. In particular, I began to chart similarities and differences in three of the key features McAdams and his students have identified in life stories: *nuclear episodes, imagoes*, and *themes*.

Nuclear episodes include high points, low points, beginnings, endings, and transformational episodes or turning points in the narrative. These are frequently long passages or passages flagged as major climaxes that are used to develop characters in an autobiography. Through these scenes, readers gain an understanding of the narrator's motivations and personal identity. These nuclear episodes, according to McAdams (1993), "are windows into the organization of human desire" (p. 297).

Imagoes are the personified idealizations of possible selves each of us use to understand and guide our behavior. Over a lifetime, a person may assume many different imagoes chosen from among the popular archetypes of culture. People might see themselves as being the good soldier, the clown, the drunk, or the loyal companion at various points in time. These character (or caricature) types are important aspects of a person's self-concept.

Finally, life-story themes are recurrent goal-oriented sequences that main characters pursue in narratives. According to McAdams (1994b) and theorists such as Bakan, the major themes of Western narratives can be understood in terms of levels of agency (or power) and communion (or intimacy). Bakan (1966) describes agency and communion as the "two fundamental modalities in the existence of living forms" (pp. 14-15). He defines agency as the "existence of the organism as an individual" manifesting itself in self-protection, self-expansion, and the mastery of the environment. Under this category, McAdams and his colleagues include themes of self-mastery, status attainment, achievement, responsibility, and empowerment (McAdams,

Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996). Communion, which includes themes of love, friendship, dialogue, care, help, and community, can be defined as "the participation of the individual in some larger organism of which the individual is a part" (Bakan, p. 15). I used this modality to guide and structure my analysis of the thematic patterns across my sample.

Although each story was unique in many ways, I tried to identify what Bertaux (1981) calls a "saturation" of various episodes, imagoes, and themes across the 20 cases. Bertaux (1981) describes saturation as the attainment of a representative sampling of data reflecting the major sociological and/or psychological structures and processes inherent in a given phenomenon. An investigator of life narratives reaches a saturation point in the research when he or she begins to discern the same or highly similar patterns from one case to the next. The stories contain numerous differences, as well, of course, but with such a small sample size, few meaningful patterns or interpretations could be drawn from this diversity. Strong cross-case similarities, on the other hand, might lead to important hypotheses to be further explored in future research. Finally, all of the case studies in this sample are available in public libraries, so this study can be replicated for alternative findings and interpretations.

Findings

Charlie McGregor's story is unique in many ways, but it also has much in common with the other cases I analyzed. Together, the narratives in this sample reveal a definite pattern, a generic or prototypical story of reform. In this section, I will describe these common themes and character types as they relate to the different narrative phases or "chapters" in the life stories: childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and later adulthood.

Like any narrative, reform stories need to be coherent and believable, to make internal sense. Although no one story perfectly fits the prototypical reform story model outlined in this chapter, the stories in this sample largely follow this common, Western narrative structure (see Figure 4.1).

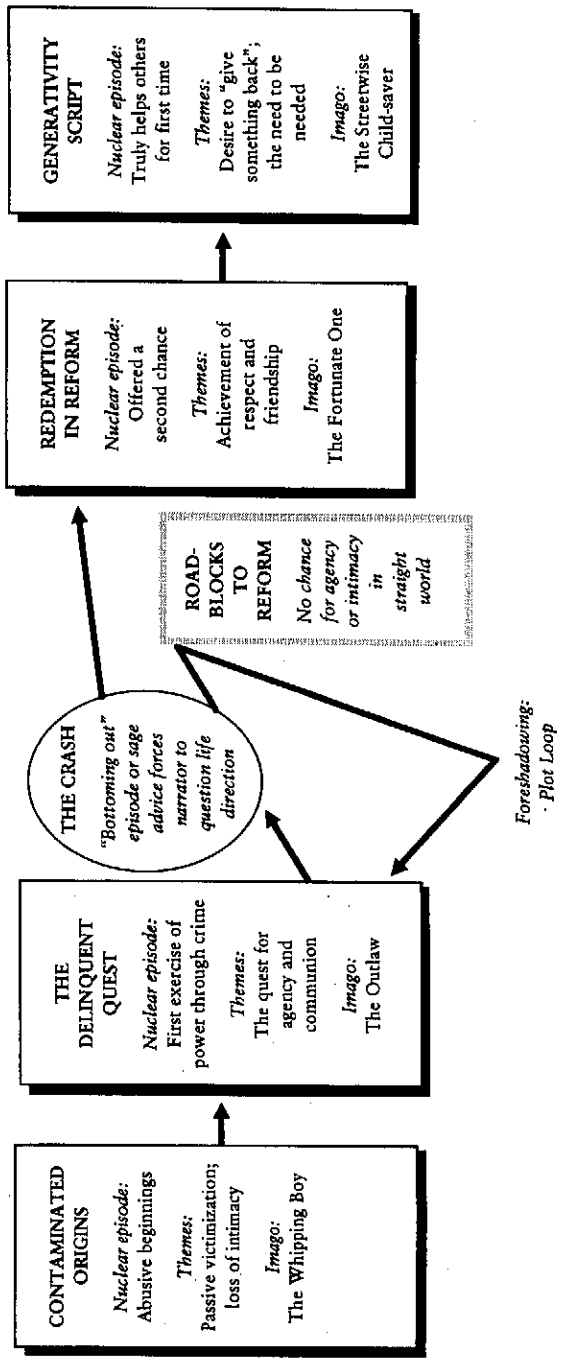

Figure 4.1. The Prototypical Reform Narrative

The plot begins with a long period of passive victimization in childhood. This leads to an ill-fated search for agency and communion in delinquent subcultures. At several points during this criminal involvement, all of the narratives contain breaks or nuclear episodes where the narrators are faced with the tragic discrepancy between their morals and their behavior. This "moment of clarity" is often preceded by a tragic episode or sage advice from a trusted friend. As a result, the narrators decide to desist from criminal behavior or at least seriously question the direction of their life to that point. Nonetheless, the narrators frequently experience structural or psychological "roadblocks" that prevent them from going straight. Usually they are confronted with a lack of opportunity for achieving respectability and intimacy outside of a criminal subculture, and therefore they drift back into criminal behavior. This "plot loop" can be seen as a type of foreshadowing for a major life change to come later in the narrative.

At some point in all of the autobiographies, the narrators report experiencing a "final" transformative experience—often endowed with supernatural importance—when all previous behaviors are called into question. Following this experience, the narrators also find noncriminal opportunities for agency and communion that help them sustain a "new," reformed identity. This "redemption" is usually credited to the enormous generosity of others (frequently a higher power) who are willing to reach out to the narrators and give them a chance to succeed. Following this experience, the narrators develop a generative plan for their life in order to "give something back" and help their contemporaries who were not as lucky. The narrators also seek to atone for their past crimes and explicitly "advertise" a new, prosocial identity to secure others' trust and to help prevent others from making the same mistakes they did as a youth.

Contaminated Origins

Probably the least surprising finding of this study is that almost every former offender's identity myth begins with a tragic childhood. In his discussion of various "ontologies of the self," Hankiss (1981)

calls this a "self-absolutory" narrative strategy, in which a negative present follows linearly from a negative past. Goffman (1961) similarly discusses the "sad tales" told by people in institutions, and Sykes and Matza (1957) say that "denial of responsibility" is a primary "neutralization" used to rationalize and justify behavior now considered reprehensible. None of this is to suggest that the personal tragedies described by the ex-offenders are untrue—undoubtedly, individuals in prison have experienced far higher rates of childhood poverty, abuse, and neglect than other segments of the population. Instead, these stories illustrate how this "cumulative disadvantage" (Sampson & Laub, 1994) or "multiple deprivation" (Currie, 1993) is internalized and understood by offenders in later life.

The level of tragedy described in this sample ranges from the irritating restrictions of Vaus's early life ("We weren't allowed to go to dances or movies," p. 30) to Morris's horrific tales of abuse ("The more I hollered the more she beat me. Then she said that a rotten Jewboy like me should not be allowed to play with other children on Christmas Day . . . [and] I was put down in the cellar," p. 9). Yet, almost every author describes the events in a way that seems like she or he was uniquely unfortunate and essentially alone in the world as a child. Hyatt's story, for instance, brims with bitterness. He writes,

> It must be pleasant for most people to think back upon their childhood days. What is your first recollection? Probably some supremely happy moment—your first doll or roller skates. . . . But my earliest recollection is one of horror and unhappiness. (p. 73)

Likewise, Torok says of his life, "If anybody could be said to have been 'born to lose,' I am that person. . . . I spent all of my childhood in orphanages and boarding schools without love, without affection, without close personal friendships" (p. 20).

Each description of early childhood is saturated with passages that reflected what McAdams et al. (1996) call *contamination*, where an episode or life passage that seems to begin with promise turns suddenly bad. Braly provides the clearest example of such a story. He writes, "I

was born with a silver spoon in my mouth—or at least one of sturdy nickel plate—but at age five . . . it was abruptly snatched and probably my mouth was torn" (p. 4). Others were separated from their families because of death or poverty, leaving them orphaned and alone. King, for instance, says his mother gave him up for adoption because she could not afford to care for him. "I was no problem child at the time, but my mother had to do something with me since there were four children in the house" (p. 5).

The Search for Agency and Communion Through Crime

Following almost linearly from these accounts of contamination in childhood, the narrators describe involvement in delinquent behavior as an adolescent or young adult as a way to gain a sense of agency and communion. Early deprivation, the authors contend, left each of them with a reduced stake in conformity. Criminal behavior and deviant subcultures, moreover, provide a rather easily obtainable avenue for "success," as well as a new "family." Erikson (1959) suggests that teenagers may "vindictively" choose a "negative" identity or identification in order to regain "some mastery in a situation in which the available positive identity elements cancel each other out" (p. 142). This is the phenomenon of preferring being someone "bad" to being "not-quite-somebody" or suffering the in-between stage of adolescence (p. 143; see also Moffitt, 1993).

Usually, the stories in this sample imply that the traumas the narrators experienced as young persons directly *caused* delinquent behavior in adolescence. For instance, Hyatt describes getting involved with crime as an effort to "get even with society" for what it had done to him (p. 185). Coss begins his childhood story by saying, "From early childhood I was destined to live a rough life. . . . There was never much love in our home. . . . The only sure way I knew to get attention was to make trouble" (p. 18).

Most of the narrators describe achieving a sincere sense of power and control through youthful delinquency. Coss, for instance, brags that his gang "literally ruled the neighborhood" (p. 25) and that

"every time I served another sentence, I came out more of a hero in my neighborhood" (p. 26). Similarly, Baker writes, "To the rest of my family, I was 'the successful one,' as if I were a lawyer, doctor, or accountant—only I was a burglar" (p. 7). Duke, who lost both parents to a gunman, writes, "I wanted to join the gang in the worst way. . . . I wanted to be like Nick and Jesse and get the respect that they got wherever they went" (p. 4).

Braly describes his first times shoplifting with his small rural gang as "an exercise of real power over the remote adult world" and an attempt to "transcend my common life" (pp. 11, 12). He says, "Stealing cast me in my first successful role" (p. 12). McGregor says he found that he could overcome the torments and cruelty of his childhood through violence:

> While on the stoop wielding the .22, I felt powerful. It was the first time I gave hell to someone else, even though I had been catching some kind of hell from the very day I was born at Harlem Hospital. (p. 2)

Finally, Vaus describes his desire for "the power to make people respect me, the money to pay them off . . . [and] the strength of making someone do what I wanted him to do" (p. 16).

According to the narrators, part of the process of "prisonization" or the acceptance of deviant values inside correctional institutions, involves learning this need for power. Braly says,

> What one learns to want in a "crime school" [prison] is the respect of one's peers. This is the danger. The naive will be drawn into competing for status in a system of values that honors and glorifies antisocial behavior. (p. 52)

Similarly, describing learning to fight inside Hart Island Penitentiary, Baker writes,

> From that point on, nobody fucked with me again. It was the animal sense of wariness and respect for one who would fight back savagely. They all said I was a good kid. This

> recognition was my downfall in a way. If I hadn't fought back, if I'd submitted to the threats and become somebody's punk, I'd never have gone back [to prison]. Instead I had gained respect and self-assurance. I had lost my fear of them—the guards and the other prisoners. I had learned new tricks and become one of them. (p. 21)

This search for agency is supported by the creation of romantic "outlaw imagoes." Former offender Warren Rhodes writes that his past delinquency was directly related to his efforts to fulfill the role of a mythical "bad dude." Shorr (1977) similarly describes the way in which a drug addict used a Humphrey Bogart fantasy to maintain his self-destructive behavior. These character or caricature types are what McAdams (1993) refers to as imagoes.

In this sample of ex-offenders, these imagoes tended toward romantic outlaws and heroic vigilantes. Braly says he saw himself as a blend of Robin Hood and Jesse James (p. 122) and later says he told himself that "I was a hunter and this was the elemental" (p. 210). McGregor says his "favorite jailhouse fantasy" involved an idealized image of himself as the prince of the Harlem underworld. "Regardless of all the dudes around me, I am the finest. I am so clean, junkies stop shooting up and whores stop flatbacking to remark, 'That is the sharpest nigger we ever seen' " (p. 369). Each narrative expressed an awareness of what a "bad" individual should be like, and these imagoes are often borrowed from literature and history. Describing fellow offenders, for instance, Rogers writes, "I wouldn't say that these screaming human beings aren't attempting to appear as the stereotyped con. Nor would I say that a few would not give up much . . . to attain the 'con' image" (p. 92).

Many of the narratives also suggest that the desire for communion is a key motivating force for involvement in criminal behavior. Torok writes,

> This hunger for acceptance and for deep, personal, and intimate love has followed me every day of my life. I suspect it has been the principal reason for the "acting out" of my repressed aggressions throughout my life, leading me into so many difficult and trying extra-legal activities. (p. 20)

Frequently criminal subgroups can at least temporarily provide a sort of familial communion, symbolized in ritual and dress, for those who have experienced little of it in their lifetimes. King writes, "In those days, thieves were very clannish, very close, and would help one another" (p. 7). Braly says that he perceived the delinquent gang as a team of outlaw bandits who were "fiercely loyal to each other, their relatives, their immediate friends, and only disloyal to that larger and more abstract society" (p. 122).

Even in prison, frequently, the characters describe more communion and agency than they say they experienced in their home lives. At Sing Sing, McGregor says, "I got a certain kind of respect from the hacks and inmates because I was a veteran jailer." In fact, he admits, "It's a terrible thing to say, but my brother inmates greeted me with more love and enthusiasm than my mother and sister had when I returned home from prison. . . . Prison was more like home than home" (p. 153). Geraway writes,

> A sampling of adult offenders in any institution will turn up case after case of men who, upon release from prison, not only committed other offenses, but committed them in a stupid and careless fashion, virtually pleading with someone to catch them. Because to them, prison is a womb, a subcultural environment where all decisions are made for them, where their needs are fulfilled by the state and, most of all, *where they are somebody* [italics added], where they are recognized by their peer group as being someone of importance. (p. 35)

The Crash: Crime Doesn't Pay

At some point in every story, however, there is a severe breakdown between the fantasy of the gangster clan and the reality of the person's life. In his "topography of transformational metanoia," Loder (1981) calls this a "rupture" in the person's understanding of the world (see

also Miller & C'deBaca, 1994), and it is similar to Durkheim's (1972) notion of the individual becoming "divided against himself" (p. 92). In this process, structurally motivated behaviors come into conflict with cultural or personal values (Groves & Sampson, 1986; see also Matza, 1964), and individuals are forced to question the direction of their lives.

All the reform stories in this sample contain numerous points at which the narrators say they reached this point. Frequently, these moments of clarity were preceded by a betrayal by fellow offenders, allegedly bonded by what Geraway decides is a "mythical" brotherhood. Howard, for instance, learned that "a gang will tolerate you as long as it is convenient, but when they are through with you, they are through" (p. 241).

For others, the turning point incident involved words of wisdom from a trusted source. While at a prison revival meeting, for instance, Coss says, "For the first time in my life, I took a long hard look at my past. All I saw was hatred and bitterness and heartache and sorrow. . . . Suddenly the sight was unbearable to me" (p. 73). Howland says he had the same experience after reading a passage in the Bible. Murphy claims to have seen the light at an Alcoholics Anonymous session, whereas an older couple befriended Erwin and allowed him into their lives. In all of these instances, outside figures in the narrators' lives merely "reminded" them of what they already believed in or thought they believed in. This reminder made the narrators see for the first time how their behavior contradicted their ideals.

For some narrators, the jolt of some "bottoming out" experience (Denzin, 1987)—like the death of a son (Brown), a drug overdose and 4-month hospital stay (Atkins), the murder of a lover (Howard), or a confrontation with one's victim (Krist)—is necessary to shine light on the contradiction between their lives and their desires. Duke, for instance, describes a traumatic car chase where he was nearly shot. After that, he says,

> I would wake up wondering how and why I ever got mixed up in this business in the first place, and how I could get the hell out of it. I would have gladly given up my jars of money . . . to get out of the rackets. (p. 83)

Roadblocks to Reform

It is important that such moments of clarity are *not* always followed by decisive life changes in the stories in this sample. Early in his autobiography, Vaus writes, "That was the first time I'd seen anyone shot and killed. The incident jarred me enough so that I reflected about life, death, and God, but that was only a momentary reflection" (p. 25). As with smoking, moreover, a person apparently can "give up" crime many times before actually going straight. Earls, Cairns, and Mercy (1993) suggest, "Initiating change is but the first step. The second step involves maintaining the change. . . . [And] the skills required for initiating behavior change are usually different from those required for maintaining it" (p. 291).

Geraway writes,

> The decision to draw away from crime and criminals and the prison society was easy to come to; it was logical. Abiding by it, though, would turn out to be the most difficult thing I had ever done, and it would be a process that would last eight years. (p. 24)

Erwin says, "I tried to change. I honestly tried, but it seemed as though years of fighting the world from behind a wall of emotional armor was too much" (p. 64). Brown, too, writes,

> Then, all but overcome with loneliness and nostalgia for my family, I would return for awhile, telling [my wife] I was sorry . . . and declaring, and meaning it, that I was going to do better. I would try, but my efforts were always short-lived. (p. 33)

These plot loops—where narrators know they should have changed their behavior, but instead returned to old ways—often take the form of "foreshadowing" in the autobiographies. Braly, for instance, writes,

> Still I recall a moment late one night in the back alleys of Sacramento . . . and the same quiet voice, which had formerly urged me to join the Navy, whispered: If you keep this up you'll find yourself in San Quentin. I realized a moment of despair because I knew I had just told myself the obvious truth. Perhaps the mad have similar moments of such clarity, when the hard truth of their life is briefly apparent, and then they, as I did, drown again in fantasy. (p. 65)

Almost 150 pages later in the story, Braly is lying in a bed in San Quentin, and he recalls this brief interruption of his earlier life (p. 211). Similarly, after watching one of his best friends die in gang violence, Duke remembers an older gang member telling him to "take a tip from an old timer and get the hell out of here as fast and as far as you can" (p. 23). Although he vividly recounted the incident, Duke became something of an old-timer himself before heeding this warning.

Frequently, recidivism is blamed on structural forces outside of the individual's control. The narrators insist that they "knew better," but something outside of their control kept pushing them back into criminal behavior. The most common roadblock to reform involves those who want to go straight but cannot achieve the type of agency and communion they became used to in delinquent subcultures. For instance, after serving 3½ years in a Salem prison for his work with a narcotics syndicate, King got married and tried to change his life for good. "I tried to settle down there but it was awfully hard. I was having an awful time of it. Consequently, I got myself in bad debts. The baby came and . . . I was so far in debt it was pathetic." Within half a page, King is back in Seattle breaking into a drugstore. Torok summarizes the problems ex-convicts face upon release. "With fifty dollars in his pocket, he must find a place to live, pay for his food, and try to keep himself solvent until he gets a job. . . . It is simply unrealistic" (pp. 23-24).

Many narrators complain that they would not settle for the low-wage, dead-end jobs for which they were qualified. Brown writes, "The prospect of some menial laborer's work didn't choke me up very much. The [jobs] I might be able to get excited about were out of my

class because of my lack of formal preparation" (p. 107). After spending 8 years behind bars, Murphy writes, "I was on my own now and it was up to me to prove to everyone that I was capable of living a decent, normal life. But I would first have to find a job" (p. 135). Two pages later, he writes, " 'Good, hell,' I said. 'I'm just a cook in a hospital and the pay is lousy, but I can't do any better because I don't have any references' " (p. 137), and he returned to criminal behavior.

Several narrators say they used to adhere to an ethos that tightly links money and respectability. Braly, for instance, writes,

> When the Cynic warned me not to try to play catch up, he was aware I would find myself far behind my contemporaries, my doubles, who had spent the last 6 years learning and earning. There was no easy way back, and it could be said I had never been there. The life I saw reflected from the advertising everywhere around me was a life I could see no way to obtain. I wanted things. I wanted clothes, a car, a hi fi, I wanted my share of that river of products Americans had begun to produce. We judged each other by these things. (p. 207)

Likewise, after his release from prison, McGregor says, "I recited a whole list of resolutions. . . . I promise to get married and raise a family. I promise to get a square job and stay out of trouble. Promises I had made a million times before" (p. 94). By the next page, however, McGregor says,

> [Then] the street dude in me . . . perked up and laid some heavy shit on me, "Nigger, if you squaring up, you better find yourself some rich broad to lay up with, 'cause you ain't gonna make it by your lonesome. That job the parole officer has lined up for you only pays chump change. How you gonna get sharp with no money to spend? . . . Without money, you're nobody." (p. 95)

Finally, the narrators frequently say they were shunned and stigmatized by the community to which they tried to return. Howard, for

instance, says that she would not have returned to the gang if only she had been "trusted enough to have been given honest work, and if friendly hearts had opened up to help and encourage" her (p. 224). As in all plot loops, the narrator returns to "old ways" only to "crash" again later.

The Quantum Change

Eventually, these plot loops are broken, and the reform narrative moves linearly to a new stage of development. The nuclear episodes that "cause" this change appear to be largely the same as earlier internal conflicts and crises that led only to stunted efforts to reform. In fact, the events that led to this change in the story—usually going to jail or church—are not uncommon events throughout the narratives. Nonetheless, "something about" this one incident makes the experience subjectively different, according to the narrators.

The transformational nuclear episodes in the sample resemble what Miller and C'deBaca (1994) refer to as a *quantum change*, where whole sets of attitudes can supposedly be called into question, leading to complete reversals in behavior. William James (1902/1985) also discusses these sudden and profound changes, which he regards as qualitatively different from ordinary and gradual personality change. Rather than describing their desistance from crime as a gradual process, most of the narratives in this sample impart considerable significance to the moment of "the change." Vaus and Coss, for instance, both cite the exact time and place of their "conversions." Others magnify the importance of the crisis that led to their decision compared to the events that sparked past, aborted efforts to go straight.

The impetus for the change, like other events in the person's life, is almost always attributed to forces outside of the narrator's locus of control. In almost every narrative, the transformational experience was something that happened to the narrator, rather than something the narrator brought upon him- or herself. Bill Wilson, the cofounder of Alcoholics Anonymous, describes the turning point away from his alcoholism as being catapulted into a new spiritual realm (Miller & C'deBaca, 1994). Likewise, Coss writes, "At that very moment, the

Holy Spirit penetrated my hard shell of bitterness and melted my pride" (p. 73).

Following their change experience, offenders seem to recast their lives as being "planned" or orchestrated by a higher power for a certain purpose. Geraway writes, "All of the times I have lived when I should have died were not accidental; they were part of a design that God has set aside for me as one of his children" (p. 280). Vaus similarly says, "One of my first lessons was to be grateful, to know I wasn't the one in control" (p. 58). By pushing the responsibility for reform onto some power other than the self, the narratives maintain a sense of consistency and believability. Early criminal involvement, after all, is almost always characterized as the result of structural and environmental forces beyond the narrators' control, as well. Several other empirical studies have supported Sykes and Matza's (1957) hypothesis that offenders tend to appeal to an external locus of control when explaining their own behavior (Schonbach, 1990). A similar story seems to be told about reform.

After frequent attempts and failures to change their behavior on their own, many narrators may lose confidence in their own ability to control their own destinies. Explaining reform by pointing to outside influences might therefore be the only internally credible narrative strategy. Moreover, making reform a religious experience endows the process with larger-than-life importance. A story such as, "I am a changed person because I decided I wanted to change," may not be nearly as convincing as a story that suggests, "God has turned me into a new person." Again, this may only be an artifact of this sample; explicitly religious recovery stories may be the most marketable types of recovery stories. Yet, if this is so, it may also indicate what types of quantum changes Western audiences find the most believable.

Redemption: Agency and Communion in Reform

The critical difference between a true turning point episode and an earlier foreshadowing episode, however, is not to be found within the experience itself. Rather, it seems to be more connected to the

perceived possibilities for identity change in the life circumstances and situations narrators face following the turning point episode. In other words, even though the narrators "see the light" during an alleyway shootout some Friday night, they might ignore the sign if they do not perceive any structural opportunities to achieve the sort of agency and communion they could obtain through criminal behavior.

One of the key elements of all the successful reform stories was the existence of intimate or valued connections *outside* of criminal subcultures and prison society. These individuals provide both a means of emotional support and an incentive to stay out of prison. In this sample, these friendships are frequently made through reform institutions and religious organizations. McGregor says that his therapy group became "the family I never had" (p. 473). Likewise, in regard to the religious organization he joined after going straight, Howland states, "I had found companionship and human beings I could trust."

Moreover, almost all of the narrators describe finding (or being handed) an opportunity to achieve power and respect outside of a criminal subculture. A criminal lifestyle can be both exciting and empowering (Katz, 1988). Many ex-offenders suggest that they seek similar fulfillment from their straight life. Hyatt says professional criminals are "as unhappy in other vocations as Michelangelo would have been digging ditches." He says "at heart he always has a love of the excitement and adventure of the game" (p. 221). Seeking power, prestige, and adventure, for instance, Baker volunteered for the infantry during wartime following his release from prison. "I was determined to get into the most dangerous part of the armed forces, the paratroopers." Moreover, King speaks eloquently about the need for ex-convicts to find a way to get their "self-respect" back. "He'll go straight a heck of a lot quicker if he knows that he's going to a job he understands . . . and a job that he likes" (p. 120). Those who reform, and stay reformed, seem to find ways to achieve self-respect and find adventure in contexts other than crime.

Because most ex-convicts have limited resources, few job skills, and few connections in the straight world, this empowerment is often achieved by using their status as reformed ex-convicts. Many find

that social work is the only field for which their talents are well-suited. "I knew the language. I felt I understood the men, and they understood me," Erwin writes (p. 95). Like several of the other authors, Vaus capitalizes on his prison experiences to become a successful evangelist.

> The daily invitations for me to speak at churches, clubs, schools, and independent organizations became a frame for our future. Interest snowballed. Requests for me to talk about my conversion trickled in at first, then . . . turned into my new full-time job. (p. 59)

Narrators find a *new* way to achieve considerable agency and prestige and avoid the dangers of a criminal lifestyle.

These transformations from victim, to delinquent, to prisoner, to respected community reformer seem far-fetched, yet they flow almost naturally from these narratives as they are told. The idea of "hitting rock bottom," then rebounding "straight to the top," is a common element in Western fiction and mythology (Denzin, 1989). McAdams et al. (in press) call this the theme of *redemption*, where good consequences seem to result almost directly from negative circumstances. Erwin, for instance, writes, "I know now at least that my own pushed-around childhood has contributed directly to my work as a chaplain" (p. 43). The narrators have discovered a way to find "something positive" to build on from their otherwise negative pasts. They have found a way to change their behavior and still maintain a consistent internal narrative.

Generativity Scripts

Finally, almost all of the narrators emphasize the desire to "give something back" to others who may not have been as fortunate as they were. Just as earlier in their autobiographies, narrators justified criminal involvement by appealing to childhood victimization, the authors explain this new transition as a sort of "thank you" to the world for giving them a second chance to succeed. Howland writes, "God had

touched me with a 'power from on high' and . . . He was going to expect me to put that power to use" (p. 101). Frequently, the recipient of this care is young people who are in situations similar to those the narrator experienced as a youth. Coss says, "Because of my past life and conversion, I have a special burden in my heart for prison inmates" (p. 118). Murphy writes,

> I was confident my own life was ruined beyond repair, but I found I could derive a certain vicarious satisfaction by becoming concerned with the future of the younger inmates—kids who had gotten into trouble once or twice, but who still had a useful life ahead of them if they could be straightened out in time. (p. 268)

Finally, Torok says, "I feel now that I can suffer personally the tragedies of other human beings, having myself touched bottom" (p. 50).

McAdams (1993) refers to this theme as a *generativity script*, whereby individuals begin to develop plans for what they hope to do in the future to leave a symbolic gift for subsequent generations. This "legacy of the self" can involve a desire for "symbolic immortality" and/or a "need to be needed" (McAdams, Hart, & Maruna, forthcoming; Stewart, Franz, & Layton, 1988). McGregor, for instance, writes, "It's taken me twenty-seven years of jailin' to learn that *I am needed* to do more than fill a shitbowl in some damn institution" (p. 368). Brown writes,

> Daily I look into the upturned, eager faces of youth filled with potential. . . . I also know that one bald-headed old ex-con is not going to convert the world, but I humbly thank God that it is the kind of world where one man *can make a big contribution—that I can be a part of molding plastic, young life.* (p. 146)

Connected to this development of generative motives is the notion of becoming a completely "new person." For most of the stories in this study, going straight is an "all or nothing" proposition, a complete shift in identity. McGregor writes,

> The pain of change is enormous. It must be similar to what a woman feels like when the seed of life is sprouting inside of her. When I became pregnant with new life, the new me took root in my belly and sucked up everything that was nutritious inside of me. . . . I went into labor and gave birth to him so my pain would be over. (p. 394)

Like Saul in the Bible, many of the narrators are even called by a different name following their conversion, as if to solidify the magnitude of the identity change. McGregor, for instance, asked his friends to stop calling him by his gang nickname, Peewee, and to refer to him by his given name. Similarly, Erwin says, "Someone . . . long ago had tagged me 'Little John.' Now they gave me a new name, 'John the Baptist' " (p. 85).

The old life, although integrated into each person's understanding of him or herself, is widely viewed as an altogether different world, never to be entered again. Coss writes, "My sins were not only forgiven, they were forgotten. As far as the east is from the west, that far has God removed our transgressions from us" (p. 123). Braly concludes his autobiography by saying, "That happened eight years ago. . . . It seems long ago, in another lifetime" (p. 375).

As if to guarantee that there is "no going back this time," many of the ex-offenders in this sample loudly advertise their new generative identity. Like the boy who cried wolf, people can only announce being "reborn" so many times in life, before those around them become a little skeptical. It is possible that the more widely and emphatically people announce their new identity, the more incentive they will have to maintain that new version of themselves. This advertising of the new identity takes several different forms in the sample. Vaus and McGregor discuss their desire to tell their reform stories to local journalists. The public ceremony of an adult baptism symbolized and helped maintain a reborn identity for Howard, Erwin, and several others in the sample. Finally, several narrators suggest that the very act of constructing an autobiography is, in a strong sense, a public securing of one's new "self."

This advertising also plays a generative role in the narrators' lives. Many authors suggest that they are publishing their autobiographies

to leave a lesson for younger generations, so they do not have to repeat the mistakes the narrators made. McGregor concludes his autobiography by saying, "I hope that some of the young people who read this book will learn from what they read about me" (p. 486). Torok says, "My burning hope for the remainder of my life will be to share my criminal and prison experiences with young people everywhere in the hope that they can get some insights into their own feelings" (p. 27).

Conclusions

In his 1925 dissertation, *Autobiographical Documents and Personality*, Ernest Kreuger suggests that the construction of one's own autobiography should be seen as an important behavior—an activity to be studied in and of itself (cited in Bennett, 1981, p. 185). In this sample it seems that autobiography construction itself may be an important element of sustaining significant behavioral reform. At least, the findings of this study are consistent with the idea that the development of a coherent story that can integrate past faults into a generative script for the future may contribute to the process of desistance from crime. The reform story outlined in this chapter appears to be one effective version of this narrative.

Like Alcoholics Anonymous members, all of the narrators in the sample have come to terms with their past. They openly acknowledge their past mistakes and claim to view their lives from a new vantage point. These reevaluations of the past often involve cognitive reappraisals of past identities as well. For instance, Braly says that he *was* (in past tense) "a liar, a sneak, a braggart, a show-off, and a thief" and that he "was unable to grasp or calculate consequences" (p. 4). Geraway writes, "For my own part, I had been as much a part of the sickness as the others" (p. 23).

According to Brewin (1982), self-blame can be both positive and negative. If a person dwells upon a more or less permanent fault ("I'm just stupid"), then self-blame is maladaptive. Yet, taking responsibility for past behavior ("I did a very stupid thing") may be adaptive. Most of the ex-offenders in this sample suggest instead, "I used to do stupid

things," but now "I have been changed." Specifically, the narrators view their past criminal behavior as a reaction to powerlessness and a lack of opportunities, and they similarly credit their reformed identities to external empowerment and outside opportunities for success.

These findings may have practical implications for offender reintegration and rehabilitation policy (see Maruna, 1995b). Moreover, this saturation of themes in reform stories provides evidence in support of a new understanding of the desistance process beyond simple maturational reform or burning out. Although turning 30 was an important event for Charlie McGregor, for instance, his desistance from crime probably had more to do with the development of a new identity and self-understanding than it did with his biological age. Additional narrative research should seek to further develop this understanding of the reform narrative and reformed identity.

Note

1. The 20 published autobiographies, written by successfully reintegrated ex-convicts, that are the subject of this chapter's analysis are listed in Table 4.1 and not included with the more traditional references. For economy, citations include only the author's name and page numbers for any quotations. The years of publication are available, along with other information, in Table 4.1.

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