

# 'I'm social without socialising': Relational re/integration after release from a life sentence

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**Research on long-term and/or life sentences has often fallen into two separate fields: how individuals experience, survive, and cope with the sentence, and how they adapt to life after release, including whether they are 'successful' or 'fail' upon release (by being recalled). Using a short-longitudinal approach, this empirical study acted to bring together existing fields of research to provide a more holistic understanding of release for life-sentenced individuals (henceforth, 'lifers'). Using the findings from this study, this article explores how lifers experienced the first five months of their release and re/integration.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on relational, rather than material, dimensions of re/integration, it reports the various ways lifers' expectations were (in)consistent with their experienced reality. As a result of their experiences post-release, some participants altered their approach to re/integration, seeking to re/integrate through forms of non-socialisation, leading to a more isolated existence in the community. Alternatively, others pursued forms of human and social capital that would facilitate their re/integration and reaffirm their position in the outside world.**

Studies of re/settlement and government policy in this area have tended to focus on *practical* and *material* support for ex-prisoners upon their release from prison and how this is associated with recidivism.<sup>2</sup> In particular, there has been a plethora of studies examining the role of support in relation to housing and accommodation, employment, healthcare, addiction, and finances.<sup>3</sup> These have consistently showed that limited employment, training or educational prospects, unstable or non-existing accommodation arrangements, and a lack of access to substance misuse support, coupled with a reduced skills base, gaps in their employment, and a criminal record represent significant barriers to re/integrating into society and may increase the risk of reoffending.

Running parallel to these studies of *material* support is a body of research examining the role of social support during the re-entry process. Studies examining the presence of objective features of social relationships (such as the closeness of the relationship, the frequency of interactions, the availability of different sources of support, and the specific resources provided) have highlighted a positive correlation with re-entry outcomes.<sup>4</sup> That is, the more connections a person has and/or develops, the stronger those

1. In keeping with Graham and McNeill (2017), and more recently Rubio Arnal and McNeill (2023), I use the prefix 're' followed by a slash throughout this article to acknowledge the problematic assumption that individuals return to a 'desirable prior condition' upon their release.
2. HM Inspectorate of Prisons and Probation (2001). *Through the Prison Gate: A Joint Thematic Review*. London; House of Commons (2004). *Rehabilitation of Prisoners. First Report from the Home Affairs Committee Session 2004-05*, House of Commons 193. London; Social Exclusion Unit. (2002). *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners*. London.
3. HM Inspectorate of Prisons and Probation (2014). *Resettlement provision for adult offenders: Accommodation and education, training and employment*. London; Ministry of Justice (2010). *Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders*. Ministry of Justice; Social Exclusion Unit (2002); Visher, C. A., Winterfield, L., & Coggeshall, M. B. (2006). Systematic Review of Non-Custodial Employment Programs: Impact on Recidivism Rates of Ex-Offenders. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 2, 1-28; Maguire, M., & Nolan, J. (2007). Accommodation and related services for ex-prisoners. In A. Hucklesby, & L. Hagley-Dickinson (Eds.), *Prisoner Resettlement: Policy and Practice*. Willan; Stewart, D. (2008). *The Problems and Needs of Newly Sentenced Prisoners: Results from a National Survey*. Ministry of Justice; Gelsthorpe, L., & Sharpe, G. (2012). Women and resettlement. In A. Hucklesby & L. Hagley-Dickinson (Eds.), *Prisoner resettlement: Policy and practice*. Willan; Jacobson, J., Bhardwa, B., Gyateng, T., Hunter, T., & Hough, M. (2010). *Punishing Disadvantage: A profile of children in custody*. Prison Reform Trust.
4. Semmer, N. K., Elfering, A., Jacobshagen, N., Perrot, T., Beehr, T. A., & Boos, N. (2008). The emotional meaning of instrumental social support. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 15(3), 235-251; Johnson Listwan, S., Colvin, M., Hanley, D., & Flannery, D. (2010). Victimization, social support, and psychological well-being: A study of recently released prisoners. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 37(10), 1140-1159; Thoits, P. A. (1986). Social support as coping assistance. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 54, 416-423.

connections are, and the ability of those connections to provide necessary resources can facilitate the re-entry process, helping an individual leaving prison to better cope with the challenges of the outside world and avoid returning to prison.<sup>5</sup>

However, the research that has been conducted has almost exclusively examined intimate and social relationships *within* the desistance process and with individuals who have served shorter sentences or are considered 'repeat offenders'. The experience of being released from a mandatory life sentence, however, is distinctly different.<sup>6</sup> Not only have mandatory lifers served significantly longer inside prison, but these individuals have often committed the most serious offence: murder. Being convicted of and having served a sentence for murder, these individuals face strict licencing conditions in the community that can act to limit their opportunities to access desistance-related factors upon release. The nature of their offence also often subjects individuals to community censure and stigmatisation, which can have social, legal, and moral ramifications for their re/integration into the community.

This article looks to move away from the previously 'individualistic focus' on specific people or groups that provide social support — which relegates or ignores the unique function of social relations and wider structures. Instead, it focuses on the *powers* and *properties* of social relations and the *impact* they have on re/integration both prior to and post-release.

### Methodology

The findings which follow are based on an empirical study of the release of 20 men serving mandatory life sentences in England and Wales. The study adopted a short-longitudinal approach by employing a set of two semi-structured interviews, conducted before and after their release from prison. Following a successful Parole Board hearing which issued their release, lifers in this study were first interviewed (T1) in prison in the days and weeks before

returning to the outside world. The second interviews (T2) were conducted in the community five months after participants' release from prison. T2 interviews were largely conducted at probation offices, with three being conducted virtually.

Of the 20 participants, 16 were reinterviewed in the community (one participant could not be located, one declined to participate, one had been recalled to prison, and one had died since the first interview). With participants' consent, all interviews were recorded, and later transcribed and coded in full, using NVivo software. The T1 interviews were analysed and coded first, whilst the T2 interviews were still being conducted, which helped to inform the process by identifying emerging themes and making amendments to the interview schedule. The T2 interviews were then analysed and coded before the complete set of interviews (T1 and T2) were then returned to as a whole for a third stage of analysis. The names presented below are pseudonyms selected by the researcher.

### Responses to Re/integration

As they prepared for their eventual release, these men were actively engaged in thinking about the next stage of their lives. For all the men in this study, such re/integration involved thinking relationally, and about symbolic aspects of social and moral inclusion. This included,

but was not limited to, thinking about being with and around everyday people separate from the criminal justice system, considering how they might be viewed and judged, and the ways in which they would be governed or managed. When these men were re-interviewed five months later, they described their experience of release again in a manner that was predominantly relational. For some participants, expectations of their ability to re/integrate with others were consistent with their experience upon release. For others, however, their experiences of release had been consistently harder than what they had imagined.

The men in this sample reported three distinct approaches to release: first, *re/socialisation*; second, *expected non-socialisation*; and third, *enforced non-*

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5. Tsai, J., Harpaz-Rotem, I., Pietrzak, R. H., Southwick, S. M. (2012). The role of coping, resilience, and social support in mediating the relation between PTSD and social functioning in veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. *Psychiatry: Interpersonal & Biological Processes*, 75(2), 135–149.
6. Liem, M. (2016) *After life imprisonment: Reentry in the era of mass incarceration*. New York University Press.

*socialisation*. The first response, demonstrated by those with consistently positive expectations and experiences, was to re/immerse themselves in their community, playing an active role in their own *re/socialisation*. These men used both existing social supports and the development of new ones to become re/integrated members of their community. The second response, *expected non-socialisation*, was exhibited by those whose had consistently negative expectations and experiences. Anxieties about engaging with others pre-release led these men to retreat from re/integration, and to favour a life of solitude and isolation. The final response to re/integration, *enforced non-socialisation*, was demonstrated by participants whose expectations were inconsistent with their experiences. Unlike the previous response, where individuals had anticipated social withdrawal and isolation pre-release, these men had expected to be able to re/integrate socially at least to some degree yet received considerably more rejections and knockbacks than they had anticipated. Consequently, these men felt forced to withdraw from social interactions, doing so as a means of self-preservation to protect themselves from further stigmatisation and potential harms.

### 1) Re/socialisation

Just under half of the participants directly spoke about their willingness to re/socialise with others upon release and to become an embedded member of the community. The process of re/socialising for these men involved surrounding themselves with other people in the community, actively mixing with people or groups, participating in social activities, and seeking opportunities to engage socially with others. By (re)immersing themselves within multiple different aspects of their community, the men's moral selves were brought into being through 'a relational and dialogic practice'.<sup>7</sup> That is, the sense of selfhood that lifers had developed during their imprisonment was realised and reinforced through their interactions with others and the feedback they received from them. The responses from family, friends, professionals, and everyday citizens in the community acted to reaffirm, and on occasion extend, who they saw themselves to be, confirming an identity that was fit for the community and daily interactions. Beyond this, social

supports acted as a protective factor during re/integration, mediating and minimising the impact of rejections by seeking to validate and reinforce individuals' sense of self and belonging within the outside world.<sup>8</sup>

Distinct from those below who withdrew out of fear of rejection, these men expressed a willingness to persevere and to continually put themselves in social situations despite any knockbacks.<sup>9</sup> These men had a realistic understanding that they would likely experience several rejections before anyone took a chance on them, and that instead it was how they responded to those rejections which was more productive:

*Are you going to be lazy and go, 'oh I can't do that'? Well you can't do it if you're not going to try. Life is all about these knockbacks. It's about, you know, getting back up. (Andrew, T2)*

Here, the men discussed their 'motivation, dedication... and perseverance' (Andrew) in overcoming challenges to re/integration. They described their ability to persist, despite adversity, as being related to the existence of social supports. This included multiple different networks that existed pre-imprisonment (e.g. family, friends) but also the development of new ones following their release (e.g. becoming members of a local church, taking dance classes, joining a knitting society at the library).

Having established networks prior to release acted to minimise and mediate anxieties regarding disclosure and treatment by others. As such, they were less concerned with how the general public might receive them, because they did not believe they would have to make many, if any, personal disclosures. Relatedly, having these social supports reminded them that they had people who knew their offence and still accepted them:

*I don't have to seek approval for validation for myself as a person anymore. The validation I get is from people I know, I trust and I get on with sort of thing. (Jeremiah, T2)*

Consistent with social bond theory,<sup>10</sup> these men outlined how pre-existing social networks helped to facilitate their re/integration to the community. In

7. Donati, P. (2008). *Oltre il multiculturalismo*. Laterza; Donati, P. (2011), Modernization and relational reflexivity, *International Review of Sociology*, 21(1), 21-39.
8. Petersilia, J. (2003). *When prisoners come home: Parole and prisoner reentry*. Oxford University Press; Hochstetler, A., DeLisi, M., & Pratt, T. C. (2010). Social support and feelings of hostility among released inmates. *Crime & Delinquency*, 56, 588-607; Markson, L., Lösel, F., Souza, K., & Lanskey, C. (2015). Male prisoners' family relationships and resilience in resettlement. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 15(4), 423-441.
9. Receiving a 'knockback' was a common phrase the men used to describe rejections, refusals, or setbacks that they experienced in the community.
10. Laub, J. H., Nagin, D. S., & Sampson, R. J. (1998). Trajectories of Change in Criminal Offending: Good Marriages and the Desistance Process. *American Sociological Review*, 63(2), 225-238; Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1990). Crime and deviance over the life course: The salience of adult social bonds. *American Sociological Review*, 55(5), 609-627.

particular, they commented that people who knew them intimately acted to keep them right, reminding and assisting them to lead a prosocial life. Such affective relationships provided the men with forms of relational goods like intimacy, social respect, trust, and a sense of belonging. The re/generation of social networks characterised by reciprocity and trust contributed to their sense of social re/habilitation, providing an increasing sense of self-efficacy for these men and, in particular, confidence in their ability to succeed in their re-entry.

Such connections also generated a sense of stability in their position in the outside world, minimising their sense of isolation and reinforcing their belief that people can look beyond their offence to see the person they are now:

*I am amongst people who I am comfortable with, that kind of know me, and that have accepted me for who I am sort of thing. (Connor, T2)*

For Connor, feeling 'accepted' was most directly related to attending alcoholics anonymous (AA) meetings. When talking about attending AA for the first time, Connor said 'I knew things had changed... I'd finally found somewhere where I belonged'. Being part of a community which shared his values and goals directly impacted on how he saw himself:<sup>11</sup>

*Secure, valued, appreciated, loved... it's that sense of kind of 'these people have got your back'... That's what it does. It gives — I heard somebody say it when they first came in — for the first time in a long time, I felt hope. It's a powerful thing that is. (T2)*

Here, the men discussed the need to 'be willing to accept help and also have the gumption to ask for help' (Connor) when they needed it. Recognising the need to call upon others to aid their own re/integration symbolised that — for these men — release was not an individual pursuit but rather a collective and relational one.

Where they were accepted amongst law-abiding, 'normal' groups of people, the men recognised that they too could become embedded members of their communities by maintaining a positive and prosocial sense of self that contributed to those around them. Here, the men reflected on and reassessed what was important for their re/settlement, re-evaluating their priorities through relational networks by seeking to maintain the way others saw them, acting and engaging in morally accepted forms of selfhood.

## 2) Non-socialisation

For the majority of participants, however, there was little or no desire to embed themselves within the communities they returned to. In contrast to those with existing social support networks pre-release, these men often had no one waiting for them outside and as such, would be required to interact with new people and groups upon their release, which generated great anxiety and trepidation. These men openly feared having to contend with punitive politics and sensationalised media coverage — both generally regarding murder and specifically related to their case — that made a negative reaction more likely. Participants were conscious of how the public could see them as 'monsters', undeserving of being released.

The unpredictability of responses that they could receive evoked a constant uneasiness about interacting with others in the community, reinforcing a sense of precarity about their ability to build connections upon their release. Rather than seeking to reconfigure and promote a positive prosocial identity, therefore, these participants isolated themselves from potential gains in social capital 'as a strategy for self-preservation and personal security'.<sup>12</sup> Here, participants did not prioritise being actively social but rather focussed on stabilising their identity in the free world as the most important aspect of re/integration. The predictability of withdrawing from community interactions generated a perception that life would be 'easier' or psychologically safer if isolated from others. In doing so, the lifers

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11. See 'belonging together' in: Pfaff-Czarnecka, J. (2013). *Multiple belonging and the challenges to biographic navigation*. Max Planck Institute.

12. Kemshall, H., Dominey, J., & Hilder, S. (2012). Public disclosure: Sex offenders' perceptions of the pilot scheme in England. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 18, 311–324. (pp.321-322)



demonstrated disengagement with social and interpersonal interactions, rejecting the need to integrate. For some, this type of re/integration was expected, whilst for others, it was *enforced*.

### a) Expected Non-socialisation

Amongst the non-socialisers were a small group of men who had anticipated that they would not be accepted into their communities, and made the conscious decision to withdraw from social interactions *prior* to release. These men had a clear sense of who they were — as people likely to be stigmatised — and of their ‘master status’ as a ‘murderer’, and feared that the judgement and vilification they would receive from others in the community would compound and entrench this identity even further. Here, they anticipated the psychological challenges of experiencing rejection and the associated risks of stigmatisation and disintegrative shaming.<sup>13</sup>

Instead of seeking to (re)socialise upon release, these men sought lives of solitude and isolation. Having anticipated judgement and vilification from others that would challenge their sense of self, these men attempted to refrain from social interactions almost exclusively. In doing so, however, the lifers invariably acted as relationally reflexive beings, altering their social and personal identities to co-exist alongside, but not with, others in the community.<sup>14</sup> Here, anxieties regarding relational interactions — that had not yet happened — became mobilised and fed into the narratives of the men’s sense of self, altering their approach to release.

Where they were not *required* to disclose (e.g. during day-to-day interactions), these participants anticipated being able to retain a sense of personal control over how, when, and to what extent they revealed information about their time in prison or their offence:

*I don’t have to tell everybody when I’m out that I’ve been in prison for a long time, that I’m a life sentenced prisoner, that I killed somebody. (Simon, T1)*

Concealing the offence, or at least certain details about it, in personal settings was seen as a reactive and defensive strategy to avoid or reduce the impact of stigmatisation, constructing a narrative which had a greater sense of moral redeemability than a ‘murderer’. By making the stigma less visible, the men believed it would be less likely for them to be ‘discredited’ enabling them to re/integrate more successfully.<sup>15</sup>

Here, the men described being ‘a lot more jaded’ and unwilling to ‘give full attention of [their] emotions’ (Steven) to a stranger out of fear of that initial judgement. They were very much aware of how a mistimed or badly received disclosure could ‘blow [their] entire social life and [their] entire social peace completely’ (Wayne). As an example of this, both Simon and Steven described how they often went to the pub to watch the football, but sat by themselves, and engaged with others only when spoken to first:

*I’m not making friends when I go to the pub, I’m making acquaintances. So I don’t go in and want to spend the next three hours sitting drinking and talking to you. I sit on my own, I have a quiet pint on my own and I say hello to people, and that’s it pretty much... I don’t get too close, too involved. (Simon)*

These interactions rarely progressed beyond superficial chats with strangers, which provided some security to the men when engaging in them. Being ‘social without socialising’ (Wayne) provided a sense of normalcy to their re/integration, reminding them that they could co-exist with others, without the requirement to develop the relationship, to the point where it warranted a disclosure. Keeping themselves separate from other people, but within touching distance, allowed these men to enjoy the small pleasures of outside life: ‘it is nice just to watch life go by. Real life, real interactions... it is nice to feel a part of it and you can be as part of it as you want’ (Wayne). As such, they embraced *being in* the community, without the requirement to be a part of the community. Voluntarily retreating from social forms of interaction was therefore not considered isolating or secluding per se, but rather signified that they could

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13. Braithwaite, J. (1989). *Crime, shame and reintegration*. Cambridge University Press.

14. See footnote 7: Donati, P. (2011).

15. Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma*. Simon & Schuster, Inc.

still find ways of community living, albeit at a distance from others.

Often released to new geographic areas, these lifers were hopeful of a fresh start, yet remained acutely aware that building connections and a social network of people, required disclosure and possible rejections. Anticipating rejection, therefore, led these men to make particular decisions about how to live their lives outside more generally. For these participants, managing their status was achieved through selective re/integration with other people and social spaces, choosing when to interact, and when to withdraw from social situations as a means of self-protection.

## b) Enforced Non-socialisation

For others, self-isolation was less an expression of 'choice' or of their capacity to enact self-agency, but was primarily related to their experience of social situations post-release and the negative repercussions which had occurred as a result. Unlike those who anticipated social withdrawal and isolation pre-release, these men had expected to be able to — at least to some degree — re/integrate socially. However, the realities that they experienced were inconsistent with their expectations, in large part because these men had experienced the greatest number of knockbacks and rejections within the sample. Reflecting on the interactions they had already had (e.g. during releases on temporary licence), and reflecting *with others*, helped these men to decide how to behave when moving forward. Here, the actions of others fed into an internal cycle which led the men to reassess both their self-concept (i.e. who they saw themselves as being) and their social identity (i.e. who others saw them as).

They men had often received 'rejection after rejection' (Gerald), in particular, from landlords and employers. Rejection in these formal spaces was seen to be highly impactful on their ability to re/settle and gain stability. Yet, it was the emotional impact of such knockbacks that the men clearly articulated as being

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more harmful. These encounters were seen as degrading and humiliating, acting as stark reminders of their criminalised status and, by extension, their moral inferiority to those without a criminal record:<sup>16</sup> 'they [employers] are forming an opinion of me... [and] that will always be emotional' (James). These men voiced their discontent and, on occasion, their anger about not being given a chance to demonstrate their worth and how they had changed as people, instead being refused the job or accommodation at the first disclosure. Receiving repeated rejections on, what they believed to be, the sole basis of their offence made the men feel like 'a lesser person' (Terry), regenerating a sense of 'shameful[ness]' (Gerald) that they had

experienced in prison about who they were and what they had done. Being denied key forms of social capital as a result of their offence, rather than affording them a fresh start, made these men hyperaware of their master status as 'murderers'.<sup>17</sup> The 'symbolic interaction stigma' imbued within these rejections subsequently led to lower self-esteem, withdrawal and isolation from social interactions.<sup>18</sup>

Whilst Gerald said he was prepared for some judgement, he 'wasn't prepared for just how much' he actually experienced, being knocked back at every turn. Such attitudes were common among those who had not experienced a disclosure prior to their release, and who had anticipated that the opinions of

people — and, relatedly, any treatment they might receive — would be mixed:

*I feel there's some people that genuinely wouldn't have a great issue with [the conviction]. They'd say 'forgive and forget'... and then other people might have a smile on their face but underneath that, they would be uncomfortable with me. (Terry, T1)*

Terry described how, initially, he wanted to 'just voluntarily disclose' as a means of being straightforward with people, but that after receiving a

16. Pogrebin, M. R., Stretesky, P. B., Walker, A., & Opsal, T. (2015). Rejection, humiliation, and parole: A study of parolees' perspectives. *Symbolic Interaction*, 38(3), 413-430.

17. Hughes, E. C. (1945). Dilemmas and contradictions of status. *American Journal of Sociology*, 50(5), 353-359.

18. This is consistent with Link et al.'s (2015) work on mental illness stigma: Link, B. G., Wells, J., Phelan, J. C., & Yang, L. (2015). Understanding the importance of "symbolic interaction stigma": How expectations about the reactions of others adds to the burden of mental illness stigma. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 38(2), 117-124.

few knockbacks, he was more selective in divulging any information about his offence. Being rejected had forced Terry to realign disclosure in theory (i.e. prior to release) with disclosure in practice (i.e. post-release) whereby it was considerably more difficult for this new, reformed self to be accepted by others.

Being excluded from social groups and rejected by various individuals on a personal level compounded the men's negative experience of disclosure and release more generally. Feeling both reduced and hurt by the persistent and pervasive stigmatisation they were subject to, these lifers reported how it got harder each time to pick themselves back up and try again, asking themselves 'how many more knockbacks can one person take?' (Gerald). Whilst the men were hopeful pre-release that disclosures and knockbacks would get easier over time, each additional rejection was instead felt more acutely as it represented a personal denunciation of selfhood. The men characterised such rejections as a 'double whammy' (Terry), being denied a job or accommodation but more implicitly being refused membership into the community.

Not only were negative reactions harder to shake off than they had anticipated but they also had longer lasting implications, compounding feelings of instability and disillusionment about life in the outside world, and negatively impacting on their pursuit of re/integration. Expressing deep anxieties about further stigmatisation subsequently became detrimental to their well-being:

*[T]he stress and anxiety brought the depression back from the bipolar and then I started getting intrusive, suicidal thoughts... I*

*think the stress of it all just got too much and it was like a trigger. (Gerald, T2)*

Instead of 'embracing' freedom, these men started to imagine the possibility of returning to prison, where interactions were considered 'less judgmental' and ontologically safer than in the community.

## Conclusion

For the men in this study, anticipating and experiencing release from a mandatory life sentence was a relational experience. They engaged reflexively in an internal conversation both before and after their release about how they would be seen by others and how they could coexist alongside them in the community. The (in)consistency of their expectations and experiences subsequently impacted upon their response to re/integration, choosing — or in some cases *being forced* to choose — whether to re/socialise or withdraw from others. The orientations presented here challenge the notion of 'reintegration' by highlighting the relational barriers that exist in seeking it, and importantly, questioning whether it is even desired by individuals upon their release from prison (i.e. would they prefer to withdraw). Understanding what can be considered 'effective' re/integration, therefore, is subjective to the individuals experiencing it, in conjunction with the groups they interact with. These findings hope to provoke conversations about how re/entry and re/integration may be understood or thought about differently, in particular for those who have been removed from the outside world for the longest periods of time.