Longitudinal cross-national perspectives on female desistance: The role of social and emotional capitals in female narrations of maintaining change

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Abstract
This paper offers a unique longitudinal qualitative perspective on a group of women maintaining desisting pathways in two different European countries: Sweden and England. Applying a social and emotional capital framework, with particular attention given to the friend and family connection, the paper aims to unveil how a resource perspective can enable a more nuanced view of the role of overlapping female identities and network management, the paradoxes of trust within these, and experiences of stigmatisation and emotional expenditure in female desistance narratives across time and space. The cross-national perspective brings to light the importance of situating the desistance process in the particular context in which it plays out, making visible how narratives may be structurally mediated by wider social, cultural, penal – and gendered – conditions and processes. These insights may, in turn, contribute to the identification of desistance support that have the potential to make female desistance paths less socially and emotionally costly.

Keywords
women, desistance, Sweden, England, social capital, emotional capital

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Introduction

International attention to women in the criminal justice system has grown substantially in recent years (Hine, 2019). So too has criminology’s interest in desistance, having been likened to an ‘explosion’ (Shapland et al., 2017: 744). One of the newer additions in this area is cross-national perspectives (see Shapland et al., 2017). This is a welcomed move, as international perspectives offer an opportunity to challenge traditional criminological conceptualisation of crime and punishment as exclusive nation–state concerns (Bringedal Houge et al., 2015). It also has the potential to develop our knowledge of how contextual differences impact on processes of desistance and reintegration (Cobbina, 2010; Rodermond et al., 2016). As noted by Hine (2019), international comparisons on women who have experiences of offending are exceptionally rare but highly valuable, as they offer important perspectives on the influence of surrounding factors in female life stories. What the few studies that engage with international perspectives have found is that the criminal justice system is far from a universal experience for women, but rather, her position within it varies significantly between, and even within, countries (ibid.). In my own previous research, female desistance paths were found to share some important aspects cross-nationally, such as the role of victimisation in the women’s life stories and the impact of short sentences, but at the same time vary in significant ways, such as the lived experiences of desistance-enabling support structures in different penal and social welfare cultures (Österman, 2018). The increasing attention given to women in the criminal justice system globally has positively brought about new perspectives on the role of gender, although critical questions have been raised regarding actual progress in terms of addressing gendered structural barriers (Hart, 2017). That said, what this growing research subfield has accomplished though, as argued by Cobbina (2010), is that it has reached a state where there is ample evidence that reintegration processes are indeed gendered.

Another body of literature that has grown substantially in the last decades is the capital literature. In the desistance field, the role of social capital has been especially highlighted. For female desistance in particular, studies suggest that social capital and high-quality relationships play an important role (Cobbina, 2010; McIvor et al., 2004; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Rodermond et al., 2016). How desisters’ capitals vary across national settings is an area that has been negligibly explored, though Segev and Farrall (2020) offer a noteworthy exception to this rule, finding that male desisters found it easier to mobilise social capital in Israel than in England. There are, however, other areas of the capital literature that has not found its way into the desistance field, but that could potentially be a valuable analytical complement. Specifically, in this paper I employ the concept of emotional capital as a complement to the social capital framework, suggesting that this may have particular value in the context of understanding women’s experiences of attempting desistance in different lived contexts.

This article aims to marry aspects of these different criminological subfields, with a focus on how women experience desistance in different contexts and across time, analysed through a lens of social and emotional capitals. The suggestion is that the application of this particular analytical lens may aid us to see the realities of how the
experience of desistance across time and place is dependent on, as well as directly impacts on, the resources available; personal as well as structural. In turn, these perspectives may contribute to the further identification of valuable desistance-support priorities for women, including how criminal justice actors could potentially up capitals that make the maintenance of a desistance path more manageable over time. The article unfolds in the following way: after an overarching introduction to key literature in the area of women, desistance and social and emotional capitals, a brief section on the methods, including ethical concerns, is offered. This leads into the core of the article with two sections presenting integrated findings and discussion; one with focus on the friend connection and a second one on the family connection. The article is then brought to a close with a concluding discussion.

Women, desistance and the role of social and emotional capitals

Social capital, and relational factors more widely, is an area that has taken on a growing role in desistance literatures (Farrall, 2004; Reisig et al., 2002; Weaver and McNeill, 2015). It is important to remember that social capital differ from social relations. Capital, as noted by Rothstein (2005), only becomes capital if the relation turns into an asset for the individual, involving a durable, and mutually operational, network. It is the combined effect of the breadth, depth and quality of such relations that shape a person’s social capital (Wolff and Draine, 2004). Social capital is connected to a range of desired outcomes (Reisig et al., 2002) and include aspects such as practical support with housing, food and other essentials, emotional support, as well as gateway connections to others with resources, including jobs and housing (Wolff and Draine, 2004). All of these can be understood as valuable for desistance. In contrast, a lack of social capital has been found to increase the ‘pains of desistance’, resulting in, for example, goal failure and isolation (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016).

Trust, and with that reciprocity and a sense of obligation, plays an important role for the strength of capital. What is particular with trust is that it can be promised and it can be earned, but it cannot be ordered or purchased (Rothstein, 2005). Trust is a complex phenomenon, and one that has been problematised for women. Gomm (2016), in her recent research with desisting women, found that trust is commonly a paradox in desisting women’s lives, linked to experiences of violence that often have been committed by people in a position of trust. In turn, this makes it difficult to form trusting relational connections with others, as they are seen as a potential risk. As noted by Gål nander (2019), viewing other members of society as a potential source of harm is a real obstruction to the development of relations with prosocial contacts. Aspects of trust may furthermore be relevant to discuss in relation to the self. In recent research desistance has been identified as a frustrating and fragile process, that is oftentimes filled with setbacks and relapses (Halsey et al., 2017). It is a process that may be experienced as uncertain, frightening, or as Fredriksson and Gål nander (2020) put forward, ‘uncanny’, to the person going through it. The person may feel stuck in a liminal space between criminal and mainstream contexts that can lead to a loss of their sense of self (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016), which in turn can be unsettling and anxiety-inducing (Fredriksson and Gål nander,
It would therefore be natural for the desister to also doubt, or indeed have limited trust in, their own capacities to shift their identity and develop relations with prosocial contacts. In turn, these experiences may lead to a feeling of being unable to connect to normality and ‘normal’ people, increasing feelings of fright (Fredriksson and Gålnander 2020), resulting in limited lives (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016).

To further understand these paradoxes around trust in women’s desistance, we must briefly give attention to what is known about the lived experiences of relationships for this group. In feminist desistance research, violence and especially intimate partner violence, abuse and the recovery from trauma, has been found to significantly influence the process of going ‘straight’ (Barr, 2019; Barr and Christian, 2019; Cobbina, 2010; Gålnander, 2019; Gomm, 2016; Harding, 2020). In view of this, maybe it is unsurprising to learn that research has found that for many women, moving away from certain friendship groups/communities and social worlds (Barr, 2019; Österman, 2018; Rodermond et al., 2016), as well as leaving violent intimate relationships (Gålnander, 2019; Gomm, 2016; Leverentz, 2006; Österman, 2018; Wolff and Draine, 2004), up their chances of desistance. Thus, in direct contrast to traditional desistance ideas, commonly based on male samples, of relationships as a stabilising factor (see for example Laub and Sampson, 1993), the desistance process for many women may, in fact, be more about discovering and claiming independence (Barr, 2019). Economic independence is an important part of this emancipatory process (Berman, 2005; Rodermond et al., 2016). Furthermore, the stress and mental health issues deriving from violence is formative for many women’s desistance path (Gomm, 2016) and there is typically an interrelationship between victimisation, mental health, substance abuse and family/relationship breakdowns in criminalised women’s lives that needs to be taken into account when working with this group (Berman, 2005; Hart, 2017; Huebner et al., 2010).

Much of this violence takes place in the context of the familial. While the traditional desistance literature places great emphasis on the role of the family as a potential valuable source of social capital (see Farrall, 2004; Mills and Codd, 2008), and certainly, healthy relationships have been identified as conducive to female desistance (Berman, 2005; Cobbina, 2010; Gomm, 2016; Österman, 2018; Rodermond et al., 2016), we must at the same time uphold a critical lens towards the family as a space of safety and support. The gendered dimension of family life is essential to consider in this context. We are reminded that the family as an institution carries a particular history, with it being positioned as ‘patriarchy’s chief institution’ in early feminist writings, founded on a solid ground of control and conformity (Millett, 1969:33). Indeed, many studies with women with convictions show that relationships with family and relatives often tend to be negative, filled with strained relations, conflicts and histories of abuse (Bui and Morash, 2010). For some then, the family is a source of stress and dependency, rather than support (Mowen and Visher, 2015). Moreover, not all families are interested to support family members’ desistance process (Farrall, 2004; Mills and Codd, 2008; Mowen and Visher, 2015). Many family environments present the opposite to social capital and are dysfunctional, producing a negative influence on the desistance process (Cobbina, 2010; Mills and Codd, 2008; Rodermond et al., 2016; Wolff and Draine, 2004). Hart (2017) found that family
breakdowns was a key aspect of lack of social capital among pre-release women (which the prison experience further exacerbated).

Placing these debates in the cross-cultural sphere, the family has different cultural connotations across time and place. In the Swedish context, the state was historically meant to aid in the de-dependencing of the individual from the family, as the family domain was viewed to often present a non-democratic and hierarchical institution (Trädgårdh and Bergren, 2006). Instead, citizens were to be part of the bigger family, namely, ‘Folkhemmet’. This is contrasted to the English context, with its more liberal political underpinnings, where there has been a long tradition of reluctance to intervene in the private family sphere (Rose, 1999). Highlighting different cultural associations around aspects of desistance are important, but very rare. In a welcomed exception to this rule, Segev and Farrall (2020) recently explored the comparative role of social capital and how it is shaped by cultural and social structures in a country, finding that, despite similar conditions, male desisters found it easier to mobilise social capital in Israel than in England due to factors such as religious traditions within families, more socially integrated ex-offender identities, and greater access to ‘bridging’ social capital.¹ Nugent and Schinkel (2016) have emphasised the role of bridging social capital for desisters, noting that the more of it a desister has, the more likely it is that the non-offending identity becomes recognised by others, thus producing ‘relational desistance’. The diversity within networks furthermore relates to structural positions in society. For example, women with lower levels of education and income having been found to have less varied social networks (Reisig et al., 2002). These capitals must additionally be placed in the context of net network resources, that is, for social relations to be a form of capital, those relations need to have resources, such as jobs, housing and money, to draw on (Wolff and Draine, 2004). The wider social, political and economic conditions within which the desistance process plays out are of relevance here. For example, in my previous research (Österman, 2018) it was found that differences in social welfare systems may create different lived experiences of female desistance on the micro-level, including levels of economic hardship, childcare options and supported access into the labour market. It is suggested then that different state systems are variedly good at enabling capital formation for desisters. Criminological research that explore macro-levelled processes are rare. Farrall and colleagues (2020) have, however, recently attempted to give attention to this gap, showing how social and political change on the national level – such as the economic re-structuring in the UK during the Thatcher years – impact, directly as well as indirectly, on citizens’ involvement in crime.

Emotional capital can be understood as a variant of social capital. It can also be understood as a gendered form of capital. First developed by Nowotny from Bourdieu’s capital framework in the early 1980s, the concept has evolved through various authors since and can be interpreted as the stock of emotional resources a person holds (Reay, 2004). The contradiction of this capital is that it is used up in interactions, as well as that it benefits those others (ibid.). It therefore importantly raises the value of non-instrumental sociality, effectively contesting the Bourdieuan assumption that the search for capital accumulation governs human behaviour (Adkins, 2004). Emotional capital is linked to both emotional labour and caregiving. Research clearly show that women do significantly
more emotional labour within the family than men, responding and taking responsibility for the emotional state and wellbeing of those within it (Reay, 2004). While we know that women globally, without exception, dedicate more time to unpaid work in the home, there are also important cross-national differences to note. Taking the countries in focus in this paper as examples; cross-national comparisons show that men spend more time on unpaid care work in the household in Sweden than in the United Kingdom (Charmes, 2019).

Beyond the household, women often also carry the main caregiving responsibility within social networks and are expected to care for men that, for example, come out from prison, which often involve strain and coping (Wolff and Draine, 2004). This expectation, linking to the cultural narrative that a woman should ‘stand by their man’ (Codd, 2000:73) – which is typically upheld by both the women themselves and the people in their community – is, however, not a two-way street. This is a common finding in research within marginalised lifestyles. For example, Skårner (2001) found that drug-using women in Sweden are consistently found to give more support to their male partners than what they receive in return. The question of reciprocity, as a core factor in social capital, is thus brought into questioning. It should be noted that expectations around female caregiving stretches beyond intimate relationships and family and has also been found to be emphasised in criminal justice programmes for women (Harding, 2020; Perry, 2013). As noted by Mills and Codd (2008), it is important to bear in mind that emotional caregiving is a heavy task and can result in reduced personal health, and so we need to stay critically aware of how any official encouragement of use of the family’s social capital may imply burdening family members – commonly women – with additional stress. This may especially be the case for certain groups of women, as similarly to other capitals, emotional capital has been found to vary within class divides. For example, Reay (2004) found that working-class women, often hampered by poverty and insufficient educational knowledge and confidence – so low on cultural and economic capital – struggled to supply their own children with emotional capital resources. Moreover, similarly to how social capital can be ‘inherited’ (Farrall, 2004), emotional capital is understood as a generational accumulative resource (Reay, 2004). Reserves are accordingly built up in families over time. Poverty is an emotionally draining experience and may deplete the emotional capital within a family. Financial hardship has been found to be so prevalent among female desisters that it can be seen as a way of life (Hart, 2017), although studies suggests that the lived experience of this may vary between desisters in different countries depending on the social welfare network (Österman, 2018).

Cultural scripts about expectations of women’s self-identities as caring figures appear in the desistance literature in different shapes and forms. The area of motherhood is a key one of these. Some argue that female desistance may benefit more by having children than male, though the precise effect will vary depending on the situation (Rodermond et al., 2016); some that parenthood may allow a woman to find a more legitimate self-identity (Mills and Codd, 2008; Schinkel, 2019), and others that the quality and nature of the bond of the relationship is what matters in terms of recidivism predictions (Huebner et al., 2010). Women who are mothers but have been convicted also suffer from greater levels of stigma, which continues far beyond them leaving offending activities behind them (Sharpe, 2015), and effectively reduces their social capital, especially bridging forms
(Wolff and Draine, 2004). We must, however, remain wary of essentialising women in this debate. Rutter and Barr (2021) have questioned whether motherhood has any inherent desistance power, or rather, whether women are inclined to relate their desistance to children, to suit patriarchal constructions of the ‘good woman’. In view of such arguments, calls have been made for a more nuanced understanding of parenthood in the desistance literature (Schinkel, 2019). The lens of emotional capital may be a useful one to add to this more nuanced interpretation, in terms of understanding the role of managing family – and other – relations during their own desistance process. This is how the introduction of emotional capital in the current article differ from previous dealings with emotions in criminological writing. Recent years have seen attempts at bringing about an increased focus on emotions in the area of crime and justice (see for example Karlstedt, Loader and Strang, 2011). Key examples of such work in the area of desistance include the classification of emotions that are experienced at different points in the desistance process in an ‘emotional trajectory of desistance’ (Caverly and Farrall, 2011); explorations of specific emotions attached to refraining from offending when opportunities present themselves (Hunter and Farrall, 2018), or indeed how feelings of frustration and desperation can lead to ‘f*ck it’ moments that may derail desistance paths (Halsey et al., 2017). However, rather than exploring the situational dynamics of emotions attached to desistance-related acts, the emotional capital lens that is being brought forward in the current paper is more considering emotions in terms of a personal, but interactionally dependent, resource and importantly, how the distribution and availability of such capital need to be critically situated in the context of other positions and roles that the person holds.

Methods

This paper is based on qualitative data produced in a 5-year follow-up study with a small group of desisting women in Sweden and England that ran between 2017 and 2018. The original study was undertaken as a part of my PhD project, which comparatively explored women’s experiences of crime and criminal justice in Sweden and England. Longitudinal research frameworks of this kind have been identified as particularly beneficial for the female desistance literature, as it opens up for exploration of phenomena over time as well as enables a whole-life perspective (Huebner et al., 2010). The original study included 24 women, 12 in Sweden and 12 in England. In this follow-up study, eight women were re-interviewed, four from each country sample group. The small sample size reflects the challenges of the method. Derrington (2019) reminds us that attrition in sample size is one of the greatest and most common challenges in longitudinal research design. Locating the women was indeed challenging, and the sample is accordingly a nonprobability convenience sample. This type of sampling is deemed a legitimate form of sampling especially when dealing with hard-to-reach populations, as well as in projects demanding flexibility due to longitudinal research designs (Derrington, 2019). The women were re-contacted through a variety of means, including through original contact details, social network platforms and via contact with previous gatekeepers in the field. While this recruitment process inevitably imply selection biases, such as being skewed to women
who are in/have had more stable life conditions since the original study and more likely to
have a presence on social media sites in their real name, a representative sample was not
the aim for this qualitatively designed follow-up study. Not allowing for generalised
findings, the results are nevertheless able to contribute to the development of unique first-
hand cross-time and -place perspectives into differences and similarities in women’s lived
experiences of desistance.

The interviews were conducted at a location that was convenient to the women and
took on average 1 hour. In adherence with an underpinning feminist methodology (Bloom
1998), although some broad themes were brought into the interview meeting, the women
were given space to relatively freely narrate their own perspectives on the last 5 years of
their life. This open narrative interview format mirrored the open nature of the key
research question guiding the project, namely, how do the women reflect back on their life
experiences over the last 5 years? The choices they made about what was prominent to
share is interpreted as relevant for subjective meaning making (Bamberg, 2011). The data
was transcribed in full and analysed thematically. In terms of ethics, the study was
ethically reviewed and approved by University of Greenwich’s ethics board in 2017.
(Sharpe, 2017) has raised the concern of how longitudinal methods present some partic-
ticular ethical dilemmas, especially in regard to re-tracing and surveilling already
‘othered’ populations. Being aware of this risk, decisions were taken to limit intrusion to
the women’s lives. Examples of this included to not use friend requests on social media
domains,3 not visiting previously known addresses, as well as not giving away the
woman’s research involvement – or indeed offering any information about my reason for
calling – if another person than the woman in question answered the phone.4

**Findings in the friends connection: From network to social capital**

For all of the women interviewed, a part of their continued desistance path involved
making active choices about their social network. Expressed in more desistance-specific
language, networks were considered from both prosocial and criminogenic perspectives.
Specially, the women were emphasising the value of ‘meeting the right people’ on the one
hand and staying away from ‘the wrong people’ on the other. This falls in line of what we
know from the general desistance literature about the value of ‘kniﬁng off’ (Maruna and
Roy, 2007) and staying away from former friends (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016), as well as
from research with women speciﬁcally how moving away from certain friendship groups/
communities is an important desistance factor (Barr, 2019; Österman, 2018; Rodermond
et al., 2016). However, these decisions come at a cost. Alternative, desisting, identities can
indeed be hard to achieve, as well as be experienced as uncanny, frightening, isolating and
limiting (Fredriksson and Gål nander, 2020; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016). A social vacuum
is commonly left in women’s lives when leaving a criminalised lifestyle (Skårner, 2001),
and a key question then becomes how to create new, more positive, connections. There
were variations in the data within this theme in terms of how challenging this process was,
which in turn related to other identities. Specifically, a strong narrative link was identiﬁed
between having recently become a parent and social capital formation. This was
overwhelmingly experienced as a positive, as illustrated here by, for example, ‘Ananda’ in the English sample:

“I’m lucky cos I’ve got my four years old and basically, I meet a lot of people who are like other mums […] Yeah. So, like my whole friendship group is based around those people now. […] If I hadn’t had my son, I would probably have struggled to find people to hang out with.” [Ananda]

Being a mother to a young child is identified by women in both the English and Swedish sample as a helpful factor for the formation of social capital along a desistance path that has required a reduction/elimination of previous network links. This is in line with research that suggest that becoming a parent can play a positive role for women on the desistance path (Huebner et al., 2010; Schinkel, 2019). However, as previously discussed, it is also essential to explore this link in a more nuanced way. Specifically, as has been questioned previously, it may be less about some form of inherent ‘turning point’ power within motherhood (Barr, 2019; Schinkel 2019), but rather, what is suggested here is that a key desistance aspect of this role shift involve the ability to develop bridging forms of social capital. As is noted in the capital literature, membership in a social network per se does not automatically produce social capital for the individual (Rothstein, 2005). Rather it needs to be an asset to the individual in question and ‘make possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence’ (Coleman, 1990: 302). For these women, this new network entry is undoubtedly conceptualised as a form of capital, and a bridging one at that, as it enables them to create new prosocial contacts with people who do not share their background that they may otherwise have struggled to make. By contrasting this to the women who have not had this inroad, the argument is further illustrated.

For women without children, or alternatively who have older children for whom parent connections are not as manifest, there was a more outspoken challenge in gaining new networks. Angel illustrates this point in the Swedish data:

I haven’t created many new friendships really […] I mean, I find it just so complicated and tedious. So it’s kind of…I’ve just dropped it […] If I’d been a bit more forward and a bit more social, then maybe I would have had a bit more success in getting a network in life that could have covered a bit for this…cos if you’re by yourself a lot of the time, you know… then you have time to….you often end up spending time with your old head. […] It just feels like that [I don’t fit in] everywhere nowadays. Or well, maybe not everywhere, it depends, but like where I lived earlier there I could feel more at home, cos there people got lots of problems. And I guess that’s it…I just feel more at home with people with problems.” [Angel]

Previous research has found that an inability for women to connect to a prosocial network can lead to pains of isolation (Gålånder, 2019). This experience must also be located in the context of a contemporary culture that places a significant emphasis on friendships, and loneliness can be both a painful and shameful experience for people who are leaving deviant lifestyles behind them (Skårner, 2001). There was a clear narrative link
in the data, as demonstrated in Angel’s quote, between a lack of network and one’s own ability or interest to engage with other people, especially those different from you; those without ‘problems’ as Angel puts it. This echoes findings in previous studies (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016) how the desire to belong, and the ease of how this can be achieved in familiar scenes and identities, can create a liminal position within the desister’s identity. The lack of especially bridging social capital is evident here. We are furthermore reminded that mutual trust is key to the functioning of social capital. Commonly in the data, the inability to engage with others linked to previous experiences of either conflict or general feelings of distrust, including not being able to share things about oneself. Angel goes on to point out that ‘regardless how much of a buddy you become with someone, I would never ever tell about stuff like that [her background]’.

“Yeah, I do on Facebook. That’s about it now. […] I feel that I’m going to be one of these people that get to a certain age and just, I don’t know […] sell everything, and just go travelling and see where life brings me. I don’t know. I don’t know what’s going to happen, it just really feels like…I don’t know, that people just piss me off now, to be quite honest […] I’m not getting close. I’m not getting close again […] I just can’t.” [Judy]

Trust is often a paradox in desisting women’s lives, which in turn makes it difficult to form relational connections with others (Gomm, 2016). There is thus a perception of relationships as risky endeavours. This lack of mutuality and trust can act as a barrier to the development of social networks, as well as transforming networks into capital. As noted by Gålnder (2019), if other members of society are viewed as a source of harm, this will act as an obstruction to the establishment of prosocial contacts within conventional society. While all of the women in this follow-up study were successful in their desistance path in terms of, on the whole, staying away from offending, it was clear that the experience of this path was a lonelier one for some than for others. In turn, the literature tells us that, over time, this isolation poses risks to their desistance path. Understanding more about how especially bridging forms of social capital can be encouraged and supported, in flexible and varied ways depending on other social identities that the woman carries, could provide helpful insights into how network gaps could be filled more effectively.

**Findings in the family connection: Repleting or depleting capitals**

Family and relatives have been found to make up the largest section of networks for women with convictions (Reisig et al., 2002), and the traditional desistance literature places significant emphasis on the role of the family (see Laub and Sampson, 1993). Within this theme the data revealed a significant difference across the sample groups, that is, the Swedish women experienced high levels of capital, both social, emotional and economical, within the family connection, while this was much weaker in the English data. A subtheme that was prominent in the English data but completely absent in the
Swedish data was that of conflictual family relations, which in turn acted as negative capital. A major part of this was in terms of depleting emotional capital among the women. All of the English women were dealing with familial conflict in their lives, which took a large narrative space in their interview data. Previous studies have found that family conflict negatively correlates with desistance and recovery from drug addiction (Mowen and Visher, 2015), and although all of the women in this study were continuingly desisting, there were stark contrasts in term of how individualised and taxing this journey was.

The subtheme of familial conflict commonly overlapped with various forms of labelling and stigmatising. That is, the women experienced being judged for previous behaviour by people in their close family, and many of the conflicts derived from this. Anna exemplify the type of challenges that the women had been dealing with in the 5 year period since I last saw them:

“My other daughter who lives with me, my younger one, she wanted to meet her [Anna’s mum] now. She’s never met her, like mum refused, she doesn’t want to get involved at all. […] She doesn’t forgive me. It is like she cut me off. […] And even my youngest has never met her. So, it is quite sad really. […] I have done everything that I could do – I’m clean, I’m working. Yeah. And it is still not enough so I don’t know… I don’t think I could do anything else. […] And with my brother it just will never change. He is calling me a fucking prostitute. […] I will not keep trying, to just feel upset.” [Anna]

While studies with males suggest that families are more accepting and less stigmatising of a criminal background (Mowen and Visher, 2015), for the English women in this particular study, the opposite is true. That is, parts of their immediate family exacerbate the stigma of an offending past. These findings must be located in the wider context of stigma being more acutely felt by criminalised women compared to criminalised men (Dodge and Pogrebin, 2001). Moreover, these narratives raise some important aspects of complexity in the women’s lives, indicating that the stigma and labelling they experience within the contours of family effectively reduce their social capital. In turn, the stigma will have further consequences for the ability to create bridging social capital (Wolff and Draine, 2004). The paradoxical conceptualisation of trust in the women’s lives is also brought to the forefront here, and how social capital relations require mutuality. Similar to how research has found that for many women, leaving intimate relationships up their chances of desistance (Gålnaender, 2019; Gomm, 2016; Leverentz, 2006; Österman, 2018; Wolff and Draine, 2004), what is proposed in this data is that for some women, this process of discovering and claiming independence as part of the desistance journey (Barr, 2019) is also applicable to the familial sphere.

Exploring these experiences through an emotional capital lens, this shows examples of the women’s attempts at upholding family connections come at a cost, in terms of investing much in making it work but it never being ‘enough’, as Anna expresses it. However, there is also a paradox in terms of capital gains and losses here. As noted by Reay (2004), emotional capital is used up in interactions, but is at the same time it can also be developed in response to barriers. We can see these parallel processes at play, that is,
challenging family conflicts deplete emotional resources while the women are trying to manage them, but at the same time we can also see how through their process of dedepending themselves from conflictual and draining family relationships, making the decision that it is not worth it, they re-gain emotional capital.

In contrast, in the Swedish data there is significant capital available within the family setting. This is a continued thread from the findings in the original study, giving further evidence to how positive family support and caring relationships with relatives can play an important role in successful desistance (Bui and Morash, 2010; Cobbina, 2010). The repleting aspect of this form of social capital are clearly illustrated here with, for example, ‘Malin’:

“I didn’t know what to do, so I called my brother […] I sent over everything I had, I had some documents that I’d received in the post and then…well he contacted them and looked into the case in detail and then he called me a few days later and said ‘now it’s done’. ‘What, what do you mean?’ But then he’d given them an offer [for paying off ‘Malin’s debt] and they had accepted that. And then that was it!” [‘Malin’]

The role of good family relations as social capital is obvious in this data, including how it links to other forms of capital, in this case economic. This is a key example of how class interrelate with social capital, as the mix of material and social resources are dependent on the network’s total access to resources (Mills and Codd, 2008; Wolff and Draine, 2004). In Malin’s case the help of her brother meant that she could get support with not only how to navigate the system to deal with an outstanding debt, but beyond this, the brother also helped her pay it off. It is thus clearly illustrated how other people can support and enable the processual change that is involved in operationalising a different self (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016).

While these differing stories of social capital within the family and its role in the desistance process are specific to the women in this study, it is noteworthy that one of the few internationally comparative studies of social capital and desistance also found that the English section of the sample had lower levels of social capital to draw on within the family setting and that their desistance journey was accordingly more of an individualised experience (Segev and Farrall, 2020). Whether the different conceptualisations of the family unit that dominate a culture has relevance here is impossible to say, though it is interesting that it is in the English (neo)liberal conceptualisation of the family as a more private sphere where there are recurring examples of lower social capital. The findings must furthermore be placed in the wider social and penal context of the two countries. This includes how the emotionally draining experience of poverty is likely to be more harshly felt in a setting of more acute financial hardship, where the total network access to social capital is also lower, which in the original study (Österman, 2018) was suggested to be a more common situation for the English desisters than for the Swedish.
Generational repetition: Triggers and emotional capital

A subtheme within the family connection that had a strong presence in the English data but was completely absent in the Swedish was ‘generational repetition’. For one of the women, this related to her father recently starting his own desistance path, but for the remaining of the women, this was related to how their own children were facing challenges, or repeating behaviour, that they previously experienced. The women often struggled with these experiences, and they commonly interlinked with both mental health challenges and support seeking. There were four key aspects of generational repetition that arose in the interviews: drug misuse, involvement with the criminal justice system, experiences of sexual abuse and self-harming behaviour. The most severe impact on the women’s own path was found in the area of sexual abuse, linked to their own experiences of victimisation of such violence, which is accordingly exemplified here.

While previous research has identified that the impact of trauma on children can be a cause of shame and guilt in desisting women’s lives (Gålナー, 2019), these findings suggest that the trauma of children can also act as a trigger to the women themselves. An example of this theme is the case of Jade. Jade, who was sexually abused by her grandfather when she was a child, here describes the experience of recently learning that her son had also been a victim of child sexual abuse, by his half-brother:

“I thought it was my fault...I hadn’t dried him properly when I bath him, and stuff like that, but when he told us what had gone on we realised what the injury was from. […] We tried to [press charges], but because of his mental […] they couldn’t do it. […] I was so hateful towards X [ex-husband] because it was his son and because he was with them both at the time […] It’s horrible because it...it digs up, brings up a lot of things. […] I just...I’d spoken to the doctor and she just popped me on the tablet.” [Jade]

Dealing with her son’s situation acted as a trigger for Jade’s own childhood abuse, which has brought her depression to a new stage and she had sought medical support to help her deal with it. This is in the context of one of her other children having recently got into trouble with the criminal justice system and is using drugs. This same son is also convicted of violence against his girlfriend, which in turn brings up Jade’s own experiences of domestic violence. Anna offers another example of these interconnected themes around generational repetition, experiences of victimisation and triggers. At the time of the interview, Anna’s oldest child had recently gone to prison on a 6-year prison term, for stabbing and child abuse convictions. She here describes how her son started to get into trouble and how it has impacted on her own path:

‘He was being violent so he got put into a hostel for the homeless but he was quite young and he was smoking spice and sleeping out in the street […] I know he was arrested previous for grooming girls on Facebook as young as ten. […] He went to a house party and got into a fight and end up stabbing somebody with a kitchen knife. So he was arrested, so when the police got his phone there is child pornography on there, and messages to young girls. […] Since my son went to prison for that, I have been quite depressed […] and it brought up my own
childhood abuse […] I was going to bed and have flashbacks and stuff, so that happens to me quite often. […] He can’t never see his sisters ever again. So that is final thing that I’m not gonna. I will go and meet him if he wants to meet me but he can’t see his sister now. […] I need to keep them safe.” [Anna]

Similar to Jade, dealing with her son’s situation acted as a trigger for Anna’s own childhood abuse, which has brought her depression to a new stage. Anna has been on anti-depressant medication for years, but these recent events have brought up challenges that she feels the current medication is not doing anything for and she is, (Leverentz, 2006) at the time of the interview, in the process of seeking further advice and support. Anna’s and Jade’s cases exemplify how the experience of generational repetition poses severe challenges to the women’s mental health and impacts negatively on their capitals, both social and emotional, especially in terms of depleting their emotional resources to cope, while at the same time balancing their ongoing caregiving roles in the immediate family. In this light, Gomm’s (2016) argument that female desistance can be understood in terms of recovery and resilience is clearly illustrated. However, critical questions are here also raised in terms of official recognition of effects of trauma, victimisation and adequate support, not only involving medicalised options, for the women’s long-term health. Especially as we know that emotional capital, similar to social forms, is a generational accumulative resource (Reay, 2004), there is arguably important desistance value of this also beyond the women’s individual health.

Concluding discussion

This paper has presented qualitative insights into the lived complexities of maintaining desistance over time by women who are living in different social, national and personal contexts. Analysed through the lens of social and emotional capitals, attention has been drawn to how the role of different capital dynamics, especially within the family and friend connection, can shape the experience of maintaining a desisting lifestyle and making it more or less of an individualised and perilous path. Questions need to be raised here, however, where the desistance aspect of these women’s lives ‘end’ and the study of women who are fighting various battles with systems, formal and informal, unfold over time. As has been noted in other desistance research (Schinkel, 2019), it is clear how exclusively focussing on offending aspects of someone’s life do not do justice to their experiences. Moreover, the findings act as a forceful reminder of the importance of placing the lived experience in the specific context in which it plays out; giving hints of how resources within networks around female desisters, both social, economic and emotional, can play a significant role for how challenging the journey is.

The findings, in line with previous studies (Cobbina, 2010; Rodermond et al., 2016), lend obvious support to the notion that social networks matter on female desistance paths and that women make active decisions around managing them. However, they also suggest something about how inroads into social capital link to other identities in the women’s lives. For example, rather than having ‘natural’ desistance power, it is suggested that motherhood can become a resource for women in terms of bridging social capital
formation. As others have called for the need for anti-essentialist approaches to the issues of gender within desistance work contexts (Perry, 2013; Schinkel, 2019), so too do I call for a more nuanced understanding of what role shifts actually ‘do’ in people’s lives and how such relate to the lived experience of desistance. It may be less the shift in identity per se, and more the social capital gains that such a shift enables, that is of relevance. It would be a worthwhile pursuit to explore how especially bridging forms of social capital can be enabled and supported through, for example, probation-oriented initiatives, all the while taking into account the core aspects of mutuality and paradoxes of trust in relation building that poses challenges in this area to many desisting women.

Moreover, the findings give a stark reminder of that not all social relations, familial or otherwise, can be converted into social capital. Some can, in effect, make the desistance path a more onerous one. For the English women in this study, family conflicts did exactly this – it further stigmatised them, reduced social capital access and were costly in terms of emotional capital expenditure. These findings remind us of the importance to remain critical of making assumptions about the role of the family as a form of capital. It also raises wider questions about how de-dependency can be supported, especially as we know that women are more commonly dependent on partners and/or networks for financial support compared to men (Berman, 2005; Reisig et al., 2002), which can make desistance tougher in terms of leaving relationships. If it is the case that de-dependency is an important aspect of keeping the desistance path a healthy and viable one for some women and should therefore be encouraged, then the state arguably also has a responsibility to provide capital compensations – economical and otherwise – that allow the woman to take this step.

Finally, bringing in emotional capital into the analysis has been an attempt to add a new dimension to the gendered aspect of social capital operations in female desisters’ lives, especially seen across time and space. It is suggested that used in this way, it may allow a more complex capturing of the different processes that impact on the woman’s total desistance resources, by allowing a broader view of emotional expenditures and gains in caregiving, often familial, settings. A key contribution to new knowledge is thus about how to conceptualise, in a gender-sensitive and holistic way, capacities to desist from crime – commented on in, for example, the work of Halsey et al. (2017) – while upholding a critical view of how the desister’s other roles and positions in wider structures and systems impact on such dimensions. Bearing in mind essentialising discourses around women, it may also be valuable to make a short concluding note on how this emotional element is not intended to be used. That it, this added capital lens is certainly not intended to feed common stereotypes about women being more emotional than men, or indeed used to assess or categorise expectations about the level of suitability of women’s behaviours. Rather, it is proposed to open up a new critical perspective on understanding how specific constructions around femininity and expectations about and of women, especially as caregivers, are factors that directly impact on the lived experience of resources that are spent and gained during the desistance process. As such, they need to not only be given sufficient attention, but also be taken into account when working with this group. Lastly, although cultural scrips about the family in these different settings are impossible to comment on from this small study, it is noteworthy that it detected similar patterns as other
cross-national qualitative studies in the desistance field, in that capitals within the family is comparably weaker in the English setting. An interesting future research endeavour would be to explore this further, in order to shed light on the extent to which narratives of change are mediated by the socio-political – as well the gendered – conditions of the particular national context in which they take place.

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**Notes**

1. Bridging social capital is simply defined as relations with dissimilar people, which is contrasted to bonding social capital, which is relations with people similar to oneself (Rothstein, 2005).
2. For a full description of the methods and approaches of the original study, including sampling criteria and recruitment, see Österman, 2018.
3. This proved a challenge as it was realised that personal messages that are received from unknown people often go into a separate inbox on, for example, Facebook. One way to get around this is to ‘add friend’. However, recognising the ethical concerns, raised by, for example, Sharpe (2017), of the possibility of increased exploitation of research respondents through ‘friendships’, the decision was taken on ethical ground not to do this. Especially as it would raise challenging questions about potentially ‘unfriending’ a person following the interview meeting.
4. I also set a limit to how many times I would repeat a call that resulted in this response.
5. Triggers can be understood as situations that bring to the surface earlier experiences of trauma and can commonly result in relapse to, for example, substance abuse.
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