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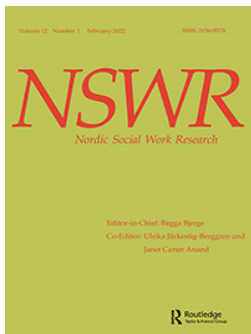
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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Possible selves. Gang passages, projective imaginations, and self-transformations

Kristina Alstam^a and Torbjörn Forkby^b

^aGothenburg University, Gothenburg, Sweden; ^bDepartment of Social Work, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Belonging to a criminal gang often strongly influences members' identities, particularly their self-perceptions and social roles. Entering or leaving a gang may challenge members' understandings of the meaning and structure of their lives and threaten their sense of control. The aim of this study was to explore how members narrate these transitions and whether such stages may be seen as liminal passages. This article draws in particular on the theory of possible selves, which suggests that people change through experiencing their present selves as incomplete versions of their anticipated selves. We analysed data from two qualitative research projects on gang exits using content analysis from interviews with clients and employees in one Swedish exit programme and clients at correctional facilities or probation services. In addition, data consists of interviews with employees from these. The analysis suggests that while gang members narrate entry as a continuation towards understanding themselves and their potential place in the world, leaving the gang implies entry into a liminal terrain with fewer role models and possible projective imaginings of their future selves. Such liminal passages are analytically linked to a need for role models and experienced guides to manifest a way forward and support defectors in the process of leaving. Gang leavers need 'ceremonial masters', in this case professionals with experience of exiting processes, to support them in imagining and creating new lives and new selves outside of the gang.

KEYWORDS

Criminal gangs; exit processes; possible selves; identity transformation; liminality

Introduction

Despite debates over definitional issues (Esbensen et al. 2001) and variations between gang cultures, settings, and idiosyncrasies (Carson, Wiley, and Esbensen 2017), gang membership arguably has a dramatic effect on a person's identity (Goldman, Giles, and Hogg 2014; Vigil 1988). It touches fundamental dimensions of self-perception, gender identity, daily activities, social roles, and emotional posture and gives meaning and direction to one's existence (Hagedorn 2008) or 'working self' (Paternoster and Bushway 2009). Transitions into or out of gangs may therefore challenge assumptions and routines that structure and provide a sense of control over one's life (Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Forkby, Kuosmanen, and Örnlin 2020b; Kelly and Ward 2020).

Theories on possible selves and liminality may be useful in understanding transitions into and out of gangs through conceptualizing the role of projective imagination in visualizing the evolving self. The aim of this article is to analyse how gang leavers narrate their exit from, as opposed to their

entry to, gangs and discuss why this second transition may be experienced as a liminal passage. This connects to a discussion of the need and function of ‘ceremonial masters’ who guide members through the phases of liminal passages.

The possible self in liminal transformations

The theory of possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986; Markus and Ruvolo 1989; Oyserman and Markus 1990) proposes that human change emerges from dissatisfaction with the current self as compared with experienced or anticipated selves in considering the future self. According to the theory, people use projective imagination to shape co-existing possible selves and through self-evaluation chose those anticipated the most realizable and fulfilling. Because the demands of a particular context and the perceived capacity of the individual define what is possible and required, the theory establishes links between individual agency, social structure, and actual contingences (Archer 2000; Emirbayer and Mische 1998).

Of several possible selves, one generally dominates in a particular situation and is presented and recognized as the self (Goffman 1959/1990). Other representations are available as potentials or shadowed selves, more or less accessible by deactivating the operational self. However, the ‘felt proximity of the future self, necessary to be motivating to the present self, contrasts with the distance of the future self, necessary to create new experience’ (Ibid, p. 324). For example, incarcerated juveniles in an unexpected situation in which their potential is denied could need considerable support to do the imaginary work required to articulate a new possible self (Clinkinbeard and Murray 2012).

In addition, selves – current, past, and future – are produced by narrating them. We chose and arrange events in different ways depending on when and to whom we tell them. ‘Selves create stories, and stories create selves’ (Todd-Kvam and Todd-Kvam (2022, 915). A self may thus be seen as a narration in which personal traits, behaviours, cognitive schemata, and emotional expressions are glued together in a particular way, and where the configuration is informed by how different identities are articulated (Vaughan 2007). Self-transformation in terms of desisting from crime would therefore include an adaptation to another storyline that bridge between history, the present and future possibilities in a reconstructed way in which the operative self that was functional in gang life is projected as a feared future self (Paternoster and Bushway 2009). The most effective self for a gang member may connect traits such as courage and brotherhood, an aversion for thinking about consequences, and a particular form of masculinity in the shape of aggressive feelings (Venkatesh 2003). The transformative process on leaving would demand a reconfiguration of these traits, perhaps by keeping bravery but adding traits such as compassion, reflection, patience, or consideration (Forkby, Kuosmanen, and Örnlin 2020b). The transformation might occur as a process of deactivating portions of the operative self and reactivating previously hidden qualities, loosening and recoupling associations to bind the new self together.

The transformative (desistance) process would certainly need to be started and fuelled from individual will. This, however, emerges from the individual’s evaluation and meaning-making from extra-individual stimulation and conditions that results in interplay between hoped for and feared selves. There is normally a phase when the individual has left the criminal activity but is not yet in a ‘safe’ desistance. Hunter and Farrall (2018) describe it as a tension between one’s future and current selves when the benefits of desistance have not yet been realized. To stabilize desistance depends in many cases upon guidance, external anchorage (hooks for change) in social circumstances, and new roles that supply the process with awarding feedback (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002).

A reconfigured self would be differently thoroughgoing depending on what the new self will engage in. In an empirical study, Forkby, Kuosmanen, and Örnlin (2020a) labelled *assimilation* as the outcome when the old self was merged into the new one in a way that one defines oneself as an ex – the identity containing a retrospect to a previous construct. This would not necessarily

include a pervasive reconstruction of the previous identity. A more radical configuration is *exclusion* in which the old identity is expelled from the new. Those who articulated this strategy told that their previous life had no meaning in the present. The last reconstruction however, *umgestaltung*, required vast and thorough treatment of previous selves and actions. This process was most visible among those who themselves functioned as supporters (wounded healers) to other defectors. To function as a bridge between gang life and ordinary society, they had to gain deeper insights about themselves to be ready to embody how these experiences could be of a more general value.

As Markus and Nurius (1986, 963) point out, perceptions of a fulfilling life, what an accomplished self means and the mechanisms leading to such tangible outcomes as happiness, productivity, health, and wealth differ between groups and individuals. What future self to strive for could be traced back to external factors such as socioeconomic position and the ‘horizons of expectancy’ embedded in social classes (Scourfield et al. 2006). People who are taught to view their possibilities as limited tend to choose a reference group situated not far from their own and keep their expectations relatively low (Runciman 1966). Having a more distant reference group (e.g. richer, healthier, or better educated) risks tensions between perceptions of what *ought* to be possible and what is possible, potentially resulting in feelings of relative deprivation and frustration (Crosby 1982).

Joining a gang may be seen as a strategy to access socially valued goals especially attractive for those in marginalized positions that otherwise experience that resources are remote (Brotherton 2008; Vigil 1988). In this respect the gang mythology act as a lever for the projective imagination by articulating a narrative in which harsh life conditions are combatted through strategies that lead to a successful life (Van Hellemont and Densley 2019). Entry requires a realignment of traits, but with a clear model of expectations. Exiting a gang, however, challenges the person’s ability to compose a future self in accordance with narratives that integrate disillusionment over the gang promises, and re-interpret history, shame, guilt and responsibilities into roles, societal positions and conditions the individual before entering could have been seen as very distant (Maruna 1997).

‘Hooks for change’ for the new identity to attach to, such as new goals or family changes, are crucial to the success of a defector’s efforts to reintegrate socially (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013). Both direct and indirect factors can influence the process. A love affair or a child’s birth might occupy time otherwise spent in the gang, provide new social relations, and open for other influences (Forkby, Kuosmanen, and Örnlin 2020b; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). Anchorage in social roles in conflict with the gang identity may both affect ones’ generalized idea of oneself and be used strategically in momentary presentations of a situational self (Garot 2007; Goffman 1979). Having to cope in a new social world requires training new or neglected capacities. For some this leads to a self-strengthening process (Irwin 1970; Meisenhelder 1977), especially when narratively anchored in a prototypical reform story explaining the change process (Maruna 1997).

Liminality is a state of ‘betwixt and between’, a process of evolving into something new (Thomassen 2016). The anthropologist Van Gennep (2019) coined the term to understand rites of passages and life stage transitions, such as that from childhood to adulthood. The liminal state is anti-structure (Turner 1975), inviting chaos into previous structures to allow the birth of the new. For this chaos to be productive and not result in entropy (Bateson 1988), it requires a power to control it. For example, in many societies, children’s entrance into adulthood is marked by rites of passages monitored by experienced guides (ceremonial masters; (Szakolczai and Thomassen 2019). Besides giving structure to the transformation, ceremonial masters could embody a promise that change is possible and rewarding and offer a narrative that articulates the process of transformation. This latter dimension is highlighted by LeBel, Richie, and Maruna (2015), who address the capacity of wounded healers. They argue that for someone moving towards another self-definition, how the narrator embodies the narrative is as important to its legitimacy and trustworthiness as the narrator or narrative (see also: Alstam, Forkby, and Holm 2021).

Identity change has been described as phases with different characteristics (a well-known reference in this context would be Ebaugh 1988). According to Arbuckle (1996), who connects change and liminality, a change process starts with the *separation phase* in which the departure from the familiar starts. Similar to this phase is *primary desistance*, which mainly focuses on the cessation of crime (Graham and McNeill 2017). Support could be needed to uphold motivation and build up trust needed to start the process of articulating what other future selves would be possible. In the second, the *liminal phase*, people reflect upon themselves and learn from their past. Graham and MacNeill (ibid) talks of *secondary desistance* as a process of becoming in which questions are asked about whom to be, and work is performed to strengthen social connections and skills (Porporino and Fabiano 2007). In Arbuckle's third, the *re-aggregation phase*, individuals connect their old and new selves and begin to express their new capacities. When it comes to desistance, the third phase is circulating around the theme of *belonging*; meaning actively attaching to (a pro-social) group that conquer what previously was found in the gang and see un-familiar circumstances and new acquaintances as potentially friendly – something Giddens refers to a day-to-day reliability (Giddens 1990). However noteworthy, as Wacquant (1990) argues, role transitions do not always follow the strict sequence presumed by phase-structured theories. There may be co-existing positions and various selves available to guide individuals' notions of themselves.

Research on leaving gangs

The leaving process may best be understood in relation to the entry process. What is first attractive, such as the promise of brotherhood, the excitement of the particular 'life style', and the money, can over time be overshadowed by the negative aspects: stress, exposure to violence and committing violence against others, separation from family and friends, and obstacles to entering adult life (Huizinga et al. 2005; D. C. Pyrooz and Decker 2011).

Some gangs provide an entire world for their members, including social support, belongingness, housing, and financial rewards that can be hard to replace (Harris et al. 2010). It can also be difficult to convince the authorities of one's commitment to leaving (Aldridge and Medina 2007), finding a legal occupation (Hagedorn and Macon 1988; Scott 2004), and managing relations with former gang members and enemies (D. C. Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2014). Sometimes desistance is prolonged and unfinalized, resulting in an extended sensation of liminality and dependence on welfare (Todd-Kvam and Todd-Kvam 2022).

Exit processes also vary individually according to the person's role and status in the gang, their social situation and personal characteristics, and the context of their exit. Some will be threatened and physically attacked by the gang to prevent them from leaving, while some in the right position and with acceptable reasons can escape consequences (Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule 2014; D. C. Pyrooz and Decker 2011; D. C. Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2014). The exit journey can start with one critical incident, but it could also evolve as a process of maturation (Kelly and Ward 2020; O'Neal et al. 2016).

Roman et al. (2017) conclude in a research overview that support for gang exit should acknowledge the pull and push factors of the gang, take advantage of leavers' doubts about the gang as they arise, train leavers in social skills, and enhance the possibilities for societal integration. However, they caution that supporting exit is not a quick fix, but a long journey filled with challenges and setbacks.

Methods

Data collection and analysis

The data originate from two research projects on gang exit and support necessary for reconstructing new selves, identities, and lives. The first project also addressed gang definitions of masculinity and associated challenges to men upon leaving. This study included 20 narrative interviews with former

gang members (males) and 42 (individual or group, equal gender distribution) interviews with support persons (including 14 interviews with prison employees, 14 with probation officers, 7 with representatives of local exit support units, and 7 with NGOs). The other project evaluated 'Passus', an NGO-based programme with the longest experience in Sweden of supporting gang exit. This included 27 interviews with gang leavers and 6 with coaches, therapists, and a coordinator. The gang defectors were all men and amongst the staff the interviews contained only one woman. Some gang defectors were ethnically Swedish; others' origins were in the middle East or Eastern Europe. Some had been members of more 'traditional' and fixed gang constellations, while others had been affiliated with 'project-like' groups. Due to the exposed situation of disasters when they leave criminal constellations, we provide no details as to what types of gangs they participated in. The interviews with former gang members were individual, while some interviews with supporting staff were conducted in groups. Data from the first study is here mainly used concerning the entering processes, and from the second on exit and exit-support processes, but data from both inspired the article.

The analysis focuses on common patterns in the trajectories of gang members despite varying contexts and group constellations such as biker groups, street gangs, mafias or project groups. These variances contribute to more nuanced view of the evolution of unifying identity-seeking processes at various stages of separating from a gang.

A secondary analysis of interviews with former gang members addresses their transformation through a life-story perspective (Carlsson and Sarnecki 2015; Holstein and Gubrium 2000). It treats their narratives as crucial to their construction of new selves and identities through reflections on the overarching storylines, discourses, and local circumstances that bind their past to their future expectations (Presser and Sandberg 2015). Even when narratives do not mirror reality, they illustrate how an individual might organize and express how a shadowed possible self could become operationalized.

Previous analyses and primary data were reread iteratively and challenged with theoretical ideas of possible selves and liminality. The comparison between the two central passages of entry to and exit from the gang became important, and detailed analyses of the tensions between these resulted in the themes presented in the Results.

The fact that the narratives were induced by the researchers' questions has bearings on the results. First, the questions guide what type of answers can be provided, so the narratives are the results of not only 'inner processes', but a structure of call-and-response. Second, disasters are interpellated (Althusser 2000/2008/2008) as 'good subjects' based on their presumed 'good desistance' or suitability as 'subjects for research'. Thus, the narratives are affected by the research ambition. Third, the differences in social position between respondents and researchers may affect respondents' frankness and what they are willing to say (Davies 2008).

The first study was approved by the ethical committee in Gothenburg (case no. 786–15) and the second was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (case no. 2019–02360).

Particip

Participants ranged in age from early 20s to over 40, and their separation from the gang varied from recent and not yet stable to integration in society for over 10 years. All participants in the studies had been deeply involved in criminal gangs, and all had come to a point where they searched for a way to exit. Some looked back on years of a successful reorganization of their lives, while others were embarking on an uncertain journey. Gang life had often become tense, and they felt the need to start their lives anew, but they did not know how to leave or where to go. Some of the social anchors that would make a new life possible, such as housing, money, issues around having a hidden identity, and receiving psychological help were in some cases resolved, and in others not yet settled. However, leaving the relative certainty of the gang is generally fuelled by disillusionment and failed hopes of the social status and belonging promised by gang life (Forkby,

Kuosmanen, and Örnlin [2020a](#)). The data from Passus employed for this paper also includes group interviews with peer support workers working closely together with the clients. The permanently employed peer support workers and those on intermittent employment were interviewed separately. Amongst the interviewed peer support workers was only one woman.

Results

Entering the gang

We began the analysis by probing constructions of the self in young men entering a gang. The collected narratives showed that the imaginative energy needed to enter the gang was different to that required to exit. From the beginning, even before gang entry, members used projective imagination to draw existing elements of their possible selves together to perform desired roles. Construction of the role in the gang, however, often required experimentation and inspiration from other gangs and representations in the media (see Van Hellemont and Densley [2019](#)). The entry process was then relatively easy as the future self was already prepared.

Participant: We got that question both me and my friend, by people from another school back when we were, I don't know if we were even a little bit younger then, 'What do you wanna be when you grow up?' 'Well, I'm gonna be a criminal and a murderer', sort of. That was it, I remember, the answer. If we said that to seem cool, or if it was like that, cause I really wanted it, I don't know, but I remember it so well.

Interviewer: Mm, you remember that answer.

Participant: Yes, I remember that answer so well, what my mindset sort of was like.

Although he contemplated the possibility that he had simply intended to impress his friends, the participant insisted that he had imagined himself 'a criminal and a murderer' at an early age. This narrative may illustrate an operative self's preparation to realize a shadowed self, supported by a public test of that option. Such an official declaration of a future self could work for young people as a test of a possible identity, indicating whether an anticipated self should be solidified or dissolved it into something else. In this case, the passage from the youthful identity to that of a criminal was narrated as a seamless process.

Another way a possible self may come to life allows others an active part in shaping the expected role as the person imitates role models to refine a self that fits the chosen context.

And we had people we looked up to in the estate where we lived and [...] played football, and at that time we ran around with pagers and that type of stuff. So we wanted to do the same, we also wanted gold and pagers and to act tough like that. Well, then we noticed that we pulled it off, you know, the first time, second time we noticed, 'Hell, this was easy'. Just walk in with a mask, a pistol in your hand, and then we've got three hundred thousand [30 000 Euro] each Saturday if we want.

The robbery is here presented as the end of a process of mimicking people with status. Their possible selves became activated by an internal logic of subsequent actions and brought to life by activating internalized and pre-defined roles. In this account, the first robbery was a test of a possible self (the robber) which proved that self's viability. The future self was in other cases discussed as a departure towards a gradual process of meeting the demands and expectations of a particular operational self. Crucial to this process were its ability to provide enough motivational energy for the projective imagination to start.

Participant: So [I] wore boots with white shoelaces, it was a lot like that, braces and it was, this whole Nazi symbol sort of, that I put on then ...

Interviewer: Put on?

Participant: I mean that role, sort of. Politically I didn't have a clue about anything really, it was just, you were sort of a diaper Nazi. The way I see it today.

Interviewer: Because that role was available and it was distinct?

Participant: Yes it was. I was somebody. I was somebody.

Contrary to Vaughan's (2007, 393) suggestion that emotions orient us in a particular way by providing signals and guiding our reactions to situations (2007, s 393), this account contains few signs of emotion. Instead, wordings such as 'pull [something] off' or 'putting on' a role may indicate that participants were aware of their possible gang selves (the robber, the diaper Nazi) before fully adopting them in an accessible reference group. It is important to consider the proximity of gang leavers' possible selves to their desired reference group as more distance requires more energy and different projective imagination, support, and contextual changes than operationalizing an expected self in a more proximal reference group.

Reference groups and the proximity of possible selves

The theory of relative deprivation posits that identifying with a reference group positioned close to one's own situation keeps expectations and feelings of deprivation low (Runciman 1966), while hopes for more affluent positions can lead to sensations of deprivation (Crosby 1982). The narratives in this study demonstrated a third rationale for joining gangs, that of reclaiming lost rights or assets (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). However, internal relations could also recreate those tensions. The prerequisites seem to be the perception of a (historical) reference group of people in adverse life situations and a (future) group embodying the expected successful lifestyle following certain actions. In this interface certain possible selves at a proximal distance to particular (gang) role models became expected, and needed only restricted projective imagination to come true.

Markus and Nurius (1986) propose that everyone has access to multiple selves, although differing in vigour. Which self becomes dominant may depend on the context. One participant described this as living always at a crossroad.

Yes, obviously, all the time, it was as I told you earlier, I've been standing like in a crossroad, so I've had one foot here, the other foot there, and life in between. So I've had the criminal world there, and I've had this regular life which I somehow need to sort of be able to have my daughter. But it's collided all the time simply because I don't know how to tear myself loose from it. Something that is such a security although a misery at the same time, so it is a security when all is said and done.

In this narrative, the world of the father and that of the criminal seems to be simultaneously active. Bearing in mind that a unified self-concept should be considered an exception (Markus and Nurius 1986, 964) and that gang members sometimes obscure their gang affinity and manifest conflicting signals of belonging (Garot 2007), this account still articulates the tension of living as two opposing selves: 'such a security, although a misery at the same time'. The account is a story of frustration and collision where dreaded and hoped-for possible selves compete in a battle that is difficult to control but also important for change to occur. It may also indicate a situation where the benefits of abstaining from crime have not yet been reaped, so the tension between the current and hoped-for future self remains (Hunter and Farrall 2018).

Participants with ties to both worlds discussed the advantage of this when exiting gangs: they could invest in the possible self already anchored in a context independent of the gang. Thus, possible selves can also be active and used in a more controlled fashion. They may be seen as 'motivational resources that individuals can use in the control and direction of their own actions' (Oyserman and Markus 1990, 122) as in the next excerpt:

When you're in here [prison] for life you have to make the warden write that they can see a change. Do you understand what I mean? You need to show them that you are serious about your changes. Then you need to address, like, you cannot get reported, and then you have to be nice, then you must address these things that you can get a hold of, and ... Do you understand what I mean?

In this account the participant comes across as controlled, but could also be understood as a positional stance towards a possible selves found as most rewarding or manageable in the particular setting of the prison (Warr 2020). However, the requirements and narrative of knowing what is required: 'It's not just about saying it, you need to show it' can function as motivational resources for managing goals and actions. This, however, can be read in two ways. It could be a manifestation of agency as the individual translates institutional demands into actions with a positive outcome, but it may also be a more calculated act, not so much a sign of self-reconstruction as of strategic adaptation to gain a privilege. How this equation is solved reveals different aspects of self-operation and how support and trust may be built.

However, strategies as above could have multiple sources and un-clear outcomes, and even those more manipulative could still be starting a process of self-evaluation. The challenge when supporting exit is therefore to acknowledge all potentially benign intentions and ignite a feedback loop of self-evolution. The institutional rewards that come with 'improved behaviour' may be appreciated and provide a pathway for a more profound will to change. For some, this could translate into a benign circle of developing faith in a rewarding system (Stolle, 2001) that helps construct a sense of trust. Such a basic trust in an institutional promise may be extended to include other institutions and people in a growing circle of confidence. The institutionally induced possible self could then become an attractive operational self.

Bridging possible and operational selves

Data from the Passus evaluation supports a major storyline of how entering gang is based on proximity to imagined or real role models that blend into the present operational self. The exit narratives, however, required more projective imaginary work for another self to seem realizable. Hence, exit could be understood as a liminal state between the present and an uncertain future that could be bridged by competent support. New role models ('ceremonial masters'; Szokolczai and Thomassen 2019) could, through their own stories and behaviours, demonstrate the possibility of another life after gang membership and help on the journey towards a new self.

They [Passus] also have staff that understand the criminal life and the gangs. There you have something very, very special. Don't have to explain a lot because they understand what it's like. They have experienced a lot themselves. / . . . / There are people here who have been around and who can reach you. [It is] not possible to help a person by just entering in a suit and saying 'Hey, we're gonna do it this way'.

The ceremonial masters in the Passus programme share many of the qualities of peer support workers (Alstam, Forkby, and Holm 2021). They have experienced the challenges faced by their clients, sufficiently recovered, and undergone training to provide support (Solomon, 2004). In the liminal state of anti-structure (Turner 1975) when a would-be ex-criminal enters a rehabilitation programme, these peer support workers lend structure and guide the client through the chaos of losing their identity and having no new self to replace it. A participant in Passus described his feelings:

/ . . . / And I was extremely, extremely paranoid about everything. Like, everything. The tiniest detail. I mistrusted everything and everyone. I looked over my shoulder all the time, wherever I went. If someone had a hoodie I almost got an anxiety attack. Just because someone with a hoodie was passing by. Like that, it was on that level. I didn't want to go out when it was dark outside either, because you can't see properly.

The participant in this phase of the process, had next to nothing left. He was not allowed to use his old defence mechanisms, such as violence, to protect himself. He had left family and friends behind, had no resources to support himself, and had to cope with threats from both his old gang and rival gangs. Thus, he found himself in a state of chaos. In the interview, he described his relationship with

the Passus contact person as having someone close who inspired him and made the efforts of leaving seem worthwhile. Another participant, elaborating on how he used his coach to guide his actions, said ‘Sometimes when it feels tough, I think to myself, *how would Samir have handled this situation?*’.

In contrast to entering, participants had few, if any, role models to follow on exiting. For many a reconstructed identity was a temporary borrowing of the self of the peer support worker. The ceremonial master may be crucial to solving the confusion of transitioning to an unfamiliar new self-concept by introducing structure and the possibility of a new life.

The Passus programme not only offers examples but rewards behavioural improvements with tangible benefits such as an internship or the possibility to lease an apartment. Every time a hoped-for future self emerges it is rewarded:

/ . . . / because I sort of got gains for what I did, so to say. Like I got an apartment there. It took a while, but I had something to look forward to all the time. Then I started school and I thought, ‘Fuck, I can do this. What if I can do this? Then perhaps I can get an internship and a job, too. And manage this and manage that’. I got rewards all the time, so it’s like Although it took a month, three months, half a year. School took me one year. I guess it was that which . . . If everything had been like crap all the time, I wouldn’t have managed.

Rewards may function as both incentives for change and reinforcements of success. What takes place on the inside – the birth of a new self – is made real and strengthened by the reward. Our data suggests the structure of planned rewards instils a sense of fairness that symbolically manifests and structures the clients’ change. Several participants described their experience of the Passus programme as one of ‘coming home’:

But Passus was the hood. I felt at home there. It was a completely different approach. Understood me, were on the same level. They had lived a similar life before, but [they] could talk about it.

This account describes the Passus programme as a safe haven. Clients entered the programme tired of a life of crime and prepared for self-evaluation, but peer support workers seemed to be the few allowed the status of ceremonial masters. Their capacity to act as role models through the example of their own experience triggered clients’ anticipatory work and helped them to define their new selves. Their common backgrounds likely averted the risk of clients feeling relative deprivation and justified clients’ efforts to transition away from a life of crime with less risk of collision between the expectations of what ought to be and what is actually possible (Crosby 1982). Peer workers also shared narratives about their ‘life before’, giving clients a chance to talk about their own. If stories create selves (Todd-Kvam and Todd-Kvam 2022), then peer workers help desisters understand their pasts through relating their own stories.

Peer support workers also seemed to know the limits of clients’ operational selves and the uneven distribution of capacity between possible selves: one highly potent and one more or less infantile.

[. . .] they could set fire to a car, that was no problem for them, but they were not able to call a person up and talk to them over the phone saying, ‘Hello I would like to work for you’. Then they are on the floor. [. . .] They cannot do it. Because they have not learned that. A cycle sort of started somewhere around the age of ten or eleven. It is like it started already back then.

Peer support workers portrayed clients as caught in a dualistic tension between being a cunning and skilled criminal and a frightened child frozen in time. One aim of the support therefore was to consider how these two selves could be ‘glued together’. Peer support workers aimed to redirect the potent criminal self into other actions by connecting it to the emerging social self:

Many are quite astute and smart, so it’s all about funnelling it. The resolution: ‘now I [have] to live through it’. Criminals are immensely creative. Helicopter robberies and I don’t know all they’re up to. So, maybe they can transform it to something else.

Discussion

This paper probed into the interfaces between intra- and interpersonal constructions of the self during transitions into – but more importantly, *out of* – gang membership. Several dimensions were visible in the accounts of gang defectors and staff in the Passus programme. Considering the influence of reference groups and role models, everyone has several potential selves to aspire to or to try to escape, and the perceived accessibility of the desired self often depends on cultural and socioeconomic belonging. The ceremonial master/peer support worker must feel familiar to the client, but also convey the central message, ‘I embody a possible future for you and will walk by your side as you cross the bridge to that future’. In fact, the peer support workers seemed able to connect with clients as opposed to Shrauger and Schoeneman’s notion (1979, p. 549) that self-evaluations are seldom influenced by feedback from others. Some clients were inspired by their peer workers to give something back to society or do the same type of work; others felt it was a life-changing experience now firmly in the past.

Theoretical work on possible selves and liminality offers an understanding of self-transformation between the (over)rational process of identifying clear steps towards a distinct kernel identity, and a view of the self as a dispersed entity with no meta-structure. Transformation may always be possible, but seems more easily facilitated when previous connections between perceived traits, sociality, cognition, and emotions are de-coupled to allow new content and connections. That could mean being helped by people who have already made this change to relativize or question previous notions of themselves or of criminality as a solution to particular obstacles in life. For some, the absence of a former functional organizing principle brings a loss of sense of self and a confusing array of possible selves to organize life in the future. Ceremonial masters could be important guides in this transformation if they are accepted as fellow passengers.

Clients may enter a rehabilitation programme such as Passus mourning the loss of a functioning self or struggling with a self in the midst of deconstruction. They lack proximity to the future self that motivates their desire for change (Sools, Triliva, and Filippas 2017), so how does the projective imagination work when clients have no clear vision of the future? Sools et al. (ibid.) posit that the distant self needs imaginary work to come into being. The peer support worker’s role is thus to embody and narratively bridge the gap to the future by representing the new self and exemplifying the possibility of self-transformation.

Our data showed the pathway into gang-associated criminality was better prepared, through prototypes of future selves available at the time, than the uncertain trail leading out. Seemingly successful criminals offered prototypes resolving the tension between the frustrated present self and the successful self of the imagined future. The way out, by contrast, came with fewer concrete examples of future selves and was often prompted by an unbearable situation and fuelled not by hope but by fear, guilt, debt, isolation, or other existential crises. Viewing participants’ accounts through the concept of possible selves, we catch a glimpse of the gap between a potent, creative operating self (capable of helicopter robbery) and the operating self of an average law-abiding taxpayer. The operating self of the modest ‘humdrum’ citizen seems the most inaccessible, complicated, and challenging for gang defectors. This may mean that the original conflict, between feelings of subjugation or frustration and aspirations for a successful life, was never resolved through criminality.

If the imagined solution on the way into a criminal gang was an illusion, the process of liminality in the phase of leaving came from a place where a fraudulently constructed self was moving towards something more permanent and perceived as negative or dangerous. The allure of the criminal life was deceptive, not only because of the danger, but also because the operative criminal self was hard to reconcile with other selves required for intimate relations outside of the gang.

Granted that gang membership affects all facets of a person’s identity (Goldman, Giles, and Hogg 2014), in this study it also seemed to require a self trapped in a closeted conflict. The self that sold drugs or committed robberies appeared limited and based on a false solution to a conflict. Gang life

did not provide the stable platform for success and communion that was imagined. Expectations therefore changed as the safety and comfort of ordinary society became more attractive. However, having been separated from the broader social world, the defectors needed guides to bolster the imaginary energy necessary in transforming from criminals to ‘ordinary’ citizens (Sools, Triliva, and Filippas 2017). If the previously functional organizing principle of the self was based partly on evading an internal conflict, the peer support worker needed to start from this conflict to help the gang leaver through the process of recognizing his innate motivations and potential. This meant viewing the client’s self-transformation as neither a rational process with well-defined stages of development nor an erratic enterprise, but as a journey to address the original internal conflict and gradually unmask an operational self that was obscured by gang membership and welcome an operational self who can, if not resolve tensions, at least articulate them.

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ORCID

Torbjörn Forkby  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5644-2455>

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