It’s all about family? A qualitative examination of the influence of romantic relationships and motherhood on desistance

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5 This chapter was submitted for publication as: Rodermond, E. (submitted for publication). It’s all about family? A qualitative examination of the influence of romantic relationships and motherhood on desistance.
Abstract

Motherhood and romantic relationships are often said to contribute to desistance of women offenders, but findings are inconsistent. The aim of this study is to qualitatively examine the effects of motherhood and romantic relationships on female desistance. To that end, in-depth interviews with a subsample of formerly incarcerated women (n = 30) were held in 2014/2015. The interviews covered a broad range of topics, including but not limited to the women's family life and criminal career. Results show that desisters were more likely to be in stable, supportive relationships after release than persisters, and to have a (renewed) close relationship with their children. Interestingly, most desisters have taken active steps to dissolve negative relationships and form new ones, after which these relationships reinforced their initial motivation to desist from crime. That said, women in both subgroups experienced a magnitude of problems in their daily lives, and these sometimes interfered with the positive influence of romantic relationships and motherhood on desistance. The present findings underscore the importance of taking into account more subjective changes as well as the broader circumstances surrounding formerly incarcerated women, as it appeared that motherhood and romantic relationships are insufficient to bring about lasting change.

4.1 Introduction

During the last fifteen years, the number of women incarcerated around the world increased extensively. According to a recent report, over 700,000 women and girls are being held in prisons worldwide, which is an increase of about 50 percent since 2000 (Walmsley, 2015). Once released, these women face many issues related to re-building their lives in the post-release context. One of the biggest challenges is to avoid committing new crimes that could potentially lead to a new stint in prison. That is, criminal desistance is a necessary ingredient of a successful transition back into the community, a transition that is often hampered by all sorts of practical and emotional problems (Arditti & Few, 2008; Brown & Bloom, 2009; Cobbina, 2009; O’Brien, 2001; Richie, 2001; Schram, Koons-Witt, Williams, & McShane, 2006; Visher & Travis, 2003).

The body of literature on desistance from crime is growing, pointing at the importance of life transitions (Laub et al., 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1993), cognitive shifts (Giordano et al., 2002; Haggard et al., 2001) agency and wilful identity changes (Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) in the process of desistance. While many desistance-studies were male-based for a
long time, studies nowadays also tend to focus on women’s termination of crime and gender differences in desistance. As a result, different correlates of female desistance have come to the fore, most notably motherhood and being married or in an intimate relationship (Barry, 2010; Benda, 2005; Broidy & Cauffman, 2006; Cobbina, 2009; Craig & Foster, 2013; Doherty & Ensminger, 2013; Forrest, 2007; Graham & Bowling, 1995; Gunnison, 2001; Huebner et al., 2010; Jamieson, McIvor, & Murray, 1999; King, Massoglia, & MacMillan, 2007; McIvor, Trotter, & Sheehan, 2009; Michalsen, 2011, 2013; Taylor, 2008; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998; for an overview, see Rodermond, Kruttschnitt, Slotboom, & Bijleveld, 2016). Interestingly, findings are inconsistent as to whether motherhood and being in a relationship have positive or negative effects on the desistance process for women. Trying to explain these inconsistencies, studies have argued that the direction of the effect most likely depends on the quality of the bonds and the specific circumstances surrounding (former) offenders (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Giordano, Seffrin, Manning, & Longmore, 2011). This is especially important when it comes to formerly incarcerated women, who are likely to be the most serious female offenders. For them, the post-release context is filled with unique challenges, that, if left unattended, might seriously interfere with efforts to desist from crime. Under these circumstances, motherhood and marriage in itself might not be enough to turn things around (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Carmichael, Gover, Koons-Witt, & Inabnit, 2005; Giordano et al., 2011).

The current study aims to qualitatively examine when and how motherhood and being in an intimate relationship has the potential to enhance chances of desistance amongst formerly incarcerated women. Where quantitative analyses have enabled researchers to draw conclusions on the correlation between family factors and desistance, looking at these factors through a qualitative lens has the advantage of gaining insights into the mechanisms underlying desistance. Drawing from semi-structured interviews, I examine the construction of the women’s post-release lives and, more specifically, the influence of their family life on their efforts to move away from crime. The results will enhance knowledge of the mechanisms underlying criminal desistance in a group of serious female offenders.

4.2 Motherhood and romantic relationships in the post-release period

As an inherent consequence of the growing incapacitation rates of women worldwide, more and more women face the challenges that follow upon
release, such as family reunification, housing, securing some form of income and, often, dealing with substance addictions (Brown & Bloom, 2009; Cobbina, 2009; O’Brien, 2001; Schram, Koons-Witt, Williams, & McShane, 2006; Visher & Travis, 2003). Under these adverse circumstances, many women resort to a criminal lifestyle sooner or later. Given this heightened risk for re-offending, increased attention is being paid to the factors that promote criminal desistance as a central element in their re-entry experiences, most notably family-related factors.

Evidence suggests that marriage, or being in an intimate relationship in general, and having children has a positive influence on women’s efforts to desist (Barry, 2010; Benda, 2005; Broidy & Cauffman, 2006; Cobbina, 2009; Craig & Foster, 2013; Doherty & Ensminger, 2013; Forrest, 2007; Graham & Bowling, 1995; Gunnison, 2001; Huebner et al., 2010; Jamieson, McIvor, & Murray, 1999; King, Massoglia, & MacMillan, 2007; McIvor, Trotter, & Sheehan, 2009; Michalsen, 2011, 2013; Taylor, 2008; Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998). From an informal social control perspective, being in a relationship and becoming a mother might bring along feelings of attachment and a ‘stake in conformity’ for female offenders, withholding these women from further offending. Recently, scholars have also argued that relationships and motherhood are central to women’s adult identities, thus affecting their desistance efforts through an internal process of identity-related changes (Broidy & Cauffman, 2006; Giordano et al., 2011). However, other studies find no or contradictory effects (Huebner, DeJong, & Cobbina, 2010; Giordano et al., 2002; Kreager, Matsueda, & Erosheva, 2010; Zoutwelle-Terovan et al., 2012).

Taking stock of the aforementioned inconsistencies, some scholars point at the importance of considering the circumstances surrounding parenthood and romantic relationships. As for parenthood, Giordano et al. (2011) emphasize “the utility of exploring not only whether parenthood is associated with reductions in crime, but specific conditions under which a prosocial impact is observed” (p. 406). According to the authors, assessing these conditions is necessary if one wants to explain why so many studies find a positive effect of motherhood, while the majority of incarcerated women have young children (Giordano et al., 2011). Indeed, studies have found that being a mother has differential effects, depending on the context. For example, Kreager, Matsueda and Erosheva (2010) found that motherhood led to reductions in drug use and delinquency among a sample of disadvantaged young women. Contrastingly, Giordano et al. (2011) found that women from advantaged backgrounds were more likely to benefit
from becoming a mother than women from disadvantaged backgrounds. They did find, however, that chances of desistance increased for all women to the extent that the pregnancy was wanted (Giordano et al., 2011, p. 411). Examining the influence of motherhood upon reentry, Michalsen (2011) found that children can both encourage and discourage desistance in the post-release period; they can act as a social bond, but they also bring along practical challenges that can hamper desistance efforts. Related to this issue, Brown and Bloom (2009) point at the many challenges faced by formerly incarcerated women, and argue that women will be better able to take advantage from being a mother when they receive “adequate material and social support” (p. 334).

With regard to social support, being married is one of the most often cited forms of social support for women, albeit findings on the effect of marriage on desistance are inconclusive (see above). Moreover, given the fact that the institute of marriage has become less prevalent during recent decades (Seltzer, 2000), scholars increasingly study effects of non-marital romantic relationships. Lastly, it has been argued that it is the quality of a relationship that is important when considering desistance, rather than being in a relationship per se (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). A handful of studies has focused on the characteristics of relationships and partners in assessing their influence on women’s desistance and found, for example, that longer relationships (Herrera et al., 2010) and higher-quality relationships (Simons and Barr, 2012) were related to crime reductions. Notably, Leverentz (2006b) explored the impact of romantic relationships on the desistance efforts of formerly incarcerated women and found that being in a relationship, even with a partner who has a history of offending and/or drug use, can be beneficial for women who are in the process of desistance. However, for some women, avoiding romantic partners altogether was found to be a necessary ingredient of a movement away from crime (Leverentz, 2006b). According to the author, this suggests that “personal agency is more important than social bonds or that other types of social bonds are more important for women than romantic relationships” (p. 484).

With some exceptions, studies tend to focus on the influence of marriage or the influence of parenthood on crime, while only controlling for the other form of social capital. At the same time, many women offenders are a mother and in a romantic relationship. These forms of informal social control are not acting on their lives independently but intertwined, and should be examined accordingly. Indeed, studies have pointed at the
crime-reducing effect of so-called respectability-packages (Giordano et al., 2002) and full family packages (Rodermond et al., 2015; Zoutewelle et al., 2012), again signifying the importance of examining the mechanisms underlying the influence of motherhood and romantic relationships, both independently and combined. Thus, the current study aims to shed light on whether and how motherhood and romantic relationships influence desistance from crime. First, I examine the extent to which romantic partners exert a positive or negative influence on the women's movements away from crime. Second, I assess whether and if so how motherhood acts as a desistance-enhancing factor. Lastly, I will elaborate on the effect of so-called full family packages, where women describe a high quality family life consisting of close bonds to a supportive partner and one or more children.

4.3 Methods
The findings presented in this chapter are part of a larger study on the desistance efforts of formerly incarcerated women (Rodermond, Slotboom, & Zoutewelle-Terovan, 2015). The initial data-collection of this project started with obtaining prison records of all women who had been released from prison in 2007 and who were found in the Municipal Population Register (Gemeentelijke Basisadministratie [GBA]) (n = 2839), complemented with register-information on different life events. After a quantitative examination of the influence of marriage and parenthood on the risk of re-incarceration (see Rodermond et al., 2015), the current study draws on verbatim transcriptions of interviews with a subsample of 30 women to qualitatively assess the influence of romantic relationships and motherhood on criminal desistance and persistence. The semi-structured interviews were held in 2015/2016. Recruitment of participants occurred through the Custodial Institutions Agency of the Netherlands by sending an invitation letter to their last known address. A random sample of 440 women received an invitation letter. Initially, 36 women agreed to participate in the study. However, 6 women decided to withdraw later on for various reasons (illness, not wanting to participate, no time to participate), so the final sample consists of 30 women. A comparative analysis showed that the women who participated were slightly older (48 vs. 44 on average), more often born in the Netherlands (70% vs. 52%), and more often married at release (30% vs. 9%) than the non-participants. Noteworthy, they had been incarcerated more often before their 2007 detention than the non-participants (almost 5 times on average, vs. 2.5 times) and their last period of incarceration lasted on average 35 days, while the non-participants were detained for 63
days on average. What is more, the participants were convicted for a mean number of 18 offences, against 11 offences in the other group. These findings indicate that the participants were criminally more active than the non-participants in terms of frequency. More importantly, this could indicate that the participating women, more so than the non-participants, could be considered revolving door offenders.

The invitation letter specifically stated that participation was voluntary, and all interviewees were given a gift voucher worth of 25 Euros. Interviews were held at the respondents’ homes, where they were most likely to feel as comfortable as possible. Interviews were recorded and lasted 1.5 hours on average. They covered a wide range of topics, including but not limited to the women’s criminal career, their period in prison, their family life, employment, financial status, housing, addiction, and their goals for the future. After a short introduction, all women were asked to sign a general consent form, stating that they were aware of the aims of the study and their right to end the interview at any point without further explanation. After transcribing the interviews, multiple readings of each interview were conducted to identify common themes in their narratives.

Of the 30 women, 11 had not been convicted for an offense during the last 7 years, and were labelled “desisters”. Nineteen women were registered for one or more offenses during that same time-period, and were labelled “persisters”. Although there is no consensus on how many years of non-offending constitute desistance, a 7-year time-frame brings one closer to grasping differences between those who re-offended and those who did not.

For the current study, common themes related to motherhood and romantic relationships in the post-release context were identified within the narratives and were coded by multiple individuals independently, using the qualitative data analysis program Atlas-TI. In the first phase of coding, the influence of both positive and negative aspects of post-prison romantic relationships on desistance and persistence was assessed, followed by an examination of positive and negative aspects of motherhood in the women’s post-release lives. In the second phase of coding, the narratives were screened for the presence of high quality full family packages, existing of both a supportive partner and one or more children playing an important role in the women’s daily life, and the meaning that was given to these packages.

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6 The interviews were coded by the principal investigator and a research assistant
During the final stage of the analyses, the specific codes were carefully examined and interpreted, leading to detailed reconstructions of the women’s post-release family lives.

Table 4.1 provides an overview of the characteristics of the sample under study.

The women were between 27 and 68 years old, and persisters were on average slightly older than desisters (47.5 vs. 46.4). Fourteen persisters and seven desisters were born in the Netherlands, the other women were born in a wide variety of countries. The majority of women in both subgroups attended at least some form of high school education. Six persisters and two desisters only went to elementary school, and three other women (2 persisters, 1 desister) did not follow any education. Lastly, two desisters followed higher education. The majority of women in this sample (n = 21) reported having children, with ages ranging from 3 to 49. About half of the women had underage children when they were released from prison in 2007 (11 persisters and 5 desisters) but most of their children reached adulthood during follow-up. Related to this, only 5 persisters and 3 desisters got to live together again with one or all of their children directly after release from prison, while most (underaged) children stayed with their father or were taken into care.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of offenses before 2007 period in prison</th>
<th>Number of offenses after 2007 period in prison</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country of birth</th>
<th>No. of children</th>
<th>Relationship status (* regarded full family package)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Partner, not cohabiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Briana</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>2 (1 died)</td>
<td>Recently divorced, and broke up recently with non-marital partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Partner, cohabiting*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Non-Dutch</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Partner since few months (he lives in another country)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Non-Dutch</td>
<td>3 (2 children died)</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Partner since one year, not cohabiting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Married, cohabiting*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As for romantic relationships, most women cited that they had a partner, although only two women were married. According to Leverentz (2006b), it is important to contextualize women’s experiences with relationships during the desistance process by describing their past relationships, “because often they were central to the origins of their offending and shaped their current attitudes toward relationships” (p. 470). Examining the
women's descriptions of their past relationships revealed similarities and differences between persisters and desisters. Both persisters and desisters reported having experienced negative, abusive relationships with intimate partners at some point before their 2007 prison period. Moreover, about half of the women had been in one or more relations with a partner with a criminal record, and most of them explicitly mentioned that one of their former partners had a direct influence on the origination and continuation of their offending and/or drug use, a finding that is in line with previous research (Uggen & Kruttschnitt, 1998).

The women showed substantive differences with respect to the number and types of crimes committed. On average, persisters had been prosecuted for 15 offenses before their 2007 incarceration period (ranging from 0 to 43 offenses), and desisters for 14 offenses (however, one desister was registered for 104 offenses, while most desisters had committed 1 – 5 offenses). Lastly, almost all women indicated to have had (severe) substance abuse problems at a certain point in their life.

4.4 Results
In order to examine in what ways motherhood and romantic relationships influence the lives of formerly incarcerated women, I compare the accounts of desisting and persisting women in describing their romantic and maternal lives after release from prison in 2007. Furthermore, I take into account the occurrence of so-called full family packages and assess their influence over and above the influence of romantic relationships and motherhood.

4.4.1 Romantic relationships
Although many women had reported being in a negative, abusive relationship in the pre-prison period, the accounts of women's relationships after prison showed a remarkably different picture. Most importantly, the majority of women in both subgroups described to have been in a positive relationship at some point during follow-up. Prior to forming these positive relationships, women took active steps to end their negative and abusive relationships, such as physically leaving their home, filing for divorce or finally pressing charges. The decision to end the relationship was often triggered by yet another instance of abuse or the sudden realization that things were not going to change, both referred to as ‘eye-openers’. As such, these stories show strong signs of agency, as expressed in the recurring use of terms like ‘realization’, ‘being fed up with it’, and ‘what am I doing’. Alison (desister) had been in an abusive relationship for thirty years. She
cited how her former partner was always drunk, and how she had lost contact with her mother and other close relatives because of him. About finally leaving him, she explained:

And you get, you feel you are getting stronger and stronger. At first, you just let him hit you over and over again. And then, at one point, you are fed up with it, and then... yeah, that takes a long time, but then you are just done with it.

Amy (desister) was registered for 104 crimes between 1992 and 2007. She had been in multiple abusive relationships, until she decided that things had to change:

And uh, then I realized that, that it was no relationship. And that it was just one big lie. Like, what have I done to myself? What am I doing to myself? You know... And I’m a nice person. I’m not stupid and all so... and then all these things happen and then I’m like how did this all happen? Something must happen here, this is no life of dignity.

Importantly, these agentic moves away from their negative relationships paved the way for forming more positive, supportive relationships, a process that featured in the accounts of both desisting and persisting women. Melissa (persister) cited how she had been in an abusive relationship up until a couple of months prior to the interview, and how she had lost contact with her family while she was in this relationship. She explained that she never dared pressing charges against her violent partner, but that all of a sudden, she realized that he had no right abusing her. She described how she finally pressed charges against him and left. Moreover, she said she had distanced herself from ‘bad people’ altogether and had made a fresh start. Eventually, a whole new world had opened up to her ever since she got together with her current partner. The fact that he was not doing any of the things that got her into trouble over and over again, such as drinking and using drugs, had helped her a great deal. Other women described how their partners had supported them in maintaining a crime- and drugs free life, for example by motivating them to go to meetings of the Narcotics Anonymous (Audrey, desister) or by directly asking them to stop using drugs and committing crimes. Moreover, their partners helped them with everyday life issues and housing. Lynn eloquently described how various desistance-enhancing factors converged after forming a new, positive relationship:
Because we were together. And then I had a place to stay and uh.. I slowly started to get clean... Because uh.. you have another life. You have a man, and you want uh. You wake up. You think, now I have to make a decision. Either... you die, if you continue. Or you start living in the right way. A normal life.

This reach for normality was described by other desisting women, and could be considered as an important part of the ongoing process of desistance. After ending her latest abusive relationship, Amy found a new partner. She described him as a calm person, who had brought structure into her life. As a side-effect of this new, positive relation, she stopped spending time with individuals who had been incarcerated and started to hang out with 'just normal people'.

Although the findings presented above show similarities with respect to romantic relationships in the accounts of desisting and persisting women, some differences came to the fore as well, and these are likely to have influenced their pathways after incarceration. First, desisters were more likely to be in a stable, long-term relationship during follow-up than persisters, indicating some sort of stability in their lives (although the number of women who were in a cohabiting relationship was low in both groups, 3 desisters and 2 persisters).

Contrastingly, the relationship status of most persisters changed frequently during follow-up. In two specific occasions, persisting women described how they had lost a partner with a good influence during follow-up, and how they suffered a great setback because of this. For example, Briana, a former prostitute, had a relationship with one of her former customers. He forced her to go to a rehab facility after prison or otherwise, he would end the relationship. However, he met someone else, and ended the relationship. Evelyn had met someone on the streets, who helped her after incarceration. She could go to him if she needed a roof above her head, and he helped her out with practical things, like washing her clothes. Unfortunately, he died during follow-up. Some persisting women described being in abusive relationships during follow-up. However, as mentioned earlier, their romantic life changed for the better during the last year of follow-up when they ended their violent relationship and formed a new, better one with a supportive partner. Remarkably, these women had not committed any offences since they were in this relationship, and it could be that their new partners had kept them from further offending.

Notwithstanding these differences, the women’s agentic movements out of abusive, negative relationships and into new, positive relationships
as displayed in the accounts of both desisters and persisters seem to be of particular relevance here, as these active steps away from their former partner paved the way for the formation of more supportive, desistance-enhancing relationships. As such, these findings stress the importance of agency in the initial phase of desistance, providing these women with the opportunity to take advantage of newly formed, supportive relationships.

Noteworthy, when asked about the criminal history of their new partners, all women cited that their partner had a criminal record and/or a history of drug use. This finding supports studies that have shown that supportive, romantic relationships have the ability to exert a positive influence on the desistance process, irrespective of the partners’ own criminal history (see for example Leverentz, 2006b). In other words, it seems to be the present-day support provided by romantic partners that counts.

4.4.2 Motherhood
Before, it was argued that the often-found positive effects of motherhood do not always hold for women who are struggling to re-build their post-release lives, and that the effects depend on the strength of the mother-child bond and the surrounding circumstances. Examining the narratives of both desisting and persisting women, similarities as well as differences were found in their accounts of motherhood.

To begin with, mothers in both subgroups expressed deep feelings of love and pride for their children, and they often mentioned their children when asked about the positive things in their lives. Moreover, they expressed a desire to turn their lives around for their children, or claimed that their children were the reason that they already started to change. The narratives revealed that being away from their children during imprisonment had been hard for mothers in both groups, and they mentioned the fear of being separated from their children as a reason to turn things around:

That was terrible for me. Because... he is all that I have, I don't want to lose my child... Because, you know, I had time to think like shit, if I go on this way, I will lose my children for real. [Laura, persister]

In essence, these stories indicate that almost all women experienced warm feelings towards their children and that they used their children as ‘catalysts for change’ (see also Giordano et al., 2002), with the potential to contribute to the initial phase of desistance. However, it became clear from the narratives that motherhood was not an exclusively positive
experience for these women. Indeed, women in both subsamples described various factors related to motherhood that interfered with the potentially beneficial influence on a movement away from crime.

First, financial difficulties played a role in their post-release lives. One woman explained that she never did anything other than stealing, and only for food. She was on social welfare after release from prison, taking care of all other family members on her own, and said it was difficult to make ends meet.

Moreover, unstable family situations featured in several accounts of persisters and desisters, with children who were taken into care, lived at the house of family members or at the house of the father against the mothers’ will. Some women blamed the father of the child for the fact that she was not able to be with her child. Briana said that her former partner played ‘a dirty game’ with the family guardian, resulting in the loss of her three children. During her period in prison, she figured that it would be better to just let them go. Jessica (persister) described a similar process, and cited how the struggle to get her children back was hard on her:

While I fought so hard. I had to bring my urine to the judge, you know? To show them that I really wanted it, you know? And, and.. it did not do anything. And then, after three years, I thought, the hell with it, I won’t get them back anyway.

Other women experienced traumatic events related to the loss of one or more children, and reported feeling indifferent about their lives. Laura had 5 children, but two of them committed suicide. Briana lost a baby one day after giving birth. Nicole lost two children and said that that’s the reason she keeps using drugs. She said she wanted things to be different, and to have a normal life, but it’s hard on her.

Lastly, persisters as well as desisters mentioned that the bond with their children had changed because of being in prison, or as a result of their drug use. They expressed concerns about having fights with their children or weakened mother-child bonds. Moreover, Melissa mentioned that her son was being bullied at school because of her being in prison, and that he blamed her for that. He did bad at school, and she worried a lot about him. Asked how her imprisonment-term influenced her connection with her children, Amanda (persister) stated that they often got mad with her, and that they called her names if she had been using drugs. She describes:
Yeah my son has become a bit snappish, but he is always a bit quiet, and my daughter was also a bit spiteful. But with the little one, my youngest, not.

Although desisters and persisters cited similar positive and negative sides of motherhood in the post-release context, some differences between the stories of desisting and persisting mothers came out as well. Noteworthy, almost all desisters who reported having problems related to their children described how things had recently started to get better, and how they slowly regained contact with their children. Interestingly, these women also mentioned the wellbeing of their children as a key motivator to turn things around, just as some of the persisters had done:

Yeah, I think I became a bit more responsible. You start doing some thinking like hey, what am I doing? ... Then you think, imagine that I use something wrong, then it's finished. And what about my son then? Yeah, that really hit me, I must say. I figured ok, things have to change, because this is not right. [Sara]

Their narratives shed light on why these women actually managed to desist from crime, whereas their persisting counterparts, who also claimed that they wanted to change for their children, did not. First, and most importantly, it was found that the desisting mothers took active steps to resolve some of the problems that interfered with fulfilling their maternal role; they stopped using drugs, and tried to bring some kind of structure into their lives. It is likely that these changes in lifestyle impacted their desistance efforts directly, while at the same time strengthening the bond with their children, influencing their desistance process indirectly. Lynn did not have contact with her children for ten years. According to her, things were getting better when she got clean, and became more ‘present’ as a result.

At the same time, findings showed that most of the desisting mothers experienced some kind of support, most likely from their partner. They provided them with, amongst other things, a place to stay, making it easier to focus on solving their problems and, as a result, to be better able to take advantage of being a mother. It could be then, that the influence of children alone is not enough to initiate desistance. Or, as already argued by McIvor (2015, p. 168), children could “offer a strong incentive for not resuming drug use and associated offending (i.e. supporting secondary desistance)”, but women might need more handles to get to that point in the first place.
4.4.3 Full family package

Before, it was hypothesized that a quality full family package consisting of a romantic partner and children could have a bigger influence on desistance than just being in a relationship or having children. Therefore, the narratives were screened for the presence of full family packages existing of both a supportive partner and one or more children playing an important role in the women’s daily life.

Within the current sample, only three persisting and two desisting women described a family life that could be regarded as a full family package. Although this number is low, the accounts of these women do add to the understanding of how having a full family package can stimulate the desistance process. Women mentioned doing ‘fun’ things together, how they were babysitting grandchildren and dividing household-chores, and they described how they preferred their ‘new lives’ in which they were spending time with their partner and (grand)children over their former criminal activities. For example, Alison (desister) lives with her partner and one of her children. She and her partner often visited her other children, and they were regularly babysitting their granddaughter during the weekend. She expressed being proud of her partner and children, and feeling much happier now. Rebecca provided one of the clearest examples of the desistance-enhancing effect of a stable family life. Besides helping her to stop using drugs, her partner got them a place to stay. He also stressed the importance of being a good example to their children. They had built a family-life together, with positive outcomes:

We are opposites. He is a tree-hugger and I am a fighter. But, we help each other. If I’m working, then uh, he takes care of the children. We do housecleaning together. We do yeah, together, we just make ends meet.

What these stories have in common is a reach for normality and the formation of a stable family-life. From an identity perspective, these women seem to value their identity as ‘family woman’ highly, and to commit further crimes would be to deviate from this role. As such, their partner and children are positively influencing their desistance process. Although the practical support from partners as described by the women in these full-family package was also mentioned by some women without (close bonds with their) children, it seems that the identity of family woman has an additional positive influence on the desistance process.
At the same time, some of these stories justify the importance of considering the broader circumstances and quality of relationships when evaluating the influence of family life factors, and might also explain why the persisters did not succeed in their efforts to desist, despite having a full family life. Amanda (persister) had been together with her partner for 23 years. She described how her partner and daughter made sure everything stayed the way it was while she was in prison, and that it was nice coming back home after prison. However, it became clear from her story that this full family package was not as stable as the label might suggest: she and her partner recently got divorced, and he had been living elsewhere ever since. About their relation, she described:

\textit{Divorced is divorced. So you don't have any... nothing to say about me... But we are still... because I have a daughter with him, you know. And I did not have a father myself, so I find it important that that stays intact.}

Although being able to go back to a family environment after release from prison has been found to increase chances of desistance, it is likely that this effect decreases when emotional bonds are decreasing. In other words, women who are in high quality full family packages are the most likely to benefit from their role as family woman.

Lastly, the story of Rebecca provides another explanation for why some women might not be able to desist, despite having a quality family package. At the end of the interview, she talked about how she used to be involved ‘into doing business’ and discussed the severe financial problems she was in at the time of the interview:

\textit{If I would get an offer now, to, to get out of debt. Then I would not know if I would do that. My guy would be yelling and screaming like a bitch but... yeah.. I think I would do it. Yeah.}

Earlier, Rebecca had described a stable, high quality family life, and attributed her ability to desist to this newly formed life. However, this latter statement made clear that her financial problems could potentially counteract the positive influence of her stable family life on her desistance efforts. Indeed, this woman re-offended (at least) once during follow-up.
4.5 Discussion

This study qualitatively examined the influence of having a partner and being a mother on the desistance efforts of 30 formerly incarcerated women. More specifically, it aimed to shed light on when and how romantic relationships and motherhood affected desistance within this group of offenders. All women had been released from prison in 2007 and were interviewed in the beginning of 2015, so a construction of at least 8 years of their post-release lives could be made.

In assessing the women's relationships in general, it became clear that almost all women had been in one or more abusive relations before their 2007 incarceration period, and these experiences impacted heavily on their lives. Women reported feeling indifferent about their lives, or they just did not know what a normal relationship would look like. The first thing that stood out when examining the influence of romantic partners in their post-release lives was that the majority of women had ended their abusive relationship and had formed a supportive relationship instead. The narratives of these women showed clear signs of agency; triggered by a new episode of abuse or a sudden realization that things would have to change, they ended these negative relationships. Consequently, their lives slowly started to get better. Noteworthy, their new partners were found to exert a positive influence on their desistance efforts, both directly and indirectly. They supported them in their movement away from crime or drug use, but they also provided them with a place to stay or helped them out with their daily life hassles. As became clear from the women’s stories, having a supportive partner changed them, and it made them strive towards leading what they referred to as a normal life, adhering to an informal social control perspective as well as identity perspectives. Consistent with previous studies (Leverentz, 2006b, Van Schellen, Apel, & Nieuwbeerta, 2012), this positive influence existed despite the criminal history of their new partners. Thus, as suggested by Leverentz (2006b, p. 483), “we may be well advised to expand our notions of ‘marriageable men’ (or women) beyond those who have no histories of involvement with drug use or the criminal justice system”.

Interestingly, active steps to dissolve negative relations to form a new, supportive one were reported by desisters as well as persisters, and they both cited that their lives had changed in a positive way since having their new partner. A possible explanation could lie in the timing of the relationship. The persisting women who described these agentic moves got together with their new partner in the year prior to the interview. Before,
they were single or still in an abusive relationship. Hence, it is likely that their lives were just starting to change, and that they would report having desisted if they were to be interviewed again within a few years.

With respect to motherhood, it was found that the majority of women in both subgroups experienced difficulties related to their children, and that they often struggled to deal with these problems. Some women's children had been taken into care, died, or the mother-child bond had weakened over the years. Interestingly, it appeared that the desisters were most successful in their efforts to strengthen their bonds after release from prison. At the same time, women in both the desisting and persisting subgroups expressed a desire to change their lifestyle for the sake of their children. It could be that the women in both groups truly wanted to turn things around, but that the persisters lacked the necessary resources to actually achieve their goals. Similar conclusions have been drawn previously by Giordano et al. (2002), who did not find an effect of motherhood on desistance in their quantitative analyses, while they did find that mothers mentioned their children as catalysts for changes. About this, the authors stated that “a focus on children as a hook for change is thus particularly useful as an illustration of our central argument – that when we focus on contemporary serious offenders, mere exposure to a given stimulus/catalyst is often not a sufficient bridge to conformity and sustained behavior change” (p. 1038).

Moreover, one has to keep in mind that at least one of the children of the majority of mothers in this sample had reached adulthood by the end of the follow-up period. Previous studies have shown that being (financial) responsible for under-aged children might cause a great deal of stress to women offenders, thereby influencing their post-release lives, while it can also have a positive effect by creating structure and giving meaning to life (see for example Michalsen, 2011). Based on the interviews, it has to be concluded that mothers of under-aged children experienced more stressors related to taking care of their children or to reuniting with them than mothers of adult children, while mothers of underaged as well as mothers of adult children mentioned the positive aspects of motherhood that have been described earlier.

Lastly, the influence of being in some sort of full family package was examined, and it was found that women who had a full family package cited how their family lives had made them change, and how they felt happy and proud. Many of the positive outcomes of being in a full family package, such as receiving practical and emotional support, were also cited by women who were only in a supportive relationship without having (a close
bond with) children; however, it seemed that spending time as a family and making ends meet together were additional positive consequences reserved for those women who were in a full family package. All in all, these stories indicate that a sense of agency and positive family-life developments can become intertwined, setting in motion a vicious circle of positive events, directly and indirectly impacting on their desistance process.

Before discussing future research efforts that could broaden the present findings, a few limitations must be noted. First, the present study was based on a relatively small sample of women, and examining more stories might provide additional insights. Second, the current sample consists of a heterogeneous group of women in terms of their criminal careers, and differences in their careers are likely to have caused differences in the women’s pre- and post-prison lives. What is more, as mentioned before, the relatively low response rate could be an indicator of differences between those who participated and those who did not. Although speculative, it could be that more of the non-participants had moved or become homeless before they received the invitation letter, or that they faced even more adverse circumstances than those reported by the participants, interfering with their potential willingness to participate. One has to keep this in mind when interpreting the results. Third, this study focused solely on the influence of relationships and children on the desistance efforts of formerly incarcerated women. At the same time, it is a well-known fact that these women often face many difficulties, impacting upon the process of desistance. Indeed, some women failed to desist despite having a supportive partner and children, while another women managed to desist while she did not have a partner or children. Again, this shows that examining desistance asks for a thorough examination of all elements of the lives of offenders, including often-found correlates of (male) desistance such as employment, addictions, financial problems and mental health status.

Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to a better understanding of when and how family life factors impact upon the desistance efforts of formerly incarcerated women. That said, future studies should aim at incorporating more of the aforementioned factors, while at the same time accounting for differences between offenders. Moreover, longitudinal designs would allow for a closer examination of how the lives of these women change over time, and how some of them manage to turn their lives around for the better.