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Working Through Desistance: Employment in Women's Identity and Relational Desistance

Grace Low*

*School of Social Sciences, University of Auckland, Private Bag 92019, Auckland 1142, New Zealand; email: glow@brookes.ac.uk; Present address: School of Law and Social Sciences, Oxford Brookes University, Headington, Oxford OX3 0BP, UK

Desistance and re-entry literature has traditionally explored particular types of women's relationships and social roles (such as maternal identities and familial relationships), while neglecting the potential for employment and work-related roles to support change. Through interviews with 15 (predominantly Indigenous) women with histories of imprisonment in Aotearoa New Zealand, this article contributes to feminist literature on women's desistance by exploring the role of employment in their change. The article explores how women (particularly Indigenous women) face significant barriers to employment, based on multiple sites of inequality. It also explores how employment (and employers) can support women's identity and relational desistance. It is argued that policy and practice should recognize and attempt to leverage the beneficial effects of employment on women's desistance.

KEY WORDS: women's desistance, employment and desistance, relational desistance

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades feminist literature has begun to explore how women journey out of crime, and how their experiences may differ to men's (Österman 2018; Barr 2019; Gålnander 2020). Earlier studies have suggested that women's desistance is more likely to be influenced by key relationships (such as with their family, children and friends), rather than their employment (Benda 2005; Herrschaft *et al.* 2009; Cobbina *et al.* 2012). This is reflected in reintegration policy and practices which often prioritize these other relationships over women's employment (Grace 2022). As Grace has noted, this may be due to the complexity of women's paid work, which is often intertwined with their unpaid work in the domestic sphere. However, more recent feminist studies suggest that employment may be important in women's desistance (Opsal 2012; Österman 2018; Barr 2019; Grace 2022). These studies variously suggest that employment may motivate or facilitate women's desistance through positive identity change, the provision of structure and routine, offering a sense of meaning and purpose, and the formation of supportive

social bonds with co-workers and employers (Opsal 2012; Österman 2018; Grace 2022). These studies also emphasize the significant gendered barriers to employment that women in the criminal justice system often face, including socio-economic disadvantage, caring responsibilities and issues concerning trauma, mental health and addiction (Opsal 2012; Österman 2018; Grace 2022; Barr 2023).

Although feminist research is beginning to acknowledge the potential role of employment in women's desistance, there is further work to be done. First, there appears to be little discussion on the potential role of employers in supporting women's identity and relational desistance (Nugent and Schinkel 2016). Secondly, few studies on women's desistance have explored Indigenous women's experiences of employment. Thus, this research seeks to contribute to feminist knowledge of desistance by exploring the role of employment in the desistance process among a sample of predominantly Indigenous (Māori) women with histories of imprisonment in Aotearoa New Zealand. In particular, the article seeks to identity key barriers that women face to obtaining employment so as to make recommendations for policy and practice aimed at better supporting women's desistance. It also seeks to explore the role of employment (and employers) in motivating and facilitating women's desistance, especially identity and relational desistance.

RELATIONAL AND IDENTITY DESISTANCE

Desistance has become a key concern in life course criminology. Theoretical perspectives of this process suggest that it involves a complex interplay between external factors (Sampson and Laub 1993) and internal identity changes (Giordano *et al.* 2002). Desistance can be divided into primary, secondary and tertiary phases. Primary desistance refers to a lull or crime-free gap in offending; secondary desistance denotes a change in identity; and tertiary desistance highlights the importance of recognition of change from others and a sense of belonging to a wider community (Maruna *et al.* 2004; McNeill 2016). In a more recent development, Nugent and Schinkel (2016) note that the language of 'primary', 'secondary' and 'tertiary' desistance implies a sequencing of time and importance. They argue that desistance is better conceptualized in terms of different 'spheres' rather than different times. How we behave depends on how we view ourselves, which in turn, depends on how we expect others see us, which in turn depends on how we act. The authors therefore propose the use of three alternative terms: 'act-desistance' to signify a period of non-offending, 'identity desistance' to suggest the adoption of a non-offending identity and 'relational desistance' to signify a recognition of change by others.

'Relational desistance'—the notion of desistance and identity change as a socially negotiated process—has received increasing recognition in the desistance literature (Weaver 2012; Nugent and Schinkel 2016; Gålnander 2020). Drawing on labelling theory, Maruna *et al.* (2004) adopt the concept of the 'looking-glass self' to emphasize how an individual's desistance can be supported when their change is recognized by others and reflected back on them. The key idea is that people believe they can change when those around them believe that they can. Weaver (2012) emphasizes how desistance is co-produced between an individual and their social setting. The author explores how men's relationships with their intimate partners and social networks can trigger a reflexive re-evaluation of their offending and support their desistance. Nugent and Schinkel (2016) propose that individuals' identity change can be supported when they develop social links to their communities and wider society (including through employment). These social connections enable an individual to act out and affirm their changing identity to a wider audience.

It has been suggested that women may be especially 'relational' in their desistance efforts (Barry 2009; Nugent and Schinkel 2016). Research has found that the support and recognition that women receive from their children and families can influence their potential to make

meaningful change (Herrschaft *et al.* 2009; Nugent and Schinkel 2016; Low 2022). One of the women in Nugent and Schinkel's (2016) research, for example, explained that her family's recognition of her change to date had helped her to envisage a better future, which in turn supported her identity desistance. In my own work (Low 2022), I have emphasized the important role of recognition of change from women's children in supporting their identity and relational desistance. However, it is important not to limit women's desistance to the adoption of socially approved gender roles, such as mother, family member or partner (Perry 2013; Barr 2019). Women's identity change and relational desistance may also be affected by their employment and relationships with their employers.

EMPLOYMENT AND DESISTANCE

The potential role of employers and employment in women's desistance has received little attention. As with most historical criminological scholarship, most traditional desistance studies have involved male participants. Many of these studies have established a link between men's employment and their desistance from crime (Sampson and Laub 1993; Farrall 2002; Laub and Sampson 2003). These studies variously suggest that employment may support men's desistance through forming social bonds between workers and employers or co-workers (Sampson and Laub 1993; Wright and Cullen 2004); altering routine activities, leaving less time or opportunity for crime (Farrall 2002; Laub and Sampson 2003; Wright and Cullen 2004); and through positive identity changes and generativity (Maruna 2001).

Earlier research on women's desistance has often suggested that employment may play a lesser role in women's desistance than in men's (Giordano *et al.* 2002; Benda 2005; Herrschaft *et al.* 2009; Cobbina *et al.* 2012). Herrschaft *et al.* (2009), for instance, found that while men often attribute change to status related goals (like employment), women are more likely to attribute change to key relationships in their lives (such as with their family, friends or therapists). Similarly, Benda (2005) suggests that while job satisfaction plays a key role in reducing men's recidivism, women's recidivism is more likely to be reduced by their relationships with friends, romantic partners and family. Earlier research on women's desistance has therefore paid attention to certain types of relationships, particularly those commonly associated with femininity—such as relationships with family and children. The potential role of employment and employers in supporting women's desistance has historically been overlooked.

However, a few more recent studies suggest that adopting the role of 'worker' may be important in women's identity change (Opsal 2012; Grace 2022). Opsal's (2012) research, for example, found that women use employment as a 'hook for change' to construct law-abiding replacement selves. Grace (2022: 82) suggests that women's employment, and their identities as 'workers', can act as an 'identity-repairing narrative' or a way for them to resist internalizing negative stigma associated with their criminality. Österman (2018) emphasizes the role of employment in supporting women's sense of inclusion in 'mainstream' society.

Despite the potentially positive effects of employment on women's desistance, feminist research has also drawn attention to the significant (and gendered) socio-structural barriers that women face to obtaining employment, which may undermine these effects (Opsal 2012; Österman 2018; Grace 2022; Barr 2023). In Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, many women struggle to obtain employment with a liveable income, especially if they have childcaring responsibilities (Österman 2018; Manatū Wāhine Ministry for Women 2022). Women leaving prison are often undereducated, with limited work experience and few employable skills (Opsal and Foley 2013). They also bear the stigma of a criminal record, which can pose a considerable barrier to their employment (particularly in traditionally women-dominated professions, such as education and childcare) (Opsal and Foley 2013; Österman 2018). Compared with men, women face heightened stigma concerning their imprisonment; they are often perceived of as

'doubly deviant', having not only broken the law but also traditional expectations of womanhood (Lloyd 1995). This stigma can pose a considerable barrier to women's employment, as well as their general sense of inclusion in 'conventional' society (Gålnander 2020; Grace 2022; Barr 2023).

In addition to having limited work experience and the stigma of a criminal record, women leaving prison often have life histories involving trauma, gendered violence, issues with addiction and mental and physical health challenges (Daly 1992). In Aotearoa New Zealand 62 per cent of women in prison have suffered from mental health and substance use disorders; 44 per cent have experienced drug dependence disorders and 68 per cent have experienced family violence (Department of Corrections 2021*a*). Barr (2023) notes that the socio-structural harms experienced by many women in the criminal justice system may constrain both their opportunity for, and ability to, work.

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT

Research by the New Zealand Department of Corrections has noted that women in prison in Aotearoa New Zealand often have low levels of education attainment, limited employment histories, and are less likely than men to find post-release employment (Bentley 2017; Morrison *et al.* 2018). Corrections' research also shows that women are less likely to view employment as an immediate post-release priority, and often prioritize other aspects of their lives first (such as childcare responsibilities, health problems or obligations necessary to fulfil their release conditions) (Morrison *et al.* 2018). Women's prisons in Aotearoa New Zealand (and internationally) have historically offered fewer employment training opportunities than men's prisons (Bentley 2017). Likewise, traditional academic and policy responses to women's reintegration have often focussed on women's adoption of socially approved gender identities (such as that of mother), while neglecting other identities (such as worker) (Grace 2022).

Over the past few decades, women in Aotearoa New Zealand have played an increasingly active role in the labour force; their participation in the labour force has increased from 54.3 per cent in 1991 to 70.3 per cent in 2021 (Manatū Wāhine Ministry for Women 2022). Despite this, women in Aotearoa New Zealand are still paid less than men, are exposed to higher levels of precarity in the workforce, and undertake a disproportionate share of caring and family responsibilities (Manatū Wāhine Ministry for Women 2022). Sole mothers and Māori and Pacific women are especially likely to face poor labour market outcomes (Reilly 2019; Manatū Wāhine Ministry for Women 2022). The Māori unemployment rate (10.8 per cent) is more than twice as high as the national unemployment rate (4.9 per cent), and is especially high for Māori women (12 per cent) (MBIE 2021). Māori and Pacific women are more likely than other ethnic groups to be sole parents and to have caregiving and family responsibilities which limit their opportunities for employment (Flynn and Harris 2015). Māori women are also more likely to experience discrimination in the workplace (including racism) than other ethnic groups (Reilly 2019; Cormack *et al.* 2020).

Māori women's poor labour market outcomes, and their experiences of inequality more generally, have been shaped by the legacies of colonization. In the nineteenth century, colonial policies, including warfare, land alienation and forced cultural assimilation, pushed many Māori into positions of marginalization and hardship (McIntosh and Radojkovic 2012; Webb 2017). Colonization has had profound and ongoing impacts on Māori, including trauma and socio-economic deprivation, which have been passed down over multiple generations (McIntosh and Radojkovic 2012). These intergenerational consequences are reflected in Aotearoa New Zealand's prison population whereby Māori represent 53.2 per cent of those in prison, despite representing only 17 per cent of the general population (Department of Corrections 2022*a*).

This over-representation is especially acute for Māori women, who make up 66 per cent of the women's prison population (Department of Corrections 2021*a*). These colonial legacies serve as important context to understanding Māori women's experiences of employment and desistance, and the multiple barriers that these women often face to obtaining employment and desisting from crime.

METHODOLOGY

The interview data presented in this article derive from a doctoral research project funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden Fund. The doctoral project focussed on the role of housing, relationships and motherhood in women's desistance, and involved narrative interviews with 15 women with histories of imprisonment. To take part, participants were required to self-identify as female, to have had at least one prison stay, and to have remained out of prison (without reoffending) for at least one year since their most recent prison term. Participants were recruited through personal contacts and non-government organizations who support people leaving prison. Two additional women were recruited through the wider Marsden funded project. The interviews were carried out during 2020 and 2021. Three of the interviews took place by way of videoconference (at the participants' request), while the remaining interviews were carried out in a location intended to be comfortable for participants and convenient to travel to. Locations included cafes, workplaces and the offices of the NGOs from which some of the women were recruited. Interviews lasted between an hour and two and a half hours.

Ten of the women in the sample identified as Māori, with three of those women also identifying as Pacific Islander, and one as Scottish, Irish and French. Of the remaining five women, one identified as Samoan and the remaining four women identified as New Zealand European/Pākehā,[1] with one of those women also identifying as Polish. At the time of the interview, participants were aged between 22 and 49 years. Eight women had served their most recent prison sentence between one and three years prior to the interview; three women between four and six years prior to the interview; and the remaining four women had not been in prison for over nine years prior to the interview. The majority of the women had histories of sustained offending across different offence types, including fraud, armed robbery, drug dealing, possession of class A drugs, kidnapping and theft. Twelve women in the sample mentioned addictions to, or issues concerning, drugs and alcohol, and one additional woman referred to a gambling addiction. Quantitative data concerning the women's employment was not obtained, but the narrative interviews revealed that the majority of the women were in paid employment. Participants' jobs included: social service work with youth, people with histories of imprisonment and/or addiction; research and social justice work; marketing and sales; warehouse packing; sheep shearing; traffic control; cleaning and school teaching.

Narrative interviews aim to shift the balance of power and control in favour of participants by following them down the paths they wish to follow (Riessman 2008). They explore how an individual uses their life story to construct a sense of self and identity, and how their experiences are located within, and shaped by, broader social processes (Chamberlain 2013). In this way, the interviews sought to give the women ownership of their stories, control over the interview as 'experts', and the opportunity to highlight the key factors which they perceived as having supported their change. However, as the focus of the doctoral project concerned housing, relationships and motherhood, the interviewer asked participants to discuss their experiences

1 Māori language term for New Zealanders of European descent.

in relation to these factors, as well as any other factors that they considered to be significant. Although the project had not specifically set out to examine the role of employment in women's desistance, it became clear after several interviews that employment often played an influential role in the women's desistance. Therefore, in subsequent interviews, and where employment was raised as a key motivating factor in the women's change, participants were asked to elaborate further on how their jobs had supported their desistance (if this was not already clear from the narrative).

With the participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the author (who conducted all of the interviews). The data were analysed thematically (Braun and Clarke 2006). Notes or initial codes were written on each woman's transcript. The coding scheme focussed on the women's pathways into crime, and the factors that had supported their change. A code could apply to a single sentence, or to several pages of data to avoid removing the code from the context in which it arose. In most respects, the coding technique aligned with principles of 'grounded theory' (or 'the discovery of theory from data') (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 1). However, the recognition of various codes was also influenced by themes or concepts in existing desistance literature (such as 'knifing off'). The initial codes were then organized into wider themes, one of which was employment. Codes were then compared both within and across interviews to establish the most significant themes and sub-themes relevant to employment and desistance.

FINDINGS

This section proceeds in two parts. The first part identifies key barriers that the women faced in obtaining employment, including their life histories which often involved trauma, socio-economic disadvantage and the stigma associated with their criminal records. These issues were often multiple and overlapping, and were especially acute for the Māori women in the sample. The second part explores the role of employment in motivating and facilitating the women's desistance. It concentrates on the change driving effects on the identity and relational aspects of the desistance process, as well as the beneficial effects of employment for women's desistance generally. Finally, it considers some potential limitations of employment as a 'hook' for long-lasting change.

Barriers to employment

Socio-economic disadvantage, trauma and addiction

Throughout the women's journeys, their employment opportunities differed according to their social locations, including their class, ethnicity and other sites of inequality. Two of the women in the sample, Beth and Lucy, had maintained stable paid employment prior to their imprisonment and during their offending. Prior to going to prison, Beth, a Pākehā woman in her forties, owned a business with her partner. Her background appeared middle class: she grew up in a 'huge house' and her father owned a number of shops in the local area. Throughout her narrative, Beth described access to educational opportunities that were lacking in the earlier stages of the narratives of many of the other women; she completed high school and a diploma in business and tourism. Lucy, a Samoan woman in her forties, also described greater access to employment and educational opportunities than other women in the sample. During her teenage years, Lucy's parents helped her to obtain employment in an office role at her father's work. She went on to obtain a university degree, and worked in a series of senior roles in business support and account management.

Beth and Lucy's life circumstances differed to the other women in the sample: their family backgrounds did not involve drugs, violence or criminality; their offending histories were comparatively short; they did not have histories of drug or alcohol abuse; and their lifestyles appeared middle class. Their life circumstances appeared to provide a pathway into education and employment that was lacking in many of the other women's narratives. In contrast, and consistent with feminist pathways literature (Daly 1992), the majority of the women faced multiple and interlocking forms of oppression, including life histories of poverty and trauma which contributed to issues concerning their mental health, substance abuse and eventual offending. For Māori women, these issues were especially pronounced, owing to the intergenerational transmission of colonial trauma (McIntosh and Radojkovic 2012). Thus, for many of the women in the sample, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic disadvantage, trauma and drug use intersected to create significant barriers to both their employment prospects, and inclusion in 'mainstream' society generally.

These women often described childhood experiences with limited access to social support or conventional avenues into employment. Several of the women's family and whānau (extended family) were involved in drugs and crime. The women often described their own drug use or criminality as a consequence of their upbringing. Sam, a Cook Islander/Māori woman in her forties, was born addicted to heroin and described her family as 'all alcoholics, addicts and doing crime'. At the age of 15, Sam 'started living the life I had seen growing up, because that's all I knew'. Another Māori woman, Jacqui, described gang affiliated family and whānau. Annie (who was also Māori) described her drug use as an inevitable 'next step' from having lived with her father: 'Dad's a drug dealer, he always has been a drug dealer, we've always had drugs around us and so it was just like the next step'. She explained how during her childhood, neither of her parents were employed and instead obtained their income through drug dealing:

> I've never seen either of my parents work [...] it was weird, everybody else's parents were working and mine are just like useless, oh well they weren't useless cause they were doing their jobs were selling drugs pretty much you know, like they didn't need to work 'cause they were making all their money off drugs. (Annie)

Tuchey, a Māori woman in her late forties, grew up around gang members, drugs and alcohol. She was raped on her 16th birthday, which led to a downward spiral into crime. Tuchey described an offending and addiction history which spanned nearly two decades. Consistent with literature on motherhood and crime (Ferraro and Moe 2003), Tuchey identified the financial strain associated with motherhood as one of the key motivators of her offending. Tuchey's life circumstances did not appear to offer an alternative and legitimate means of income, nor the 'cognitive blueprint' to guide her to obtaining one (Giordano *et al.* 2002):

> Not knowing that I could have done it differently, and went and got skills and upgraded myself and experience and actually got a job, they say it but you know saying it is really easy from doing it. (Tuchey)

Many of the women in the sample described issues concerning drug/alcohol addiction or abuse which prevented their opportunity, ability and desire to work. These issues typically began as a coping mechanism to earlier trauma. Only a few of these women mentioned having paid employment during periods of addiction. When these women did mention employment, such as working in customer service positions, it was often temporary; it proving ultimately too difficult to maintain employment while battling an addiction. Sarah, for example, robbed her work

while under the influence of drugs. Ally could not maintain her job at a call centre while battling a methamphetamine addiction:

> I was functioning really, really well and I was managing to function and then it all came crumbling down and I couldn't maintain an addiction whilst working […] so I went back to dealing methamphetamine. (Ally)

Employment therefore rarely featured in the early stages of the women's narratives. The majority of the women (predominantly Māori) were embedded in marginalized circumstances, with few conventional bonds to society or opportunities for employment (Sampson and Laub 1993). McIntosh and Radojkovic (2012: 38) have noted that due to the ongoing effects of colonization disadvantage is reproduced 'so that prison life becomes negatively but normatively accepted' among many Māori communities. Likewise, for many of the women in this research (the majority of whom were Māori), lifestyles associated with criminality and drug use were often normal and familiar, while normative lifestyles associated with stable employment were unfamiliar (Fredriksson and Gålnander 2020).

Criminal records and stigma

For all the women in the sample, a formidable barrier to obtaining employment was their criminal records. The stigma associated with a criminal record is often felt acutely by women, who are considered 'doubly deviant' (Lloyd 1995). In this research, stigma could manifest differently depending on the women's gender, class, ethnicity and employment backgrounds. Tuchey (who is Māori) reflected on the initial challenges she faced in attempting to obtain employment with a criminal record and without any social support. With no employment opportunities in 'conventional' society, Tuchey felt that she (and similarly situated others) had no alternative than to return to crime:

> Well, you know the majority of us when you go inside, if you're a criminal you've burnt bridges right, it could be from your previous partner, or your family, so when you're inside you've got no help, and that tells you, you've got no help when you get out, so what do you do? What you know best, you revert back to your old ways which is crime […] there is no alternative and there are no opportunities for us you know. And then they say, 'oh yes sign up on the benefit and you can go and get a job' 'oh yeah, like that, that easy aye?' 'Have you got a criminal history?' 'Yeah' 'oh yeah, nah' […] so it's a lose, lose situation if you ask me. (Tuchey)

In addition to the stigma of her criminal record, Tuchey may have faced an additional and overlapping layer of stigma due to discrimination and racism among employers based on her ethnicity. This is supported by research which suggests that Māori are particularly vulnerable to discrimination in the labour market (Reilly 2019). Tuchey talked generally about the stigma associated with her ethnicity:

> Being Māori it sort of like gave me a setback, like it does with society, you know, it's like society looks at you and it's like 'oh they're just another useless fucking hori'[2] you know […] it's pretty hard, pretty hard aye. But you know like that's when you're like still with the law and that aye, they look at you like, yeah you're like low level, depending on your crimes or whatever it is. (Tuchey)

Tuchey appeared to view her criminal record as a barring her from any type of work, and her ethnicity as a 'setback' to her inclusion in 'mainstream' society generally. Conversely, other

2 A derogatory and racist term to refer to Māori.

women in the sample were aware of how their criminal records could constrain their prospects of more well-paying and meaningful work. Ally, a Pākehā woman, said: 'I aint gonna be a lawyer or a doctor or anything like that, I've ruined all those chances'. Lucy spent nearly two years in prison for fraud. Prior to her imprisonment she had worked in senior roles in business support and account management. However, following her conviction, she mentioned that 'I'm limited to what I can do and my abilities, uh, I suppose, wasted'. Beth spent two years in prison for possession of class A drugs. Prior to going to prison, Beth owned a successful business. However, after leaving prison and discussing her employment options with her parole officer, she was implicitly told that her career prospects were now limited:

> Even to the point where I spoke to the parole officer once I'd finished my parole and I said to her, 'what can I do job wise?' Like 'I'm useless to everybody.' And she said, 'Oh, do you know anyone that's like you know got a gardening business. You can go and do some gardening.' I'm sitting there thinking, what the fuck… I'm not… like she's basically saying, all you're good for is labour work […] And she knew that I'd been at [company name] and had my own business and I was like, so yeah, I felt like utter trash for the first year after coming out. I really did. (Beth)

It appeared that the stigma associated with a criminal record could be internalized differently based on the women's social locations, including their ethnicity, class and employment backgrounds. Beth, a middle-class, Pākehā woman with a previous business career felt demoralized by the types of employment available to her following her conviction (such as gardening). Contrastingly, Tuchey, a Māori woman who came from a marginalized social and economic background, and faced double stigma by both her criminal record and her ethnicity, felt that her criminal record barred her from employment more generally, rather than a particular type or 'quality' of job.

Employment and desistance

At the time of the interviews, all of the women in the sample had been desisting for at least one year. All save two women in the sample referred to being in paid employment. Nearly all of the employed women referred to their jobs as key 'hooks for change' to support their desistance (Giordano *et al.* 2002). In particular, the women emphasized the role of their employers in 'giving them a chance' at a job, and recognizing and encouraging their change. Employers' recognition of the women's change (relational desistance), helped the women to view themselves in a more positive way (identity desistance). Employment also provided the women with structure and routine, supportive social networks, and a sense of meaning and purpose.

Employers 'taking a chance'

An important way in which employment motivated and facilitated the women's desistance was through their employers' encouragement and support. The women were aware that their criminal records could deter prospective employers and often expressed appreciation for employers who had looked beyond their past and 'gave them a chance'. During Lucy's imprisonment she was employed at a retail company through a Release to Work[3] programme. She emphasized her gratitude to her employer for accepting her despite her offending history:

> When I was working with them through the Release to Work program and I was in prison I wore an ankle bracelet. And so, they were all aware of that [my criminal history] and they

3 The 'Release to Work' programme supports those who are classified as minimum security, and deemed as suitable, to obtain paid employment in the community during their imprisonment (Department of Corrections 2021*b*, 2022*b*).

> were really inclusive and that was something […] they accepted me right from the get go and offered me permanent work. (Lucy)

At the time of the interview, Lucy was working with another company in a marketing role. She described her employers (who are aware of her criminal record) as 'amazing people and they're so trustworthy'. Beth had been out of prison for around three years and was employed supporting individuals in the criminal justice system. Like Lucy, she similarly explained that she was grateful that 'someone gave me a chance'. She described her relief at seeing a job advertisement requesting lived experience. Beth added that if it had not been for this job opportunity she would have had few options for (meaningful) employment:

> If it wasn't for [employer] … I just happened to come across her job on Seek[4] and it said lived experience welcome. And I was just head down, I'm going to get that job. And I just, yeah, if I didn't get the job, I was like, 'mum, if I don't get this job, you're going to have to come pick me up because yeah, I'm going to go to bed for the year.' But otherwise I don't know what I would be doing. (Beth)

It was not only the mere fact of giving the women a chance at a job that supported their desistance. Employers accepted and recognized the women's change which, in turn, helped the women to view themselves in a more positive way, and to construct a more positive identity for the future. Beth's employer ran a successful business helping individuals with histories of imprisonment. Beth said she could see herself in her employer, and her employer became the inspiration for her to continue working in the criminal justice system. When asked about her goals for the future, she said:

> To become [employer]. [Employer's] literally me ten years ago. It's pretty much guy for guy, but yeah, I would like to … not necessarily run my own business, but like be up there, and being successful and helping other people. My aim is basically to stay in the justice area and yeah just help as much as I can. (Beth)

Mandy, a Māori woman in her thirties, was abused by her father from a young age, and experienced related issues concerning addiction and trauma over several years. At the time of the interview, Mandy had been crime and drug free for around two years and was working as a sales representative. Mandy's employers were not concerned by her criminal history, and fully supported her desistance and recovery (including giving her time off work to attend recovery meetings, as well as offering to pay for Mandy to attend them). Mandy explained that by giving her 'a chance at a career' her employers had helped her to perceive a 'different life' and to envisage the 'possible self' that she could become (Paternoster and Bushway 2009):

> I just started to see like a different life, like this different life, 'cause I've never really had like strong male role models, or anybody really give me a chance at a career. But my job has really done that so my company is owned by three males. And they seen something in me that I couldn't see and they had faith in me where I had none in myself, and they told me I could do it until I started believe in myself […] my two bosses I call them daddy one and daddy two, cause they're the first males that have treated me with respect and have trusted me, they gave

4 An online job search platform.

> me a credit card and a laptop and a phone and all of this stuff that nobody has really given me that chance before […] they respect me and they told me I could do it, and yeah for a little bit I had to see myself through their eyes until I could believe it in myself, and grow like a little bit of confidence and it just has kind of grown and grown and grown and grown. (Mandy)

An employer's belief in the women's ability to change catalysed or reinforced the women's self-belief in their pro-social potential. This reflects Maruna *et al.*'s (2004) notion of a 'looking-glass self-concept', where the support of someone else (in this case an employer) can help an individual to realize their personal value. The employers who 'took a chance' on the women helped them to develop a sense of efficacy and the belief that they could turn their lives around. Their employer's encouragement helped them to attain a sense of relational desistance (a feeling of recognition of change by others and sense of community acceptance and belonging). Ally mentioned that once she was hired, she 'started feeling like a member of society and the community again'. Lucy explained that employment 'gives you that feeling that you're actually contributing something to society'.

Changing routine, social networks and identities

After obtaining employment, some of the women restructured their priorities and focussed solely on their work. Consistent with wider (male-based) desistance literature (Farrall 2002; Laub and Sampson 2003), employment could change the women's daily structure and routine, leaving little time to offend. Liz, for example, obtained employment as a traffic controller which dominated her schedule entirely: 'That's all I was doing every day. I was just working, working, working. I had no time to go out with friends'. Jacqui, who was employed as a sheep shearer, also focussed on employment after leaving prison: 'Just worked, make money, do the mahi,[5] get the treats'. For Liz and Jacqui, as their daily schedules became dominated by their work, their identities became tied to their roles as workers. Jacqui, for example, explained that her focus on working and earning money has become part of 'who I am':

> If you ain't paying me I don't even understand why I'm in your presence, so if I ain't making money I'm not here to be funny, so fuck see ya, and that's just who I am you know, so I've come a long way. (Jacqui)

A few women referred to the friendships or social bonds they had made with colleagues or employers as supportive of their change (Sampson and Laub 1993). Tuchey, who was working as a packer in a warehouse, explained that she has formed new friendships with work colleagues, rather than maintaining friendships with her former criminally involved friends: 'Changed all of them to work friends, so I've only got work friends, and a neighbour, you know'. Tuchey's new social network of colleagues therefore provided her with an opportunity to 'knife off' former associates who were unsupportive of her change (Maruna and Roy 2007). Tuchey's work also provided her with a sense of meaning and purpose: 'Just knowing when I wake up every afternoon, yay I'm going to work, I've got a job!' Liz explained that her job keeps her busy and motivated, and her colleagues provide her with emotional support: 'It [employment] kept me motivated, it kept me busy, every day every night it kept me busy … and plus I got tight with a few mates at work too … so yeah, they actually helped me as well'.

Several women in the sample worked, or aspired to work, in social service roles with youth, people who had been to prison, or people dealing with addictions. Consistent with wider

5 A Māori language word used to refer to work.

desistance research (Maruna 2001; Österman 2018; Barr 2019), these women expressed a generative desire to 'give back' and help others embarking on similar journeys:

> I help the youth because I was one of them, and I believe if we can guide and support them to a better way of living there's hope for them for a better future. You know I love my job. (Sam)
>
> I love working with the women that come from the prison, helping them to rebuild their lives even from the littlest things like helping them trying to find a doctor so they can get prescriptions, getting them clothes from work and income, getting them IDs, just those little things you know 'cause sometimes, for some people it's really hard to do those little easy things. (Sarah)

For several women, therefore, adopting the role of the 'professional-ex' gave meaning and purpose to their lives (Maruna 2001). Like participants in Maruna's (2001) sample, these women were able to draw on their past identities and use them as inspiration for a more productive future. Their roles as mentors, councillors and support workers were central to their crime and drug-free identities.

The limitations of employment on women's desistance

Although many of the women had clearly derived purpose and meaning from their jobs, it is important to recognize that employment is not a panacea (Barr 2023). The type of work (and pay) that women obtain is likely to impact the potential for employment to promote long-lasting change. Some of the women in the sample were working in manual labour, or low-wage labour jobs. These women were often Māori and typically came from socially and economically deprived backgrounds, and did not appear to have the same employment opportunities as women advantaged by their social class. Although they framed their commitment to their jobs and changing identities in positive terms, their experiences reveal some tensions concerning individual agency and the societal constraints of their criminal records and a low-wage labour market. As Opsal (2012) has pointed out, irrespective of an individual's attitude to their work, participating in precarious or low-wage labour will present its challenges.

Liz and Jacqui, for example, were working long hours, and sometimes to the detriment of other key relationships (such as those with children). Jacqui, for example, began work each day at four in the morning, and very rarely had any time off. In fact, Jacqui mentioned that she often had no other option that to take her children with her to work. Similarly, Liz's long hours working as a traffic controller left her with little time to engage with other relationships which may have supported her change. Another participant, Tuchey, who was working as a packer in a warehouse, explained that she hasn't had enough money to meet her rental payments over the last few months. Liz, Jacqui and Tuchey were relatively early on in their desistance journeys (both Liz and Jacqui had been out of prison for less than two years, and Tuchey referred to her change as occurring within the last two years). As these women were early on in their desistance journeys, it is open to question whether they will continue to use employment as a 'hook for change' to craft new identities, without experiencing changes to their working and social conditions generally (Opsal 2012). Indeed, although Tuchey appeared to attain meaning and purpose from her job (as described above), when asked whether she enjoys her job, her response was more hesitant: 'yeah, yeah… sort of… sort of…'.

DISCUSSION

This article presents three main theoretical contributions to literature on employment and desistance. The first contribution concerns the importance of women's roles as 'workers' in their

desistance journeys, which supports feminist authors' claims that women's desistance and rehabilitation should not be defined only in relation to gender-based roles, such as mother or other caring-based roles (Perry 2013; Barr 2019). Contrary to earlier research which suggests that employment may not feature prominently in women's desistance (Benda 2005; Herrschaft *et al.* 2009; Cobbina *et al.* 2012), the findings in this article suggest that employment—and women's identities as 'workers'—can play a key role in motivating and facilitating change. Employment could restructure the women's daily schedules and routines, introduce them to new and supportive social connections, and provide them with meaning and purpose. These findings are consistent with more recent feminist research which suggests that employment can play a significant role in motivating and reinforcing women's changing identities in the desistance process (Opsal 2012; Grace 2022).

The second contribution concerns the role of employers in supporting women's desistance—particularly relational desistance (Nugent and Schinkel 2016). Employers' support appeared to operate through a dynamic bilateral feedback loop. By offering the women a 'chance' at a job, and encouraging and believing in the women and their change, they supported the women's relational desistance (acceptance of change by others). This, in turn, supported the women's identity desistance by helping them to embrace a more positive version of themselves. Consistent with Maruna *et al.*'s (2004) notion of the 'looking-glass self', the women came to view themselves as being capable of meaningful change in part because their employers believed in them. These employers often inspired the women to see their own potential, and in one case (Beth), embodied the realization of that potential. Although previous research has recognized that employment plays a key role in identity and relational desistance (e.g. Nugent and Schinkel 2016), there has been little research on the mechanisms by which employers themselves can support this process. This research therefore adds a unique contribution to existing literature by emphasizing how employers' interactions with desisting individuals can support those individuals to view themselves more positively and to envisage a crime and drug-free 'future self' that they can become (Paternoster and Bushway 2009).

The third contribution concerns the role of employment in Indigenous women's desistance. Māori women in the sample faced interlocking systems of oppression based on their ethnicity, socio-economic position and other sites of inequality, which limited their opportunity and ability to work. Consistent with other literature involving Indigenous women leaving prison (Baldry 2010), most of the Māori women in the sample came from socially and economically deprived backgrounds (often with family members or whānau involved in the criminal justice system), and had few avenues into conventional employment. Many of these women were dealing with ongoing issues concerning addiction, mental health and trauma, which limited their potential to obtain or maintain work. These women needed to heal from the underlying issues influencing their offending, such as trauma, mental health and addiction to engage with employment as a 'hook for change'. Without healing from these issues, and receiving other forms of socio-structural support, the beneficial effects of employment on desistance are likely to be limited.

In contrast to most Māori women in the sample, a few (non-Māori) women described life circumstances and resources that provided a pathway into education and employment (including access to a university education or parents who helped them to obtain work). These women did not describe life histories of significant socio-economic disadvantage, trauma or addiction, and discussed employment in well-paid, senior roles prior to their imprisonment. As with all the women in the sample, these women's criminal records posed a formidable barrier to them obtaining employment post imprisonment. However, they appeared to internalize the stigma associated with their criminal records differently. Women with more advantageous life circumstances (such as Beth) appeared less concerned that their records constrained them from about

obtaining 'any' type of work, and were more aware of how their records constrained their access to well-paid, more conventionally prestigious, employment. Contrastingly, Tuchey, a Māori woman who came from a socially and economically deprived background, and experienced stigma on multiple levels, by her gender, ethnicity and social class, appeared to view her record as barring her from any type of employment, irrespective of the 'quality' of the work.

These findings emphasize how stigma can be internalized differently by individuals based on their social location, including their class and ethnicity. The combination of gendered, racial and criminal stigma can make it especially difficult for Māori women leaving prison to obtain employment. A key finding in desistance literature is that in order to desist from crime individuals need at least some degree of hope (LeBel *et al.* 2008), and a sense of an alternative future. The interplay between gendered, racial and criminal stigma may limit some Māori women's *expectations* of obtaining employment, which may make it more difficult for them to use employment as a 'hook' to construct a contented 'future self' (Paternoster and Bushway 2009). These findings contribute to intersectional understandings of desistance (Fader and Traylor 2015), and are likely to have relevance to Indigenous women leaving prison in other settler states (such as Canada and Australia), who similarly face substantial barriers to their re-entry as a result of the historical and contemporary legacies of colonization (Baldry 2010).

The findings in this research suggest a number of implications for policy and practice, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and elsewhere. First, as others have emphasized (Baldry 2010; Barr 2023), criminalized women (and especially Indigenous women) should not be held primarily responsible for changing their lives when their socio-structural context has offered them so little in the way of support. Reiterating Baldry's (2010) recommendations from over a decade ago, it is the state's responsibility to provide women, and especially Indigenous women, with opportunities and support for change. This includes not only access to paid employment but mental health and addiction services, counselling, education, childcare, housing support and 'safe spaces' to heal (Baldry 2010; Barr 2023). High-quality treatment programmes should be readily available for women in the criminal justice system so that they can heal from some of the underlying issues influencing their offending (such as trauma, mental health and addiction). As in other Western jurisdictions (Petrillo 2022) the availability of such programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand is limited, and the state needs to provide them with further resources and financial support.

Second, Aotearoa New Zealand should consider reforming its statutory procedures regarding the concealment of criminal records. The Criminal Records (Clean Slate) Act 2004 currently enables convictions to be concealed if, among other criteria, the relevant individual has received no fresh convictions within the past seven years and has never received a custodial sentence. These criteria therefore permanently exclude anyone who has been to prison, and such women can never rid themselves—at least officially—of the 'ex-offender' label. Furthermore, although the ability to conceal a criminal record after seven years is likely to support identity desistance, it is unlikely to affect rates of recidivism. In fact, US research suggests that if an individual remains crime free for six or seven years, then their risk of reoffending begins to approximate the risk of new offences by individuals without criminal records (Kurlychek *et al.* 2006). As Maruna (2014: 128) points out, 'if somebody already *has* managed to desist from crime for a half-decade or more, they most likely have already been fully reintegrated and are comfortably employed'. As such, this article recommends that the New Zealand Government consider reforming the Clean Slate Act to: (1) include individuals who have served short-term prison sentences (the majority of women with histories of imprisonment) and (2) enable those individuals to apply for an earlier concealment of their criminal record (see Maruna 2014). This would help remove the stigma of a criminal record as a significant barrier to employment.

Third, further funding and resources dedicated to both Corrections and community-run employment initiatives (such as the Release to Work Programme) would support more women leaving prison into employment. It was clear from Lucy's narrative, for example, that working through the Release to Work Programme had played an important role in her integration into society upon release. Historically, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, women's employment training opportunities in prisons have been more limited than those in men's prisons (Bentley 2017; Grace 2022). Additionally, the New Zealand Department of Corrections research suggests that, compared with men leaving prison, similarly situated women have shorter work histories, a narrower range of employment skills, and are less likely to have access to existing employment networks to support them into work (Morrison *et al.* 2018). This highlights the important role that prison and community-run employment initiatives can play in helping women obtain employment. This observation is likely to have relevance for several other jurisdictions, as international research has similarly recognized that women's identities as 'workers' could be better mobilized by providing them with greater employment related support programmes (see e.g. Grace 2022).

Fourth, it is important to create avenues for women's employment which support strength-based approaches to desistance and rehabilitation. These approaches focus less on 'risk' and more on the positive contributions that a person can make to society (Maruna and LeBel 2003). The women in this research emphasized, in particular, a desire to 'give back' to others in the form of the 'professional ex'. Opening up further opportunities in social services work for those with histories of imprisonment would be an especially valuable way of supporting their change. As Barr (2023: 16) notes, for employment to support women's desistance, it must be 'meaningful, well-paid and reflect individual's hopes and talents'.

Consistent with Barr's caution, this article points to some of the limitations of long-hour, low-wage, manual, labour, and raises the question of whether women employed in these types of jobs will continue to use employment as a 'hook for change' in the long term. Although the article touches on some of the limitations of these types of employment, the interviews did not explore these in depth. Instead, the research mainly considered whether and how employment could support women's desistance. An important avenue for future research would be a longitudinal project on women's employment and desistance, to explore the effects of employment on women's desistance when they first obtain it, as well as several years later. This would enable a better understanding of whether the beneficial effects of employment (and particular types of employment) last long term. Future research could focus on some of the challenges associated with long, low-wage labour, and could consider the implications of these challenges on other factors which may support women's desistance (such as their relationships with children or other supportive individuals). Such longitudinal research could capture the notion of desistance as a fragile process, rife with setbacks, struggles and relapses (Fredriksson and Gålnander 2020).

Finally, particularly with respect to low paid, menial or manual labour, there must be a persistent concern that women are exploited. It is clearly in the interests of an employer to fill a gap in the labour market for low-wage labour, and such employers should not necessarily be praised for 'taking a chance' on women who fill an undesirable job. While the employers mentioned in this research appeared genuine in their efforts to support the women, it is not the case that every employer who hires an individual leaving prison facilitates their desistance. Relational desistance—the sincere recognition of a durable change in others—requires a genuine investment in both the person and their future.

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