

# **Towards redemption: Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander men's narratives of desistance from sexual offending**

## **Authors:**

- 1. Associate Professor Kelly Richards (Corresponding author)**  
Queensland University of Technology, Faculty of Law, School of Justice  
GPO Box 2434 Brisbane Queensland AUSTRALIA 4001  
[k1.richards@qut.edu.au](mailto:k1.richards@qut.edu.au)  
ORCID: 0000-0001-6829-8016  
Twitter: @DrKellyRichards
  
- 2. Dr Jodi Death**  
Queensland University of Technology, Faculty of Law, School of Justice  
GPO Box 2434 Brisbane Queensland AUSTRALIA 4001  
[Jodi.death@qut.edu.au](mailto:Jodi.death@qut.edu.au)  
ORCID: 0000-0002-0522-4324  
Twitter: @jodi\_death
  
- 3. Professor Kieran McCartan**  
University of the West of England, Department of Health and Social Sciences  
Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol, BS16 1WA  
[Kieran.Mccartan@uwe.ac.uk](mailto:Kieran.Mccartan@uwe.ac.uk)  
ORCID: 0000-0002-7766-9410  
Twitter: @kieranmc80

## **Funding details:**

This work was funded by Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety.

**Word count:** 12,525

## **Towards redemption: Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander men's narratives of desistance from sexual offending**

The literature on desistance from crime shows that desisters often engage in a process of rebiographing, crafting life stories – or “redemption scripts” (Maruna, 2001) – that make sense of their move away from crime. However, this literature has largely excluded non-White offenders and sexual offenders. The current study addresses these gaps by examining the desistance narratives of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander men convicted of sexual offending. Drawing on interviews with these men, it identifies ways in which cultural identity can foster desistant identities among sexual offenders.

**KEYWORDS:** Desistance; Sexual offending; Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander offenders; Redemption scripts

Two broad theoretical explanations exist that attempt to account for desistance, or “the long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in persistent patterns of criminal offending” (Maruna, 2001, p. 26): informal social controls explanations; and cognitive transformation explanations (Farmer, McAlinden, & Maruna, 2015; Harris, 2017b; Kras & Blasko, 2016). The former set of explanations is concerned with external influences (also conceptualized as *structure* or *social changes* (Le Bel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, 2008)) (e.g. employment, marriage) on one's cessation of crime. The latter set is concerned with internal changes (also conceptualized as *agency* or *subjective changes*) (Farmer et al., 2015; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Harris, 2017b; Le Bel et al., 2008). As desistance scholars have long argued, such processes do not occur in isolation from each other; rather, desistance is likely achieved when external and internal factors coalesce (Fox, 2014; Giordano et al., 2002; Le Bel et al., 2008). As Harris (2017b) and Kras (2014) have argued, however, since those convicted of sexual offences are increasingly restricted from obtaining employment or marriage relationships, theories of internal desistance are especially relevant to understanding the cessation of crime among this population.

Doing “narrative repair” work (Stone, 2016) is increasingly recognized as a key aspect of the process of internal desistance from crime (Bullock, Bunce, & McCarthy, 2019; Presser, 2008; Rocque, Posick, & Paternoster, 2016). Seminal studies show that desisters engage in a process of “rebiographing” (Maruna, 2001) in which they craft believable self-stories about why they are “going straight” (Maruna, 2001; Presser, 2008). Such recovery stories or “redemption scripts” (Maruna, 2001; see also Farmer et al., 2015) typically include a number of “key plot devices” (Maruna, 2001; Stone, 2016). The desister first establishes a set of core beliefs that characterize their “true self” or the “real me”. This is accomplished via foreshadowing episodes in which the individual demonstrated, even at the height of their criminal behaviour, that they were essentially a good person, at least “deep down”. Thus “instead of discovering a “new me,” the desisting ex-offender reaches back into early experiences to find and reestablish an “old me” in order to desist” (Maruna, 2001, p. 89).

Presser’s (2008) work builds on this foundation by arguing that desistance narratives typically fall into one of three categories. In the first, “reform narratives”, desisters highlight the profound change that they have undertaken and contrast their current self with their previous, criminal, self. These reform narratives closely reflect the redemption script proffered by Maruna (2001). A second group of desisters adopt what Presser (2008) terms “stability narratives” (p. 71), in which the narrator depicts him- or herself as having a steady, enduring moral character. In stability narratives, crime is not demonstrative of the narrator’s character but is rather an aberration: “the self is *not* himself for only as long as the harmful action lasts” (Presser, 2008, p. 82; italics on original). The third and most common type of narrative identified by Presser is the “elastic narrative” – i.e. a combination of reform and stability narratives, in which elements of each is present.

In any case, the desister categorizes poor past behaviours as separate from the “real me” and characterizes these not as a reflection of their true self but as a product of the environment:

“The offending came from out there, not inside” (Maruna, 2001, p. 93). Desisters commonly make reference to an external “It” – some alien source of action distinct from the narrator (Maruna, 2001). In Stone’s (2016) terms, desisters differentiate the “bad It” from the “good me”. In constructing a narrative of desistance, individuals must then free the true self from this environment, or find the “diamond in the rough” (Maruna, 2001, p. 95). Usually, desisters make reference to an external force that has given rise to this: “If it weren’t for X (organization, new philosophy or religion, some special individual, God, etc.), I would still be involved with crime” (Maruna, 2001, p. 96).

Desisters’ narratives feature a sense of “tragic optimism”; they recast their lives in such a way that good is made from the bad: “If it weren’t for X (me going to jail, my life of crime, etc.), I never would have realized Y (that there are more important things in life than money, that I was good at helping others, etc.)” (Maruna, 2001, p. 98). Compared with those who actively persist with crime, desisters’ narratives are characterized by an optimistic sense of control over the future (Maruna, 2001). Finally, desisters’ narratives are characterized by the discovery of a higher purpose, the desire to be productive and “give something back to society”, particularly to the next generation (Maruna, 2001; McNeill & Maruna, 2007; Shover, 1996). Such desires are described in the literature as “generativity”, which McAdams and de St Aubin (cited in Maruna, 2001) define as “commitment to promoting the next generation, manifested through parenting, teaching, mentoring, and generating products and outcomes that aim to benefit youth and foster the development and well-being of individuals and social systems that will outlive the self” (p. 99). Generativity commonly involves assuming the role of the “professional ex” (Brown, 1991; Le Bel, Richie, & Maruna, 2015) or “wounded healer” (Halsey & Deegan, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Whyte, 2000a; 2000b). As Le Bel et al. (2015) explain, this entails crafting a legitimate career that capitalizes on one’s own deviant past. Maruna (2001) argues that “the desisting self-narrative frequently involves reworking a delinquent history into a

source of wisdom to be drawn from while acting as a drug counselor, youth worker, community volunteer, or mutual-help group member” (p. 117). “Giving back” through such generative activities can be a marker of secondary desistance (McNeill & Maruna, 2007, p. 231) or the shift from a temporary cessation of offending towards a sustained adoption of a non-offending identity (McNeill & Maruna, 2007; see generally Bullock et al., 2019).

While this narrative form has been found to characterize the stories of many groups of desisters, this literature is beset by a number of limitations. Of chief importance for this article are its focus on white desisters, and its focus on desistance from non-sexual crime. The two corresponding bodies of literature on desistance among non-White populations and among sexual offenders thus form the backdrop to the current study, and will be canvassed in turn below.

### ***Desistance and non-White populations***

Recent scholarship points out that the identity transformation model of desistance has been based predominantly on samples of white offenders, and that much desistance scholarship is “colour-blind” (Farrall 2009, p. 6; Veysey et al., 2013). Scholars have begun to call for examinations of the role of culture, “race” and/or ethnicity in the desistance process (Fader & Traylor, 2015; Farrall, 2016; Glynn, 2016; Veysey, Martinez, & Christian, 2013). Indeed, while a number of studies have examined differences in desistance among ethnic groups (Liem & Richardson, 2014; Stewart, Hamilton, Wilton, Cousineau, & Varrette, 2014; see Calverley, 2013, for an overview), or the desistance journeys of non-white populations (e.g. Hughes, 1998), only a few consider the influence of ethnicity or culture on identity transformation among desisters.

Finestone's (1967) pioneering research, which focused on the reintegration of Italian and Polish ex-prisoners in Illinois, found that ethnic communities' attitudes towards prisoners and their reintegration shaped the environment in which desistance occurs. Calverley's (2013) more recent research on 33 desisters in the United Kingdom, from Indian, Bangladeshi, and Black or dual heritage backgrounds, reached similar conclusions. Calverley (2013; italics in original) found that processes of desistance are both "*universalistic and particular*" (p. 139). Processes that interviewees identified as having helped them along a journey of desistance (e.g. support from significant others) were found across the three groups, thus supporting the bulk of existing literature on White offenders. However, "the socio-structural and socio-cultural differences between them [the groups] affected how, when and where these mechanisms operated" (Calverley, 2013, p. 139).

For example, Calverley (2016) found that Black and dual heritage desisters reported a much stronger focus on generativity, which appeared to be absent for the other two groups, "probably because there are other prosocial identities available to them" (p. 138). Importantly, however, none of Calverley's (2016) participants reported an explicitly racialized narrative of identity change or the reclamation of a "lost" cultural identity. Rather, Calverley (2016) argues that reclaiming a lost cultural identity is one trajectory among numerous potential others, a point underscored by Glynn (2014; 2016).

Importantly, however, the literature on the desistance of Indigenous offenders has produced different findings, emphasizing the importance of explicitly Indigenous identities in desisters' narratives of change. (The term "Indigenous" has been adopted in this article to refer to Indigenous cultures internationally, whereas the more specific terms "Aboriginal" or "Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander" have been used to refer to the Australian context. The term "Aboriginal" has been used in relation to the Canadian context where this terminology has been adopted by the original authors of studies cited). Howell (2008), for

example, researched 42 Canadian Aboriginal males with extensive histories of (mainly violent) offending. She found that sixty percent claimed that cultural experiences, such as contact with Elders, and participating in cultural events and ceremonies, prompted or supported their journeys to desistance.

Deane et al. (2007) discuss the Ogiijiita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin (OPK) program for Aboriginal gang members, based in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The program aims to support gang members who have been released from prison to desist from crime by providing paid employment in a housing renewal program, alongside counselling, referral to educational opportunities, and “encouragement in pro-social values through traditional North American Aboriginal cultural teachings” (Deane et al., 2007, p. 126; see also Bracken et al., 2009). Deane et al. (2007) argue that in this program, retraditionalization activities are critical to individuals’ success: “of greatest importance was the recognition of Aboriginal values and identification of one’s self as an Aboriginal person” (p. 134). However, neither Deane et al. (2007) nor Bracken et al. (2009) provide insight from the participants themselves about how these activities shape their own identity changes (see further Heckbert & Turkington, 2001; Hodgson & Heckbert, 1994; Hundleby, Gfellner, & Racine, 2007).

Given the dramatic overrepresentation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (A&TSI) individuals in the criminal justice system in Australia, where the current research is situated, it is surprising that desistance research has largely ignored the role of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultural identity (see e.g. Haigh, 2009; Halsey, 2006). Sullivan’s (2012) and Marchetti and Daly’s (2017) studies are the only exceptions that could be located. Sullivan (2012) interviewed 15 Aboriginal male offenders from a regional New South Wales town, and examined the relative importance of Aboriginality in identity reformation, as well as the role of generativity within this process. The men explained that a number of aspects central to their Aboriginal cultures – such as fatherhood and kin connections - motivated a shift to a desistant

identity. In contrast to the offenders in Maruna's (2001) study, however, desisters accepted full responsibility for their crimes, rather than externalizing responsibility by separating the "real me" from the offending. As Sullivan (2012) states:

although they may understand the contribution of external factors to their getting into trouble and may even express some bitterness about their upbringing or circumstances...they believe that their actions were their own decision and that no one else is to blame. (p. 307)

Sullivan (2012, pp. 308-9) explains this as a manifestation of the Aboriginal cultural value of fierce autonomy, which has been identified as a key component of Aboriginal sociality. Nor did Sullivan's participants discuss uncovering a "true self". Instead, they often made reference to "snapping out of it" as though they had been temporarily in a daze" (Sullivan, 2012, p. 309). Sullivan's (2012) participants did, however, adopt elements of generativity, with some taking on the role of "professional ex" by accepting paid employment with those at risk of, or experiencing, criminal justice system contact. Others spoke more generally about "helping their people" – an "underlying value of Aboriginal sociality" (Sullivan, 2012, p. 316) – or enacting generativity by taking on caring roles within families.

Marchetti and Daly (2017) interviewed 29 Aboriginal men and one Aboriginal woman who participated in an Indigenous sentencing court process as a result of their perpetration of intimate partner violence. Participants were from regional locations in either New South Wales or Queensland. Like Sullivan, Marchetti and Daly (2017) found that the men's identities as fathers and members of A&TSI communities shaped their desistance trajectories. A small number of desisters undertook generative projects, seeking to help other A&TSI people in the community. Marchetti and Daly (2017) conclude that the desisters in their study used culture, and their participation in an Indigenous sentencing court process, as a "hook for change"



(Giordano et al., 2002). By this, they mean that “a rekindling of Indigenous values”, and being reacquainted with cultural heritage and identity, shaped desisters’ narratives of identity transformation and their adoption of law-abiding identities (Marchetti & Daly, 2017, p. 1529). Both Sullivan (2012) and Marchetti and Daly (2017) therefore offer broad support for a narrative repair framework of desistance; however, their work suggests that Aboriginal men’s desistant identities do not mirror all aspects of the “redemption script” as outlined by Maruna (2001).

Taken together, this literature suggests that (re)developing an identity grounded in Indigenous culture may be an important component of desistance journeys. While the sampling procedures of these studies may be skewed towards this finding, it is important to note that similar conclusions were reached irrespective of whether study participants had been involved in a program of retraditionalization. While it may be tempting to dismiss the findings of Marchetti and Daly (2017), Bracken et al. (2009) and Deane et al. (2007) as reflecting “therapy speak” (Maruna 2001, p. 177), similar findings emerged from studies not reliant on correctional programs for participants (e.g. Hodgson & Heckbert, 1994; Hundleby et al., 2009; Sullivan, 2012). It is possible then that reclaiming a lost cultural identity is of more importance for Indigenous than other ethnic minority desisters.

### *Desistance and sexual offender populations*

Most existing research on internal desistance processes excludes individuals who have offended sexually (Harris, 2017b; Milner, 2017). Indeed, there is only limited research on desistance from sexual offending in general (Farmer et al., 2015; Harris, 2014). This is likely due to assumptions that sexual offenders are “different” as a population from non-sexual offenders, or that sexual offenders do not desist (Harris, 2017b; Kras, 2014; Laws & Ward,

2011). The small number of studies that examine the internal desistance processes of individuals convicted of sexual offences reveal somewhat conflicting findings.

Harris (2014, p. 1566) conducted Life History Interviews initially with 21 men convicted of sexual offences in the USA, and found that among a small number of men in her sample who had been free from prison the longest, a type of redemption narrative emerged, the final stage of which was characterized by generative aims and/or actions. However, for most of the desisters in Harris's (2017b) larger study (with 73 men), redemption scripts were unattainable: "Redemption was simply not an option....no one mentioned successfully turning over a new leaf, being able to honestly start anew, or to have truly righted their wrongs...Men convicted of sexual offences do not have this luxury" (pp. 219-222; see also Kras, 2014). This builds on Maruna's (2016b) work, which argued that the community's views of sex offenders are such that narratives of redemption for sex offending simply may not be possible.

Other research, however, suggests that men convicted of sexual offences do make use of redemption narratives, although often in ways that differ somewhat from Maruna's (2001) original conceptualization. Farmer, Beech and Ward (2012) conducted Life History Interviews with five men who had desisted from sexual offending against children, and a comparison group of five who were (potentially) still active offenders. Their research shows that in broad terms, the narratives of the desisters echo the redemption script. Desisters far more consistently framed their life stories in terms of having found redemption, and having a higher degree of optimism and self-efficacy than persisters. Interestingly, Farmer et al. (2012) note that the desisting group were more likely to report adverse childhood experiences, which they argue "seem to be seen as a precursor to the Redemption themes" (p. 942).

Kras (2014) conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 73 male sexual offenders after their release from prison in Missouri, and 29 of these same offenders again three years later. She

found that overall, in telling their stories, the men in the sample adhered to the plot contours of both redemption and condemnation scripts. Often, for both desisters and persisters, the two were intertwined, with redemption scripts often “wrapped within condemnation scripts” (Kras, 2014, p. 75). She found that among those categorized as desisters, the predominant narrative strategy was crafting external rationales for the offending, such as mental health conditions and adverse childhood experiences. Thus, “their explanations contain attributions that distance them from the moral deficits of the stereotypical sex offender” (Kras & Blasko, 2016, p. 1747). In contrast, sexual persisters tended to internalize the cause of their sexual offending, casting their deviant sexuality as a fixed trait. In general terms this reflects the findings of Farmer et al. (2015), whose interviews with 25 sexual desisters and seven persisters revealed that desisters commonly cast their offending as situational and anomalous, while persisters did not separate their offending from their “true selves”. There were nonetheless some key differences in the scripts in Kras’s sample of sex offenders compared with Maruna’s (2001) original identification of them among a non-sex offender sample. Chief among these is that while non-sexual offenders typically report feeling “doomed to deviance” (Maruna 2001), “the important distinction for sex offenders was that they did not feel condemned to reoffend, but rather felt condemned by society’s *perception* that they would reoffend” (Kras, 2014, p. 56; italics in original). Furthermore, Kras (2014, p. 93) did not find strong commitment to generativity among the men in her sample, which she argues is likely due to fearing rejection from the community.

Taken together, this nascent literature suggests that redemption scripts may be adhered to by individuals convicted of sexual offences in varying ways across a range of contexts. This variation may be due to varying sociogeographic and policy contexts. In any case, as Kras (2014) argues, the redemption script “may need to be refined when considering the circumstances of sex offenders” (p. 93).

Against this backdrop, this article responds to scholars' calls to examine concepts of desistance generally and redemption scripts specifically, among culturally diverse cohorts, as well as to take heed of how rebiographing may differ according to social and historical context, and the role of culture, "race" and/or ethnicity in the desistance process (Fader & Traylor, 2015; Farrall, 2016; Glynn, 2016; Marchetti & Daly, 2017; Stone, 2016; Sullivan, 2012; Veysey et al., 2013). It also contributes to the limited literature on identity transformation among convicted sex offenders. Harris (2017a) argues that an especially pertinent question is how individuals convicted of sexual offences and subject to punitive post-prison regimes – while they "shoulder a permanent label of 'sex offender'" (p. 3052; see also Kras, 2014) – construct desistance narratives. The current study contributes towards addressing these gaps, as it examines the experiences of A&TSI men designated as dangerous offenders under Queensland's *Dangerous Prisoners (Sexual Offenders) Act 2003 (DPSOA)*. Using Maruna's (2001) narrative theory of identity and the key elements of redemption scripts as the analytic framework, as well as giving consideration to Presser's (2008) categories of reform, stability and elastic narratives, it considers how A&TSI men desisting from serious sexual offending undertake narrative repair work and employ redemption scripts in rebiographing their lives. Crucially, it examines the role of A&TSI cultures in this process of rebiographing.

The remainder of the article is presented in four main parts. The following part provides an overview of the Cultural Mentoring Program, which formed the focus of the broader study on which the current study is based. Next, an outline of the methodological approach is provided. Following this, the key findings from the study and their significance in light of the background canvassed above are presented. Finally, the article considers the implications of the findings of the study in both theoretical and practical terms.

### **The Cultural Mentoring Program**

The broader research project from which this article stems involved an exploratory study of the Cultural Mentoring Program (CMP) in Townsville, Queensland, Australia (see XXXX, 2020). A&TSI men who have served a prison sentence in relation to sexual offences and have been released from prison under the *DPSOA* can participate in the program. Under the *DPSOA*, individuals who have been sentenced to prison for a serious sexual offence may be subject to either a continuing detention order or strict community-based supervision order at the conclusion of their sentence. Orders are for a minimum period of five years (see generally Freckleton & Keyzer, 2010; Hogg, 2014). ‘Serious’ sexual offences are defined under the *Act* as those involving violence, or committed against a child (or against a person who the prisoner believed to be a child). Offenders subject to the *DPSOA* are those deemed at unacceptable risk of sexual recidivism, and are subject to electronic monitoring, surveillance, close parole supervision, and intensive case management (Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney-General, 2016). To be clear, only those prisoners determined to be a high risk of reoffending are subject to these provisions under the *Act*. The most recent data published by Queensland Corrective Services ([QCS] 2018, p. 122) indicate that at 30 June 2018, 127 *DPSOA* offenders were under supervision in the community in Queensland. Statistics on the number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander *DPSOA* offenders in the community are, however, unavailable.

The geographical context is important to note here. Townsville is a regional location in far North Queensland with population of approximately 230,000, including a relatively substantial A&TSI population (8% according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Townsville is not the home community of most of the men relocated to this area under the *DPSOA*. Instead, the men are usually from remote island or mainland communities, and are relocated to Townsville to preclude contact with their victims, and to ensure that a range of services is available to assist the men in the community.

The CMP is therefore targeted to a cohort of extremely marginalized men. In collaboration with other Elders, and local community agencies, one Elder provides support to the men on a fee-for-service basis. QCS, the government department responsible for managing custodial facilities and the rehabilitation of prisoners within and following imprisonment in the state of Queensland, assists by identifying suitable offenders to participate in the program, but is not involved in the delivery or oversight of the CMP. All A&TSI men released under the *DPSOA* to the Townsville area are informed about the CMP, however, participation in the program is voluntary. Participants do not receive any formal benefit, such as reduced correctional supervision, from engaging with the program. Participants are informed about the CMP prior to or shortly after their release from prison, and can join the program any time following their release. The CMP involves six two-hour one-on-one individual mentoring sessions with an Elder, with the option of a further six sessions if requested by the participant and approved by QCS. The program content focuses specifically on spiritual and cultural mentorship, and involves reconnecting the men with aspects of their traditional cultures, in order to support their integration into the community and foster law-abiding behaviour. Participants are encouraged and supported to engage in activities to enhance their ties to culture, such as involvement in traditional ceremonies, A&TSI community events, and activities to reconnect the men with the land, such as canoeing, traditional fishing practices, and bushwalking. Elders in the program also inform participants on areas of cultural knowledge, such as traditional arts and crafts, and the men's tribes and family histories (see XXXX, 2020). The specific activities provided to each participant vary according to their needs; the Elders offer an unstructured, individualised response on this basis.

A weekly peer support group in the Townsville community, which provides guidance, support and mentorship about relationships and healthy living generally, is also available to any A&TSI

or non-A&TSI man in the community. The existence of this group is important to note, as in some instances it provides an avenue of support – and of deepening and continuing cultural learning - alongside participation in the CMP. Some of the men interviewed for this study had taken part in both the CMP and the peer support group, and sometimes spoke in broader terms of the support and assistance they had received from participating in both of these measures.

### **Research design and methodology**

The broader research project from which this article stems was overseen by a Steering Committee, which included A&TSI representation. This was critical to ensuring that the project was undertaken in a culturally appropriate manner. The methodological design for the study was qualitative; it examined the beliefs, experiences and knowledges of those involved in the CMP to develop a “sympathetic understanding and explanation of reality” (Weber in Bayens & Roberson, 2011, p. 24). Specifically, the research was phenomenological, in that it examined the participants’ own understandings (Pompili, 2010) of their reintegration and desistance processes in the context of the CMP. Qualitative methods are best-placed to provide rich insights into the lived experiences of individuals. The research was interested in particular in examining how the CMP shaped offenders’ narratives about their own identities, and how (re)connecting with culture encouraged and shaped the formation of narratives about past, present and future law-abiding selves.

### ***Data collection***

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with A&TSI offenders who were currently participating in or had recently participated in the CMP (n = 14 interviews with 11 individuals). Offenders were recruited via a mix of purposive and convenience sampling (i.e.

individuals were recruited into the study on the basis that they were available to take part (Gray, 2009)). They were informed about the research and invited to participate by either CMP program staff, or a designated probation and parole officer. In all cases, prospective participants were informed about the research verbally and provided with a copy of the Participant Information and Consent Form to inform their decision about whether to participate in the study.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and one-on-one with an interviewer. Interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each (range = 20 minutes to one hour). Marchetti and Daly (2017) likewise found that their interviews with A&TSI offenders were shorter than might be expected. They argue that this may be due to the social constraints that A&TSI interviewees may feel when being interviewed by a non-A&TSI person. It has been documented that due to cultural differences, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander interviewees can have a tendency to:

...say 'yes' or 'no' by default or stay...silent when they do not fully understand a question or explanation due to embarrassment, to say 'yes' when they mean 'no', to respond to questions based on what they perceive the interlocutor may expect to hear - often assuming that the first of a range of options given to them is the preferred one, and to experience shame when being 'put on the spotlight' through a direct or sensitive question (Perales, Baffour, & Mitrou, 2015, p. 15).

In the current study, however, participants were asked open-ended questions to circumvent such issues. Furthermore, interviews with CMP participants were either conducted by a member of the research team (the first author) or by an Indigenous male Research Assistant who was recruited and trained for this purpose. This was an important element of the study as it enabled the A&TSI men to opt to be interviewed either by an A&TSI or non-A&TSI (i.e.



white Australian) researcher depending on their personal preference. The benefit of such an approach is that participants could be interviewed by a cultural “insider” or “outsider” according to their wishes. As noted above, three participants opted to be interviewed by both. This is an unusual occurrence, and one for which the research team had not prepared. Nonetheless, it resulted in an unexpected check on validity, as the research team was able to compare the interview transcripts of these three participants, and determine that the contents of each of the interviews was very similar. This suggests that in these three cases at least, participants were equally comfortable being interviewed by the A&TSI and non-A&TSI researchers. While it is impossible to know whether this would have been the case for the other interviewees, it may also reflect the fact that this group of men has divulged their story so many times, in so many different fora (e.g. mandated therapy, correctional supervision), that they are comfortable doing so, irrespective of the cultural identity of the interviewer. While an average interview length of 45 minutes is on the shorter side, participants tended to answer the questions asked of them quite directly, rather than discussing tangential or unrelated material, as can often occur in qualitative interviews (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). This may reflect a form of deference to the interviewer consonant with other forms of deference identified by Perales et al. (2015, p. 15). Rather than limiting the quality and validity of the data, however, in the current study this resulted in a wealth of interview material captured in a shorter space of time.

In terms of content, the interviews focused on whether and how the CMP assisted the reintegration and desistance processes of the offenders involved in it. The questions were devised to illuminate aspects of the conceptual framework in this regard – to test how the narratives of this under-studied population aligned with Maruna’s (2001) redemption script. For example, offenders were asked: Has being in the CMP brought about a change in the way you view your past behaviour? How? Does the CMP help you see yourself as separate from

your offence? How? and Has being in the CMP prevented you from reoffending do you think? How? (For a full copy of the interview schedules, see XXXX, 2020).

### ***Data analysis***

As audio-recording was not consented to by interviewees, handwritten notes were taken, then typed into an MS Word document. Summaries of interviews were entered into qualitative data analysis software program NVIVO. All transcripts were read through multiple times in order for familiarization to occur (Caulfield & Hill, 2014; Grbich, 2013). A process of deductive and inductive coding was then undertaken in NVIVO. The data were coded deductively (i.e. categorized according to pre-determined themes – in this case, the “key plot devices” of the redemption script (Maruna, 2001)) and inductively (i.e. according to new factors that emerged as relevant to narrative repair work but did not reflect the documented elements of the redemption script) (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Finally a thematic analysis, which explored the views and experiences of participants (Caulfield & Hill, 2014), as well as convergences and divergences across these (Caulfield & Hill, 2014; Mason, 2018), was undertaken to illuminate this conceptual framework. Members of the Steering Committee, including the key Elder who delivers the CMP, were provided with an opportunity to comment on draft findings from the project as they emerged. This was important to ensuring not only that findings were presented in a culturally appropriate way, but that the findings were presented accurately from a cultural perspective – i.e. that the non-A&TSI researchers had not misinterpreted the data due to a lack of cultural knowledge.

### ***Ethics***

The research was approved by XXXX University's Human Research Ethics Committee (approval #1600001093) and by the QCS Research Committee. Given that participants had been incarcerated in relation to sexual offending, ensuring the confidentiality of interviewees was paramount. Participants are therefore referred to by use of the generic descriptor "CMP participant" to ensure that no individual participant's responses can be pieced together from quoted material.

### *The participants*

CMP participants who provided their age were aged between 34 and 53 years, with an average age of 42. While not all were comfortable discussing their offending and incarceration histories, most of the men revealed having completed multiple and/or lengthy prison sentences, having served between five and 18 years in prison as a result of their most recent conviction for sexual offending, with a mean time served of approximately 10 years. Participants who revealed their release dates had been released from prison between two and nine years prior to the interview; most had completed the CMP between one and three years previously. While most of the men did not report having been incarcerated previously in relation to sexual offending, many had been incarcerated previously, either as young people or adults, for other violent and non-violent crimes. In the main they therefore did not appear to be sexual "specialists". However, as noted above, individuals subject to the *DPSOA* have been convicted of a "serious" sexual offence – that is, one involving violence and/or perpetrated against a child. All those willing to disclose their treatment history reported having completed sex offender treatment in prison. The men had varying connections to their traditional cultures, with some having been involved in cultural activities as youngsters in their home communities, others learning about culture for the first time in prison, and a third group connecting to culture for the first time via the CMP.

It would be difficult, although not impossible, for individuals subject to the *DPSOA* to reoffend, particularly in the initial months following their release from prison. As noted above, those subject to the *DPSOA* are electronically monitored, subject to round-the-clock surveillance, required to report to a parole officer daily in the first instance, required to reside in specifically designated accommodation, and compelled to participate in intensive therapeutic treatment. Some of these conditions ease over time, with individuals being surveilled less frequently and required to report to parole less often. The men in the study were therefore all “primary desisters” in that they had not reoffended following their release from prison. In the main they also presented as “secondary desisters” – i.e. presented identity narratives incompatible with offending (Liem & Richardson, 2014; McNeill & Maruna, 2007). The men were engaged in “assisted desistance” (Farrall, 2016; McNeill & Maruna, 2007) – that is, they were or had been engaged in a program designed to support them to (re)integrate into the community after prison, with the corollary aim of fostering their desistance from crime.

### **Towards redemption: Narratives of desistance**

In contrast to Sullivan’s (2012) findings on A&TSI desisters, and Harris’s (2017b) and Maruna’s (2016) observations about desistance from sexual offending, the narratives of the men in the current study adhered to the contours of the redemption script, albeit with some interesting and important differences. These are discussed in the remainder of this section.

#### ***Reconnecting to the true Warrior self***

While the men did articulate a version of the “true self” or “real me”, this narrative work was done on a *cultural* and *collective* rather than individual basis. Only one participant described discovering a true self as envisaged by Maruna (2001), stating that by “looking into himself”

he came to “realize that *I’m not one of those guys* that do that stuff”, and that he was in the process of “becom[ing] a changed person” (italics added). All other participants had undertaken identity work involving the discovery of an abstract, cultural “true self” rather than an individual self as articulated by Maruna (2001). For the men in the study, a non-offending self was explicitly a *cultural* one, in which they understood and practised culture, and were recognized within that culture.

A key aspect of this identity work involved evoking the archetype of the Warrior. The Warrior refers to the traditional masculine role in A&TSI communities – of men who are strong, who are protectors and providers, and leaders in their communities, as the keepers of particular knowledges and those responsible for passing on cultural knowledges and practices.

Many men in the program had clearly adopted the symbol of the Warrior, which is a key concept in the delivery of the CMP, and used it to explain how they had come to see themselves. One described the program preparing him to “becom[e] a man as Warrior”, and others spoke of their desires “to be a provider for children and family, the need to become a Warrior”, and to “becom[e] a Warrior again and becoming a father figure in the family”. For one participant, the Warrior represented a connection to family and ancestors, and “is a spiritual way”. Others did not mention the Warrior motif per se but spoke in more general terms about developing a strong, positive masculine identity. The men acknowledged that the traditional male role in A&TSI communities has been disrupted, with one stating that “Mothers and grandmothers now play the role of father in Indigenous families. We need to get this role back”. In this context, they spoke of their desire to become that “strong Warrior, protector, provider” again. The Warrior was thus clearly identified by the men as a positive model of masculinity, while offending and being in prison was described in negative terms. As one of the men put it: “If you want to be *that man* or *this man* – the Warrior – it’s your choice”. By evoking the Warrior, the men created identity narratives that allowed them to adhere to an image of themselves as

having always been good – at least “deep down” (Maruna 2001: x). The discovery of the “old me” or “unspoiled identity” (Maruna, 2001, p. 89) is an explicitly *cultural* undertaking, extending to encompass not only the men’s pre-offending selves but to the thousands of strong, pre-colonial Warrior men.

In addition to evoking the Warrior archetype, the men positioned their ancestors, families, and/or cultures (rather than individual selves) as unspoiled entities, constructing their true selves as inherently and indelibly connected to them. The men were eager for the interviewers to understand that while the CMP may teach them about respect, spirituality, healthy relationships, and so on, such teachings are *an extension* of what they have been taught in their own families and communities. For example, one participant acknowledged that he learned about respect in the CMP, but stressed that such teachings *build on* what he was taught about respect from a young age. Another discussed cultural knowledge that “has been handed down for those who kept on it and didn’t let go”, stating “that’s who I am – a cultural person – and [this] gives me pride and satisfaction of who I am”. Here, the participant presents his traditional culture as continuous, and this connection to an unspoiled, traditional cultural identity is framed by him as a source of positive identity. A fellow CMP participant spoke in similar terms, describing having been spiritual as a child, and having “learned spiritual ways as a child”. This participant acknowledged that the CMP “helped me to feel the spiritual way *again*”. In doing so, he positions his traditional spirituality as enduring – something that may be *built on*, but not discovered for the first time, in the CMP. The men thus sought to position themselves as connected to a continuous set of cultural values and embedded in a continuous cultural infrastructure – again echoing the unspoiled self.

One participant in Howell’s (2008; italics added) study of Canadian Aboriginal desisters similarly evoked a collective, cultural true self in explaining his move away from substance abuse and offending:

You know, everything is about the culture, because, to me *my culture is who I am. That is my identity*, you know....Because sticking needles in my arms, and drinking, smoking dope, you know, and popping pills is *not who I am, you know. My people never did that. My people lived off the land and uh, they were healthy and they loved each other. And uh, that is who I am*, you know....So, the culture opened me up to who I am. (p. 114)

Howell does not discuss her findings in relation to the redemption script or the discovery of a true self. However, it is important to note that this finding was also reflected in her study, as it suggests that for Indigenous offenders, locating a cultural rather than individual true self may be an avenue of narrative repair that ought to be fostered by professionals who work with this population.

There are a number of potential explanations for this key finding. Bracken et al. (2009) argue that this form of identity work might be considered a type of resistance by Indigenous offenders in colonized societies. Rather than responding to structural racism in self-destructive ways, they argue that retraditionalization programs provide “a way to see desistance not in terms of conforming to the larger society’s view of Aboriginal people, but rather for each to see themselves as an Aboriginal person who is becoming consistent with his [*sic*] ‘true’ culture” (p. 74). In actively seeking to align themselves with a long history and cultural identity, the men implicitly cast their crimes as inconsequential in the “bigger picture”.

It is also possible that for A&TSI men who have sexually offended and been classified as dangerous under the *DPSOA*, it is all but impossible to lay claim to an individual good self. The stigma associated with being Indigenous, perpetrating sexual violence, and being designated a dangerous sexual offender may limit the potential for the discovery of an unspoiled self so profoundly that the men opt instead for a mythical or incorporeal version of

this by evoking aspects of A&TSI cultures such as the Warrior. An alternative explanation is that in undertaking this type of narrative repair work, the men are simply making use of the cultural scripts available to them.

Another possible explanation is that the men are parroting the “therapy speak” (Maruna, 2001, p. 177) to which they are exposed in the CMP and/or other programs. This is undoubtedly at least partly the case. However, the men’s adoption of the Warrior motif in particular was so consistent and strong that it has unquestionably been woven into their narratives of desistance, regardless of its origins. Moreover, the interview questions put to the men were open-ended and gave them wide scope to make sense of their journeys how they saw fit. They therefore could have constructed their true selves in any number of ways but almost invariably chose to do so by reference to elements of their cultures. The men were not asked any questions about the Warrior; if their references to this archetype are “therapy speak”, then the “therapy” has been particularly effective, at least in terms of shaping their desistance narratives. It is worth reiterating here that previous scholarship has highlighted the importance of the development of an identity grounded in Indigenous culture for Indigenous desisters, irrespective of whether study participants had been involved in correctional or other retraditionalization programs (e.g. Hodgson & Heckbert, 1994; Hundleby et al., 2009; Sullivan, 2012).

On the surface this appears to contradict Sullivan’s (2012) conclusion that the narratives of Australian Aboriginal desisters do not follow the plot contours of the redemption script. However, this finding may actually complement Sullivan’s work. Like Sullivan, the current study found that in the main, the A&TSI men did not identify true selves as imagined by the redemption script. Rather, they evoked an abstract, collective self – more akin to an archetype. The nascent literature on the gendered nature of desistance and narrative repair work (see e.g. Runggay, 2004) may help make sense of this finding. In Stone’s (2016) study, women desisters evoked the archetype of the “good mother” in a similar way. This key finding thus builds on



the redemption script as originally elucidated, to show how variations of it may be employed by diverse offender groups. This is important as it suggests that there is another tool in the desister's arsenal – an abstract or archetypal self that might be drawn on in the search for a true, good self.

### ***Trauma, loss and the bad “It”***

Most of the men pointed to their experiences of trauma and/or loss as the bad or external “It” or cause of their offending. In a small number of instances, the men nominated substance misuse or mental health problems as contributors to their offending. However, in the main, they cast their experiences of sexual abuse and other forms of childhood violence, abuse and neglect as giving rise to their later perpetration of sexual violence as well as their limited understanding of the harmfulness of their actions. For example, one stated that he “has witnessed a lot of bad things in life, and something bad happened to me too”. This participant described being raised in a home in which he had been exposed to violence and substance abuse, and in which his mother's partner had been abusive towards the whole family. As he understands it, this level of violence was normalized; he described “growing up thinking it was OK to bash your partner”. Another described a similar context that informed his later criminal behaviour. In addition to witnessing a high level of violence in his community as a child, he “thought it was okay for me because of how I grew up. Even growing up and seeing your parents arguing all the time and you think it's okay to bash women up or take advantage of women”. This reflects Farmer et al.'s (2012) finding that early life difficulties may form a tragic foreshadowing scene in a desister's redemption script, offering them a natural starting point from which to rebiograph their life, and against which to contrast their later success as desisters.

Nonetheless, and somewhat paradoxically, the men took ownership over their offending histories, and claimed personal responsibility for their actions. This was a strong theme to emerge from the interviews. The men explained their sexual offending as the result of poor choices on their part: “I made a bad choice. I wasn’t thinking straight”; “I made a mistake”; “I’ve been choosing the wrong things”; “I know what’s right from wrong and I made the wrong decision”. In doing so, the men again presented “stability narratives” (Presser, 2008); their crimes were cast as a result of poor *choice* rather than poor *character*; that is, as fleeting aberrations from their true selves.

This suggests that a midpoint exists between externalizing blame for offending by identifying a “bad It” and taking full individual responsibility for offending, as was the case in both Sullivan’s (2012) and Marchetti and Daly’s (2017) studies. In the current study, the men both identified a breeding ground or context for their offending while simultaneously accepting responsibility for it (see also Kras & Blasko, 2016, p. 1746). On the surface it is tempting to argue that the sexual nature of the offending of the men in the current study might account for this difference. It is possible that the shame experienced by sexual offenders may cause them to attribute blame for their offending to an external or environmental cause. Certainly there is a vast literature showing that sexual offenders commonly deny or minimize their offending at least partly due to the shame and stigma associated with sexual violence perpetration (Farmer et al., 2015; Harris, 2017a; Waldram, 2010). This could explain the difference between the current study and Sullivan’s (2012) study, which focused on non-sexual offending. However, given that the men in the current study noted childhoods in which they were exposed to both sexual and domestic violence, it is striking that the desisters in Marchetti and Daly’s study, *who had perpetrated domestic violence*, did not make reference to childhood experiences of witnessing domestic violence as having given rise to their offending. It is of course possible that the perpetration of *domestic* violence is not considered as shameful as the perpetration of

*sexual* violence, although given that the two are often interrelated, this is somewhat doubtful and requires further exploration in future research. In any case, it suggests that there is nuance in terms of A&TSI desistance narratives across various offender populations.

Strikingly, the men in the study did not point to colonization as the bad “It”. Given the enduring public discourse in Australia about the role of colonization as a causal factor for high rates of violence (including sexual violence) in some A&TSI communities (O'Brien, 2010; Smallbone, Rayment-McHugh, & Smith, 2013), this finding is unexpected. It is even more striking given that a key teaching of the CMP is that the men in the program must live by two different systems of law as a result of colonization. As the Elders who deliver the program explained, the men must obey both “white man’s law” and A&TSI LORE (traditional worldviews that set out the relationships between humans and their environments, and the obligations that characterize these relationships (Spillman, 2017)). In other words, the CMP gives participants some scope to understand their actions in the context of the effects of colonization on A&TSI communities. However, this was an explanatory framework consistently, albeit implicitly, rejected by the men interviewed for the study.

It is difficult to know how to interpret this finding. It may reflect the Aboriginal cultural value of autonomy, as identified by Macdonald (1986; see further Sullivan, 2012). Both Sullivan (2012) and Marchetti and Daly (2017) argue that their Aboriginal participants’ strong statements of personal responsibility for their offending are an expression of the value of autonomy, or independence within the context of an extended kinship system. Another possible explanation is that by disavowing the notion that colonization has given rise to high levels of sexual violence, the men are resisting the characterization of A&TSI communities in negative terms. By claiming personal responsibility and constructing their offending in terms of individual choice, the men implicitly position themselves as aberrations or outliers among their A&TSI cultures rather than as symptomatic of them. Their narratives in this regard might,

therefore, be considered to reflect resistance as much as desistance (see also Bracken et al., 2009).

### *Personal efficacy and projectivity*

The men also took fierce ownership of their current and future law-abiding selves, displaying a sense of optimism about the future and a strong sense of self-efficacy. Although the men often acknowledged that the CMP had supported their desistance in some way, most were eager to disabuse the interviewers of any notion that the program would prevent them from reoffending. Instead, they construed their desistance as a result of their own choices and actions. For example, one of the men explained in his interview that the CMP would not prevent reoffending. Rather, he would not reoffend now because “I love my freedom and I don’t want to jeopardize it”. This participant claimed to be unconcerned about the possibility of reoffending, because offending was something he chose in the past. By extension, it is something he simply plans not to choose again. Others stated that the program “makes you think – but it’s up to us [to not reoffend]”, that “keeping out of trouble is up to you” and that “it’s your choice to walk the road”. Men in the study did not identify an external savior (e.g. program or person) responsible for recognizing their true potential, but rather took credit for their own desistance; none of their narratives could be considered to reflect the discovery of a “diamond in the rough” (Maruna, 2001).

This finding is largely unsurprising on a number of grounds. First, the CMP delivers to participants a strong message about taking ownership of their future. Participants’ expressions of responsibility for their law-abiding selves may therefore reflect the Elders’ message to the men in the program, and their internalization of it. As previous scholarship (see, for example, Halsey, 2006) has identified, the subjects of correctional programming often internalize such

responsibilizing messages. Second, it has been well-documented that desisters typically highlight their own personal agency and contribution to their desistance (Harris, 2017b; Sullivan 2012) – or in Maruna’s (2001) terms, display a sense of optimism about personal control over their own destinies. Third, this finding reflects both Sullivan’s (2012) and Marchetti and Daly’s (2017) finding that Aboriginal offenders expressed a keen sense of autonomy in their desistance narratives.

In any case, the men’s view of themselves as desisters whose success is largely a result of their own actions, resulted in many of the study participants identifying themselves as uniquely well-positioned to give back to their families and communities. Indeed, most of the men discussed their wishes to use their own experiences to help future generations in their communities or families – or to undertake generative projects. For example, one of the men discussed at length his desire to perform generative activities, and claimed that “I made a mistake but now it’s time for me to be a leader – to my nieces, nephews, family and community”, later describing in more general terms his desire to “help the younger generation”. A fellow CMP participant explained that following his participation in the program, he aspired to “be a good role model for kids”. Another spoke of his desire “to help out the younger generation”, and more specifically, his own niece. When asked in his interview what could be improved about the CMP, this participant recommended that it include a more explicit focus on helping others, particularly the younger generation, claiming:

Right now, a lot of brothers are struggling [with] where they [are] heading and more urgently it’s about young kids who are our future, not only here in Townsville, whether they are Indigenous or not.

For this participant, this is especially vital since “young people who offend are crying out for help”.

For some, generative projects were explicitly cultural. For example, one CMP participant described seeing it as his “job” to teach the younger generation about culture, and stated: “Some boys have lost their culture. I have to teach them the didgeridoo”. Another similarly wants to join a dance troupe and share his skills and knowledge, since “most Indigenous people today in cities aren’t deeply involved in their culture”. Another participant spoke about wanting to help others, and share with others what he had learned in the CMP about “physical, emotional and spiritual and mental wellbeing”. This reflects Hundleby et al.’s (2007) finding that the Canadian Aboriginal women in their study expressed a desire to pass on the cultural knowledge they had acquired as part of their own desistance journeys.

Two key points must be made in connection to the above discussion. The first is that the peer support group described above, while not the focus of the current study, is important in this context as it provides the men with an opportunity to *practise* generativity and to rehearse and perform the role of the “professional ex” (Brown, 1991). The men’s actions in mentoring members of the support group suggest that they have reframed their offending pasts into a source of wisdom and authority, on which they can now draw to help others (Le Bel et al., 2015; Maruna, 2001). In this way the group gives desisters an opportunity to practise generativity, thereby “legitimising the person’s claim to having changed” (McNeill & Maruna, 2007, p. 231).

This occurred despite the very strict limitations imposed on the men under the *DPSOA*, and the fact that while they may possess (or at least profess) a will to generativity, they are afforded few opportunities to enact generative projects. In Sullivan’s (2012) terms, the men lack opportunities to turn imagination (“projectivity”) into action (“generativity”). The men’s optimism in this regard may therefore be misplaced; as Maruna (2001) concedes, redemption scripts rely on desisters adopting “willful, cognitive distortion” and bear “almost no resemblance to the ugly realities of the ex-offenders’ lives” (p. 9; see further Colvin, 2015). In

this context, the peer support group becomes crucial; it provides one of very few spaces in which the men might demonstrate generativity, and discover “reason and purpose in the bleakest of life histories” (Maruna, 2001, pp. 9–10). As Rungay (2004, p. 419) notes, very disadvantaged groups of offenders commonly lack the opportunities to practise the mundane routines associated with desistance. This is particularly true for those who have sexually offended. Given the restrictions placed on them in the post-prison context, sex offenders typically lack opportunities for the “moral inclusion” (Maruna, 2011) or acceptance by others that accompanies desistance (Fox, 2015; Kras, 2014). This supports Bullock et al.’s (2019) finding that even in the confines of prison, where inmates’ prospects for enacting their intentions to desist are severely restricted, programs can and should provide opportunities for generativity - for “making good in unpromising places” (p. 406).

Second, the support group provides an opportunity for others to *witness* these generative acts and reflect back to the individual a belief in his desistant identity. As Maruna et al. (2004) have argued, “desistance may be best facilitated when the desisting person’s change in behavior is recognized by others and reflected back to him” (p. 274). In this vein, a couple of participants expressed wanting their families and communities to witness and recognize their imagined generative selves. As one stated, “I want to be somebody – to my nieces and nephews and the wider community. I want them to think I am a good person and see changes in me”. Another said: “I want to help grow up [raise] my children and grandchildren. They won’t know me or have respect for me [otherwise]”. Given that for most individuals subject to the *DPSOA*, opportunities to enact generativity in one’s family or community are limited or non-existent, the support group plays a vital role in providing witnesses to the men’s budding generative selves.

## **Conclusion**

The narratives of the A&TSI men in the current study largely reflected the key plot elements of the redemption script in general terms. However, there were some important differences in the more finely-grained detail of their scripts. Specifically, the men constructed explicitly cultural true selves and often, explicitly cultural generative goals. They largely eschewed notions of external forces influencing their desistance, instead taking ownership of their offending and desistance. Inasmuch as they pointed to any external influence on their offending, they disavowed colonization as an explanatory factor, instead contextualizing their offending as a result of their own trauma, and the normalization of violence and abuse in their upbringings. Their narratives were strongly optimistic, even in the face of often devastating histories and hopeless current circumstances.

These findings extend Maruna's (2001) redemption script into new territory and add to the emerging literature on internal desistance processes among diverse offender populations. They suggest that the narrative tools available to desisters are broader than those of individual life stories, and underscore Maruna's (2016a) more recent point that "redemption scripts are not written in a vacuum" (p. 294). Findings suggest that among the extremely disenfranchised and disadvantaged, including the most profoundly affected by colonization and stigma, when narrating individual good selves may be difficult, a more abstract cultural good self may be possible. It may seem surprising on the surface that offenders are able to craft optimistic narratives in such bleak circumstances; a number of scholars have suggested that structural disadvantage faced by certain groups may impede attempts at internal desistance (Kras & Blasko, 2016, p. 1750). It stands to reason, however, that these are precisely the conditions under which such scripts are most likely to emerge. This underscores Calverley's (2016, 2013) work, which indicates that desisters adopt prosocial identities from those available to them, depending on the sociocultural context in which reintegration efforts take place. In such



circumstances, desistance narratives may become both an individual coping mechanism and a form of resistance (Bracken et al., 2009). In contrast to Fader and Traylor's (2015) concern that "the interplay between racial and criminal stigma may make it more difficult for people of color to craft desistance narratives" (p. 252), the current study shows not only that A&TSI men convicted of serious sexual offences were able to do so, but that they drew heavily on aspects of their traditional cultures to do so. Racial stigma undoubtedly hampers desistance in some contexts (Glynn, 2016, 2014); however, culture may contemporaneously be a rich resource for crafting law-abiding future selves. In practical terms the current study therefore indicates ways in which criminal justice professionals might support desistance narratives among Indigenous offenders. (Although it should not be assumed that all Indigenous individuals will welcome a focus on culture (see Heckbert & Turkington, 2001; Howell, 2008; Hundleby, et al. (2007)).

The findings of the current study challenge those of Sullivan (2012), whose research indicated that the desistance narratives of Aboriginal offenders do not typically follow the elements of the redemption script. There are a number of possible explanations for this difference. First, A&TSI cultures are diverse, and it is possible that the particular cohorts in these studies are sufficiently different from one another to produce varying results. A related explanation might be that Sullivan's (2012) participants were residing in their home communities at the time of the research. In the current study, most of the men had been prevented from returning to their home communities, and had instead been relocated to Townsville. This relocation may have profound effects on the ways in which the men make sense of their circumstances. As Farrall (2016) has argued, drawing on existential geography, the spatial dynamics of desistance processes ought to be paid greater attention.

Understanding the findings of this study through the lens of existential geography may be particularly relevant given the strong ties that A&TSI individuals often have to land and Country. As Blagg (2011) notes, "Aboriginal people from remote communities taken far from

home to jails in cities often “cry for country” and exhibit a range of emotional problems linked to separation” (p.146). However, it may be the case that dislocation from their home communities actually allows for identity change, as the men have access to new audiences and a new environment in which to imagine their future selves. While this was not the focus of the current research, it may help explain differences between the current study and previous research, and undoubtedly could be afforded attention in future research.

A third possible explanation is that the sexual nature of the offending by the men in the current study gave rise to a particular form of desistance narrative that was not the case for the non-sexual offenders in Sullivan’s (2012) study. As noted earlier, the shame associated with sexual violence perpetration in particular may foster particular types of desistance narratives. Such an explanation would, however, require further interrogation. Most “sexual offenders”, including those in the current study, are not specialist offenders, but rather tend to perpetrate a variety of sexual and non-sexual crimes (Wortley & Smallbone, 2014). The distinction between the cohorts in the current study and Sullivan’s (2012) study may therefore be somewhat artificial. However, those subject to the *DPSOA* are deemed serious sexual offenders and are governed as such, with all the attendant stigmatization that such a designation incurs. It may therefore be the case that the *official response* to the sexual nature of the offending, rather than the nature of the offending *per se*, gives rise to the difference between the current study and Sullivan (2012).

A final point is not only that A&TSI desisters construct narratives embedded in particular cultures, but that *all desisters* do. In other words, Anglo Celtic offenders likewise draw on cultural scripts when they adopt individualized desistance narratives. Such narratives have always been cultural; this has simply not yet been sufficiently recognized or interrogated in the extant literature. This key point, and the others outlined above, build on the nascent literature

on desistance narratives of non-white populations and thus make an important contribution to this under-researched topic.

### **Limitations**

A number of limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings outlined above. The non-probability sampling methodology, while commonly-utilized in research of this nature (Farmer et al., 2015; Harris, 2014), and largely unavoidable given the topic and research population, means the findings are tentative. Further, the cross-sectional design of the study means that data were only captured at a single point in time. This is not ideal in desistance research, where longitudinal studies may provide deeper insights, given that desistance journeys are rarely linear. However, the study is the first to shed light on the desistance narratives of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander men convicted of sexual offending, and it therefore begins to address a critical gap in the literature. As is the case with any study of desistance, it is difficult to say with certainty that the desisters are truly desisters. However, in the current case, it can be assumed with confidence that the men in the study were not actively reoffending, given the limitations on their movements and level of surveillance to which they are subject. Finally, the men had been relatively recently released, meaning that their desistance over the longer term was not able to be examined (see Harris, 2014). It is, however, noteworthy that redemption narratives emerged comparatively quickly for the men. Future research should build on that presented here, noting these methodological limitations, to contribute further to our understanding of this topic.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors gratefully acknowledge XXXXX for funding this research, as well as Queensland Corrective Services and the Cultural Mentoring Program for their support of the project. They would like to thank all those who participated in the research, and to acknowledge the important contribution made by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participants. They are also grateful for the research assistance of Dr Justine Hotten in the early stage of the project and of the Research Assistant who assisted with data collection on the Cultural Mentoring Program.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **References**

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2016). *2016 Census QuickStats: Townsville*. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Bayens, G., & Roberson, C. (2011). *Criminal justice research methods: Theory and practice, Second edition*. Boca Raton: Taylor & Francis.
- Bracken, D., Deane, L., & Morrisette, L. (2009). Desistance and social marginalization: The case of Canadian Aboriginal offenders. *Theoretical Criminology*, 13(1), 61-78.
- Brown, J. (1991). The professional ex-: An alternative for exiting the deviant career. *The Sociological Quarterly* 32(2), 219-230.
- Bullock, K., Bunce, A., & McCarthy, D. (2019). Making good in unpromising places: The development and cultivation of redemption scripts among long-term prisoners. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 63(3), 406-423.
- Calverley, A. (2013). *Cultures of desistance: Rehabilitation, reintegration and ethnic minorities* London: Routledge. .
- Caulfield, L., & Hill, J. (2014). *Criminological research for beginners: A student's guide*. London: Routledge.

- Deane, L., Bracken, D., & Morrissette, L. (2007). Desistance within an urban Aboriginal gang. *Probation Journal, 54*(2), 125-141.
- DiCicco-Bloom, B., & Crabtree, B. (2006). The qualitative research interview. *Medical Education, 40*, 314-321.
- Fader, J., & Traylor, L. (2015). Dealing with difference in desistance theory: The promise of intersectionality for new avenues of inquiry. *Sociology Compass, 9*(4), 247-260.
- Farmer, M., Beech, A., & Ward, T. (2012). Assessing desistance in child molesters: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 27*(5), 930-950.
- Farmer, M., McAlinden, A.-M., & Maruna, S. (2015). Understanding desistance from sexual offending: A thematic review of research findings. *Probation Journal, 62*(4), 320-335.
- Farrall, S. (2016). UNDERSTANDING DESISTANCE IN AN ASSISTED CONTEXT: Key findings from tracking progress on probation. In J. Shapland, S. Farrall & A. Bottoms (Eds.), *Global perspectives on desistance: Reviewing what we know and looking to the future* (pp. 187-203). London: Routledge.
- Finestone, H. (1967). Reformation and recidivism among Italian and Polish criminal offenders. *American Journal of Sociology, 72*, 575-588.
- Fox, K. (2014). Restoring the social: Offender reintegration in a risky world. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, 38*(3), 235-256.
- Fox, K. (2015). Theorizing community integration as desistance-promotion. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 42*(1), 82-94.
- Freckleton, I., & Keyzer, P. (2010). Indefinite detention of sex offenders and human rights: The Intervention of the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations. *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law, 17*(3), 345-354.
- Giordano, P., Cernkovich, S., & Rudolph, J. (2002). Gender, crime, and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation. *American Journal of Sociology, 107*(7), 990-1064.
- Glynn, M. (2014). *Black men, invisibility and crime: Towards a critical race theory of desistance*. London: Routledge.
- Glynn, M. (2016). Towards an intersectional model of desistance for black offenders. *Safer Communities, 15*(1), 24-32.
- Grbich, C. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: An introduction*. London: Sage.

- Haigh, Y. (2009). Desistance from crime: Reflections on the transitional experiences of young people with a history of offending. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 12(3), 307-322.
- Halsey, M. (2006). Negotiating conditional release: Juvenile narratives of repeat incarceration. *Punishment & Society* 8(2), 147-181.
- Halsey, M., & Deegan, S. (2012). Father and son: Two generations through prison. *Punishment & Society*, 14(3), 338-367.
- Harris, D. (2014). Desistance from sexual offending: Findings from 21 life history narratives. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 29(9), 1554-1578.
- Harris, D. (2017a). Desistance from sexual offending: Behavioral change without cognitive transformation. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 32(20), 3049-3070.
- Harris, D. (2017b). *Desistance from sexual offending: Narratives of retirement, regulation and recovery*: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Heckbert, D., & Turkington, D. (2001). *Turning points: A study of the factors related to the successful reintegration of Aboriginal offenders* Ottawa: Correctional Service Canada.
- Hodgson, M., & Heckbert, D. (1994). *HEALING, SPIRIT AND RECOVERY: Factors Associated With Successful Integration An Exploratory Study Examining the Lifestyles of Aboriginal Offenders Who Have Become Law-abiding Citizens*. Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada.
- Hogg, R. (2014). 'Only a pawn in their game': Crime, risk and politics in the preventive detention of Robert Fardon. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 3(3), 55-72.
- Howell, T. (2008). *The point of no return: Aboriginal offenders' journey towards a crime free life*. University of British Columbia Vancouver.
- Hsieh, H., & Shannon, S. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277-1288.
- Hughes, M. (1998). Turning points in the lives of young inner-city men forgoing destructive criminal behaviors: A qualitative study *Social Work Research*, 22(3), 143-151.
- Hundleby, J., Gfellner, B., & Racine, D. (2007). Desistance and identity change among Aboriginal females. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 7(3), 225-253.
- Kras, K. (2014). *Redemption or condemnation? A long-term follow-up of the desistance patterns of sex offenders* PhD. University of Missouri - St Louis, St Louis.

- Kras, K., & Blasko, B. (2016). Pathways to desistance among men convicted of sexual offenses: Linking post hoc accounts of offending behavior and outcomes. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 60(15), 1738-1755.
- Laws, D. R., & Ward, T. (2011). *Desistance from sex offending: Alternatives to throwing away the keys*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Le Bel, T., Burnett, R., Maruna, S., & Bushway, S. (2008). The 'chicken and egg' of subjective and social factors in desistance from crime. *European Journal of Criminology*, 5(2), 131-159.
- Le Bel, T., Richie, M., & Maruna, S. (2015). Helping others as a response to reconcile a criminal past: The role of the wounded healer in prisoner reentry programs. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 42(1), 108-120.
- Liem, M., & Richardson, N. (2014). The role of transformation narratives in desistance among released lifers. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 41(6), 692-712.
- Macdonald, G. (1986). *"The Koori way": The dynamics of cultural distinctiveness in settled Australia* PhD. University of Sydney Sydney.
- Marchetti, E., & Daly, K. (2017). Indigenous partner violence, Indigenous sentencing courts, and pathways to desistance. *Violence Against Women*, 23(12), 1513-1535.
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Maruna, S. (2016a). Desistance and restorative justice: It's now or never. *Restorative Justice: An International Journal*, 4(3), 289-301.
- Maruna, S. (2016b). *Self-narratives of desisting sex offenders: Where are the redemption scripts?* . Paper presented at American Society of Criminology annual meeting New Orleans.
- Maruna, S., Le Bel, T., Mitchell, N., & Naples, M. (2004). Pygmalion in the reintegration process: Desistance from crime through the looking glass. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 10(3), 271-281.
- Mason, J. (2018). *Qualitative researching, Third edition*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- McNeill, F., & Maruna, S. (2007). Giving up and giving back: Desistance, generativity and social work with offenders. In G. McIvor & P. Raynor (Eds.), *Developments in social work with offenders* (pp. 224-239). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Milner, R. (2017). *Desistance in men who have previously committed sexual offences: An exploration of the early processes* PhD. University of York, York.

- O'Brien, W. (2010). *Australia's response to sexualised or sexually abusive behaviours in children and young people*. Canberra: Australian Crime Commission.
- Perales, F., Baffour, B., & Mitrou, F. (2015). Ethnic differences in the quality of the interview process and implications for survey analysis: The case of Indigenous Australians. *PLoS One*, *10*(6), 1-20.
- Pompili, M. (2010). Exploring the phenomenology of suicide. *Suicide and life-threatening behavior*, *40*(3), 234-244.
- Presser, L. (2008). *Been a heavy life: Stories of violent men*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Queensland Corrective Services. (2018). *Annual report 2017-2018*. Brisbane: Queensland Corrective Services
- Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney-General. (2016). *Annual report 2015-2016*. Brisbane: Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney-General.
- Rocque, M., Posick, C., & Paternoster, R. (2016). Identities through time: An exploration of identity change as a cause of desistance. *Justice Quarterly*, *33*(1), 45-72.
- Rumgay, J. (2004). Scripts for safer survival: Pathways out of female crime. *The Howard Journal*, *43*, 405-419.
- Shover, N. (1996). *Great pretenders: pursuits and careers of persistent thieves*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Smallbone, S., Rayment-McHugh, S., & Smith, D. (2013). *Preventing youth sexual violence*. Brisbane: Queensland Department of Premier and Cabinet.
- Spillman, D. (2017). Coming home to place: Aboriginal lore and place-responsive pedagogy for transformative learning in Australian outdoor education. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*, *20*(1), 14-24.
- Stewart, L., Hamilton, E., Wilton, G., Cousineau, C., & Varrette, S. (2014). The effectiveness of the Tupiq Program for Inuit sex offenders. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, *59*(12), 1338-1357.
- Stone, R. (2016). DESISTANCE AND IDENTITY REPAIR: REDEMPTION NARRATIVES AS RESISTANCE TO STIGMA. *British Journal of Criminology*, *56*, 956-975.
- Sullivan, K. (2012). *Motivating and maintaining desistance from crime: Male Aboriginal serial offenders' experience of 'going good'* PhD. Australian National University Canberra.



- Veyesy, B., Martinez, D., & Christian, J. (2013). "Getting out:" A summary of qualitative research on desistance across the life course. In C. Gibson & M. Krohn (Eds.), *Handbook of life-course criminology: Emerging trends and directions for future research* (pp. 233-260). New York: Springer.
- Waldram, J. (2010). Moral agency, cognitive distortion, and narrative strategy in the rehabilitation of sexual offenders. *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology* 38(3), 251-274.
- Whyte, W. (2000a). The history of recovered people as wounded healers I: From Native America to the rise of the modern alcoholism movement. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* 18(1), 1-23.
- Whyte, W. (2000b). The history of recovered people as wounded healers II: The era of professionalization and specialization. *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 18(2), 1-25.
- Wortley, R., & Smallbone, S. (2014). A criminal careers typology of child sexual abusers. *Sexual Abuse: A Journal of Research and Treatment*, 26(6), 569-585.