This study explores how a group of women recently released from prison as parolees attempt to sustain their exit from deviant careers by constructing replacement selves. To examine this process, I analyze semi-structured interviews with female ex-offenders and show how they draw on work as a hook for change (Giordano et al. 2002) in their unfolding identity work. Contrary to traditional gendered scripts, these women view themselves as active participants in the world of work. Upon release not only do they desire to work to meet financial needs, but they also use employment as an avenue through which they begin to construct pro-social replacement selves. Drawing on longitudinal qualitative data, I point out that as time on the outside passed, many of the women continued to use work as a way to fashion new conventional selves despite their experiences with low-quality working conditions. I also provide evidence, however, that when women experience significant employment instability, they are unable to sustain their hopeful identity project and, instead, reengage their past deviant selves.

Introduction

Understanding the case of women is increasingly a focus for researchers examining crime and desistance (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Leverentz 2006; Uggen and Kruttschnitt 1998). For some time, criminologists have pointed out that women experience unique pathways into crime (Belknap and Holsinger 2006; Daly 1996; Heimer and DeCoster 1999). Hence, it is not surprising that researchers also identify that there are gendered pathways out of crime. In particular, a small number of observers explain how life-course transitions historically used to understand men’s desistance from crime may function in a different way for women (Laub and Sampson 2003; Leverentz 2006). Relatedly, some researchers establish how becoming a mother can function as a significant life-course event for women that lead them away from illegal or delinquent activity (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Kreager, Matsueda, and Erosheva 2010). Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002), for example, illustrate how motherhood might be a “hook for change” or a catalyst that
energizes “rather fundamental shifts in identity and changes in the meaning and desirability of deviant/criminal behavior” (p. 992).

Less explored in the literature are women’s experiences with work after leaving prison and returning to their communities. Although research firmly establishes the important role quality work plays in men’s lives post-incarceration and through the desistance process (Sampson and Laub 1993; Uggen 1999, 2000), it is less clear how or even if employment functions similarly for women. Undoubtedly, women’s extreme economic marginalization is central to understanding their offending patterns (Holtfreter, Reisig, and Morash 2004) and research provides evidence that reducing women’s economic marginalization with work simultaneously increases the likelihood of desistance and a successful reentry (Freudenberg et al. 2005; Holtfreter et al. 2004; Schram et al. 2006; Uggen and Kruttschnitt 1988). However, others have suggested (Giordano, et al. 2002; Visher and Travis 2003) it is possible that working plays a less fundamental role in women’s transition back into the community after spending time behind bars or out of illegal activity. For example, although women experience more financial hardships pre- and post-incarceration than similarly situated men (Snell and Morton 1999), they may also be more likely to find alternative sources of income, like an employed spouse or government support, to meet their basic needs. Relatedly “being” a worker may be a less important role women use to understand or shape their new, law-abiding, self-concept.

In this article, I parse out the role employment plays in women’s lives as they leave prison, return to their communities under the supervision of parole, and desist from criminal activity. Although some evidence suggests that working may play a less significant role in women’s reentry and desistance efforts than men’s, the data I present in this article provide evidence of its critical role in women’s lives during this period. Drawing on the recent work of criminologists (Giordano et al. 2002; Maruna 2001) who examine the role of cognitive or identity transformations in the desistance process, I demonstrate that, following their release from prison, women use employment as a hook to craft pro-social identities. In this, however, I also elucidate how the passage of time on the outside affects their use of work to construct replacement selves.

Women, Employment, and Desistance

Work is often at the center of researcher’s examination of desistance. Substantial evidence indicates that being employed is a key variable in understanding desistance from crime. Researchers commonly use theories of social control to conceptualize the process. For example, Sampson and Laub (Laub and Sampson 2003; Sampson and Laub 1993) posit that attachment to a conventional institution exerts a strong constraining influence on individual
behavior. This theory of social control predicts that as individuals build up informal bonds to work (as well as to other pro-social roles and institutions), they develop a stake in conventionality which results in increased costs to and decreased likelihood of offending.

A major criticism of social control theories, and exogenous theory more broadly, is that it largely disregards the capacity of individuals to exercise their own agency within an existing social structure. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002), for example, maintain that social control theories “tends to bracket off the ‘up front’ work accomplished by actors themselves—as they make initial moves toward, help to craft, and work to sustain a different way of life” (p. 992). This criticism prompted these researchers to develop and test a theory of desistance rooted in symbolic interactionism. Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph’s (2002) theory of cognitive transformation posits that the desistance process begins when individuals choose pro-social opportunities from their local environment, like work or a spouse, and these “hooks for change” provide an opportunity for individuals to transform their identities. These evolving identity transformations facilitate the creation of replacement selves whereby desisting individuals begin to think and understand themselves as law-abiding kinds of people whose “new” selves are fundamentally at odds with their past criminal selves. Hence, these authors argue that it is the shifting conception of self that initiates and eventually sustains change.

Noting the lack of research on women, Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph were explicitly interested in examining how marriage and employment, along with other factors, prompted decreasing criminal activity among this demographic group. Drawing on life history narratives with a sample of young women, they found some evidence that motherhood served as a catalyst for change among participants. As established at the outset of this article, this finding is consistent with other research that suggests there is a relationship between being a mother and desistance (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Enos 2001; Kreager, Matsueda, and Erosheva 2010; Opsal 2011). However, the researchers found little evidence in the narratives of their participants that employment operated either as a source of social control or a hook for change prompting cognitive shifts—particularly if it was low-quality, unstable work. Moreover, the women in the study who successfully desisted from crime were significantly more likely to draw on traditional gendered roles (i.e. good wife and mother) to explain their exit out of criminal activity.

Traditional cultural narratives that emphasize “appropriate” conventional femininity may indeed strongly shape women’s self-concept and serve as compelling hooks for change given the strong cultural and structural roots of such narratives. Additionally, however, because the institution of work is a highly gendered arena, women are also more likely to experience a host of obstacles
finding quality work post-incarceration (Flower 2010; Freudenberg et al. 1998; Greenfeld and Snell 1999; Petersilia 2003) that may make them less likely to use employment as a point of departure for crafting replacement selves or may disrupt their initial agentic moves to draw on work to construct a pro-social self.

Unlike Giordano et al., Shadd Maruna (2001) did find that meaningful work provided the participants in his research with a “sense of empowerment and potency” (p. 121). Maruna (2001) examines the role of shifting self-concepts in creating desisting selves and explains that when individuals work is rewarding and especially when it is therapeutic, it can create a pathway to desistance because through their working pursuits they can find meaning and reformation. Maruna’s sample included both men and women and his analysis focused on the commonalities rather than potential differences based on gender. However, a number of other researchers also posit that the mere presence of a job is unlikely to create a powerful deterrent effect; alternatively, it is quality work that links employment to change (Freudenberg et al. 2005; Uggen 1999). For example, jobs individuals experience as rewarding rather than punishing seem to “increase social controls, decrease the motivation to commit crime, and thereby alter the relative attractiveness of legal and illegal activities” (Uggen 1999: 145). Hence, as Maruna’s (2001) findings indicate, gratifying or quality work may be more likely to serve as a “hook for change” and increase the chances that individuals use it as a site for identity work.

This study builds on the research described in this section by examining the unfolding identity work of a group of women newly released from prison. I demonstrate that, as new releases, women viewed themselves as active participants in the working sphere and used employment to begin to construct pro-social replacement selves. Drawing on the longitudinal design of the study, I also delineate three pathways the participants in this study took as they adapted to their own changing attitudes toward and experiences with work. In particular, I illustrate how serious employment instability challenged women’s commitment to work as a source for crafting replacement selves and often corresponded with a reemergence into criminal activity.

Methods

The analysis I present in this paper is based on data I gathered from a series of open-ended, semi-structured interviews with 43 women who had recently been released from prison and were returning to their communities as parolees. To be eligible for participation, participants needed to be exiting from prison onto parole in the Denver-metro area. I chose the Denver-metro area because the Colorado Department of Corrections releases more parolees
to this area than to any other county in Colorado (Rosten 2007) and because of my geographical proximity to the community.

I initially recruited each woman by working directly with a local prison from which the majority of female offenders in Colorado release. Weekly, I entered into the prison and spoke with women who were eligible and about to release. As the study progressed, I relied on additional sampling techniques including advertising at community agencies that offered support services to this population as well as snowball sampling. Using multiple recruitment strategies was critical in generating a sample for this research. Generally speaking, the participants in this study belong to a very transient and hidden population. It was often extremely difficult and time-consuming to make and maintain contact. Although most women were recruited through the local prison, it was not unusual for participants to be exposed to several recruiting methods (for example, first in prison and then—once released—through a friend who was already involved in the project) before they decided to participate and called the project hotline.

I interviewed each participant up to three times over a period of 1 year focusing, broadly, on their reentry experiences. The semi-structured interview schedule was open-ended and covered topics such as: perceptions regarding level of preparedness in leaving prison; moment-of-release concerns and events; sources of support on the outside; experiences with employment; various challenges that arose; perceptions about their future; and finally, being a part of the parole system. The open-ended format of the interview was critical for this study. It allowed me to hit on similar themes in each interview but provided flexibility in how we covered those themes. Moreover, it also allowed women to talk more or less about a topic that did or did not apply to them and gave me greater flexibility as a researcher to deviate from the schedule when a woman’s narrative was not going where I had anticipated and to develop other interesting ideas that arose. Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1991), in choosing the same methodological orientation in their own research, explain that it helped them understand “women’s own perspectives as well as get unanticipated information about events and problems” (p. 138). Each interview took place at the interviewee’s choosing (typically their residence or a public location like a park or library), was digitally recorded, and later transcribed verbatim.

I conducted three rounds of interviews with participants; however, because the analysis offered in this paper draws only from the first two interviews, I focus on those here. The first interview occurred as soon as possible after the woman’s release from prison. Specifically, the final sample included 18 women who were interviewed within 14 days of release, 13 women who were interviewed between 15 and 31 days of release, and 12 women who were
interviewed within their first year on the outside. The mean amount of time between release and the first interview was 74 days (median = 17 days).

I attempted to conduct the second interview 3 months after the initial and used the same interview schedule; however, I focused on understanding changing circumstances and attitudes among the women. As stated earlier, retaining contact with this highly mobile and economically marginalized group of women was difficult. For example, a number of women struggled with securing stable housing upon release that resulted in several quick housing transitions and outdated contact information. Additionally, some women violated the conditions of parole, were revoked back to prison, and could not be contacted for follow-up interviews. Despite these kinds of obstacles, I interviewed 30 women a second time.

Conducting each initial interview soon after the women’s release onto parole and most of the interviews within their first year on the outside meant that participants were in similar stages of the reentry process. This enabled me to see how women adjusted to life on the outside and observe how time and differing circumstances affected their reintegration efforts. For the purposes of the analysis presented in this article, follow-up interviews enabled me to track changing: employment circumstances, feelings toward work, and attitudes about being on the outside. These follow-up interviews also served an important latent function by strengthening my rapport and connection with many of the women. Hence, I often collected richer and thicker data at follow-up interviews than I was able to collect at initial contact.

In the analysis I present in the next section, I use time as a variable to understand women’s shifting commitment to using work as a hook for change as they craft their replacement selves. Given the attrition from the study, it is important to consider potential differences between those women who remained in the study and those who did not. Women who did not participate in follow-up interviews did not because (1) criminal justice officials returned them to prison or (2) their contact information quickly became outdated. In either case, subsequent contact was not possible. Neither of these reasons, I argue, provides evidence of systematic differences between those women who remained in the study and those who did not. For example, women who were returned to prison may have been more likely to reoffend or violate the conditions of their parole agreement. On the other hand, they may have been under the supervision of parole officers who were more likely to use revocation in handling violation behaviors. A number of women who participated in follow-up interview were violating their parole conditions, but their parole officers chose not to file for revocation. Secondly, outdated contact information typically resulted when women made several housing transitions; these women tended not to have family in the area of their release or were simply
unable to secure stable housing. However, a number of women who remained in the study were without familial resources and stable housing. Finally, the attrition did not shift the sample averages on key demographic attributes like age, race, length of time spent in prison, or offense type. Hence, although study attrition may mean that there are some differences between the women who remained in the study and those who did not, I argue that these are not systematic differences that skew the analysis.3

Finally, I analyzed the data in several stages. First, I coded each interview using NVIVO software and line-by-line coding (Charmaz 2006). Second, using memos (Charmaz 2006), broad analytic themes emerged from focused codes including employed self, parolee self, drug-free self, mother self, role of stigma, obstacles to reintegration, and understanding success. Lastly, I continued to examine these themes at length working to understand how ideas were related across categories. Although I initially focused on understanding the common ground of the women’s narratives, within each analytic theme, I looked for variation among concepts.

**Respondent Characteristics**

Table 1 summarizes major demographic characteristics of the women in this study and compares those characteristics to the population of females who were released from the Colorado Department of Corrections during the study recruitment period. The women in the sample ranged in age from 23 to 54 years, but similar to the population, were—on average—37. The sample was racially and ethnically diverse with whites and Hispanics underrepresented and black women overrepresented. However, because the sample was limited to women residing in the Denver metropolitan area and offenders who are black are more likely to release to this area, this racial composition is not surprising (Rosten 2007).

Consistent with other research on women involved in the criminal justice system, many had been serving time because of a drug offense. However, almost all women (91%) reported a drug or alcohol dependency history.4 Additionally, the majority of women (72%) were mothers (68% of those women, n = 21, reported being mothers of children under the age of 18); however, none of the participants in the current study were residing with or had custody of their children upon release from prison.

Although some women explained the state had revoked their custody rights at some point in the past (typically because of their drug use and/or involvement in the criminal justice system), other women reported their children were in the custody of ex-partners, family members, or friends. A number of women explained they hoped to regain custody of their children when they were more financially stable and completely “off paper” (i.e., out of the
parole system). Finally, upon release, an equal number of women ($n = 14$) resided with a family member or in a reentry facility. Remarkably, however, eleven released homeless which typically meant they were assigned to a bed at a local shelter. Three of the remaining participants released to friends’ homes while one released to her own home which she managed to retain despite being in prison off and on for 4 years for the same drug offense.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Sample ($n = 43$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Participants ($n = 43$)</th>
<th>All women released onto parole in CO during sample recruitment ($N = 832$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data provided by DOC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% White</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Black</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Hispanic</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Native American</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Asian</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most common serious offense convicted of on most recent incarceration (percent)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug (34.9)</td>
<td>Drug (36.5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theft (14)</td>
<td>Theft (16.7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgery (9.3)</td>
<td>Attempted escape (6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total months in prison</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First incarceration (percent)</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-report data</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with children</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with children under 18</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% released to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family-member’s home</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reentry facility</td>
<td>33</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

Women’s Economic Marginalization Post-Incarceration

Planning for reentry ideally begins in prison before an individual releases. Many of the women in the current study reported working with a case worker to find an appropriate residence to which they could release. Additionally, the vast majority of women reported participating in a prerelease course offering women counsel and potential sources of support once on the outside. Although there was some limited preparation, figuring out how to meet economic and material needs once on the outside was a primary concern the vast majority of women reported having. Beyond figuring out how to meet housing, food, clothing, and transportation needs, because each woman in this study was under the supervision of parole, they also had to meet an array of extra expenses like weekly urinary analyses, regular breathalyzers, counseling sessions, and monthly parole fees and restitution payments.

Individuals who leave prison, however, often come back to the community with few or no financial resources and literally begin from financial ground zero. Nadia explained:

I didn’t have clothes the day I walked out, didn’t have groceries or even any way to buy anything to eat that day I walked out. I didn’t have a coat. It was cold and snowy. I mean snow was up to my mid-calf. I didn’t have any way of contacting anybody, at all.

About two-thirds of all states provide some amount of money to former prisoners the day they walk out of the prison gates (Petersilia 2003:7), and often, this is their only economic resource. In Colorado, the state provides $100 to individuals at their initial release; however, if the parole board returns them for a parole violation, the state does not provide these funds the second time out. Consistent with other states, many participants were provided with a few basic material supplies upon release. For example, when women released “homeless,” officials provided them with a bag of toiletries and bus tokens. Beyond these items, and a packet of resources given to all women that provided them with lists of (often outdated) “felon friendly” work sites, landlords, community agencies, and resources—most quickly had to figure out how to pay for rent, purchase food, and buy clothing on their own. It was not unusual for women to show up for their initial interview with me in their prison-issued jogging suit explaining that they had not had time to make it to a clothing bank to receive free clothing and simply could not yet afford to buy anything. For nearly each woman in the current study, their lack of financial resources at the time of their release made their initial steps into the free world unusually stressful and required that they immediately figure out how they were going to—literally—survive on the outside.
Choosing Work

To meet their financial burdens, the women could draw on a number of different sources. For example, a variety of community agencies whose clients were primarily formerly incarcerated individuals returning to their communities provided the majority of women in this study with some type of assistance ranging from free bus tokens, food vouchers, and clothing, to (in a few cases) housing vouchers that paid an entire month’s rent. Alternatively, only a few women relied on their family for financial and material support upon release. For example, April—23 years old and the only participant to release to clear middle-class circumstances—relied on her parents who provided housing as well as a number of other material needs. Subsequently, her parents also paid for college tuition when she decided to return to a local university to finish her degree. April, however, was an unusual case; most women did not receive any sort of substantial financial assistance from their families because they were typically economically marginalized. Instead, the most common type of support offered by families upon release was a place to stay; 33 percent ($n = 14$) of the women released to a family member’s home. Public assistance was a third source many women drew on to meet their basic needs upon release. Although the majority of the women in the current study received food stamps at some point during the study period, only a few relied heavily on other forms of governmental assistance. Those women who did were diagnosed with severe mental or physical disabilities that impaired their ability to work in the public sphere.

Although the participants in this study did rely on several sources of support to meet their basic needs upon release, 77 percent ($n = 33$) identified work as the chief way they believed they would “make it” on the outside. These women viewed working as critical for their basic survival because they believed it would allow them to meet their immediate needs. Liz, 44 years old, explained that upon release, “I had to get a job, like, right away. ‘Cause I was scared. I was scared everything was gonna—I was gonna be on the streets.”

Women newly released from prison had a number of expenses to meet, a variety of ways to meet some of those needs, but—early after their release from prison—overwhelmingly believed that to get back on their feet they would need to work. Employment, however, served another important function for the women in this study. In the next section, I describe that women also saw work as an opportunity to create new identities and new lives that contrasted from those they inhabited prior to incarceration. Indeed, early on in the release process, work played an additional role outside of meeting material
needs; it served as a hook for change through which they began to construct pro-social replacement selves.

**Work as a Pathway to a Replacement Self**

Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) posit that a fundamental and primary aspect of a cognitive shift is the actor’s openness to change. At initial interviews, all of the women in this study expressed clear investment in “being different.” For example, 32-year-old Nisha, who had a criminal record related to her off and on drug use which began in her teenage years, explained, “I’m a new person coming out…I have no desire to go back to Aurora where I used to live at, or go looking for these certain people [who I used drugs with]. I could have called everybody that I remember their number, and I just chose not to.” After spending 2 years in prison on a drug conviction and then several more months on a parole revocation, she explained how things would be different this time because she was committed to change:

So I got another chance and I’m gonna do it this time, because I want change. I want to go home and be with my kids, I want to live a drug-free life. I want to be able to be an abiding citizen and do what I need to do and not always be in trouble and be bad-ass. That is not me.

Although being open to change is one way actors can work to shift their conceptions of self, Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) posit that it is often an “insufficient” step in creating successful and sustained change. Instead “exposure to a hook and one’s attitude toward it are important elements of successful change” (p. 1001). Hence, the hook must be structurally available and, additionally, the actors must perceive the hook in a particular (positive) way so that it is conducive to the creation of a replacement self that is incompatible with participation in criminal activity.

Consistent with this argument, most women in this study actively sought and obtained employment post-release. Recent research describes the obstacles former felons experience when they look for work post-incarceration (Pager 2005; Western, Kling, and Weiman 2001). However, the women in the current study had few problems finding some form of work relatively quickly post-release primarily because most initially looked for work they knew was “felon-friendly.” Because of this job-seeking strategy, only a few women at initial interviews reported problems finding work if they actively sought it out; however, the jobs these women found were rarely sustaining. Most commonly, the women reported initial work in the telemarketing, food service, and janitorial industries. Their wages rarely exceeded $7.50 an hour, they never reported having benefits, and they almost never worked full time. This work is certainly not what research would traditionally conceptualize as “quality.”
Despite this, at initial interviews, many women explained that employment would play a central role in creating and sustaining change as they set out to be different kinds of people. Baby D, for example, identified working as a critical part of living a different kind of life than what she had been living prior to incarceration. She explained she was “ready to accept responsibility” for her life and doing that “means I have to work. I have to do the things you do to make it and not to be in trouble with the law and stay out of prison.” Like Baby D, 23-year-old Freesia made a similar connection between working and change:

Freesia: I’ve never been a self-sufficient adult in my life. I’ve never done stuff for myself...it’s my goal to grow up.

TO: What kinds of things do you have to do [to be a self-sufficient adult]?

Freesia: Just working for a living, paying your own bills, buying yourself stuff, taking care of yourself, feeding yourself, being happy...I want to survive, you know what I’m saying? On my own.

As discussed in the previous section, the vast majority of participants viewed working as critical to their well-being because it was a basic fact of survival. However, employment played an additional role beyond making ends meet. Participants expressed a connection between working and change explaining that being employed was symbolic of becoming and being different people who would remain “on the straights.”

Notably, the women did not view these new employed selves as short-term creations that would sputter out in their relevancy or power as other economic resources from a new partner or additional government support became available. Instead, a number of women identified long-term career aspirations they looked forward to achieving because they believed they would continue to live crime and drug-free lives. Ashley, for example, aspired to open her own salon; Alice wanted to work up through the ranks at the restaurant she was working and become a general manager of one of the branches; and Dee wanted to go back to school to finish her medical technical degree she had begun before becoming involved in the system. Hence, although prior to incarceration, many of the study participants were severely economically marginalized and unemployed, their narratives provide evidence of considerable resiliency. Paralleling Horatio Alger-cultural stories, the majority of the women in this study expressed believing they would be able to “pull themselves up” by their own bootstraps via their own hard work. Indeed, the women initially own their change; in other words, they believe the change and difference originate from their own agentic moves.
Most participants reported beginning at similar places regarding their employment endeavors as well as their attitudes toward work. However, as time on the outside passed, employment paths diverged as did the women’s commitment to constructing a replacement self. Although very few women advanced out of low-wage work, many experienced relative work stability confronting no major obstacles that upset their ability to do work, identify as workers, or view work as a way to create change in their lives. Indeed, many women continued to narrate a hopeful connection between employment and creating changed selves. However, during the same time period, other women experienced significant obstacles with work, unstable working conditions, or began to view their hard work as a fruitless act. For these women who felt bounded by poor or unstable working conditions, their sense of progress faded, their hopeful attitudes toward employment were disrupted, and their use of work to craft replacement selves was challenged. Notably, the vast majority of the women in this latter group reengaged their deviant selves. In the following sections, drawing on the longitudinal design of the study, I delineate these various pathways.

Sustainers. Earlier in this article, I explained that few women who looked for work initially upon release had problems finding work; I also noted that the work they found was of low quality. At second follow-up interviews, only two of 22 women reporting a work history during their time on the outside explained they had found higher-quality jobs. Ina, for example, initially worked at a roadside construction site as a traffic flagger. However, because the work was temporary and difficult to get to using only public transportation (no women in this study were allowed to drive because of parole conditions), Ina continued to look for other work until she found a job operating a printing press. At her second interview, she explained she made $12 an hour, consistently worked overtime, and made enough money to support herself. Ina enjoyed her work and expressed satisfaction with her employment progress. Further, she believed she had a future because of this job explaining, “There’s a lot of levels that you can move up to. There are some people making, like $27 an hour there, which is crazy. Give me 5 years and I’m gonna be set.” Regarding her long-term goals, Ina focused on her job explaining, “I want to move up in my job, I definitely want to be making more money. I just want to be happy.”

Like Ina, women commonly made one or two job transitions in their first few weeks or months on the outside. Unlike Ina, however, most women
remained in low-wage labor. Nisha, for example, transitioned from one fast-food restaurant to another; through this move her wage changed from $6.85 to $7 an hour. At both locations, she experienced relatively inconsistent hours and made just enough, she explained, to put “a roof over my head” and “food in the fridge.” Despite making just enough to get by, Nisha explained that she was satisfied with and optimistic about her employment progress because, “What I make, I work hard for, and it may not seem like a whole lot, but I work for it.” Further, she explained that working made her feel “good about myself:”

I feel good that I’m doing something with my time, with my life, that I’m not just laying around. Sometimes I feel like—like this week I felt like I slept my week away ’cause I didn’t have to work ’till today. But it makes me feel good that I’m doing something, doing something with my life.

Nisha, who hoped to someday become a Certified Addiction Counselor, explained that being a “good worker” and having a “good work ethic” was important, “Because it could get you further in life.”

Ina and Nisha represent a group of women I call sustainers ($n = 12$). Although rarely did these women achieve considerable employment progress in their search for quality work, neither did they confront major employment set-backs. For example, the few job transitions they made were by their own choice and resulted because they believed they were taking steps to improve their working conditions. This is not to say, however, that sustainers did not experience any problems or set-backs. Indeed, like other women in the study, they experienced the stigma of being a “criminal,” housing instability, and challenging relationships with ex-partners and family. Further, most were bounded by the structural conditions of low-wage labor: living paycheck to paycheck and without health insurance, experiencing monotonous working conditions, and having little control over their schedule.

Despite this, however, this subset of women continued to view work and their ability to independently earn a wage in a positive way; they continued to use work as a site for their identity project using their working selves as evidence of and inspiration for a changed and different self. Hence, I call this group of women who, early after their release from prison, continued to craft replacement selves using work as well as offer optimistic perspectives about their future sustainers because—despite rarely making employment progress that could shift the material conditions of their lives—over time they continued to craft replacement selves through their working selves. Notably, these women did not report engaging in illegal activity at follow-up interviews.
Questioners. Although experiencing stable working conditions provided sustainers with some support needed to continue to use it as a hook for a changed self, it was not a sufficient condition to produce this outcome. Like the first group of women, a very small number of participants (n = 2) also experienced work stability. Unlike the sustainers, however, since the first interview, these questioners had become overwhelmed by the structural reality of low-wage labor and had begun to profess doubt that through work they would be able to become different kinds of people.

Abby, 43 years old, experienced this deteriorating confidence. After spending several years in prison for a drug-related offense, the state released Abby onto parole and she quickly found a job as a housecleaner. At our first interview, she explained that at $6.85/hour, the pay was poor and the work was grueling: “I can’t walk when I get done [with a shift].” Despite this, at our first interview, Abby was happy to be out of prison and satisfied she had found a 40-hour-a-week job. At Abby’s follow-up interview, however, she reported feeling disenchanted with her work prospects and the possibility that her hard work would help her create a different kind of future.

Abby: I want to be happy. Actually, I want that little house with that picket fence. Maybe a little Subaru or something in front, little station wagon.

TO: Why does that sound good?

Abby: I don’t know, it’s just something I never had. I had many apartments, but I never really owned nothing, had any big worries. Right now I want all of that, I do.

TO: All of that being—?

Abby: Being the little house, all the bills that go with it, all of that. A real struggle, you know?

TO: Why does that sound appealing?

Abby: OK, maybe it’s because of what I’m goin’ through now. I’m goin’ through everything without nothing, you know what I mean? Meaning that I can’t—I mean, I’m goin’ from pillar to post, and I work every day. I have nothin’ to show for it. So if I have a little house, at least I know why I’m broke, because I paid my rent, my mortgage, and I paid my car note or whatever. I would have something to show. But right now I don’t have anything to show, nothing.

Although Abby was initially hopeful upon release from prison, later on she found herself unable to get out of a dead-end job, barely earning minimum
wage, and wondering whether this was all she would be able to accomplish even though she was working hard.

Unlike the sustainers who remained committed to their identity work, Abby’s ability to reconcile a vision of a different self while simultaneously working in the structural conditions of low-wage labor had begun to wane. Hence, although most women continued to view work positively and used it in other ways outside of making ends meet, it was not a sufficient condition to sustain identity work. Hence, the questioners had not yet rejected work as a hook for change, denied the possibility of change, or become reemerged in illegal activity, but—in comparison with the sustainers—neither did they express similar levels of satisfaction with their work or the progress they had made on the outside.

**Rejecters.** As their time on the outside passed, the final group of women whom I call the rejecters \((n = 8)\) experienced serious work-related obstacles or unstable working conditions, as well as dramatically shifting attitudes toward work and being different, conventional citizens. The nature of these conditions was specific and distinct from those the other women in the study experienced. For example, unlike sustainers who *chose* to leave a job and begin another because they were optimistic about a different opportunity, several of the rejecters were fired. Notably, these job losses were often related to the women’s parolee/felon status. For example, Liz, whose story follows below, was fired explicitly because her employer did not want to employ ex-felons while Linda’s boss fired her because her parole officer made too many onsite visits to check up on her. Several rejecters did “choose” to leave their jobs; however, their motivation for leaving and the pure number of times they transitioned between jobs was different from the sustainers or questioners. Specifically, women in this pathway switched jobs again and again—sometimes up to four or five times in a 2- to 3-month period. Moreover, they explained they changed jobs because they disliked the conditions (sporadic hours, low-wages, difficult bosses) of their work. Hence, the sentiment behind the transitions was different than sustainers who switched jobs because they found, what they perceived as, a better opportunity. Indeed, these are qualitatively different motivations.

Confronting these work-related obstacles made rejecter’s reintegration back into the community more complex because it increased their economic marginalization and, occasionally, brought informal sanctions from their parole officers (for example, warnings that without work supervision requirements would increase or extra check-ins from the parole officer at the new work site). Participants often explained that one of the primary concerns of the parole officers’ supervising them was that they remain steadily employed.
An additional consequence of experiencing these kinds of employment stumbling blocks was that these women began to view and understand their relationship with work differently. Even though at initial interviews they viewed employment as an avenue through which a pro-social self would emerge, after experiencing significant obstacles, they discontinued this narrative entirely. In fact, rejecters no longer saw the possibility that they would or even could become different people. Notably, each woman in this category—with the exception of one—expressed renewed reengagement with the deviant self at second interviews. Liz’s changing employment circumstances illustrate this process and outcome well.

At our initial interview, Liz—a woman I described in my field notes as “particularly determined about being different”—explained she had found (unusually) steady full-time work through a day-laborer agency. This agency placed her temporarily at an apartment complex doing general maintenance; impressed by her work ethic, her boss requested Liz on a more long-term basis. Although Liz worked at the complex full time she explained, it was unlikely they would hire her on a permanent basis because the corporation that owned the apartment building had a formal policy against hiring felons. Hence, “hiring” Liz via the day laborer agency dissolved the company of liability that may arise from directly hiring her. Despite these unusual—and tenuous—working circumstances, Liz was proud she found full-time work, and she was particularly satisfied that she outworked all of her male co-workers. Further, Liz explained how working provided her the opportunity to create change and feel different about herself:

I don’t get paid all that much….Building from scratch is a little difficult, to try to get out on your own like that. But it’ll happen. Like I—the harder I work, the more I feel like I’m working towards that [change] in a positive way, you know?

At our follow-up interview, however, Liz’s circumstances had taken a turn for the worse. In fact, she explained she was certain her parole was about to be revoked because she had tested positive for using illegal substances. She had begun drinking alcohol in excess and smoking marijuana because she was “depressed.” She explained, “the only thing that I’ve found that was makin’ me feel better was 100 proof vodka, for some reason, and it’s not me to do that. But I would feel better.” When I asked Liz why she had started using alcohol and drugs putting her at risk of parole revocation she explained, “I have no clue. I just—I don’t know.” However, over the course of the interview, it became clear that Liz started using while experiencing significant problems with work.

Liz explained that following our first interview, things had continued to go well for her because she was “makin’ quite a bit of money,” she felt
financially stable, and she was able to rent a small apartment on her own. Work was providing Liz with the opportunity to transcend her felony record. Additionally, because of her reliability and proven work ethic, she explained that her boss, “decided that they were gonna go to the corporate office and ask them to overlook my felony” to hire her on a permanent basis. She explained what happened next:

Soon as corporate found out I had a felony, there was a person on the property who said, “Get her off the property right this minute.” They didn’t even know me. They didn’t even know how much I had done for them. My boss, I thought he was gonna cry…they have my back. They wanted me. But, corporate said, “A felony.”

Upon release from prison Liz, like most women in the current study, was optimistic about finding work, supporting herself financially, and creating and sustaining a new law-abiding self. However, after experiencing set-backs in her search for employment, Liz explained despondently at our final interview she was certain she would end up back in prison:

There are so many of us [on parole] that are that close to being either homeless or back in prison. Any day, it’s like any day you could be homeless or in prison again. It’s like a constant fight daily not to go there. It’s a weird way to live.

TO: What’s weird about it for you?

Liz: There’s no guarantee, there’s no guarantee tomorrow’s gonna be the same as today. There’s no guarantee I’m not out of that apartment tomorrow. It’s like, most people are like, “I’m gonna go home with my family.” da-da-da-da, every day, every day, It’s not like that for me…it sucks being alone. I hate it. It’s lonely.

Many of the women in this study reintegrated back into their communities without significant social support. In fact, the vast majority of rejecters reported an absence of familial emotional support and, sometimes—as illustrated in Liz’s case—a complete lack of family. Broken up families resulted from a number of phenomena. For example, Tamara grew up in the state’s foster care system and explained that she has seen her parents “in periods throughout my lifetime, but when you don’t really spend some time with somebody, they’re just strangers.” Baby D, on the other hand, explained that all of her brothers were incarcerated in different states, and she avoided the rest of her family because she considered them to be bad influences. And CJ used her sister’s name when she got arrested and now her family “wants nothing to do with me.” Regardless of the source of disconnect from their family, the majority of women acknowledged that returning to the community and dealing with challenges would be easier with familial support as Liz explained, “I mean, it’s a disadvantage. Yeah, other people got it easier.”
Baby D concurred explaining, “I’ve gotta rely on myself, and not have something to fall back on, nobody to lean on.”

Liz’s story, along with the experiences of the other rejecters, illustrates how individual agency is bounded by structural and cultural conditions. Early in their release each of these women had been open to change and utilized work as a hook to begin to craft a pro-social version of their selves. However, over time they experienced problematic working conditions making employment an unattractive or structurally unavailable site through which they could craft a new identity. For some women, the effects of these set-backs were exacerbated by a lack of familial support. Finally, in nearly each of these cases what began as optimism and hope about the future transformed into pessimism about desistance and participation in illegal activity.

Discussion and Conclusions

Increasingly some researchers focus on women’s lives post-incarceration. Although this body of research is growing, what remains less explored is the role of work in women’s reentry, reintegration, and desistance process. The purpose of the data I presented in this article was to elucidate these relationships. In particular, I sought to build on the existing efforts of other researchers—especially Peggy Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph (2002) as well as Shadd Maruna (2001)—who work from a symbolic interactionist perspective and write about the identity work of former prisoners and its connection to desistance. This article contributes to these bodies of work by exploring a group of women’s relationship to employment upon release from prison. The findings illustrate how, upon release, work was an important site for their identity projects, which centered on creating and maintaining conventional, law-abiding selves. Because the data are longitudinal, their experiences also provide insight into the way agency is bounded by structure and culture (Harris 2011); over time factors impacted some women’s ability to use work as a hook for change as well as their commitment to crafting replacement selves. This analysis is limited by its focus on one group of women returning to their communities after spending time behind bars. Hence, the findings presented here should not be used to understand the identity work of all women at this life-course event. Instead, the findings are best used to unpack social processes, develop theory centered on cognitive transformations, illuminate new research questions, and refine existing ones.

This research illustrates that early in their reentry women used employment as a hook for change (Giordano et al. 2002) and viewed it as an avenue through which they could construct a different kind of self who would “live on the straights.” Contrary to Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph’s (2002) findings, being a “worker” was central to nearly each woman’s emerging
construction of a changed or “replacement” self. A number of researchers point out (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Enos 2001; Kreager et al. 2010) and I have addressed elsewhere (Opsal 2011) that motherhood can play a compelling role in women’s desistance efforts. However, none of these women relied solely on traditional gender roles as they crafted their replacement selves. Relatedly, almost no woman in this study pointed to the importance of being a “good wife” or supportive partner (Leverentz 2006) in their narratives about exiting out of criminal activity.

As time on the outside passed, however, all of the women experienced the challenges that come with reintegration back into the community (see, for example, O’Brien 2001; Richie 2001): unstable housing or homelessness, inadequate transportation, the stigma of a criminal record, being under the surveillance of parole, contending with serious (and sometimes untreated) drug and alcohol histories, or being unable to have contact with their children were all common conditions the women in this study faced. Additionally, as detailed throughout this article, nearly all of the women continued to work minimum-wage jobs. Regardless of their attitudes toward these jobs, participating in low-wage labor will produce challenges. For example, most of the working women in this study, regardless of their expressed satisfaction toward their work, did not earn enough to make ends meet.

Giordano and fellow researchers (2002:1026) clearly acknowledge that disadvantaged circumstances can intersect and disrupt cognitive transformations; all of the women in this study experienced some level of disadvantage, whether resulting from challenging economic conditions or the stigma of a criminal record, which could have shifted their commitment to their identity projects and produced this outcome. Despite these challenges, as time passed, some maintained their identity work continuing to draw on employment as a hook for change. Other participants, however, began to doubt or fully reject the idea that their own hard work would provide them the opportunity to construct a new self who lived a crime-free life.

This study illuminates several factors influencing this latter pathway. First, the nature of their unfolding relationship with work differed from those women who maintained their identity work. Specifically, women who stopped using work as a hook experienced structural obstacles like being fired because they were an ex-felon, which explicitly challenged their access to this hook. Because work was at the center of their claims to a new self, the unexpected removal of their job disrupted their emerging—and fragile—identity work. Additionally, women who stopped using work as a way to craft a replacement self between first and second interviews became quickly dissatisfied and disenchanted with their minimum-wage jobs. As a result, most of these women transitioned between a number of jobs relatively quickly; these transitions out
of and into work created complexity in the (already complex) reentry process. For example, they often experienced some period of unemployment between jobs, which intensified their (already) unstable economic circumstances. Additionally, being employed was a formal condition of parole each of these women was required to meet. Although in this study there was no evidence that a parole officer would try to send a woman back behind bars for being unable to find or hold down a job, being “between jobs” brought some of these women under closer scrutiny of their parole officers along with informal sanctions. Thus, these unstable conditions created additional stressors for those women whose commitment to identity projects ceased.

Second, a number of women in the current study returned to their communities without social support from their families. However, a commonality among the vast majority of participants who did not sustain their identity or desistance projects was an absence of familial emotional support and, sometimes, a complete lack of family. This sense of being alone and without support seemed to amplify the struggles of these women. Beth Richie (2001) explains that it is often the impact of competing demands among newly released women that “form a complex web of concerns and stressors that often compete with and exacerbate one another” (p. 380).

Theoretically, support can be found among peers. Harris (2011) notes that successfully desisting individuals in her study relied on relationships with similarly situated peers to support their desistance projects. Notably, however, the parole condition of “no contact” with other individuals who had criminal records had the unintended consequence of isolating some of the women in this study from potential sources of support because they lived in communities affected by mass incarceration.

Lastly, age intersected these pathways in an interesting way: three of the four youngest women in the study who initially sought out work and used it as a hook for change later could not sustain their identity or desistance projects. This finding is consistent with life-course research on work as a turning point that shows that being employed has a stronger deterrent effect for older individuals (see, for example, Uggen 2000). Hence, although this is a small number of women to draw substantive conclusions about the way age and employment intersects cognitive work, it is a compelling finding that future research can examine.

When considering the women who were able to continue their identity work, we must bear in mind that most participated in follow-up interviews no more than 1 year after their release. It is important to consider how this timeframe might have affected their identity work and resulting long-term cognitive transformations had they been interviewed again. In other words, one has to wonder how long these women could sustain their crafting of
replacement selves without experiencing corresponding shifts in the material conditions of their lives. In fact, it is likely that time helps explain the discrepancy between this and Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph’s (2002) analysis. Specifically, Giordano et al. conducted follow-up interviews a number of years after participants returned to their communities. It is possible that upon release the women in their sample experienced few gains in their working efforts and that after sometime it became a less attractive or less structurally available hook to continue their identity work. Because conventional roles like mother and wife are significantly more accessible to women than “worker,” these may become more compelling ways to continue to do identity work and craft replacement selves.

Thus, the findings from this study suggest several directions for future research. Although throughout the analysis, I highlighted a number of conditions and, in particular, processes that produced different relationships with work for the women, a compelling direction for additional research would examine how ex-prisoners view and make sense of the work they do. As described earlier, researchers have rightly pointed to the importance of quality work—rather than the mere presence of work in creating deterrent effects. Clearly, when the structural conditions of ex-felons’ work—pay rate, presence of benefits, or numbers of hours per week—are quality, it is also probable that they are more likely to identify their work in the same way. However, this idea of “quality” becomes complicated when understanding ex-felons working situations given that they have so few opportunities to engage with jobs that would conventionally be conceptualized this way. Moreover, female ex-offenders—like those in this study—are further excluded from this type of work because of multiple strikes against them: their gender, the presence of a criminal record, and potentially their race. Therefore, this study suggests that to understand job effects of desistance, researchers should focus on “extra-economic conceptions (Uggen 1999) to accurately assess job quality. However, beyond measuring factors unrelated to wages like status (Merton 1957), job satisfaction (Wadsworth 2006), or job stability (Savolainen 2009) researchers should also seek to understand whether or not the respondents view the work as meaningful and transformative.

Relatedly, the current analysis suggests that individuals’ own understanding of their work is critical to gaining insight of the connection between work, desistance, and cognitive transformations. Hence, it would be useful to more fully examine the relationship between women’s own definitions of quality work, how they understand the purpose of work, and how this impacts both their tolerance toward the conditions of low-wage labor as well as their commitment to their identity projects. This type of examination would create, for example, a deeper understanding of how similar experiences with work
can produce entirely different attitudes and reactions (as in this study, a better understanding of the mechanisms that differentiate the sustainers from the questioners). Additionally, as I allude to above, research could also seek to clarify how time affects the focus of one’s identity project.

It is also useful to consider potential policy recommendations. Some researchers (Giordano et al. 2002; Visher and Travis 2003) have surmised that working may play a less fundamental role in women’s transition back into the community because they may be more likely than men to rely on other financial support and less likely to use the role to shape their self-concept. Perhaps most notably, the findings provide compelling narrative evidence that many of the women in this study viewed employment as the primary way they would meet their expenses and used their working selves as a way to craft an image of a changed self. Connecting women—and men—to post-incarceration employment should be a pre-release priority. Additionally, women must be properly equipped with the skills for gainful—quality—employment. Prison programming should emphasize appropriate education and vocational skill-building so once on the outside they have increased opportunity to succeed. This is particularly important given that low-skill/moderate-wage jobs are especially limited for women.

Finally, in sum, this study illustrates the central tension within social research: considering the interplay between structure and agency. Although examining cognitive transformation begins with considering the agentic moves of individuals exiting out of illegal activity, these findings leave us considering the important role of structure in sustaining the crafting of those replacement selves. Desistance is an ongoing process and creating a self that lives on the straights can be a precarious project for women who hold overwhelmingly marginalized economic and stigmatized social statuses.

ENDNOTES

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1 I attempted to gain permission to interview women who were in the custody of local jails and occasionally visited the women informally, but county corrections officials would not provide me with official access.
2Of the thirteen women who did not participate in a second interview, seven had already been revoked back to DOC; two had absconded and I was unable to reach; and I was unable to contact four respondents either because they did not return repeated efforts to contact them or I could not locate current contact information.

3I make a similar argument elsewhere; see Opsal, 2011.

4Women with drug or alcohol dependence histories self-identified as using illegal drugs or alcohol and, in particular, reported regular use of illegal drugs and/or alcohol prior to going to prison the most recent time.

5Eleven women in the current study were incarcerated on a revocation (rather than a new offense) and were not provided with these “release funds.”

6There were ten women who, upon release, reported that they did not anticipate immediately looking for work. Two of these women chose to enroll in college courses, five explained they had multiple health problems and were seeking government assistance, and three women identified mental illnesses as prohibitive factors for working.

7The participants reported that being trained as a “flagger” was the most common employment training opportunity offered at one of the women’s prisons in Colorado. Women commonly became certified as a flagger while in prison and occasionally worked as a flagger upon release. Although typically better paying then other minimum wage jobs available to the participants, the women reported this work to be quite unstable and unreliable.

8Clearly, there is substantial evidence that race intersects former felons’ experiences with work in important ways (for example, Pager 2003). Therefore, I did consider the way race intersected the women’s reentry experiences and identity work. In another study (Opsal 2009), I address one way that racial identity intersected these experiences. In the current analysis, however, there was no clear patterned way that race “mattered.” The felon status seemed to be the master status for these women in regard to work.

REFERENCES


