A Narrative Approach to Exploring the Life Experiences of Female and Male Offenders of Child Sexual Abuse in South Africa

by

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis, *A Narrative Approach to Exploring the Life Experiences of Female and Male Offenders of Child Sexual Abuse in South Africa*, is the result of my own work. I hereby submit this thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology at the University of Pretoria. I confirm that I have not submitted this work, either partially or fully, to any other institution of higher education to obtain a degree. Each significant contribution to and quotation in this thesis from the works of other people has been attributed, cited, and referenced.

Karmini Balwanth

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse is a widespread crisis that has lasting detrimental effects on the victims, offenders, and the systems in which they exist. The risk factors associated with child sexual offending, such as poverty and violence, are rife in South African communities and possibly exacerbate the rate of offending and reoffending. It is essential to explore the life stories and identity constructions of offenders of child sexual abuse to contextualise the offence and inform effective treatment and prevention strategies. This study was therefore designed to explore how child sexual offenders in South Africa construct stories to make meaning of their life experiences and events.

A qualitative, narrative approach was used to elicit the life stories of 12 offenders who were convicted and sentenced for child sexual abuse in South Africa. Adult male and female offenders were purposively sampled from the Department of Correctional Services to participate in two individual interviews, in which oral and visual narratives were collected. Narrative analysis was applied to the life stories to preserve the uniqueness of individual stories while collating themes across the sample.

Child sexual offenders in this study constructed redemptive narratives of personal transformation, continuous morality, and ongoing purpose across the lifespan. Offenders utilised various narrative techniques such as denial, minimisation, externalisation, and justification of their offences to convert their criminal identities into prosocial self-definitions. To circumvent a ruptured identity by the crime, offenders romantically constructed criminality as a catalyst for their personal transformations and overall purpose in life. The emergence of a transformed and moral identity seemingly allowed child sexual offenders to present a positive sense of self to persuade the audience of their realignment with the morals of normative society. Exaggerated tales of transformation, stories of inflated morality, romanticised accounts of offending, and neutralisation strategies are associated with

criminal desistance and behavioural reform in offenders who re-story their lives and then enact these prosocial identity constructions. By decentralising their criminal identity, offenders may avoid confronting their deviance, trivialise the impact of the harm caused to others, and therefore maintain criminality. However, offenders in this study extended their accounts of transformation to current and intended prosocial actions and roles instead of criminality and deviance.

The process of identity (re)construction and its possible association with behavioural reform is relevant for researchers, mental health practitioners, correctional officials, and communities that feature in the lives of child sexual offenders.

Keywords: Child sexual offender, life story, narrative identity, identity construction, redemptive narratives, moral coherence, corrections, South Africa

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Preface

As a teenager, I developed a keen interest in understanding the complexities and intricacies of the criminal mind. I pursued this interest through my academic and professional journey, which ultimately spanned a decade of scenes as a counselling psychologist at the Department of Correctional Services, South Africa. In this role, I was responsible for the psychological assessment and treatment of male offenders who were criminally convicted, sentenced, and incarcerated at a maximum correctional centre in Gauteng.

My research interest was sparked by numerous subjective experiences in my professional encounters with offenders of child sexual abuse and personal incidents in society. My role as a correctional psychologist often piqued curiosity and conversations in different contexts, discussions that generally implied that child sexual offenders were cruel and subhuman. However, the life stories that offenders shared with me were dominated by tales of humaneness, survival, optimism, fleeting weakness, morality, and transformation. Thus, my research journey began with the desire to represent the voices of a tremendously stigmatised and ostracised group whose stories were mostly untold and unknown.

As my interest in the lives of child sexual offenders grew, so did my empathy. I eventually developed a therapeutic group programme that focused on developing crime-related insights, healthy sexual attitudes and behaviours, and relapse prevention for child sexual offenders. The research concept of the current study was significantly shaped by occurrences in these groups. As a mental health practitioner, I became increasingly aware of the dearth of literature that guides the treatment of child sexual offenders in South Africa. This study was therefore designed to gain insights into this group of individuals about whom we have limited knowledge in the South African context of crime rehabilitation and psychological treatment.

Chapter 1: Introduction, Problem statement, and Aims

1.1 Introduction

Child sexual abuse[1] is a global concern that usually features prominently on the agendas of national and international crime prevention strategies due to the detrimental effects it has on child victims and society (Bougard & Hesselink, 2019; McCartan & Richards, 2021; Ward et al., 2018). Sexual offences against children are generally under-researched and, more notably, female child sexual offenders[2] are further underrepresented in the literature compared to their male counterparts (Cortoni et al., 2017; Kramer, 2015). There have been limited attempts to understand the offenders of child sexual abuse from their uniquely authored positions and how they construct their life experiences in which the offence is often embedded (McLeod, 2015).

The following sections elaborate on these gaps in the literature regarding child sexual offenders and substantiates the relevance of the current study and its objectives to explore the life stories of sentenced offenders of child sexual abuse in South Africa. While it is important to explore the impact of sexual abuse on child victims, it is essential to understand the contributors to the offending process. This is not intended to undermine the impact of the harm caused to others but to inform the prevention of child sexual abuse from a different context. Drawing on McAdams's (1990) theory of narrative identity, this study argues that exploring the life stories and identity constructions of child sexual offenders is crucial to conceptualise the abuse holistically, understand the contexts and factors that contribute to the offence, and identify structural elements that are necessary to support offenders' efforts to

[1] In the context of this research, child sexual abuse refers to performing any sexual act with a child, as defined and criminalised by the Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act 32 of 2007 (Criminal Law Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act 32, 2007). The term 'child sexual offence' is used interchangeably with 'child sexual abuse'.

[2] In this study, 'child sexual offenders' refers to individuals who have been criminally convicted and legally sentenced according to the Criminal Law Sexual Offences and Related Matters Amendment Act 32 of 2007. 'Child sexual offenders' are also referred to as 'child sexual abusers' and 'child sexual perpetrators'.

refrain from crime. This study has the potential to contribute to the development of effective crime prevention and psychological treatment interventions aimed at rehabilitating child sexual offenders in South Africa.

1.2 Research background and rationale

Although child sexual abuse is a global concern, local studies postulate that child sexual abuse is endemic in South Africa (Bougard & Hesselink, 2019; Londt, 2008; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022; Ward et al., 2018). Crime statistics by the South African Police Services (SAPS) reported 22070 cases of child sexual offences, of which 17118 were rape, accounting for 41.4% of all sexual crimes recorded in South Africa between the 2019 and 2020 financial year (South African Police Services, 2020). Further studies report that 78% of sexual offenders were victims of child sexual abuse, mostly in their homes by close relatives, thus posing additional barriers to reporting the abuse (Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014). In a different study, 27% of youth participants reported experiences of sexual abuse, while the entire sample reported being victims of some form of child abuse (Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018).

A nationally representative study confirms that child sexual abuse is widespread in South Africa as one in three adolescents in this study's sample reported being sexually abused. The study elaborates on the detrimental long-term mental health effects of the abuse on the child victim - such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, risky sexual behaviour, and substance misuse (Ward et al., 2018). International studies on victim impact from child sexual abuse report mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, rage, difficulties with identity, self-injury, and substance abuse (Cortoni et al., 2017; Maniglio, 2011). A South African study by Ward et al. (2018) adds that the predisposing risk factors for being abused, such as poverty, high unemployment, and low education levels, are common realities that pervade the daily experiences of children across their homes, schools,

and community contexts, further contextualising the rifeness of child sexual abuse in South Africa.

Still, it is argued that the prevalence and pervasiveness of child sexual abuse in South Africa is not fully represented in the literature (Bougard & Hesselink, 2019; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Ward et al., 2018). This is due to instances of sexual abuse (especially of children) being tremendously underreported because of barriers to reporting crime and low conviction rates. Yet, the rate of child sexual abuse in South Africa is still higher than the global average, suggesting that the actual prevalence rate and subsequent dilemma is far worse than is currently known. In addition to exceeding the global average, local studies indicate that sexual abuse in South Africa is characterised by higher levels of violence than international patterns (Woodhams & Labuschagne, 2012). Scholars attribute this distinction to South Africa's unique set of psychosocial stressors, poverty, and violence consequent of the legacies of the apartheid regime, patriarchal ideologies, and the AIDS epidemic that has lasting effects on family systems (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021).

Although contextual realities and psychosocial stressors, such as poverty and violence, indicate vulnerabilities for child victims in South Africa, it also delineates aggravating risk factors for sexual offending and reoffending. However, little is known about the perpetrators of child sexual abuse in South Africa because research predominantly focuses on determining causal pathways to crime (Dastile, 2013; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014). It is essential to have focused studies that attempt to understand the aetiology of child sexual offending to facilitate a more effective rehabilitation process and prevent child sexual offending. This avenue of study is necessary and cannot be neglected. However, this study asserts that it is just as crucial to explore individual contexts of abuse through personalised accounts to conceptualise the offence contextually, identify factors that contribute to

offending and promote structures that support rehabilitation. This information can be used to guide prevention and treatment strategies for child sexual offending.

By focusing only on crime stories and pathways, we neglect the impact of offending, sentencing, and incarceration on the offender. These subjective consequences perpetuate mental conditions that might have precipitated the offending and would possibly heighten the risk of reoffending. Studies on causal pathways to offending indicate a connection between criminality and early adversities, psychological distress, and the development of maladaptive behaviours (Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). Hence, unresolved traumas and psychological distress are implicated as risk factors for sexual offending (Maniglio, 2011). Steyn and Hall (2015) add that the mental wellbeing of incarcerated offenders, mainly those with a history of victimisation and abuse, is worsened by oppressive carceral conditions and implications such as privacy violations and verbal abuse. As a result, they advocate for a greater focus on the psychological health of incarcerated offenders. Positive mental health indicators are imperative for the success of behavioural reformation attempts. This highlights the need to study stories of criminal identity to understand and enhance the psychological functioning and address the mental health needs of offenders.

Dastile (2013) argues that research on sexual offending should move beyond the dominant discourses of deviance. Instead, research should be dominated by and rooted in personalised life stories contextualising the realities of offenders and offending. Limited studies in South Africa focus on how perpetrators of child sexual abuse construct the offence, the child victim, and the self in relation to the crime (Londt, 2008). Therefore, this study aims to incorporate these narratives into understanding offenders. This richer understanding has the added advantage of avoiding a generalised intervention and rehabilitation programme that might not apply to the subjective nature and treatment of the local population.

In addition to the general scarcity of studies on offenders of child sexual abuse, there is a further gap in the literature regarding male and female offenders of child sexual abuse, with literature on female offenders of child sexual abuse being minuscule (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Kramer, 2015; Rowe, 2011; Steyn & Booyens, 2017). Although there are attempts to bridge this gap, it is evident that there is greater awareness and acceptance of the notion of male child sexual offenders than female child sexual offenders (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017). According to Cortoni et al. (2017) and McLeod (2015), female offenders of sexual crimes are underreported and underrepresented but are not as rare as they are perceived to be. Kramer (2015) explains that there is a longstanding denialism around female sexual offenders due to traditional conceptualisations of the female nurturer and females being associated with sexual compliance instead of aggression. However, the ongoing denialism around female sexual offending deprives the victim and offender of essential support and corrective treatment (Da Costa et al., 2014). Studies indicate that the effects of female-perpetrated sexual abuse are as detrimental to victims as abuse by male offenders. In some studies, there are more severe effects due to the disbelief and shame that victims of female offenders experience (Cortoni et al., 2017).

Studies on offender gender contrasts have often yielded mixed findings, yet there is evidence of fundamental and distinct gendered patterns in sexual offending against children and offender experiences of their perpetrating behaviours. The oversight of these gender differences results in potentially ineffective treatment interventions and limited impact for female offenders based on research conducted on the male population (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Comartin et al., 2018; Murhula & Singh, 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Sexual offenders' programmes, which primarily address sexual deviance of attraction and arousal to children and were specifically designed for men, have limited impact and relevance for the female population that did not report arousal or attraction as the cause of their offending

(Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017). Steyn and Hall (2015) report that female offenders display unique mental health needs and vulnerabilities that correctional operations and programmes should consider. The primary aim of the current study is not to decipher gendered pathways to offending. However, gendered identity will be discussed if there are any notable differences in the narrative constructions of male and female participants. Thus, this study will include the narratives of both male and female child sexual offenders in South Africa.

1.3 Narrative research as a method of inquiry

Research, especially in South Africa, usually focuses on the child victim instead of the perpetrator in the parent-child abusive context (Hesselink & Booyens, 2016). Conventional questionnaires and structured interviews usually dominate research approaches with offenders. In these studies, offenders are primarily described in terms of their biographical backgrounds and defined variables to explore cognitive deficits, paedophilic interests, and pathological psychological constructs that facilitate the abuse pathways (Dastile, 2013; Mogavero & Hsu, 2018; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Presser, 2010; Turner et al., 2018). Hence, studies on the offenders of child sexual abuse are usually either offence-focused in exploring external factors and conditions that can be changed to prevent child sexual abuse or offender-focused on the internal constructs and propensities that can be adjusted to avoid the abuse (Wortley et al., 2019).

The unique context of criminalisation and incarceration of child sexual offenders could benefit from a narrative approach to research, in which an untold narrative is heard whilst the complex narrative environment and broader narratives are conceptualised holistically (Dastile, 2013; Presser, 2010; Venalainen, 2018). This is evident from narrative studies with offenders that report detailed and complex findings vastly different from the typical categorisations of crime-specific variables noted in studies adopting more

conventional research methods such as questionnaires and structured interviews (Venalainen, 2018).

Although conventional research studies have made crucial strides in the field of child sexual offending, Londt (2008) asserts that offenders' individualised accounts of their crimes can make a meaningful contribution to the conceptualisation of criminal pathways. Offenders' personalised narratives contextualise the offence holistically, thus contributing valuable insights to the process of child sexual abuse, its enablers, and deterrents, which could be influential to prevention and treatment programmes. The high recidivism[3] rate in South Africa is partly attributed to the ineffectiveness of rehabilitation programmes that are predominantly disclosure-based programmes that aim to prevent reoffending through cognitive restructuring methods. Narrative experts argue that the link between positive narratives and behavioural reform that is evident in desisting offenders motivates for a shift to facilitating interventions that enable the reconstruction of narratives into positive transformations that transcend the criminal identity (Maruna, 2001). The association between narratives and behavioural reform can be meaningfully explored through the life stories of offenders.

The 'narrative turn' has made a valuable contribution to the social sciences by reconceptualising the relationship between individuals and society as one that is intricately entwined (McAdams, 1990). The self is viewed as inseparable from historical, political, and sociocultural contexts, with narratives providing useful links between the self and society. A study of life stories elicits accounts theorised as a coproduction of both internal and external factors relevant to the offence. King (2013) also emphasises the importance of identifying sociocultural factors that create identity changes by either enabling opportunities for positive roles or structural constraints that inhibit agentic actions of identity reconstruction and

[3] Recidivism refers to reoffending or relapsing into criminal behaviour.

deprive offenders of the opportunities to self-correct and empower. By focusing on the entire life story of the offender, the criminal identity might not be framed as the most prominent and defining part of an offender's self-concept (Stevens, 2012).

The intention is not to dismiss the impact of the crime or to idealise offending. Instead, it serves to understand criminality as part of a complex human experience in which the criminal identity is one part that is not always self-defining or lasting (McCartan & Richards, 2021). Presser (2010, p. 431) indicates that "the stories of offenders are invaluable for detailing the meanings that people give to their own violations", agreeing that a narrative approach to studying child sexual abuse takes a more holistic perspective on the offence when embedded in larger narratives. Narrative research also circumvents the issue of gendered inequalities in research by highlighting existing narratives and the exact positioning of the gendered story either at the forefront or background or shifting in between (Fleetwood, 2015).

The relevance of identity studies (such as the present research) to the offender population is to understand offenders; a classification of people largely ostracised from mainstream society. Their exclusion is due to internal and external constructs that defied the fundamentals of the 'prototypical' human being, such as deviant interests and antisocial decisions, but predominantly because of their criminal actions that violated the rights of others. By studying narratives of identity in carceral contexts, we can understand the factors that either result in desistance or persistent identities[4] among offenders - which are essential to reduce future risks and provide the needed support (Bullock et al., 2019). Specifically, it is asserted that positive self-characterisations might support ex-offenders' efforts to desist from

[4] Desistance is the process by which individuals abstain from crime despite a history of criminality whereas persistence describes individuals who continue to criminally offend (Maruna & Liem, 2021).

crime just as redemptive identities[5] are associated with improved mental health indicators (Maruna & Liem, 2021; McAdams, 2018).

This study adopts a narrative-based social constructionist paradigm in which the realities of child sexual offenders are theorised as socially constructed through the different stories they tell (Squire et al., 2014; Wertz et al., 2011). Guided by the work of McAdams's (1990) theory of narrative identity[6], this study aims to explore the life stories of convicted and sentenced male and female child sexual offenders in South Africa to explore the meanings they attribute to their offending behaviours. This aims to contribute to existing efforts to reduce child sexual abuse by addressing the psychological conditions of child sexual offenders, which has been linked to the propensity to offend (Maniglio, 2011). As already discussed, despite being of universal concern, child sexual offenders and their realities remain on the peripheries of research.

1.4 Research problem and aims

Child sexual abuse is a widespread crisis that has both immediate and long-term detrimental effects on the child victim, such as mental illness and distress (Cortoni et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2018). Despite recent interest in identifying sexual offending patterns against children, there is a notable scarcity of empirical studies on offenders of child sexual abuse in South Africa. This dearth of knowledge creates difficulties for those who render crime rehabilitation and mental health services to offenders in South Africa.

Drawing on McAdams's (1990) theory of narrative identity, this study will elicit the "absent voices" on the realities of offenders of child sexual abuse (Dastile, 2013, p. 5297). This aims to conceptualise this pervasive phenomenon more holistically, with the ultimate

[5] Redemptive identities demonstrate growth and transformation that emerges from negative experiences and events (McAdams, 2021).
[6] A construct that was first introduced by Paul Ricoeur (1991).

objective of influencing context-relevant rehabilitation and mental health programmes for male and female child sexual offenders in South Africa.

The broad aim of this study is to explore the following question:

- How do child sexual offenders in South Africa construct stories to make meaning of their life experiences and events?

More specifically, the research will aim to answer the following sub-questions:

- What narrative practices do offenders utilise to construct and reconstruct their personal identity?
- What are the key elements in desistance narratives?
- How can the storied experiences of constructing identities inform context-relevant rehabilitation programmes and mental health interventions to reduce recidivism rates of child sexual abuse in South Africa?

1.5 Possible contribution of the study

This study will contribute to the body of literature by studying both male and female offenders of child sexual abuse, qualitatively eliciting their unique life narratives, and understanding how they construct their identities through the life stories they tell. In doing so, this study may contribute to a holistic understanding of the complex nature that encapsulates the realities of child sexual offenders in South Africa. These findings will increase societal awareness of criminal trajectories of child sexual abuse and its contextual contributors that are prevalent in local communities. Further, the research findings could contribute to developing and implementing context-relevant rehabilitation interventions and effect changes in psychological treatment initiatives for child sexual offenders to enhance their mental wellbeing and possibly decrease the recidivism rate of child sexual abuse in South Africa.

1.6 Overview of the study

The current chapter (Chapter 1) briefly introduced the contexts of the research problem that culminated in the study's research questions and aims. The following chapter (Chapter 2) hones in on the narrative constructionist epistemological stance of the researcher and the narrative identity theory used to frame and guide the current research. Chapter 3 contextualises the study by reviewing literature relevant to the study of criminal offenders, with a specific focus on narrative identity construction. The study's methodology, qualitative research design, and pertinent methodological choices and processes along the research path are particularised in Chapter 4. The study's findings span the following three chapters. Chapter 5 presents a Narrative Portrait, a brief biography, of each participant in the study. Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 thematically present and discuss the study's results. Finally, Chapter 8 summarises the study's key findings, limitations, theoretical and practical contributions, and suggestions and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 2: The Paradigm of Narrative Constructionism

2.1 Introduction

The findings of Murhula and Singh (2019) which partly attributes the high recidivism rate in South Africa to ineffective rehabilitation programmes that have not been tailored to the unique needs of offenders is particularly relevant to this study. Researchers such as Dastile (2013) and Presser (2010) highlight the importance of studies that elicit personalised accounts and narrative constructions of criminal offenders to gain a comprehensive understanding of the offence. Narrative researchers emphasise the impact and importance of enabling prosocial identity constructions that are associated with criminal desistance (Bullock et al., 2019; Dollinger, 2018; King, 2013; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012). This highlights the importance of adopting a narrative approach to research and interventions with criminal offenders in South Africa. This study adopts a narrative-constructionist approach to exploring the lives of child sexual offenders in South Africa. Narratives and its constructionist approach aim to gain comprehensive insights about people, their life experiences, and the world through storytelling practices. As Squire et al. (2014, p. 77) explain, “narrative research seems to allow us vivid pictures and deep understandings of people’s lives. It lets us grasp some of the complexity, multiplicity, and contradiction within lives as within stories.”

This study is framed by Dan McAdams’s (1990) theory of ‘narrative identity’ in which personal identities are conceptualised as narrated, contextual enactments of the self through efforts that continuously seek to create unity and continuity across the lifespan. Thus, identity development is assumed to be fluid and evolving based on one's dynamic life factors and experiences (McAdams, 1990; Stevens, 2012). Despite its fluidity, identity conceptualisations also require a coherent, stable, and purposively integrated sense of self (Stevens, 2012). As life unfolds, past experiences are interpreted, refined, and reframed to

craft a coherent and consistent story of purpose and convince others of one's life story as the narrator intends. This is achieved through various narrative practices in collaboration with narrative environments and audiences (McAdams, 2021; Murray, 2008; Stevens, 2012). The following sections unpack the relevant constructs of narrative constructionism as an epistemological frame for this study of identity. Further, McAdams's theory of narrative identity is discussed for its significance as an interpretive lens for the life stories of criminal offenders. Lastly, the debate on narrative research as an apt method of inquiry with a stigmatised population is considered.

2.2 Narrative paradigms of social constructionism and psychology

Narrative constructionism as an epistemology asserts that people know the world through language (Murray, 2008; Wertz et al., 2011). It postulates that language constitutes reality and people construct meanings in their narratives using available social, cultural, and interpersonal resources which then affects their understandings and actions in the world in which they exist. Therefore, reality is linguistically and culturally mediated through narratives. By studying narratives, we can understand an individual's realities as the narrator intends for us to know them. Unlike narrative naturalism, in which researchers aim to find an objective truth in stories about a person and their world, narrative constructionists do not believe there is an actual reality that can be discovered through stories. Narrative theorists initially asserted that there are as many stories as social situations, with stories being temporary and fleeting expressions irrelevant outside the momentary social context in which it is told (Wertz et al., 2011). Contemporary narrative theorists understand narratives as more complex than simple emulations of social realities. This expands the previous conceptualisations to include the reciprocal relationship between internal constructs, such as reasoning and mental processing, and the sociocultural contexts in which narratives are embedded (McAdams, 2021). Narrative psychology conceptualises human beings as natural

storytellers, who create themselves through stories and whose story content and form are meaningful to understand human experiences (Josselson, 2004; McAdams, 2018; McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Psychologists studying narratives generally explore the relationship between stories and identity development (McAdams, 2018). They specifically investigate how the storied life is integrated to creatively form a self-identity that is coherently constructed to signify overall purpose for the narrator. According to the paradigm of narrative psychology, self-narratives are used to express and represent an individual's inner psychological constructs (Murray, 2008). We gain insight into their identities through the stories people tell about themselves (McAdams, 1990). It is also acknowledged that self-narratives are collaboratively constructed, co-authored, and coproduced in interactions with others and not merely windows into the mind (Maruna & Liem, 2021). As such, narratives speak of individual meanings about the narrator and their social worlds, communities, and generations (Squire et al., 2014). The composition of offenders' stories gives us a glance into the social, cultural, and political contexts of their offending process, how they interacted with these contexts, and the meaning created for them. The complexities of narratives and its dynamic purpose cannot be fully realised without understanding its fundamentals, which is explained in the section below.

2.3 The functions and features of narratives

This section aims to explain: what is 'narrative'; the purpose of narratives; the structure and form of narratives; stories as a sociocultural construct; and stories as shapers of reality.

2.3.1 Definitions of narratives

Narrative experts differ in their definitions of story and narrative, with some arguing that a story is a simple recollection of events and experiences told in lay terms while narratives are complex interpretations of stories organised strategically (Bruce et al., 2016;

Presser, 2010; Squire et al., 2014). According to these authors, narratives have distinct features that are fundamentally different from stories, with stories being the building blocks of narratives. Some narrative theorists use the terms narrative and story interchangeably as most stories, they argue, have a narrative element (Chase, 2011; Murray, 2008; Maruna & Liem, 2021). They claim that most stories, like narratives, are structured, purposed, intentional, organised, progressive, and tailored for an audience, thus proposing that stories are usually narrativised.

Narrative constructionists broadly define narratives as a form of discourse that communicates the interpretation of the interface between the self and its ever-changing world within which it exists in a mutually constitutive relationship (Murray, 2008). In the context of this study, the terms 'narrative' and 'story' are used interchangeably when describing events, experiences, and self-characterisations. Adopting Murray's (2008) definition, a story or narrative is an organised interpretation that temporally sequences events meaningfully to bring order to disorder by making sense of the self and its relation to the world for both the narrator and audience.

2.3.2 The purpose of narratives

Storytelling is described as a process of sense-making to understand the self, others, and the world by interpreting events, experiences, actions, and self-characterisations that occurred over time (Chase, 2011; Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; McLean & Thorne, 2006; Murray, 2008; Squire et al., 2014; Stephens & Breheny, 2013). Individuals use narratives to order and shape these experiences to create a sense of meaning and wholeness. Narrative authors postulate that we alter past memories to align with our present sense of self (Bamberg, 2011; Riessman, 2008). As such, offenders' narrations of their past experiences are not viewed as a report of what occurred at that particular developmental juncture. It is an interpretation of historic events and experiences through the current lens of criminalisation

and incarceration. As such, there is never a single interpretation of events or representation of the self. Murray (2008) concurs that narratives are never complete as they are ever-changing and continue to evolve as different events and interpretations are incorporated. Storied accounts are usually fragmented and saturated, multivocal and dialogical, with different accounts being in conversation with and juxtaposed to others (Gergen, 1991; Wertz et al., 2011). Hence, there are a panoply of stories created and enacted by narrators to serve a particular purpose.

2.3.3 Structures of narratives

In storied accounts, no event or experience is placed haphazardly but is discursively done to create order and meaning. Narratives can be categorised into different forms depending on the evaluative outcomes of the plot. Frye (1957, as cited in Murray, 2008) categorises narratives into: 1) comedy, which tells stories of progress towards a happy ending; 2) romance depicts progressive stories in which the main character overcomes adversity and regains what was lost; 3) tragedy which comprises regressive tales despite the protagonist's positive efforts; and 4) satire which is a stable story. Thereafter, Gergen and Gergen (1984, as cited in Murray, 2008) distinguishes between three story structures based on whether their plots are: 1) progressive and display positive movement towards a goal; 2) regressive, which reverses the positive outcomes of a goal; or 3) stable which is constant and shows no change. The narrative mechanism of emplotment sequences life experiences and events into beginnings, middles, and ends in a coherent way that organises the past, present, and future. People then use narratives to restore a sense of order and meaning after adverse or disruptive life events such as criminal convictions and sentencing (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Murray, 2008). Hence, narratives are described as interpreted meanings that have purpose, intention, and structure (Maruna & Liem, 2021).

2.3.4 Sociocultural influences on narratives

According to Presser (2010), stories are constructed for specific audiences – sometimes multiple and sometimes imagined. Hence, the research story has been tailored for its context and will change as the perceived expectations of the immediate context change. Narratives are also deemed dialogic exchanges and co-constructions between narrators and their intended audience (Squire et al., 2014). Chase (2011) explains that the narrative environment, or immediate context in which the story is told, is characterised by numerous psychological and social factors that shape and modulate the emerging stories. Thus, a narrative is usually analysed in the context in which it occurs, accounting for the situation in which it happens, the intentions of the narrator in constructing a story in a particular way, and the audience it is being constructed for (Wertz et al., 2011). Accordingly, offenders' life stories are expected to be narrated differently to a researcher than to a therapist or a court of law.

Narrative theorists who study 'big stories' of lengthy autobiographical accounts or self-reflections focus more on the content of the told than the relational context of the telling (Bamberg, 2011; Freeman, 2011). Conversely, small story approaches focus on individuals' social embeddedness and the interactive nature of stories and contexts, exploring how individuals use stories to position themselves in relation to others in the world (Bamberg, 2011). Although this study adopts a 'big story' approach in exploring the life stories of child sexual offenders, attention is still drawn to the 'small stories'. Small stories are depicted in the narration of day-to-day, seemingly mundane activities (such as breakfasts and laundry) that researchers tend to overlook yet are influential in how a person experiences the self in everyday activities (Bamberg, 2011; McAdams, 2018; Pasupathi, 2006). The aim of the small story approach is not to access internal representations or truths but to explore how offenders discursively construct the self in relation to others through narrations of daily activities and

interactions, experiences, and events in correctional facilities and society. Narratives can therefore be found anywhere, in diverse forms and across time, cultures, and contexts (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Although storytelling is a creative process of social-self-characterisation, there are fundamental societal and cultural imprints in the way that stories are told and structured (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Presser, 2010; Squire et al., 2014).

In addition to personal narratives, there are meta narratives or master narratives, which are larger discourses shared in social spaces (Bruce et al., 2016). Master narratives are the dominant narratives in a specific community. People generally conform to the norms of the dominant narratives echoed in everyday conversations, often labelled as 'common sense' in that context. Presser (2010) elaborates that storytelling has a history for most offenders whereby the story of their crime has been told in the legal, family, media, and correctional contexts. Therefore, the researcher might access a loaded story that might sound rehearsed or clichéd. Still, it is embedded in a particular sociocultural context that depicts the broader narratives, such as incarceration as a redemptive form of suffering. Counter narratives are rare and usually in opposition to the master narratives and their underlying premises. However, personal stories can simultaneously echo and counter the master narratives they interact with (Squire et al., 2014). McAdams (2021) highlights that the life stories of stigmatised groups are often characterised by counter narratives that give voice to otherwise unheard voices in such a way that narratives transform stigma into strength. As Squire et al. (2014, p. 34) state,

> stories, then, are never only personal stories, but instead, they are situated in relation to the stories of others, both known and unknown, and critically they are located within, even while they might challenge, the expected norms of a social group.

Murray (2008) advises that in analysing the personal narrative (micro narrative), the broader social narrative (macro narratives of sexuality, gender, and criminality) in which it is

embedded should also be considered. Narratives are not independent of cultural contexts and discourses; they are structured in relation to macro narratives of a particular culture - either assimilating or opposing the main narratives. Narrative practices are used to either challenge, avoid, or accept dominant discourses (Chase, 2011; Stephens & Breheny, 2013).

Narrative constructionists conceptualise narratives as a deliberate discourse that participants construct in response to their beliefs of what is expected of them in that specific context (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Squire et al., 2014). For example, the narrative environment (research interview context), the perceived expectations of the audience (interviewer), and the strategy of the narrator all influence the stories told. Storytellers will apply different narrative practices to position and reposition the self in their stories. Narrative research that adopts a *hermeneutics of demystification* explores the latent meanings behind narratives (Josselson, 2004). This is done by interpreting the narrator's constructions through what they say and omit. This approach, which also informs the analysis of this study, "assumes that any given told story refers to an untold one as well" (Josselson, 2004, p. 18). Narrative techniques are utilised to structure the story coherently, support the plot, create a sense of purpose for the narrator, and convince the audience of the story's authenticity (Bamberg, 2011; Geiger & Fischer, 2017). Narrative practices, also referred to as defence mechanisms in other fields of psychology, include strategies such as denial, justification, rationalisation, minimisation, positioning and counter-positioning, and opposing or assimilating macro narratives. Narratives are relevant for what it tells us about an individual's past and present and their anticipated futures.

2.3.5 Narratives as shapers of reality

Narratives are theorised as influential shapers of reality; hence its value extends beyond what it tells us about past events into its influence on future realities (Bruner, 1991; Maruna & Liem, 2021; Pasupathi, 2006). The narrator is viewed as dialogical and

dynamically shifts between past, present, and future narratives to create an evolving sense of self across time. Fay (1996) explains that we live our stories through our actions which have a narrative character, and through our stories, we can reflect on our actions, understand narrative patterns, and link the past with the present. Narrative experts describe a constitutive view of stories in which stories influence lived experiences just as lived experiences influence stories (Bamberg, 2012; Murray, 2008; Presser, 2010). As such, life stories and life experiences are reciprocal because the nature of life experiences determines the content and form of the stories told; stories that are told to order and shape historic life experiences while simultaneously shaping future life experiences (Bamberg, 2012; Murray, 2008; Presser, 2010). In other words, "our lives are enstoried and our stories are enlived" (Fay, 1996, p. 197). Having unpacked the basics of narratives and its value as a social construct for research with criminal offenders, the following section discusses the connection between storytelling and identity construction.

2.4 The fundamentals of narrative identity theory

Dan McAdams is a principal author of narrative identity in psychology. McAdams's (1990) theory of personal identity is a reinterpretation of Erikson's life cycle theory. Both theorists postulate that identity, as an internal mental process, is constructed as a coherent and deliberate act to demonstrate a continuity of the self with a unique sense of purpose that distinguishes the self from others (Dunlop, 2017; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Erikson's theory of identity formation or fragmentation premises that an individual's self-concept is built as a co-creation of one's biological, psychological, and sociocultural realities within a developmental process of systematic stages (Erikson, 1959, as cited in Baddeley & Singer, 2007). However, McAdams (1990) states that complex life processes such as identity development cannot be so neatly demarcated – developmentally or chronologically. Although the authors agree that identity predominates human internal processes from adolescence, they

do not agree that it is resolved by the end of early adulthood. McAdams (1990) adds that people seek meaning, semblance, unity, and purpose throughout their lives and across different contexts. Like Erikson, McAdams asserts that interpersonal relations and societal expectations influence how individuals construct their identities and cultural contexts.

Key to McAdams's (1990) theory of identity development is the premise that identity is developed through narratives and individuals self-define through autobiographical stories of the self. McAdams's innovative insights on human identity saw the development of the theory of narrative identity, in which individuals are believed to conceptualise and construct their lives through dynamic stories. Narratives serve as a significant psychological resource to make meaning of life experiences and imbue life with a sense of purpose and unity through temporal coherence (McAdams, 2021). Narrative identity, which emanates from the theorist's life story model of identity, integrates one's reconstructed past of how they came to be, who they currently are, and their imagined future of who they are to become.

2.4.1 The origins of McAdams's life story model of identity development

McAdams's (1990) life story model of identity is based on the life stories of 75 male and female research participants aged between 35 and 50. Based on the study's findings, a model of identity as a life story was conceptualised, which is currently known as narrative identity. The theory delineates salient features of the life stories collected, specifically around settings, scenes, characters, plots, and themes (McAdams, 1990; McAdams, 2018). The model explains that life stories and narrative actions always occur in an ideological setting that the narrator has created as a backdrop to their story. The ideological setting may include one's religious beliefs or ethical contexts that create meaning and resolution for the narrator. The key scenes, critical incidents, or what McAdams terms 'nuclear episodes' are narrated as high points, low points, and turning points throughout the narrator's life course. The narrator

emphasises nuclear episodes to either complicate the story, cause it to progress or change direction, and ultimately create continuity of the self.

The story usually resolves into a generativity script in which the narrator's life transfers a legacy of meaning to the next generation. The thematic content of life stories is dominated by lines of agency (autonomy, achievement, and power) or communion (love, intimacy, affection, belonging, and affiliation), or by both. Nuclear episodes are either characterised by the agency of one's impact on their surroundings and situations from which they emerge prestigious, or communal nuclear episodes that feature images of communion and interpersonal connections (McAdams, 1990). Essentially, McAdams's theory of identity suggests that individuals strive for coherence and stability in their identities and they continuously revise their life stories throughout adulthood to create this sense of unity and continuity. When instability occurs, these stories are either reinterpreted or other parts of the life story are integrated into the narrative of the self to restore a positive identity (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; McAdams, 2018; Murray, 2008).

2.4.2 Stories as the building blocks of identity construction and reconstruction

Through storytelling, people reinterpret parts of their past identities and consolidate their current identities by reworking and making sense of past identities as they fit into current self-conceptions. They subsequently shape their future identities consistently with past and present selves. Hence, the life story continues to be evolving and fluid (McAdams, 1990; McAdams & McLean, 2013). Depending on their subjective interpretations and reinterpretations of early experiences and attachments, people also differ in how they construct stories as either positively or negatively intonated. Interpretations range from hope and trust to pessimism and distrust, with negative experiences sometimes resulting in positive identities as it bears relevance to their personal identity (McAdams, 1990).

Murray (2008) agrees that narratives bring order and meaning to one's life experiences and structures a sense of self and identity. As we tell stories that contain elements of the self, it defines, shapes, and constructs our identity. Internal constructs, such as intentions, wants, desires, and motives, find meaning and are expressed through stories, shaping and organising these internal constructs. In addition, the self or identity can be defined by self-understandings, morals, beliefs, values, mental health, life lessons, decision-making, preferences, religion and roles, experiences, events, relationships, and life stages (Pals, 2006). In this study, all references made to the self, retrospectively or prospectively, implicitly or expressed, are explored for its relevance to the personal identity.

Narratives help us define ourselves, make meaning of events and life experiences, and ultimately construct a self-identity in relation to social relationships. A person's identity is never fixed or complete; it is a fluid process of continuous refinement of the narrative character (McAdams, 1990). While normative transitions in the life cycle result in identity revision and reconstruction, tragedies such as death or loss (or criminality or incarceration) result in even greater identity reconstructions and transformations (McAdams, 1990). Individuals are more likely to make meaning from past events that were experienced as conflictual, negative, or troubled to integrate it harmoniously into their overall life story (McLean & Thorne, 2006).

The life story is a big story of identity which focuses on the content and associative form of different life events that create a narrative arc of the self (McAdams, 2018). McAdams (1990) explains that an 'imago' is a collection of one's similar characters or roles that are drawn together, evaluated, and organised to create a sense of synchronicity in the self. As the life story develops, different situational roles emerge to demonstrate a unitary self that serves a unique purpose. Therefore, a life story might have one or many imagoes that are not always coherent with a singular plot that sequentially organises and orders life events to

create a sense of identity (McAdams, 1990; Raggatt, 2006). Instead, there are often multiple self-representations or narrative voices that are inconsistent, illogical, and contradictory and tell differing stories and positions (McAdams, 1990). This presupposes that the story told is one of many stories the narrator can tell.

The mature adult is often characterised by multiple opposing imagoes harmoniously integrated to form the life story, with each imago emerging to add some value to the overall purpose of the self (McAdams, 1990). Different identities exist in an individual, with each identity being linked to a different social relationship or life experience. Therefore, identities evolve as we define and redefine ourselves in multiple contexts (Murray, 2008). The narrative identity structure model agrees that multiple narratives can be expressed by an individual (Dunlop, 2017). Contextualised narratives are a product of a particular social context and social roles that the narrator constructs based on life experiences - such as the story of the offender, mother, wife, and daughter. The overarching generalised narrative (or life story) is constructed by drawing from experiences that underlie the contextualised narratives over time, creating a sense of continuity, coherence, and differentiation of self.

2.4.3 Creating coherence across the life story through redemptive accounts

McAdams (1990) asserts that creating a unified and coherent personal identity is a complex process, especially when an individual has multiple conflicting identities (such as an abuser and parent). Halbertal and Koren (2006) argue that people do not innately strive for identity synthesis by trying to resolve plural and conflicting identities to create a singular identity. Instead, people can embrace identity dualism by integrating divergent identities to create a positive identity and this ambiguity does not mean that the individual lacks in their self-identity. Typically, such individuals construct positive narratives of hope instead of despair that just the socially deviant identity (such as the criminal identity) would afford them. Identity coherence occurs if disparate or divergent identities, despite being

condemnable, bring about hope and resilience in individuals instead of suffering and angst (Halbertal & Koren, 2006). The conflicting identities mutually influence each other to bring about a positive self-identity and do not co-occur independently, laden with contradiction. While some identities will be suppressed or denied due to its negative value, some will use it to demonstrate the growth of other identities (McAdams, 1990). Moreover, narrators use past experiences to construct their trajectories of identity growth.

Narrators use the nature of their childhoods (progressive or adverse) as a lens of interpretation for their life experiences and to make sense of their life trajectories (Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 1990). They also interpret past experiences by creating causal connections between these experiences and their ability or inability to grow (Pals, 2006). Past experiences are constructed as having a growth-limiting or growth-promoting impact on one's identity, ultimately fostering identity growth or deterioration. Causal connections are narrative strategies used to create the springboard effect to show growth and transformation in a narrator's life story. In the life story, the narrator is either portrayed as a passive recipient of adversity or an active agent in initiating transformation.

One causal connection can be shown to reverse the effects of another. For example, the lack of acceptance that is presented as causing poor self-esteem and an incomplete sense of self can be reversed by spiritual salvation positioned to facilitate a boosted self-esteem and a complete sense of self (Pals, 2006). The act of connecting past volatile experiences and attributing cause is to create coherence in one's identity (Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 1990). Coherence is achieved by showing that there is an intricate golden thread in one's identity and that disparate life experiences and events are not random and unrelated. Instead, individuals demonstrate how adverse experiences contribute to the development of their identity. This reframes the disparate experiences so they do not cause contradiction and discontinuity in an individual's personal identity (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Pals, 2006).

In narrative identities, patterns of regression or contamination are noted when positive experiences are narrated as making positive impacts, but negative experiences reverse the previous positive impacts on the self (Pals, 2006). Contaminated occurrences limit identity growth opportunities and create a negative self-evaluation. Accounts of suffering or contamination usually indicate oppression that prevents an individual from exercising their agency (Murray, 2008). Alternatively, positive experiences are portrayed as having growth effects and negative experiences create detrimental results. This is a separated and compartmentalised construction of the self that leaves limited opportunities for growth promotion. This usually indicates the presence of unresolved emotional issues, which are kept contained so they do not affect the positive aspects of the self. Lastly, negative life experiences can be positioned as causing positive impacts to create a transformative narrative or redemptive self (McAdams, 2021). There is no attempt to separate the negative sequences from the positive ones in redemptive scripts. Both negative and positive experiences are integrated to form a reconstructed, coherently redemptive identity (Pals, 2006). Negative life experiences, such as suffering, usually pose a narrative challenge that requires more effort to resolve by the narrator, who must explain and justify the event (McAdams, 2021).

The most common approach to narrating adverse life events is to deny or discount them because they are too threatening and discordant to incorporate into one's identity. Others choose to make meaning of the suffering by processing and resolving them positively, from which individuals emerge as resilient (McAdams, 2021). By highlighting negative experiences as turning points, individuals create a springboard effect from which the rest of their life course is narrated positively with indicators of openness to learn, develop, change, and be resilient. Such resilience is then presented as being used to help others enduring similar negative experiences. An individual who displays the springboard effect differs from one who does not because: they acknowledge the magnitude of the impact on the self

(socially and psychologically) and do not minimise its effect; they analyse, explore, interpret, and gain meaning from the event in a way that they have a positive ending to their story instead of it being unresolved; it results in the construction of a transformed self and redeemed identity (Pals, 2006).

Individuals who obtain narrative closure by framing suffering in redemptive terms also display enhanced psychological maturity, emotional wellbeing, and better mental health scores (McAdams, 2021). In psychological research, greater levels of narrative coherence are associated with better psychological functioning and wellbeing. Contamination sequences are associated with cognitive disorganisation and dysfunctional personality traits; however, a causal connection has not been established between narrative elements and mental health (McAdams, 2021). Just as the life story is dynamic and never complete, so is the element of coherence.

Coherence is not a property that is either present or absent within a life story (Pals, 2006). Coherence is constructed, in varying degrees, by interpreting and sequencing life stories in a meaningfully connected way. This is done by evaluating certain events as the cause of, or contribution to, subsequent events and outcomes in a narrative. Thus, causal connections are fundamental narrative practices to achieve coherence and continuity of the self in a person's identity construction. Ricoeur (1984) cautions that causal connections should not be confused with causal law in which a preceding event invariably results in a specific outcome across various contexts. Constructing causal coherence is considered a form of narrative reconstruction - a strategy of imaginative work that people do when there is a disruption in the expected life course (Maruna, 2001; Pals, 2006). It is an interpretive practice in which people narratively reconstruct discontinuities in their imagined biography to recreate a sense of order from the fragmentation caused by the rupture.

Narrative reconstruction attempts to reconstitute and repair ruptures and realign the present and past, self and society, to restore order and maintain a unified and purposeful self (Riessman, 2008). Maruna's (2001) theory of 'making good' is a theory of narrative repair of spoiled and stigmatised identities. Identities are reconstructed by offenders narratively mining through their historic experiences, highlighting their moral agency, and reframing adverse experiences as redemptive sufferings (Maruna, 2001; Stone, 2016). Identity formation and reconstruction do not end with the narrator but continue through generative actions (McAdams, 1990).

McAdams (1990) theorises that teleologically anchored life stories are not only integrated to affirm a sense of purpose for the narrator. It is constructed to create a continuous purpose that does not end with physical death but continues immortally beyond the narrator through generativity. Such actions are usually future-orientated and include procreating, parenting, teaching technical skills and procedures, and cultural narratives through renovating, maintaining, and creating meaning systems to be passed on through generations (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; McAdams, 1990). Generativity can occur across different identities, such as a father, worker, and mentor and can include acts of benevolence by making a meaningful contribution to the lives of others. Generativity is both agentic and communal – created through an individual's desires and efforts yet also for the mutual benefit of society at large (McAdams, 1990).

Others desire to pass on a generative legacy of sexual awareness, open discourses on sexuality, and responsible sexual behaviours. Generative adults display more redemptive stories, whereas less generative adults have more contamination sequences to their narratives, and generative adults have more communion than less generative adults (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Maruna, 2001). Erikson's theory of psychosocial development includes identity and generativity as distinct life stages. Once identity is developed then, a few stages later,

generativity is centralised as a life stage. McAdams argues that generativity is part of identity development and extending meaningfully into subsequent generations is essential to integrating one's identity (McAdams, 1990).

2.4.4 Conceptualising identity development as a psychosocial affair

McAdams (1990) argues that society provides the narrative template for life stories through narrative resources and identity possibilities afforded or limited by the sociocultural context in which a person exists. Different societies will enable the emergence of a distinct set of characters in life narratives, define its contents and meaning, and organise its structure. Nonetheless, universal character types will emerge across various contexts, usually benevolent characteristics such as the caregiver or helper. Individuals do not merely import these societal scripts. They adapt these images according to their understandings and subjectivities to create a unique self that is distinct from others in the same contexts (McAdams, 1990). Identity development is thus described as a psychosocial affair.

Life stories originate from, and are shaped by, the various sociocultural contexts in which the narrative is embedded - such as culture, community, literature, media, and family (Baddeley & Singer, 2007). Narrative identity is not merely a collection of existing internal views of whom one is, it includes personal and social factors about an individual and the world in which they exist (Stephens & Breheny, 2013). The personal story is often portrayed as a reflection of the prevalent stories within a particular context (McAdams, 1990). The redemptive self, for example, reflects a master narrative of a heroic protagonist who rose into tales of atonement, achievement, emancipation, and self-actualisation (McAdams, 2021). In addition to the broader contexts in which it is located, narrative accounts are shaped by the immediate context in which it unfolds.

In addition to personal views and meanings, narratives are also influenced by the situation in which they are told, creating the situated self (Pasupathi, 2006). Pasupathi (2006)

explains that a listener's responses to a telling, shapes and influences the future telling of the story and the formation of the life story. This highlights that personal identity is actively and collaboratively constructed in storytelling activities with a listener, making it a joint endeavour or collaborative construction of the self between the listener and narrator. As Riessman (2008, p. 106) argues, "we are forever composing impressions of ourselves, projecting a definition of who we are, and making claims about ourselves and the world that we test out and negotiate with others." Telling a criminal story, for example, will likely yield negative responses, whereas religious stories are more likely to shape a favourable identity. While others seemingly shape the kinds of stories we tell, our narrative accounts are also constructed to influence impressions of the self (Baddeley & Singer, 2007).

In summation, certain storytelling practices are employed for specific audiences and tailored to create certain impressions or effects on others. Identities are performed through storytelling, changing, and evolving through the story and across stories (Riessman, 2008). Also, there is an ongoing relationship between the identities expressed in stories and the creation of selves in and through stories (Pasupathi, 2006). By constructing a type of self, a desirable self, in a social context, one would feel a sense of pressure to become that self or create a sense of consistency in self-identities that would be expressed in future stories. Hence, current constructions of identities are influenced by one's past selves, and the current constructions will also influence how future identities are formed. If positive self-identities are expressed in the interview context, it will influence how offenders construct and enact their future identities. In other words, narratives are shapers of reality (Bruner, 1991; Pasupathi, 2006). Despite the significance of McAdams's theory of narrative identity in conceptualising identity development, the model has been critiqued for focusing on social factors and neglecting biological and psychological factors; reliance on autobiographical memories; the use of narrative skills; the requirement of mature cognitive skills such as

critical reasoning; the need for social skills; and the ability to meaningfully connect past events and current occurrences to create coherence (Ergun, 2020). The next section engages with scholarly debates on the reliability of narrative identity theories and research.

2.5 Narrative research as a contested method of inquiry

Narrative research is often met with scepticism due to the potential unreliability of testimonies that rely on human memory and the subjective storytelling skills of the narrator (Squire et al., 2014). There are additional concerns about researchers or audiences romanticising the narrative, which can further undermine its credibility. Narrative identity rests upon the processes of autobiographical reasoning and a mature form of cognitive processing, which not all individuals have. Furthermore, in postmodern or contemporary times, identity is conceptualised as being constructed by a person as they wish to be perceived, can be reconstructed continuously, and is never finished (Riessman, 2008). Narratives are critiqued as possibly imaginary and lacking any representation of reality (Squire et al., 2014). This becomes particularly problematic in the context of stigmatised identities prone to appear socially appropriate and sometimes capricious to avoid the negative effects of the stigma (Mann & Hollin, 2007). Criminal offenders are then expected to construct exaggerated prosocial identities without truly reflecting their criminal identities' impact on their overall sense of self.

In response to the critiques above, it is noteworthy that narrative research does not pursue facts nor are stories presented as representations of truths (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Stories are examined for what they mean and achieve for the narrator as subjective truths that are neither judged nor falsified. If the narrative seemingly distorts the reality it refers to, it is still understood as a function or product of the narrator's reality. Therefore, every narrative is considered factual for its intended purpose (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Although life stories are based on biographical facts, it is viewed as an interpretation of

experiences by the narrator. These interpretations emerge from integrations between past, present, and future realities. Narratives are influenced by sociocultural templates, including the research context's narrative environment. It is not simply accurate snippets of lived experiences (Chase, 2011; Maruna & Liem, 2021; McAdams, 2021). The focus remains on the evolving self, demonstrated through narrative constructions that emerge from reconstructions of events.

In addressing whether the narrative is 'true', narrative researchers argue that knowledge is constructed, partial, and incomplete (Squire et al., 2014). Narrative researchers are more concerned with subjective realities of frameworks by which individuals live their lives than with objective truths. Narratives are understood as more complex than simple emulations of social realities and include the reciprocal relationship between internal constructs, such as reasoning and mental processing, and sociocultural contexts in which it is embedded (McAdams, 2021). Although the 'told' is interpreted for what the narrator is trying to articulate through their stories, the researcher is also aware of the 'untold' (Josselson, 2004). The unspoken aspects of the story are interpreted alongside the told as it reinforces the meaning behind what was said in order to understand the reasons for identity positioning (Maruna & Liem, 2021).

Social researchers often use narrative research to explore 'little-known phenomena', focusing on the narrative voice (Squire et al., 2014). Although stories are depicted as belonging to the narrator, it is acknowledged that the narrative is co-constructed. This approach to narratives has been met with considerable opposition, with concerns around the accuracy of measuring internal constructs or self-narratives that cannot be separated from its social impressionability (Maruna & Liem, 2021). In narrative research, attempts are not made to detach narratives from the research context to isolate internal and sociocultural constructs. Self-narratives are complex products of the interface of narrators' internal and social worlds

and are therefore theorised as such. Just as other mental constructs are debatably never accurately measured, the same remains for narrative identities (Maruna & Liem, 2021). Authors defend the meaningfulness of storytelling for social action by arguing that stories are constructed within a sociohistorical context and are representative of reality. The way in which a story is told is considered an action in and of itself (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; McAdams, 1990; Squire et al., 2014; Stephens & Breheny, 2013).

The concept of an evolving identity has been termed 'narrative instability' (Maruna & Liem, 2021). Some researchers doubt if dynamic and constantly evolving stories can accurately convey significant interpretations or predictions without longitudinal studies or data triangulation. Although narrative identities are constructed from continuous reinterpretations framed through an evolving lens, its reconstruction, integration, and narrative positioning are of interest to studies such as this. There is value in understanding the moving target, as critiques often describe it, by understanding that identities are not complete makeovers that are essentially different across time and contexts. Instead, theories of narrative identities emphasise the universal structures of narratives and identities, with elements that remain stable diachronically as people synchronically narrate coherent stories about themselves (McAdams, 2021). The pervasiveness and universality of narratives have also been scrutinised for rendering it so ubiquitous that researchers might oversimplify narratives and neglect the philosophical underpinnings of stories (Squire et al., 2014). This highlights the importance of researchers performing methodologically rigorous studies to accurately capture the essence of stories without trivialising seemingly ordinary responses that might be significant. Narrative research has demonstrated relevance and yielded advances in various fields of study, to which research with criminal offenders is no exception.

2.6 Applying narrative identity research to offenders

In conclusion, Presser (2010, p. 431) states, “the stories of offenders are invaluable for detailing the meanings that people give to their own violations.” Understanding offenders can be aided through narratives. In narrative research, the arrangement of events usually highlights a turning point that distinguishes the “pre-offence” and “post-offence” periods, making it a valuable tool for analysis. The construction of the narrative makes a moral point which is usually in defence of the moral condemnation that offenders receive because of their criminal actions (Presser, 2010). Firstly, McAdams’s (1990) theory of narrative identity could be meaningfully applied to understand how psychosocial and sociocultural processes contribute to the formation of meaning for offenders. Secondly, it can be used to explain how offenders reconstruct their identities to synchronise the disjointed pre- and post-offence periods to create a coherent identity that is positively transformed to the likeness of general society. Thirdly, narrative identity theory could provide meaningful insights into how offenders create the redemptive self by narratively integrating opposing identities without invalidating fundamental life stories but proving that they were instrumental to create a sense of unity and purpose in the narrator.

Critiques have been aimed at narrative accounts for its lack of causality or any causal explanatory function to criminal actions. It would be presumptuous to assume that self-narratives cause criminal behaviour, but we can assume that there is a co-determinacy between certain narratives and actions (Maruna & Liem, 2021). It is argued that, by emphasising a stigmatised voice like narrative researchers attempt to, the research could reinforce social exclusion of the researched (Squire et al., 2014). Opposing responses indicate that it has the potential to move the marginalised voice from the periphery. It, therefore, depends on the researcher to be sensitive in how their writings portray human lives in their studies (Josselson, 2004). Moreover, narratives afford a sense of agency to the narrator who

engages with their world through storytelling (Chase, 2011; Murray, 2008). Storytelling could be beneficial as it affords the opportunity to speak and frame one's narrative. The mere act of voluntarily telling one's story of redemption can be psychologically beneficial to the narrator (Maruna & Liem, 2021). Having deliberated on the relevance of narrative research to the offender population in the preceding sections, the next chapter contextualises the issue of child sexual abuse in the relevant body of literature and unpacks the identity constructions of child sexual offenders.

Chapter 3: Child Sexual Offenders and Narrative Identity Construction

3.1 Introduction

This study, rooted in the narratives of individuals who sexually abused children, posits that the global issue of child sexual abuse cannot be fully addressed without understanding the lives of child sexual offenders. Understanding the unique life stories of offenders assists in identifying the varied contributors to offending and the structural factors that support their efforts to desist from crime. This aims to inform more relevant crime prevention programmes in South Africa which has a high recidivism rate. Narrative theorists assert that behavioural reform and criminal desistance stem from supportive conditions that enable the reconstruction of prosocial identities, making stories of transformation crucial to reducing criminality (King, 2013; Maruna, 2001).

The sections in this chapter discuss relevant literature on child sexual offenders. Firstly, the chapter highlights the prevalence of child sexual abuse across various contexts and extends the discussion into the traditionally unthinkable notion of a female child sexual offender. Secondly, a brief discussion on selected theoretical models of child sexual offending is presented based on its contribution to developing theories of narrative identities in criminal offenders. Thirdly, research findings on criminal offenders are unpacked regarding identity constructions and reconstructions across the life trajectory. To conclude, the relevance of a narrative approach to understanding the lives of child sexual offenders in South Africa is highlighted.

3.2 Child sexual offenders in context

Child sexual offenders are often considered the quintessential social outcasts that have not existed among us. However, the early emergence of prominent figures like Roman Polanski in 1977 and Woody Allen in 1993, and more recently Jimmy Savile in 2012 and R. Kelly in 2021 - who have all been accused of or convicted for sexually violating minors -

highlight that child sexual abuse occurs across generations, nations, and socio-economic groups (News24, 2022). Similarly, in South Africa, child sexual offenders, such as the international tennis champion Bob Hewitt, who was sentenced for sexually abusing minor girls in the 1980s, and educated professionals like Advocate Dirk Prinsloo and Cezanne Visser, who were convicted for sexually predatory crimes against vulnerable minors, indicate that individuals who sexually abuse children are widespread across all spheres of society. Darren Goddard, a psychologist in South Africa, was recently convicted for sexually abusing school children whom he counselled. This demonstrates that sexual abuse can be committed by different role players in children's lives, even among esteemed and outwardly caring professions and professionals. Although child sexual abuse is a global concern, local studies postulate that child sexual abuse is a pervasive reality for those living in South Africa (Bougard & Hesselink, 2019; Londt, 2008; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022; Ward et al., 2018).

3.3 Child sexual abuse in South Africa

South Africa's history of psychosocial stressors, poverty, and violence from the apartheid regime has had lasting effects on family systems, notably transmitted through intergenerational abuse. These factors influence the development of children as South Africa ranks amongst the highest in the global rate of sexual violence against children (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022). This highlights the need for studies that explore child sexual abuse in South Africa. Recent studies on a South African sample of serial rapists found that 22% of their victims were children younger than 16 years old (Woodhams & Labuschagne, 2012). Economic impoverishment forms additional sociocultural barriers to reporting child sexual abuse as families are often financially compensated for their silence by offenders and the family's financial needs are usually prioritised over the rights of the victimised child (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022). Remnants of patriarchal ideologies in South Africa also leave children powerless against adult male dominance, with men demonstrating a sense of ownership over

the bodies and lives of women and children they financially support (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). Child sexual abuse rates in South Africa are believed to be heightened by the virgin cleansing myth, a false belief that having sex with a virgin girl would cure HIV/AIDS (Leclerc-Madlala, 2002). A South African sample of serial rapists reportedly displayed higher levels of violence than in international trends (Woodhams & Labuschagne, 2012). Although child sexual offending is rife across the world, it is apparent that its presence in South Africa draws on a unique set of historical and sociocultural factors that still characterise the rate and patterns of child sexual perpetration in the country.

A nationally representative study of child sexual abuse supports the notion that child sexual violence is widespread in South Africa, a study in which 35.4% of participants surveyed reported sexual victimisation (Ward et al., 2018). The study was conducted with 5631 adolescents across eight provinces in South Africa from September 2013 to February 2015. Participants were recruited from their households and schools and data were gathered through interviews and questionnaires. According to this study, the factors that predisposed the risk of abuse among most South African children include common psychosocial stressors and realities in South African communities, such as poverty, poor levels of education, unemployment, and parental inadequacy (Ward et al., 2018). Children who were sexually abused showed higher levels of substance misuse, risky sexual behaviour, and mental health conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety compared to the sample of children who did not report sexual abuse (Ward et al., 2018). This study concludes that sexual violence against children is widespread in South Africa and has long-term detrimental effects on the child victim. While a study like this is essential to understand the prevalence of child sexual abuse and the factors that predispose current children to sexual abuse in South Africa, it also demonstrates the pervasive adversities and developmental traumas that adult sexual offenders in South Africa may have also endured as children. This

demonstrates the need for studies that explore the first-hand accounts of the life histories and contexts of offenders who sexually abuse children.

A South African study on adolescent sexual offenders concurs that individuals are socialised into violence and sexual control as forms of expression and self-assertion (Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014). Sexual victimisation was reported by 78% of the sample, primarily by their family members. Their victims were primarily prepubescent female family members who were abused in their homes and deemed vulnerable by their psychosocial ills, such as dysfunctional family structures or poor supervision. Ward et al. (2018) also indicate that the offenders were mostly known to the victims in their study. This highlights the private and confined nature of most child sexual abuse occurrences that poses a greater immediate risk for children and form additional barriers to reporting the abuse. In a different sample of male youth sexual offenders in South Africa, 27% reported sexual victimisation during childhood, while the entire sample reported other forms of childhood victimisation (Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018). Although child sexual offenders have remained on the periphery of research agendas in South Africa, far less is known about their female counterparts (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Kramer, 2015; Rowe, 2011; Steyn & Booyens, 2017).

3.4 Female child sexual offenders

As one reads the statistics and trends mentioned above, the offender is almost always, stereotypically, a male. Female child sexual offenders are underrepresented in the literature and are not rare, partly due to underreporting of the offence and low conviction rates (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022; Cortoni et al., 2017; McLeod, 2015). By studying only one gender, we maintain a gendered discourse on sexual offending, marginalising one whilst overrepresenting the other. Attempts to bridge the gendered gap often result in a generalised gendered pathway to child sexual abuse patterns (Denov, 2003; Miller, 2013). Research on female offending usually compares male and female offence processes, with comparisons

mostly weighing favourably for females (Cortoni et al., 2017). The impact of female perpetrated sexual offences on child victims suggests that the subjective consequences are as detrimental as crimes committed by males. However, there is greater awareness and acceptance of male child sexual offenders than female child sexual offenders.

3.4.1 The invisible female child sexual offender

A meta-analysis of sexual offences data across 12 countries indicates that reported crimes account for 2% of female perpetrated sexual abuse. In contrast, victim study reports indicate that approximately 12% of sexual offences were committed by females (Cortoni et al., 2017). This demonstrates the underrepresentation of females in reports of sexually perpetrated offences. Despite the growing prominence of female offenders of child sexual abuse in the global media in recent years, society is still in disbelief that female perpetrated child sexual offences occur (Kramer & Bowman, 2011). The invisibility or denial of the female sexual offender is attributed to the misperception that females are passive sexual beings that lack agency in sexual encounters as opposed to their male counterparts and cannot act aggressively and abusively in a sexual context (Kramer, 2015). Furthermore, the gender stereotyped perception of women as nurturers designed to empower and develop, usually serving the needs of men and children, contradicts the moral fibre of a female sexual offender who abuses to fulfil her needs (Kramer & Bowman, 2011).

These gendered sexual stereotypes permeate every level of society - from local communities of victims who do not report the offence to legal institutions that fail to investigate and convict reported cases or sentence female convicts more leniently than their male counterparts (Denov, 2003; Kramer & Bowman, 2011; Moulden et al., 2007). Female offenders and expert professionals working in the field of child sexual abuse seem to trivialise the effects of female perpetrated sexual abuse as it defies social norms and traditional sexual scripts of the male aggressor and female victim. This allows female

offenders further diffusion of responsibility for their offending (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Kramer & Bowman, 2011; Miller, 2013; Williams et al., 2019).

In most studies, female sexual offenders seem to echo traditional sexual scripts of the innocuous female (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Comartin et al., 2018; Miller, 2013; Venalainen, 2018). This is achieved by: villainising a male co-offender or attributing blame to a past male abuser; denying their offences; positioning themselves as being less criminally involved; being less sexually deviant; or minimising the harmful effects of the abuse on the victim. A South African example that typifies the innocuous female who, at the time of conviction, attributed blame to a dominant male co-offender is evident in the case of Cezanne Visser, also known as "Advocate Barbie" (Thom & Pieters, 2011). In this case, the victims claimed that Cezanne Visser assumed a crucial role in leading them to her partner, who sexually abused the minors. Cezanne explains that her actions were driven by her psychological vulnerabilities and a controlling partner. Attributing blame to a male co-offender, against whom they are usually evaluated more positively, is possibly a strategy used by female offenders to avoid responsibility for offending and conceal their deviant sexual interests (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022). This highlights the need for research to engage critically with the gender stereotypes of female sexual offending and the denialism around female offenders of child sexual abuse.

3.4.2 Contrasting female and male child sexual offenders

Social structures, research, and literature are critiqued for gendering sexual abuse, emphasising notable differences in the representation of male and female sexual offenders (Denov, 2003). Comparative studies on male and female sexual offenders focus on offender characteristics, victim details, and offence patterns. Although some researchers report no demographic differences between male and female offenders (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Peter, 2009), other studies indicate significant differences in offender characteristics (Bourke

et al., 2014; Comartin et al., 2018). Significant gender differences are noted in offenders' psychological functioning, with females displaying more psychological distress than males (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Comartin et al., 2018; Gannon et al., 2008; McLeod, 2015; Miller, 2013; Venalainen, 2018; Williams et al., 2019). However, mixed findings are reported for gender differences in offender experiences of childhood adversity. Similar disagreements in findings pertain to the victim's age, relationship to the offender, number of victims, and number of perpetrations per victim (Bourke et al., 2014; Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Comartin et al., 2018; McLeod, 2015; Miller, 2013; Peter, 2009). Further contention in the literature centres on the motivators to offend between female and male child sexual offenders.

Exploratory research tends to attribute the cause to underlying psychological dysfunctions emanating from the female offender's earlier victimisation by a perpetrating male and other external factors to the female offender (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Comartin et al., 2018; Denov, 2003; Gannon et al., 2008; Kramer, 2015; Williams et al., 2019). However, the motivations for perpetration are intrinsically linked to the male offender's sexual deviance or uncontrollable libido. Studies supporting feminist criminological perspectives usually emphasise gender vulnerability through early experiences of adversities that male offenders were less likely to encounter (Levenson et al., 2015). This supposedly predisposes them to perpetration risk factors such as drug abuse, cognitive impairments, emotional problems, learning and physical disabilities, and domestic abuse in the home, which males are presented as less prone to enduring (McLeod, 2015). It is postulated that escaping such adversities usually results in further economic hardships that are resolved through prostitution, substance abuse, criminality, and entrapment by toxic males (Levenson et al., 2015).

In a South African study, Ward et al. (2018) report more female than male victims of child sexual victimisation, with boys being more susceptible to non-contact sexual offences.

In contrast, girls were mostly victims of contact crimes. However, there was no difference in the risk factors that predisposed boys and girls to sexual abuse or the mental health impact the abuse had on them. Female children did not show any more distress than male children did. Generally, they were equally affected, and more adversely impacted and distressed than those not sexually abused.

Further distinctions are made about female offenders being powerlessly compelled to offend by a dominant male co-offender versus being sexually or financially motivated to offend (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Comartin et al., 2018; Gannon et al., 2008; Moulden et al., 2007; Peter, 2009). According to Burgess-Proctor et al. (2017), female offenders also differ in characterising the offence compared to male offenders. While male offenders usually admit to offending and describe the offence in sexually explicit detail, females use less sexually charged verbs and mostly deny their involvement or wilfulness in offending or reference their sexual arousal as males do. Although rare, some female offenders report offending for sexual or financial gratification. In contrast, others offended for intimacy and connection with the victim or their co-offender while some abused for direct or indirect retribution, which the victim was instrumental to. Their offence styles vary from subtle grooming to sexual aggression. Their victims also displayed varied responses ranging from engaged to submissive to resistant. A recent overview of female child sexual offender literature provides evidence for aggressive sexual crimes and genital mutilation of their victims, even when offending solo (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022).

Although female sexual offenders vary in their offence processes, they also show similarities to male offenders (Gannon et al., 2008; Miller, 2013; Moulden et al., 2007). The importance of understanding sexual offenders as a diverse group is affirmed by findings of significant differences in the profiles of medium-term and short-term female offenders in the same correctional centre and significant differences in offence characteristics reported by

young male sexual offenders (Coetzee, 2019; Steyn & Booyens, 2017). This emphasises the need for studies to explore the crime stories of female sexual offenders alongside male offenders.

In addition to the victimisation narrative, female offenders of violent crimes against their male partners told crime stories of oppression, failure, fear, powerlessness, and shame (Venalainen, 2018). They also told stories of agency, boundaries, self-defence, and protection of vulnerable others. Studies on male and female offenders agree that gender was not central to the self-definitions and personal evaluations of offenders in their sample (Dollinger, 2018; Rowe, 2011). Instead, they explain how participants of the same gender differed in how they defined and positioned themselves. While most explorations focus on gendered vulnerability, in other studies, female offenders emphasised their age, class, and ethnicity instead of gender (Fleetwood, 2015). Gendered discourses were emphasised by female offenders only when it supported their criminal actions and were overlooked if it eroded their self-identity. Nonetheless, the high prevalence of a male co-offender in female perpetrated offences compared to male child sexual offenders confirms that female child sexual offending patterns are distinct from male child sexual offenders (Comartin et al., 2018).

Studies that aim to explore the impact of gender in carceral contexts seem to further the ideology of an innocuous and vulnerable female offender (Fleetwood, 2015). The primacy of gender vulnerability in criminal contexts is rooted in early studies of female criminality from feminist critiques of criminology. After many years, research still concentrates on clarifying the cause of female criminal behaviour, attributing it to their personal victimisation, lack of resources, and continuous mistreatment in the correctional system. Studies suggest that the correctional system is not designed to accommodate women’s unique needs and experiences, leading to difficulties adapting to the harsh conditions of incarceration (Fleetwood, 2015). The preoccupation with women’s adaptation originates from earlier

assumptions that women are more vulnerable than men and might be unable to cope with a life behind bars initially designed for men (Rowe, 2011). This often resulted in adapting facilities' infrastructures and programmes to incorporate normative conceptualisations of the feminine identity.

This narrow approach of gendering perpetration fails to understand gender beyond the material and sociocultural conditions of offending, or that gender, as a social construct, intersects with numerous other sociodemographic factors such as age, race, and sexuality in creating varied narratives (Rowe, 2011). McLeod (2015) concludes that too many complexities distinguish male from female offenders to attribute it to gender itself. There has been an oversight of how females story their offending and the role that narratives play in preceding and maintaining criminal pursuits, a gap that this study anticipates addressing by eliciting the detailed life stories of female offenders of child sexual abuse. Seemingly, ongoing gender distinctions trivialise female offending, reinforcing the barriers to reporting the abuse due to victim shaming and stigma (Denov, 2003; Levenson et al., 2015).

3.4.3 The effects of sexual abuse on children perpetrated by female offenders

Contrary to popular belief, the victims of female perpetrated sexual abuse face similar traumatic effects to victims of male perpetrated sexual abuse, including depression, suicidal ideation, rage, difficulties with identity, and substance abuse (Cortoni et al., 2017). Individuals who experienced sexual abuse by both males and females maintain that the abuse by a female offender was more psychologically damaging for the victim due to the suspicion with which their disclosures were met. The trivialised ideology of harm by a female offender seems to perpetuate the impact of the abuse on the victims and impede restorative processes (Levenson et al., 2015). Increasing knowledge of female child sexual offending, as this study aims to achieve, is essential to address and prevent child sexual abuse. Theoretical insights

across multiple disciplines significantly contributed to the evolving field of child sexual abuse, although these initiatives mainly included male and, more recently, female offenders.

3.5 Theoretical models of sexual offending

Clinical and research attention primarily focused on developing models for understanding the aetiology of criminal behaviours, specifically, criminal pathways to child sexual offending, to inform the prevention and treatment of criminality. It is beyond the scope of this study to review the vastly extensive models that characterise the evolving topic of child sexual offenders. The following theoretical models are discussed due to its relevance to the narrative identities of criminal offenders in this study: (1) cognitive-behavioural theories (including implicit theories; pathways model; the judgment model of cognitive distortions; extended mind theory; multi-mechanism theory of cognitive distortions); (2) the integrated theory of sexual offending; (3) sex offender relationship frames model; (4) developmental theories; (5) theories of moral development; and (6) the descriptive model of female sexual offending.

3.5.1 Cognitive-behavioural theories

Early theories of biomedical deficiencies and psychopathologies, such as antisocial personalities, that were more evident in sexual offenders than nonoffenders prompted investigations of cognitive processes such as thinking styles, attitudes, and beliefs (Abel et al., 1984; D'Urso et al., 2019; Keown et al., 2010; Marshall, 2018; Navathe & Ward, 2014; Ward, 2000; Ward & Keenan, 1999; Ward et al., 2006). Cognitions have since featured prominently in the explanatory models for criminal behaviours. Specifically, cognitive distortions or thinking errors were identified as the leading contributor to initiating and maintaining criminal actions. Most cognitive theories of child sexual offending expand on the work of Abel, Becker, and Cunningham-Rathner (1984), pioneers of cognitive distortions commonly found in child sexual offenders. According to these scholars, child sexual

offenders' thought processes were notably dominated by thinking errors, such as the willing child victim (Abel et al., 1984). These thinking errors reportedly allow them to offend and reoffend through cognitive strategies such as minimising, justifying, rationalising, and externalising their criminality. Despite scholarly consensus about the prominence of cognitive distortions in sexual offenders, cognitive models initially failed to account for the origins of these thinking patterns (Keown et al., 2010; Szumski et al., 2018; Ward, 2000; Ward & Keenan, 1999; Ward et al., 2006).

Implicit theories by Ward and Keenan (1999) expand on early cognitive models by adding that offence-supportive cognitive distortions partly emanate from core beliefs about the self and the world. Belief systems are founded on offenders' faulty interpretations of their negative life experiences from a young age. These beliefs or implicit theories are reflected in offence-supportive statements made by child sexual offenders and generally include: 'children are sexual beings'; 'sex is not harmful to children'; 'uncontrollability' (which is the inability to control internal and external forces); 'dangerous world' (in which others are described as malevolent and untrustworthy); and 'entitlement' (due to a superior position that the offender holds) (D'Urso et al., 2019; Heffernan & Ward, 2015; Keown et al., 2010; Marshall, 2018; Steel et al., 2020; Van Vugt et al., 2011; Ward, 2000; Ward & Keenan, 1999). Ward et al. (2006) caution that these statements or verbalisations could be responses to a situational context to deflect blame and criticism or based on social desirability and not a reflection of implicit theories or distorted beliefs of sexual offenders. Accordingly, this theory builds on early cognitive models by premising that offending behaviour is driven by thoughts and emotions.

Next, theorists conceptualised criminal pathways through affect or emotional states, with negative emotional states implicated as the main reason for offending, alongside faulty cognitions (Maniglio, 2011; Marshall, 2018; Ward & Siegert, 2002). Ward and Siegert's

(2002) *pathways model* of child sexual offending delineates distinct offending pathways that were each characterised by psychological deficits in either: (1) emotional regulation (such as anger and stress); (2) intimacy and social skills (being unable to meet these needs with adults); (3) deviant sexual scripts (deviant preferences or paedophilic interests); or (4) antisocial cognitions (offence-endorsing beliefs); and (5) multiple deficits or dysfunctions that were a result of biological, cultural, and learning processes (Gannon et al., 2012; Maniglio, 2011; Ward & Siegert, 2002). An empirical study by Gannon et al. (2012) did not find evidence for intimacy deficits and deviant sexual scripts pathways. However, it corroborated the presence of other deficit-based pathways to offending. Additional pathways were suggested relating to psychological dysfunctions of impulsivity and predatory interests not theorised by the pathways model. It is argued that the cognitive models of criminal offending link faulty beliefs and cognitions to offending linearly (Heffernan & Ward, 2015; Keown et al., 2010; Navathe & Ward, 2014; Szumski et al., 2018). Offenders are portrayed as driven to offend by their uncontrollable cognitions without accounting for their agency to act against faulty thinking patterns or the ability to engage in goal-directed behaviours not to offend.

The judgment model of cognitive distortions (Ward et al., 2006) presents a more comprehensive explanation of the dynamic interplay between distorted values, beliefs, and actions that allows offenders to initiate and maintain child sexual offences. This model incorporates a conceptualisation of the environmental, social, and cultural systems in which cognitive distortions are embedded. The emphasis in this model remains on the motivation of offenders whose decision to offend is underpinned by goal-directed motives (Marshall, 2018; Steel et al., 2020; Szumski et al., 2018; Van Vugt et al., 2011; Ward et al., 2006).

Most of the causal pathways models to child sexual offending discussed so far primarily attribute offending behaviour to internal psychological factors and neglect to

consider the social contexts that create conducive opportunities for offenders to act on these factors. Essentially, these models assume monologic paradigms. In the past, research and treatment of child sexual abuse focused mainly on individualistic approaches (Marshall, 2018; Webster, 2018). However, there is a recent shift towards recognising the impact of external factors on offending behaviours while acknowledging the individual's personal responsibility for their actions.

The *extended mind theory* (Ward, 2009) shifts from conceptualising the offence from intrapsychic factors that drive offending behaviour to the interaction between individual factors and the systems in which they occur. This theory argues that cognitive distortions are a joint production of internal beliefs and external social processes (Heffernan & Ward, 2015; Szumski et al., 2018; Ward, 2009). More recently, Szumski, Bartels, Beech, and Fisher (2018) developed the *multi-mechanism theory of cognitive distortions* by investigating varied offence-related cognitive distortions that occur at different temporal points across the lifespan. This model concludes that distal cognitive distortions occur long before one offends in the form of implicit theories formed in response to developmental adversities. This is different from the proximal cognitive processes that occur in the immediate offending context, which is also impacted by emotional states and similarly varies from the post-offence thought patterns, like defence mechanisms to cope with the consequences (Crookes et al., 2022; Efrati et al., 2019; Steel et al., 2020; Szumski et al., 2018). This theory also acknowledges the role of value judgments, goal-directed motivations, and visceral factors like emotion and sexual arousal that impact offenders' decision-making. Thus, a linear relationship between cognitions and actions is refuted by this model, which proposes the ability to engage in offence-opposing cognitive processes, thus, presenting a more holistic conceptualisation of criminal offending. Despite its theoretical significance to sexual

offending literature, there is no empirical research to substantiate the theoretical premises of this model.

3.5.2 Integrated theory of sexual offending

According to Ward and Beech's (2006) *integrated theory of sexual offending*, a combination of biological factors, such as genetics and brain development, and ecological factors, like sociocultural environments and personal circumstances, interact to affect neuropsychological functions, like motivation, perception, and memory. These functions may result in clinical symptoms, such as emotional problems, cognitive distortions, and deviant arousal, ultimately leading to sexual offending (Crookes et al., 2022; Maniglio, 2011; Szumski et al., 2018; Ward, 2009; Ward & Beech, 2006). Accordingly, sexual cognitive distortions are neither inherent nor permanent. They will only emerge in opportune social conditions, such as exposure to child pornography, and will, therefore, not be as explicit in rehabilitation contexts, for example.

3.5.3 Sex offender relationship frames model

Elaborating on the social role of values on cognitions and behaviour, Navathe, Ward, and Rose (2013) presented the *sex offender relationship frames model*. This model conceptualises the role of values emanating from the social context of the relationship between the offender and victim in shaping the beliefs and cognitions that result in child sexual abuse (Heffernan & Ward, 2015; Navathe & Ward, 2014; Navathe et al., 2013; Ward & Durrant, 2013). This framework postulates that offenders create relationship frames with the child victim, which define their roles and constitute specific values that create thought processes that inform the nature of the offending actions. The relationship frames are based on value clusters and are defined as follows: 'master-slave' in which the offender is most coercive and controls the victim; 'teacher-student' in which the offender is imparting knowledge to a willing victim; 'caregiver-child' is characterised by an offender who strives to

nurture and support their victim who is usually dependent on them as a caregiver; and 'lover-partner' is defined by an emotional bond between the victim and offender that is supposedly desired by both and mutually beneficial (Navathe & Ward, 2014; Navathe et al., 2013). These relationship schemas are further assessed by the degree to which the offender portrays the offence in terms of: being consensual or coercive, with the master being most coercive and the lover alluding to the relationship being consensual; being authoritarian or cooperative through the use of power by the offender towards the victim; and in how they justify the social adaptiveness of the relationship (Navathe & Ward, 2014).

However, the identity process that ensues from the crime - for example, how the caregiver maintains their identity as nurturers once confronted with the harm caused to the child - is unclear in this model. The boundaries of these frames are permeable and offenders can shift between these frames over time and across victims, although this is rare (Navathe & Ward, 2014). While a shift in values results from inter-frame movement, the reason for the redefinition of the offender-victim relationship and subsequent cognitive shifts in decision-making remains unclear in this model.

Webster (2018) concurs that sexual offending is an outcome of intersubjective patterns of interaction between an individual and various systems across the lifespan and contests any attempt to conceptualise offending as a result of individual functions. Sexual offending is attributed to the complex (nonlinear) interplay between cognitive, affective, physiological, interpersonal, historical, social, and cultural factors at a given time. A small change in one of these systems could create significant changes to the emerging outcomes, highlighting why the same person can act as a child sexual offender and, minutes later, a benevolent pastor (Ward, 2009; Ward & Beech, 2006; Webster, 2018). The unique cognitive structures of sexual offenders that seem to differ from nonsexual offenders and nonoffenders

feature prominently in the aetiology of criminal pathways, and in most discussions, seem to be preceded by dysfunctional formative experiences.

3.5.4 Developmental theories

Developmental theories explain that adverse experiences such as rejection, abuse, neglect, loss, and poor attachments in childhood result in warped understandings of the self and others, possibly contributing to interpersonal difficulties and dysfunctions in adulthood (Maniglio, 2011). Less direct types of victimisations, such as parental divorce, exposure to violence, family disruption, and removal from the home, also constitute childhood traumas identified as notable risk factors for sexual offending. Childhood victimisation, psychological dysfunctions, and interpersonal difficulties are commonly reported by child sexual offenders (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; D'Urso et al., 2019; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Maniglio, 2011; Ward et al., 2006). Distorted beliefs about the world being a dangerous place and people being untrustworthy could result from early victimisation and unresolved traumas (D'Urso et al., 2019; Szumski et al., 2018). Accordingly, aberrant behaviour could be a result of adverse childhood experiences that go unresolved (McCartan & Richards, 2021). Research suggests that offenders adopt dysfunctional means such as substance abuse and deviant sexual practices to cope with psychological distress (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Maniglio, 2011; Marshall, 2018). In addition to defective developmental trajectories, the moral development of child sexual offenders is universally accepted as being essentially impaired.

3.5.5 Theories of moral development

Early *theories of moral development* state that progressing through the developmental stages depends on cognitive development, excluding the possibility of regression to earlier stages (Kohlberg, 1984, as cited in Van Vugt et al., 2011). It is theorised that moral development commences with compliance with moral rules to avoid punishment, eventually progressing to moral behaviour rooted in justice and respect for the humanity of others.

Thereafter, moral judgment was theorised as context dependent, suggesting that deficits in moral judgment alone does not cause sexual offending (Heffernan & Ward, 2015; Van Vugt et al., 2011). Furthermore, moral judgment is influenced by cognitive distortions and implicit theories about sexual offending that enable offending actions to occur.

Bandura (1986, as cited in D'Urso et al., 2019) indicates that individuals morally disengage by reframing their offensive actions as moral by employing the following cognitive defence mechanisms: moral justification; euphemistic labelling; advantageous comparison; displacement or diffusion of responsibility; disregarding or distorting the consequences; or dehumanisation and attribution of blame. Recent empirical studies confirm that criminal offenders display faulty beliefs of sex with children that is linked to higher levels of moral disengagement (D'Urso et al., 2019; Van Vugt et al., 2011). The evolution of the theories above of sexual offending pathways has contributed to understanding the process of child sexual offending. Despite its significance, it was developed for male offenders, with only recent attempts to theorise the criminal pathways of female sexual offenders.

3.5.6 Descriptive model of female sexual offending

Gannon et al. (2008) developed the first feminist criminal pathways model - the *descriptive model of female sexual offending***.** This model explains the aetiology of female perpetrated sexual crimes regarding the affective, cognitive, behavioural, and contextual factors associated with the offence. The model delineates two offence pathways that female sexual offenders follow: (1) solo offending is an offence pathway in which the offender plans the crime to fulfil a specific need which could be sexual or not, with emphasis on developmental traumas and psychological dysfunctions; and (2) co-offending in which they are male-coerced or male-accompanied and offend as a means to facilitate intimacy with or avoid rejection by, a male co-offender (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022; Comartin et al., 2018; Gannon et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2019). The former offence pathway is similar to

the trends noted in the typical male sexual offender. The latter depicts a cycle that is unique to the female sexual offender, therefore, requiring a unique intervention.

Although these theories, which primarily address the aetiology of sexual offending, have made substantial strides to impact child sexual abuse prevention and treatment, less theorising has occurred for persistence or desistance in child sexual offending. This is an area this study aims to contribute to by also focusing on the post-offence stories of child sexual offenders. Desistance theories have been instrumental in highlighting the protective and risk factors for reoffending (Maruna, 2001). More specifically, stories of transformation and redemption reportedly dominate the narratives of offenders who abstain from crime. Stories of transformation and its link to behavioural reform are relevant to rehabilitating child sexual offenders and reducing the rate of child sexual abuse.

3.6 Identity (re)construction through stories of redemption

Research on criminal offenders generally focuses on the offenders' characteristics, offence details, or victim details by isolating each category to determine associations and causal connections in a controlled fashion. In contrast, narrative research, like the present study, examines these areas as interconnected components that are integrated into the life story to create a sense of coherence and meaning for the narrator (Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 1990). There has been minimal interest in the narrations of criminal offenders. Those who did venture exported narratives from their contexts by analysing and interpreting narratives from non-narrative frames (see Bougard & Hesselink, 2019 and Hesselink & Booyens, 2016). In addition, studies of criminal identities, such as desistance studies, primarily aim to inform child abuse prevention. This study asserts that studying the stories of criminal identities is crucial, particularly for psychology. By doing so, we can improve our understanding of offenders' psychological functioning, address their mental health needs, and ultimately reduce and eliminate the recidivism rate. The following literary sections engage with research

conducted across various criminal contexts that demonstrate the key constructs and processes of identity constructions of offenders as they weave stories from the beginning of their life trajectories into their anticipated futures.

3.6.1 The theory of 'making good'

The Liverpool Desistance Study (LDS) is a principal study into the narrative constructions of identity in criminal offenders (Maruna, 2001). The study compared the self-narratives of desisting and persisting ex-offenders and reported that they constructed divergent identities. Despite minor differences, the life stories of persisters followed a typical condemnation script of hopelessness and helplessness. In contrast, desisters were able to transform their identities into redemptive scripts, which Maruna (2001) terms 'making good'. The key features of the redemptive identity are the initial and ongoing defence of the innate goodness of the narrator, who is a victim of external adversity that they tried to overcome by antisocial means, resulting in criminality. The theory adds that these offenders are eventually empowered by an external force that believes in them, leading to their redemption from criminality and restoring the positive self that has always been there. Lastly, through generative actions, they can fulfil the purpose they were always meant to, thereby maintaining their positive identities.

Maruna (2001) explains that persisters' narratives closely resemble macro narratives of deviance, struggle, high recidivism rates, and ongoing criminality. In contrast, desisters' narratives seem exaggerated in purpose, morality, transformation, and adaptive growth. The author argues that this inflated sense of transformation creates opportune pathways for them to 'make good', implying that a transformed personal story is essential to leading a crime-free life. It is unclear whether the optimistic stories precede the behaviour change or vice versa. However, Maruna (2001) is adamant that an interactional relationship exists between the stories and lives where self-narratives support and sustain a positive identity. As he explains,

"the construction or reconstruction of one's life story into a moral tale might therefore, itself, be an important element of sustaining significant behavioural reform" (Maruna, 2001, p. 105). The tenets of this model are significant for the treatment and prevention of criminal (re)offending as it expands on the aetiology of criminality by incorporating opportunities for positive change and behavioural reform.

Many researchers extended the findings of Maruna's (2001) theory of 'making good' by studying diverse groups of (ex)criminals in different contexts (Bullock et al., 2019; Dollinger, 2018; King, 2013; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012). Most studies corroborate the findings of this foundational study in its extension to incarcerated offenders, female offenders, offenders across different locations, and using different methodologies. Despite the significant contribution of Maruna's (2001) study, shortcomings include: the strong gender imbalance of the sample that was male dominated; the inclusion of only minor crimes of drug and property related offences with no reference to sexual offenders; the exclusively British sample that might have very different social constructions to South African offenders; and the study was based on ex-offenders whose stories are regulated by vastly different narrative environments to a carceral context. Still, the premises of Maruna's (2001) framework of redemption demonstrates relevance in the content and structure of the crime stories discussed below. Redemptive narratives are usually temporally sequenced and typically commence with accounts of formative experiences of hardships.

3.6.2 Pre-offence stories of adversity

Despite the outcomes of their narrative constructions differing, both persisting and desisting groups of offenders in the LDS report similar pre-offence experiences of adversities such as childhood abuse, economic deprivation, and substance abuse. Both groups position themselves as victims in these circumstances and attribute the cause for these adversities to external forces beyond their control (Maruna, 2001). Research on (child) sexual offenders

discussed earlier in this chapter outlines pre-offence stories of adversity such as poverty, high population density, exposure to crime, gangsterism and unemployment, low education levels, increased school drop-out rates, physical abuse, emotional abuse, witnessing substance abuse, sexual abuse, rejection, exposure to pornography, violence, and dysfunctional families (Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021).

Childhood maltreatment and abusive parents are related to insecure attachments later in life, forming relationships that were experienced as invalidating and people as untrustworthy (Levenson & Socia, 2016). These unfulfilling formative connections are narrated as precedents to interpersonal difficulties, partner rejection, toxic relationships, emotional difficulties, identity issues, poor self-esteem, stress, the pursuit of emotional closeness, dysfunctional coping mechanisms through sex, pornography, and substance use later in life (Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021).

3.6.3 Positioning the criminal identity in the life story

Developmental studies explain the relationship between early adversities, psychological distress, maladaptive behaviours, and criminality. Gannon et al. (2008) propose that formative vulnerabilities result in various mental health issues that predispose offenders to further adversities during adolescence and adulthood. Sexual offenders often report ongoing psychological distress such as feelings of inadequacy, rejection, loneliness, anger, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, substance use, suicidality, and self-injury that emanate from difficult formative experiences, and which supposedly precede their offending (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; D'Urso et al., 2019; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Maniglio, 2011; Ward et al., 2006). These attributions for offending could also be a narrative practice used by offenders to neutralise the harmful effects of their crimes by externalising the cause for their deviance to sources outside of the self and to shift the perpetration lens from themselves onto the world that supposedly caused their distress.

According to Ward et al. (2018), children who reported sexual victimisation displayed worse mental health conditions than children in the sample who did not endure sexual abuse. Adverse contexts and victimisation experiences resulted in helplessness, powerlessness, and despondency. These are formative realities which offenders supposedly coped with through their antisocial and criminal behaviours, creating a connection between early adversities and the development of maladaptive behaviours and criminality (Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). However, this argument also excuses criminal behaviour by portraying it as unavoidable, which permits wrongdoers to evade taking complete accountability for their detrimental actions.

Adult male offenders of child sexual abuse in an outpatient sexual offender treatment programme in South Africa reported experiences of sexual dysfunctions, rejection, and distress in their intimate relationships with their adult partners prior to their offending, construing a distinct pathway from their unmet intimate needs to their sexual offending (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). A case study of a sexually offending mother's life depicts how a parent's own experiences of childhood and adulthood victimisation were coped with by abusing her children, resulting in intergenerational abuse (Hesselink & Booyens, 2016).

Sexualised coping, a psychological dysfunction and criminal disorder, is described as being used to meet unfulfilled needs for affection, emotional closeness, control and attention (Levenson & Socia, 2016). Alternatively, sexual fantasies and gratification are presented as alleviating psychological distress (Maniglio, 2011). Offenders supposedly obtain a sense of sexual control over children instead of the disempowerment and inadequacy they experience in their sexual encounters with adults (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). They also present themselves as relieving their sexual traumas and inadequacies by sexually abusing children. According to research, male sexual offenders who target children often justify their actions as driven to obtain sexual pleasure, to cope with negative emotions like stress or anxiety, and to

establish a sexual connection with their victims whom they view as sexually mature (Mann & Hollin, 2007). The victims of these offences are experienced as a substitute for their sexual partners whom they feel alienated from. According to Hesselink and Jordaan (2018), crime serves a purpose in the lives of offenders. It gives offenders a sense of control in the face of their powerlessness as victims. However, engaging in actions that cause harm to others in order to alleviate one's suffering is never acceptable or justifiable behaviour.

Similarly, a study of defendants on trial observes how offenders commence their crime stories with sad stories of early adversity often caused by external factors, against which they were seemingly helpless and in need of support (Dollinger, 2018). Offenders position themselves in the typical categories ascribed by society, such as being criminal, which implies deviance and having violated basic societal norms. However, they add their own meanings to the categories by constructing sad stories of victimhood that elicit sympathy and serve as a possible justification for their crimes. Offence outcomes are constructed as expected and inevitable, rooted in offenders' own victimisation as seemingly helpless children.

Although offenders embed their criminal actions and identities in adverse early experiences, portraying themselves as helpless victims, externalising criminality as justifiable and inevitable is amiss. Their offending is positioned as a response, a choice, and a deliberate act to cope with their complex realities and negative emotional states, thus justifying it as necessary for the self, without regard for the detrimental effects on others. Offenders also narrate their crimes as heroic and beneficial to others (Dollinger, 2018). Therefore, they narrate a quasi-criminal identity by emphasising the integrity that supposedly prompted criminality and credibility emanating from their criminality. While these constructions might produce positive and romanticised self-evaluations of their identity (as noted in desisters), it

could also reinforce offence-supportive beliefs and antisocial cognitions that enable offenders to morally disengage and then persist in reoffending.

In a study of the narrative identity of women in the drug trade, Fleetwood (2015) demonstrates how offenders narratively align their criminal and personal identities through deliberation and negotiation. They act only in a way perceived as relevant to their personal identities, which changes in response to contextual factors such as finances. Based on their decisions to offend, individuals narrate criminality as either impossible, meaningful, or inevitable. They explain how they talk themselves into and out of lawbreaking at different stages in their lives, illustrating individuation, narrative positioning, and identity negotiation in relation to criminal identity constructions. For example, a female offender in Fleetwood's (2015) study talked herself out of offending because the crime did not align with her personal identity; hence, she rejected it. Likewise, another offender initially rejected crime because it did not fit with her personal identity. However, as her identity changed through life crises, her decision to offend became more fitting and crime became more meaningful to her life. Lastly, crime fitted in with a third offender's identity as she was born into a family business of crime and committed criminal acts at a young age, which made future offences seemingly inevitable and justifiable. Fleetwood (2015) concludes that personal identities are central in employing offending or nonoffending stories in the general life story. Like the emergence of their criminal identities, offenders' stories also highlight the interactional relationship between structural elements or external forces and individual agency that result in their transformed identities.

3.6.4 The development of redemptive identities

Harsh carceral conditions make it seem like an unlikely place for one to be transformed positively, yet from the accounts of offenders, it seems that they can reform despite accounts of depraved carceral conditions (Best et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2019;

Herbert, 2018; King, 2013; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012; Steyn & Hall, 2015; Stone, 2016). The crime stories of offenders usually transition into stories of redemption - identity transformation primarily based on the offender's intentional and autonomous decision to change with the support of external forces and religious pursuits.

3.6.4.1 The role of individual agency in personal transformation. In redemptive scripts, offenders usually attribute positive changes to personal characteristics such as maturation and cognitive growth, increased self-control, deliberation about their future, becoming family-orientated, and realising the harm that they caused to their families and victims (Bullock et al., 2019; Herbert, 2018). Identity theory attributes the personal change to the volitional choice-making power for offenders to engage in certain behaviours and refrain from others instead of being passively controlled by social structures such as religion, marriage, or employment. The decision to change is often prompted by the discontentment of one's negative behaviours and circumstances and offenders are portrayed as deliberately and continuously engaging in positive changes to avoid reverting to the negative self (Hallet & McCoy, 2015). Their past adversities are also constructed as a catalyst for transformation, with external help enabling their transformation.

3.6.4.2 Empowerment through incarceration. Like Maruna (2001), King (2013) emphasises the importance of sociocultural factors in creating identity changes. These structures can either provide opportunities for positive roles to be enacted and reinforce more positive identities than the current ones, or they can create constraints that hinder the ability to reconstruct their identities. Due to these constraints, offenders may be deprived of opportunities to self-correct and empower themselves. In transitioning from crime stories, redemptive narratives also communicate the significance of empowering external factors such as helpful others or a higher power that believes in them and helps them to discover and reach their purpose. Such external sources may include psychologists, social workers, family

members, supportive correctional officials, positive interpersonal relationships, rehabilitation programmes, spiritual and cultural activities, positive reinforcement, social support, being afforded opportunities to engage in positive change, creating jobs that contribute to the community and facilitate individual development, access to education and training, and a therapeutic and nurturing environment (Best et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2019; Maruna, 2001; Stevens, 2012).

Rehabilitation programmes enable fulfilling participation that creates a sense of meaning, resolution of past deviance, purpose, self-worth, and achievement by making a positive difference (Stevens, 2012). Contrary to the hostility offenders experienced in society, a safe correctional environment facilitates meaningful reflections, self-explorations, resolutions of past issues, and growth (Rowe, 2011). Good relationships with officials, positive acknowledgement, and humanising interactions empower and promote offenders' desires to reform (Bullock et al., 2019; Rowe, 2011). Focusing on their skills and capabilities instead of their risks and deficits motivates offenders to reorder the direction of their lives (Best et al., 2021; Stevens, 2012).

These subjective accounts highlight the importance of legal policies in creating favourable conditions for positive change and, therefore, rehabilitation to occur. The White Paper on Corrections in South Africa, for example, stipulates that rehabilitation should be a societal responsibility aimed at supporting individual transformation efforts (White Paper on Corrections in South Africa, 2005). The rehabilitation initiatives outlined in the White Paper on Corrections are premised on the Correctional Services Act No. 111 of 1998 which regulates the safe custody, humane treatment, and rehabilitation of offenders during their sentence period (Correctional Services Act No. 111 of 1998, 1998). This includes: needs-based correctional sentence plans; participation in correctional and therapeutic programmes; adequate healthcare; social support; opportunities to work; spiritual and moral development;

skills and educational development; social responsibility initiatives; social reintegration plans that includes access to a support system; and supervision and monitoring by the Department of Correctional Services. Similarly, The United Nations (2015) Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners provides standards and norms for the humane treatment, rehabilitation, and social reintegration of criminal offenders. Hence, the focus is expanded to protect the public and prevent recidivism through human development and social responsibility. The objectives of these policies ensures that offenders are provided with adequate opportunities and support which are crucial for them to correct their criminal behaviours and desist from crime.

As indicated in the studies above, offenders often construct meaning associated with personal growth, renewal, and positive changes from their incarceration. Understandably, not all offenders undergo positive changes while incarcerated, as highlighted in Rowe's (2011) research on how offenders construct their identities. Some narratives of incarceration are negative and painful, while others are ambivalent. Parts of the incarceration are experienced as condemning offenders' social and personal identities with a deep sense of loss and degradation. They endure the loss of personal status and are reduced to the 'offender' title. The loss of adult status, individual choice, and personal agency is also mentioned as undermining and demeaning for offenders. The erosion of the meanings associated with an individual's sense of self and social roles and status they once held in society seemingly result in a mortification of certain parts of the self (Rowe, 2011). In a study conducted by Bullock et al. (2019), offenders narrate similar hardships, such as severance of family ties, economic and material losses, traumas and stigma, and current deprivations associated with incarceration realities.

Identities imputed to offenders by experts such as psychologists and officers in the system are depicted as essential in shaping their self-definitions. For example, being placed in

trusted roles apparently helps them feel virtuous and positive, thereby motivating progress, while negative labelling is disempowering (Stevens, 2012). Adherence to numerous stringent correctional rules that prioritise security over their wellbeing can disempower and demoralise offenders, stripping them of autonomy and a positive identity in correctional facilities (Best et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2019). When faced with structural barriers that hinder their ability to make changes, offenders appear to redefine their social roles or identify with social roles that would result in positive self-evaluations (King, 2013).

Some offenders develop adaptive strategies to cope in correctional centres that erode their general sense of self and negatively impact their characters (Rowe, 2011). For example, a South African sample of female offenders describe mental health difficulties such as depression, anxiety, and stress after losing interpersonal relationships due to their incarceration (Steyn & Hall, 2015). They also report suitable coping mechanisms and high levels of hopefulness, meaning, and motivation. Although offenders will mostly have common conditions of carceral ills and adversities, their experiences of it will be primarily mediated by their own life experiences, identities, and other subjective factors that are unique to them. Hence, varied accounts are expected between individual offenders, ultimately creating redeemed or criminal identities (Rowe, 2011). Hence, it is crucial to frame identity (re)construction as individual agency that is conditioned by structural realities that can either enable or debilitate new nonoffending identities envisioned by offenders (Best et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2019; King, 2013; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012; Stone, 2016).

Explorations of incarcerated offenders' experiences and responses to barriers they perceive were built against them by society indicate that offenders continue to desire and maintain social connections despite being socially excluded (Herbert, 2018). This could indicate implicit resistance to social denigration. Offenders try to stay connected to various social groups and engage in social relations, especially by influencing, mentoring,

counselling, and effecting positive change in other offenders. They act as wounded healers and reconstruct their self-identities by characterising their carceral identities as agents of positive change and assets instead of hindrances. In addition, offenders act as stabilising agents in correctional centres by assuming meaningful roles and complying with correctional rules. Interconnectedness seemingly helps offenders add value to others' lives and reconstruct a positive identity for themselves (Herbert, 2018). Offenders possibly use these constructions of prosocial roles and activities to strengthen their accounts of transformation, thereby allowing them to realign with the values of normative society.

Participants in Rowe's (2011) study also drew on superior past roles and experiences, like being affluent or educated, to help them cope with denigrating carceral experiences by emphasising positive identities and marginalising threatening ones. Likewise, the conversion narratives of offenders in the LDS and Herbert's (2018) sample are characterised by newly discovered talents, creative skills, functional competencies, educational improvement, and artwork for social services (Herbert, 2018; Maruna, 2001). As an example, despite her hostile pre-offence realities, a sexually abusive mother managed to find meaning through a transformed identity in the correctional system by forming friendships, attending programmes, enacting nurturing roles, attending therapy, and displaying personal agency and optimism (Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Maruna, 2001). Personal goals and ongoing self-development seemingly give offenders a sense of control over their sentence and facilitate the shift from incarceration being punitive to positively transformative (Rowe, 2011). Thus, identities shape and are shaped by the incarceration experience. Offenders demonstrate that they can meaningfully contribute to the lives of others in correctional facilities and plan to utilise their skills to benefit society. This extends their value beyond the denigrated category they have been confined to by benefitting mainstream society through their personal conversions.

By maintaining social connections and developing their lives benevolently, offenders create a transformed life story or the 'redemptive narrative' that enables them to discursively realign with the values and actions of normative society. Herbert (2018) argues that offenders do not confine themselves to morally offensive identities, but rather they position themselves as active contributors to the common good. Still, offenders across studies depict themselves as being aware of the restrictions of their conviction and incarceration, limiting their ability to make meaningful impacts on society's functioning. Hence, through their accounts of suffering and growth restrictions, they do not seem to romanticise their carceral identities which they present as limiting the growth potential of their future identities (Herbert, 2018; Rowe, 2011).

Rowe (2011) emphasises that new and transformed identities are not complete identity makeovers in which the old, spoiled identity is wholly discarded. Instead, significant parts of the pre-offence experiences shape the current self-identity and anticipated future identity. In support of consistent identities that are not static or context-bound, Rowe (2011) shows how offenders import their personal identities into the correctional system. Identities are then shaped in response to the criminalised and incarcerated realities, which continue to be negotiated as the individual diversifies their life experiences and interactions with their contexts. The carceral identity challenges, advances, or reinforces personal identities in unique ways that are uncomfortable and pleasant for offenders. Notable shifts also seem to occur in their self-meanings, from the beginning of their incarceration until they exit. This demonstrates that the construction of the self-identity is an active and ongoing process throughout the incarceration term.

Bamberg (2012) asserts that individuals create their self-identity, resolving the "who-am-I" question by constantly navigating their sense of self across three realms, each with opposing alternatives: sameness-difference; agency-passivity/recipiency; and constancy-

change. Firstly, individuals either align or distinguish themselves from others based on similarities or differences. This creates either division or unity between the self and others, a sense of belonging or uniqueness that enables them to move between group memberships. Studies show how offenders shift from the social category of criminal to prosocial through their stories of the responsible roles they played pre-offence and post-offence, distancing themselves from criminals and creating unity between themselves and society (Dollinger, 2018; Herbert, 2018; Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; King, 2013; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011).

Secondly, individuals position themselves in the world as either passive recipients of outside influences that caused their wrongdoings or as active agents responsible for their outcomes and successes (Bamberg, 2012). Again, offenders position themselves as helpless recipients of adversity that precipitated devastation and criminality, yet positive outcomes like career success and personal transformation are attributed to their efforts and superior decisions (Bullock et al., 2019; Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Dollinger, 2018; Fleetwood, 2015; Hallet & McCoy, 2015; Herbert, 2018; Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018; King, 2013; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012).

Finally, people tend to either present a consistent narrative of their past and present selves or describe a transformation of their personal identity over time (Bamberg, 2012). Offenders in previous studies have shown personal transformation over time instead of constancy (Bullock et al., 2019; Hallet & McCoy, 2015; Herbert, 2018; Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012). Therefore, identity transformation is a purposeful and dynamic act of agency and motivation and not merely reactive to societal conditions and structural prescripts.

However, these do interact with internal functions to bring about transformation. Despite the idea that offender behaviour is driven by adherence to institutional rules, there is

evidence of conscious deliberation about their future, reflections on the present, and strategising how to align the realities (Best et al., 2021; King, 2013; Rowe, 2011). Thus, personal change results from intentional choices made by offenders to choose an alternative future identity of varied prosocial roles using available social resources. In addition to their efforts and supporting external forces, spirituality was identified as a redeeming influence for criminal offenders.

3.6.4.3 The importance of Christianity in stories of redemption. While the theme of a higher power and religion features in the redemptive scripts of Maruna's (2001) sample, offenders in Herbert's (2018) sample did not mention religion in their conversion narratives. It was traditionally believed that desistance was achieved through religious control that inhibits deviance by inciting fear of supernatural punishment yet lacking personal agency for behavioural change. Recently, authors argue that religious offenders make agentic moves towards their personal changes that seem not to be reactionary and externally controlled (Hallett & McCoy, 2015). A study of desisting ex-offenders attributes their positive changes and identity transformation to their Christian religion through engagement in spiritual activities during their incarceration (Hallett & McCoy, 2015). An exploration of the effect of Christian beliefs on adult male sexual offenders' self-identities indicates that the concept of forgiveness by a higher power was central to the redemptive narrative (Blagden et al., 2020). All offenders in this sample unanimously believed that God had forgiven them. God's forgiveness is positioned as absolving them of guilt and negating the effects of ostracisation and their need for societal acceptance. Although they reported that they do not necessarily forgive themselves, perhaps indicating that they do not trivialise the impact of their crime, God's forgiveness prompts their process of self-forgiveness, which they construct as instrumental to their moving on. Further, it motivates them to desist from crime and maintain forgiveness.

The personal impact of spirituality reportedly has positive effects on mental health outcomes and belonging to a social group such as religion is related as an adaptive mechanism of conversion during an identity crisis (Blagden et al., 2020). By socially identifying with their religious groups instead of the sexual offender categorisation, offenders somewhat replace their deviant criminal identity with their positive religious identity. Religion is apparently an instrumental resource for offenders who, through their own agency, choose it as a redemptive path to a new prosocial identity (Hallett & McCoy, 2015). Through religion, most offenders narrate a resurrected self, a new self that emerges from the old self yet is distinct from their old selves (Blagden et al., 2020). Identity transformation is further demonstrated through their benevolent activities. By portraying moral identities, offenders seem more invested in enacting positive roles aligned with that identity and the stories they tell about themselves. Reconstructed identities are also used to imply that they are rehabilitated, moral, and ready for reintegration into mainstream society. Narratives of present realities are coherently projected into anticipated future outcomes of either optimistic or bleak post-incarceration possibilities for desisting and persisting offenders.

3.6.5 Aiming for generative futures

Irrespective of whether offenders construct their criminal identities as transformed or persistent, there is a common desire for deinstitutionalisation that means freedom, independence, reintegration into society, and economic growth (Rowe, 2011). However, future realities are perceived divergently. On the one hand, persisters indicate that their ongoing involvement in crime results from their lack of control over their future and despondency to obtain opportunities that would foster a crime-free life (Maruna, 2001). On the other hand, the redemptive scripts of desisters are full of purpose that extends into generative future actions of benevolence and hope. Despite structural support, offenders attribute positive aspirations to their individual agency and choices to pursue change through

deliberate control over their futures (Stevens, 2012). King (2013) explains identity transformation as a process in which offenders first reconceptualise their identity by distinguishing their future identities from their past ones, focusing on future identities that are incongruent with offending ones.

Central to the narrative of the redeemed identity is channelling generative efforts as the wounded healer to help and mentor others who are now in the same process of offending as they were, usually through social and religious movements that strive to empower others (Bullock et al., 2019; Maruna, 2001). They express their intentions to make positive future contributions by returning to dysfunctional and criminalising systems with the hope of facilitating reform that will imprint on generations to come (Maruna, 2001). Desisting offenders notably re-story their past deviance into positive futures, the desire to live normal and stable lives with jobs and families, optimism about generativity, and their ability to live crime-free lives (Bullock et al., 2019). Offenders in a therapeutic community also consciously connect their current transformation to future desistance in an optimistic fashion (Stevens, 2012). Therefore, through their accounts of generative actions, offenders strengthen their positioning of themselves as moral people with noble intentions to improve the lives of others. In doing so, they align their values and future actions with that of normative society and against antisocial beings. Also, giving back to society through benevolent acts creates the impression that the sentence is worth it for them. These stories of goodness and morality are constructed across the life stories of most offenders.

3.7 Narratively constructing a coherent moral identity

In the context of criminal conviction and sentencing, separating those who abide by the law and those who do not is a means to maintain society's moral order by creating unity between 'us' while ostracising 'them' (Herbert, 2018). Dollinger's (2018) analysis of the connection between macro narratives and personal narratives of offenders on criminality adds

that the culturally ascribed category of 'criminal' positions offenders as deviant and immoral perpetrators, lacking in self-control and in contrast to victims. The practice of dividing people into categories of 'us' and 'them', labelling some as good and others as bad, and distinguishing between humans and monsters can have a detrimental effect on offenders' mental health, increasing their risks of reoffending (McCartan & Richards, 2021; Webster, 2018). This approach focuses more on the person as a problem than addressing the problematic behaviour.

However, on the other side of the moral boundary, there is a social reality that offenders exist in, a reality that is not merely characterised by deviance, suffering, and denigration. Narrators within these categories also position themselves differently in and between categories and can either align or contrast their identities to public discourses - embracing, resisting, or being neutral towards them (Dollinger, 2018). Depending on their self-identity - good or criminal - offenders employ particular narrative techniques and relate specific stories to demonstrate, defend, and create an integrated and coherent self-identity.

3.7.1 Portraying stories of goodness

Maruna (2001) states that central to the contaminated identity is the inevitably criminal self that ascribes to society's expectations of inescapable immorality. On the contrary, the redeemed identity is defined by a fundamentally positive self-evaluation, the self that has always been 'good' and 'normal'. The redeemed identity defines the self by moral values, not deviant actions or structured roles. The personal identity is consistently depicted through narrative foreshadowing of the moral self in various parts of the life trajectory. From the beginning, many conventional and normative experiences characterise the life story (Geiger & Fischer, 2017; Maruna, 2001). To emphasise their normative lifestyles, offenders draw on their past positive roles, such as being a loving parent or loyal friend. These roles are highlighted to decentralise the crime in their life stories and create a thread of normality

(Geiger & Fischer, 2017; Maruna, 2001). Even in their narratives of reform, they narrate recurrent histories of goodness, strengthening the believability of their transformation to others (Maruna, 2001).

In the face of a rapidly and radically changing sense of self that has been stripped of multiple identities, offenders seem to clutch onto a consistent and coherent sense of self that can be integrated into their new identities (Maruna, 2001). Attaching redemptive value to previous sufferings and criminality reconstructs the events they were once apparently oppressed by and powerless against as necessary precipitants to their personal identity transformations. This restores their life's purpose and creates narrative coherence. Offenders reinforce their constructions of the moral self by attributing cause or locus of control to external forces of adversity and abuse and positioning their crime as adaptive coping mechanisms. Offenders often use the separation of their good character and bad actions, contrasting goodness with contamination and distinguishing between criminal and victim as a defence mechanism to create a persuasive contrast between their past deviance and current transformation (Maruna, 2001). Although this could be a strategy to realign with normative society, it could also indicate attempts to avoid confronting the pain and harm they caused their victims, families, and communities. Therefore, the current study approaches the discourse of goodness with the understanding that offenders weave personal attributes and experiences to construct a particular impression of their moral identity. The term 'goodness' is used in this study to refer to offenders' accounts of prosocial attributes, intentions, roles, and actions.

Rowe (2011) explains that a sense of shame and distress is associated with the stigmatised criminal identity, which is perceived as a spoiled identity, and which offenders struggle to reconcile with their attestations of a generally moral self. By temporally weaving together similar stories of morality, from the beginning of their lives far into their anticipated

futures, offenders create a continuous identity. Continuity allows them to maintain parts of their personal identity without completely rejecting their old, spoiled identities in pursuit of new, reformed ones. Instead, significant parts of their (albeit old) self-identity meaningfully exist in the present and can significantly impact their future narratives (Blagden et al., 2020; Maruna, 2001).

Positive identities are maintained through offenders' continuous attestations to their ongoing decency and normality by morally distancing themselves from other inmates of more severe crimes. For example: statutory rapists judged themselves as more moral than child molesters; child molesters were positioned as morally superior to incestuous offenders and paedophiles; and attempted rapists were portrayed as more decent than rapists (Geiger & Fischer, 2017). Similarly, non-addicts morally distanced themselves from substance users; and substance users juxtaposed themselves to murderers (Rowe, 2011). Offenders position their criminal identities as relatively moral and superior to offenders who committed seemingly ruthless crimes, creating a hierarchy of criminality, severity, and deserved punishment in which the emerging self is positively constructed (Dollinger, 2018). There are also comparisons between those who bear primary (perpetrating) and secondary (supporting) responsibility for committing the offence, usually positioning themselves in a flexible moral scenario. Offenders consequently construct stories of their incarceration experiences to present themselves as moral and resist the stained stigma of being a sexual offender who is morally deficient (Dollinger, 2018; Geiger & Fischer, 2017; Herbert, 2018; Rowe, 2011). Their accounts maintain a positive moral identity even in the carceral context. However, in defending their moral character, they narrate romanticised accounts of offending followed by exaggerated stories of transformation and morality that might appear dismissive of the harm they have caused.

3.7.2 Defending their goodness

Offenders use various narrative strategies when recounting their life experiences to justify and defend their moral character. Narrative techniques range from complete denial of their offences to lacking in criminal intent (Bullock et al., 2019; Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018). Wortley et al. (2019) conducted a study on the factors that prevent acts of child sexual abuse from being completed. They compared the conditions of completed offences to those that were not completed and found that incarcerated male child sexual offenders in their sample stopped the abuse mainly because the victim requested them to or showed signs of distress. Those who completed the offence interpreted the victim as being willing to participate and continued because it was perceived as enjoyable or beneficial to the child (for affection or otherwise), thereby positioning the self as lacking in deviance and antisocial intent. Although these narrative strategies of denial, justification, and minimisation serve to maintain positive self-evaluations by avoiding the destruction caused, victims may experience this as undermining their pain and suffering.

Pertinent to the current study, a recent South African study of male child sexual offenders highlights the deliberate grooming processes of child victims whom offenders perceived as ‘willing’ participants and who appeared to benefit from the sexual encounter (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). Offenders believed the sex was pleasurable for the children, who apparently did not resist the sexual acts. The victims were reportedly groomed with gifts and privileges which supposedly secured their cooperation and minimised the possibility of disclosure. The child victims were related as substitute sexual partners with whom offenders suggest they were engaging in mutually beneficial relations. This is similar to a sample of female sexual offenders who defended their offence as beneficial to the victim (Gannon et al., 2012; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). On the contrary, empathy deficits were evident in a group of South African male sexual offenders towards their own victims but not towards general

victims of sexual abuse (Coetzee, 2019). This could be a strategy to avoid taking responsibility for the harmful effects of their crime while aligning with normative societal morality.

Nonetheless, feelings of guilt and regret were also described by offenders who constructed the child sexual abuse as mutually beneficial, often resolving to cease the abuse but without much success (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). Even at the peak of their offending, they portray themselves as morally aware and ambivalent (Dollinger, 2018; Maruna, 2001). Having a moral conscience before the offence and a guilty conscience after the offence is used to persuade others that offenders are morally aware and capable despite their brief and atypical acts of criminality (Geiger & Fischer, 2017). Just like sexual abuse, sexual offending is also reported as having long-term detrimental effects on the offender, presumably to affirm the presence of a moral conscience in offenders (Da Costa et al., 2014).

Research on the post-hoc crime stories of incarcerated male sexual offenders illustrates how offenders construct positive personal identities by reconstructing their experiences to resist blame and responsibility for perpetrating (Geiger & Fischer, 2017). In contrast to the long-term strategic groomer described above, child sexual offenders in Geiger and Fischer's (2017) study narrate impulsive, spontaneous, and uncharacteristic sexual arousal from their interaction with the specific child victim yet with no other child they encountered regularly. Statutory rapists also defended their criminality by attributing blame to the victim's behaviours. Some offenders claim that if they had known certain details, like the actual age of the victim, they would not have committed the offence. They suggest their actions were unintentional and therefore resist blame for their offending. Others attributed blame to being intoxicated by drugs or alcohol during the offence. Past normative lifestyles, commendable characters, and benevolent roles are used to emphasise that their criminality was indeed a brief act of uncharacteristic deviance (Geiger & Fischer, 2017). Offenders mine

through their deviant actions for positive features and emphasise superior qualities such as compassion or success to neutralise their criminality (Maruna, 2001). Through neutralisation techniques, offenders reconcile the ambiguous realities of deviance and their claims of morality through their narratives (Geiger & Fischer, 2017; Maruna, 2001).

Offenders construct a positive moral identity aligned with the conventional morality of a normative society by dichotomising their acts of goodness from their criminal acts (Maruna, 2001). Offenders in studies of redemptive scripts allude to the re-emergence of their moral being, a restoration of the moral self they were always meant to be, but as life unfolded unfortunately, the morally upright self was concealed (Bullock et al., 2019; Stevens, 2012). They polarise and contrast their past and present selves but acknowledge that their past experiences were instrumental to their transformation. Thus, they romantically construct their criminality as a bridge, and not a barrier, to their life's purpose (Stevens, 2012). Criminality is also constructed as being purposeful as their lives were strategically crafted by a higher power to fulfil a specific purpose. Hence, they were predestined for crime, incarceration, and reform. Maruna (2001) argues that the redemptive framework of 'making good' is not merely a process of rehabilitation or treatment of the criminal identity. Instead, it is described as a liberation of the self from systemic woes so their purpose of goodness can continue.

The narrative practices utilised by offenders to construct their self-identities in the studies discussed thus far include denial, lacking criminal intent, rationalising deviance, attribution of criminal blame to external rather than internal factors, conflicted loci of control (my responsibility but not my fault), trivialising criminal effects, and denial of injury to victims. These narrative strategies are considered cognitive distortions and are, therefore, pathologised in the field of psychology and the correctional system.

Some researchers argue that religion can exacerbate cognitive distortions that justify and rationalise crime by being offence-supportive, allowing offenders to avoid responsibility

for their crimes (Geiger & Fischer, 2017). This, in turn, can impair victim empathy and perspective-taking. Consequently, most rehabilitation and treatment programmes entail a process of cognitive restructuring that begins with the admission of guilt, confrontation of defences and cognitive distortions, acknowledgement of the magnitude of harm caused, and ultimately the development of victim empathy and assuming full responsibility for offending behaviour. Recently, cognitive theorists such as the authors of the multi-mechanism theory of cognitive distortions assert that targeting specific cognitive distortions could actually reinforce its existence through a process of belief polarisation in which offenders further endorse their own beliefs when confronted with opposing beliefs (Szumski et al., 2018). Therefore, narrative identity authors agree that a confrontational practice should be avoided. Instead, attention should be drawn to accounts of justification to contextualise the offence, understand it holistically, and prevent it from reoccurring.

3.8 The importance of a narrative approach to research and interventions in South Africa

Murhula and Singh (2019) conducted a literature review on the effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes in the South African correctional system. They cite multiple authors who suggest that the high recidivism rate in South Africa is partially due to ineffective rehabilitation programmes that are not tailored to the diverse needs of offenders. The focus of rehabilitation programmes has previously been on its content. However, the focal lens has recently been expanded to the context in which programmes are rendered and intervention processes. Client authorship and ownership are listed as being essential for change to occur (Frost et al., 2006). This highlights the need to evaluate the relevance of correctional programmes in South Africa to its recipients. It also suggests the importance of adopting an approach that supports the emergence of prosocial identities in offenders. This

can be done by affording opportunities for narrative reconstructions that facilitate positive identity formation.

It is recommended that work with offenders should focus on facilitating reconstructed identities by centralising transformed identities which are validating for offenders that are in the process of realigning their moral selves with that of society (Geiger & Fischer, 2017; Maruna, 2001). It is argued that disclosure-based treatment programmes could exacerbate feelings of shame and humiliation, resulting in the internalisation of a criminal identity which subsequently may be enacted (Blagden et al., 2020). Instead, narrative experts assert that, by helping offenders transform their criminal identities, they are more likely to assume prosocial identities and then enact these (Bullock et al., 2019; Geiger & Fischer, 2017; Maruna, 2001; Stevens, 2012). They suggest that neutralisation techniques, such as cognitive distortions, protect the moral self and preserve offenders' sense of goodness and redeemability. This is essential to form a positive self-identity and forge a generative future.

Focusing entirely on restructuring the criminal identity minimises opportunities for positive identity growth. It possibly erodes the structure of the moral identity, which is linked to the motivation for ongoing moral lifestyles. Narrative studies on successful desistance from crime demonstrate an association between effective desistance and offenders who were given the opportunity to reconstruct and convert their crime narratives into redemptive ones (King, 2013; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011). Hence, there appears to be an association between narratives of transformation and behavioural reform. It is, therefore, recommended that criminal offenders be encouraged to reconstruct their crime narratives into transformative tales through narrative-informed interventions.

3.9 Conclusion

The literature on child sexual abuse clearly demonstrates its detrimental impact on various levels of victims and the offender. Although female child sexual offenders receive

less attention than male offenders, the impact of their crimes on their child victims is just as adverse. This emphasises the need to challenge the denialism and trivialisation of female perpetrated abuse. Significant strides have been made towards conceptualising the causal pathways to offending, concluding that offending results from the dynamic interaction between an individual and their context. This highlights that external contributors to crime should also be targeted for interventions to prevent child sexual abuse. The association between narrative constructions and behavioural reform is of specific significance to this study and the contribution that the study of the narratives of child sexual offenders can make to preventing and reducing the rate of child sexual abuse in South Africa.

In conclusion, criminal offenders, especially offenders of child sexual abuse, are the quintessential social outcasts that highlight a symbolic boundary that categorises them as immoral and doomed to deviance. However, reviewing the literature on offenders in the preceding sections illustrates that offenders use narrative practices such as denial and justification to avoid the harmful consequences, blame, and shame associated with their offending actions. They avoid the negative consequences of their actions as it could erode their sense of self and ability to conceptualise personal change. Instead, they narratively reconstruct their various identities to demonstrate moral transformation. Redemptive narratives enable them to permeate the moral boundary and realign their personal identities and actions with the values of normative society.

In telling their life stories, offenders weave together different accounts of their past, present, and anticipated futures with the golden thread of a constant moral identity. The moral identity is portrayed as momentarily overwhelmed but eventually restored through their personal agency to utilise social and spiritual resources that facilitate identity growth and transformation. While these accounts appear to be offence-supportive by justifying its occurrence and minimising the harm caused to multiple victims, narrative scholars postulate

that these narrative practices are associated with reform and criminal desistance (King, 2013; Maruna, 2001). The next chapter delineates the methodological processes of this study, together with the researcher's underlying decision-making and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This research study explores the life stories of offenders of child sexual abuse in South Africa. The methodological steps were designed to answer the primary research question: *How do child sexual offenders in South Africa construct stories to make meaning of their life experiences and events?* This study adopts a narrative-based social constructionist ontology, theorising offenders' realities as socially constructed through narratives. Narratives are viewed as deliberate constructions through which individuals communicate meaning. The narratives in this study are approached from a *hermeneutics of demystification* in which the implicit meanings behind narratives are interpreted by focusing on the unspoken alongside the spoken (Josselson, 2004). This examines how a story is constructed and ordered, noticing inconsistencies and silences to understand what individuals are conveying through their stories. This is unlike a *hermeneutics of restoration* in which researchers aim to transmit the intended meanings that individuals communicate. Accordingly, a qualitative research design was deemed most suitable to access in-depth narrative accounts of participants' life experiences.

This chapter tracks the current study from its conception, discussing the steps followed in its implementation and the writing of the final report. It chronicles the methodological approach utilised in the study, which details the purposive sampling method and subsequent recruitment process that ensured the relevant target population was accessed. Thereafter, the data collection and analysis process undertaken through individual interviews using the 'life story' approach (McAdams, 1990) and its application is motivated for. Additionally, this chapter includes a discussion of the ethics that were considered to protect the participants while safeguarding my wellbeing as a researcher. Lastly, I outline the

measures taken to produce rigorous research outcomes, such as reflecting on my personal experiences.

4.2 Participants and sampling

4.2.1 Sampling techniques

As discussed in the preface section of this thesis, the research question for this study originated from my professional work with child sexual offenders in South Africa. After formulating a research question, the next step was determining which population would be appropriate to address the research question and study objectives. A purposive sampling method, which entailed selecting individuals deemed best suited to answering the research question, was utilised (Silverman, 2013). This study's participants included offenders convicted and sentenced for a sexual offence against a minor child in their current or previous conviction. The Department of Correctional Services in South Africa was identified as the most convenient place to access participants. Population parameters and inclusion criteria for the sample included the following:

- Participants who were incarcerated, on parole, or under correctional supervision at the time of the study.
- Offenders who could communicate in English, the only language I am fluent in. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, the use of a translator might have impacted the flow of communication between the participants and I and the richness of the narratives shared, creating a more threatening environment for the participants who might have felt outnumbered in the research interview. It is noted that only including offenders who could converse in English might have created an overrepresentation of certain narratives in the research context.
- Variation in demographic variables (such as age, race, and gender) as a diverse sample ensures that varied perspectives informed the study's inferences.

Due to the inclusion criteria, the study's sample was purposively drawn from the population of 112 190 sentenced adult male offenders and 2957 sentenced adult female offenders in the Department of Correctional Services, South Africa in 2021. There were 235 active correctional centres across 46 Management Areas in South Africa where this research topic could be investigated. The choice of Management Areas for this study was based on the location of the main female correctional centres per province, as there are fewer female centres in the country (Department of Correctional Services, 2019).

Deciding on a sample size is often a complex process in qualitative research, with very few guidelines on what constitutes an ideal sample size (Silverman, 2013). Lewis (2017) states there is no standard sample size in narrative studies – which can range from focusing on the narratives of one individual to as many as are needed to answer the research question or reach data saturation. While some authors suggest that data saturation indicates a suitable sample size, narrative studies anticipating unique accounts could continuously elicit new narratives that challenge typical data saturation methods (Levitt et al., 2017). This is further complicated by novice researchers being eager to collect more data than is necessary, who might not understand the bounds of data saturation (Lewis, 2017). Narrative researchers caution that conducting narrative research studies on large samples might oversimplify the complexity of human identities (Maruna & Liem, 2021).

Data adequacy ensures that the number of participants included in the study is guided by the quality of the information gathered instead of presumptions regarding numbers or sample sizes (Levitt et al., 2017). Including diversity within the research phenomenon is more important to define data adequacy than the number of participants. Thus, Lewis (2017, p. 7) advises that,

> it is better to see small and to understand a piece of the puzzle and then later fit the puzzle piece into a larger picture. As you grapple with questions of too much or too little data, realise that you likely have what you need.

For the practical considerations of obtaining ethical approval and my academic timeframe to conduct this study, a sample of 12 participants was selected for narrative inquiry. The research proposal stated that the study would be extended to other correctional facilities if thin or uninterpretable narratives were elicited. It was initially planned that six participants would be sampled from correctional centres in Gauteng, which was the most convenient location for me, three participants from KwaZulu-Natal, and three from the Free State. Ultimately, seven participants were sampled from Gauteng correctional centres, two from KwaZulu-Natal, and three from the Free State. This study was not undertaken in the Management Area where I was employed due to possible conflicts of interest, researcher bias, and participant bias.

4.2.2 Recruitment process

To uphold offenders' rights to privacy, their details cannot be obtained without their consent. Due to security protocols in correctional facilities, outsiders are not permitted to initiate direct private access to research participants. The Department of Correctional Services is considered a closed or private research setting in which gatekeepers control access to participants (Silverman, 2013). In addition to ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Pretoria, ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Correctional Services, which identified a research guide or primary contact person. It was further stipulated that the Area Commissioners, the highest authority at the identified Management Areas, be contacted for access to relevant gatekeepers at the identified male and female correctional centres.

As such, I contacted the Area Commissioners at four Management Areas across the three identified provinces to introduce the research study. The approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Correctional Services was emailed to the Area Commissioners, who then referred me to the Area Coordinators for Development and Care (the component that manages social workers and psychologists in each Management Area) or the Heads of Correctional Centres in which the research was permitted to be undertaken. Once approval was obtained from the Heads of Correctional Centres, a psychologist or social worker was contacted and briefed on the research study, and a copy of the participant information sheet (Appendix A) explaining the exact purpose and procedures of the study was emailed to the social worker or psychologist to identify qualifying offenders.

In the context of this study, the social worker or psychologist at the identified correctional facilities were considered the 'gatekeepers' who assisted with the recruitment process to ensure the protection of the privacy of child sexual offenders. Once they identified a suitable offender, they discussed the contents of the information sheet with the identified offender. The offender then decided if they wanted to participate voluntarily or not. If they opted to participate, then an in-person individual interview was arranged with me. If they did not volunteer to participate, then another offender was identified. In some correctional centres, a suitable offender could not be identified by the psychologist or social worker, while in other centres, more than one offender volunteered to participate.

The stringent monitoring and supervision of offenders in correctional centres did inevitably compromise participant anonymity as the gatekeepers who arranged the research interviews were aware of who participated in the study. However, it was anticipated that social workers and psychologists would afford the most contained and private recruitment process given their professional code of ethics. This avoided the disclosure of research participation to numerous contact persons in each correctional facility. Requesting that

volunteers contact me directly potentially imposed financial and social disadvantages to certain offenders as they are financially responsible for their private telephone calls, which are monitored, and they are afforded limited calls in a week. Thus, social workers or psychologists recruiting participants mitigated the risk that participation in this study would create unnecessary costs and compromises for the participants.

Based on my experiences of resistance from child sexual offenders to participate in therapeutic services, it was anticipated that similar challenges would be encountered with child sexual offenders volunteering to participate in the research study. Offenders of child sexual abuse are rarely included in research due to the stigmatisation of the offence and barriers to accessing this population (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022). This study was conducted during the global COVID-19 pandemic. The Department of Correctional Services implemented restrictions in response to the pandemic, which impacted research interviews with offenders. Ethical approval was granted during lockdown level 5 in February 2021 when researchers were not permitted access to correctional centres. Once this restriction was lifted, correctional officials implemented a rotational shift pattern in which only half the staff complement was present at any given time. This created further challenges as most social workers or psychologists were seldom available to recruit participants. When they successfully arranged a meeting and I arrived at the centre, further challenges were encountered, such as the offender being ill, involved in labour, or participating in correctional programmes.

In one province, I arrived for an interview with a parolee who did not show up for the interview, the social worker was not available to assist, and another offender could not be identified before I had to leave the province. In that instance, only two offenders were interviewed at the facility instead of three. Similarly, in another province, a parolee was too ill to participate on the day of the scheduled interview and did not arrive for the rescheduled

interview, but a third incarcerated offender participated instead. Likewise, a psychologist could not identify a third suitable participant in the third Management Area, so only two participants were interviewed, while four participants (instead of three) were interviewed in the fourth Management Area. Thus, the required number of participants (n=12) were still recruited and interviewed for this study.

4.2.3 Sample characteristics

I initially intended to maximise variation in demographic variables to obtain a diverse sample, but when the specifics could not be obtained, any willing participant was requested. In the end, 12 offenders participated in this study. Six males and six females from the following race groups participated: four Black; one Coloured; one Indian; and six White. One participant was a non-national, while the rest were South African citizens. The age of the participants ranged from 31 to 72 years old. One participant was a parolee, one was under correctional supervision, and 10 were incarcerated. Although they were all convicted of a sexual offence against a minor child, their sentence lengths ranged from eight years of correctional supervision to life sentences. Nine participants were solo offenders, and three were co-accused to their intimate partners, who were the primary perpetrators of the offence. Participants were primarily biologically related to the victims of their offences. The duration of the criminal activities ranged from single episodes to four years of sexual abuse. As per self-reports, participants' demographic details and brief criminal profiles are presented in Table 1 below. The names of participants, their victims, family members, and friends have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities. Likewise, the names of towns, cities, provinces, correctional facilities, countries, and other named locations and places that could identify participants have been changed in this study.

Table 1

Participant Demographics and Criminal Profiles

Name	Age (in years)	Gender	Race	Conviction	Sentence	Years served	Status	Relationship to victim(s)
1. Anton	67	Male	White	Sexual abuse, flashing	8 years	1	Correctional Supervision	Foster Daughter
2. Bianca	42	Female	White	Sexual assault	12 years	4	Incarcerated	Fiancé's Nieces
3. Charlotte	56	Female	Black	Rape	18 years	6	Incarcerated	Biological Nephew
4. Derick	63	Male	Black	Rape	Life	15	Incarcerated	Biological Daughter
5. Ian	60	Male	White	Rape, sexual assault	Life	19	Incarcerated	Biological Daughters
6. Jenna	35	Female	White	Failure to report child sexual abuse	15 years	10 months	Parole	Biological Daughters
7. Leroy	42	Male	Coloured	Rape	20 years	9	Incarcerated	Friend's Daughter
8. Neville	72	Male	Indian	Rape	Life	11	Incarcerated	Employee's Daughter
9. Nina	32	Female	White	Rape, sexual assault, neglect	20 years	8	Incarcerated	Biological Daughter
10. Tamara	43	Female	White	Rape, indecent assault, child abuse	Life	8	Incarcerated	Biological Daughters
11. Thandi	31	Female	Black	Rape	Life	3	Incarcerated	Biological Daughter
12. Themba	42	Male	Black	Rape	Life	19	Incarcerated	Biological Niece

4.3 Data collection

Data were gathered through two individual interviews per participant, which elicited detailed oral accounts of offenders' life experiences. Previous research suggests that the most popular method for accessing inner narratives is in-person, confidential interviews that are audio recorded (Maruna & Liem, 2021). Moreover, face-to-face contact in which rapport can be established creates a less threatening context to explore sensitive topics such as sexual and criminal behaviour. The life story approach dominated the contents of the interviews, and the structure was guided by a predetermined interview schedule (Appendix B), as discussed below. In addition to oral accounts, textual forms of data such as diaries, logs, and archival documents also feature in narrative studies (McAlpine, 2016). Hence, data were also gathered through a visually recorded (written or drawn) depiction of participants' life stories.

4.3.1 The life story approach

This study used a modified version of McAdams's 'life story interview' in which offenders were invited to share their life story from birth onward as they deemed necessary (McAdams, 1990). While questionnaires and structured interviews dominate research on criminal offenders, scholars emphasise the need for researchers to seek unconventional methods to explore how criminal offenders make meaning of their world (Dastile, 2013; Presser, 2010; Venalainen, 2018). Mann and Hollin (2007) used motivational questioning in their sample of male sexual offenders. They postulate that direct inquests into motivations, causes, and reasons for offences could be ineffective in the criminal context.

Narrative interviewing techniques are notably more suitable than conventional question-answer schemas on their own due to the following strengths: 1) the interviewer imposes no structure; 2) the interviewee uses their own spontaneous language, which gives a richer, in-depth snippet of their reality; and 3) there are minimal interruptions and influence from the interviewer (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). Storytelling is believed to be a universal

competence, an everyday activity that most people are familiar with, and is not limited to formal educational or stratified language (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; McAlpine, 2016). This is important in a sample of first- and second-language English speakers with different literacy levels.

By allowing offenders to author their own stories, the researcher, as an outsider, creates a sense of relatability and ease amongst offenders who are reminded that they are the experts of their own lives. Research with offenders presents unique methodological challenges from the interview context of criminalisation and incarceration, added stigma, and possibly resistance to unpacking the crime narrative (Presser, 2010; Venalainen, 2018). Due to the added stigma of child sexual abuse, this group of offenders might be more prone to respond in a socially desirable, defensive, or resistant fashion. Thus, assuming a less direct approach was essential for offenders to personalise their narrative accounts with minimal structuring from the researcher and the research process. Presser (2010) adds that a narrative approach to studying child sexual abuse takes a more holistic perspective on the offence as embedded in larger narratives. Dastile (2013) adds that research on sexual offending should move beyond the dominant discourses of deviance and should be dominated by the life stories and contextual realities of offenders, centred on the voice of criminal offenders that are mostly absent in the literature.

The life story interview is an extended form of the personal narrative interview in which the researcher invites the participant to tell their life story and then asks questions based on the experiences and events shared (Murray, 2008). The life story is considered a complete telling of one's entire life experience, with recollections being the most salient to the narrator or what they feel is safe and suitable to share. Understanding narratives as a snippet in time, modulated by memory, and constructed for a specific purpose, the life story is also considered partial yet complete for its purpose. A life story approach, in which

participants are invited to express their life stories in any way they feel appropriate, is also less threatening as it positions the crime as an event in time and not a defining characteristic of the offenders' identities. It is premised that the life story integrates the internalised stories of the narrator's past, present, and future, which bring meaning to their realities and experiences (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The life story approach also focuses on how life experiences are interpreted to distinguish the self from others whilst simultaneously creating a sense of coherence and continuity of oneself across time and contexts (Dunlop, 2017).

The current study did not impose a clear structure for sharing the life story. All participants were invited to tell their life stories in any way they were comfortable, from the beginning, including anything important to them. Although this implicitly introduced chronological expectations, it neither prescribed the structure of the timeline nor the content of the phases that should be shared. This was done uninterruptedly as narrative theorists emphasise that it is crucial not to interrupt the narrative flow or offer commentary during storytelling as it may shape a different narrative (Chase, 2011; Murray, 2008). Instead, questions, probes, and clarifications occurred at the end of the interview. It is encouraged that researchers follow the narrator's story trail and not be prescriptive or intrusive (Riessman, 2008). The way researchers conduct interviews, the questions they ask and follow up on, and their approving or disapproving gestures shape the stories told and the direction in which it unfolds or how it is constructed. Researchers need to share control with participants to facilitate collaborative narratives. Although this may cause temporary uncertainty and possible anxiety for the researcher, it allows greater equality as the participant can lead and direct the interview. This may lead to more authentic accounts of a phenomenon of interest (Riessman, 2008). The life story account was followed by clarity-seeking questions on what participants shared, their interpretations of events and experiences, and predetermined open-ended questions about each participant's pre- and post-offence experiences.

4.3.2 Part 1: Oral narratives

4.3.2.1 Interview schedule. While the interview content focused on the life stories of participants, the interview structure was informed by narrative interview guidelines, which include: 1) *initiation;* 2) *main narration*; 3) *questioning* phase; and 4) *concluding* talk, to facilitate in-depth and uninterrupted storytelling (Murray, 2008). During the initiation interview phase, consent was discussed with the participants, as per the information sheet (Appendix A), and questions about the interview or study were addressed. Thereafter, the life story question constituted the main narration phase of the interview. I invited participants to share their life story, with an initial prompt of, "Tell me about yourself, your life story, everything you would want me to know about you, anything you can remember from the day that you were born that is of importance to you."

Once participants indicated they had completed their life stories through statements such as, "So, that's basically my story from there to here" or "That's what I can say to you", it was taken as an invitation to transition to the questioning phase of the interview. At this stage, I thanked the participants for sharing their stories and asked clarity-seeking questions that emerged from the narrative accounts or immanent issues expressed by the interviewee in response to the questions. In addition to the life story statement and probing, I developed predetermined exmanent questions for the participants based on the research interest to ensure that participants' unrestricted accounts are expressed while addressing the research aims (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000) as is depicted in the interview schedule (Appendix B).

Questions were intended to probe into specific areas that would add depth to the life stories, experiences, and events. It was not repeated if the life story content had already answered these questions. While exmanent and immanent content may differ, the researcher is advised to convert their exmanent questions into immanent questions in narrative interviewing (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). In this research context, there was a notable

social gap between the participants and myself as we are considered to exist worlds apart, hence the added importance of enquiries anchored in the narration and using the narrator's language. Although participants sometimes defined terminology unique to carceral contexts, my prior experience allowed me to understand their jargon and probe appropriately. Terms like CMC (case management committee), Head (head of the correctional centre), Members (correctional officials), ticket (offender identification card), and so forth were utilised. Despite an interview schedule of a detailed series of questions, in narrative research, the interview protocol is treated as a guide that the researcher might never utilise (Murray, 2008). Narrative research methods shift from the conventional interview prototype by reframing the narrative data as a collaborative creation between the narrator and listener (Chase, 2011).

4.3.2.2 The initial audio-recorded interview. Once the psychologist or social worker at the correctional centre obtained verbal consent from the participant, an in-person interview was arranged at a suitable time for the offender and the correctional centre's operations. I gathered data through 24 interviews with 12 participants from March 8, 2021, to April 21, 2021. All the interviews occurred at the correctional centre, where the participants were incarcerated or monitored and supervised. The Department of Correctional Services prescribed the location of the interviews. Interviews were usually conducted in the offices of correctional officials, social workers, psychologists, heads of correctional centres or visit rooms. These were typically private locations with restricted access. Correctional officials were never present for the interviews, which ensured that the interviews were conducted privately. I was usually introduced to the participants by the recruiter or escorting official.

In the first interview, informed consent was discussed in detail, and each participant was given an information sheet (Appendix A) to keep. Participants were then given an opportunity to ask any questions about the research process. They were then asked to sign the consent form, which they all completed and signed as part of their willingness to participate

(Appendix C). Participants also agreed on the consent form for the audio recording of the interviews. All interviews were recorded using a digital audio-recording device placed inconspicuously on the desk separating the participant and I. It is essential to ensure that the relationship between the researcher and narrator in the data generation phase is at the centre of the process because storytelling is a joint activity - a process that can be inhibited by the visibility of recording devices and notetaking (Lewis, 2017). Interviews are usually recorded to enhance the accuracy of representing narratives and the interpretations of the data (Riessman, 2008).

The participants and I wore facemasks for the interviews in compliance with COVID-19 regulations. Although physical distance and barriers such as a desk and face masks may have impacted rapport and openness in in-person contexts (Tremblay et al., 2021), the room setup was already structured, and tampering with that structure was forbidden for security reasons. This created the added responsibility to adapt to evolving realities when conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic (Tremblay et al., 2021). However, participants indicated that they were comfortable wearing their face masks and did not indicate signs of distrust or discomfort with my face mask.

Due to the aforementioned barriers, I extended efforts to establish a trusting relationship by building rapport with participants at the outset of the process. I maintained rapport by listening attentively without interrupting and maintained attention on the participant by notetaking after the interview. The interview context was related as a safe space, emphasising the importance of the researcher learning more about the participants and how significant their input was to advance knowledge about offenders of child sexual abuse (Squire et al., 2014).

The length of each interview is listed in Table 2 below. The initial interview varied from 59 to 150 minutes, with an average length of 108 minutes. The shortest interview of 59

minutes ended prematurely due to the centre's operations for that day. The initial interview was concluded with the participants being encouraged to ask any research-related questions. They were reminded that counselling services were available from the social workers or psychologists in their centre if they felt the interview was upsetting. The exercise of the visual narrative was then discussed with the participants. Handwritten field notes of observations made during the interview and probing questions for the follow-up interview were recorded immediately after the interview was completed.

4.3.3 Part 2: Visual and oral narratives

4.3.3.1 The visual life story. In addition to their oral life stories shared in the interview, participants were invited to visually record their life story through the following prompt: "As an additional task, if you agree, I would like you to write/draw/depict your life story. There is no right or wrong way to do this. It can be as detailed as you feel necessary. The aim is for it to capture the story of your life from your perspective." The visual narratives, created in their usual environment (correctional centre cells), were analysed alongside their oral narratives. Personal narratives, narrative practices, and narrative identities are shaped and modulated by the contexts in which they are produced; hence, the formal interview context will produce a particular narrative that is shaped by the research dynamics (Chase, 2011; Lewis, 2017; Maruna & Liem, 2021). It is suggested that documentary analysis of other narratives of the self, such as diaries, letters, or creative works, would allow data triangulation and, ultimately, a fuller narrative of participants' identities across contexts (Maruna & Liem, 2021).

Participants were expected to struggle to articulate their stories verbally due to trauma, shame, distrust, language barriers, and an embodied outsider (researcher) by race, gender, and non-criminal status. However, a recorded task outside the interview context might feel safer for participants. Poor literacy levels might disadvantage participants by

requesting just a written narrative. Therefore, participants could depict their stories through visual autobiographies of creative forms (Squire et al., 2014). The visual narrative was also used as a guide to prompt memories and stories in the follow-up interview. Although the visual life story was optional, all participants were willing to complete the task. They were provided with basic stationery to complete the task and invited to a follow-up interview later in the week, which they agreed to attend.

4.3.3.2 The follow-up audio-recorded interview. It is cautioned that the initial invitation to narrate one's life experiences might be met with suspicion and unresponsiveness and may warrant follow-up meetings with the participants until they feel more comfortable and confident to narrate certain experiences (Murray, 2008). This was initially the rationale for a follow-up interview as I anticipated that the participants would not be open to sharing their stories in much detail. Plenty of emphasis is placed on the importance of the narrative context being conducive for stories to be produced. Even if the ideal criteria are met, participants might still be reluctant to engage with the process. They might be hesitant to perform the role in which they are categorised - criminal, bearing associations of guilt, callousness, perversion, and danger (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000; Squire et al., 2014). Instead, the lengthy initial interviews in this study necessitated a follow-up interview to cover exmanent research questions that could not be asked in the first interview due to time constraints.

The follow-up interview was intended to discuss the visual narratives and probe into different scenes from the life story, guided by exmanent and immanent questions. At the outset of the follow-up interview, offenders were asked about reflections or questions they might have had from the first interview. Most offenders expressed a sense of relief about being able to share their stories with me. None of the participants reported feelings of distress or negative effects from the initial interview. Participants were then invited to explain and

interpret their visual narratives. Table 2 lists the type of visual narrative each participant used to illustrate their life story by drawing pictures or writing stories and poems. Ten offenders submitted written life stories while one supported his written life story with drawings, one participant wrote a poem about her life story, and another drew pictures of her life story. The participants were requested to interpret the visual narratives to ensure that the meaning captured was valid and presented a trustworthy account of their experience. Thereafter, I probed into the visual narratives used as a guide to elicit memories and stories. The interview was then guided by the second half of the interview schedule (Appendix B).

Participants were invited to ask questions or provide comments before the interview was closed by thanking them for participating. Participants were also reminded that counselling was available if they felt any distress from the interviews, although none of them indicated the need for counselling. The follow-up interviews lasted between 21 and 209 minutes, as listed in Table 2. The participant with the shortest follow-up interview was unsure if she could attend the follow-up session, so most of the interview questions were covered in her first interview, which lasted 150 minutes. The longest interview of 209 minutes was due to extensive detailing of life experiences and events. There were just over 38 hours of audio recordings for the combined interviews. This was considered sufficient data to be analysed for the study's aims.

The overproduction of narratives evident in this study could be a strategy to disguise events or avoid confronting specific realities in the interview (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). It can, however, be argued that lengthy stories and copiously detailed information-sharing can be a discursive practice used to convince the reader of one's position, especially in the context of moral denigration in which the narrator has a moral point to prove. Despite the value of such rich data, Maruna and Liem (2021) caution that extensive data can be challenging to analyse, as explained in the analysis process below.

Table 2

Interview Length and Type of Visual Narrative per Participant

Name	Duration of interview 1	Duration of interview 2	Type of visual life story
1. Anton	105 minutes	53 minutes	Written
2. Bianca	104 minutes	58 minutes	Drawings
3. Charlotte	99 minutes	46 minutes	Written
4. Derick	59 minutes	144 minutes	Written
5. Ian	102 minutes	209 minutes	Written
6. Jenna	150 minutes	21 minutes	Written
7. Leroy	144 minutes	52 minutes	Written, Drawings
8. Neville	116 minutes	92 minutes	Written
9. Nina	107 minutes	60 minutes	Poem
10. Tamara	100 minutes	145 minutes	Written
11. Thandi	80 minutes	44 minutes	Written
12. Themba	133 minutes	85 minutes	Written

4.4 Data analysis

4.4.1 Transcription

Narrative researchers typically represent narratives through verbatim transcripts (Riessman, 2008). The audio recordings of the interviews in this study were converted into text by transcribing it verbatim to capture the depth of the story content and storytelling practices as workable data. In this process, the interviews were listened to repeatedly to ensure accuracy in transcription. The theoretical framework determines transcription inclusions and, in this study, the story is believed to be a co-construction between the

participant and the audience. Therefore, the interactional context, conversation flow, and my responses were transcribed in detail (Riessman, 2008). Transcription is an interpretive process, hence I personally transcribed copious amounts of audio recordings, as outsourcing the task might have resulted in losing a crucial step in the data interpretation. Personal notes of interpretation were also recorded and coded during the interview and transcription phases of the study.

4.4.2 Narrative analysis and interpretation

Narrative researchers focus on spoken or written communication's content, delivery, and purpose when analysing data (Squire et al., 2014). Firstly, narrative analysts generally focus on the 'content' of the narratives, that is, 'what' is being said or the moral within and across participants' stories. Secondly, the focus is on 'how' these stories are 'structured' and organised to make meaning of life events and experiences. Thirdly, the 'context' of the immediate audience and broader sociocultural environments in which the personal narrative is embedded is analysed to understand 'why' the story is constructed in a particular way (Murray, 2008; Riessman, 2008; Squire et al., 2014; Wertz et al., 2011). Focus is also drawn to unspoken stories to decode underlying meanings of what is told (Josselson, 2004). In accordance with the study's aims, the thematic content of the contextual stories was the predominant focus of interpretation. Critical to narrative analysis is maintaining the narrative arch or storyline and analysing the story holistically instead of fragmenting parts of the story in pursuit of themes across cases (Riessman, 2008). Most research studies on narrative identity and life stories commonly code for content and form, themes of narrative coherence, agency and communion, redemption and contamination sequences, autobiographical reasoning, and meaning-making (McAdams, 2021).

Thus, the narrative template or structure used to weave stories together to form the generalised life story was also interpreted alongside the contextual stories (Dunlop, 2017).

Finally, commentary was made on the impact of narrative environments, which ranged from the immediate interpersonal interview context in which the participant and I collaborated to produce a particular narrative, to the correctional environment of criminalisation and incarceration. I initially planned to conduct a thematic analysis of the content and structure of the oral life stories and visual analysis of the recorded narratives. However, most participants opted to write their life stories, while one drew pictures to substantiate his text, and another used only drawings to illustrate hers. Due to the detail and depth of the oral and written narratives, it was decided that participants' verbal interpretations of their drawings would be analysed as oral life stories instead of using a visual analysis approach. A visual analysis would constitute a far more complex process, making it unsuitable for this study's purpose. The visual narratives were mainly used as a prompt for participants to share their stories, so it was not necessary to do a visual narrative analysis. This also enabled the researcher to remain within the purpose of prioritising the voices of offenders and staying close to their descriptions.

It is cautioned that rich accounts in qualitative inquiry could result in unwieldy research data (Maruna & Liem, 2021). Indeed, the unanticipated level of detail and complexity in the life stories was difficult to analyse without reducing the stories or omitting critical details in participants' narratives. The pervasiveness and universality of narratives can make it seem ubiquitous, and therefore researchers might oversimplify individual narratives (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). As such, I was constantly mindful of being respectful towards participants in how I represented their stories. I frequently considered if they would recognise their lives in my interpretations as a fair and accurate mirror of the outcomes of the interviews. I deemed it necessary to introduce each participant to the reader, presenting them as individuals with a holistic story versus isolated and segmented extracts. While narrative studies can focus on literary elements such as characters, plots, scenes, etcetera, this study

focused on the thematic content of the stories. Murray's (2008) narrative analysis guidelines, which entail a descriptive and interpretive data analysis phase, were implemented to preserve participants' uniqueness.

As recommended by Murray (2008), in the initial phase of data analysis, each life story was summarised by starting with the demographics and then moving developmentally through their story, elaborating on key points. This helped to contextualise the data by providing information about the participants, contexts, histories, cultures, and demographics. Narrative portraits or life story summaries are organised in the following chapter according to how it was told, often following a temporal order. This was done to re-present narratives to preserve the participants' voices by retaining narrative elements and emphasising their individuality (McAlpine, 2016).

Next, the narratives were analysed sequentially according to its beginning, middle, and end, the key features of which were coded into content themes based on emerging patterns across individuals (Murray, 2008). The 'beginning' included information from the (pre)birth phase until the crime narrative emerged, termed the 'pre-offence phase'. The 'middle' phase is encapsulated by the 'crime narrative', and the 'end' which was usually a reflection on the offence, was termed the 'post-offence phase' and included current self-representations and anticipated futures. Content themes within these phases were generated from the data using the narrative identity theoretical lens (McAdams, 1990). However, the study findings included new insights that emerged outside of the literature. Afterwards, themes were identified and coded within and across the participants' life stories to keep the storyline intact. The thematic findings in the following chapters are presented using the sequence of the storyline introduced by the participants.

The descriptive phase of data analysis commenced immediately after the initial interview occurred. The stories of life experiences, events, characters, self-representations,

and turning points were listed according to key phrases by the participants, such as "hard childhood", "God saved me", "prison was good for me", and "people will judge me." The audio recording of the interview was listened to in preparation for the follow-up interview. Further key phrases that were structuring, thematic, emphasised, or repetitive were manually added to the initial list. As the interviews progressed, patterns between participants' narratives began to emerge, and an integrated list of keywords was developed. A similar identification of patterns occurred during the transcription process. Later, each transcript was read together with the recorded task to form one complete dataset per participant. Each participant's narratives were read multiple times to engage in triangulated data immersion (Murray, 2008) and the emerging codes became more pronounced and refined. Each transcript was then summarised for the narrative portraits and keywords about life experiences, events, self-representations, and references to others and the world were recorded in the margins of each transcript.

An outline of the life story structure was created for each participant from the transcripts. It was divided into the pre-offence, offence, and post-offence phases – a temporal order that participants created. The nuclear representations within each phase were also noted. Contamination and redemptive sequences, as well as the thread of moral coherence, were highlighted in different colours to demonstrate the form of the stories. The visual life story was read alongside the transcripts, and further patterns and omissions or contradictions to the oral life stories were noted.

Finally, an exhaustive list of keywords was created from all the engagements with participants' narratives. For example, the pre-offence phase was dominated by contaminating lines, such as accounts of poverty, neglect, hardships, traumas, and abuse. Redemptive lines narrating success, compassion, and communion followed this. The theme of constant morality ran across the stories. Keywords were then grouped and organised into coding categories

according to similarity in the life story while maintaining the phases of the pre-offence, offence, and post-offence. Coding categories such as adversity, dangerous world, rehabilitation, and valuable roles were highlighted. A coding frame was then developed by arranging multiple codes according to patterns of themes across transcripts. Thereafter, the structure of the story was analysed to determine if the narrative plot was stable with an objective tone, regressive with a pessimistic tone, or progressive and optimistically intonated. The final step in this phase was to remark on the narratives' sociocultural context in which it was embedded (Murray, 2008).

In the interpretive phase, the narrative themes identified in the descriptive phase were interpreted and discussed using McAdams's (1990) theory of narrative identity construction. The results were first presented as narrative portraits. A compilation of themes related to the content and structure of life stories was created to answer the research question about how offenders used their experiences to shape their identities. According to Lewis (2017, p. 8), "the narrative researcher is tasked with the difficult challenge of somehow not othering participants through the process of re-storying the stories that have been entrusted to them." Therefore, the findings of this study were rooted in the stories told by the participants, and efforts were made to balance the inclusion of participants' voices by not over-representing certain voices. The chosen extracts exemplified commonalities across the data and were suitable to its respective code. In addition to using in vivo text to substantiate the findings of this study, multiple steps were taken throughout the research process to enhance the quality of the study's outcomes (Riessman, 2008).

4.5 Quality assurance

Riessman (2008, p. 200) asserts that "there is no cannon, clear set of rules or list of established procedures and abstract criteria for validation that fit all projects." As a novice researcher, this reality often left me feeling unsure amidst numerous sensitive issues in which

this study is grounded. Thus, extra care was taken to ensure that the study's findings maintained the integrity of participants while remaining respectful to the victims and other audiences. Steps taken to enhance the quality of this research study from inception to conclusion were informed mainly by Riessman (2008). This study aimed to uphold the following criteria to ensure trustworthiness: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4.5.1 Ensuring trustworthiness

The data obtained in narrative studies is a collaborative outcome between the participant and the researcher at a specific time and might not be replicable (Riessman, 2008). It is crucial for researchers to illustrate the quality of their research by demonstrating trustworthiness in their findings and their representation of the stories shared with them. Unlike positivist frameworks, constructionist studies are not concerned with the believability of the narrator's accounts which, as collaborative outcomes between a narrator and audience, are influenced by social desirability and impression management. Incoherence or discontinuities could indicate fragmented experiences and not invalidity (Maruna & Liem, 2021; Riessman, 2008). Although all narratives are reported as factual for its purpose and meaning, if evidence such as literature on the topic, collateral sources, and group narratives suggest that the narrative is a distortion of the materiality it references, then that distortion is discussed in the researcher's findings (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000).

The primary limitation of a study rooted in social constructionism is the credibility of the researcher's interpretation of the accounts shared with them (Levitt et al., 2017; Riessman, 2008). Further onus rests on the researcher to interpret the findings plausibly and ensure that the claims made by the study are credible interpretations of the stories narrators share. Credibility was achieved in this study by conducting two interviews with each participant and triangulating their stories by collecting oral and visual narratives from each

participant. The use of reflexive journaling and interview recording devices also enhanced the accuracy, and therefore the credibility, of the interpretations of the data (Levitt et al., 2017; Riessman, 2008). Immersing myself in the participants' stories as the interviewer, transcriber, and analyst increased the accuracy with which participants were represented in this study. To mitigate the subjectivity bias of a single researcher being the only analyst, credibility checks were done by a colleague neutral to the current study by developing an additional coding frame from the transcripts (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). Codes were then exchanged, and discrepancies were discussed until themes were revised agreeably.

The participants and research context were described in rich detail through extensive quoting to allow the reader to determine the extent to which the findings might be applicable or transferable to other contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purposive sampling approach adopted by this study also enhanced the transferability of the findings. Interpretations were grounded in data excerpts to increase the dependability of the research (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). The presentation of findings should be balanced between data inclusion and researcher's interpretations. Including too little data could over-represent the researcher's views and deviate from the actual data and credibility. Similarly, focusing on too much data with little interpretation from the researcher would result in varied interpretations from readers that might be decontextualised from other important excerpts (Squire et al., 2014). Using a co-coder to corroborate the fit between the narratives and interpretations enhanced this study's dependability.

In narrative studies, researchers show trustworthiness by demonstrating methodological rigour by detailing the procedures followed and critical decisions made in collecting and interpreting their data. This creates a clear and elaborate audit trail that can be followed by another researcher and the audience (Levitt et al., 2017; Maruna & Liem, 2021; Riessman, 2008). The methodological steps undertaken in this study, specifically in the data

collection and analysis, were detailed to allow readers to follow the research process. While this ensured the dependability of the findings, it also ensured confirmability by allowing other researchers to establish the value of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Quality assurance and trustworthiness were also achieved through a process of reflexivity.

4.5.2 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the process by which researchers reflect on the research they produce, how it was produced, and the influence of the contexts in which it was produced (Squire et al., 2014). It is considered a process of self-reflection that interrogates the rationale for the specific topic and the influence of the researcher's presence on the emerging story. In narrative studies specifically, researchers are entwined in the narratives constructed, and research participants narrate their life experiences in the context of the research relationship (Elliot, 2005; Lewis, 2017; Wertz et al., 2011; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). Researchers should, therefore, be reflexive of their worldviews and presuppositions throughout the research process.

This thesis began with a declaration of my prior interests in the topic and subjective position relating to the field of child sexual offenders. This was to highlight the impact of my subjectivity on the study's findings (Levitt et al., 2017; Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). It is encouraged that reflexivity be undertaken as a research practice throughout the process (Squire et al., 2014). Hence, I integrated critical systematic reflexivity into every phase of the research process by interrogating the reason for the choices made in critical discussions with my research supervisors.

In the interview context, the research data is considered a collaborative outcome of the relationship between the researcher and participants. The researcher, traditionally placed in an authoritative position in the research context should, therefore, be cautious about reflecting on and deflating power dynamics (Lewis, 2017). It is also acknowledged that

narrative researchers typically work hard to create a safe space, especially for sensitive topics (Squire et al., 2014). On this basis and my own experience of the research context, interviewees arguably hold a dominant position as the researcher seeks access to their detailed experiences, which they can willingly offer or not. As a researcher, I was acutely aware of my dependence on the participants of this study. This created a feeling of powerlessness and the need to be agreeable and not probe in a manner that might appear distrusting, judgmental, or adversarial. The sensitivity of the topic and the precariousness of the interview locations increased the risks associated with fieldwork. Hence, I noticed feelings of intimidation and, at times, felt unsafe – a feeling that was familiar in my other roles in the Department of Correctional Services.

To prioritise the safety and wellbeing of researchers, the Department of Correctional Services required the presence of correctional officials during interviews. Unfortunately, my safety as a researcher was not adequately considered as I was often left alone with mostly unescorted offenders and officials seldom checked in on me. This was partly due to the 50% staff rotation system during the COVID-19 pandemic that resulted in centres being understaffed. Entering and leaving the centres raised safety concerns for me and concerns about the curiosity of nearby offenders. In some cases, offenders in the passages where the interviews were happening interrupted the interviews to request psychological assistance from me. Participants often intervened and explained my role as a researcher to the inquiring offender. This might have made my anxiety and concerns noticeable to the participants. Embodiment references were also made by narrators, such as comments on my marital status and whether I had children, being of a similar height to the victim, or being the same complexion as a spouse. This highlights that my personal attributes were observed and possibly impacted the impressions of the narrators and inevitably shaped the stories they shared.

Typically, narrative research with criminal offenders presents unique methodological challenges as the researcher approaches the research context with caution and suspicion due to the social expectation of the inauthenticity of offenders (Presser, 2010). Similarly, in studying sensitive topics like child sexual abuse, the researcher should engage in perspective management by being aware of and minimising the impact of their worldviews on the research study (Levitt et al., 2017). Hence, I made a conscious effort not to appear judgmental or interrogative.

Self-reflection was critical during the interviews as I got drawn into a position of empathy, especially when incidents of vulnerability were narrated or psychologised repertoire was utilised. In such situations, the divide between the researcher's boundaries and the therapist's inclinations created a sense of tension for me. Dickson-Swift et al. (2006) assert that studying sensitive topics can elicit ambiguous relationships between researchers and their participants. The most challenging issue in this study was the blurred boundary between the roles of researcher and counsellor, which was cumbersome to maintain. Furthermore, managing my own emotions, outward expressions, and reactions to maintain professional composure was exhausting and overwhelming as most offenders described persistent feelings of distress and psychological difficulties.

At the end of the interview, participants were encouraged to seek ongoing psychotherapy. However, most had already undergone psychological assessments and treatment either for parole consideration or personal development. This often led to feelings of helplessness in me as the researcher, a therapist to child sexual offenders in a different correctional facility, and switching roles felt stifling. I noticed a similar pattern of role confusion in other situations where I evaluated offenders for parole eligibility, in which I felt inclined to be more inquisitional as a researcher.

Unlike some researchers in the study by Dickson-Swift et al. (2006), who were uncomfortable being placed in a therapist role by participants due to their lack of counselling skills, I (like some in the referred study) struggled to suppress my therapeutic abilities. This created an ambiguous role in the research context, making it more emotionally depleting to maintain the boundary. Independent coder-reliability became crucial in this phase as recollections of past encounters with offenders of child sexual abuse were blending with the current research context. Cross-reference was often made to past experiences with similar offenders when drawing conclusions in this study and it seemed far more challenging to silence known psychological formulations than anticipated.

It was naively assumed that the therapist-researcher boundary would be as distinct as the professional-personal boundary was to maintain, but this was not the case. My handwritten field notes also reflected that "the interviews felt very similar to the therapeutic and assessment contexts that create a sense of familiarity in me." Dickson-Swift et al. (2006) agree that research interviews could be very similar to counselling interviews and require the use of similar skills like rapport building and empathy, thus compounding the issue of unclear boundaries between researcher and therapist. They conclude that "research interviews can mirror therapeutic interviews" (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006, p. 859), which was relatable for me and the participants.

Combined with my personal beliefs as a Christian, the stories of spiritual redemption and transformation became easy to re-present without critical reflection. Awareness of these self-insights helped me understand my positive regard for offenders in this study and the subsequent interpretations of the data. My lens of positive psychology would arguably colour the study's conclusions and recommendations. Lengthy discussions about these conceptualisations and the emerging narratives with colleagues and research supervisors,

together with the codes generated by the independent coder, assisted with minimising my subjectivities and biases in considering alternative interpretations (Riessman, 2008).

Interestingly, the transcription process was unlike any encounter I was accustomed to in the corrections contexts. On the contrary, this process was surprisingly difficult and elicited feelings of disbelief and anger towards the stories shared. Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) explain that transcribing requires repeated attention to sensitive detail instead of being a mechanical task, often eliciting emotional responses in researchers. These feelings are heightened if the transcriptionist also collected the data as it entails reliving the experience in greater detail. Such responses might also result in interpersonal difficulties and social withdrawal, yet the emotional impact on researchers exploring sensitive topics is rarely documented. There was also the implicit self-expectation that I would not be negatively impacted by similar stories I have repeatedly listened to for a decade. One possible explanation is that when transcribing, the stories were no longer being experienced in the criminal context, personified with emotion and eye contact.

Instead, it was decontextualised and transferred to my safe space, my home, where the transcribing occurred. This was a space in which my young children were asleep meters away from the detailed expression of harming children, perhaps triggering my maternal identity. In this instance, the research felt triggering and nauseating. I often had to stop the transcription process because I felt emotionally aroused, angered, repulsed, and consumed by the stories told, the same stories I heard and nodded empathetically to hours or days earlier. This reaction made me realise the impact these stories could have on the audience of my study, creating a sense of responsibility to protect others against these often gruesome and insensitive details. The impact was overwhelming and I sought professional support through debriefing sessions arranged with psychologists familiar with the dynamics of working with offenders. It was advised that I discontinue transcribing in my personal contexts, such as my

home, and instead transcribe in more neutral spaces, such as my therapy practice rooms. The change in physical contexts created the necessary shift to help me complete the transcribing process, albeit taking months to finalise. This was perhaps a vital process for me to balance empathy with the harm caused, a shift in my awareness from the offender to the victim, and from corrections to society. This reflection and reflexivity ensured that critical and holistic inferences were made from the stories.

4.6 Ethical considerations

This study commenced with a research proposal that committed to adhering to specific ethical standards and principles that would protect the wellbeing of the participants and all relevant stakeholders that the research project might impact. Ethical practices were built into the blueprint of this study and remained at the fore of decision-making processes. This awareness was heightened by the sensitive nature of the research topic and offenders' classification as a vulnerable group with limited human rights. The following research ethics by Silverman (2013) were practically adhered to: 1) ethical approval; 2) informed consent; 3) voluntary participation and the right to withdraw; 4) protection of participants through confidentiality and anonymity; and 5) avoiding harm.

The blueprint of my ethical commitment was first approved by my research supervisor and research proposal readers, then the Psychology Department, and finally, the Research Ethics Committee of the Humanities Faculty at the University of Pretoria and the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Correctional Services. Conditional ethical approval was initially granted by the University's Research Ethics Committee pending written confirmation by the Department of Correctional Services that counselling services were available for participants if they were negatively impacted by the research interviews. I requested this information from each Management Area and obtained it from social workers and psychologists in the different Management Areas. The letters confirming the availability

of counselling services were submitted to the University's Research Ethics Committee and full ethical approval was granted in writing (HUM017/0420) (Appendix D).

The recruitment process only commenced once full ethical clearance and written permission were obtained from the Research Ethics Committees of the University of Pretoria and the Department of Correctional Services. The social workers and psychologists at the identified correctional facilities initiated the recruitment process to maintain the privacy of offenders who might not want to be known to a researcher. The information sheet detailing this study was sent to the recruiter to be discussed with the prospective participants, so that they could make an informed decision to participate before meeting with me. This form of recruitment also enhanced confidentiality through a contained and private recruitment process and seemed most suitable for the unique security dynamics of the correctional environment. I discussed the complete nature of the study procedures, purpose, and future uses of the results with the participants in simple and clear language at the outset of the initial interview. Each item on the consent form was discussed with the participants and they could object to any one of them, for example, being audio recorded, although none of them disagreed.

Each participant was given an information sheet with my contact details and that of my research supervisor. Participants were encouraged to contact us if they had any research-related enquiries. Participants were then allowed to ask questions about the study before giving consent and the interview only proceeded once verbal and written consent were obtained. Participants were reminded at the beginning of each interview that participation was completely voluntary. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any given time, without penalties, judgment, or negative consequence to them and their information would then be deleted from the dataset.

Confidentiality and participant anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms and identifying information, such as the names of correctional facilities, people, and places, were

amended in the transcripts and the final report. This also minimised the possibility of the gatekeepers being able to identify the offenders' narratives. All data files were stored anonymously in encrypted digital folders on password-protected technological devices to which only I had access. The consent forms with identifiable participant details were stored separately from the interview data in a locked cabinet. In correctional facilities that required an escorting correctional official to be present for the interview, privacy and confidentiality were maintained by having the official within sight but at a distance from which they could not hear the interview.

Due to the topic's sensitivity, it was anticipated that recounting past and present experiences could cause distress among participants. Narrating traumatic experiences can also be a healing process if the listener creates a safe space for the teller, is prepared to listen, and has the right attitude (Squire et al., 2014). However, the risk of re-traumatisation remained a possibility. Participants were, therefore, encouraged to inform me if they felt uncomfortable and preferred to discontinue participation. Most participants got emotionally aroused while narrating certain events but opted to continue with the interview. They were encouraged to seek counselling services, which I arranged with each centre's social workers or psychologists. Most participants affirmed that they were aware of the channels to access help at the centre and were all involved in a therapeutic process with a psychologist or social worker during their sentence. Due to their knowledge of, and experience with, relevant help-seeking approaches, it was decided that I would not refer participants for counselling unless clear intentions of self-harm were expressed.

For the various reasons explained thus far, I expected participants to struggle to articulate their life stories in the interviews. On the contrary, participants narrated their life stories in detail, with accounts that lasted for hours. This possibly suggests that the research space was experienced as safe and confidential enough for offenders to be vulnerable and

share in-depth stories. I was aware that participants could become vulnerable to the point of needing therapeutic containment. Therefore, I adhered to the principle of non-maleficence by not probing into sensitive topics that were evidently distressing for the participants, such as family abandonment, deaths, and traumas.

As advised by Dickson-Swift et al. (2006), I tried to make the interview as conducive as possible for participant openness yet avoided the research interview becoming a therapy session. As an extension to avoiding harm to a stigmatised population, Squire et al. (2014) advise that researchers pay close attention to how others might interpret their findings and the impact of this on the researched. Hence, the study's inferences are presented in a way that is respectful to the participants and audience. This is to avoid harmful effects to both the participants and readers, thereby maintaining ethical integrity in presenting the stories (Lewis, 2017). It was omitted if there was a vague possibility of a conclusion being offensive or misinterpreted in a harmful way. Additionally, ethical research remains faithful by accurately reporting its findings. Remaining close to the meanings imbued by participants in the stories they shared is a fundamental practice in narrative research. In prioritising the voices of offenders of child sexual abuse, I made every effort to re-present the stories of offenders in this report accurately.

Every effort was made to treat participants with dignity, respect, and appreciation in the research context. It was initially decided that participants would not be compensated for participating in the study as a small incentive, such as R50, might be experienced as an undue inducement to offenders without financial support from family members. Participants still willingly engaged in the research process although there was no direct benefit to participating in this study. As a gesture of appreciation, participants kept the remaining unused stationery given to them to record the visual narratives. Most participants expressed relief from sharing their life stories, having their stories heard, and gratitude for an interest in non-criminal areas

of their lives. Although scholars are divided on whether narrative researchers should imply that storytelling is healing for participants (Chase, 2011; Riessman, 2008; Squire et al., 2014), it was evident that participants in this study were positively affected by their participation and contribution.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter elaborated on the methodological choices to explore the life experiences of child sexual offenders in South Africa through a qualitative narrative lens. Twelve participants were purposively selected from the Department of Correctional Services to share their life stories through individual interviews. Throughout the research process, ethical frameworks were utilised to safeguard both the participants and potential readers who may be affected by the study. Quality assurance practices such as ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity were implemented to ensure trustworthiness and enhance the quality of the study's conclusions. In the next chapter, each participant's life story is summarised and presented as 'narrative portraits'. The chapters that follow the narrative portraits focus on the content and structure found within and across all participants' life stories and are presented in a collated structure of themes.

Chapter 5: Narrative Portraits

This chapter was dedicated to introducing each participant to the reader. Each narrative portrait began with a basic description of the offender's demographic information, followed by the location of the research interview and the criminal conviction and sentence length. Thereafter, the life stories were presented according to the temporal order introduced by the participants to capture the structure of the narratives. The narrative portraits have been omitted from this thesis due to the confidential nature of its contents.

The next chapter explores the redemptive script that offenders constructed in their narrative accounts.

Chapter 6: Redemptive Identity: Demonstrating Growth from Contamination

6.1 Introduction

The stories presented in the preceding chapter mostly had a romantic plot of progressive accounts in which the offender, the main character in the life story, overcame adversity and regained what was once lost. These accounts highlighted areas of identity development, growth, and transformation to form redemptive narratives. This chapter presents the study's findings in terms of how participants narratively rebuilt fragmented parts of their identity by opposing stories of contamination with redemptive accounts. The results illustrate how redeemed identities were constructed by weaving together contrasting stories between the pre- and post-offence periods to create a sense of continuity in the life story and maintain a prosocial identity. These stories depicted the offence period as the greatest negative turning point and spiritual experiences as the most significant positive turning point. Further contrasts were made between the world of corrupting external forces and the resilience to overcome adversities. The chapter is divided into the following major sections: pre-offence stories of overcoming adversity; positioning the criminal identity through externalisations; and post-offence constructions of change. The presentation and titling of the themes below emphasise how participants constructed their identities through stories of major deterioration and subsequent transformation across their lifespan.

Narrative scholars assert that the construction of inflated accounts of transformation are crucial practices through which criminal offenders reconstruct their criminal identities into desistance stories that enable prosocial identities and actions to emerge (King, 2013; Maruna, 2001). The link between the construction of positive self-characterisations and behavioural reform is essential to consider in contexts that aim to reduce and prevent criminality. Indeed, idealised identity constructions can maintain offence-supportive behaviours by offenders who avoid confronting their criminal identities and continue to

offend. However, offenders in this study who constructed desistance narratives also presented themselves as transformed individuals. This was done by illustrating the positive roles and activities they assumed in the correctional facility and their generative plans to impact society when they are on parole. Hence, offenders in this study provided more evidence for 'making good' through their exaggerated accounts of transformation than suggesting that they engaged in criminal thoughts or actions.

6.2 Pre-offence stories of overcoming adversity

As offenders related their early memories, it became evident that their interpretations of historic experiences were mainly negatively intonated. They primarily began their biographies with stories of tumultuous formative experiences in which they were usually helpless victims of external forces of adversity. Participants who described positive childhood and adolescent periods still constructed negative turning points during adulthood, which they linked to their criminal conviction and sentencing later in life. These stories of misfortune were contrasted with subsequent stories of personal empowerment, success, and liberation from oppressive forces that created a positive turning point in their life trajectory. Progression was attributed to their own resilience, choices, efforts, and abilities through which they were apparently able to agentively deliver themselves and their families from dire circumstances such as poverty and abuse. In the stories below, offenders reflected on their experiences of intergenerational abuse, inadequate parents, poverty and hardships, and victimisation, which they supposedly overcame through their own strength and individual agency.

6.2.1 Opposing intergenerational effects

Whilst most offenders narrated difficulties since birth, others contextualised their adversity in intergenerational histories of abuse by positioning their life stories against the backdrop of their pre-birth conditions of family distress and intergenerational abuse. This implied that their adversity was never because of their own doings. Instead, it was existing

conditions they were subjected to from their early years. Tamara contextualised her birth and misfortune in existing intergenerational sexual and physical abuse the women in her family endured at the hands of their "own father." She narrated that the abuse she endured was an extension of what was already occurring in her family system.

> Tamara: Let me rather start before I was born, things that I was told by mostly my mother and her sisters. My mother and, there's I think four sisters, but only three went through the same. They were molested and raped by their own father for many years. [Extract 1]

Tamara related pre-existing abuse that she was "told" about, validating that it was not just her interpretation of reality but that others confirmed the abusive realities. This verified her stories of victimisation while reinforcing her lack of responsibility and helplessness in her turmoil as others endured the same. In the extract above, she set the scene of sexually abusive fathers by stating that "my mother" and "her sisters…were molested and raped by their own father." In other stories, she related speculations of her protective and affectionate stepfather possibly sexually abusing her older sister. Later, she expressed the belief that her husband was "the one that I think did it", referring to her suspicion that he sexually abused their daughters, for which she was convicted. This created a sense of inevitability of sexual abuse by paternal figures irrespective of whether they were openly villainised or seemingly ideal nurturers like her stepfather was. Despite her reflections on pervasive and longstanding abuse in her life, she explained how she resisted her family's abuse norms and was determined to break the cycle of abuse and protect her daughters in a way she was not protected. Tamara explained further:

> Tamara: I taught my children how to bath themselves since they two years old because I know what happened to me from that age. I taught them to wash themselves and that nobody must touch there. If someone touch there they must tell them, 'No', and they must talk to somebody else and tell them what that person is doing. Not even I washed them there and then all this shit happened to my kids [cries]. [Extract 2]

Tamara portrayed herself as an aware and reflective mother by relating that she acted in a certain way "because I know what happened to me from that age." She portrayed herself as a responsible and protective mother who tried to empower her daughters to prevent being abused by teaching them "to wash themselves and that nobody must touch there" and to report abuse if it did occur, "they must talk to somebody else and tell them what that person is doing." In other stories, she detailed how she shielded them against their father's physical abuse, although in this story, she explained how she failed to protect them from his sexual abuse. Despite her vigilance and efforts, the intergenerational abuse continued as a seemingly unavoidable reality.

According to Tamara, her husband was never implicated in the sexual abuse. However, by constructing the seemingly inevitable reality of sexually abusive fathers, she imaginatively placed her daughters' father on the crime scene as the only logical perpetrator against whom she juxtaposed her own protective and nurturing nature. In doing so, Tamara echoed the macro narrative of the female nurturer and male abuser (Denov, 2003; Kramer, 2015). The abuse was therefore depicted as not being her fault or personal doing. Instead, they were all positioned as victims of a larger unavoidable system of sexual abuse. This furthered the belief of a dangerous and malevolent world, a belief system that is implicated in the development of offence-supportive processes in criminal offenders (Abel et al., 1984; D'Urso et al., 2019; Keown et al., 2010; Marshall, 2018; Navathe & Ward, 2014; Ward, 2000;

Ward & Keenan, 1999; Ward et al., 2006). Similarly, Bianca described her father's unfair treatment of her as an extension of his own father's unrealistic expectations of him, which was all consequent of cultural expectations. She explained where it all started and how she responded.

> Bianca: Everything actually started when I was really young. I was always the little black sheep in the family. My grandfather always wanted boys in his family to carry forth the surname. It was a very big thing in the Afrikaner life if I can put it like that, to carry forward the surname. So, my father had two daughters, me and my sister, so none of us could carry forth the surname…He didn't really approve of it because he wanted boys. He wanted my grandfather to be proud of him. [Extract 3]

Bianca backdated the onset of her challenges to when she "was really young." Like Tamara, she drew attention to her vulnerability and blamelessness in her misfortunes, endorsing the narrative of a malevolent world of corrupting external forces (Maruna, 2001; Ward & Keenan, 1999; Ward et al., 2006). She described how she was faulted as the "little black sheep in the family" and unwelcomed because of her gender as "they always wanted boys." Hence, she characterised herself as being disadvantaged by her gender, which was not her choice, reinforcing the notion of powerlessness against oppressive systems such as "the Afrikaner life" she was born into. Unlike her sister, Bianca resisted her father's expectations by retaining her feminine identity by "playing with dolls…having long hair, wearing dresses." She went on to explain that she endured a lack of approval from her father, who "didn't really approve of it"– rejection which she later attributed as the cause of her sexual deviance as an adult and the acceptance which she so desperately sought that she overlooked her fiancé's sexual abuse of his nieces.

Creating causal connections between formative experiences and the development of negative behaviours was a narrative practice that offenders in this study used to make sense of their life's outcomes and create a sense of predictability and continuity in their personal identities (Pals, 2006). In addition, Bianca positioned her gender as a vulnerability against male dominion. By retaining her femininity, she was subjected to multiple experiences of exploitation and abuse, furthering her predisposition for psychological difficulties.

Developmental theorists agree that intergenerational abuse and adverse formative experiences (as described by offenders in this study) negatively impact the development of children and contribute to the emergence of mental illnesses and psychological distress later in life. These mental illnesses and unresolved traumas are commonly found in incarcerated offenders (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022; Steyn & Hall, 2015; Szumski et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2006). By tracing their misfortunes back to their early years, offenders alluded to inadequate parental protection from adversities. This portrayal implicated their parents, their protectors, as possible facilitators of their adversities and, therefore, dysfunctions, either through deliberate abuse or negligence.

6.2.2 Reconstructing parenthood

Participants represented the parental figure in various ways across their life stories. Parents were usually portrayed as absent through death or abandonment, physically present but emotionally distant, as alcoholics, mentally ill, or hostile and rejecting. Parental inadequacies were described as the reason for disadvantage and distress linked to their conviction and sentencing. The impact continued through constructions of ongoing distress and lasting trauma which they still expressed during their incarceration. Despite their parents' shortcomings, offenders positioned themselves as determined to assume more effective parental roles in their children's lives. Even offenders like Ian, who narrated positive family

relations, still constructed a lack of parental affection, describing that "it wasn't there." Charlotte's parents were described as absent during her upbringing, "We never stay with them", so her grandparents raised her. Despite her own maternal void, she reported how she was able to be a present and providing mother to her sister's children. Likewise, Themba mentioned, "I was staying with my sister" in his parent's absence. Derick noted, "I was dumped" by his mother, while Bianca detailed her feelings of neglect by her parents despite their physical presence in her life, "It was just the attention that I needed." Nina narrated her father's death as a devastating turning point, and her mother (who was present) was portrayed as having "criticised me" and "broke my self-esteem." In the extracts below, Neville described the effects of his mother's death by suicide and his father's inadequacies:

> Neville: I lost out, I lost out a lot, a lot, a lot. For one, I could have been properly educated. Education would have taken me out of all this dirty ways of living…and my mother being there would have helped a lot for me, for my wellbeing. Because with her not being there, I'm nowhere, nowhere. [Extract 4]

Neville emphasised the magnitude of the impact of his mother's death on the rest of his life by repeating, "I lost out a lot." He listed the lack and depravations in "education" and "wellbeing" he endured because of her death. Neville contrasted being "nowhere" in life due to his mother's death with the ideal positive outcomes that would have occurred if she had been present. He attributed his sexual deviance and overall distress to his lack of education. While this connection was used to demonstrate the impact of the trauma of his mother's death on his "dirty ways of living", it also implied that his father was inadequate. Although Neville said that he did not remember much of his early years, he narrated the circumstances around his mother's suicide attempt in graphic detail. He described his memory of a passing

ambulance on his way home after school at the age of five, recalling that his mother set herself alight in her nylon saree, which was highly flammable, by drenching herself in paraffin and detailing her burn wounds when he visited her in hospital prior to her death. Neville emphasised the significance of this incident in setting the scene for the rest of his life by recollecting it in such detail and linking it to the negative outcomes later in his life. It is premised that individuals tend to recall tragedies in more detail because it requires greater resolution than positive experiences require (McLean & Thorne, 2006). However, the emphasis on trauma and its possible contribution to the emergence of a criminal identity created a more persuasive argument of cause for offenders. Neville proceeded to speak of his father's inadequacies as a parent.

> Neville: After I did my 6, I wanted to do 7 and 8, 9, 10 but my father said, no he can't afford that. I must work. So, I went to work…then at the end of the month, my father was there to collect the money so I ran away from there…I mean he doesn't give me a chance to buy clothing for myself, move on, and build. [Extract 5]

Neville added that he was determined to get educated and "wanted to do 7 and 8, 9, 10 but my father said, no he can't afford that." Instead, he had to "work" to earn an income from a young age, employment which he pursued to empower himself financially, "move on, and build." He repeated, "at the end of the month my father was there to collect the money so I ran away from there", supposedly resisting his father's demands by escaping him. Through these repetitions, Neville presented his father as inadequate, exploitative, and a barrier to his financial success. He simultaneously introduced personal stories of determination, ambition, resistance, and autonomy. Contrary to his accounts of his father, Neville explained how his

children hold him in positive regard and how he ensured that they got educated, unlike his father, who exploited his earnings and efforts to empower himself.

> Neville: My wife and my children, they simply love me and I've looked after them very well, they were never deprived of anything…I looked after them well. [Extract 6]

Neville mentioned that "my wife and my children, they simply love me." He portrayed himself as a different kind of parent than his father and a husband whom his wife cherished. This was unlike his father, who was supposedly the reason for his mother's suicide. Neville implied that his wife and children's fondness of him was due to his efforts and actions of care and provision as he "looked after them very well, they were never deprived of anything" – again portraying himself as different from his father, who said that "he can't afford" schooling for Neville. He suggested that his children's educational achievements were due to his insistence that "no child of mine will ever walk around without a matric certificate", thus presenting himself as a responsible and effective parent. Neville distinguished himself from his father by demonstrating how he surpassed his father in his paternal achievements, as a husband, and in his overall character and abilities. Leroy also reflected on how his parents' absence and shortcomings affected his life. He explained that he aspired to provide a better upbringing for his future children.

> Leroy: I was very young, I was eight…When you find out your father have left and you understand, maybe you blame yourself. I said maybe it's me. When you go to school then you have parents in what, what, meetings in school you know. When the parents comes and there's no person for you…Having a mother that couldn't read and

> write and a son that couldn't read and write, it was something tough for me…When you look at people when they come here, when you go to visit and you find people with their fathers, you feel the emptiness of a father…that's why I said if I make a baby when I come out next year or next of next year, I wanna be the best father. [Extract 7]

Like the other participants in this study, Leroy highlighted the "very young" age at which his adversity began. He showed the impact his father's absence had on him by initially mentioning that he "blames" himself for his father's abandonment and continued to "feel the emptiness of a father." Although his mother was described as physically present, her learning impairments appear to have hindered her ability to support an essential aspect of his development as "having a mother that couldn't read and write and a son that couldn't read and write, it was something tough for me." He presented himself as deprived and disadvantaged compared to other children by mentioning that for school meetings, "when the parents comes and there's no person for you" and in correctional centres, "you find people with their fathers." As such, he constructed accounts of hardship that were not his fault and circumstances that he was young and helpless against. Unlike his parents, Leroy was determined to be "the best father."

Early attachments play a significant role in interpersonal functioning and outcomes in life (Levenson & Socia, 2016). As a result, parents are often deemed the gold standard of comparison, nurturance, and determiner of life's outcomes. Therefore, participants attributed their hardships to parental absence, which they indicated preceded their crimes. This positioned the resultant ruptures in their life stories as seemingly predictable and expected. These are forces against which they portrayed themselves as powerless, a sense of being failed by their protectors and through no fault of their own. However, they presented

themselves as determined to redeem their parental experiences through their own decisions and actions as parents, demonstrating identity growth instead of deterioration. Offenders converted these stories of lack into positive outcomes through their own successful efforts to become more effective parents than theirs, thereby yielding successful generative efforts in their identity constructions. They also portrayed themselves as protagonists that delivered their families from the legacies of poverty and resultant hardships. McAdams (1990) explains that throughout their lifespan, individuals create a sense of purpose unique from others by juxtaposing their personal attributes to that of others. Most participants distinguished themselves as the most financially and occupationally successful in their families, emphasising their personal agency in their success. Communal lines were therefore integrated as protagonists that rescued their families and communities from distress.

6.2.3 Defeating poverty and hardship

Further to parental absence and inadequacies, offenders reflected on poverty and hardships they endured during their formative years as impacting their life decisions. Local studies confirm that psychosocial stressors such as poverty are rife in South African communities (Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022; Ward et al., 2018), and economic deprivations and hardships usually feature in the life stories of offenders (Maruna, 2001). Despite the deprivations they highlighted, offenders related reactions that indicated perseverance, determination to succeed, and a good work ethic that they characterised as fostering identity growth. Offenders expressed and constructed numerous reflections on their life choices and personal efforts, redirecting their life stories and extending economic emancipation to their families. In Extracts 4 and 5 above, Neville described his early circumstances, lack of educational funds, and in other stories, lack of food. However, he reflected on his occupational accomplishments later in his life story:

> Neville: I was always working. I didn't have a problem with working. I was very lucky where work was concerned…I was quite high ranking…I was a boss of my own. [Extract 8]

Neville first narrated early accounts of the dire poverty that his family endured. According to Neville, his mother was "selling vegetables" and his older sister was "a domestic worker" since early adolescence. He also started working from a young age to support his family. In this extract, Neville noted that, contrary to his family, he was "very lucky where work was concerned" and "was always working." He elaborated on his lucrative employment across various industries and being promoted by his employers until he "was quite high ranking." Therefore, he created the impression that he was successful at his work, which was apparently due to his own diligence as he "didn't have a problem with working." As such, Neville positively distinguished himself from his family members while demonstrating his rise from poverty, thereby depicting a positive turning point in his life narrative. He, therefore, narratively reconstructed his identity by demonstrating a springboard effect of success that emerged from adverse experiences and events (Pals, 2006). Further to Leroy's plights explained in Extract 7 above, he described experiences of physical impoverishment and hardships as consequences of poverty:

> Leroy: I had a tough childhood, a very, very tough childhood. We've been raised in a place called Germiston in a garage where my mother and my aunt, she was a domestic worker and my aunt was a domestic worker…I'm being a laugh stock at school. I'm being this guy who's not beautiful, not handsome enough, not tall enough. I was always the outsider. I was always the guy with torn clothes at school, doesn't smell

> nice at school...And there was no other things that we can cook, it's only pap and *maotwanas,* you know, chicken feet. [Extract 9]

Leroy emphasised that he "had a tough childhood, a very, very tough childhood." He listed numerous consequences of living in poverty as the cause of his difficulties. He unpacked crowded living conditions, "domestic" employment, living in a "garage", limited food options, "torn clothes", and body odours. While some might describe this as a reality that never had a lasting negative impact, Leroy related his childhood as "very, very tough", emphasising that it was a challenging and problematic period for him. He then labelled himself as a "laugh stock at school" and "the outsider" to demonstrate the effects of poverty on his sense of self and interpersonal functioning. Through these descriptions, Leroy portrayed himself as vulnerable, ostracised, victimised by his peers, and lacking in his sense of self. By positioning this reality as a consequence of apartheid and occurring during his childhood, he alluded to his own victimhood and powerlessness in these oppressive and calamitous contexts. Leroy contrasted these formative stories to his occupational progress and financial success that he supposedly achieved after his mother's death.

> Leroy: The roles I played outside, actually a family man, to go to work…I worked myself up to be a manager, driving around at night, checking on sites, doing reports and all those kinda things. The salary comes in, *hayi*, there's a money for partying. But I was not a drinking person. I just only drink one beer then the whole money just buy food and everything for my family. [Extract 10]

Like Neville, Leroy constructed the springboard effect from his early accounts of adversities that created identity growth (Pals, 2006). This is accomplished through

descriptions of occupational growth like, “I worked myself up to be a manager” and conducting tasks like “checking sites, doing reports.” He continued to reflect on the roles he assumed as a “family man” who used most of his earnings to feed himself and his family instead of on alcohol and “partying.” In doing so, Leroy presented himself as responsible for his occupation and family. He elaborated, “I worked myself up”, which implied that he obtained such success through his determination and efforts. In his accounts, Leroy contrasted his past helplessness and victimisation to his agentive transformation, from which he positioned himself as having emerged successful and valuable to others. Themba also narrated poverty and hunger during his early years. He first wrote about hunger as a child and then his financial success as an adult.

> Themba: Things weren’t always rosy at home and we’d often go to bed hungry. [Extract 11]

Themba, who previously described ineffective and neglectful parents, also spoke of poverty and hunger during his early years as he and his sister “often go to bed hungry.” In other parts of his life story, he narrated how his sister got food for him from her friends’ houses. In the following extract, Themba elaborated on his occupational and financial success later in life.

> Themba: The money was good and I was living quite the high and lavish lifestyle. Things were going so well for me that I ended up even buying a car for myself and also look very well after my family. [Extract 12]

He constructed the first positive turning point in his life through his occupational success and financial gains as he related his earnings as “the money was good.” He continued to explain, “I was living quite the high and lavish lifestyle”, almost boasting about the extent of his achievements. Like other participants, he explained how his earnings were used to “look very well after my family.” In other stories, he mentioned monetary amounts like R40 000 and R100 000 that he gave to his uncle and sister in addition to caring for their basic needs, thus implying an above average level of success and possessions. Evidently, Themba presented a progression from poverty through financial growth, simultaneously creating the impression that he used his earnings responsibly to care for his family’s needs.

Career success and financial liberation from poverty was often the first redemptive sequence that most offenders in this study created in their life trajectories. Furthermore, communal lines were created during pre-offence contexts as individuals victimised by their systems. However, as adults, they reversed their communal lines as protagonists that delivered the same family and communities from poverty. This also implied that they were responsible with their earnings and altruistic towards their family members. Their sense of responsibility was narratively extended towards themselves as they agentively reconstructed their lives from victimisation to empowerment in various contexts.

6.2.4 Shifting from abuse to agency

In addition to parental absence, poverty and hardships, most participants described abuse by various individuals as affecting their lives. They related accounts of abuse that varied from physical to sexual abuse, primarily by known perpetrators. They concluded that a lack of support and further victimisation by significant others who were aware of their calamities exacerbated the impact of the abuse on them. Offenders linked the abuse and lack of support to experiences of immediate distress that contributed to them being criminally convicted and which caused ongoing suffering. Typically, offenders presented themselves as

being reactive to their abuse, although they expressed that their reactions to self-protect often affected further deterioration in their lives. Studies reveal that early traumas, psychological distress, and inadequate coping mechanisms precipitate the use of deviant coping in offenders (Levenson & Socia, 2016; Maniglio, 2011; Mann & Hollin, 2007; McCartan & Richards, 2021). Similarly, in the LDS, desisting offenders explained that they tried to overcome adversities by antisocial means such as crime (Maruna, 2001). Derick wrote about early accounts of childhood abuse that he was subjected to and then his reaction to the abuse:

> Derick: I was beaten, slammed to the floor and one time I was spanked with a log from stack of firewood. My skull was fractured when I was 10. I became too hardened I never gave my mom the satisfaction of crying when I was beaten. That time I was sure she is my mother. I was an arrogant young boy when I left home at 16. I flew off the handle at just about anything. I was really notyi [naughty]. I had such hostility I often got into fight with men much older than me. I couldn't stand even the slightest insult. I flew off the handle at just about anything. I was a cocked gun with a trigger finger. I stole, drank, and used any drugs that I could find. It was amazing that I didn't kill myself. [Extract 13]

In earlier parts of his life story, Derick explained that he "was dumped" by his mother, who "hire me to the people to look their animals" from a young age. In this excerpt, he detailed extreme forms of punishment from his mother, such as being "beaten, slammed to the floor", "spanked with a log", and his "skull was fractured." He implied that the punishment was intended to deliberately harm him and "satisfy" her. However, he presented himself as being in control by "not crying when I was beaten" and eventually "left home at 16." Although Derick initially depicted himself as a vulnerable victim whom his mother

deliberately harmed, he juxtaposed his helplessness with his acts of resistance, such as concealing his pain and vulnerability and fleeing his supposed abusers. He attributed his reactive behaviours and negative emotional states, such as being “hardened”, “arrogant”, “naughty”, “hostility”, “fights”, crime, and substance use, to the abuse he reportedly endured. The extent of the abuse and his supposed reactions to it were presented as so extreme that it could have been fatal, which he established by indicating that “it was amazing that I didn’t kill myself.” In doing so, Derick also constructed treacherous and deliberately destructive communal lines in his family system. According to him, he could only survive being abused by coping through substances, aggression, and sex. Nina also explained that she was molested by her brother when she was younger and apparently opted to gain weight as a way of repulsing him.

> Nina: My brother molested me as a child and since then I started gaining weight. I believed in my mind it was for him to lose his attentions towards me but today I’ve forgiven him. We’ve made peace, we’re over it, it’s fine. It’s just, it’s something that happened in my life. But I gained a lot of weight. [Extract 14]

Nina explained that she was “molested” by her brother, who is four years older than her when she was in grade 4. She linked the abuse to feelings of confusion and shame, so she apparently opted to remain silent. Nina portrayed her mother as disbelieving her when she disclosed the abuse as an adult, “according to them, I’m lying”, undermining her experience as “my mom tried to smooth it over.” In doing so, she extended her accounts of her victimisation beyond the actual molestation and her perpetrating brother to much later in life and across different interpersonal relationships. However, she countered her constructions of helplessness by mentioning, “I started gaining weight”, presenting herself as reacting “for

him to lose his attentions towards me." Nina created the impression that her mother did not protect her and her coping mechanisms (weight gain) and disclosure was dismissed, criticised, and invalidated. This supports the construction of the vulnerable self that was oppressed by others who perpetually chose not to protect them or support their efforts to self-preserve, ultimately shifting the perpetration lens from themselves onto others in the world.

She narrated the incident as being resolved because "we're over it, it's fine", appearing somewhat dismissive of the sexual abuse as "something that happened in my life." Yet she went on to relate, "but I gained a lot of weight." In other stories, Nina mentioned that her weight gain was a problem for her mother, which Nina related as causing more significant strain on their relationship than her mother disbelieving her disclosure of the sexual abuse. She constructed numerous other reflections on the impact of her weight gain on her personal and interpersonal functioning. However, she did not relate the sexual abuse as having as significant an impact on her. In the context of her conviction for child sexual abuse, by presenting her sexual victimisation as trivial, she could possibly be trying to avoid confronting or admitting to the impact of the sexual abuse on her child. Tamara also detailed accounts of pervasive and persistent abuse from supposedly trusted and random people throughout her life. She continued to reflect on these experiences that she presented as causing ongoing psychological distress.

> Tamara: Since I was small, from the age of two, I was molested and stuff…I had this since I was two years old. I've been living with it all my life. Even after I grew up, there were men that couldn't, that didn't want to leave me alone. [cries]. [Extract 15]

Tamara vividly recalled very early memories "since I was small, from the age of two, I was molested" by known and unknown men. She detailed repeated sexual abuse by her

peers, family members, neighbours, employers, partners, and strangers across various contexts. She related the abuse as pervasive across her lifespan when she stated, "I had this since I was two years old. I've been living with it all my life." Tamara, therefore, expressed and constructed layered accounts of persistent victimisation in her life. She also positioned the world as untrustworthy, from those closest to her, extending further into the world of strangers. By relating the vulnerable age from which the abuse occurred and the lack of protection from authority figures, Tamara positioned herself as powerless against the abuse and blameless in causing the abuse. She presented the abuse as persistent and inescapable by listing the different contexts in which she experienced the distress. Later, Tamara explained how she learnt to cope with her abuse.

> Tamara: When I grew up, I got mixed up with dagga and some other party drugs and stuff…That time I was using it for the drug use of it, to cut me out from everything around me 'cause I didn't want to know what's going on…I was cutting. I'm also a cutter as well. But I don't cut for getting rid of the pain like other cutters do. I do it mostly to calm me down as well. I had a tendency to hurt myself to calm myself. [Extract 16]

Tamara portrayed her substance abuse and "cutting" as coping mechanisms to deal with the abuse she narrated in Extract 15. She achieved this by explaining that drugs "cut me out from everything around me 'cause I didn't want to know what's going on." She mentioned that she also cut herself because "I had a tendency to hurt myself to calm myself." The use of substances and cutting presented the abuse as so consuming that she had to disassociate from her reality. She justified her substance use by stating that she used drugs "to calm me down, it's not for the drug use of it", thereby implying that it was not used for

enjoyment. Similarly, she distinguished herself from other cutters by noting, “I don’t cut for getting rid of the pain like other cutters do. I do it mostly to calm me down as well”, again justifying the need for these actions because of her abuse. Participants in this study seemingly created accounts of dual victimisation of the self – by others and then by the self through cutting, substance use, and risky sexual behaviours. This might suggest attempts to evade accountability by justifying their antisocial actions of substance use and sexual deviance. Narratives of personal victimisation also shifted the perpetration lens from the self onto others. However, through these accounts, they presented themselves as agentively coping despite being abused.

Evidently, the life story of all offenders in this study began with accounts of hardship and adversity during their early years, presenting themselves as powerless against these realities. Studies on offenders confirm that childhood victimisation and unresolved traumas are common experiences in the criminal offender’s life story (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Maruna, 2001; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014; Szumski et al., 2018; Ward et al., 2006). Indeed, this might be termed the ‘abuse excuse’ in which offenders construct stories of victimhood to elicit sympathy, justify their offending, and evade accountability for their deviance. However, developmental traumas emanating from formative experiences of neglect, loss, rejection, and abuse have been linked to interpersonal difficulties and mental dysfunctions later in life - which also feature prominently in the lives of offenders (Maniglio, 2011; Ward et al., 2006). Cognitive-behavioural theorists premise that offence-supportive beliefs and thought patterns that lead to offending are primarily influenced by negative early experiences that create beliefs such as a dangerous world of malevolent and untrustworthy people (Abel et al., 1984; Marshall, 2018; Navathe & Ward, 2014; Szumski et al., 2018; Ward, 2000; Ward & Keenan,

1999; Ward et al., 2006) – conclusions that featured in the narrative accounts of offenders in this study.

Furthermore, causal connections were drawn between accounts of early adversities that supposedly had a growth-limiting impact on their identity development and criminal conviction. Attributing cause is an interpretive practice to sequence and make meaning of events and outcomes to achieve a sense of coherence in one's identity (Pals, 2006). These stories of victimhood that precede criminal stories are noted in a study of defendants still on trial (Dollinger, 2018). Hence, these might not be insights facilitated by offender rehabilitation and therapeutic programmes, usually designed to address the possible causes of criminality. The echoing of criminality rooted in early traumas could possibly demonstrate a macro narrative of pre-offence adversity resulting in criminality.

Bamberg (2012) explains that individuals create their self-identity by either attributing cause for life's outcomes to external forces or their own choices and actions. However, in this study, offenders indicated passive recipiency to hostility and corruption that resulted in devastation yet active agency for positive outcomes in their lives. While adversities reportedly resulted in distress and negative states, progression through their own efforts was marked as positive turning points in their lives. Progression was not depicted as an antidote to their suffering which was presented as ongoing. It was portrayed as positively reconstructing their life trajectories, allowing them to rebuild prosocial identities. While it is argued that individuals are more likely to make meaning from negative past experiences such as conflict, tragedy, and trauma (McLean & Thorne, 2006), adverse experiences also seem to offer more plausible explanations for criminality than empowering tales. Setting the scene of their life stories against a backdrop of adversity created a theme of helplessness and the inevitability of some personal distress and failure. However, continuously defending criminality as an

inevitable outcome can lead to normalising deviant actions. This, in turn, may inadvertently maintain the cognitive structures that support criminality among offenders.

Using early adversities as a lens of interpretation for subsequent actions and outcomes allowed the narrators to create a sense of continuity and predictability in their identities. Reframing adversity as having a growth-promoting impact was a narrative practice used by offenders to contrast the helpless victim of circumstances to the autonomous agent of transformation (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Pals, 2006). Further, by highlighting negative experiences as detrimental turning points, individuals created a springboard effect from which prosocial identities emerged (Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 2021; Pals, 2006). Instead of adversity causing ongoing identity deterioration, offenders demonstrated their ability to overcome these formative experiences and create personal growth. Their progression into protagonists, positioned as emancipating their families from poverty and hardship, created the impression of responsible and compassionate individuals despite their own victimisation experiences.

McAdams (1990) explains that themes of individual agency of autonomy, achievement, power, and communion themes of love and belonging usually organise narrative identities. Concordantly, in this study, lines of agency were depicted by constructions of an internal locus of control for resilience and achievements. However, apart from their spiritual identities, most offenders' communal experiences were dominated by pessimism, distrust, and exploitation, and not love and belonging. The world was constructed as a dangerous place where others could not be trusted. Thus, contrasting their narratives of victimisation by external systems to their own acts of agency and self-defence, creating a counter narrative to the dominant discourse of an innocuous world which they perpetrated. Through stories of past triumph and victory, offenders demonstrated their ability to cope with adversity and created a sense of continuity in their resilience while distinguishing themselves

as having unique abilities (Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 1990; Rowe, 2011). Overall, offenders narrated adverse formative experiences of disadvantage, loss, and victimisation by external forces. However, they demonstrated how they managed to thrive and convert their lives into stories of hope and triumph. Despite their rise, participants described a further fall that was supposedly inevitable due to their early tragedies, thereby portraying their crimes as a consequence of their life's challenges.

6.3 Positioning the criminal identity through externalisations

In addition to attributing criminal identities to adverse experiences, offenders employed narrative practices that portrayed the offence in a manner that presented a prosocial identity. For example, the offence is narratively constructed through various minimisations (like downplaying the impact of the harm caused), justifications (by blaming their own victimisation for their actions), and externalisations (through the external locus of control). In this study, the crime narrative was further characterised by causal connections between external forces, such as dysfunctional intimate relationships that were presented as creating distress and then criminal actions for male offenders. Similarly, female offenders who denied offending presented accounts of dysfunctional intimate relationships that supposedly resulted in their criminal convictions. Offenders claimed to have engaged in unhealthy coping mechanisms (such as substance abuse, pornography, sex, and cutting) as a reaction to their abuse and lack of support from apathetic others. They defended their coping mechanisms as essential for self-protection and surviving the abuse and adversities they endured. They ultimately associated these coping mechanisms with their involvement in criminal activities. Therefore, there is a fluctuation in attributions of blame between individual attributes and external forces as the precipitants to criminality.

6.3.1 Attributing blame to internal versus external causes

Although all the offenders in this study were convicted for either primary or secondary roles in child sexual abuse, they differed in how they attributed the cause of their criminality to external factors. Offenders, primarily males that admitted to offending, linked personal factors, such as preceding states of uncontrollable sexual deviance, pornography and sex addictions, paedophilic interests, substance abuse, and psychological distress to their criminal activities. They portrayed these psychological states as caused by life circumstances or significant others, thereby implicitly externalising the cause of their crimes. Offenders possibly used a narrative practice such as externalising the cause of criminal behaviour to present themselves as less blameworthy. This approach may have diffused responsibility for the offence and could prevent offenders from taking full ownership of the harm caused to their victims.

Derick linked the rape of his daughter to his own sexual abuse as a young boy by explaining that sexual abuse "it's a cause of man to rape a child." He emphasised that they would not have offended if he and other offenders received "trauma counselling" for earlier adverse experiences. Themba also linked his desire for sex with children to a state of drunkenness, explaining, "when I drink, I'm start to thinking about small children." Similarly, Neville attributed his offending to "alcohol."

> Neville: We lived quite alright because in the building trade I was doing very well but then I got into the habit of drinking alcohol and that became a bad habit to me, very bad habit. It interfered with my working, it interfered with my family life…I started looking elsewhere again…And it was on and on and on and on…That became a life to me, cost me a lot in petrol but it didn't really worry me at all, didn't worry me at all. I just continued doing that, continued doing that. [Extract 17]

Neville seemed to dichotomise his alcohol consumption by describing it as “a bad habit to me, a very bad habit” with his overall success of “doing very well”, concluding that alcohol consumption “interfered” with his success. Through this reflection, he implied that alcohol use caused deterioration in various areas of his life, such as his “work”, “family life”, and “doing well.” Most importantly, alcohol consumption is framed as creating a persistent and inescapable sexual drive and obsessive pursuits that went “on and on and on and on.” He evaluated the consequences of these “habits” as having impacted him financially but noted that the costs were of little regard to him. He portrayed his supposed sexual pursuits as being habitual through the statement “that became a life to me”, noting the costs but reflecting that “it didn’t worry me at all, didn’t worry me at all. I just continued doing that, continued doing that.”

In extracts 5 and 8, Neville listed steadfast ambitions to obtain financial wealth, a consistent work ethic, and undeterred efforts to succeed. Yet, in this instance, he presented his sexual behaviours as so consuming that he failed to challenge it despite being acutely aware of the threat it posed to his achievements thus far, suggesting a state of uncontrollability. In his follow-up interview, Neville described loneliness and isolation, which “alcohol and sex took it away from me.” Therefore, linking his early psychological voids and unresolved traumas to his deviance later in life. This explanatory link has been established in offender studies that corroborate using sex to cope with distress (Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Maniglio, 2011; Marshall, 2018). Similarly, Ian attributed the rape of his daughters to his pornography addiction.

> Ian: This pornographical stuff started to become addiction with me also, it started to change my life for the worst. I wanted more sex with my wife…yes, we had our happy times then other times when I wanted to have sex then we started arguing about

> it. I still don't know actually what happened the first day but in the beginning it was just for the children had to play with me. [Extract 18]

In earlier stories, Ian implied that his pornography addiction occurred due to his wife's choices and not his. He accomplished this by linking the onset of his pornography attraction to his wife's job as a "sales lady in a hustler shop" in which he assisted her with customer complaints by viewing the books and videos. He went on to connect the viewing of pornography to an increased sexual drive, presenting his wife's resistance to satisfy his changing sexual needs as the cause of conflict, disconnect, and supposedly his sexual deviance. Like Neville, Ian dichotomised the "happy times" in his marriage to his growing sexual needs about which "we started arguing." He blamed the negative outcomes on the pornography addiction by stating, "this pornographical stuff started to become addiction with me also, it started to change my life for the worst." He expressed ongoing confusion about his sexual deviance, which he depicted as uncharacteristic through his statement, "I still don't know what actually happened." Through this statement, he also implied that he was unknowing and unable to control his desires and the subsequent unplanned sexual abuse.

This is consistent with the pathways model to child sexual abuse of multiple dysfunctions that resulted in offending (Gannon et al., 2012; Ward & Siegert, 2002). A common factor was the inability to regulate negative emotional states such as anger and stress. Another factor was unfulfilled sexual needs within intimate relationships. In addition, deviant sexual scripts, such as addictions, could have contributed to criminal behaviour. Offender studies also reveal patterns of substance abuse, mental illnesses, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, negative feelings of inadequacy, rejection, loneliness, and anger consequent of early unresolved traumas (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Dollinger, 2018; D'Urso et al., 2019; Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018; Levenson et

al., 2015; Maniglio, 2011; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Ward et al., 2018). This depicted an abused-abuser pathway from which their criminal identities emerged, creating almost an inevitability of crime from their own victimhood.

Offenders in this study presented their offending actions as reactive to alleviate a negative emotional state or meet an unfulfilled sexual need. Criminal actions were portrayed as a response, a choice, and an intentional act by offenders to emancipate themselves from supposed tumultuous realities and cope with negative emotional states. This is, unfortunately, achieved at the expense of other people's wellbeing. Scholars demonstrate how offenders were not simply driven to crime (Fleetwood, 2015; Szumski et al., 2018). They deliberated and negotiated their decisions to offend as it became relevant to their identities, thereby demonstrating personal agency, narrative positioning, and negotiation in criminal identity constructions. Similarly, individuals who denied committing sexual offences also shared accounts of being sabotaged and victimised by others, which led to their conviction and sentencing.

Although all the female participants in this study denied direct and intentional sexual perpetration of their child victims, they also externalised the blame for their supposed wrongful convictions to acts of sabotage and malice by another, such as the legal system, the complainant, or the co-accused in their crimes. Unlike most of their male counterparts in this study, they directly externalised the blame for their convictions to an identifiable individual. Tamara, a solo offender, blamed her husband for sexually abusing her children. However, she also explained that her children testified of her abuse, not their father's. Bianca also narrated the cause for her conviction to her co-accused as the primary perpetrator in this offence by claiming that "he groomed me." According to Bianca, the evidence presented in the court of law suggested that she was aware of the sexual abuse, witnessed it, and had the children watch her perform sexual acts. Charlotte claimed that her sister maliciously "lied" about her

raping her son. Yet, there was apparently a "voice recording" of her instructing her nephew to purchase "condoms" for them to have sex. Thandi attributed her conviction and sentencing to what she portrayed as an incompetent and biased legal system that supposedly disadvantaged her as a "poor foreigner." Jenna expressed blame towards the complainant – her children's daycare mother - for having her arrested so she could, according to Jenna, gain custody of Jenna's daughters.

> Jenna: This lady went and made this bunch of lies about me and my husband and then you go and commit suicide…It was very difficult for me because I'm sitting in prison and I know I'm innocent. And I mean for my husband it's even more difficult because he's still sitting in prison. [Extract 19]

Earlier in her story, Jenna explained that her children's "daycare mother…had an obsession with our children" and was apparently angered by Jenna and her husband's decision to transfer their children to a more advanced school. Jenna concluded that the daycare mother deliberately projected "her frustrations" from other parents onto Jenna and her husband instead of the parents she was apparently aggrieved by. Jenna told numerous stories of inappropriate and obsessive behaviours to support her suspicions of the complainant's intentions to sabotage and cause "harm" to Jenna's family. She described the complainant's evidence as a "bunch of lies about me and my husband" despite her stating that there was a "video recording" of the children describing the physical and sexual abuse from their father. Jenna went on to explain that the complainant committed suicide, which seemed futile as she never got custody of the children, which was supposedly her intention in having them sentenced. At the same time, her actions were depicted as depriving the children of their parents. Jenna presented the outcomes of the guilty verdict as being "very difficult" for her

and “even more difficult” for her husband, who was still incarcerated. Jenna reflected on her criminal conviction and sentencing as confusing and senseless, relating difficulties for her, her husband, and her children. In these accounts, Jenna positioned her family as the victims and the complainant as the villain. Seemingly, the female participants in this study explicitly attributed blame to an identifiable individual for their conviction and sentencing. In contrast, the male participants alluded to the role significant others played in their criminality.

Exploratory studies typically attribute blame for sexual offending to the male sex drive and female psychological distress (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Comartin et al., 2018; Denov, 2003; Gannon et al., 2008; Kramer, 2015; Williams et al., 2019). However, the males in this study also attributed the cause for their criminal activities to psychological distress and negative emotional states. The female participants in this study did not implicate psychological distress as a primary motivator to offend. Contrary to the descriptive model of female sexual offending (Gannon et al., 2008), the solo female offenders in this study (Thandi, Charlotte, and Tamara) did not admit to offending to fulfil an individual need consequent to developmental traumas. Instead, they denied offending and externalised blame for their criminal convictions. The shifting of blame for criminality enabled ongoing diffusion of responsibility for offending. Offenders achieved this by splitting off the deviance from their claims of a prosocial self that was reportedly falsely convicted, thus, creating and maintaining a prosocial self-concept. It appeared that female offenders could not reconstruct their personal identities through conversion narratives like male offenders did, possibly because of the influence of macro narratives of the “female nurturer.” Instead, they completely rejected a criminal identity in their life stories. Irrespective of whether they admitted to offending, most offenders in this study narrated strained relations with their intimate partner or spouse.

6.3.2 Portraying crime as a reaction to dysfunctional relationships

Further to their attributions of blame to internal dysfunctions or malicious others, most offenders contextualised their crimes in hostile intimate relationships. These relationships were characterised by intimacy flaws, despair, and despondency, which supposedly preceded the criminal activities for which they were convicted. They presented their intimate partners as inadequate, creating causal connections between their partners and their offending actions or their supposedly wrongful convictions. Most of the male participants in this study narrated experiences of rejection in their relationships with their intimate partners, which they concluded resulted in their sexual abuse of children. Still, some portrayed their victims as willing, consenting, seductive, and sexually intentional. For example, shortly before he sexually abused his daughters, Ian described his marriage as disconnected, conflictual, and sexually frustrated, which supposedly worsened after a burglar raped his wife.

> Ian: In the beginning we were alright then afterwards, like I said when she was raped. After that it was like all the doors were closed. And it made us more that we start arguing about sex, and it was not just about sex, it was about almost everything. At a stage I felt like I wasn't good enough anymore because everything I do is wrong…I cannot blame her for anything, she once told me that we are both to blame for what happened. [Extract 20]

Ian started by describing an "alright" marriage that became conflictual as they were "arguing…about almost everything" after his wife was raped. The rape of his wife was portrayed as a victimisation of the entire family and not just of his wife. In other scenes, Ian expressed his turmoil from his wife being raped by narrating, "I felt like everything was

falling apart", which he portrayed as impairing his ability to comfort his wife as "I didn't know how to help my wife." Specifically, he presented his marriage as most impacted as it changed from an "alright" marriage to constant conflict, arguments, disconnection, and sexual frustrations. Ian implied a complete breakdown of the marriage by saying, "all the doors were closed" after the rape, implying that the marital problems were not his fault. Instead, he characterised further personal victimisation through accounts of his wife's criticism as "it felt like I was doing everything wrong, in her eyes I could do nothing right anymore."

Although Ian explained that he lived with his wife until he was sentenced for this offence, he concluded that he and his wife were both responsible for the breakdown of the marriage, which commenced with her being raped. He stated that he "cannot blame her for anything" but he continued to mention that "she once told me that we are both to blame for what happened." Although he created the impression that he took responsibility for his actions, by quoting his wife he implied that it was not his fault. Ian externalised blame for his offending by linking his sexual deviance to his marital strain, which was apparently caused by the rape of his wife, thus positioning himself as a victim in the context of his own offending.

Similarly, Leroy framed the onset of his offending behaviour as a response to his intimate partner cheating on him and ending their relationship. He said, "It's like, okay she's there and she's doing something, let me cheat this side…I find a woman, sleep with her. After sleeping with her, dump her." Like Ian and Neville, Leroy positioned his decision to offend as a provocation or retaliation to a discordant intimate partner and intimacy deficits with his primary partner. Hostile partners and unmet sexual needs were therefore implicated as a primary cause for their offending, an explanation reported in research studies (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Szumski et al., 2018; Ward & Siegert, 2002). Likewise, the female participants in

this study positioned their criminal convictions and sentencing in relation to their intimate relationships.

The female participants in this study all denied offending. They were mostly expressive about the abuse they endured from their intimate partners or emphasised their choice to stay in the toxic relationship to satisfy affective voids supposedly created by early adversities and unresolved traumas. The solo female offenders in this study also emphasised their abuse and betrayal by intimate partners like most of the male-accompanied female offenders. Events emanating from their intimate relationships supposedly resulted in their criminal convictions and sentencing. For instance, Tamara, a solo offender, spoke of the impact of her husband's abuse towards her, "so in the end he broke me down" and therefore, "I never saw what he was doing to my kids." In other accounts, Tamara mentioned that her daughters implicated her in their sexual abuse by testifying, "I sold their bodies for money." Thandi explained that she married into a wealthy family "to change that situation" of poverty that her family endured. Instead, she narrated being repeatedly cheated on by her husband, an incident that supposedly preceded her daughter's injury and Thandi's arrest.

> Thandi: It's like I loved my husband. I never thought that one day I will come this point that I don't want man anymore in my life but here I am…serving the sentence the things that they didn't happened just because of me loving someone because if I didn't love him maybe I will be that, okay I'm outside suffering with my children it's fine but why, why I was following him? To do what? 'Cause he was using his penis with her womens. [Extract 21]

Thandi positioned herself as a victim of her husband's cheating. She achieved this by depicting herself as an affectionate wife, "I loved my husband", describing her "suffering",

which she attributed to his cheating "cause he was using his penis with her womens." She connected her criminal conviction to her love for him as she elaborated, "serving the sentence the things that they didn't happened just because of me loving someone because if I didn't love him maybe I will be that, okay I'm outside." Thandi denied that her "2-month-old daughter" was raped despite the presentation of medical evidence of penal "penetration" that required medical interventions such as "stitches." She mentioned that the judge accused her of "protecting someone who raped the child." In these accounts, she did not directly blame her husband for raping her child because that might necessitate accountability on her part. Instead, she constructed accounts of blame towards him through his betrayal of her. By attributing the cause for her sentencing to her affection for her husband, Thandi characterised herself as blameless in her sentencing and furthered her victimisation narrative into her offending context. She portrayed ongoing victimisation from her husband cheating on her by mentioning, "the suffering that I'm going through even now" as well as her aversion towards males altogether, "I never thought that one day I will come this point that I don't want man anymore in my life but here I am." Thandi seemed to contrast her characteristics of loyalty to her husband's flaws which supposedly resulted in her being convicted. Bianca also presented that she was "groomed" and "threatened" into silence by her fiancé, who was the primary perpetrator in the crime for which she was sentenced.

> Bianca: I was too scared to talk…He made me believe that if he leaves me nobody will love me again, I will never find anybody to accept me in life again…And I never realised it until I went to *Ntate* Mokoena [psychologist] and he helped me with this and he assisted me. You can actually say I went through life with closed eyes…If I could have, I would have protected them but he threatened my mom. [Extract 22]

Bianca portrayed herself as helpless because “I was too scared to talk.” She also presented herself as naïve in her relationship by explaining that “I never realised it until I went to *Ntate* Mokoena [psychologist] and he helped me with this and he assisted me.” By drawing on the insights of a psychologist, she strengthened the argument of her supposed naivety and her partner’s manipulation. She described her life choices as being under her partner’s influence by stating, “he made me believe” and “he threatened.” Through these statements, Bianca depicted her partner as manipulative and controlling and positioned herself as obliging and compelled to act in specific ways. She implied that her silence was her only role in the crime, which she constructed as her only option at the time to safeguard herself and protect her mother’s life, but also silence that she was apparently unknowingly manipulated into. She alluded to her innocence by stating, “You can actually say I went through life with closed eyes.” As such, she positioned her character as unknowing and vulnerable and her partner as the villain in her crime story. Characterising the self as blameless and vulnerable was also a form of manipulation that enabled offenders to distance themselves from the harm caused by the crime, even if this was achieved through their silence. This is consistent with the latter cycle of the descriptive model of female sexual offending (Gannon et al., 2008), of being male-accompanied or male-coerced into offending, with offending being partly motivated to maintain a closeness to the co-offender who was usually the intimate partner.

The narrative of attributing the cause for offending to intimate partners was also noted in this study’s female solo offenders, such as Thandi and Tamara, even though they did not admit to offending and there was no co-accused in the crime. They continued to deny offending, thus endorsing macro narratives of denialism of the female child sexual offender (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Kramer, 2015) and a villainised intimate partner. Although they blamed their intimate partners for some other reason in their lives that they ultimately linked

to the crime, none of the female offenders constructed accounts of gender vulnerability as direct causes of their incarceration. In accordance with the literature, females in this study shared stories of victimisation, helplessness, and naivety (Venalainen, 2018). They simultaneously echoed atypical narratives of sexual autonomy, such as openly expressing their sexual desires and using sexual activities to meet their emotional needs.

6.3.3 Deviating from gendered sexual scripts

Despite the denial of sexually perpetrating their child victims, most of the female offenders in this study did not portray themselves as passive sexual beings or disadvantaged in the legal or carceral contexts for being female (as postulated by Denov, 2003; Kramer, 2015; Kramer & Bowman, 2011; Venalainen, 2018). Instead, they described a history of sexual promiscuity or strong sexual desires, with similar references to using sexual activities (with consenting adult males) to meet their emotional or financial needs like their male counterparts in this study. The offenders who presented accounts of sexual victimisation also described sexual enthusiasm and pleasure in certain relationships. Bianca narrated how she became sexually promiscuous, “it was an addiction feeling of how many men I can sleep with” despite her initial resistance to sex because “a biker raped me.” She related that she eventually experienced pleasurable sex with various men, stating that sex “made me feel important, it made me feel accepted.” Likewise, Thandi described the sex in her marriage as follows:

> Thandi: I love sex and they were satisfying me those mens that’s why I didn’t have any reason to cheat. [Extract 23]

And in response to her current sexual desires, she said:

> Thandi: We talk about sex, sometimes. I'm human, I miss sex. [Extract 24]

In these excerpts, Thandi explicitly communicated her "love" for sex and that sex was enjoyable and "satisfying." Despite being convicted of a sexual offence, she did not downplay her sexual desires. She related it as a normal "human" function which offenders openly "talk about" and admittedly "miss" engaging in. Tamara also described her history of sexual promiscuity and "selling my body for money." In the following extract, she described how she satisfied her sexual needs through masturbation.

> Tamara: I also learnt from certain videos that I mentioned there that I also learnt how to satisfy myself…I'm also happy with that. I can help myself, I don't really need somebody to help me. [Extract 25]

In extract 15, Tamara detailed persistent sexual abuse since a young age, yet when she was older, she converted her narratives of exploitation into resourcefulness. She indicated that sex was transactional for her as she mentioned, "selling my body for money." In extract 25 and other scenes, she detailed (self)masturbation to "satisfy" her sexual needs. This implied that she was not only sexually obliging for her partners or financial needs, but she also desired sex to the extent of needing to self-satisfy. Tamara extended her narrative of sexual autonomy by expressing her ability to "help myself" and "I don't really need somebody to help me."

Evidently, female participants did not try to conceal their sexual histories or minimise their sexual interests, contrary to what the literature suggests (Augarde & Rydon-Grange, 2022; Denov, 2003; Kramer, 2015). Similar to previous research on offenders, the gender identities of participants in this study were not consistently significant to their personal

identities (Dollinger, 2018; Fleetwood, 2015; Rowe, 2011). Although the female participants in this study seemed to defy the traditional sexual norms of females lacking in sexual autonomy, this sample was split between solo and male-accompanied female offenders. Still, no notable differences were found in how solo and male-accompanied female offenders constructed their life stories. Hence, the stories elicited in this study showed that female sexual offenders in this sample were a diverse group that shared similarities with their male counterparts. This affirmed that gender alone did not simplistically predict specific crime narratives (Gannon et al., 2008; Miller, 2013; Moulden et al., 2007).

Offenders in this study used various narrative practices to make sense of and position their criminal identity in a way that enabled positive self-evaluations to emerge. This was possibly intended to persuade others that offenders, despite their past crimes, were prosocial beings that belonged in mainstream society. In the previous section, offenders narrated pre-offence adversities in which they were positioned as victimised by others and through unfortunate circumstances that were not their fault, such as poverty and hardship. This set the scene for the seemingly inevitable crime that followed. This section highlighted that most male offenders extended their accounts of 'criminality due to victimisation' by attributing the cause for their offending to internal dysfunctions such as pornography addictions and alcoholism. The presentation of inner chaos beyond their control emphasised their powerlessness against their uncontrollable sexual drives that supposedly emanated from psychopathology. The notion of an uncontrollable male libido or sexual deviance has been implicated in most criminal explanatory models on sexual abuse (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Comartin et al., 2018). However, most male offenders in this study blamed their pre-offence adversities for the psychological distress that led to their sexual deviance. In doing so, the male participants directly attributed the cause for their offending to individual characteristics and indirectly blamed external factors for provoking their criminality.

Female participants, on the contrary, denied offending and attributed blame for their criminal convictions and sentencing to sabotage and malicious others, furthering the ‘dangerous world’ narrative to their criminal identities. By implying a sense of powerlessness against external factors that resulted in their criminal identities, offenders shifted responsibility for their criminal actions onto society. Thus, endorsing the narrative of a ‘dangerous world caused offending’ versus a ‘dangerous criminal’.

Offenders in this study mostly contextualised their criminal identities in their intimate relationships that apparently provoked their sexual offending or resulted in them being criminally convicted. The experience of distress in intimate contexts and unmet sexual needs by adult partners is well documented in explanatory models of offender behaviour (Gannon et al., 2012; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Szumski et al., 2018; Ward & Siegert, 2002). The development of sexualised coping mechanisms in offenders has been linked to early traumas, ongoing psychological distress, and insufficient coping skills to deal with emotional and sexual needs (Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Maniglio, 2011). Studies confirm that offenders sexually abused children to create intimacy with the child who was portrayed as an adult-like sexualised being and a substitute for their intimate partners whom they felt alienated from (Mann & Hollin, 2007; Ward & Siegert, 2002). Despite its benefit for offenders, harming others to satisfy personal needs and desires is never acceptable.

Participants in this study who blamed their intimate partners for their crimes justified their sexual offending as a result of their partners not meeting their needs. Cognitive theorists agree that the mental representations of offenders are dominated by justifications, minimisations, externalisations, and rationalisations, which they term ‘thinking errors’ or ‘cognitive distortions’ (Abel et al., 1984; Marshall, 2018; Navathe & Ward, 2014; Szumski et al., 2018; Ward, 2000; Ward & Keenan, 1999; Ward et al., 2006). Theories such as the judgment model of cognitive distortions and the multi-mechanism theory of cognitive

distortions premise that post-offence thought patterns are usually defensive of criminal actions to neutralise the consequences of the harm they have caused (Szumski et al., 2018).

Narrative practices used in this study, such as minimisations, justifications and externalisations or blaming, are crucial mechanisms through which offenders alleviated the negative impact of the stigmatised criminal identity on their personal identity. These techniques allowed them to repair the rupture in their personal identity caused by their criminality and convert their criminal identities into more prosocial self-definitions. While transformative narratives characterised by positive self-evaluations are linked to behavioural reform, it is crucial to recognise the magnitude of the harm caused to others without normalising criminality as inevitable. This is important to facilitate insights that would challenge offence-supportive constructions in offenders. Offenders in this study continued to demonstrate their prosocial identities through stories of positive roles and activities during their incarceration.

6.4 Post-offence – Constructing a change of lens from conviction to redemption

The crime narrative featured prominently in the life stories of participants. While some provided graphic details of the sexual exchanges between themselves (or the primary perpetrators of the offence) and the victims, others elaborated on the circumstances directly before and after the offensive act occurred. Despite this variation, the crime narrative followed a typical script which depicted the crime and their arrests as the most contaminating event in their life story. It was portrayed as the largest negative turning point that supposedly reversed the fortunes and progress they had made up until that point. Nonetheless, participants were able to challenge and change the constructions of their criminal convictions and its impact on their identity through constructions of their intentional and autonomous decision to empower themselves. Although the transformation process was characterised by resilience, it was usually presented as aided by external structures such as support systems.

Participants in this study portrayed spiritual growth as a defining point in their life trajectories. It supposedly redeemed them from the disparaging impact of their criminal identities, thus depicting a positive turning point in their life story.

Offenders presented themselves as being positively transformed during their incarcerations due to individual attributes supported by positive features of their carceral contexts. However, they mostly depicted correctional facilities as dangerous and hostile places where growth and renewal were generally impossible. They narrated multiple losses of material possessions, abandonment and rejection in interpersonal relationships, threats to their personal identity through stigmatisation, and loss of possible life gains due to ostracisation. Nonetheless, they depicted themselves as overcoming these challenges, demonstrating a unique disposition and superior resilience that enabled identity reconstruction. Through their inflated accounts of transformation that created idealised depictions of the self, offenders demonstrated the positive roles and activities they engaged in during their incarceration. They discursively extended these prosocial actions into their anticipated futures.

6.4.1 Reframing criminal distress as the purpose to grow

Irrespective of whether they admitted to committing the offence or not, turned themselves into police officials or fled the crime scene, offenders portrayed their convictions and sentencing as being somewhat unbelievable and surreal. Being arrested, criminally convicted, and incarcerated was related as a regression that caused losses and distress for offenders in this study. Participants described humiliation by their arrests, frustration, and disempowerment by the legal proceedings. Offenders also constructed accounts of external oppression and victimisation in their conviction, sentencing, and incarceration processes. Despite their devastating stories of being sentenced and the precarious correctional environment that created ongoing oppressive experiences, most offenders related positive

growth that apparently occurred during their incarcerations. They attributed the positive changes to their choices and inner strength, distinguishing themselves from most offenders who were not as successful in transforming positively. For example, Anton initially portrayed his conviction and sentencing as a negative turning point: "This has been the most devastating experience I have gone through my whole life" but eventually redefined that as "it was a learning curve for me…a new chapter." Similarly, Bianca explained that her sentencing and incarceration were more devastating than her former victimisation experiences. However, she concluded that she was able to extract positive meaning from the apparent distress.

> Bianca: They arrested me and took my fingerprints. That was very bad. It's very humiliating if you can take it like that…And then the day when we did our sentence was the worst day of my life…That was the most embarrassing day of my life. I wanted to die, nothing mattered. My sister was sitting in the bench behind me crying her eyes out and I would never in my life want to put anybody of my family, friends, anything through so much pain again, ever. There's nothing nice about being arrested, there's nothing nice about coming to prison. The only thing that's nice about coming to prison is you can find yourself, not everything about prison is bad. There's a lot of people who come here who can't cope. They commit suicide because they think it's so bad your life is ending now. It's not. Your life's actually beginning. [Extract 26]

Bianca denied committing a sexual offence and concluded that her conviction and sentencing were unwarranted. She constructed a thread of vulnerability by detailing the "very bad" and "very humiliating" process of being "arrested." She explained, "our sentence was the worst day of my life." Bianca emphasised the magnitude of the impact of her sentencing

on her through phrases such as, “that was the most embarrassing day of my life. I wanted to die, nothing mattered.” She extended the construction of her ordeal to family members by describing their “pain” and her sister “crying her eyes out.” Bianca emphasised the hardship and anguish of incarceration by stating, “There’s a lot of people who come here who can’t cope. They commit suicide.” In this statement, she also compared herself to offenders who lost their lives, whereas she was able to “find” herself in corrections. As such, Bianca positioned herself as having unusual resilience, unlike most offenders. She shifted from narratives of vulnerability and distress to agency and, ultimately, transformation (in the extract below). She implied that she did not romanticise the reality of being incarcerated by repeating, “there’s nothing nice about being arrested, there’s nothing nice about coming to prison.” Yet, she reframed incarceration as a new “beginning.”

Most offenders in this study indicated areas of growth consequent to their criminal conviction, with some extending the construction of their crimes as part of God’s plan for their lives, portraying criminality and incarceration as a bridge and not a barrier to their purpose in life. As Bianca continued to relate:

> Bianca: Prison taught me a lot of things. I can never say that I shouldn’t have been here. I should have been here. It was on my path and I thank God that I’ve ended up here. It’s not nice, I also wanna go home, I really, really wanna go home but I thank God that he put me through this because I’m a stronger person. I’m a grown up, I’m not a kid anymore. [Extract 27]

Bianca emphasised that she did not idealise her incarceration by stating, “it’s not nice, I also wanna go home, I really, really wanna go home.” Still, she presented herself as having fostered positive learnings as “prison taught me a lot of things”, describing her growth as,

"I'm a stronger person. I'm a grown up, I'm not a kid anymore." Hence, Bianca reframed her negative ("not nice") incarceration as a refining process of her character, "a learning curve." She narrated that it was supernaturally destined for her to be incarcerated, "I should have been here. It was on my path" and "I thank God that he put me through this." This alluded to the inevitability of her incarceration despite her choices or character, enabling her to distance her character from her criminality. Like Bianca in extract 19 above, Jenna described her distress from being criminally convicted and incarcerated despite her alleged innocence. Nonetheless, she related changes that had to occur in her marriage and spiritual life, portraying her criminal conviction as facilitating these changes.

> Jenna: I think spiritually I've grown a lot, especially last year in the 10 months with my sentence...It really had an impact on our marriage as well, making it stronger and I think also for us to appreciate each other more. [Extract 28]

Although Jenna was briefly incarcerated for "10 months" and was on parole, she identified positive areas of growth that occurred in this brief period that she was apparently unable to accomplish before her incarceration. She achieved this through statements such as, "I think spiritually I've grown a lot, especially last year in the 10 months with my sentence." She presented the impact as extending beyond her personal growth into her marriage as "it really had an impact on our marriage as well, making it stronger" and "for us to appreciate each other more." Unlike Bianca, Jenna told pre-offence stories of active involvement in the church, living on the church premises, and attending Bible studies. However, she still implied that she was incarcerated to develop her faith by constructing her incarceration as spiritually purposed and possibly inevitable. Narratives of criminality through spiritual purpose allowed

offenders to externalise accountability for offending and, therefore, ownership for their harmful actions.

This was the first incarceration for most offenders, who presented the correctional environment as unsafe and difficult to adapt to. All the offenders in this study portrayed challenging carceral conditions, which ranged in description from depraved physical conditions such as overcrowding to substandard food, harsh punishment from officials, violence, gangsterism, sexual abuse, insufficient family visitation rights, and a general sense of danger. Charlotte, who depicted her incarceration as detrimental to her life, continued to describe the inhumane treatment by officials, “They treat us like animals, they don’t treat us like human beings.” Neville portrayed lawlessness in correctional centres, such as gangsterism, “This number business, 26 and 28”, violence through stabbings, and “sodomy.” He criticised officials for their supposed unwillingness to enforce adequate discipline, referring to them as “very backward” in performing their duties to “push people forward” so they can “be corrected.”

Participants claimed that their victimisation and oppression continued into their incarceration. Correctional facilities should be defined by rules, authority, control, and structure to facilitate the correction of deviance and positive changes. Instead, the correctional environment was presented as a lawless setting without control, with certain offenders like the ones in this study relating perpetration by other offenders. Correctional centres were portrayed as facilities that fostered deviance and criminality, failed to protect offenders from harm, and victimised offenders who tried to self-protect. Incarceration was, therefore, described in opposition to what was expected of a setting of correction and rehabilitation. This implied that despite harsh conditions, those who were able to make positive changes (as participants in this study attested to) were resilient and determined to change.

Further to their narratives of an unsafe environment and alleged maltreatment from officials, offenders described their ongoing psychological distress and suffering from the realisation of the harm caused to their victims. In doing so, they positioned themselves as vulnerable and impacted by their crimes. Most participants emphasised the severity of their psychological difficulties by stating that they received psychotherapy to alleviate their distress. Ongoing mental health challenges and distress are reported as being rife among South African incarcerated offenders (Steyn & Hall, 2015). Both parolees in this study also described persistent challenges despite an end to their incarceration. Themba explained in the extract below that his offence still caused distress, for which he sought psychotherapy.

> Themba: You see when it comes to the child, I hate myself even deep down in my heart...This thing it came to me, 'Why you didn't kill yourself once, you must go and rest, once.' I feel the shame of that child I rape. Every time when I sleep there, I cry. Every day I cry in my cell…This thing is painful ma'am and so I don't know ma'am I'm going to do what. This thing is very, very, eish, it's very, very painful for me it's very, very painful. [Extract 29]

Themba first constructed accounts of turmoil and distress by emphasising through repetition that, "I hate myself", "every time when I sleep there I cry", "this thing is painful", and "it's very, very painful for me it's very, very painful." He implied that his distress resulted from his reflections on his crime, "I feel the shame of that child I rape." He presented this reality as consuming to the extent of considering "why you didn't kill yourself." The possibility of "rest" through death presented a contrast to his current reality, which was alluded to as being tumultuous. Themba mentioned in other stories that he was involved in psychotherapy due to his mental health challenges but, despite this, he depicted a sense of

helplessness: “I don’t know ma’am I’m going to do what.” Through constructions of distress because of their offending and concerns for children, offenders like Themba presented themselves as accountable, remorseful, and possibly even rehabilitated. Accounts of personal suffering bears retributive connotations, possibly presenting themselves as having adequately atoned for their wrongdoings. Their presentations of vulnerability and humaneness also created the impression that their crime negatively impacted them, possibly implying that they did not romanticise their offending. Emphasising their humaneness through suffering challenged the notion of monstrous criminals to elicit sympathy instead of disdain from others. In addition to their accounts of psychological distress, offenders narrated positive roles and activities they engaged in. Despite relating thoughts of “committing suicide because I’m useless to my children”, Thandi spoke of her attempts to develop herself academically during her incarceration.

> Thandi: I’m attending school. I came here 2016. I didn’t even know one word in English. I started school in Level 1, now I’m in Level 3. I can say that I’m not good but I’m trying. [Extract 30]

Thandi demonstrated her growth since incarceration by stating, “I came here 2016. I didn’t even know one word in English”, yet she conversed in English with the researcher. She also mentioned her academic progress, “I started school in Level 1, now I’m in Level 3.” Thandi was similar to Leroy in her presentation of pride obtained through academic achievements despite illiteracy or dyslexia. Both attributed their academic development to their choices and diligence, as she stated, “I’m trying.” In subsequent stories, Thandi reframed her sentencing as an opportunity to educate herself by “attending school” and eventually “when I come out sitting and hiring people that are outside” to alleviate poverty in

her village. While drawing on past positive roles was essential to support a prosocial identity, offenders demonstrated their transformations through stories of developing new talents, abilities, and skills in corrections which created a shift from their criminality to their empowerment and rehabilitation (Best et al., 2021; Herbert, 2018; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012). Accordingly, offenders in this study characterised themselves as engaging in growth that benefitted them and others.

Moreover, offenders identified spiritual transformations as instrumental to their achievements. Some presented an immature faith before their incarceration that apparently developed substantially since, for example, Jenna and Leroy. Others, like Ian and Neville, related their spiritual awakenings as a result of their criminality. Religion was positioned to have a springboard effect on their lives and anticipated futures. They implied that their changes were not produced by rehabilitation programmes but by their religious choices. Ian demonstrated this through his transformative spiritual journey, which began when he was given his first Bible about two years before he was convicted and sentenced. Most offenders' conversion narratives were portrayed as occurring during their incarceration when they became spiritually committed. This raises the question of whether the conversion was due to the structured environment, institutional control, or rehabilitation programmes. However, Ian's conversion narrative was related as occurring before his incarceration when he was arrested, years before he was convicted and sentenced. This presented their transformation as primarily influenced by their spirituality. Neville emphasised the significant influence of religion on his transformation in the extract below.

> Neville: Incarceration has changed my way of life completely, not on its own, but with the aid of God's word, the Bible, and strong faith, and God-given wisdom. [Extract 31]

In earlier stories, Neville detailed the hostilities of the carceral context, but in this excerpt, he depicted benefits such as "incarceration has changed my way of life completely." In doing so, he portrayed himself as transformed and rehabilitated. He added that it was "with the aid of God's word, the Bible, and strong faith, and God-given wisdom" that these changes occurred. By implying that rehabilitation could only occur with supernatural interventions, he presented his personal change as undebatable in the human realm.

In past studies, desisting ex-offenders attributed positive changes to their Christian religion and engagement in spiritual activities, forgiveness by God, acceptance, and ultimately self-forgiveness (Blagden et al., 2020; Hallett & McCoy, 2015; Maruna, 2001). God's acceptance was portrayed as negating the effects of societal rejection and the future need for societal acceptance. Their desistance was apparently not driven by religious control but by their motivation to maintain God's forgiveness. Identifying with a religious group maintained a positive identity by replacing the social categorisation of a sexual offender (Blagden et al., 2020). By framing their crimes as part of God's plan for their lives, offenders presented a sense of purpose even in their offending. It also indicated a sense of helplessness, an inevitability that the crime would have occurred. This implied that they were not antisocial and completely responsible for their actions, but a higher power predestined them for this reality. Although this enabled positive self-evaluations to emerge, it might also prevent offenders from taking full ownership of their offending and confronting the magnitude of the damage that their offending actions have caused. Furthermore, it is theorised that when instability or a rupture occurred in the life story that threatened the personal identity, other identities were integrated into the life story to support the personal identity and ultimately maintain a positive identity (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; McAdams, 2018; Murray, 2008). Hence, offenders constructed a prosocial identity by emphasising their religious stories.

McAdams (1990) explains that life stories are often embedded in an ideological setting, such as religion, created by the narrator to instil a sense of meaning and resolution to their actions. Offenders often described how they interpreted their adverse life experiences through their religious lens, imbuing the hostile experience with meaning and purpose. More importantly, it was constructed as a resolution to their criminality and dysfunctions that resulted in them being criminally convicted. Ordinarily, the crime would create a sense of discontinuity in their life's purpose, leading to identity deterioration. However, their spiritual experience was presented as reversing the effects of their criminality by creating identity growth instead of deterioration. By identifying with their religious groups and committing to certain moral principles and practices, offenders seemed more vested in enacting the positive roles and stories that they told about themselves (Blagden et al., 2020). Their spiritual identity then created continuity through their incarcerations into their anticipated futures.

The emergence of the spiritual identity was constructed at different stages for offenders in this study. Some mentioned being spiritually awakened soon after being arrested, and others more recently during their incarcerations. Regardless of when it happened, they portrayed it as a significant event that created acceptance, meaning, and redemption. Through their spiritual growth, they narrated that the impact of their criminal identity was reduced, and they were in a more empowered state than before the crime occurred. Through Christianity, a resurrected self, a new self emerged from the old self, yet was distinct from the old self (Blagden et al., 2020). Thus, spirituality often created a springboard effect to demonstrate transformation and identity growth (Pals, 2006). Their attestation to personal transformation was demonstrated through their accounts of their contributions to the lives of others within correctional facilities.

6.4.2 Creating interpersonal value despite the loss of support

Offenders detailed numerous areas of loss as a result of their incarceration. Others described realisations that they were only in superficial relationships with friends and family members who abandoned them, presenting feelings of exploitation by their loved ones. Themba, Neville, Anton, and Derick explained how they supported friends and family members over the years. However, the support was not reciprocated during their greatest time of need when incarcerated. They also described a decrease in visits over the years, which was exacerbated by COVID-19 restrictions, as Charlotte explained in the extract below:

> Charlotte: I miss my life, my family, even the children too. That one who was doing matric that time when I get sentence. He got two children now. I miss them, I never saw them. As it's COVID, I, we don't have a visitor since last year. So, I miss my family. [Extract 32]

Charlotte emphasised through repetition that "I miss my life, my family", "I miss them", "so, I miss my family." The mention of missing her family multiple times in a short extract highlighted the extent of her longing for her family. She highlighted the length of her separation from her family by comparing the one child's milestones of "doing matric that time when I get sentence" to "he got two children now." Missing her grandchildren, whom she "never saw" represented an even greater loss for her. In other stories, Charlotte described her family system as "supportive" throughout her incarceration. Yet, she still constructed narratives of pain from separation which was heightened during the "COVID" pandemic that restricted public access to correctional facilities. Charlotte depicted herself as family-orientated and, therefore, vulnerable due to the separation from her family. She reflected on her positive contribution to other inmates despite her hardships in corrections:

> Charlotte: I always give, even here, even here. Because other people they don't have a visitors. If maybe I got lots of soap, I'll give someone, maybe roll on, maybe food because at the kitchen they gave me maybe potatoes, carrots, sometimes meat. I share with everyone, with everyone. [Extract 33]

In this excerpt, Charlotte presented herself as highly generous through statements like "I always give" and "I share with everyone", repeating "everyone." Charlotte mentioned "even here" as a continuation of her previous stories of benevolence in her community, implying continuity in her altruism in the correctional facility, an environment which she previously portrayed as dehumanising. Her generosity was demonstrated through the list of items that she gives, such as, "soap", "roll on", and "potatoes, carrots, sometimes meat." She also distinguished herself from other inmates through the family support that she received, the financial liberties that she had, and the preferential treatment that she received in her food ration. Her account of compassion towards other offenders was contrary to the "hard, hard, hard" outcomes that she described in other stories, thus presenting herself as altruistic despite her incarceration's negative impact on her.

Seemingly, offenders illustrated that despite their losses, they added value to the lives of others in correctional facilities. They also presented themselves as desiring social connectedness despite being marginalised from society through incarceration. Through this construction, they emphasised their humaneness and resisted the dominant discourse of being antisocial and unable to connect socially. Repeated accounts of social interconnectedness in corrections and acts as wounded healers were common strategies offenders used to show that their carceral identities were agents of positive change, assets and not hindrances (Herbert, 2018). Anton, who was only incarcerated briefly, highlighted his loss of support from his

family and friends, and abandonment by the church despite accounts of being a loyal and devoted family member, friend, colleague, congregant, and community member. Likewise, Themba explained how his criminal actions were judged by his uncle whom he supported financially before his incarceration:

> Themba: When I get the money, I give him, my sister, I give him the money. I give him 1000, 'My uncle, 20 000 is here, you gonna see what you going to do with that money'… And my sister 250 000, I've got this money, you gonna see you going to do what.' And then even me too I must get the pocket money…I was giving him the food there in the house. But today I'm so disappointed, it's only my sister who came here but my uncle he didn't came here. [Extract 34]

Themba portrayed himself as a giver who generously provided for his family's needs and luxuries. His generosity was emphasised by the insignificant amount of "pocket money" that he retained for himself compared to the amounts he gave to others, "I give him, my sister, I give him the money. I give him 1000, 'my uncle, 20 000'", "and my sister 250 000." Despite his accounts of generosity, he related, "but today I'm so disappointed, it's only my sister who came here but my uncle he didn't came here." Themba positioned himself as blameless in the relationship breakdown by relating his kindness towards his family, thus, attributing the loss of the relationship to their actions and not his criminality. The stories of losses consequent to their incarceration furthered the narrative of victimhood, a treacherous world that betrayed and exploited them and worsened their vulnerabilities. Like Charlotte (in extract 33), Themba also created a sense of continuity in his positive actions between his pre- and post-offence periods. He described the positive role that he assumed in the correctional centre:

> Themba: Here in prison, ma'am, I don't have a friends, I am closer with the cops. I don't have a friends. I am closer with the cops there in B-Section. There in that section, I was sleep with it, the cops why they like me, I don't want the guys, you know here in prison there's guys who are 26, 28, these guys who like to stab the cops, you see. So, me I don't like these guys…Me, when I see you, I go to talk with that cops, you must destroy with that cops. That's why even the Head of Prison there in B-Section, he put me in charge, I must help the cops. [Extract 35]

Themba emphasised his choice to associate with officials instead of offenders by repeating, "I don't have a friends, I am closer with the cops. I don't have a friends. I am closer with the cops there in B-Section." In doing so, he distanced himself from typical criminals and positioned himself as morally superior to other inmates. He characterised himself as a peacekeeper in the centre through accounts such as, "Here in prison there's guys who are 26, 28, these guys who like to stab the cops, you see. So, me I don't like these guys" and "me, when I see you, I go to talk with that cops, you must destroy with that cops." His attestation to his valuable role is strengthened by indicating that "the cops why they like me" and "even the Head of Prison there in B-Section, he put me in charge, I must help the cops."

By associating with correctional officials, he realigned with prosocial beings. Although he described losing support from significant others, this loss was not enough to ignite friendships with offenders. Therefore, he portrayed a mature moral frame that did not allow for criminal associations despite the need for close relationships with others. He presented himself as avoidant of criminals and actively opposed criminality in the centre by protecting officials against other inmates. This aligned him with the law enforcers and against the lawbreakers, exemplifying how offenders move between social categories as it benefits

their self-identity. They identified with groups (such as officials or law enforcers) and drew on contextualised roles within correctional centres to corroborate their belonging to the selected category. They simultaneously argued against their belonging to other social categories, such as the criminal category (Dollinger, 2018).

As discussed above, offenders in this study narrated the ongoing traumatic consequences of their arrests, convictions, sentencing and incarceration, including the loss of support from loved ones. This was similar to studies in which offenders' incarceration accounts centred on stories of suffering, angst, degradation, loss, and psychological distress consequent to incarceration (Bullock et al., 2019; Maniglio, 2011; Rowe, 2011; Steyn & Hall, 2015). Positioning themselves as victims due to the consequences of their incarceration could possibly be used to divert attention from the traumatic impact of their harmful actions on their victims. They emphasised their humaneness through constructions of vulnerability to contrast the characterisation of antisocial criminals. Their humaneness was emphasised by signifying their stress reactions to negative external conditions and losses, again positioning others and the world as hostile and the self as a recipient of this adversity. However, by attributing blame to others for losses they endured due to their crimes, offenders failed to take responsibility for their criminal actions as the cause of the losses and adversities they related in their post-offence period.

Instead, they contrasted their losses to the value they supposedly added to the lives of others as a result of their personal transformation. Offenders also compared their experiences of oppressive external conditions to their resilience and perseverance using adaptive coping strategies that ultimately created identity growth that extended beyond themselves. In documented redemptive scripts, offenders also emphasised their personal agency, volition, and individual attributes that prompted their process of transformation and they claimed to maintain the changes through ongoing deliberate choices and actions (Bullock et al., 2019;

Hallett & McCoy, 2015; Herbert, 2018). This was a further construction of the ideal self that had been transformed yet appeared dismissive of their criminality and its impact.

Drawing on specific life experiences, roles, and group identities allowed a positive identity to emerge by neutralising threatening forces to the personal identity (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Hallett & McCoy, 2015; McAdams, 2018; Murray, 2008). Participants in the LDS and other studies also depicted a post-offence positive turning point in their lives through empowering external forces that believed in them and helped them recognise their purpose (Best et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2019; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012). The sources of support were a higher power or helpful others like psychologists, correctional officials, social workers, family members, rehabilitation programmes, opportunities to change, nurturing environments, and humanising interactions. Thus, redeeming them from criminality and restoring them to a positive state which could not have been established in a dangerous and unsafe society. Similarly, the participants in this study narrated exaggerated accounts of transformation and identity growth, primarily due to their religion and then their support systems, including family and friends. Lastly, they attributed their transformations to opportunities to add value in their roles, such as students, mentors, labourers, and peacekeepers in the correctional centres. Like offenders in other studies (Best et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2019; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012), they also explicated how apparently inept and oppressive correctional officials, punitive treatment, and negative labelling formed barriers to effective rehabilitation whilst humanising interactions with officials were supportive of efforts to self-empower. Hence, through their efforts and support structures, offenders in this study claimed that they positively transformed and ultimately made a positive impact, demonstrating their ability to ‘make good’.

Narrative studies on offenders’ accounts of redemption depict identity reconstruction as individual agency that is conditioned by structural realities that can either enable or

debilitate transformation and the emergence of positive identities (Best et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2019; King, 2013; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012; Stone, 2016). Individuals in this study demonstrated how they endured multiple structural constraints that would ordinarily inhibit agentic actions of identity reconstruction (such as gangsterism and abandonment) yet managed to self-correct and self-empower. Thus, individual resilience is framed as greater. In their transformation process, there was a shifting between narratives of oppression, distrust, and contamination and ones of optimism, growth, and renewal that formed the redemptive identity. This created further continuity in their personal identities and purpose to benefit the self and others, from how they overcame early adversities before their incarcerations, through ongoing actions to continue their purpose, and unique abilities not found in others. This presented a seemingly romanticised account of the self through their exaggerations of transformation. In creating the redemptive arc, participants demonstrated their shifts from their criminal identities through the rehabilitation of past sexual deviance.

6.4.3 Narratives of resolved dysfunctions and transformed sexual identities

The participants who admitted to sexually abusing children constructed their offending behaviour as underpinned by abnormality and dysfunction, such as substance abuse, sexual dysfunctions, and emotional difficulties. Those who denied offending also narrated psychological voids that resulted in situations that precipitated their criminal convictions. These are considered corrupting factors that caused their offending or criminal convictions that might not have usually occurred. During their incarceration, they apparently resolved these abnormalities that precipitated their criminality, subsequently enabling them to distance their current self from being at risk for reoffending. Sexual dysfunctions preceding offending are also noted in other offender studies (Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). Although Anton partly denied sexually offending, he described feeling sexually “abnormal” for most of his life due to a preference for “caning” instead of sexual intercourse. Neville also included

hypersexuality as a cause for offending in extract 17, and Ian to pornography addiction in extract 18. In the extract below, Ian related that he managed to address his pornography addiction during his incarceration.

> Ian: I'm actually still very ashamed of myself for what I did but I have to get rid of all this and to start a new life. I cannot stay in all those things. I make it a point not to, even if I watch movies on the TV and it starts with sexual scenes, I will get up and I'll walk away. It's better for me, it's something that I know I have to do every time…So, I can only say I'm a recovering porn addict, so I have to stay away from all those things. [Extract 36]

Ian presented himself as regretful about his past sexual functioning by stating, "I'm actually still very ashamed of myself for what I did." He narrated the need to change by saying, "I have to get rid of all this and to start a new life. I cannot stay in all those things." He depicted himself as acting to bring about the desired changes by mentioning that "I make it a point not to", explaining, "if I watch movies on the TV and it starts with sexual scenes, I will get up and I'll walk away." He continued to portray himself as insightful about his sexual functioning and how to manage his risks by expressing that "it's something that I know I have to do every time." Ian emphasised his ongoing risks by saying, "I can only say I'm a recovering porn addict, so I have to stay away from all those things." By labelling himself as a "recovering porn addict", Ian placed himself within a frame of mental disease. Employing medical causes possibly created a reduction in his sense of responsibility for his criminality which was caused by a disease and not just desire. Hence, Ian presented himself as acknowledging his sexual deviance and expressed regret for his actions which he was trying to prevent. Further to this extract, Ian spoke of collaborating with "authorities" to eradicate

"pornographical movies in here" and he expressed the desire to "destroy all the things from where it starts down to the last shop where they sell those things."

Likewise, most participants distinguished between their past and present sexual identities. For example, Bianca related past sexually promiscuous behaviours even in her monogamous relationships, but then she related that "I will be celibate for the rest of my life." In contrast to Leroy's history of sexually exploiting women, he expressed different intimate ideals. First, he wrote about his past actions:

> Leroy: I find one and date her. After having sex with her, I just dump her like she is nothing. I was a man that just wanted sex from women. [Extract 37]

In this excerpt and previous stories, Leroy admitted to sexually objectifying women by stating, "I was a man that just wanted sex from women." He implied that he was unable to identify any other value in females except their potential sexual value to him. Hence, he groomed them into having sex with him, "I find one and date her" and disregarded them once the sexual encounter was over, "after having sex with her, I just dump her like she is nothing." Then, he depicted a shift in his intimate desires by detailing his future intentions to remain in a committed relationship and fulfil his unmet needs for romance and intimacy.

> Leroy: I'm in a relationship for three years now with a wonderful woman from Zambia. She's 34 now and she's the most beautiful woman in the world. She's the most sexiest world and the only thing I'm dreaming about, I'm thinking about is just going home now and just taking care of her, emotionally, physically, spiritually, having all the things that I didn't have when I was young. [Extract 38]

In extract 37, Leroy described how he exploited women. In extract 38, he presented glorified and idealised impressions of his partner, whom he described as “wonderful”, “most beautiful woman in the world”, and “most sexiest.” This contrast was possibly constructed to depict a shift in his attitudes and perceptions of women and intimate partners. Leroy continued to present himself as a transformed intimate partner by juxtaposing his current self as a caring partner, “I’m thinking about is just going home now and just taking care of her, emotionally, physically, spiritually” versus “dumping” women in the past. He presented further changes in himself by elaborating on his future plans with his partner, which he depicted as a response to voids in his past relationships by “having all the things that I didn’t have when I was young.” In other scenes, he constructed accounts of intentions to start a family with her, portraying his partner as the mother of his children, bearing implications of value and worth, aiming to please her, and not using her for his sexual satisfaction. Leroy alluded to being a changed intimate partner with transformed sexual constructions. In other stories, he stated, “but the moment we step out of this place things change, the old nature comes back. It’s where now you need to fight over the old nature.” This implied that offenders were aware of their risk areas and need for ongoing self-awareness and did not idealise their transformations as permanent and without risk. Contrary to Leroy, who admitted to raping a child, Tamara denied sexually perpetrating anyone, yet she also contrasted her past and current sexual tendencies to demonstrate a reformed sexual identity:

> Tamara: I’m not like that, the way I used to be outside where people were calling me the woman with the white liver where I could have sex without feeling. Now I have to be feeling something for that person before I can actually have sex with that person. [Extract 39]

In previous stories, Tamara narrated a complex history of sexual encounters, which ranged from sexual victimisation to sexually transacting with others to meet her own physical, financial, and emotional needs. In this extract, she presented a transformed sexual identity by distancing herself from her past actions, indicating, "I'm not like that, the way I used to be outside where people were calling me the woman with the white liver where I could have sex without feeling." She contrasted her past sexual actions with her current values by stating, "now I have to be feeling something for that person before I can actually have sex with that person." She implied that sex was just a physical experience in the past but now she required an affectionate engagement. Hence, offenders presented their perceptions of sex as changed to being "sacred" and occurring in committed relationships.

Offenders in this study constructed the redemptive narrative by creating continuity in the past and present roles they assumed, as well as the adversities endured and subsequent resilience. However, they created a dualism, a stark contrast between their past and present sexual identities. Research suggests that conflicting identities (such as abusive nurturers) were not necessarily resolved or suppressed to create a sense of identity synthesis (Halbertal & Koren, 2006). Instead, the opposing identities can co-exist to produce a positive identity. While the general criminal identity in offenders' accounts was used to demonstrate transformation and identity growth, the identity as a child sexual offender or sexual dysfunction was constructed as resolved as its ongoing existence threatened their sense of morality and transformation. As McAdams (1990) states, while some identities will be suppressed and denied, others will be used to demonstrate identity transformation and growth.

Indeed, a transformed sexual identity is an expected macro narrative in a rehabilitation environment for offenders sentenced for sexual abuse. While this narrative strategy allowed the storyteller to maintain a prosocial identity characterised by 'normal'

sexual attitudes, it could be used to persuade others of the offender's realignment with normative society. The narrative of a transformed sexual identity was fundamental for constructing a redeemed identity in child sexual offenders, hence offenders that denied offending also employed this narrative practice. Although this facilitated the construction of a prosocial and acceptable being, the high recidivism rate in South Africa suggests that internal and external offending conditions were not as adequately resolved as offenders in this study alluded to.

The extended theory of mind, which conceptualises offending as an interaction between internal and social processes, depicts sexual cognitive distortions as neither permanent nor inherent (Ward, 2009; Szumski et al., 2018). It only emerges in opportune social conditions, such as exposure to child pornography. Psychoanalytic complexity theory agrees that crime results from the complex interaction between internal and external factors (Webster, 2018). A change in one factor can change the outcome, explaining why the same person can act as a caring parent and then a sexual perpetrator and then a caring parent again to the same child. Offenders in this study implied that the dysfunctions that preceded their criminality were resolved and that their social conditions changed. Therefore, they presented an idealised characterisation of their transformation by negating the possibility of reoffending. In addition to their accounts of sexual and personal change that have supposedly benefited them and others around them in the correctional facility, offenders explained that their value was not confined to carceral contexts. They narrated how they planned to utilise their competencies and skills to benefit mainstream society upon parole placement, hence constructing accounts of generative futures.

6.4.4 Resisting stigma for generative futures

All offenders in this study expressed detailed plans to positively contribute to the close and distant systems into which they will be released. Generative accounts varied from

improving their roles as parents and spouses to starting their own families, educating the youth in their communities about sex and crime, and being actively involved in community protection initiatives. In addition to altruistic acts, offenders expressed the desire to transmit a legacy of sexual awareness through dialogues on sexuality and responsible sexual behaviours. These intentions aim to prevent others from enduring a similar fate of being sentenced for child sexual abuse. Offenders elaborated on their determination and competence to achieve these goals despite society's resistance to these acts of benevolence. Despite their accounts of transformation and resilience, offenders still constructed stories of fear towards their futures and difficulties coping with the ambiguities of their parole. Their accounts of fears and anxieties were usually about reintegrating into society and society doubting their rehabilitation and rejecting them. They portrayed their coping by either avoiding negative criticism against them or proving themselves through positive contributions to society. This positioned them as vulnerable and humane, unlike society that supposedly judged and rejected them, thus maintaining their victim stance.

For example, Neville related that people would probably doubt his transformation, "I don't think people are really gonna accept my change", but he anticipated that he will "show the change that the prison's made." Nina also suggested that she would endure challenges upon parole placement "cause outside people are going to point fingers at me and tell me 'you're a rapist'." To circumvent this, she detailed her plans to avoid the presence of children, "to protect myself, I love those kids dearly, but you will not allow me to be alone with them." Themba mentioned, "when I go out here, I must go and find another place, to go and start my future with the guys who don't know me" due to the possible stigma and ostracisation from his community. Bianca detailed accounts of her anxieties about possible parole placement, although she positioned herself as sure that she wanted to be released from the correctional system:

Bianca: You're even scared to go back to where you've come from 'cause you don't know what to expect…it's all stupid little things that makes you scared. [Extract 40]

Although most offenders described correctional centres as a hostile and unsafe environment, it was depicted as somewhat safer than the realities they anticipated upon parole placement. This created the impression that criminals and carceral contexts were comparatively less threatening than normative society. Bianca portrayed the unsafeness and unpredictability of society by indicating, "you're even scared to go back to where you've come from 'cause you don't know what to expect." She emphasised, "it's all stupid little things that makes you scared", demonstrating the extent of how unsafe and vulnerable she expected to feel in society if even simple activities caused fear and anxiety for her.

Alongside the personal growth they presented as occurring in correctional facilities, offenders portrayed a sense of regression that also occurred consequent to their incarceration, for example, not being able to use a "glass plate" or "cook" a meal like they were once able to. The unpredictability of how family, friends, and communities would receive them was also depicted as frightening for offenders, suggesting that they expected a hostile reception. This strengthened their constructions of society being as treacherous as when they left it, thus highlighting the contrast between their positive changes and a stagnant and unforgiving world. Bianca responded affirmatively when asked about possible judgment from society. She also showed how she resisted judgment through her spiritual identity:

Karmini: Do you think you're going to be judged when you leave prison?

Bianca: Yes definitely. It's a sexual offence. People, and not just a sexual offence, if you come out of prison, the only thing people see is prison. 'Oh, that's *gemors*, that's

> rubbish'. It's fine if you think so. I think I'm a jewel. God gives his hardest battles to his strongest soldiers. [Extract 41]

Although participants in this study narrated concerns of societal rejection, suspicion, and doubt, it was not depicted as a debilitating prospective reality. Instead, they all indicated plans to prove their personal change and value or ignore hostile others by living on their own terms irrespective of how others perceived them. Their spirituality and God's forgiveness of them were used as a conduit for the latter possibility in which they chose to focus on their spiritual acceptance, which supposedly surpassed any human rejection. In the excerpt above, Bianca portrayed society as judgmental by stating that she "definitely" expected to be judged. This judgment was generalised to all offenders who "come out of prison" and "not just a sexual offence." They were defined by their criminality as "the only thing people see is prison", implying that the person is criminalised instead of the behaviour. This also suggested that other important parts of them were overlooked by society. Bianca contrasted how society treated criminals as "rubbish" versus "I think I'm a jewel." This strengthened the impression of a biased and judgmental society.

In other stories, she spoke of how she internalised how God sees her, which was depicted as having changed her self-perspective from a worthless criminal to a valuable and precious person; "a jewel." She reiterated that her incarceration was purposed by God, a superior purpose that set her apart from others who have not endured a similar fate. She accomplished this by stating, "God gives his hardest battles to his strongest soldiers." Her stigmatised criminal identity was framed as being of supernatural ordainment that positively elevated her above society, thus enabling her to resist the stigma imbued to her. Most participants expressed the importance of making positive impacts and the desire for generativity regardless of future uncertainties and possible hostilities. Despite her accounts of

stigma and obstacles to being listed on the sexual offender's register, Tamara related her plans to continue protecting the lives of children through their mothers instead.

> Tamara: I want to warn other women, the signs, everything…a child can get worse hurt than my children did, and they may die…Those women can actually do what I didn't do, the stuff that I didn't actually do in the right way. [Extract 42]

As previously mentioned, offenders in this study presented themselves as resisting the anticipated judgment and rejection from society. Instead, they positioned themselves as positive contributors to society. In this extract, Tamara portrayed herself as a contributor to society by expressing her intentions to protect children and prevent abuse. She accomplished this by mentioning how she intended to prevent other mothers and children from experiencing the same abuse that she and her children did by "warning other women, the signs, everything." Although she expressed the acknowledgement of her shortcomings in her crime, she framed it as acts of omission or oversights and not deliberate acts of sexual offending. This was demonstrated in her statement, "those women can actually do what I didn't do, the stuff that I didn't actually do in the right way."

She minimised her children's ordeal compared to what other children could experience, "a child can get worse hurt than my children did, and they may die." This construction possibly allowed her to resist the full impact of the judgment and stigma she received from her offence. Through her accounts, Tamara evaded complete stigma as a child sexual offender and detailed her plans to protect other children strategically, irrespective of society's resistance to her efforts. This account also problematised society's judgment as obstructing the contribution she could make to prevent child sexual abuse. In doing so, Tamara minimised the severity of her classification as a sexual offender by dismissing

society's attempts to protect children against further harm from known sexual offenders. In response to what parole meant for him, Ian suggested there are limited job opportunities because of the stigma that offenders experienced.

> Ian: There's a big stigma around prisoners. Nowadays, as you hear, they don't want to give us opportunities outside and that's why so many of the guys are coming back to prison…I'm here for 19 years, my friend that stays with me it's about a month or two from now he will be in prison for 27 years. There's other guys that here are for 30 up to 33 years already in prison. We started to correct our lives since we, some of us started correcting our lives since we get into prison. [Extract 43]

In the stories quoted above, offenders contrasted their positive ideals and transformation to society's hostile and unchanging attitudes. In this extract, Ian set the scene of societal rejection by mentioning the "big stigma around prisoners." He extended the 'unsafe world' narrative by attributing blame for reoffending to society's rejecting actions that prompted further criminality. He demonstrated this by mentioning, "they don't want to give us opportunities outside and that's why so many of the guys are coming back to prison." He emphasised their rehabilitation by stating, "some of us started correcting our lives since we get into prison."

His emphasis on rehabilitation was strengthened by listing lengthy incarcerations, such as, "19 years", "27 years", and "30 up to 33 years." This implied that society was making an unfair and biased judgment against possibly rehabilitated offenders. By specifying the number of years spent in the correctional system, he also alluded to sufficient time for society to have prepared for their release yet failed to do so. This problematised society instead of (ex)offenders for criminal outcomes, shifting the perpetration lens from criminals

onto society. Ian expressed his intention to bridge the employment gap by creating jobs for himself and other offenders when he is released on parole. He detailed his business plan to employ and empower offenders released from the correctional system through what he termed “charity.”

> Ian: The main aim for me in this is not to make money for myself…So, the main aim is to actually do charity work, to go out and help others. If I can just help one person to change or to realise that the things that you are doing are wrong and he can change his life, he or she can change their lives around, and walk on a new path in their life, I’ve achieved something. [Extract 44]

Seemingly, offenders claimed to bear the added burden of job creation which inmates such as Ian were prepared to assume due to society’s supposed shortcomings. Ian highlighted his selflessness by saying, “the main aim for me in this is not to make money for myself.” He continued to construct accounts of generosity by clarifying, “the main aim is to actually do charity work, to go out and help others.” Hence, offenders presented themselves as selfless and altruistic, the opposite of a hostile society that “don’t want to give us opportunities outside.” Ian also positioned himself as transformed by portraying himself as an agent of “change.” This also distinguished him from offenders who were yet to “realise that the things that you are doing are wrong” and “change his life.” Hence, offenders demonstrated that their narratives of transformation resulted in plans to live a crime-free life of generative actions instead of ongoing criminality.

Redemptive identities were usually optimistically intonated and ended in generative scripts in which the narrator’s future self imparted a meaningful and valuable legacy to future generations. This was sometimes achieved as a wounded healer for those who endured

similar hardships (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Bullock et al., 2019; Maruna, 2001; McAdams, 1990). Also, they aligned their future realities with normative society, of intentions to desist from crime, with families, jobs, and stable lives (Bullock et al., 2019). This was done through deliberate control over their futures and not primarily based on external support structures (Stevens, 2012). Bamberg (2012) explains that the act of showing similarity or difference to others is to prove one's belonging in one social category instead of another. Through the construction of benevolent intentions and generative plans, offenders displayed ideals shared by society. Thus, allowing them to create a sense of unity between themselves and society, convincing others that they belonged in society and not incarcerated.

These acts of benevolence and compassion that offenders presented themselves as displaying for the lives of others are contrary to their construction of a society that set out to dispossess offenders rather than empower them. Offenders presented this supposedly hostile and rejecting society as creating an uncertain future of which they were fearful. This extended their counter narratives of a dangerous and hostile world versus the positive self into their anticipated futures. Furthermore, God's forgiveness and acceptance was used to negate and overcome societal rejection, as depicted in the literature (Blagden et al., 2020). Studies indicate that when structural barriers threaten their individual agency to change, offenders redefine their social roles or identify with various social roles that would result in a positive self-evaluation (King, 2013). As such, they position themselves as possessing agency to uphold their purpose despite challenges and obstacles. However, offenders are still acutely aware of the restrictions of their criminal identities and its growth-limiting impact (Herbert, 2018; Rowe, 2011). They apparently do not romanticise their criminal and carceral identities as they understand that it limits their growth potential and future identities.

6.5 Conclusion

McAdams's (1990) theory of narrative identity, which suggests that a sense of self is constructed through storytelling, was demonstrated in offenders' narrative accounts in this study. They frequently referenced who they have become through autobiographical memories of who they once were. This chapter noted offenders' constructions of victimisation which continued from their pre-birth contexts into their post-offence periods in how they were arrested, the losses they endured and the maltreatment they received in correctional facilities. Constructions of adversity extended into their futures in which they expected to be judged, stigmatised, and probably rejected by society. Temporal coherence was established by creating causal connections between past experiences and consequent actions, such as adversities causing distress and crime (McAdams, 2021; Pals, 2006). Positioning criminality as seemingly inevitable and of external cause enabled a prosocial identity to emerge. Internal attributions for success and external attributions for failure were narrative techniques that maintained a prosocial identity. This attribution style can be adaptive and beneficial for offenders who are in the process of reforming their self-concepts. However, it could also maintain offence-supportive cognitions and heighten one's risk of reoffending. Furthermore, the fluid process of identity development was highlighted as offenders demonstrated how dynamic life experiences continued to shape and reshape their sense of self. However, they all seemed to direct efforts towards constructing a prosocial identity imbued with coherence, stability, and purpose. In so doing, they usually avoided confronting their criminal identity, which may have created the impression that they were dismissing the impact of their offending.

Consistent with most narrative research, the narratives produced in this research were usually temporally sequenced, with a general sense of progress between nuclear episodes and a plot that resolved into anticipated generative efforts and a legacy of purpose (McAdams,

1990; Murray, 2008; Riessman, 2008). Thus, redemptive scripts dominated the narratives in this study as offenders illustrated how they continuously reconstructed their life trajectories, primarily through their resilience, Christian religion, and opportunities for growth within the correctional system. Their growth into prosocial identities was narrated through accounts of their development in correctional facilities, ongoing supportive roles, spiritual maturity, and generative actions to benefit others in the world. Offenders showed efforts to integrate their past, present, and future selves that created continuity across the lifespan and overall purpose in their personal identity. The effects of their criminal identities were neutralised by their spiritual identities, facilitating the emergence of a prosocial identity.

Their positioning of a prosocial identity seemingly created opportune pathways for them to engage in positive roles and activities that benefitted them and others around them. These beneficial actions would arguably not be possible by constructing a criminal identity marked by persistent deviance and causing harm to others. Offenders reinforced claims of their transformations and prosocial ideals through stories of refraining from, detesting, and acting to eradicate crime and immorality. The emerging identities from these life experiences distinguished them from others. They often portrayed themselves as more successful than their family members. More recently, they related a superior sense of purpose to other inmates they apparently transcended in their rehabilitation.

Offenders' stories demonstrated the interactional relationship between external elements and individual factors that resulted in the emergence of the criminal and the redeemed identity. Identity growth was therefore depicted as a purposeful and dynamic act of agency and motivation. Sociocultural factors did not merely control identity development; it interacted with individual functions to bring about change as the offender deemed fit. Although they constructed areas of growth and change, it was not portrayed as a total identity makeover or transformation as offenders demonstrated the importance of the past self to the

present self. Macro narratives such as the abused-abuser pathways, denialism of female sexual offenders, and male sexual deviance were echoed in this study. Still, unique stories of female sexual autonomy and deviance, as well as males attributing their sexual deviance to their intimate relationships, were also produced in this study. Simultaneously, counter narratives of offender victimhood in a dangerous world, resilience and growth, and child protectors were stories which offenders utilised to resist public discourses. This demonstrated how they defied the typical criminal identity script to align with the ideals of normative society and position a prosocial self-identity (Dollinger, 2018). Offenders related that their prosocial identities encompassed positive behaviours that benefitted them and society. Alongside the redemptive scripts, offenders also coherently described their steadfast morality, as discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 7: Identity Coherence: Narratively Reconstructing the Moral Identity

7.1 Introduction

The moral identity was a narrative thread that offenders used to weave stories across the lifespan. This chapter presents offenders' narrative accounts of noble acts towards others and esteemed value systems as fundamentals of a moral identity. The moral identity was demonstrated temporally, across different contexts, against all adversities, and in contrast to how others fared in similar situations. The crime, which would ordinarily cause a rupture in the moral identity, was also constructed with indicators of a sensitive individual who temporarily and partially suppressed their constant moral conscience. The moral identity was then reconstructed through more redemptive than contaminative stories, furthering their constructions of a transformed self or, at the least, an empowered self. This was achieved by demonstrating growth through their efforts as active crafters of their futures. The reconstruction of the fragmented identity was reinforced through their spiritual identity, which was supernaturally redeeming and, therefore, undebatable in the human realm. Although these idealised depictions of a moral identity appeared superficial and undermined the destruction caused by offenders, such exaggerated tales of morality have been linked to behavioural change and desistance from crime (Maruna, 2001).

The sections in this chapter illustrate how offenders constructed their moral identity by weaving stories of their acts of goodness from the beginning of their lives into their anticipated futures. This chapter is divided into the following major themes, maintaining the temporal order introduced by participants: constructing pre-offence stories of goodness; demonstrating the moral ambivalence of offending; positioning incarceration as 'God's plan'; and portraying post-offence stories of goodness.

7.2 Constructing pre-offence stories of goodness

In telling their life stories, offenders demonstrated how they have generally, and specifically as caregivers, prioritised the wellbeing of children in their lives. This was done by juxtaposing their convictions for committing a crime against children with the details of positive relationships they always had with children. Offenders described how they apparently assumed responsible and nurturing roles in their families from a young age, in their careers, and in their contribution towards their community development. These roles were presented as requiring courage, perseverance, superior decisions, and exemplary behaviours that would be considered uncharacteristic of criminals. Those who admitted to abusing their children still positioned themselves as safeguarding them against abuse from others. Those who denied the offences usually spoke of protecting their children and others in their communities.

For example, Derick explained that he physically "healed" children as "an African healer" and counselled them as a church leader. Leroy portrayed himself as having assumed trusted roles such as taking "youth into camps" in Christian "youth ministry." In extract 2, Tamara explained how she tried to protect her children by teaching them how to safeguard themselves against abuse in a way that she was apparently unable to protect herself as a child. Similarly, Nina and Thandi described themselves as "observant" and "very protective" of their infant daughters, who were the primary victims in the offence for which they were convicted. Jenna repeatedly elaborated on nurturing acts such as "taking care" of her ill daughter to prevent "colds and flus." She also depicted herself as a vigilant and "strict" mother who ensured her daughters were conservatively dressed to prevent them from being sexually abused. Neville emphasised his success as a parent by mentioning that he provided for his children's needs and "looked after them well." In the extract below, Leroy explained

how he cared for, but never abused, his niece and that his niece was apparently able to separate the abuser from the nurturer in him.

> Leroy: I spent three years taking care of Delia [his niece], three years…my love for Delia was comparing to the love that I had for Tia [the victim] was different…Sometimes she tells me, 'You know what, I know what you did. I understand what you did, but I didn't say you that person. You different from that person, you took care of me, you did not fiddle around with me, you did not do anything with me. That person who did something to Tia is not my uncle, he's not my father that raised me'. [Extract 45]

Prior to this story of caring for his ill niece, Leroy provided detailed stories of how he apparently "left school to take care of my mom." In this extract, he elaborated on how his life was halted to care for his ill niece, "I spent three years taking care of Delia, three years." The repetition of "three years" was possibly used to highlight the prolonged period over which he cared for others, demonstrating his compassionate and selfless acts of care and positioning himself as a responsible family man. Leroy distinguished between his paternal and criminal actions according to his "love" for the victim versus his niece, "my love for Delia was comparing to the love that I had for Tia was different."

He strengthened the contrast between his paternal and criminal identity by quoting his (now adult) niece as saying, "that person who did something to Tia is not my uncle, he's not my father that raised me." He portrayed his niece as insightful, "I know what you did. I understand what you did" yet she excused his behaviour because it was apparently uncharacteristic, "you different from that person." He presented her as supposedly affirming his caring role as a father and not a perverse sexual offender: "you took care of me, you did

not fiddle around with me, you did not do anything with me." Leroy directly compared his niece and the victim of his offence to support his claims of a specific attraction to the victim and not a generally perverse nature. He created the impression that he was dedicated and caring towards his loved ones who reciprocated his affections, drawing more attention to those positive roles to neutralise his criminal role. This narrative practice facilitated positive self-evaluations by evading the criminal identity and discursively neutralising it with accounts of the paternal role. In doing so, offenders seemed callously dismissive of their victims' traumatic experiences. Similarly, in the extract below, Anton described his relationship with the children he was a housefather to:

> Anton: I can give children a lot…I can be very good for children, like I always have been. At the previous children's homes, all the kids that were in our house for the six years, will most probably say to you, they said, I'm the best house father there ever have been. [Extract 46]

Anton initially explained that he could not biologically conceive children due to his wife's dreaded disease, yet he explained that he filled this void by fostering children from abusive homes. In this extract, Anton characterised himself as beneficial to children by stating, "I can give children a lot" and "I can be very good for children." The repetition of his usefulness to children as well as the use of "a lot", "I always", "very good", "I always have been", "all the kids", and "best house father" is used to emphasise his value to the children who encountered him. He mentioned that the children he raised attested to his positive role as a father, "all the kids that were in our house for the six years, will most probably say to you, they said, I'm the best house father there ever have been." He compared himself to other house fathers that were portrayed as saying that the "children must get punished" whereas he

"was much more lenient." Like Leroy, Anton used the stories of his paternal role to divert from his destructive actions. Outside of their immediate contexts, some offenders described how they protected and provided for the needs of their community members, as Nina did in the extract below:

> Nina: I'm used to charity work. I used to help my mother…at the end of the year, they basically draw a children's home…at least per person one outfit…There's a lot of people that their kids leave them there…And usually on Easter, we'll go and we'll, especially old age homes, we'll knock on the doors, ask how many people are there and we'll give them each an Easter egg…When it comes to charity work, that's one of my things that I love. [Extract 47]

Nina first depicted herself as altruistic by repeating, "I'm used to charity work" and "when it comes to charity work, that's one of my things that I love." Nina positioned her benevolent acts towards children against the backdrop of sexually abusing her 13-month-old daughter. She embedded herself within a moral family system that was accustomed to caring for the needs of vulnerable others, such as children and the elderly. She achieved this by referencing her mother in her charity work, "I used to help my mother", and she referred to "we" and "us" in the extract. By contextualising themselves within morally valued systems, offenders supported their claims of fleeting criminality and constructions of goodness. She also spoke about her charitable acts towards the elderly in her community: "we'll give them each an Easter egg." She presented herself as compassionate for the vulnerable in society found in "children's homes" and "old age home" because "their kids leave them there", providing basic needs like "clothes" and luxuries like "Easter eggs." Nina, therefore, presented herself as bridging the inadequacies of others in society by providing for the needs

of children who were possibly abandoned by their parents, and children that she indicated abandoned their parents. Further to their nurturing roles as child protectors and providers, participants like Neville constructed accounts of their integrous career identities.

> Neville: I'm a very decent guy when it comes to honesty and I wouldn't rob a labourer of his money. Even if I was broke, I rather go home without no money than hold somebody's wages back, you know, I was decent. [Extract 48]

Neville previously detailed persistently deceiving his wives and sexually exploiting women and children by "using" them. In this extract, he mentioned positive attributes in his occupational roles. He characterised himself as, "a very decent guy", mentioning "honesty" and "I wouldn't rob a labourer of his money", repeating, "I was decent." He demonstrated this by relating his actions as an employer, "even if I was broke, I rather go home without no money than hold somebody's wages back." These attributes were presented as contrary to his siblings as he described his sister as "shrewd" and "she's sort of a little bit on the crooked side." He also stated that his brother, "he done me down for a lot."

Some offenders in this study contrasted their roles as abusers and carers. Conversely, others portrayed themselves as abusive people yet effective parents compared to other parents who were not criminally convicted yet inadequate in their parenting roles. Furthermore, through their stories of charitable acts towards vulnerable groups, offenders positioned themselves as morally superior to those in society who apparently abandoned their children and elderly parents. Offenders used these narrative strategies and stories of other altruistic acts to emphasise their superior morality and possibly neutralise the harmful roles they assumed as abusers. These were not presented as random acts of kindness but supposedly

emanated from a valued family system, strengthening their claims of a steadfast moral character.

Narrative scholars explain that individuals create a particular identity (such as a moral identity, in this instance) by interpreting historic experiences and organising narrative accounts of various contextualised roles (Dunlop, 2017; McAdams, 1990; Raggatt, 2006). This creates a narrative arc that convinces the audience that the preferred identity exists. The narrative identity structure model agrees that contextualised roles are woven together to create a generalised narrative impression of the self (Dunlop, 2017). The sex offender relationships framework elucidates how certain roles can justify particular actions, thus creating causal connections between contexts, roles, and behaviours when positioning the personal identity (Navathe & Ward, 2014). Maruna (2001) concurs that desisting offenders mine through historic experiences to reinforce their constructions of a positive self.

Past positive roles, actions, and normative and conventional lifestyles are used to decentralise the deviant crime in the life trajectory and construct it as displaced in the overall thread of normality (Geiger & Fischer, 2017). Offenders in this study mined through their past experiences and emphasised positive roles which they used to placate the salience of their criminality. Offenders diverted attention from their deviance and centralised their morality by constructing accounts that showed how they acted morally superior to others before offending. McAdams (1990) and Raggatt (2006) add that various roles, albeit contradictory or illogical, are interpreted and harmoniously organised to create a sense of synchronicity in the self. This serves to portray a unitary and purposeful self. Concordantly, offenders in this study connected stories in a way that allowed their roles as a nurturer and an abuser to co-exist without causing deterioration of their self-concept. Stories of values and principled actions were also extended to the crime narrative, with offenders detailing moral debates during their offending.

7.3 Demonstrating the moral ambivalence of offending

Contrary to the typical redemptive scripts of offenders (Bullock et al., 2019; Maruna, 2001; Stevens, 2012), the participants in this study did not construct a morally deficient self during the offence period. Instead, they argued for ongoing morality even in the context of criminality by employing narrative strategies such as denial, lacking in criminal intent, a consenting or sexually aware victim, and mutually beneficial sexual encounters to justify their constructions of a steadfast moral character. In addition to drawing on what they presented as nurturing roles and integrous characteristics to preserve their moral identity, offenders positioned their crimes in relationship frames that enabled moral disengagement by framing sex with minors as somewhat beneficial to the victims. This narrative practice was used to minimise the impact of the detriment caused to their victims and allowed offenders to evade taking ownership for causing harm. They told stories of ongoing victim alliances through repaired relationships and forgiveness from their victims to reinforce their characterisations of personal goodness. This supported existing premises that criminality did not occur only in those who failed to develop morally. Instead, their moral judgment was influenced by particular internal and external processes that enabled the offending (D'Urso et al., 2019; Van Vugt et al., 2011; Webster, 2018). For example, Themba claimed that his child victims "ask me sweets or money", which he apparently gave to them in exchange for sex. Neville also mentioned that he paid his child victims for sex, "she wants to have sex and you pay her for it." Leroy spoke of the sexual encounters with his victim in the extract below.

> Leroy: Twice a week, once a week, sometimes the whole week we sleep. That's the thing, she was used to it by now. 'But hey, come let's go, leave everything'. 'I want a cell phone', then I buy the cell phone, I give her. You know when she needed money, I had money, gave her, until she moved out from the flat. [Extract 49]

Leroy portrayed a transactional relationship with his child victim by quoting the victim as saying, “I want a cell phone”, which he provided, “then I buy the cell phone, I give her.” He implied that the victim initiated sex with him by portraying her as directly expressing what she “wants.” He used the words, “we sleep”, which alluded to reciprocity, which he also implied by mentioning the frequency of the sexual encounters as occurring “twice a week, once a week, sometimes the whole week we sleep.” He strengthened his argument of a transactional relationship of mutual gain by speaking of her needs which he met, “when she needed money, I had money, gave her.” Leroy created the impression of a lover-partner relationship by mentioning the frequency of the sexual encounters and normalised sex with the victim by stating, “she was used to it by now”, constructing the sex as transactional and the relationship as reciprocal. The sexual abuse was positioned as a fair exchange between him, who desired sex, and the victim, who wanted money and items which he supposedly provided. Representing children as sexual beings implied that they were sexually aware, capable of making informed decisions about engaging in sex, desired sex, and benefitted from it. Seemingly, Leroy implied a willing and consenting victim and displaced responsibility for the crime to her actions and behaviours. By contextualising their crimes in transactional relationships with a willing victim, offenders trivialised the harm caused to the victims who were presented as benefitting from and condoning the sexual abuse, thereby invalidating their criminal capacity. In the extract below, Anton related a teacher-student role in showing his victim a video of sexual acts.

> Anton: I did show her, but the reason I showed her was she nagged me and I thought better to go and look into bestiality and just now she sees something else, let me rather just show her. [Extract 50]

Anton was convicted for showing pornographic content to his child victim. He initially constructed a caregiver-child relationship with his victim, "Taylor [the victim] and I were like grandfather-granddaughter." In the extract above, he said, "I did show her", portraying himself as honest and transparent about what he did with the victim. He justified his actions by stating, "the reason I showed her was she nagged me", presenting his crime as unplanned and spontaneous while implying that the crime of showing the victim a sex video occurred because of her insistence. Anton portrayed a teacher-student role by explaining, "I thought better to go and look into bestiality and just now she sees something else, let me rather just show her." In this instance, he seemingly justified the criminal act as educational and to protect her, a narrative which he contrasted to stories of his father's shortcomings of inadequately teaching him about sex. Therefore, Anton positioned himself in the caregiver-child and teacher-student relationship frames with his child victim. Similarly, Ian explained that his behaviour was not predatory, constructing a lover-partner relationship with his minor daughter whom he raped.

> Ian: The sex and things that I had with Lani [the victim], I can remember at the end it became more regularly. It wasn't just once or twice in a week…we had something like a relationship. [Extract 51]

Like Leroy, Ian related the sexual abuse as a regular and ordinary activity they both became accustomed to. He achieved this by mentioning the frequency of the abuse as occurring "regularly" and "it wasn't just once or twice in a week." He also referred to the sexual encounters as "the sex and things that I had with Lani" instead of using terms like "rape" or "sexual abuse", thus deflating the severity of the harm endured by the victim. The

sexual abuse was portrayed as emanating from a romantic relationship which was mutually desirable by stating, “we had something like a relationship.” This enabled him to construct accounts through which he diffused responsibility for the deviance of his actions by attributing a willingness and maturity to the victim. Offenders in this study, therefore, echoed narratives identified as offence-supportive beliefs in other studies, such as ‘children are sexual beings’; ‘sex is not harmful to children’; ‘uncontrollability’; ‘dangerous world’; and ‘entitlement’ (Abel et al., 1984; Gannon et al., 2008; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Ward & Siegert, 2002; Ward et al., 2006).

Offenders commonly used moral disengagement to reframe typically immoral acts as having a moral underpinning through acts of moral justification, euphemistic labelling, displacement or diffusion of responsibility, and disregarding or distorting the consequences of their crimes (D’Urso et al., 2019). In this study, moral disengagement was facilitated through the sex offender relationship frames of the lover-partner, teacher-student, and caregiver-child (Navathe & Ward, 2014). These relationship frames were commonly represented in the crime narratives of offenders who implied an emotional bond of care and support that was presented as beneficial to their allegedly consenting and willing victims. Some offenders, like Anton and Tamara, presented idealised depictions of themselves as caring, responsive parents to the child victims, and others, like Leroy and Themba, claimed that the children benefitted from the sexual encounters through desired exchanges. This defended and positioned the sexual abuse as transactional and inoffensive to the victims and, therefore, not immoral.

Participants often constructed tensions around their decision to offend, which were presented as preceded by a complex inner dialogue and not simply driven by pleasure-seeking behaviours with desirable outcomes. Hence, the narratives in this study demonstrated that offenders engaged in offence-opposing behaviours, refuting that criminals were completely driven by faulty belief systems (Szumski et al., 2018). They also described the

bleakness surrounding their help-seeking attempts, partly diffusing blame to societal constraints and their systems for their (re)offending. Ian narrated how he tried to stop abusing his daughters but failed.

> Ian: I realised I had to stop, I must do something about this. But where do I go? And I wanted to go to see a pastor but then I'm, 'No I cannot go and see the pastor.' I wanted to go and see a social worker or a psychologist. 'No, you can't go there because if you speak about it they will lock you up', and that is the truth, they have to. Because there's no place where you can go for help without getting arrested. And I needed the help because I wanted help at that stage. So, it's also within myself I try to withdraw myself from those things but it's like an addiction, you addicted to these things. [Extract 52]

Ian portrayed an inner tension from offending, a struggle between acknowledging the wrongfulness of his actions and a sense of uncontrollability that he felt powerless against. He accomplished this by first mentioning his awareness of his wrongdoings, "I realised I had to stop, I must do something about this." He implied desperately wanting to stop abusing his daughters, "I needed the help because I wanted help." Constructions of helplessness and isolation followed this by him stating, "but where do I go?", concluding that, "there's no place where you can go for help without getting arrested." Then he presented the debate of options for help versus the implications of disclosing the abuse, which ended in him talking himself out of seeking help, "and I wanted to go to see a pastor but then I'm, No I cannot go and see the pastor. I wanted to go and see a social worker or a psychologist. No, you can't go there because if you speak about it they will lock you up." Ian presented the sexual abuse as uncontrollable by mentioning his futile efforts to stop abusing his children, "I try to withdraw

myself from those things but it's like an addiction, you addicted to these things." The mention of "addiction" positioned his deviance as pathological instead of criminal, thereby alluding to impaired criminal capacity.

Despite the use of neutralisation techniques such as a willing victim, offenders in this study (and others) indicated that they attempted to cease the abuse without much success (Dollinger, 2018; Geiger & Fischer, 2017; Maruna, 2001; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Wortley et al., 2019). Attempts to cease the abuse were depicted as futile, and their powerlessness is presented as exacerbated by society's apparent inadequacies to curb sexual abuse. In these constructions, offenders portrayed themselves as morally aware and conflicted while offending, thus refuting notions of temporary immorality during offending. This demonstration of morality extended into their post-offence periods as they narrated accounts of personal suffering and distress that they attributed to their offensive actions. In extract 29, Themba presented himself as suffering every night from the harm caused to the child victims he raped. Similarly, Bianca, who denied offending, also presented herself as sympathetic towards the victims of her crime by mentioning, "I'm very sorry for what happened to these girls." Offenders claimed that the sexual encounters were not simply pleasurable for them. In addition to constructions of psychological conflicts around their decisions to offend, they narrated accounts of personal sufferings that resulted from their offending actions. Derick listed the subjective effects of raping his daughter:

> Derick: Now, after having that, realising that it was wrong, I take almost seven to eight months not eating very well. My legs start swelling and all that, then tried to take my life, trying to maybe to see that I can make something that the police can kill me. [Extract 53]

Derick started by acknowledging that his actions were deviant by saying, “realising that it was wrong.” Then, he listed this realisation’s impact on him, “I take almost seven to eight months not eating very well. My legs start swelling and all that.” He presented the magnitude of the impact as extreme by stating, “tried to take my life, trying to maybe to see that I can make something that the police can kill me.” This created the impression that the wrongfulness of his actions was so unbearable for him that death seemed like the only way to rid himself of the “pain.” In this account, Derick positioned himself as the victim in his offending context, eliciting sympathy instead of contempt. This also suggested that he perhaps endured sufficient punishment for offending.

While sex and sexual perpetration bear connotations of pleasure and enjoyment for offenders, participants in this study presented themselves as having feelings of shame, guilt, and distress. The accounts of anguish they constructed from their harmful actions were portrayed as so intense that they preferred death, and apparently attempted to kill themselves or be killed. Hence, they constructed counter arguments to the sexual activities being pleasurable for them. Offenders positioned themselves as moral people by constructing a moral conscience before the offence and a guilty conscience after the offence, which they presented as causing ongoing distress and suffering (Da Costa et al., 2014). Offenders typically used these narrative strategies to oppose macro narratives of immorality, criminality, and perversion to demonstrate their constant moral integrity (Bullock et al., 2019; Gannon et al., 2012; Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Wortley et al., 2019). The moral identity was possibly employed to disguise ongoing criminality or to ‘make good’ and refrain from crime.

Participants narrated ongoing positive relationships with their child victims. They depicted their victims as affirming their value by continuing to support them. They created the impression of a resolution by portraying their relationships with their victims as one of

their many conversion stories. They depicted themselves as continuing to protect their victims against further abuse. Although Tamara and Nina denied sexually abusing their daughters, Tamara stated that her daughters visited her in the correctional centre. Nina mentioned that her daughter is "curious" about her and "wants to meet me." Anton also alluded to the victim of his offence recently "trying to get hold of me…on Facebook." Ian stated, "my children has forgiven me", describing a "better relationship…more like a father-daughter relationship." Derick spoke of his post-offence relationship with his daughter in the extract below:

> Derick: Happiness [the victim], she says to me, 'Father, whatever is happening, I forgive you and I love you…I love you because I do understand why was happening'. [Extract 54]

In this extract, Derick suggested that his daughter forgave him and desired a relationship with him. He strengthened this statement by quoting his daughter as saying, "father, whatever is happening I forgive you and I love you", repeating the words "I love you." He maintained his position in the caregiver-child relationship frame by quoting his daughter as referring to him as "father." He created the idealistic impression that his daughter absolved him of guilt by saying, "I do understand why was happening", presenting her as justifying the sexual abuse. Hence, through his constructions of his daughter's narrative, Derick furthered the concept of a victim alliance instead of alienation which is expected of a victim-perpetrator relationship.

Adopting these frames of socially adaptive roles allowed caregivers to maintain their identities as nurturers to their victims. They achieved this by presenting stories of forgiveness by, and representations of ongoing relationships with, their (now adult) child victims. This

also created the impression of consistency in the 'nurturer, not abuser' narrative. Offenders portrayed their victims as either trying to protect them from being convicted or suggesting that they (the victim) initiated contact after the offence occurred to rebuild relationships. In this way, participants implied a victim alliance instead of alienation, strengthening their arguments of a moral self. This could also be a strategy to resist blame by suggesting that the victims pardoned their transgressions. This neutralisation technique was used to reconcile the conflicting realities of their deviance and their claims of morality (Geiger & Fischer, 2017; Maruna, 2001). However, in doing so, they appeared to romanticise and minimise their offending behaviours.

According to Maruna's (2001) theory of 'making good', redemptive scripts are characterised by the ongoing defence of a moral identity that has apparently always been present but was temporarily suppressed. Their redemption from criminality does not result in a new identity but a restoration of their positive identities that have been constant. Correspondingly, studies on redemptive offender narratives usually attest to the re-emergence or restoration of the moral self that was temporarily weakened or absent during offending (Bullock et al., 2019; Maruna, 2001; Stevens, 2012). These stories are ordered to depict a turning point that creates a dualism between the pre- and post-offence periods to demonstrate moral redemption (Presser, 2010). On the contrary, offenders in this study did not dichotomise their accounts of morality with their criminality. Instead, they constructed a continuously steadfast moral identity even while offending. Polarisations between the pre-offending and post-offending selves were to show improved coping and positive contributions but not to contrast the presence or absence of deviance. This demonstrated how offenders' seemingly romanticised accounts of their criminality created a thread of morality that resulted in outcomes such as victim reconciliation, improved coping, and generative actions instead of ongoing criminal cognitions or actions. Hence, offenders demonstrated

how they 'make good' through exaggerated accounts of transformation, goodness, and morality.

In addition, they discursively countered their antisocial actions with stories of their moral actions across the lifespan, positioning their deviance as morally conflicted even as it occurred. The redeemed identity was not depicted as a moral makeover, and criminality was not presented as immorality in this study. Instead, offenders created a sense of continuity in their moral being through their constructions of moral tensions while offending rather than a dualism in their morality between their pre- and post-offence periods. Hence, constructions of the consistently moral self afforded the continuity in identity required to depict the self as an integrated and unified being, perhaps strengthening the believability of their moral capabilities. Also, their criminal convictions were interpreted through a spiritual lens of 'purpose'. This neutralised their criminal identities and fostered continuity in their moral identity.

7.4 Positioning incarceration as 'God's plan'

Irrespective of whether participants denied offending or not, they related stories that indicated a sense of predestination to imprisonment. By attributing the cause of their criminality to a force that was beyond their ability to resist, they implied a lack of volition and powerlessness in their criminality, which allowed them to diffuse responsibility for offending. Through these constructions, offenders created the impression that irrespective of how good they were, they would have the same criminal outcomes because it was pre-planned for their lives. This could serve to persuade others that they were not necessarily depraved but were certainly navigated towards incarceration. These spiritual attributions also eliminated the possibility that they were not meant to be incarcerated and that their sentencing was a haphazard event that should not have occurred. This buffered the rupture caused by their crimes by reducing the disjoint between their pre- and post-offence periods. It

also allowed offenders to integrate their criminal identities into their lives without completely discarding it. More importantly, offenders seemed to create a sense of continuity in their life's purpose by interpreting their criminal outcomes as part of their fate. As Leroy explained:

> Leroy: God had a purpose for me to come to prison…It's been pre-planned already for me to come here but I may needed to know more about myself in here than outside…It's where now I started to know me. [Extract 55]

Leroy presented his incarceration as inevitable and unavoidable by stating, "God had a purpose for me to come to prison", repeating, "it's been pre-planned already for me to come here." He elaborated on the purpose of his incarceration being, "I may needed to know more about myself in here than outside." He concluded, "it's where now I started to know me." This positive outcome implied that his purpose of change had been achieved, alluding to his readiness to be released from the correctional facility. He, therefore, implied that his sexually deviant actions were only partly responsible for his conviction and sentencing. By stating that his incarceration was purposeful, he positioned his incarceration as a positive occurrence in his life trajectory despite its negative impact as an isolated incident in the life story. Constructing accounts of predestination to incarceration allowed Leroy to reframe an adverse life event optimistically as being of redemptive value that contributed to his transformation and unique purpose. Bianca also described a sense of helplessness in God bringing her to the correctional centre.

> Bianca: It's a path that God chose for me. I can do nothing about it. [Extract 56]

Unlike Anton and Leroy, Bianca did not portray herself as spiritually inclined when she was sentenced. However, she also attributed her incarceration to God's purpose for her life. She did this by stating, "it's a path that God chose for me." This implied that her incarceration was not due to her deliberate actions or deviance, it was "chosen" for her. This positioned her crime as unavoidable and herself as powerless against redirecting her life trajectory, as she continued to explain, "I can do nothing about it."

Jenna also explained in the extract below how "the Lord" planned their incarceration, despite their innocence, for personal transformation and to use them to help others.

> Jenna: I think maybe that's why the Lord decided to take us through this because I think somewhere along the line maybe we just lost perspective of what is important to us…I think for both of us it's about helping other people. [Extract 57]

Like Leroy and Anton, Jenna narrated that she and her husband were actively involved in their church at the time of their sentencing. Nonetheless, she presented them as missing God's purpose for their life while they were outside by stating, "I think somewhere along the line maybe we just lost perspective of what is important to us" and she concluded, "that's why the Lord decided to take us through this." She implied that they were incarcerated to realign their life's plans and activities with their overall purpose. Jenna extended the purpose of her incarceration from being for her and her family to being necessary for her to help others too. She did this by claiming that her criminality will be used to advance the lives of others by helping them live more meaningful lives. She achieved this by mentioning, "I think for both of us it's about helping other people." This exemplified how offenders narratively converted their criminality into tales of transformation that they portrayed as creating opportunities for them to positively impact the lives of others.

Ordinarily, the crime would create a sense of discontinuity in their life's purpose and lead to identity deterioration. However, their spiritual interpretations of the crime being 'God-purposed' defended their moral self-representations and enabled identity growth instead of deterioration. Arguably, denying a criminal identity was not enough to maintain a positive identity externally. Through stories of spirituality, offenders neutralised the threat that the crime posed to their personal identity by integrating it into the life story as purposeful and ordained. This is consistent with the literature on narrative identity constructions in which causal connections are used to interpret experiences and behaviours (Maruna, 2001; Pals, 2006). It was also a narrative practice that reconstructed discontinuities and repaired fragmentation in the lifespan to create a sense of order and meaning from the rupture.

Spiritual causal connections were used in this study to narratively reconstruct moral identities after criminality disrupted the life course. This enabled the past self to align with the present and anticipated future selves. Reframing disparate experiences as purposed and not haphazard or unrelated allowed the narrator to achieve a sense of synchronicity in their identity by eliminating the contradiction that just the crime would create (Baddeley & Singer, 2007; Pals, 2006). Evidently, offenders in this study demonstrated a continuous moral identity from their past roles and actions to their spiritually ordained crimes to maintain their life's purpose. Constructions of their moral identities were extended into their carceral contexts and anticipated futures, demonstrating how their roles and choices in the correctional facility and future plans were to benefit others.

7.5 Portraying post-offence stories of goodness

Most offenders depicted their incarceration as having growth-promoting impacts on their identities. This was achieved by presenting roles they apparently assumed in influencing positive change, such as nurturers and mentors to offenders, stabilising agents who maintained peace in the correctional centre, and complying with carceral rules. These

constructions of positive roles and values were extended into generative plans. Hence, they maintained their positions within the goodness framework through stories of future benevolence. They narratively constructed a prosocial character by contrasting accounts of their superior personal attributes and actions to other inmates. Their humaneness in the correctional facility was often emphasised. For example, Themba explained that he protected juvenile offenders against sexual abuse by other predatory inmates by "reporting it to the cops." Tamara described herself as a "prison mother" who assumed nurturing roles to vulnerable inmates. Derick positioned himself as a "mentor" to younger offenders. In extract 33, Charlotte told stories of altruism towards other inmates. In the extract below, Bianca explained her interaction with other offenders:

> Bianca: It's so nice for me inside here, for all the young kids, especially the juveniles, the little girls. They drink disinfectant or they make *mbamba* that's a alcohol they make out of bread. I like going to them and sitting with them and talking to them about God, telling them…'make sure that you make the right choices, don't do the same mistakes that I did'. 90% of them are here for theft because of drugs. I've been clean 13 years. [Extract 58]

This story of advising and mentoring "young kids", "juveniles", and "little girls" is set against the background of her conviction for the sexual abuse of her partner's teenage nieces. This portrayed her as being of benefit and not harm to a group of individuals that would typically resemble the victims of her crime. She positioned herself as morally superior to them by detailing, "they drink disinfectant or they make *mbamba* that's a alcohol they make out of bread", as opposed to, "I've been clean 13 years." Bianca constructed an account of personal transformation, which she then used to help the "juveniles", "I like going to them

and sitting with them and talking to them", encouraging them to "make the right choices" and "don't do the same mistakes that I did." In this excerpt, Bianca presented herself as morally restored, harmless towards children, being of benefit to younger girls, and morally superior to other inmates. Through this seemingly exaggerated narrative of transformation, Bianca presented personal changes that benefitted her and others whom she tried to influence positively. Offender studies on redemptive identities explain that offenders mention acts as wounded healers, stabilising agents, and peacekeepers to strengthen their attestations to being assets and not hindrances (Herbert, 2018; Maruna, 2001). Offenders also substantiated their ongoing morality through compliance with carceral rules and lack of deviance, as Ian explained in the extract below.

> Ian: I walked a straight path like this from when I came into prison…I never lost my A-group. You will lose it if you do something wrong, if they caught you with, if you fight or do something wrong. [Extract 59]

The preceding chapter discussed how offenders portrayed the correctional environment as unsafe and in which it was difficult to foster positive behaviours. Despite constructions of a precarious and unpredictable environment, Ian portrayed himself as well-behaved, compliant, and prosocial in this extract. He accomplished this by stating, "I walked a straight path like this from when I came into prison." He explained, "I never lost my A-group", a classification which correctional officials provided for complying with the correctional centre's rules, and "you will lose it if you do something wrong", proving that he never did anything wrong "from when I came into prison." In other stories, Ian described his efforts to root out criminality and corruption in the correctional centre by "complaining" about it to the "authorities." He juxtaposed himself to other inmates who "still do the wrong

things." Offenders constructed an overall prosocial identity by emphasising their stories of progress, empowerment, and hope. Through the construction of carceral identities that positively influenced rather than corrupted, offenders defended their moral identity within the carceral environment (Dollinger, 2018; Geiger & Fischer, 2017; Herbert, 2018; Rowe, 2011). Therefore, they presented themselves as aligned with prosocial norms and unlike antisocial criminals. Nina also distinguished herself from other inmates:

> Nina: I am more mature than people that are almost twice my age in prison because they don't think…if you do something wrong you must expect there's gonna be consequences. And a lot of them don't see that. My mind works differently than theirs. [Extract 60]

Nina distinguished herself from other inmates by stating, "I am more mature than people that are almost twice my age in prison." This difference was based on her attribution that "my mind works differently than theirs." She elaborated on the differences by giving examples like, "they don't think…if you do something wrong you must expect there's gonna be consequences", portraying them as being unaware of consequences because "a lot of them don't see that." Therefore, Nina positioned herself as prosocial and the opposite of offenders by contrasting her maturity and consideration for consequences to other inmates. Bamberg (2012) explains that individuals navigate the sameness-difference realm to create division or unity between themselves and others to enable shifting between social categories. Hence, it seemed that participants in this study reconstructed their moral identities by distancing themselves from inmates and, therefore, criminality.

Offenders maintained a prosocial identity by employing this narrative practice of contrasting their esteemed characters and other inmates' typical deviance. They also created

hierarchies of immorality between offenders to prove that they were relatively moral to criminals (Dollinger, 2018; Geiger & Fischer, 2017; Rowe, 2011). Identity construction through storied life experiences created synchronicity in the self and a unique purpose from others (Dunlop, 2017; McAdams, 2018). Thus, offenders in this study reconstructed their moral identities and proved their redemption by disassociating with typical criminality in their carceral context and aligning with the morals of society. Their alignment with the values of normative society was reinforced by presenting views that detest child sexual abuse. Jenna explained her views on child sexual abuse:

> Jenna: I get very angry when I hear about stuff like that over the radio or on the news or wherever you read it in the newspapers. I really get angry about that because it's a child, it's an innocent child. [Extract 61]

Jenna portrayed herself as vehemently opposed to child sexual abuse by repeating, "I get very angry when I hear about stuff like that" and "I really get angry about that." She presented herself as compassionate towards children by explaining that her anger was because "it's a child, it's an innocent child." Jenna refuted any link to child sexual abusers by constructing it as distant from her contexts, which she only encountered indirectly "over the radio or on the news or wherever you read it in the newspapers." In doing so, she positioned herself within moral and not criminal systems.

Lastly, accounts of future generativity through benevolence strengthened their construction of moral identities integrated from the past into the present and future identities. In the previous chapter, Tamara positioned herself as a child protector by narrating how she tried to safeguard her children from abuse, how she tried to protect children in her community from abuse, and how she will continue to protect them indirectly by empowering their

mothers to prevent child abuse. Offenders also expressed how they intended to contribute to society through job creation and prevention of child sexual abuse. In doing so, they discursively demonstrated their moral alignment with society, like offenders in documented studies of redemptive identities (Bullock et al., 2019; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012).

7.6 Conclusion

In addition to narratively constructing redemptive identities of growth from adversity, offenders also related stories of personal morality. They achieved this by presenting themselves as child protectors and not intentional abusers, who still despised child sexual abuse. They emphasised their moral identities by drawing on positive roles they assumed, narratively splitting off their criminal identities and positioning the prosocial ones. This narrative strategy was to morally distance themselves from their offending and represent themselves as normal, caring people, thereby constructing prosocial identities.

They highlighted their roles across various contexts and throughout their lifespan to portray themselves as consistently principled and moral. The moral identity was the golden thread across their life experiences and events which created a sense of continuity and temporal coherence in their life story. Criminal events were positioned in the life story as fleeting acts of weakness, not by absolute choice but by God's predestination for their lives, hence presenting themselves as powerless against supernatural forces that purposed their incarceration. Stories of moral ambivalence and inner dialogues characterised their criminal scripts, and they defended their actions even in the context of their crimes. They constructed accounts of current goodness through presentations of their altruistic roles in the correctional facility and their intended generative actions. Through their moral identities, offenders positioned themselves as realigned with normative society and against criminal offenders whom they struggled to relate to.

Narratives of redemption and prevailing moral identities created the impression that offenders romanticised their offending behaviours with exaggeratedly positive outcomes, such as being valuable to their victims, families, carceral community, and society. Maruna (2001) suggests that narrative practices such as exaggerations of transformation and inflations of morality, romanticised accounts, and neutralisation strategies enabled offenders to desist from crime and construct a positive sense of self that could be realigned to normative society. However, these discourses could also be used to disguise ongoing criminality. Offenders in this study constructed seemingly exaggerated accounts of transformation and morality, yet they also narrated how they utilised their growth and learnings to contribute to the lives of others instead of continuing with criminal pursuits. Hence, they demonstrated how they enacted the prosocial identities that they attested to.

Understandably, the reader would struggle to reconcile the image of a brutal criminal who violated vulnerable children in the most unthinkable ways with a romanticised account of their life stories of victimhood from which they emerged morally superior. While the dominant discourse of the dangerous offender perpetrating an innocent society exists, offenders in this study expressed a shared counter narrative of a dangerous world that could not be trusted, repeatedly transgressed them, and continued to limit their growth and positive efforts. McAdams (2021) explains that stigmatised groups used counter narratives to convert stigma into strength. Nonetheless, they continued to reflect macro narratives that loathed criminality and embraced constructions of positive transformations of morality, caring for children, protecting the vulnerable, and planning benevolent futures. Through constructions of the moral identity, offenders demonstrated that they did not passively confine themselves to their criminal identities. Instead, they constructed accounts that resisted the public discourses of deviance and immorality (Dollinger, 2018; Herbert, 2018). Moral tales were therefore employed as counter narratives to the macro narratives of deviance and immorality,

through which offenders presented themselves as suitable for reintegration into society. The next chapter concludes this thesis with an overview of the study's findings and its possible implications for the rehabilitation and research of child sexual offenders in South Africa.

Chapter 8: Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

8.1 Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a pervasive issue which permeates every level of society (Bougard & Hesselink, 2019; Londt, 2008; McCartan & Richards, 2021; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2022; Ward et al., 2018). It has lasting impacts on victims, offenders, and the various systems in which they exist (Cortoni et al., 2017; Maniglio, 2011; Ward et al., 2018). Although it is imperative to understand the impact of the offence on the child victim, it is just as necessary to explore the untold stories of the offenders to inform the prevention of this social ill (Dastile, 2013; Londt, 2008; McLeod, 2015; Presser, 2010). South African experts argue that the crime recidivism rate is perpetuated by the ineffectiveness of generic rehabilitation programmes rendered to diverse criminal offenders (Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018; Murhula & Singh, 2019; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014; Steyn & Booyens, 2017). As a practitioner in the field of criminal rehabilitation in South Africa, I agree that focused studies are needed to understand the personalised accounts and contexts of child sexual offending. Indeed, effective and competent practice is informed by empirical research and evidence-based theories, the lack of which results in significant ethical dilemmas in rendering these services - the dilemma faced by practitioners working with child sexual offenders in South Africa.

Therefore, this research study was designed to contribute to the prevention of child sexual abuse by exploring offenders' constructions of the contexts and factors that they present as contributing to their criminal trajectories and supporting crime rehabilitation. Primarily, this study explores how child sexual offenders in South Africa construct stories to make meaning of their life experiences and events. It is premised that offenders' life stories and identity constructions would facilitate a holistic conceptualisation of criminal desistance or persistence. This information can inform the most effective rehabilitation interventions for child sexual offenders. In addition to prosocial identity (re)constructions, it is premised that

effective mental health treatment would support behavioural change in offenders as studies report an association between redemptive identities and improved mental health indicators (Maniglio, 2011; Maruna & Liem, 2021; McAdams, 2018; Steyn & Hall, 2015).

This chapter presents a concise summary of the findings discussed in the previous chapters and the implications of these findings for future research and practice with child sexual offenders. The study's methodological strengths and limitations are then reflected on, followed by recommendations for future research with child sexual offenders. As a co-creator of the narratives presented in this study, it is essential to consider the influence of my research narrative and experiences as a psychologist on the conclusions and recommendations presented in the following sections.

8.2 Summary of the research findings

The presentation of the study's findings in this section incorporates a response to the research questions from which the research design and processes emanated.

- ***What narrative practices do offenders utilise to construct and reconstruct their personal identity?***

In accordance with McAdams's (1990) theory of narrative identity, this study showed evidence for using stories to construct the sense of self. These stories are woven together to create a plot of continuity and purpose across their lifespan. In addition, offenders narratively reconstructed discontinuities in their life stories and repaired fragmentation caused by their crimes to demonstrate identity transformation and growth. The emergence of an inflated transformed identity was used to persuade the audience of their realignment with normative society from which they have been ostracised and deemed deviant. All offenders in this study chronologically plotted their life stories, setting the scene for sequence, order, and purpose in the unfolding trajectory. Similar to offender identity studies, the life stories in this study followed a redemptive script in which the narrator contrasted contaminating sequences of

victimisation by a dangerous world with progressive accounts which were enabled by their individual efforts and spiritual pursuits (Bullock et al., 2019; Herbert, 2018; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011).

Offenders first presented their historic life events, incidents, and experiences as adverse, which they linked to the emergence of their criminality. Criminal actions were defended as coping mechanisms for their adverse experiences. They narratively shifted from the position of offender to the position of victim by portraying their crimes as a result of their own victimisation. Through these constructions, offenders decentralised the harm they caused by diverting attention to their sufferings instead. Research on female sexual offenders suggests that the criminal pathways of females differed considerably from those of males (Burgess-Proctor et al., 2017; Comartin et al., 2018; Gannon et al., 2008; Levenson et al., 2015; McLeod, 2015; Murhula & Singh, 2019; Steyn & Hall, 2015; Venalainen, 2018; Ward et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2019). This is attributed to their unique life experiences of social and psychological impacts that shaped their offending behaviour practices; experiences to which males were supposedly less exposed. However, the male offenders in this study presented their own unique set of social and psychological impacts that were related as no less traumatic than those of female offenders. Both male and female participants related stories of psychological vulnerability, ongoing distress, and past dysfunctions that precipitated their criminal process. Hence, offenders echoed a discourse of psychopathology over a gendered narrative of child sexual abuse, with the outcomes of child sexual abuse by male and female offenders being positioned as equally detestable and punishable. The preferred narrative of psychologising perpetration instils a sense of hope for resolution, whereas gendering perpetration creates a more stable and enduring dysfunction.

Numerous references were made to their humaneness and vulnerability by narrating accounts of their birth into hostile contexts, inadequate parents, perpetual adversity, ongoing

traumas and distress, and fears of rejection by society. Attributing cause to former adversities were interpretive practices used by offenders to sequence and make meaning of events to achieve a sense of identity coherence and continuity across time. Offenders externalised the cause for their criminality to hostile others or their spiritual fate to neutralise the consequences of the harm caused and ultimately foster a prosocial identity. Further neutralisation techniques such as denial of offending, lacking in criminal intent, a consenting or sexually aware victim, the creation of relationship frames to justify offending as mutually beneficial sexual encounters, and moral ambivalence featured in the narratives of offenders. Offenders employed these narrative practices to evade their criminal identity and its impact on others and support their constructions of a moral identity. This finding is consistent with offender studies in which individuals coherently constructed a moral identity (Geiger & Fischer, 2017; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011).

In addition to guarding against the stigmatised criminal identity, offenders employed various narrative practices to counter their criminality with moral tales, such as personal stories of transformation, valued past and present roles, benevolent future ideals, spiritual awakenings, moral distancing from criminal offenders, and steadfast morality. Through their seemingly idealised accounts of transformation, offenders emphasised their prosocial identities instead of ongoing criminality. Furthermore, this study proposes that the spiritual identity was positioned to integrate the duality created by the conflicting criminal and moral identities. Constructions of the spiritual identity seemingly neutralised the effects of the criminal identity on their personal identity, simultaneously strengthening their claims of the moral identity. This resulted in identity growth instead of deterioration that a criminal identity would ordinarily create. Hence, spirituality was depicted as an essential feature of the transformed self, enabling offenders to present themselves as prosocial beings.

A significant finding of this research is that offenders constructed a counter narrative to the dominant discourse of an absolutely innocuous world that they monstrously perpetrated as morally depraved antisocial beings. This was achieved by juxtaposing their humaneness and vulnerability with the hostile world that they were supposedly subjected to; a world that was narrated as influencing their criminal outcomes. Moral tales and stories of personal change through the resolution of past dysfunctions were used to support their claims of transformation. McAdams (1990) premises that the redemptive self is a reflection of the master narrative of a protagonist defined by stories of achievement and self-actualisation. This study adds that the redemptive template in the correctional context is of resilient and moral tales - tales of heroic transformation and differentiation of the self from immoral criminals. Therefore, this study suggests that through the constructions and reconstructions of their life stories, offenders presented themselves as realigned with the norms and values of mainstream society. This served to demonstrate their successful rehabilitation and readiness for reintegration into society. The transformation stories of offenders also distinguished between factors they portrayed as enabling change versus barriers they overcame to become their desired selves.

- ***What are the key elements in desistance narratives?***

Offenders' narratives demonstrated the interactional relationship between external forces and individual factors that created the criminal and the transformed identity, as noted in the literature (Best et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2019; Herbert, 2018; King, 2013; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012). In addition to their psychological strengths, offenders listed the following as positive contributors towards their personal change: spirituality; supportive family members; psychologists and social workers; counselling services; the development of talents and skills in correctional facilities; assuming trusted roles; nurturing and mentoring other inmates; opportunities to influence positive change; being affirmed and

encouraged by correctional officials; and chances to engage in benevolent future roles in society. Offenders listed the following as posing external barriers to behavioural reform: hostile family relations; apathetic and corrupt correctional officials; negative labelling by correctional staff; dangerous correctional centres rife in gangsterism and violence; contraband such as drugs and pornography in correctional centres; inhumane and punitive carceral rules and conditions; lack of physical resources and basic amenities in correctional centres; societal rejection and distrust; and lack of opportunities in society to maintain positive changes. Individuals revealed how they endured multiple structural constraints that would ordinarily inhibit agentic actions of identity reconstruction, yet they portrayed themselves as persevering to self-correct and self-empower. Thus, these findings suggest that individual resilience was framed as greater than external barriers to change.

Narrative studies on offenders' accounts of redemption depict identity reconstruction as individual agency that is conditioned by structural realities that can either enable or debilitate transformation and the emergence of positive identities in offenders (Best et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2019; King, 2013; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012; Stone, 2016). In this study, offenders qualitatively delineated more barriers to rehabilitation than enablers. Accordingly, rehabilitation and criminal desistance were positioned as deliberate and dynamic acts driven by one's own agency and motivation. External factors did not simplistically control transformation, although these factors were portrayed as interacting with internal functions to bring about positive changes. When faced with structural barriers that were presented as threats to their individual agency for change, offenders portrayed themselves as redefining their social roles or identifying with various social roles that resulted in positive evaluations of the self, such as a 'Christian' which is more socially acceptable than a 'criminal'. Furthermore, offenders narratively distanced themselves from

the likeness of other inmates, criminality, and what they described as the deviant Department of Correctional Services's culture.

Indeed, the effectiveness of rehabilitation in the Department of Correctional Services is generally met with suspicion due to overpopulated and understaffed correctional facilities, the prevalence of contraband, gangsterism, violence, and the high recidivism rate in ex-offenders. Hence, research participants might have echoed a macro narrative of ineffective rehabilitation interventions in South Africa when they listed the well-known structural barriers to transformation in local correctional facilities. They contrasted this to their individual rehabilitation by detailing their personal efforts towards positive change, which they apparently achieved, thereby justifying their belonging in society as opposed to being incarcerated. These constructions of the morally aware self often appeared exaggerated and romanticised, practices that offenders used for impression management and ultimately to demonstrate that they were transformed positively enough to benefit society. The value of these identity (re)constructions to rehabilitating and treating child sexual offenders in South Africa will now be discussed.

8.3 Implications of the research findings

In addition to the theoretical insights discussed in the preceding section, this study aims to contribute towards the rehabilitation and psychological treatment approaches for child sexual offenders in South Africa. This section sets out to answer the following research question:

- ***How can the storied experiences of constructing identities inform context-relevant rehabilitation programmes and mental health interventions to reduce recidivism rates of child sexual abuse in South Africa?***

The narratives in this study centred on the psychological and external structural factors that offenders identified as having either identity growth or deteriorating impacts. Narrative

authors advise that it is crucial to understand the factors that inhibit or facilitate identity reconstruction and, ultimately, the reformation efforts of criminal offenders (Best et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2019; King, 2013; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012). A significant finding of this study is that child sexual offenders narrated the desire for acceptance and integration into mainstream society. As such, they selectively mined through their past, present, and anticipated future to construct a favourable sense of self that was good and moral; a self that was aligned with normative society and at odds with criminality. It is still important to consider if these positive self-evaluations and trivialising of the criminal identity were used to disguise and reinforce the existence of criminality. Offenders in this study presented themselves as transformed, rehabilitated, and prosocial instead of suggesting the ongoing presence of criminality and deviance. They narratively extended their prosocial identity into their future through accounts of criminal desistance and benevolent contributions towards the wellbeing of the communities they intended to return to.

There was greater emphasis on constructions of their personal strengths and superior attributes than their weaknesses and deviance. These strengths were presented as emanating from their moral identity, which they used to 'make good' through the constructions of their intentions to do good. Narrative identity frameworks assert that these positive aspirations and exaggerated transformative stories are dialectical practices linked to desistance from crime (Geiger & Fischer, 2017; King, 2013; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011). It is postulated that, through the telling of positive stories about the self, individuals are more vested in becoming the version of themselves that they narrated – that is, stories as shapers of reality (Bamberg, 2012; Bruner, 1991; Fay, 1996; Maruna & Liem, 2021; Murray, 2008; Pasupathi, 2006; Presser, 2010).

It is suggested that disclosure-based and confrontational treatment programmes that centralise the criminal identity could exacerbate feelings of shame and humiliation (Blagden

et al., 2020; Geiger & Fischer, 2017; King, 2013; Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Liem, 2021; McCartan & Richards, 2021; Rowe, 2011; Szumski et al., 2018). This most likely results in the internalisation of a criminal identity, which is subsequently enacted. Furthermore, confrontational approaches to sexual offender treatment may create a threatening environment that might mirror the victimisation experienced in their early traumas (Levenson et al., 2015). This might render the encounter countertherapeutic, possibly doing more harm than good. Research suggests that utilising strengths-based approaches to treat sexual offenders results in lower recidivism rates compared to traditional treatment programmes that aim to reduce inherent deficits linked to criminal offending (Levenson et al., 2015; Marshall, 2018; McCartan & Richards, 2021). The basic premise is that enhancing offenders' strengths will equip them with prosocial skills to address the dysfunctions that generally result in offending behaviour.

Based on the findings of this study in which offenders concertedly employed various narrative strategies to construct their moral identity and neutralise forces perceived as threatening to the self, it is postulated that confrontational approaches to rehabilitation might be experienced as judgmental, hostile and, therefore, be rejected by offenders. Such programmes could lead to identity deterioration and deviant scripts associated with persistent criminality. Positive identity constructions and desistance from crime are more likely to occur when the offender feels supported, acknowledged, affirmed, and allowed to discursively realign with the moral systems of normative society (Best et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2019; King, 2013; Maruna, 2001; Rowe, 2011; Stevens, 2012; Stone, 2016). This study proposes that child sexual offenders should be encouraged to construct positive self-stories and centralise prosocial identities that are more likely to be enacted than criminal identities. Individual and group correctional programmes and therapeutic interventions should focus on encouraging offenders to reconstruct narratives of resilience and morality instead of

centralising narratives of deviance and condemnation, in addition to taking ownership for the impact of their criminal acts. In addition to prosocial identity constructions, positive mental health is instrumental to behavioural reform and desistance from crime (Steyn & Hall, 2015).

The long-term psychological impacts of childhood abuse noted in the literature were also highlighted in this study as offenders narrated lasting developmental traumas and ongoing distress from their pre-offence abuse (Cortoni et al., 2017; D'Urso et al., 2019; Heffernan & Ward, 2015; Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Maniglio, 2011; Marshall, 2018; Maruna, 2001; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021; Ward et al., 2018). Thus, implicating early adversities as precipitants and maintainers of criminality, the ongoing presence of which might continue to pose risks for reoffending. The findings of this study did not support the development of gender-specific rehabilitation initiatives for child sexual offenders as the emerging narratives did not show evidence of notable gender contributors to criminality. However, in accordance with most experts, this study agrees that the unique and diverse psychological needs of child sexual offenders were inadequately incorporated into generic correctional programmes in South Africa (Londt, 2008; Murhula & Singh, 2019; Steyn & Hall, 2015). On the contrary, participants in this study expressed that they were able to resolve much of their psychological, sexual, and interpersonal dysfunctions through individual treatment interventions with a psychologist or social worker during their incarceration.

While it is impractical to expect every offender to engage in such individualised treatment programmes due to the shortage of psychologists and social workers in correctional facilities, it remains a key recommendation of this study. This study advises that rehabilitation interventions address unresolved psychological issues and traumas in addition to criminogenic needs as positive mental health is imperative to create and maintain lasting behavioural change. Further possibilities should be explored by the Department of

Correctional Services, such as partnering with non-governmental and private organisations that render such services, consider the employment of registered counsellors, and provide counselling opportunities in correctional centres for students in training. In addition to addressing offenders' mental health needs within corrections, this study recommends proactive mental healthcare to reduce the risks of offending.

Child abuse prevention programmes usually focus on protecting children by raising awareness of the typical sexual predatory or grooming tactics of offenders and the relevant reporting avenues and monitoring structures available to children. As part of this initiative, sexual offenders are only targeted for treatment after they offend to prevent reoffending. Similar to studies on causal pathways to criminality, participants in this study attributed the cause for their criminality to early adversities and unresolved traumas (Hesselink & Booyens, 2016; Hesselink & Jordaan, 2018; Levenson & Socia, 2016; Maniglio, 2011; Naidoo & Sewpaul, 2014; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). This study highlights the importance of directly addressing the factors that contributed to sexually abusing children with individuals in society before they offend. For example, by providing accessible and affordable counselling services to process traumas, facilitating effective skills to cope with distress, and unpacking sexuality. In addition to individual treatment approaches, this study emphasises the significance of systemic interventions to resolve child sexual abuse.

Consistent with other research studies, offenders in this study portrayed harsh carceral conditions as detrimental to them by presenting it as exacerbating existing distress and limiting their growth potential (Stevens, 2012; Steyn & Hall, 2015). All the offenders in this study constructed accounts of difficult carceral conditions, which ranged from depraved physical conditions such as overcrowding to substandard food, harsh punishment from officials, violence, gangsterism, sexual abuse, insufficient family visitation rights, and a general sense of danger. It is advised that the Department of Correctional Services explore

ways to create a safer and more conducive environment for correcting offending behaviour and imparting healthy life skills. For example, offenders might be more equipped to positively transform if given opportunities to assume positive roles in correctional centres, through supportive correctional officials, learning new skills, academic growth, and humanising treatment. Humanising treatment, such as avoiding negative labelling and facilitating personal development, would be more conducive to shaping prosocial behaviour. Hence, external conditions should also be conducive for offenders to improve their mental health and sustain positive behaviours.

The offenders' accounts in this study demonstrated the significance of understanding crime holistically as they narratively embedded their crime in the various systems in which they existed. Studies reveal that there is an interplay between psychological factors, such as negative emotional states, and external conditions, like a lack of societal support, hostile relations, rejection, adversities, and abuse, that contribute to criminality (Crookes et al., 2022; Heffernan & Ward, 2015; Maniglio, 2011; McCartan & Richards, 2021; Szumski et al., 2018; Ward, 2009; Ward & Beech, 2006; Webster, 2018). Individualist approaches have initially dominated the research and treatment landscapes of child sexual abuse, with recent shifts to trying to understand how various external contexts influence offending behaviours. However, the personal responsibility for criminality still lies with the perpetrating individual (Marshall, 2018; Webster, 2018).

This thesis argues that there is a complex interaction between various systems and subsystems across the lifespan from which child sexual offending was presented as emerging, thereby necessitating a holistic approach to its treatment and prevention. Holistic interventions would also entail strengthening family ties and reinforcing support structures for offenders to enable continuation of support when they leave the correctional system. Contrary to crime studies in which offenders described their crimes as a consequence of

moral weakness or being out of control, participants in this study described being morally aware and conflicted while offending (Bullock et al., 2019; Geiger & Fischer, 2017; Stevens, 2012). They presented themselves as engaging in complex inner dialogues of offence-opposing possibilities, implying that they were not impulsively driven to offend. Most offenders explained that they tried to cease the abuse without much success due to a lack of support structures that would not be condemning. Therefore, it is suggested that specific avenues of support and treatment be available for nonoffending individuals in society who consider themselves at risk for sexually abusing children. This could mitigate the possibility of them pursuing their urges or intentions to sexually abuse children.

The offenders in this study varied from biological and foster parents, uncles and aunts, to family friends and strangers. The offenders also varied in socio-economic status, race, gender, and age. Common to all offenders were narratives of inadequate sexual knowledge and awareness. Hence, sex education and child abuse prevention programmes should be present across all communities and within all family and social structures in which children exist. Systemic interventions are also recommended to support ex-offenders' efforts to positively transform and maintain these changes. Amongst these suggestions are: family support; social reintegration initiatives for offenders upon parole placement; adequate opportunities to live a crime-free life in society; and chances to play meaningful roles in society.

While the moral divide between 'us' and 'them' is a psychological mechanism used by society to unify and symbolically safeguard the ingroup from the deviant, it is cautioned that moral denigration and ostracisation could tarnish the wellbeing of criminal offenders and impair their ability to rehabilitate (Dollinger, 2018; Herbert, 2018; McCartan & Richards, 2021; Webster, 2018). McCartan and Richards (2021) highlight the need for multilevel and multidisciplinary approaches, such as community interventions, to enhance awareness about

sexual offenders and impact society's attitudes and willingness towards reintegrating them. This study does not imply that offenders should be absolved of guilt for their crimes or evade responsibility for their destructive actions. Instead, it suggests that individual corrective action should be supported by systemic interventions to address this issue that permeates and impacts every level of society. Despite the valuable contributions of this study's findings to the practice of child sexual offender treatment, there are limitations to the research design and process that should be considered.

8.4 Limitations and Recommendations for future research

Although narrative research methods are essential for representing untold stories and moving stigmatised stories from the peripheries of society, it is cautioned that these methods may also contribute to the social exclusion of research participants (Chase, 2011; Squire et al., 2014). The common caveats to a storied approach have been discussed extensively in Chapter 2 and include: imprecise representation of internal constructs; narrative instability over time and across contexts; influence of social factors such as the researcher on the stories; lack of reliability of testimony due to recall errors and interpretations; and impression management by offenders (Maruna & Liem, 2021). Offenders were recruited only by psychologists and social workers and they were aware that I was a psychologist. This might have influenced a psychologised repertoire, such as the value of counselling, which was consistently depicted across the stories. In some instances, the recruiters were previously involved in the parole consideration process of participants, which may have shaped the transformation narratives that dominated this study's findings. Hence, future studies might elicit a different narrative if participants were recruited by correctional officials instead of psychologists and social workers and the researcher's profession remained anonymous to participants.

In response to these possible limitations, the epistemological stance of this study is that the information gathered was socially constructed, personal interpretations at a given point in time. No claims to 'truth' or 'reality' are made in this study and stories are understood as partial and incomplete. Furthermore, the stories elicited are conceptualised as co-creations between individuals and the various contexts that encapsulate them. These accounts are expected to change as individuals reinterpret and reconstruct the same recollections in different contexts. Thus, the relevance of the stories lies in the meaning it holds for the narrator.

Although I tried to accurately represent the participants' life stories, with the assistance of triangulated visual life stories and a co-coder for the stories, the rigour of the findings could be enhanced in future studies by inviting participants to verify that the narrative themes are fitting representations of their lives. All offenders in this research were incarcerated at a specific point in time, mostly with lengthy sentences, hence their constructions might differ from those sentenced to minimum sentences or never convicted. Although generalisability is not intended by narrative research as the value of the findings lies in rich contextual information (Riessman, 2008), future research could consider expanding the sample size, including correctional centres in outlying areas, and the use of multiple researchers who also vary in demographics. This would elicit diverse stories influenced by varying factors, provide a more comprehensive view of the lives of child sexual offenders, and possibly enhance the transferability of inferences.

The researcher is conceptualised as a co-creator of the stories shared in this study. Consequently, my research narrative, experiences as a psychologist, choice of topic, methodological decisions, lens of interpretation, and interaction with the participants influenced the findings reported in this thesis. The stories elicited would expectedly be unique stories yet resemble the narratives of others. This was evident from the similarities in

the stories shared by this study's participants and the child sexual offenders I encountered as a psychologist in the Department of Correctional Services. As such, this study's conclusions or inferences might be relevant to offenders in other contexts. Still, no claims of criminal desistance can be made by this study as offenders were either incarcerated or strictly monitored by the Department of Correctional Services. Exploring the narratives of desisting and persisting offenders outside of the Department of Correctional Services's authority might be useful to understand the factors necessary to reduce recidivism in South Africa.

Participants attributed their criminality to external adversities against which they were helpless victims. Although this attribution style might be necessary for their stories of transformation, research can be extended to ex-offenders to determine if they can desist despite ongoing adversities and barriers to change. Furthermore, the narratives presented in this study appeared exaggerated in transformation, purpose, and morality. Further studies could explore if narratives of transformation are discursive strategies that enable offenders to cope with their criminal trajectories and create a sense of personal wellbeing yet unrelated to redemption and desistance. Future research could also critically engage with more theories on desistance and rehabilitation, such as the Good Lives Model and the Risk-Needs-Responsivity Model, and its relevance to offenders' narrative constructions. Most of the participants in this study presented their Christian beliefs as instrumental to their rehabilitation. Research studies could explore the impact of other religious or spiritual beliefs on offenders' identity constructions. It was beyond the scope of this study to explore the gender differences in constructing the crime narrative. This is an important area that can be considered in future research with criminal offenders. Offenders in this study alluded to ineffective rehabilitation programmes, highlighting the need for further research to evaluate the relevance and effectiveness of crime rehabilitation programmes in correctional facilities in South Africa.

Based on the personal insights facilitated by this research experience, I propose a recommendation for how future research processes can be improved. As a researcher, I found much value in the recommendations of Dickson-Swift et al. (2009) on the need for self-care for researchers exploring sensitive topics. Although this is a common practice for psychotherapists, it is seemingly undervalued for researchers. This study's impact on me suggests that researchers can be triggered throughout the research process based on their own life experiences or affected by exposure to traumatic content, which could compromise their psychological wellbeing. Experiences such as insomnia, anxiety, depression, and vicarious traumatisation must be guarded against. Face-to-face interviews can be exhausting and overwhelming if inadequate debriefing and recovery time is undertaken after each interview. I was fortunate to have the psychological insights to link subjective reactions to the research process. I was also surrounded by trained psychologists who continuously provided effective debriefing and psychological support. Despite being trained in mental health and utilising psychosocial support services available to me, the impact of the research was admittedly underestimated. However, not all researchers have the same advantages and could experience mental health challenges during, and long after, the research process.

Thus, it is recommended that researcher wellbeing is actively and proactively prioritised in the ethical considerations of studies. Intentional planning for psychological wellbeing will prepare researchers for the possibility of emotional distress and equip them to self-protect (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Researchers studying sensitive topics might benefit from research supervision and mentorship. Therapeutic services and informal support networks, such as research colleagues and peer support groups, should also be accessible for researchers exploring sensitive topics. These acts of self-care are imperative for the psychological health of researchers. Along with the psychological safeguarding of researchers, physical safety should also be ensured (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008) by the

Department of Correctional Services, with explicit plans to protect researchers from physical danger. Moreover, in my view, it is essential for researchers to receive introductory training on identifying mental illnesses so they can refer participants for appropriate mental healthcare if necessary.

Methodologically, this study attempted a novel approach to research with offenders by capturing their uninterrupted life stories, triangulated with visual life stories which they recorded in their carceral environment. The success of this study and the rich accounts obtained are attributed to the life story research approach, which allowed offenders to author their narratives, focusing on the entire life story, and without primary focus on the crime. Storytelling, even in the research context, which creates opportunities for storying and re-storying of lives, can be beneficial to creating new, more positive meanings for offenders who have disrupted and denigrated life stories. Through storytelling, individuals also shape their future realities and actions. Hence, storytelling can be considered social action itself (Chase, 2011; Maruna & Liem, 2021; Murray, 2008; Squire et al., 2014).

Offenders in South Africa are rarely given the opportunity to author their stories from their perspectives, hence their voices are missing from the literature (Dastile, 2013; Londt, 2008; Naidoo & Van Hout, 2021). Minimal attempts have been made to understand their unique conceptualisations of the self and their contexts. Therein lies the value of a study like this, as iterated by Themba, "But thanks to you to be in front of me to talk with that thing, when I start to talk with that thing, I'm starting to be relieved in my life." Nina related the benefit of speaking about her life, "It gives relief whereas you can tell your story…that relief just to like you know what, there's a mountain off my shoulders." Accordingly, future research endeavours could add value to the lives of offenders by adopting a narrative-based methodological approach that decentralises the criminal identity of child sexual offenders by focusing on the entire life story as this study did. Most significantly, this research approach

explores the untold stories of child sexual offending to contribute valuable insights to prevent child sexual abuse in South Africa.

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Appendix A: Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO EXPLORING THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE AND MALE OFFENDERS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Hello, my name is Karmini Balwanth, I am currently a PhD student at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. You are being invited to take part in my research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully, which will explain the details of this research project. Please feel free to ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

- The purpose of this study is to explore the life narratives of female and male offenders of child sexual abuse in South Africa. Little is known about the life experiences of male and female offenders of child sexual abuse, hence, I have decided to conduct a study that explores the past, present and future life experiences of offenders sentenced for child sexual abuse.
- The overall aim of this study is to explore how female and male offenders of child sexual abuse in South Africa construct their life stories.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

- You are invited to participate in this study because you have been convicted and sentenced to incarceration or correctional supervision for committing a sexual offence against a minor child.
- You have also been included because you are an adult who is still serving a sentence in the Department of Correctional Services as an inmate/parolee/probationer.
- You will be excluded if your sentence has expired or if you are younger than 21 years old

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

- You will be expected to participate in one or more individual interviews with the researcher in the correctional centre. Each interview will take approximately 90 minutes. You will also be requested to record your life-story in any form that you feel comfortable, and submit this to the researcher.

After the first interview you will be invited to attend a follow-up interview in which we will discuss the recorded task and any thoughts you may have had since our previous interview.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

- Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason, if you decide not to take part in the study this will be without negative consequences or being penalized, and all your information will be destroyed.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

- You will remain anonymous throughout the study. Confidentiality will be ensured by assigning code names to each participant, and that will be used in all research notes and documents. No identifying details or links to this particular correctional facility will be made. I will make every effort to ensure that the interview cannot be traced back to you.
- Research findings will be discussed anonymously with my supervisor, fellow-researchers, and colleagues to enhance the quality of the study. Findings from this data will also be disseminated through conferences and publications. Reporting of findings will be anonymous, only the researchers of this study will have access to the information.
- If an escorting correctional official is required to be present then (s)he will be requested to sign a confidentiality agreement with the researcher.
- Please note participant information will be kept confidential, except in cases where the researcher is legally obliged to report incidents such as abuse and suicide risk.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

- There will be no direct benefit to you for participation in this study, However, I hope that the information obtained from this study may further our understandings of the life experiences of both males and females sentenced for sexual offences against children.

WHAT ARE THE ANTICIPATED RISKS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

- It is possible that you might get upset by the stories you tell. If at any stage in the interview you feel uncomfortable, anxious or distressed by what we are discussing then we will discontinue the interview immediately and you will be advised to seek counselling in your correctional facility.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE UNLIKELY EVENT THAT SOME FORM OF DISCOMFORT OCCURS AS A RESULT OF TAKING PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?

- Should you have the need for further discussions after the interviews an opportunity can be arranged for you to contact me via the Psychologist or Social Worker in your correctional facility

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

- Electronic information will be stored for period of 15 years. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable.

- Participant information in hard copies of raw data be will locked in the cabinet and electronic data will be kept in a file that is password protected in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria.

WHAT WILL THE RESEARCH DATA BE USED FOR?

Data gathered from the participant would be used for research purposes that includes:

- Dissertation, article publication, national and international conference presentations
- For administration purpose or policy briefs
- For further research or secondary data analysis.

WILL I BE PAID TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

- No, you will not be paid to take part in this study.
- Travel expenses will be paid for the participants who have to travel to the site. This means there will be no costs involved to you if you take part in this study.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL

- This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. Ethical approval number is HUM017/0420. Ethical approval has also been granted by the Department of Correctional Services Research Ethics Committee. A copy of the approval letters can be provided to you on request.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

- A summary of the research findings can be sent to you upon request. A final report will be sent to the Department of Correctional Services.

WHO SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE CONCERNS, COMPLAINTS OR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY?

- If you have questions about this study or you have experienced adverse effects as a result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided below. If you have questions regarding the rights of a research participant, or if problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the researcher, please contact the supervisor on the contact details below. Alternatively you can contact the Psychologist or Social Worker in your correctional centre to facilitate contact with the researcher or the researcher's supervisor.

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and in advance for participating in this study.

Researcher

Name: Karmini Balwanth
Contact number: 0815399404
Email address: Karmini@live.co.za

Supervisor

Name: Prof Terri Bakker
Contact number: 0124204924
Email address: Terri.bakker@up.ac.za

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO EXPLORING THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE AND MALE OFFENDERS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN SOUTH AFRICA

Interview Schedule

Initial Interview Schedule

1. Discussion of Study Information and Consent

2. Life Story: Tell me about yourself, your life story, and everything you would want me to know about you – anything you can remember from the day you were born that is of importance to you

3. Additional prompts aligned to the research topic:
   3.1 Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
   3.2Timeline gaps: Can you tell me more about your birth/childhood/ adolescence/adulthood/anticipated future?
   3.3 I would like to hear more about the different roles that you played in your life
   3.4 Who would you say played important roles in your life?
   3.5 When you think about your life experiences, which comes to mind as the best and the worst?

4. As an additional task, if you agree, I would like you to write/draw/depict your life story. There is no right or wrong way to do this, it can be as detailed as you feel necessary. The aim is for it to capture the story of your life from your perspective.

Departmental Research Committee (ResCom)
University of Pretoria, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Psychology
Humanities Building, Lynnwood Road, Hatfield, 0083, South Africa
Private Bag X20, Hatfield 0028, South Africa
Email: psychology.rescom@up.ac.za
Website: www.up.ac.za/psychology

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Departement Sielkunde
Lefapha la Bomotho
Kgoro ya Saekolotši

Follow-Up Interview Schedule

1. General Participant Demographics: Age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, birthplace, marital status

2. I am interested in what thoughts you might have about our conversation since we last met

3. Tell me about your life story and how you recorded it

4. If the life-story does not include the crime narrative then it will be probed into as follows:
   4.1 Tell me about the crime for which you are convicted and sentenced – you can begin anywhere and just tell me as much as you can remember
   4.2 How do you understand your crime in relation to the rest of your life?
   4.3 Tell me about sexual offences against children
   4.4 How do you understand child sexual abuse committed by people of the opposite (and then the same) gender as you
   4.5 Tell me about your experiences with children

5. Closure

Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO EXPLORING THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE AND MALE OFFENDERS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN SOUTH AFRICA

{ETHICAL APPROVAL NUMBER: HUM017/0420}

WRITTEN CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, ____ (**participant name**), confirm that the person asking for my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT APPLICABLE
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any consequences or penalties.			
I understand that information collected during the study will not be linked to my identity and I give permission to the researchers of this study to access the information.			
I understand that this study has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance from the Research Ethics Committee Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pretoria and the Department of Correctional Services.			
I understand who will have access to personal information and how the information will be stored with a clear understanding that I will not be linked to the information in any way.			
I give consent that data gathered may be used for dissertation, article publication, conference presentations and writing policy briefs.			
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.			

STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT APPLICABLE
I consent to being audio recorded.			
I consent to being video recorded.			
I consent to having my photo taken.			
I consent to have my audio recordings /videos/photos be used in research outputs such as publication of articles, thesis and conferences as long as my identity is protected.			
STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT APPLICABLE
I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication whilst remaining anonymous.			
I have sufficient opportunity to ask questions and I agree to take part in the above study.			
I agree to a correctional official being in sight for the duration of the interview if required by the correctional centre			

Name of Participant   Date   Signature

Name of person taking consent   Date   Signature

Appendix D: Research Ethics Committee Approval

Faculty of Humanities
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotho

19 February 2021

Dear Mrs K Balwanth

Project Title:	A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO EXPLORING THE LIFE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE AND MALE OFFENDERS OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN SOUTH AFRICA
Researcher:	Mrs K Balwanth
Supervisor(s):	Prof TM Bakker
Department:	Psychology
Reference number:	20795212 (HUM017/0420)
Degree:	Doctoral

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 19 February 2021. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,

Prof Innocent Pikirayi
Deputy Dean: Postgraduate Studies and Research Ethics
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: PGHumanities@up.ac.za

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotho

Research Ethics Committee Members: Prof I Pikirayi (Deputy Dean); Prof KL Harris; Mr A Bizos; Dr A M de Beer; Dr A dos Santos; Ms KT Govinder Andrew; Dr P Gutura; Dr E Johnson; Prof D Maree; Mr A Mohamed; Dr I Noomé; Dr C Puttergill; Prof D Reyburn; Prof M Soer; Prof E Taljard; Prof V Thebe; Ms B Tsebe; Ms D Mokalapa