The role of recognition in the desistance process

A case analysis of a former far-right activist

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Abstract

This article explores the intersubjective dynamics that foster desistance from crime. It explains that the concepts of 'identification' and 'recognition'—as defined by Jessica Benjamin—illuminate how psychic change can come about despite social continuity within offenders' lives. The value of Benjamin's approach is illustrated through the analysis of the case of a former far-right activist. The article shows that in order to desist from crimes that involve a symbolic 'othering' (e.g. hate crimes) offenders have to reclaim the psychic parts of themselves that are projected onto victims. The article concludes that when those deemed 'other' are able to withstand and survive hostile projections the possibilities for psychic change among desisting offenders are enhanced.

Key Words

desistance • hate • psychoanalysis • racism • recognition • subjectivity

> It is not a question of knowing the facts of past events but of the meaning of the events and how they can be re-emplotted . . . Historical narratives are not only models of past events and processes, but also metaphorical statements, not just a reproduction of past events but a complex of symbols.
>
> (Kennedy, 2002: 127)

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In more ways than one, 'the child is father to the man'.

(Diamond, 1998: 251)

Introduction

Over the course of the last five years two authors have transformed the study of criminal careers from an overly technocratic and under-illuminating wing of criminology, to a broadly accessible, critically engaging, yet still policy-relevant field of study. Bringing much of this transformative work together, Shadd Maruna's (2001) *Making Good* and Stephen Farrall's (2002) *Rethinking What Works with Offenders* have proved to be landmark books establishing, as they do, the need to pay close attention to offenders' and ex-offenders' narratives of change. While deploying quite different methodologies—Maruna's a content analysis of persisters' and desisters' accounts and Farrall's an ongoing series of semi-structured interviews with probationers over two years—both books converge on some similar insights and conclusions.

- First, both Farrall and Maruna agree that desistance is a process, which may be induced, reaffirmed or disturbed by 'events', but is inadequately theorized as a singular moment (Maruna, 2001: 26; Farrall, 2002: 212). Put differently, few ex-offenders undergo radical transformations of self and, for reasons connected to the relationships in which they are embedded and the areas where they live, even the most successful desisters often find themselves implicated in conflicts that can induce relapses into criminal activity.
- Second, both Farrall and Maruna demonstrate that successful desistance depends upon social and psychological contingencies. These contingencies include: the desire for change; mental and physical health; the availability of decent and secure accommodation; social capital accruing opportunities like regular and meaningful employment, education and the evolution of relationships with partners, parents and children; the ability to reconstruct one's past as part of a 'generative script'; and finally, the belief of significant others, sometimes culminating in feelings of reintegration or 'earned redemption' (Maruna, 2001: ch. 8; Farrall, 2002: ch. 9; Maruna and Farrall, 2004).
- Third, Farrall and Maruna (2004) argue that 'desistance-focused' interventions are more likely to be effective than 'offence-focused' interventions. Put differently, practitioners 'should concentrate on those factors associated with desistance' and place less emphasis on those 'factors that led to the original offending' (Farrall and Maruna, 2004: 361).
- Fourth, Maruna and Farrall (2004) argue that academics would be wise to differentiate 'primary desistance'—a kind of 'crime-free gap' in the life-course—from 'secondary desistance'. The latter is best described as 'the movement from the behaviour of non-offending to the assumption of a role or identity of non-offender' (Maruna and Farrall, 2004: 174). Because most secondary deviants engage in numerous pauses in the course of their criminal careers, Maruna and Farrall advise criminologists to concentrate on the

question of how secondary desistance is accomplished. Elaborating further, Maruna and Farrall explain that:

> recent research . . . provides compelling evidence that long-term desistance does involve identifiable and measurable changes at the level of personal identity or the 'the "me" of the individual' (Lemert, 1951: 76) . . . Whilst ex-offenders rarely describe themselves as 'desisting', they do talk about 'going straight', 'making good' or 'going legit' (Irwin, 1970). These phrases imply an on-going work in progress.
>
> (Maruna and Farrall, 2004: 174–5)

Identity and identification

This article focuses on the dynamics of this 'on-going work in progress'. Before doing so, however, it is necessary to grapple with some conceptual complexity, alluded to, but not yet explored by Farrall or Maruna. When Maruna and Farrall differentiate 'identity' from 'personal identity' they allude to a critical difference between people's social 'presentations of self' and their more private, internalized 'senses of self', otherwise known as the 'me' of the individual. Yet neither Maruna nor Farrall make clear how this 'personal identity' or 'sense of self' gets *internalized*. Nor do they explain how this internalized self relates to the *social identities*—to extend the references to Goffman (1968)—desisters and persisters presumably carry around with them.

This is a problematic that has been highlighted before within criminology. Richard Sparks' (1995, 1996) pioneering work on crime in the media is, among other things, an account of the importance of considering how audiences *identify* with the typically fantastical heroes and villains that make the consumption of crime fiction such a popular pastime. Similarly, Tony Jefferson's (1996, 1998) work on the life of Mike Tyson is an attempt to unravel the question of how and why the young and seemingly vulnerable Tyson came to *identify* with his bullying aggressors, setting in motion a transformation from 'lisping fairy boy' to 'world heavyweight champion'. Finally, and from within the study of criminal careers, Jon Snodgrass' (1983) follow-up of Stanley, Clifford Shaw's (1930) notorious Jack-Roller, exposes how relevant *identification* is to the study of desistance. Snodgrass uncovered that Shaw was perceived by Stanley as the '"father" he lacked in his boyhood', and further that it was the reciprocal identification between the two men that explained the early success of the social treatment intervention to which Stanley was exposed *and* the intervention's ultimate failure once the research relationship concluded (Snodgrass, 1983: 455).

In sum, the lesson we should extract from these three authors is that the internalized, but none the less intersubjective, processes of *identification* matter as much, if not more, than *identity* in trying to make sense of continuity and change in offenders' lives. Where 'identity' refers rather ambiguously both to the way in which people present themselves and the

way in which they are perceived by others, 'identification' refers to those mental processes that involve imagining parts of ourselves to be similar to, or compatible with, qualities we perceive in others. It is through this kind of 'object relating'—as it is called in psychoanalytic parlance—that we are sometimes able to identify with another person's feelings (of outrage, fear, loss or suffering, for example) even though our social identities (in terms of gender, ethnicity or occupation, etc.) are quite different. Indeed, it may well be the inability of our (mostly social) identities to convey the (mostly psychic) complexity of our identifications that renders us restless beings, motivated to change, as Stuart Hall argues:

> Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us . . . Identities are, as it were, the positions which the subject is obliged to take up while always 'knowing' (the language of consciousness here betrays us) that they are representations, that representation is always constructed across a 'lack', across a division, from the place of the Other, and thus can never be adequate—identical—to the subjective processes which are invested in them. The notion that an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is 'hailed', but that the subject invests in the position . . . and that in turn places *identification*, if not identities, firmly on the theoretical agenda.
>
> (Hall, 2000: 19, emphasis in original)

So we are beckoned into identities—subject positions—from the outside, while we actively 'invest' in them from the inside. We feel hailed towards subject positions, and hence obliged to assume identities by experiences of identification that sometimes exceed our conscious awareness. Yet, our investments in particular identities can only ever be temporary. Our identities remain precarious precisely because they accrue meaning from the assessments of those whom we are not—non-identical others—who, because of their difference, are imagined to possess the qualities we lack.

Identification, recognition and change

How and when does identification facilitate change? As Jessica Benjamin (1990, 1998) explains, identification facilitates change when people feel adequately recognized by another person whom they themselves are able to recognize as an external, sovereign other.

> Identification can serve as a means for bridging difference without denying or abrogating it, but the condition of this form of identification is precisely the other's externality. The other's difference must exist outside; not be felt as a coercive command to 'become' the other, and therefore not be defended against by assimilating it to the self. It is here that the notion of recognition

as mediated not only through identification, but through direct confronta-
tion with the other's externality, makes a difference.

(Benjamin, 1998: 96)

As with other psychoanalytic engagements with feminism (Butler, 1993;
Chodorow, 1995), one of Benjamin's central concerns is with the question
of why it is that so many children, particularly boys, resolve their multiple
and conflicting identifications with their parents along highly sex-specific
lines. Benjamin's (1990) particular answer to this question has to do with
the way in which the experience of powerlessness the developing child
encounters as it begins to separate from its mother (or other primary carer)
can motivate it to defensively repudiate its identifications with her. From
the infant's point of view its mother is both the all-powerful possessor of
everything it needs to survive, and the passive servant that shores up its
feelings of omnipotence, of being at the centre of everyone's attention. As
those involved in the study of masculinity and crime have argued, the
trouble with boys often begins when this 'paranoid schizoid' mode of
relating is resolved through a rigid and near-exclusive identification with
father figures who are imagined to be invulnerable precisely because they
are emotionally unavailable (Frosh, 1994; Gadd, 2002; Jefferson, 2002).
What Benjamin adds to this critical work on masculinity, and where her
work could further inform the study of desistance, is her observation that
life presents many opportunities for children and adults to renegotiate less
exclusive identifications with the masculinity and femininity they perceive
in people of both sexes.

In the first instance, an 'over-inclusive' approach to identification can be
negotiated, Benjamin argues, if and when the child comes to recognize
its mother as a separate being with her own needs, able to survive its
destructive impulses and hence autonomous enough to confer recognition
on others.[1] If some form of mutual recognition can be achieved, despite the
inevitable power imbalance between mother and child, then it is likely that
both parties will feel a mixture of 'otherness and togetherness' (Benjamin,
1990: 15). This is where other significant adults become especially im-
portant to the child's development. If, for example, an older friend, relative
or teacher reassures the child that it is also like them (identificatory love),
that it shares their qualities too, the child can develop a capacity to
experience, and even enjoy, the co-presence of otherness and togetherness
across many relationships. Moreover, such processes need not necessarily
be completed during childhood. Freud's (1917) manic-depressive patients
overcame their melancholia as they gradually came to accept that the parts
of their selves they had psychically invested in relationships with deceased
or departed people were not irreversibly lost. As the shadow of the object
fell upon the ego—as the mourner's own projections onto lost others crept
back into their conscious awareness—so projected parts of the self were
reclaimed and reinvested in new relationships.

Reconciling Freud's insights with the developmental psychology of Erik Erikson (1950), Benjamin observes that similar opportunities for transformative forms of recognition also exist in many everyday relationships. When our partners survive our angry projections, we can find ourselves confronted by their alterity or externality. As reparation is made for hostile projections there are often opportunities for regaining contact with 'lost love objects', as one partner signifies their acceptance of the other, including both their good (consciously owned) qualities and bad (often unconsciously disowned) qualities. Similarly, when children grow up ('too fast') parents are often confronted with their own unconscious dependence on the child's recognition, and hence the child's alterity. In such circumstances the contradictions between the parent's idealization of the child as someone like them (whom they had once hoped would accomplish everything they never did) *and* as a precious dependant who looks to them for inspiration are brought into focus. As the child establishes its independence the parent may feel a sense of loss (akin to grief) that has to be mourned if the parent is to 'let go' (see also Diamond, 1998). More politically, and perhaps of most interest to criminologists, Benjamin argues that the overcoming of Apartheid in South Africa could not have happened without the psychic survival of those Othered by racializing discourses:

> The strategy of the African National Congress exemplified the intervention of the Other as subject, achieving through their solidarity and recognition a form of agency despite persecution and denial of recognition by their opponents. The ANC and Mandela assumed an ethical responsibility for the consequences before that responsibility had been honoured by the white government, before symmetrical power had been established. Much of what transpired in the initial transition offered an alternative to the reversal of power relations that silence the silencer. This is the difference the Other can make, precisely because the Other insists on being a subject, not simply attacking the other's subjectivity.
>
> (Benjamin, 1998: 98–9)

By way of confirmation of her hypothesis, Benjamin urges us not to forget that it was also De Klerk's 'ability to envision *surviving* the destruction of the Afrikaner way of life that allowed difference and externality to emerge' (1998: 98–9, emphasis in original).

What this political application means for the study of desistance is that for those offenders for whom victims occupy an important symbolic place—as they do, for example in the perpetration of many hate crimes—certain intersubjective conditions have to be met in order for the process of change to gain momentum. Whether those involved in perpetrating hate crimes are able to change may depend critically on whether members of the victimized group are able to assert themselves as sovereign autonomous others, and whether this in turn enables the perpetrators to re-engage with the feelings they usually project onto victims. As Farrall and Maruna's research on desistance has shown but not adequately explained, this

process is likely to be gradual because it is painful, not necessarily unidirectional, and highly contingent upon the capacity of significant others—including those imagined to be members of the victimized group— to confer recognition on the victimizer.

Recognition in evidence: a case study of a former far-right activist

Discovering Frank

Frank was a 44-year-old potteries worker, local odd-job man and British National Party[2] (BNP) electoral candidate living in the heart of a former mining community in the West Midlands. He was one of fifteen 'perpetrators' interviewed as part of an ESRC-project entitled 'Context and Motive in the Perpetration of Racial Harassment and Violence' (Gadd et al., 2005). Frank was interviewed three times during the course of the project. The first two interviews took place a week apart in April 2004, and took a biographical form that specifically encourages interviewees to 'freely associate' in response to an opening invitation to tell their life-stories (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Extracts from a brief follow-up interview, conducted six months after these two biographical interviews, are also presented to demonstrate the subjective change that had occurred in Frank during this time period.

    Unlike others working for the British National Party in his locality, Frank was an eager research participant, writing and ringing back on the day he received his invitation to participate. When I arrived at Frank's house I discovered a friendly white man of average, but muscular build, who listened attentively, but asked no questions. Despite his willingness to be interviewed, Frank proved to be a 'high maintenance' interviewee. He gave short, concise answers, tending to wait for more questioning before elaborating on his recollections. When he paused or had finished talking, Frank would usually lower his head and look towards the floor without making eye contact with me. When I encouraged Frank to tell me the story of his life he sought more guidance almost immediately.

> Well, I was born in [mining estate], come off a family of seven, five brothers and one sister. [16[3]] Basically I don't really know what you want, like. That's the thing about it. I mean a lot has gone on in me life like. What specific points, like?

Childhood and youth

I urged Frank to tell me the stories of his family life, schooling and work life. Frank responded with accounts of a violent upbringing, a criminal youth, imprisonment and involvement with the National Front. He had grown up in a large family that 'never had nothing'. His father was a 'hard man' and an ex-prisoner who 'wasn't too kind' to his wife and six children.

While his mother worked in the Potteries industry, Frank's father 'wouldn't work', preferring to send his children to 'pinch' bags of coal from local trains rather than to school. When he did go to school, Frank was 'always fighting . . . 'Cos me dad said so.'

While his father beat all the children, Frank felt he was given special treatment: 'He seemed [to] dote on me, like. I mean, tried bringing me up the way he was like, you know.' Frank's dad 'enjoyed fighting' and brought Frank 'up to be the same basically', so much so that when he 'got in scrapes' at school with those children who had seen him 'scrounging' coal, his father would 'smack him around . . . Show me how to actually hit someone.' On one such occasion another boy split Frank's head open with a car jack. Frank's dad responded by getting Frank in the garden and giving him a '. . . right good hiding . . . then I went to the hospital and then I had to go back the following day and beat this lad. And he made sure I did, like.'

Often the children would be 'shoved' outside so they could hear, but not see, their mother being abused by their father. However, Frank remembered one time when he came home from school and saw his mother's face 'covered in blood . . . he'd obviously hit her, like. We were too young to do anything then so.' Yet, when pushed for further childhood recollections of his mother, Frank claimed to have none.

Employment, involvement in crime and membership of the National Front

Frank remembered his first job, labouring with this brother, with great fondness—it was 'good money and good fun'—even though it often exposed him to his brother's sadistic pranks. These pranks included stripping him naked and tying him up in the towns where he and the other labourers had been working. During the time he had this job, Frank became involved in stealing cars and thieving from shops, typically in 'gangs'. At the age of 17, Frank was convicted of robbing a local (white) shopkeeper at knifepoint and sent to borstal. At the time of the offence, Frank and his friends had been drinking all day and had run out of money.

> . . . so we decided to pull straws . . . who'd go commit, get some money, like. Anyway, me and me mate pulled short straws out [*laughter*] so we had to do it. Well, we didn't have to, but we did like, you know.

Although Frank's mother said nothing to Frank about the robbery, Frank's father correctly anticipated that Frank would serve his time 'standing on . . . [his] head'. Frank quickly established himself as 'one of the top boys' in borstal—'cos I like fighting and there were people there waiting to fight me, like'. Having repeatedly engaged in this fighting, Frank was denied parole, and finished his two-year sentence in Strangeways Prison. When Frank returned to his estate, aged 19, it was as a skinhead:

From there it just spiralled . . . In them days you just sort of got out of control. You get into things you didn't really want to get into [10] like National Front and used to go [to] National Front meetings and all that. [30] . . . So there was a crowd of 10, 15 of us, but skinheads. I mean, they were known to be hard, like, so you sort of got in with them. And you could guarantee, like I say, that you'd be in trouble somewhere or the other. It was shit.

Frank struggled to explain why he considered being an NF skinhead 'shit': he had enjoyed the adrenaline-pumped fights the skinheads got him into, a stab wound to the stomach further 'glorifying' the violence; and the racism the NF promoted was entirely consistent with having been 'brought up racist', Frank's 'dead racist' father switching television channels whenever he saw 'a black in a film'. Yet Frank denied that he had done what the National Front wanted him to do. Back then, the NF's philosophy was:

anything black you shouldn't have anything to do with. If you can get away with it, you know, give it a good hiding, like. Maybe the British National Party's philosophy is still the same basically . . . There's still people there what actually do that . . . They were saying that the country were going to be over-filled, and all this, over-run with them, and we'd have no jobs and you tend to believe them, like, especially when you're young.

Conversely, Frank argued—albeit in one of his most contradictory reflections—that the drunken fights he and the other skinheads sought out were always with groups of black and Asian young men who were keen to fight back.

I mean it wasn't a point of picking on somebody. It never got that far. I was never brought up to pick on people . . . it was just like I held me own. I mean, even though me dad really wanted me to pick on people, I never really did. But fighting's different. If they are up for it then we're up for it. That's different, like . . . If they didn't want it, then you never got hit, like. I wouldn't go jump on them just for the sake of it. I never did.

Adult life and desistance

By the time Frank was 25 his brothers had grown to 'despise' their father, who had become wheelchair bound after several strokes. Although Frank's brothers had little or nothing to do with their dad, Frank, on the other hand, was often called upon to defend his father in the pub fights he provoked by running his wheelchair into the legs of other drinkers. None the less, when Frank's father had his fatal stroke, the two men were not on speaking terms. Frank had threatened to hit his father, his father having 'just got on to' him for coming in late from the pub.

. . . so I picked him up out his wheelchair and I was going to hit him, like. And he went in hospital a few weeks after that. Anyway, he died in hospital and I never had the chance to say I was sorry and that so . . . It hurt me. I still miss him to this day, like.

By then married and with a newborn daughter, Frank promised his wife that he would 'never be in trouble again', leaving his friends to keep him informed about the NF's activities without getting involved himself. Frank succeeded in settling down despite residing on the same estate where he had grown up and maintaining his acquaintances within the NF. Thereafter, Frank remained in the same job for over twenty years, only ever having been unemployed for one day. Frank's marriage remained 'happy' and 'close', he and his wife having a second child together, a son, five years after the birth of their daughter.

Joining and leaving the BNP

It was not until Frank had turned 40 that he became active within Britain's far-right once more.

> Well it [4] I can't, like I say, how I got back into it, I don't know . . . Just one day there was a meeting up town and I happened to go, like . . . Me and me wife went, like . . . They [the BNP] was talking and everything they said seemed to make sense, like. I mean, couldn't fault really anything they said 'cos everything they said is what I believed in . . . They were saying what they get when they come in to the country and you know what our own people were getting . . . It's basically it's going to be over-run, the country is. [DG: You thought the country was going to be over-run?] Yer. Always have done.

Once again things 'spiralled' for Frank, he and his wife both committing themselves to the BNP's election campaign. Frank stood in the local election and got a 'big buzz' out of giving speeches about 'law and order'; a topic which reflected Frank's own preoccupation with the drug-addicted burglars on his estate (whose legs he had earlier threatened to break) as much as the BNP's crime policy. However, despite adorning a suit for his new role, Frank felt that some of his audience interpreted his tattoos as 'a mark of being a troublemaker' (something that bothered him so much that he attempted to have the tattoos removed). When Frank had tried to talk to the pensioners, whose financial impoverishment most bothered his wife, the pensioners 'near enough booed' Frank off, saying that he and his colleagues 'were nothing but racist'. Possibly related to this, Frank had helped both his mother and mother-in-law settle some debts they could not afford to pay, although this did not bring Frank and his mother any closer.

> [S]he'll go out of her way sometimes . . . to try talk to me and [7] like I say I'm a quiet person anyhow . . . and just I know her's trying to do it, like, and you know, try and talk to me, but I just can't, like.

As the election campaign got underway, Frank's son was picked on at school ('cos like I say they got coloureds in their school') and Frank's daughter was ostracized by some of her work colleagues as her father's political allegiances became more widely known. However, it was only after the elections that Frank began to have doubts about the BNP. First,

Frank's wife resigned from her role as the local party treasurer after the BNP's racism was exposed in the local media. Then Frank started to have suspicions about the nature of the racism condoned within the party after he witnessed a senior BNP figure proposing that people with black relatives should be excluded from full membership: 'Can't blame the kids . . . To do that is blatantly racist.'

Frank was 'disgusted' with what he had heard and decided to apologize to the 18-year-old 'half-caste' woman and her mother, who worked in his local pub.

> Them as friends had voted . . . for me, like, even though it's a racist party. That hurt me. It really did, like . . . [4] Felt ashamed, like cos they actually voted for me and I was telling them that it is no longer a racist party, 'It isn't National Front' . . . I was telling them lies at the end of the day because they are.

The 'half-caste' woman's mother was so furious with Frank that she was 'going to belt' him, but her daughter was willing to accept Frank's apology. 'She said she didn't vote for the party, she voted for me anyhow.'

Since withdrawing from the BNP, things had been generally looking up for Frank and his family. Frank's employers had enrolled him on an evening course in engineering that he had enjoyed so much that he was self-financing his attendance on another course; his daughter had been offered a place at university; and as for his son, Frank had provided him with a different kind of upbringing to his own: 'I haven't got no problems with him at all. I love him to bits and that's it, you know. Tried give him more than I've ever had, like, you know.'

Six months later

The significance of these closing remarks became more apparent six months later, when I asked Frank what it was that he thought was 'shit' about the NF. Frank struggled to explain before ultimately conceding that it was with the benefit of hindsight and from the perspective of his children that he had made this assessment:

> It was, I mean [4, *sighs*] I don't know. I can't really say it. [*Sigh*,3]. You don't, you wouldn't want your own kids be brought up, you know, that way of life like, you know, and do them things what I used to do, like.

Asked whether he had been surprised about recent media coverage that had exposed the level of support for racist attacks among members of Britain's far-right parties, Frank said he was not, and made his boldest admission to date: 'A load of racists, thugs . . . They will never be any different, as far as I'm concerned. I mean skinheads aren't they? Exactly what I was them years ago.' Soon after, the interview concluded and during the brief discussion that ensued I told Frank I was expecting to become a father myself. After congratulating me, Frank offered a surprising revelation. Two members of the BNP had found out about him apologizing to the young

'half-caste' woman and had responded by knocking two of his teeth out. Frank had exacted physical retribution on one of his attackers, and was expecting to get his own back on the other: 'I don't want to take revenge but I think if I don't then the next time he sees us out he's going to do it again. So the only way is, you know, do it to him first.' Frank's wife did not want Frank to retaliate, but Frank felt she understood why he felt he had to: 'She doesn't want me do it, like, but like I say, she knew it wasn't me.' Frank promised that if the BNP stood for election again in his ward he would expose them for what they had done and oppose them by standing as a Labour Party or Independent candidate.

The role of recognition in desistance

Frank's story is primarily an example of the kind of continuity and change that we know characterizes most people's lives, as well as most offenders' criminal careers (Butler, 1993; Sampson and Laub, 1993). Frank's offending began during his youth (when his father encouraged him to steal coal), persisted into his teens, becoming more intimidating (shop-lifting in gangs) and violent forms (fighting in custody) as he approached adulthood, and escalating during his twenties when he joined the NF. Frank's criminal career came to an abrupt halt around the time of the birth of his first child, a year into his marriage. Until his very recent retributive attack on the BNP candidate who had beaten him up, Frank had been desisting since his midtwenties. This desistance had pertained despite considerable social continuity in Frank's circumstances. As an adult, Frank continued to live on the estate where he had grown up, and remained in contact with his former National Front collaborators, supporting their cause even if he did not directly participate in their activities. To this end, Maruna and Farrall are clearly correct when they argue that the processes of (secondary) desistance necessitate changes at the level of 'personal identity'. Indeed, one can see in Frank's transformation from NF law-breaker to BNP law-enforcer evidence of the kind of 'generative script' Maruna detected in his desisters, as well as the significance of the kind of exchanges in 'social capital' Farrall (2002) detected in the lives of some of his probationers. But to frame the analysis in this way seems to lose sight of the considerable continuity in Frank's life, particularly with regard to his perspectives on racism and immigration and his feelings towards members of his family. A more nuanced psychosocial approach is required.

   It is not hard to see, in the case of Frank, the utility of Hall's assertion that we are in some senses 'hailed' to the subject positions we occupy. Sent out stealing by his father and beaten by him if he lost a fight, the prospects of being able to 'hold his own' and become the 'top boy' must have proved too tempting for Frank. The butt of his older work colleagues' pranks, one can appreciate how a poorly educated young man might succumb to the pressure to live up to the terms of a foolish game, robbing a shop to raise

beer-money for his mates having drawn the 'short straw'. Social research has demonstrated how the National Front has provided many criminally stigmatized, working-class men—like Frank—with a fleeting sense of belonging; exploiting populist disquiet about immigration while fostering alliances between those individuals who routinely gain vicarious pleasure from the enactment of extreme physical violence (Billig, 1978; Fielding, 1981). In the 1990s, Frank was certainly not the only 'active citizen' whose neighbourly vigilance straddled the line of legality (Evans, 2003). Similarly, at the turn of the millennium Frank was not the only BNP activist trying to dissociate himself from a criminal past by getting tough on criminals and foreigners (Copsey, 2004). Even in his most recent promise to stand against the BNP, Frank could be construed as investing in a discourse that has gained much wider currency since Burnley councillor Maureen Stowe defected to the Labour Party claiming she was 'not a racist' (Gadd, 2004). However, if we want to capture Frank's agency, the subjective shifts in his investments that explain his apparent 'secondary' desistance, then we cannot afford to reduce his life to a series of socially determined transitions. As Hall argues, we have also to address the question of how the subject invests in, or identifies with, certain subject positions. What kinds of identifications motivated Frank's various investments in crime, fighting, the far-right and fatherhood?

Too often, criminological researchers expect their respondents to answer their research questions for them, hoping to eschew the challenge of interpretation that narratives of life present them with (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). This would have been an unrealistic expectation to have of Frank. By his own account, Frank was a 'quiet person'. He wanted to talk but did not know what to say to me, just as he could not talk with his mother. Frank could not explain why he twice got involved in the far-right. Like the robbery he perpetrated against his local shopkeeper, he did not have to do it, but he sometimes felt unable to resist the course of events: 'things' for Frank 'just spiralled'—a sentiment that had its parallel in his fear of the country being overwhelmed by immigrants. Yet, despite this experience of being overtaken by the course of events, we learn from Frank that there were parts of his life where he accomplished considerable control. Unlike his own father, Frank had held down continuous employment, kept out of fights, respected his wife and rarely, if ever, struck his children. It was over 22 years ago when Frank had promised his wife he would 'never be in trouble again'.

In order to move beyond the dichotomy between agency and determinism we need to explore—in an interpretive fashion—the intersubjective dynamics that inform Frank's narration. Hints at the significance of these intersubjective dynamics can be found in Frank's brief account of his marriage. It was not simply that the 'love of a good woman' straightened Frank out. Rather the 'closeness' Frank and his wife managed to negotiate made other forms of identification possible for Frank, even though these possibilities remained under-exploited throughout much of his adult life.

Frank's marriage appeared to have been characterized by the kind of 'otherness and togetherness' Benjamin (1995, 1998) takes as indicative of 'mutual recognition'. Where Frank's father doted on Frank because he wanted his son to be 'like him' (i.e. the same), Frank and his wife were somehow able to respect each other's difference. For example, Frank respected his wife's decision to leave the BNP while he stayed. Furthermore, Frank's wife had not tried to change Frank after they married. Rather, Frank promised his wife he would stay out of 'trouble' when their daughter was born, confining his long-standing association with the NF to the pub. Within these conditions, Frank's identifications with his children did not pan out in predictably sex-exclusive fashions. There were hints of object love in Frank's feelings towards his son—whom he loved 'to bits' and wanted to have everything he never had—and identificatory love for his daughter—whose educational aspirations Frank clearly related to. As I will argue, it is the possibility of recognition, created by the capacity to hold these different types of identification in tension, that help explain Frank's ultimate disenchantment with the BNP.

While standing for election had brought Frank's own criminal past back into focus—shaming him enough to get the tattoos that marked him out as a troublemaker removed—it was the confrontation with the BNP's 'blatant' racism that most disturbed Frank. Upon discovering this 'blatant' racism, Frank felt 'ashamed', 'disgusted' and 'hurt'. 'Hurt' was a term that Frank also used to describe how he felt about his father's untimely death: something that may have been just a coincidence, but could equally signify that Frank's apology to the 18-year-old 'half-caste' barmaid drew on a set of meanings with roots in his past. This young woman and her mother are Frank's 'friends' now, but in an earlier era, when Frank was a 'racist thug' they might have been his enemies. To appreciate the significance of this younger woman's ethnicity one has to remember that it is not simply, or always, black people who are othered in the discourses of the far-right. When the NF and the BNP speak on behalf of white Britons, they routinely evoke the fear of miscegenation. Hence, the threat of being over-run that these parties evoke is not just a fear of strangers. It is also a dread of contamination, a fear that the foreigners will have children, and further still that 'white purity' will be compromised by the birth of 'mixed race' or 'half-caste' children (Kovel, 1970; Frosh, 1997; Ifekwungiwe, 1999). With this history of racialization in mind, the young woman in question could have been construed by Frank as other in more ways than her (presumably) 'black' mother.

However, on this occasion the processes of identification delimited the potential for othering. The young woman was also Frank's friend, an employee in the pub where he had spent much of his life. She was also a teenager: two years younger than Frank's daughter, two years older than his son and the same age Frank was when he was serving time in borstal. From Frank's perspective, this young woman was still a child. Picking on the children was what made the BNP's racism—like the NF's before them—

'blatant' and thus unacceptable. Here we should recall it was Frank's father's unwillingness to let his son be picked on—for being a thieving 'scrounger'—that legitimated his brutal lessons in how to fight. So Frank apologized, but the outcome was not what he expected. The young woman refused to be positioned as victim, to be assimilated into a universal category of minority under threat. Instead, she did what Benjamin advocates in order to make the shadow of the object fall upon the ego. She contained her own outrage, not hitting Frank as her mother was 'going to'. Instead, the young woman positioned herself as an autonomous and knowledgeable subject, not a victim or cultural dupe, but someone able and willing to confer recognition on Frank despite his political naivety. The woman told Frank she voted for him because of who he was, and still is, making it possible for him to envision survival beyond his feelings of shame and disgust.

Reading Frank's story from this starting point, it is possible to deconstruct the pattern of identifications between Frank and his father in order to shed new light on why it was that Frank struggled to tell a coherent lifestory, as well as why he only belatedly—in the third interview—conceded that he had been a 'racist thug'. Look again at the contradictions in Frank's early account of his involvement in the NF. Here, Frank made the following incompatible claims:

1. that he was never brought up to pick on people;
2. that he was brought up to be 'the way' his father was, and;
3. that his 'dad really wanted' him 'to pick on people'.

Put in the context of Frank's idealization of his father, Frank's inability to admit his racist past begins to make sense. In object-relations theory idealization represents a splitting of the ego to maintain a sense of omnipotence against the threat of powerlessness. This splitting typically entails a parallel denigration of another (external) love object that comes to represent the disowned parts of the self. From a psychoanalytic point of view, Frank's inability to remember anything positive about his mother is indicative of the extremity of the denigration this form of splitting can entail and is entirely consistent with a defensive reaction to the developmental process of separation. The story Frank tells us about his own upbringing suggests that he, Frank, did not benefit from the kind of 'good enough' parenting that best facilitates the retention of cross-sex identifications.

Despite their common victimization, Frank expressed little compassion for his mother's suffering. Frank never said it must have been terrible for her, nor that she felt it was terrible for him. Instead, Frank only recollected his own powerlessness to intervene: 'He'd obviously hit her, like. We were too young to do anything.'

The point here is not to be judgemental. Frank was right; he could not have intervened without incurring his father's wrath, and even then his intervention may not have been effective. Similarly, Frank's repeatedly

abused mother, probably out working more than most because of her husband's refusal to work, may well have been too damaged, too depressed and too terrified, to contain the trauma suffered by Frank at the hands of his father. In such circumstances, object relations theory anticipates Frank's inability to see his mother 'as a subject rather than a dangerous object' and his near-exclusive identification with his brutal father. On the question of what this means for the developing boy's sense of masculinity, Benjamin is again ahead of us:

> [T]oo flooded to develop ownership of desire . . . [h]e must adopt a defensive activity. Unable to be his own container, he must defensively use the activity of discharge into the object who contains. In this sense, the masculine defense entails neither separation nor boundaries but an urgently driven relation to the object. This is activity without authorship or ownership—hence without genuine subjectivity that allows space for another subject.
>
> (Benjamin, 1998: 56)

Benjamin's notion of an urgently driven relation to the object—activity without authorship—resonates with the way in which things seemed to get out of conscious control in Frank's life. Having drawn the short straw, Frank felt he had to do an armed robbery, however absurd this now sounds. Things repeatedly 'spiralled': Frank's racism rapidly pulled him into more organized and dangerous forms of violence; his violence became pre-emptive; fighting anyone in prison who knew of his reputation until he became 'top boy', as well as the black and Asian youth whom, upon his release, he discovered shared his enthusiasm for violence. Given the pervasiveness of racist metaphors that centred on the potential for being flooded, swamped and overwhelmed by immigrants during this era, and Frank's father's racism, it is not difficult to imagine how it was that 'race' became a powerful container for the feelings and desires Frank was unwilling to own during his teenage years. Put bluntly, it was never just about race. The worlds Frank inhabited were also about being hard, being known to be hard—like his father—and taking on those who 'were up for it'. Frank's racism was (at least in part) a rigidly masculine repudiation of the feminine, together with all its potentially overwhelming softness and (bleeding?) vulnerability (Benjamin and Rabinbach, 1989).

It is probably the embededness of Frank's racism in these early gendered identifications which helps explain the potency of Frank's fear of being over-run. But even here we have to ask why this psychic fear persisted despite the overwhelming weight of social reality,[4] and what it was about the 'hurt' Frank felt most recently that finally dislodged the comforting relationship between this fear and organized racism. It is in the complexities of Frank's shifting identifications where we find clues that help resolve these riddles. What is interesting about the family relations that pertained around the time of Frank's father's death is that a form of psychic

splitting had become reproduced along family lines. While Frank idealized his father, the other siblings despised him. Yet, it was Frank who had actually attacked his father, Frank's father having accused his son of the kind of drunken irresponsibility to which both men were prone. One can imagine that Frank, having served his prison sentence in its entirety for being a fighter like his father, might be sensitive to such a hypocritical accusation. (It is hence telling that Frank also used to fight with his brother because they were also 'so alike' their 'personalities clashed'.) Yet in the cold light of day this physical attack on a disabled and rapidly deteriorating man must have left Frank with an acute sense of guilt[5]—'an anguished state of mind arising out of an internal conflict, particularly *over the worth of the self*' (Hinshelwood, 1991: 314, emphasis added).

It is because these issues—about the worth of the self—were bound up in Frank's attack on his father that his father's sudden death 'hurt' Frank so badly. This helps explain why the discovery of the BNP's desire to exclude black and dual heritage people also hurt Frank. Frank identified with two people who would be excluded by the BNP's policy. More specifically, Frank identified with the youthful vulnerability of his barmaid, and most probably the parental responsibility and anger expressed by her mother, even though the anti-immigration discourses he had so long invested in construed both women as 'other'. What made his conflicting identification with the BNP and these two women so deeply troubling—disgusting—for Frank was that it brought into focus his close identification with a 'dead racist' father, whom he still misses 'to this day', and whose idealization had become a defining part of his sense of self. The success of the younger woman in (inadvertently) awakening Frank to his lengthy identification with violent racism owes much to a combination of situational factors, namely: Frank's identification with her vulnerability; her successful negation of Frank's projection of her as foreign, a victim and as a political dupe; and, perhaps most critical to the non-defensive resolution, her capacity to establish herself as a sovereign other, able to recognize Frank for who he is now (i.e. someone worth voting for and not the foolish troublemaker he once knew himself to be). However, this outcome was also contingent on Frank having begun to mourn the loss of his father, and his concomitant experiences of new forms of identification and recognition since his father's death, most notably in his relationships with his wife and children. It is these processes of identification and recognition that enabled Frank eventually to re-engage with those parts of himself he had previously disowned through projection, to begin to work through the contradictory denials that constituted his position on not 'picking on people', and to overcome and survive the shame, hurt and disgust he was beginning to feel. As Benjamin concludes:

> Owning the other within diminishes the threat of the other without so that the stranger outside is no longer identical with the strange within us—not

our shadow, not a shadow over us, but a separate other whose own shadow
is distinguishable in the light.

(Benjamin, 1998: 108)

Discussion and conclusion

I am not suggesting that this apologetic moment radically transformed
Frank from 'racist thug' to 'anti-racist activist'. Frank's language remained
un-reconstructed, and his hate for the haters was suggestive of another
form of polarized thinking. Rather, I am arguing that for Frank this
encounter mobilized patterns of identification—most notably with his
children, his partner and his community—that had been negotiated over a
much longer period. In so doing, Frank's encounter with the barmaid
induced a more consciously evident process of subjective change, despite
considerable social continuity in his life. This subjective change in Frank
supports this article's opening observation that what matters when it comes
to fathoming out why some offenders desist and still others persist has as
much to do with identification as it does with identity. It is these patterns
of identification that help explain why Frank's desistance from 'trouble' did
not coincide with his desistance from involvement with organized racism.

This analysis raises the question of the kind of change we might expect
from desisting offenders. A shoplifter-come-violent racist turned unofficial
community guardian-come-vigilante, the kind of piecemeal change wit-
nessed in Frank's life-story may be as good as it gets for many reforming
offenders. Desistance from crime can often mean the resumption of other
forms of behaviour that are no less problematic, dangerous and destructive.
When racist thugs become far-right activists, when sex-offenders become
sex-tourists, when wife-batterers become controlling partners and when
illicit drug-users become self-harming alcoholics, criminologists are con-
fronted with the fact that desistance from crime does not map neatly onto
the policy-driven search for positive outcomes—as Maruna (2001) and
Farrall (2002) point out, albeit in different terms. As the case of Frank has
illustrated, this does not necessarily mean that offenders are forever
damned by anti-social tendencies and low-self control (cf. Gottfredson and
Hirschi, 1990; Farrington, 2002), but nor does it mean that those who
undergo crime-free gaps are set on a pathway between primary and
secondary desistance (cf. Farrall and Maruna, 2004). For the perpetrators
of many crimes, victimizing an 'other' is often a symbolic process, over-
laden with meaning that is embedded in their pasts[6] (Hyatt-Williams, 1998;
Cartwright, 2002). Frank's identification with his brutalizing father was
implicated in his criminal activities and his fear of immigration. It was only
when the connections between these two aspects of himself were finally
brought into focus that Frank was able to concede that he had been a
'racist thug' and that he would not want his children to 'do them things' he
used to do.

Seen through the work of Jessica Benjamin, Frank's case teaches us that recognition plays a critical role in facilitating psychological change. The intersubjective negotiation of meanings and power relationships entailed in the reclamation of split-off parts of the self constitutes a more dynamic process than labelling theory—however refashioned—is able to capture. The good news is that, in spite of this complexity, opportunities for recognition repeatedly arise throughout the life-course, most notably when loved ones are found and lost, when we witness our parents confront their own mortality and when we identify with the vulnerability and strengths of our children. In such circumstances, adults are easily confronted by the potency of their own projections. Where new phases in relationships awaken the individual to both the fantastical quality of their projections and the independence of the other's existence outside these projections, new possibilities for identification and recognition emerge. The experience of recognition—especially when it runs against the tide of expected power relations—can make the other seem less strange, as (psychic) sameness renders (social) difference less significant. In such circumstances, new subject positions can be tried on for size, the past can be viewed from different perspectives, lost love objects can be mourned and the fear-evoking can suddenly appear reassuringly familiar. In many of these circumstances, personal change, including desistance from crime, becomes possible.

The bad news is that the complexity of the processes involved makes it difficult to see how crime policy can foster opportunities for recognition. When it comes to tackling the kind of criminal behaviour in which the symbolic status of the victim is paramount—what Betsy Stanko (2001) calls 'targeted violence'—it will be relatively futile to try to distinguish 'desistance' and 'offence-focused' interventions. In such cases, desistance-focused interventions will be those that empower the individual offender to rethink the symbolism of the offence from the perspective of the other. This, as some post-structuralist writers have recently argued, means conceding the subjective nature of crime in much the same ways as Macpherson's definition[7] of a racist incident attempts (Holohan and Featherstone, 2003). What object relations theory adds to the post-structural analysis is a reinsertion of the centrality of intersubjective dynamics between aggressors and aggressed in the search for mutual understanding. Following Benjamin, change is most likely to occur when offenders are confronted by the capacity of those they construe as other to survive their negative projections (whether physical or psychical), when the aggressed refuse to be what their aggressors want them to be, and when minorities resist the pressure to assimilate or otherwise become the menacing threat they are often constructed as (Benjamin, 1998: 86).

In sum, the prospects for establishing more relationships in which recognition becomes possible hinges crucially on discovering patterns of identification that transcend the parameters of social difference. It also hinges on the creative power of those constructed as other to survive their

aggressors' hostile projections so as to establish themselves as *significant other*s capable of meaningfully conferring recognition. Work that empowers victims is, therefore, crucial to changing offenders. In the field of challenging hate crime, this will mean overcoming the repetition of those official discourses that fluctuate between homogenous constructions of minorities as 'victims' and homogenous constructions of minorities as 'social problems', and the replacement of these discourses with narratives that validate the experiences of those individuals whose experiences run against the grain of social categorization (Gilroy, 1992: 11–12). This will not be easy in a climate in which racist and anti-racists alike rely heavily on relatively empty notions of 'community' (as in the 'black community', the 'Asian community') to mobilize support for their causes. In the anti-immigration climate that appears to be sweeping most of Western Europe at the present time, the most challenging responses will probably involve celebrating the fact that racism rarely, if ever, fosters assimilation, while drawing attention to the various ways in which so many migrants repeatedly confer recognition on their all-too-often hostile hosts, despite so many attempts to construct them as unworthily other.

Notes

1. The child's dependency on the mother's recognition equates to the 'lack' that Hall is also concerned with, and is a powerful driver in the child's motivation to reciprocate the mother's recognition.
2. The BNP is one of a small number of political parties considered to be on the far-right in the UK. The BNP was formed under the leadership of John Tyndall in 1982 after the fragmentation of the National Front (Ryan, 2004). The BNP's current leader Nick Griffin was a former member of the National Front, has referred to the Nazi Holocaust as 'The Holohoax' and has a conviction for inciting racial hatred (Ware and Back, 2002).
3. Number indicates length of pause in seconds; in this case a 16-second pause.
4. Frank's electoral ward, and for that matter his city, are home to relatively few people from minority ethnic groups. Furthermore, Frank had never suffered from unemployment, despite the predictions of the NF.

5. Herein lies another reason for the enduring strength of Frank's idealization of his father. As Speziale-Bagliacca explains:

> The sense of guilt is a means whereby an individual's obedience or disobedience is obtained. Bound, at least in part, to remain unconscious, it is responsible for much suffering and—among other things—leads to an idealisation of the persecutor, as well as imitating behaviour (by imitating him the victim becomes his persecutor and in a way deludes himself that he has him under control).
>
> (2004: 8)

6. John Bowlby made the same discovery over 50 years ago in his clinical studies of young thieves, runaways and persistent truants. Bowlby discovered that stolen goods often symbolized to children who had been deprived of parental affection a form of goodness they unconsciously craved. Some of Bowlby's respondents stole in order to inflict the suffering they had themselves endured onto those they perceived as more privileged. Others behaved in 'anti-social' ways 'in defiance of feelings of guilt' that were 'too overpowering and alarming to be consciously accepted' (Bowlby, 1947: 35).

7. The MacPherson Inquiry was established in 1997 to identify what could be learnt from the murder of Stephen Lawrence in April 1993. The Inquiry explored, among other things, the inadequacies of the police response at the time of the assault, the shortcomings of the subsequent criminal investigation and how these had contributed to the failure to bring a successful prosecution against the alleged perpetrators. One of MacPherson's key recommendations was that the police consider 'any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person' to be a racist incident and record it as such (MacPherson, 1999: 328).

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