The five stages of prisoner reentry. Towards a process theory

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**Abstract**

This paper is based on an ethnographic study involving 58 Roma and Romanian participants who were released from Jilava Prison in Romania between January and July 2015. The methodology involved interviews, observation, questionnaires and PhotoVoice. The findings seem to suggest that most of the factors associated with desistance and reentry in the literature (e.g. family, employment, informal networks) are relevant to the ex-prisoner's experiences. The main contribution of this paper is the observation that these factors come into play at different times and in different stages of the reentry process. Five reentry stages were identified in this study: pre-release-anticipation, recovery and reunion, activation, consolidation and relapse. The aim of the paper is to describe this reentry process as the participants experienced it. Theoretical and practice implication are discussed.

**Keywords**

reentry, ex-prisoner, desistance, stages of reentry, Romania

**Introduction**

Literature is replete with evidence regarding the factors or the contexts that impact on resettlement or reentry. However, it is not yet clear exactly how and when these factors influence the trajectories of ex-prisoners. This paper aims
at contributing to filling this gap by suggesting a possible process theory of prisoner reentry. The paper is based on an ethnographic study that involves 58 participants from different ethnic backgrounds. The methodology is a qualitative one comprising interviews, questionnaires, ‘photovoice’ and observational methods. The follow-up period is one year after release but this paper draws upon data relating only to the first six months. It seems that the main reentry stages take place in the first three to six months. By reentry we mean the transition of offenders from prison to community (Hughes and Wilson, 2004). We opted for this rather American term and not resettlement – the more European one – because it better captures the time frame that our research covers. Resettlement is defined as a process of reintegration back into society that starts from the beginning of the sentence (Mead, 2007) while reentry covers mostly the final part of the sentence and the immediate post-release stage. While acknowledging the importance of starting the reintegration project as soon as the prison sentence begins, due to resource reasons, the research focused more on the final part of the prison sentence and the post-release experience.

**Desistance and reentry**

Two sets of literatures are relevant for this research: the desistance literature and the reentry literature. Although there is some overlap between these two they are not coterminous. However, in what follows these two literatures will be presented together as they support each other.
One of the first factors associated with desistance was age (Eleanor Glueck, 1937; Sampson and Laub, 1992). Most researchers agree that participation in ‘street crimes’ starts in the early teenage years, peaks in adolescence and ends before the person reaches 30 or 40 (Farrington, 1986; Rowe and Tittle, 1977; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990).

Later on, research started to stress also the role of structural life events such as gaining employment or finding a partner (Sampson and Laub, 1993). The so-called ‘good marriage effect’ was further explored and detailed by Laub et al. (1998) who argued that it is cumulative and gradual, just like investments. Therefore, time is an important factor in building up a family and growing out of crime. Horney at al. (1995) looked also into how ex-prisoners experience the first year of release and concluded that the level of involvement in crime is dependent of ‘local life circumstances’ including living with a partner. Living with a partner may provide individuals with more to lose and may lead to anticipation of shame if new crimes were committed. However, these perceptions depend a lot on the character and quality of the relationship between the partners.

Having a job after release has also been found to be an important factor in desistance. In his meta-analysis, Lipsey (1995) concluded that the single most important factor that reduces re-offending is employment. Later studies or meta-analyses were not so straightforward in suggesting that employment has such a direct impact on recidivism (see Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; McCord, 1990; Haines, 1990). Visher et al (2006) reviewed eight studies on community employment programs and concluded that employment programs
have an important impact on life adjustment after release but they do not seem to have a statistically significant impact on recidivism.

More recently, research evidence emphasizes the importance of identity in the desistance process. Maruna (2001), for instance, looked into the self-narratives of offenders who continue their criminal careers and compared them with the narratives of those who desist. Although, he did not find any significant difference between these two groups in terms of personality traits (e.g. agreeableness, extroversion, neuroticism, openness etc.) or background factors (economic circumstances, poverty, abuse etc.), Maruna concluded that there are important differences between these two groups in terms of self-identity and particular recovery stories. In short, he concluded that the desistance process involves learning from the past behaviour, relinquishing an old self, finding a meaning to go straight, accepting the conventional rules and generating new goals and plans for the future.

Hope is another factor that has been mentioned in the literature as correlated to reconviction after release. Based on the follow up of 130 male offenders, Burnett and Maruna (2004) concluded that ‘Participants with high hope scores seem better able to cope with the problems they encounter after they leave the prison walls’ (398) and consequently are less likely to reoffend.

Also stressing the cognitive part of the process, Giordano et al. (2002) developed a theory of cognitive transformation where they identified four main components of desistance or types of cognitive transformations: a general
openness to change, exposure and reaction to ‘hooks of change’, the replacement of self and the transformation of the ex-offender’s views regarding the deviant behaviour.

But different ethnic groups experience desistance and reentry differently. Calverley (2013), for instance, demonstrated how ethnicity is an essential interactive factor that generates differences. When comparing Indians, Bangladeshis, Blacks and those with dual heritage in one London borough, he observed significant differences in terms of attitude towards crime and criminals and also in terms of pathways to desistance. Indians, and Bangladeshis for instance, benefited from the love and support of their families. These families use their differing financial and social resources to encourage reform and social success for their members. The desistance pathways of dual heritage offenders were more solitary.

In their recent book, Farrall et al (2014) put forward an integrated model of desistance that provided a good starting point for this research. The merit of this model is that it pulled together macro- and micro-level processes while paying attention to both structural and individual-level factors. At the macro-level, they places forces like social institutions, such as family, criminal justice, economic or value systems. These factors are influenced also by some ‘shocks’ which emerge with little warning (e.g. the arrival of heroin or economic recession). All these contextual factors contribute to the shaping of different opportunity schemes and understandings of the world.
At the individual level, Farrall et al (2014) place factors like gender, ethnic origin, nature and length of the previous criminal career, alcohol or substance dependency, relationships between individuals, places and spaces, social support, identity and so on. A special role seems to be played in the Farrall et al’s (2014) model by the emotions and feelings experienced by the desisters and significant others. By integrating all these factors together in a coherent model, Farrall et al (2014) illustrated how complex and individualized the desistance process can be.

In a recent study, Schinkel (2014) reflected very usefully on the subjective experience of twelve parolees in Scotland. In spite of the good relationship with their criminal justice social workers (the name for probation officers in Scotland), the paroles faced many obstacles in their desistance pathway. One of the most important was the lack of work, which prevented them from securing new identities and lives through work – and from fulfilling the plans that they had developed in prison. These post-release struggles reflected back on their perceptions of parole, as the criminal justice social workers were not able to provide help with employment. In consequence, a combination of disappointment together with a constant fear of making a potential mistake with grave consequences, led the parolees to consider reentry mainly as a frustrating and painful experience.

Previous research, however, has made only tangential reference to how and when particular influences on desistance come into play in the reentry process. When do some influences become more important than others? This
question is important in particular in the reentry context since it may be that different sorts of interventions should be organized at different times to reflect different priorities. Timing was considered in the psychology literature in the transtheoretical model of change (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1983) where the authors have identified six different stages of change (pre-contemplation, contemplation, decision, action, maintenance and relapse). As illustrated in Miller and Rollnick (2012), different strategies should be employed at different stages of change.

Based on the men participants' accounts, this paper will make an attempt to organize the stages that seems to describe the prisoner reentry journey for most of the participants.

**Method**

The study was based on a two main theoretical traditions: interactionism and grounded theory. In line with the interactionist approach, we were very interested in how ex-prisoners understand their social realities and their interactions. The focus was on the situated character of their understanding and interpretations. In order to capture these perceptions we spent hours in interviews, observed the day of release and the processes following release, applied problem checklists and used photovoice methods.

Grounded theory was used mainly in the data analysis stage where the findings were analyzed following the three stages: deconstruction (coding),
construction and confirmation. More details about these procedures will be provided below, in the data analysis section.

Another important clarification for any ethnographic study is the researcher’s positioning in relation to the participants. It was made clear to the participants that the researcher’s role was only to observe and record and not to provide help or any kind of assistance. In this respect, we took a limited participant position that allowed us to run the interviews and observations without influencing the course of the participant’s lives.

This methodology was designed in this way in order to allow us access to the subjective meanings of life events close to release and also to provide us with ways to triangulate data from different sources.

**Sampling**

The first priority for us was to recruit a wide variety of prisoner’s profiles. In order to do that, we used a purposeful sampling method, more precisely the maximum variation sampling as described by Patton (1990). The main variables that we used were: ethnicity, length of sentence, age, criminal history, domicile, level of education, marital status and the level of support during incarceration (calculated in term of number of visits and telephone calls). At the end we recruited a number of 58 informants.

Table 1. The participants profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Roma - 28</th>
<th>Non-Roma - 30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>22-30 years old – 15</td>
<td>31-40 years old – 21</td>
<td>41-60 years old – 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status</strong></td>
<td>Single – 12</td>
<td>Free union – 29</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The study took place in Jilava Prison and therefore some contextual information about this prison may be of use. Jilava Prison is about 40 minutes drive from Bucharest. It is one of the oldest prisons in Romania, being established in 1907. The prison hosts about 1400 prisoners at any one time, most of them for theft. Jilava provides open and semi-open regimes. According to the Penal Code, only prisoners in these two regimes can be conditionally released. At the time of this research, the only obligation of the conditionally released person was not to re-offend during the conditional release. All our participants were conditionally released – mostly after serving two-thirds of their sentence. The conditional release procedure comprises two stages: first, the parole board in the prison coordinated by the surveillance judge makes a proposal to the court and second, the court makes the final decision if a prisoner should be released on parole or not. Prisoners may also address the court directly. It is very seldom that the court takes the decision without a support letter from the parole board. The main difficulty in relation to conditional release is that prisoners perceive this practice as highly unpredictable. They are never sure if they hit all the positive points necessary for the judge to grant their conditional release. They have many examples when prisoners in a more or less the same situation received different
decisions. Here it seems that the legal conditions such as ‘to have a good behavior during incarceration’ and ‘the court is of the opinion that the prisoner has changed and is ready to re-enter the society’ create a lot of room for interpretation and therefore for unpredictability.

Access to Jilava Prison was secured prior to beginning the research. The director of the prison was informed about the aim, the length and the methodology of the study. The benefits of the research were explained both for the prison and the society.

All participants close to release in Jilava Prison were informed in general terms about the research. They were invited in a large room where they were informed about the study, its aims and what is expected from them. Once they expressed an interest in taking part, they were fully informed about the study and its methodology. This was done during individual interviews when they were also invited to complete a questionnaire that assisted us to gather basic demographic information about the participants. In order to clarify issues of ethnic identification, we asked questions about the cultural and social characteristics of their families covering the last three generations (e.g. occupations, languages etc.). At the end of the questionnaire they were asked about their ethnic origin. There was only one case (out of 58 participants) where all the cultural features made us think that the participant is Roma but he stated he is Romanian. We duly considered him as Romanian in our study. For more information about positive self-identification see Durnescu et al. (2002). Once they agreed to participate in the study, the participants were asked to provide contact details from ‘significant others’ (i.e. family or close friends) outside in order to be able to stay in touch after release. They were
also informed that they can withdraw at any time with no justification and also that anything they disclose during the research is protected under the confidentiality principle. However, they were also informed that, according to the Romanian Penal Code, confidentiality will not protect them if they disclose information regarding a deed that had or may have as a consequence the death of the victim. They were also asked to complete consent forms where all this information was mentioned in written. We had no participant in our sample that could not read or write at all. However, three of them had difficulties in reading and thus we offered ourselves to read the paperwork aloud for them.

*Data collection and analysis*

For both observational research and semi-structured interviews, detailed protocols were designed and researchers were instructed how to use them in the same manner. Interviews were conducted prior to release, one week after release, one month, three months, six months and one year after release. This paper records the findings from the first six months after release. As others have argued (Roselfeld et al, 2005), we found that the most important period after release is the first three to six months. The interviews covered questions regarding the participants’ expectations, understandings, identity, obstacles, sources of support, priorities and plans.

The observational research took place mainly on the day of release, when researchers accompanied the participants to their destination, and during the interviews that took place in the participants’ houses or in their communities.
Observation looked at participants’ behaviour, emotions, interactions with others, environment and so on. All observations were recorded on a Google drive (password protected and using codes rather than real names) and accessible to all researchers at all time.

Questionnaires were also used in this research although these data are not yet available for analysis. Only three questions from the questionnaire will be considered in this paper, mostly relating to questions of citizenship.

Participants were given disposable cameras and invited to take pictures of what they think is important for the first two-four weeks from release. After the four-week interview they were asked to select three most important pictures they took. These discussions were recorded and analyzed as the other interviews.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were also recorded in the Google doc mentioned above. The data was analyzed using grounded theory as described in Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Gobo (2008). The coding started after the first round of interviews so we were able to adapt our approach to the emerging themes. The quotes were attributed to participants using the initials of the names and also numbers. For the sake of simplicity, in this paper only the initials will be used.

In the deconstruction stage, researchers (5 researchers) were asked to code independently 30% of the interviews for each stage (e.g. pre-release, first
The interview and observation protocols were used as ‘check lists’. After coding each stage, all five researchers gathered together and decided which codes to keep and which to dismiss. In this construction stage, we also identified the emerging themes and decided on whether we needed to recruit more participants of particular profiles or whether we should explore different issues, interpretations or understandings. The confirmation stage was reached once the researchers agreed – in consensus – on the codebook and the themes that emerge from data.

Findings

Based on the data collected, we identified five distinct stages that ex-prisoners tend to follow: anticipation, recovery and reunion, activation, consolidation and relapse. The stages are defined according to the experiences related by the participants.

Pre-release-Anticipation

This stage is a very emotional one for the participants. As the day of release is not certain for those who apply for conditional release in Romania, the participants experience a mixture of hope, anxiety and uncertainty:

I would give anything to be free, to be close to my family. Now when I don’t have so long until the release, I feel like I have to wait five years or more. The time passes very slowly when you know you don’t have so much left. But I have to wait for the court to decide.
They [the judges] can postpone my release. I cannot even anticipate my chances. As it happened, sometimes prisoners with no criminal history, with no disciplinary issues in prison, with work record inside prison got postponed by the court in spite the positive report from the prison. You simply don’t know … (H.D.)

or

I may escape from one jungle and go to another. Anyway, I am happy and nobody could take this feeling away from me. Maybe this happiness will last one, two, three days and after life will become real … (Z.G.)

Sometimes these feelings are very powerful and prevent prisoners from sleeping or participating in daily routines: ‘I could not sleep and cried a lot’ (C.G.); ‘stress, I could not sleep, I could not take the unfair treatment and this was the most painful experience’ (C.G.); ‘a nightmare’ (D.D.); ‘I had the impression that my bed is my grave, that I cannot come out. I thought I will never get released’ (D.D.).

Many participants defined themselves as an ‘average John’, as simple and ‘normal’ men. A small proportion of them described themselves as ‘second class men’ or even ‘garbage’. This identity seems mostly triggered by adverse prison experiences and the loss they experienced while in prison. Loss is a constant feeling among our participants and is configured in the participants’
accounts in different forms and shapes: loss of time, loss of family, loss of material goods, loss of health, loss of job, loss of status/face etc. Once again, as in other studies (see Sykes, 1968), prison proves to be a lot more than deprivation of liberty.

Despite their negative accounts of imprisonment (or perhaps because of them) almost all participants at the time of release express a super-optimistic view over their successful reintegration. The vast majority of them describe this moment as a ‘second chance’, ‘a new start in life’ or a ‘new birth’. The reasons behind this attitude are complex: some, due to the bad experience, do not want to come back to prison again; some participants wish for a fresh start in life; others have a strong sense of underachieving or loss and they want to recover etc. What remains important is that their cognitive orientation or the orientational change is directed towards a new and prosocial life (see also Giordano et al., 2002, Shover, 1985).

First two weeks – Recovery and Reunion

On the release day, prisoners follow a slow and complicated prison routine. In some cases they do not even know if they are going to be released or not on that day. This is the case for those on conditional release where the prosecution may appeal until the last moment. A good sign is that the funds available in their account are removed in order to be handed over to them at the gate. When the money is not there anymore, it means they are to be released. Release normally takes place after 15.00.
Based on the number of people that wait for the prisoners at the gate, we divided them into three categories: ‘the heroes’, the ‘family men’ and the ‘lone crusaders’. The heroes are those awaited by a large number of people, usually from the extended family. This is common for Roma people coming from large and high status families. People come with many expensive cars and with music to welcome their kin back into their family. Usually, they are noisy and the released prisoners get a lot of attention from other people waiting at the gate. As one of the participants explained, this behaviour displays status and solidarity:

… This is how we do it. When one of my mother’s brothers was released more than 20 people went there to wait for him with six cars. This is how we show that we are together and we support each other. Being there shows that you missed the person who spent time in prison. (B.S.)

Often this ‘welcoming ritual’ is continued at home where the whole family come together to celebrate with a barbecue and music till the middle of the night. Again, this ceremony is very noisy and attracts attention from the whole neighborhood. Based on our own observations and conversations with the participants it seems that the symbolism around this ritual is related to the idea of welcoming home. At the same time, this ritual is an opportunity for the family to show status. For example, famous musicians are invited to perform in order to celebrate the high status the family enjoys in the community.
The second category of released people are the ‘family men’. In their case, someone from the family – one parent, one brother or others – comes to wait at the gate. After short greetings, they leave the scene as quickly as possible. Most often, this ritual is continued at home with some close relatives and with maximum discretion. Neither the extended family nor neighbours are expected to take part in this process. On the contrary, the less people know that the person served a prison sentence the better. This seems to be the most frequent welcoming ritual for the Romanian participants.

In some isolated cases, there were no people waiting at the gate for the released person. We called these prisoners ‘lone crusaders’ because they seem to be socially isolated and enjoy little or no support even from the beginning of the release process. The next step for these ex-prisoners is to ask someone to give them a lift or take the bus to their city/village where they either live alone or share a house with an elderly parent. Prisoners in this category are recruited both from Romanian or Roma communities that are situated economically and sometimes even geographically at the margins of the society. For the ‘lone crusaders’ the absence of the family means a deep and painful social isolation. As we will see later, this isolation has multiple consequences for the experience of release.

For the rest, the centrality of the family is one of the most common features among ex-prisoners in the first two weeks:

I spent most of the time in the house, with the family. (BD)
I spent a lot of time with the family, with the kids. I knew this will happen. I just want to stay together with them (PA)

Family, family is the most important. I enjoy their warmth and their attention. I am like a small spoiled child these days… I am grateful to God to find my family still here, around me. There are so many prisoners losing their families while in detention ... (PI)

Some participants explain spending time with the family as a consequence of missing them while incarcerated. In this sense, spending time with them seems a symbolic attempt to recover for the time spent away from each other. Other participants report strong guilty feelings towards their families. As in other studies (Comfort, 2009; Arditti, 2016), imprisonment impacts not only on the offenders but also on their families:

They have done prison time with me. We were released together (BA)

My children would not have been sent to child protection if I had been a free man. Because I got sent to prison, they were sent to child protection ...(CA)

They were very affected that I was there. The family stayed outside, alone and with no help. This was very painful for me.(BD).
In some cases, the family was interpreted in a wider sense, especially among the Roma participants. In their case, participants reported short visits to the close relatives or to the cemetery, to visit family members who had died while they were incarcerated. All these actions around the family and the social networks seem to be interpreted as a negotiation and a confirmation process that the ex-prisoner is accepted back into the social fabric where he belongs.

The centrality of the family was also reflected in the pictures the participants took in the first two weeks. Most of the pictures are with mothers, fathers, wives, children and relatives. Moreover, most of them are taken in the intimacy of the participants’ homes.

Related to the centrality of the family, most participants reported limited mobility in the first two weeks. The idea of spending time with the family was pictured in most cases in the ‘home’ context:

I just stayed inside. I was not out at all on Wednesday. On Thursday I went downstairs for a little bit. Even now I don’t feel like going out. (IM)
or
I don’t want to go out. I was away for too long (AC)

But staying inside is also related to the post-prison adaptation. Many participants reported in the first two weeks confusion and dizziness:

I see too much movement. I am not used to this (BA)
or

I could not deal with the cars. I see them moving so fast I get dizzy (NE)

Some other participants report flashbacks and behaviours that are typical for the prison: waking up at 05.00 a.m. and waiting for tea; hiding mobile phones, asking permission to switch off the light or the TV etc. In some cases these symptoms were so strong that they can be defined as discrete subtypes of post-traumatic stress disorder or post-incarceration syndrome, in Liem and Kunst's (2013) terms.

In a few instances, participants complained about medical problems related, in their view, to the prison conditions: stomach pain, asthma, heart problems, insomnia and so on. In their terms, recovery means sleep (without worries that somebody will steal their goods), spending time with the dear ones, long discussions with the family about how it is to be behind bars, medical checks and treatment etc.

For a limited number of participants staying in the house is also a strategy to avoid trouble by avoiding people:

If I go back to the same groups of people I don’t know what will happen.

This life runs too fast… (SA)

For others, avoiding trouble means avoiding places:
I don't like this area where I am leaving. It was cleaner in the prison and you can find only bad people (IM)
or
I went for a walk last night and some old friends came to me and said: come and have a drink with us!! I told them: I am home now. Are you crazy? Why do you try this with me? I don’t need your drink. (PA)

Apart from staying out of trouble, participants reported many obstacles in the first two weeks: dealing with temptation (‘Temptation is big. Your mind may slip away. Jealousy starts working. You see a telephone, some keys forgotten in a car … Temptation is big’ - B.V.), fear of failure (‘I was in prison … I don’t want to go back there … I know that something bad can be done quickly’ – B.V.), lack of financial help, social isolation, stigma, shame and difficulties in dealing with children. Most of these difficulties are already mentioned in the reentry literature (Horney et al, 1995, Schinkel, 2014) which may indicate that they are not necessarily context dependent.

In overcoming these obstacles, the participants drew heavily on their family resources (e.g. wife, brothers and sisters, parents). Friends are also important especially when it comes to finding employment. In some cases, different churches were mentioned as providing practical help. It is important to mention that the State – as a potential source of help -- is almost absent from the participants’ narratives. Although ex-prisoners are eligible for different forms of benefits or social services, participants know that the procedures to access these rights are long and complicated and the level of help is sub-
standard. For instance, the social benefit for one person was about 30 Euros/month in 2016.

Another reason for the absence of State assistance might be that the participants reported in the questionnaires a deep distrust in the State. The questionnaire includes three questions (adapted from Farrall et al., 2014) about citizenship. Almost all participants in the study stated that the State does not care for people like them, the State does not listen to people like them and it does not matter if one lies to the State.

Weeks three and four – Activation

If family is the main priority for the first two weeks of release, becoming economically active is the priority for the third stage of release. Family is still present in the participants’ discourses but when asked about what is very important now, almost all of them start talking about employment:

What shall I say? Only good things happened: work, home, children, and nephews. I cannot believe I am close to them now… (IM)
or

I tried to survive, to find work with the help of a friend and my brother … (DV)

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1 See for more information: http://www.asistentasociala.info/social.html
For those with wide social networks (family and friends), finding work was slightly easier than for those socially isolated, confirming findings from other studies (see Neumann and Pettersen, 2013). The social network influenced the prospects of getting a job either by sharing information about the availability of a job or by vouching for the ex-prisoners. In some cases, families employed ex-prisoners in their own small family enterprises. Roma participants seem to be more entrepreneurial than the Romanian ones as they tend to create their own jobs rather than to search for an existing ones. In so doing, they create their own construction teams, they start or resume playing musical instruments and so on. What appears to be quite common among the participants is their involvement in the so-called informal economy or ‘hustle’ economy, as defined by Thieme (2013). This is not the right place to discuss the challenges, opportunities and the strategies of finding, creating or maintaining work. This will become the subject of another paper. What we wish to emphasize here is that work or individual autonomy becomes a priority for ex-prisoners from a couple of weeks from release onwards.

The relationship between family and work in our study is more complex than the one described in the literature so far. Family is not only a space that supports or facilitates work but also an important pressure for ex-prisoners to become active economically speaking. In many participants’ narratives we found a mutual pressure that families places on ex-prisoners. During detention, families are expected to visit, to send money and parcels. After release, they are also expected to provide material and psychological support. However, after two or three weeks, if not sooner, participants start to perceive
a reciprocal moral and implicit pressure to start providing for the family. As IM stated:

I think day and night: can’t I do something to help my family, can’t I work at something? I told you, I have a child in prison. It is very hard… I cannot sit down and wait. I cannot stand to stay on my wife’s money. I cannot wait for my wife to bring me cigarettes or to ask me if I want a juice….

or

To wait for your children to feed you is a shame… (BD)

or

I need to make my children proud of me. How else I can show my gratitude? (BD)

This pressure is also promoted by the gender cultural expectations whereby men are expected to be the head of the family and also the main provider (see also Popescu, 2010):

If you don’t have everything you need in the house, what kind of men are you? (BD)

As participants are involved in more activities outside their household and have different priorities, they become more and more distant from the prison experience. Although the marks of prison are still present, the participant’s discourses are not dominated anymore by the prison talk. After two – three
weeks, ex-prisoners start talking less and less about prison, they start to forget the prison experience, report less post-prison syndromes and get engaged in discussion frames that make prison less relevant.

These transformations are reflected in identity shifts. As ex-prisoners become more autonomous and useful for their families, they stop describing themselves as prisoners or ex-prisoners but more like ‘normal Johns’ or fathers, husbands and so on, confirming the importance of the self-identity (Maruna, 2001):

Now? I am father of five children, grandfather of 9 nephews. I am not nobody anymore. (IM)

In many cases, these identity transformations are accompanied by work around the house: painting and decorating, redoing the fences, repainting the outside walls etc. Although these works may be justified by pragmatic reasons, they also seem to play more symbolic functions. At least in some cases, these actions seem to communicate to the family and the local neighborhood the message: now I am back and things will be better.

This trend is not so visible among the socially isolated lone crusaders. Most of them did not succeed in finding work or other meaningful activity within the first month from release. In their case, prison and its consequences are still very present in the prisoners’ narratives. Hope for a successful reentry starts fading away.
When work is not accessible or is not satisfactory, participants employ an ‘I’ll go abroad’ strategy. But even this is not easy: the participants need to have information about where work is available; they need somebody to host them in the destination country until they receive the first resources; and they need some funds to pay for the travel. As with finding work in Romania, the informal social networks play an essential role. Those with little social capital are again disadvantaged compared to those with wide and potent social networks.

Besides finding work, this period seems also populated with many and diverse challenges: anxiety and disorientation, difficulties in dealing with children, fighting temptation, fighting bureaucracy and so on. Once the ‘honeymoon’ of return is over, ex-prisoners have to deal with the real life and the real difficulties. In so doing, they tend to count mostly on the family and friends support. This support can be moral, psychological but also practical or financial. As in the previous stage, the State is almost entirely absent.

After week four – Consolidation or Relapse

As described above, almost all participants were very optimistic and wished for a new life at the point of release. If the first two weeks were dedicated to family and recovery and the next two were focused on becoming active and autonomous, in this stage participants who succeeded in the previous stage tend to ‘settle down’ and consolidate their new career as ‘virtuous citizens’.
Once they found employment or other means to generate income, they tend to have access to new social networks and develop new daily routines. These changes seem to consolidate their self-respect and new identity. Prison is described more and more as an accident or as an exception in their biography:

I was minding my own business. I would not go to prison if there hadn’t been one or two ‘friends’. I have never done any crime in 54 years and now? Why should I start now? (NE)

or

For me going to prison was a mistake. I will never go back there. I went to prison and I had five years to think about this. Never again … (BC)

Another interpretation offered by some participants regarding their offending past is related to maturity. Many participants explain their offending past as having ‘a childish mind’ or ‘not thinking twice before acting’. In their case, life seems to be divided into two parts: before the prison sentence and after the prison sentence. Contrary to how they were before, they are now more mature, they ‘think twice’, they ‘shut up and go out’ when a tense situation occurs and so on. This narrative seems to be specific to those over 30 who consider also that they ‘are too old to go back to prison’ (B.D.). This observation resonates quite strongly with previous research on the age-crime curve (Goring, 1915; Farrington, 1986; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990).
Those participants with little social capital have very limited chances to find a job and fuel their hope for a new life. After three or four weeks almost all their possible reserves – money borrowed from distant family or friends, small help from neighbors etc. – are exhausted. In this case, participants start growing a very strong sense of helplessness. Life outside prison is increasingly perceived as more difficult than life inside prison:

One cannot live in this country. You have my word for it, outside is far worse than inside prison…. We wonder why thieves reoffend and go back to prison? Of course they do. Because of poverty, despair. You don’t have anything today. You don’t have anything tomorrow. Day after day the same. After that you need to go stealing again or do something… (B.C.)

Life in prison is not remembered as dreadful as it was described at the time of release. On the contrary, as Z.G. puts it, prison life becomes romanticized:

For better or for worse, you have three meals a day. If you are smart you can find a coffee and a cigarette…(Z.G.)

In these depressing circumstances, the presence of the ‘old friends’ willing to help seems to be very welcome for some participants but at the same time a very powerful force to return to crime.
The routes to going back to crime are very diverse and almost individualized in our sample. In many cases factors like gambling, old conflicts, complicated situations, impossible problems, impulsivity or lack of self control and so on are associated with relapse. However, what seems to be most common among our participants who reoffend (15 out of 58) is the strong feeling of hopelessness and the perception that a better life is not possible. These feelings and perceptions can also be identified in some participants who managed to secure a job but the level of income is far below their expectations. In both cases, the phantom of ‘going abroad’ is prevalent. For some participants, ‘going abroad’ means a chance for a better paid job and a decent life. For other participants, ‘going abroad’ is a good chance to start a new life where criminal record cannot reach them anymore. In a limited number of cases ‘going abroad’ is for committing crimes. In almost all cases these are petty crimes like pickpocketing or shoplifting. The destination countries are selected according to the participant’s knowledge of penal law or perceptions regarding the risks of apprehension. For instance, countries like Switzerland, Italy and Spain seem to be perceived as quite lenient towards shoplifting, as long as the value of the stolen goods does not go beyond certain level.

The discussion around reconviction after release is, of course, more complex and deserves more space. However, in this paper we only intended to outline the process by which ex-prisoners experience reentry as they leave prison.

**Concluding discussion**
As noted above, aspects of most theories of desistance and reentry mentioned in the literature review section were confirmed in this study. Factors like age (Farrington, 1986; Rowe and Tittle, 1977; Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990), family, employment (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Horney et al, 1995), peers, hope (Burnett and Maruna, 2004) and self identity (Maruna, 2001) were mentioned in the participant's discourses over and over again. How they interact with each other or with social events or resources was also captured (see also Schinkel, 2014).

However, apart from testing the presence of these factors, the main aim of this paper is to place these factors temporally in what seems to be a process of reentry. By ‘process’ we mean a set of sequences ordered logically on a time scale. As argued above, it appears that there are five distinct stages of the reentry process, each of them with different priorities and challenges:

Fig. 1. The process of reentry
The first stage – Anticipation – is dominated by anxiety and hope. The first priority is to secure release as soon as possible. Almost all participants are optimistic about the future and are willing to start a new life. In the Recovery and Reunion stage participants prioritize the family. They tend to spend as much time as possible with the family in a safe environment provided by their own house. During this time, they also deal with the aftermath of prison time.

Activation is a crucial stage when ex-prisoners try to become self-sustainable and economically active. If they succeed in this stage they move on to the Consolidation phase when they internalize a new self-identity as virtuous citizens (e.g. father, husband etc.). Being autonomous and useful for their family provide ex-prisoners new insights into their own self identity and sustain the hope for a better future without crime.

With no social networks and no resources, some ex-prisoners feel trapped into a lifestyle of crime. As life outside prison is harder than the one inside prison their sense of hope and optimism for a law abiding life fades away. Relapse in their case is just one step away and is perceived as the only way possible.

Of course, the realities lived and described by our participants are much more complex, individualized and nuanced than this model suggests. However, these stages seem to characterize more or less almost all the journeys experienced by our participants, beyond the details. Participants with different ethnic background also followed this process. Due to the limited potential of
their networks and the precarity of their own human capital (e.g. little school, few vocational training), Roma participants were not able to capitalize to a full extent on the large social solidarity or their entrepreneurial spirit. The Roma participants in our study followed the process described above at the same pace, with the same difficulties but with less personal and social resources.

This diagram and process description resemble quite strongly with the ‘cycle of change’ as developed by Prochaska and DiClemente (1983). As in the ‘cycle of change’, not all ex-prisoners move through all these stages after the same amount of time. On the contrary, some ex-prisoners may speed up some stages and spend more time on others. Moreover, reaching the consolidation stage is not a guarantee for non-offending. Moving between stages is a rather fluid journey for some offenders. Therefore, the reentry stages should not be seen as distinct. There are many cross cutting themes but their order of priority seems to be different from one stage to another. Family, for instance, remains important for all stages but it seem to be the first priority in the recovery and reunion stage.

In some phases participants seem to prioritize different aims. This observation has important practice implications. For instance, employment interventions in the first two weeks from release may not be as effective as a few weeks later, when the ex-prisoner may feel ready to make concrete steps towards becoming autonomous. This finding may be also important in particular for the half-way house programs that prioritize employment over family relationships immediately after release. These programs may become more effective if they
involve families and recovery services as much as possible in the first stage of release.

The limited mobility in the first two weeks means that recovery services (e.g. counseling, health assistance, drug services and so on) should be organized as close as possible to the neighborhoods where the ex-prisoners tend to return (see also Hipp et al, 2010). Employment, vocational training and education should be available for the ex-prisoners as soon as possible after week two. Of course, prior planning and preparation can only help. In order to help ex-prisoners to survive away from crime for a longer period of time – increasing therefore the chances for becoming autonomous - a release grant should be available at least for those with small social capital (the ‘lone crusaders’, for instance). The level of this grant should be high enough to allow ex-prisoners perform a decent life and thus fostering hope and optimism.

As this study is based on a relatively small sample of 58 participants selected from only one region, these results should interpreted cautiously. It may be that we could not include in our sample some profiles that may have a totally different post-release trajectory. Moreover, some of our conclusions may not travel so well to other social-cultural contexts. However, when comparing our conclusions with Calverley (2013) findings we can note that reentry pathways are deeply embedded into the cultural and ethnic features of those involved. Like the Indians and Bangladeshis in London, the Roma ex-offenders tent to benefit from the love and solidarity of their families. On the contrary, the
attitude of the Romanian society towards crime and offenders is much more exclusionary which makes the ex-prisoner’s journey back into freedom more difficult and solitary.

This study has multiple ramifications and connections with existing research. They can be further explored in future studies. For instance, the welcoming ritual performed by the Roma ex-prisoners can be analyzed as a rite of passage, as described by Maruna (2010). This may provide some useful insights on how these rituals could foster new non-criminal identities or celebrate criminal identities. Employment seems indeed to play an important role. However, we have noted that employment is actually confined into a broader context of becoming autonomous and the capacity to deliver for others. Furthermore, generating income involves many times participation in hustle, informal, quasi-formal or formal economy. Sometimes, the same participant participated in more than one form of economy in the same time. More attention should be paid to what the new economy can offer to ex-prisoners.

More research should be conducted to test whether the processes described above are evident in other socio-cultural contexts. It may be that different solidarity structures or degrees and forms of State involvement could impact on this process, both in terms of content or time scale. Supervision after release may also impact one way or another on the process. How the process works with different groups – like women, drug users etc. – can be another direction to explore in the future.
References:


