Dealing with the stigma

How eight men experience and cope with their “sex offender” label

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Abstract

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This study concerns individuals convicted of sex offences and their experiences with their stigmatized status both in prison and post-release. The study is based on qualitative interviews with eight adult men, all convicted of at least one sex offence. The eight men interviewed were relatively recently released from prison, and most were still subject to terms and conditions set by the Norwegian Correctional Services. Five had been sentenced to regular prison sentences, two had been sentenced to preventive detention, and one had been given a community sentence in addition to imprisonment.

These men’s experiences in prison involved hearing about and witnessing violence and threats towards other persons convicted of sex offences. A few had been bullied themselves. Some were advised by prison staff to come up with a believable cover story to avoid negative sanctions from other prisoners. As a result, most informants did their best not to be recognized as a “sex offender” in prison, although some could not avoid the label. However, they were all highly aware that they were unwanted and seen as outcasts by the prison community.

Their experiences in prison seem to be relevant for their choice of coping strategies after release. Drawing on theories of stigma and labeling, this thesis explores the different strategies used to escape stigma and negative sanctions after release. My results indicate that these strategies in most cases were a result of other’s perceived attitudes towards people
convicted of sex offences as a group. Many informants had experienced broken bonds with family and friends as a result of their convictions. Furthermore, this group of offenders is sometimes negatively portrayed in the media, leaving individuals convicted of sexual offences with labels such as “monster”. This thesis also explores the informants’ thoughts and feelings linked to being labeled, and how they describe their self-images and future lookouts. Some still presented their futures with hope and enthusiasm, while others seemed somewhat hopeless. They described how their status as a person convicted of sexual offences did, and could possibly, limit their opportunities to live the life they wanted.

The idea of Norway as exceptional when it comes to post-release reintegration and inclusiveness is thus challenged by this study. When an action is seen as extremely deviant and unwanted, the person responsible is labeled as well. And the label seems to stick, also in a country where no registration or notification laws for persons convicted of sex offences exist. The recidivism rates for this group of offenders are low, but the desistance literature suggests that belonging to a community and a social network is of great importance for re-building an identity as a non-sex offender. What the informants wanted was to be able to be open about their conviction and treated like any other citizen despite the fact that they had once committed a sexual offence. Their stories indicate that there is a need to review the idea of the inclusive Norwegian society, concerning this topic.
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First and foremost, I would like to thank the eight men who were willing to trust me and talk to me about a difficult topic. You have been indescribably brave. I appreciate our conversations which I have learned a lot from. I truly hope this thesis serves your stories justice, and I wish you all the best for the future.

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1 Introduction

In 2018 the then Norwegian Minister of Justice, Sylvi Listhaug, appeared in the media stating that all child molesters are monsters. The monster label was meant to deter anyone considering abusing or touching a child. “If you rape a child, you are a monster”, she stated as a fact (NRK, 2018). This statement created discussion and social media exploded with comments, many in support of her frankness. A fair amount of the comments held negative attitudes towards people convicted of sexual offences and served as examples of how these offenders are a marginalized and stigmatized group that most people would hate having as a neighbor. Several studies have shown that popular attitudes towards people who have committed sexual offences are more negative and punitive than attitudes towards other offenders (Kjelsberg & Loos, 2008; Pickett, Mancini, & Mears, 2013; Rogers & Ferguson, 2011). How the media presents sex crimes has been given some of the fault for the perpetual “moral panic” (Cohen, 2011; Fox, 2012) concerning persons who have sexually offended. In the international literature we find countless examples of how they are often portrayed as incurable, monstrous predators in the media (Farmer, McAlinden, & Maruna, 2016; Mancini, 2018; McCartan, 2010; Willis, Levenson, & Ward, 2010).

There is no doubt that sexual offending is a serious social problem that affects many people (Marshall, Marshall, Serran, & O'Brien, 2011). According to a meta-analysis covering 22 countries, 7.9% of men and 19.7% of women had suffered some form of sexual abuse prior to the age of eighteen (Pereda, Guilera, Forns, & Gómez-Benito, 2009). In a Norwegian study, 24% of the women in the sample and 12% of the men, reported that they had experienced sexually offensive behavior before the age of 16 (Steine et al., 2012). The negative consequences of being a victim of childhood sexual abuse or rape as an adult are well documented (see Marshall et al., 2011; NOU 2017:12, 2017). As a result of the ever increasing focus on the issue of sexual offending, society has become highly aware of how widespread the problem is, and there is consensus that since the 1990’s we have experienced a spike in public concern over people who have sexually offended (Fox, 2012; Mancini, 2018).
1.1 Background

In some countries, laws and policies have seemed to follow or coincide with news coverage and subsequent public concern (Mancini, 2018). When I started working on ideas for this thesis, I downloaded an app called “sex offenders” from my app provider. Although I was not willing to pay for it and thus only got the “lite” version of the app, it allows me to access a map with little red pins showing where registered US persons convicted of sexual offences live. By clicking the pins, the name and picture of a registered so-called sex offender, usually a man, pops up, in addition to a few facts about his looks, race, address and conviction. For instance, conviction details can include descriptions like “child pornography”, “2nd degree sex offence” or “rape first degree, child sexual abuse committed against a child under 12”. In this way and others, people convicted of sex offences are, in the US, publicly labeled as deviants. They are considered individuals that should be avoided, closely monitored and strictly controlled. Thus, to deal with the public concern and to empower local residents to be aware of and protect themselves and their children from persons convicted of sexual offences living in their neighborhoods, the US and a few other countries\(^1\) have implemented Sexual Offender Registration and Community Notification (SORN)\(^2\) laws. In short, these laws involve mandatory registration, community notification and legal restrictions for persons convicted of sex offences (McAlinden, 2012; Tewksbury, 2012). As “sex offences” is a wide category, not all persons that are subject to registration are convicted of violent sex offences. As definitions vary, so do requirements of registration between countries and from state to state in the US (Rolfe & Tewksbury, 2018; Schultz, 2014). In some US states, offenders must register for life in registries that are available through web sites, in police departments or in libraries (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Robbers, 2009), or through the mentioned apps that are easily accessible even for persons like me, on the other side of the globe. In various states in the US, persons will also have to notify their communities about their offending history and are not allowed to enter certain areas or “Child Safety Zones” (Pratt, 2016).

\(^{1}\) At least 10 countries have implemented some form of sex offender registry. However, in addition to the US, South Korea is the only other country to permit public access to the sex offender registry (Rolfe & Tewksbury, 2018).

\(^{2}\) Washington state was the first to pass a notification statute in 1989, and notification laws are now known generically as Megan’s Laws (Presser & Gunnison, 1999). After the murder and rape of a young girl named Megan, Megan’s Law (New Jersey) came into existence in 1994. A federal Megan’s Law followed in 1996 and led to the introduction of a range of new registration and notification laws. Prior to Megan’s Law, The Jacob Wetterling Act of 1994 required all states in the US to register certain types of offenders. Other SORN laws named after child victims have later supplemented the Jacob Wetterling Act and Megan’s Law (Rolfe & Tewksbury, 2018).
These SORN laws have been widely criticized for making reintegration difficult after release for people convicted of sexual offences, and some have argued that we are witnessing in these countries is a “war on sex offenders” where persons convicted of sexual offences are “named and shamed” (Hinds & Daly, 2001). Extensive research has suggested that the mentioned policies are unfortunate both for the offender and the rest of society. The public labeling of people convicted of sex offences expressed through SORN laws is said to contribute to sustain stigmatization, and affect the released individual’s possibilities to find a job, proper housing and successfully return to society after release (Bailey & Klein, 2018; Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994; Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Levenson & Cotter, 2005a; Schultz, 2014; Tewksbury & Copes, 2012; Willis et al., 2010). Whereas England and Wales have adopted SORN laws and implemented very strict policies concerning this group of offenders, most other European countries, including Norway, have rejected registries on rights-based grounds and opted for more inclusionary therapeutic interventions. Within these countries there has been a well-established tradition of medical and scientific practice as the fundamental approach to sexual offending. In short, the approach tends to focus more on treatment as opposed to management of the offender (see McAlinden, 2012 for a full review). This is arguably the prevailing approach in Norway.

Thus, unlike the countries with SORN laws, Norway has focused more on inclusion and reintegration of persons convicted of sexual offences both in prison and after release. In 2010, Norway made changes to the Penal Code, which in general has led to longer prison sentences for sexual offences. However, policies still differ quite distinctively from the US and UK. Several structural policies are put in place to make reintegration possible and the penal system is in many ways built to provide a new start. People’s criminal history is strictly confidential, even if they are convicted of a sexual crime. The exception is when applying for certain types of jobs that require a clean record, mainly jobs where one is responsible for other (vulnerable) people. Furthermore, there are no laws that imposes registration or notification towards neighbors or the community for people convicted of sexual offences. Thus, the time offenders serve in prison is officially all the punishment they receive. High crime societies (such as the US) are said to rely more upon stigmatization (Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994). Still, there is reason to believe that stigmatization towards people who have sexually offended is an issue that needs to be dealt with in Norway too, although the system is built for inclusion.
Understanding how persons convicted of sexual offences experience their lowered social status, and how recognition of being socially devalued may or may not affect them emotionally, is important. The international research base in this area is extensive due to SORN laws. In Norway, research has so far mostly focused on the therapeutic aspects of sexual offending. The research includes mapping and evaluating the treatment options offered to people who have sexually offended (Askeland, Jensen, & Moen, 2017; Friestad, 2005; Holt, Nilsen, Askeland, & Moen, 2016; Nøttestad, 2006), exploring the recognition and understanding of the sexual offence among the offenders themselves (Brantsæter, 2001; Hermstad, 2006), and measuring attitudes towards child sexual abuse as a phenomenon (Tennfjord, 2006). Studies have also shown how people convicted of sex offences are being excluded in Norwegian prisons, and how narratives about exclusion of them are used by other prisoners to counter stigma and reposition themselves as morally conscious (Ugelvik, 2015).

However, we know very little about how general attitudes, labels and stigma affect released (s)ex offenders in a small country like Norway.

1.2 Research questions

An understanding of how persons convicted of sexual offences receive, process and interpret messages about their socially undesirable, marginalized social status can advance understandings of how formal and informal responses can effectively achieve social control (Tewksbury, 2012). To understand the width of this issue, there is a need to explore the perceptions of those most impacted by the stigma – persons released from prison after serving a sex offence conviction. In this thesis I ask:

- *How do persons convicted of sexual offences experience attitudes towards them post-release, and what strategies do they make use of to cope with or escape the attached stigma?*

- *How are these post-release strategies connected to their prison experiences?*
To answer these questions, I will include a chapter describing the stigmatization processes the eight informants in this study experienced while in prison. However, my main focus is how the alleged inclusionary and rehabilitation-oriented Norwegian society welcome offenders back after serving a prison sentence for a sexual offence.

1.3 Context: Norway

Norway’s structural policies seem closely aligned with what Braithwaite (1989) has called reintegrative shaming. Braithwaite’s theories will be presented more detailed in chapter 3 but in short, this type of shaming, unlike the disintegrative type, is temporary. It is used to communicate censure to an individual, but ultimately aimed at correcting the offender’s behaviour and reintegrating him or her back into society. When a prisoner in Norway has served his time, he is done with the wrongful actions that sent him to prison. Thus, officially, the loss of freedom is all the punishment convicted persons suffer (Johnsen & Granheim, 2012). The 300-350 persons convicted of sexual offences who are released from Norwegian prisons every year (Statistikkbanken, 2016) should – on paper – have every possibility to return to society as an ordinary citizen, at least more so than in countries where policies are more limiting and exclusionary.

1.3.1 Scandinavian penal exceptionalism

Compared to other countries, Norway and the other Nordic countries have a relatively small prison population, and it has been said that Nordic social democratic welfare states stand out as exceptional (Dullum & Ugelvik, 2012; Pratt, 2008). Thus, “the Scandinavian exceptionalism” (Pratt, 2008) and the Scandinavian and Nordic prison policy is known worldwide. The Scandinavian penal-welfare model has been held up by many as an ideal, as the prisons in these countries are often described as more humane, constructive and welfare-oriented than prisons elsewhere (Todd-Kvam & Ugelvik, forthcoming)).

The roots of Scandinavian exceptionalism are, according to Pratt (2008), “to be found in the highly egalitarian cultural values and social structures in these countries” (p. 120). The fact
that Scandinavian countries have a quite well-functioning welfare-state is also seen as an important part of the foundation for the exceptionalism (Dullum & Ugelvik, 2012; Smith & Ugelvik, 2017). However, Nordic prison researchers have traditionally been far less positive in their descriptions of prison conditions and penal policies, and the Scandinavian exceptionism and the assertion that penal practices in these countries are particularly humane has been challenged (see e.g. Christie, 1981; Shammas, 2016; Smith, 2012). To imply that Norwegian prisons are more humane is, according to Neumann (2012), to imply that it is less painful and less stigmatizing to be imprisoned in Norway, and that it does not hold serious consequences for the rest of the prisoners’ lives. She argues that the observed differences in material standards does not necessarily influence how prisoners experience imprisonment. Barker (2013) argues that Nordic penal regimes are “Janus-faced” with one side that is mild and benign and another that is more disciplining and oppressive. Furthermore, Johnsen and Granheim (2012) found that there were few differences in how prisoners in Norway and the UK rated their quality of life in prison, despite the fact that the material standards were quite different. Thus, theories of the alleged “exceptionalism” have been criticized for overstating the degree to which Nordic penal order is based on humaneness and social solidarity. In other words, there seems to be a gap between how the rest of the world view Nordic prisons and penal policies, and how these institutions are seen by Nordic prison researchers (Smith & Ugelvik, 2017). Different cultures yield different interpretations of the same issues, and people tend to see the world through their own cultural frames.

Furthermore, Norway and the Scandinavian countries have been characterized by high levels of trust in the state and its welfare systems. They are also described as very egalitarian societies, with a narrow field of class differences (Pratt, 2008; Smith & Ugelvik, 2017). Equality as a cultural value has been held high in the Norwegian society. However, Ugelvik (2012) has stated that the darker side to this equality is the related pressure to conform, to be like everyone else, and not stand out as different. The Scandinavian culture of equality has thus in many ways also been a powerful technique of social control. A question that has been asked is whether the Nordic countries really are cultures of equality or if they simply have mechanisms for excluding different populations in other ways than the English-speaking world (Dullum & Ugelvik, 2012). The question can be raised whether we are talking about immigrants, drug users, or, as in this thesis, persons convicted of sexual offences. My hypothesis is that there are limits to inclusiveness in the Norwegian society, even if persons
convicted of sexual offences are not put on a registry for all to see.

1.3.2 The Norwegian Correctional Services

Norway is a small country that holds 38 prisons. Even though some of the countries smallest prisons have recently been closed down or administratively absorbed by larger prisons, the average Norwegian prison is still comparably small (Johnsen & Granheim, 2012). Out of approximately 4000 prison cells, about two thirds are high-security. In addition to the prisons, the Norwegian Correctional system includes 17 probation offices in 40 locations (Kriminalomsorgen, 2019). Unlike many other jurisdictions, e.g. the UK (Ievins, 2014), Norway has no prisons solely for persons convicted of sexual offences. A few prisons have units that offer specialized programs for persons who have sexually offended, but most prisons have a mixed prison population. Thus, persons convicted of sex offences live side by side with other prisoners. The rationale for the mixed population is the thought of inclusion and normality, and the general principle of allowing prisoners to serve their sentences close to their home and family (Storvik, 2011). The dark side is a potentially higher risk of being excluded simply for being convicted of a sexual offence among other groups of offenders.

In 2017, about 430 persons\textsuperscript{3} were sentenced to prison for sexual offences in Norway. In addition, 8 were sentenced to preventive detention for these types of offences (Statistikkbanken, 2017a). There has been a substantial increase in the proportion of prisoners serving sentences for sex offences for the past 20 years, and the increase is seen as a challenge for the Norwegian Correctional Services. Persons convicted of sexual offences made up about 16 % of the total prison population in 2017, compared to about only 6 % in 2000 (Kriminalomsorgsdirektoratet, 2017, p. 33). The main reason for this increase is not a higher number of persons convicted of sexual offences (although we have seen a small increase in convictions as well), but a new Penal Code leading to more severe punishment for serious crimes (Johnsen & Granheim, 2012), including longer prison sentences for sexual offences (Shammas, 2016). Current court practice witness of an extensive increase in lengths of sentencing for some types of sexual offences for the past ten years (Hansen, 2013), and it has

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{3} 430 reactions could mean less than 430 persons if some were sentenced twice in one year. This is possible, but certainly not common.}
been argued that Norway’s penal state has moved in a more punitive direction (Shammas, 2016). Several Continental European countries have in fact for the past years enacted more restrictive laws on sexual offending (McAlinden, 2012). In addition to longer sentences for sexual offences, other less severe crimes are more often than before subject of other forms of punishment than imprisonment, leading to a larger proportion of persons convicted of sexual offences in Norwegian prisons (Shammas, 2016).

The core values of humanity and normality that permeate Norwegian criminal execution can be considered cornerstones of the country’s correctional system. In other countries (e.g. the US) humane conditions are not as highlighted as a prison political ideal, as the prison system is characterized by ideas of the prisoners as excluded from society (Gröning, 2019, p. 56). In Norway, the focus is mainly on recognizing that prisoners are citizens with the same legal rights as everyone else. The aims of reforming offenders are an integral part of the Norwegian penal and legal policies, thus rehabilitation and preparing prisoners for a life outside prison is seen as an important part of the punishment (Storvik, 2011).

### 1.3.3 Sexual offence legislation in Norway

Chapter 26, sections 291 to 320, in the Norwegian Penal Code concerns sexual offences. The criminal offences this section covers, ranges from acquiring sexual depictions or images of children to more severe offences like aggravated sexual assault, incest or sexual activity with children (Lovdata, 2015). Sexual offences are thus not a fixed, homogenic category, and the severity of the offences differ. Violation may lead to a fine or imprisonment, depending on the severity of the violation. The maximum sentence in Norway is 21 years imprisonment⁴. For prisoners with sentences longer than 74 days it is possible to apply for early release from prison on license after having served two thirds of the sentence. After an overall (risk) assessment, some licensees will have to report to the probation office at regular times for a set period after release. This mandatory reporting is called “møteplikt” in Norwegian, and shall as a main rule only be set when it is seen as necessary to prevent relapse (Storvik, 2011). About 35 % of prisoners released on parole after serving two thirds of their full sentence are subject

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⁴ An exception is the 30-year maximum sentence for crimes related to genocide, crimes against humanity or other war crimes as further specified in chapter 16 of the Penal Code.
of such mandatory reporting (KSF, 2012). Not all, but many, people convicted of sexual offences will be in this group. The period of mandatory reporting is part of the execution of sentence, and severe violations of terms or conditions can lead to re-imprisonment (Storvik, 2011).

**Preventive detention**

As an alternative to a regular prison sentence, a person who has committed (or attempted to commit) a sexual offence, can be subject to *preventive detention* if a sentence of imprisonment is deemed insufficient to protect the life, health or freedom of other persons. Such a reaction requires an obvious risk that the offender will again commit a serious offence (Johnsen, 2013; Storvik, 2011). Preventive detention is a special sanction that combines punishment and treatment logics. As a punishment, it is reactive, but it also features proactive public protection as a core part of its rationale. When a person is sentenced to preventive detention, the sentence includes a timeframe that cannot exceed 21 years. This timeframe can however be extended (see Johnsen, 2013 for a full review). Prisoners sentenced to preventive detention can also be released before the timeframe expires, and the rules for early release from preventive detention are covered in chapter 7 of the Norwegian penal Code. In short, the prisoner needs to have shown self-development and progression, and a thorough risk assessment is performed before the prisoner may be released on parole. Thus, a condition for release is reduction of risk of new offences as a result of the offender being rehabilitated (Storvik, 2011). If the prisoner is granted early release in court, conditions of mandatory reporting almost always apply. Other terms and conditions involving treatment, housing, work, social network and the like can also be set by the court or Corrections, depending on the type of crime and factors that are considered likely to influence relapse. For persons who have sexually offended against children, conditions can for instance include not being allowed to be in contact with children under a certain age.

In rare preventive detention cases the court can decide that the prisoner released on parole must have residence in an institution or a municipal housing unit for more than one year. The court can further set as a condition that the parolee can be held back in the institution against

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5 Section 40 in the Penal Code
his will and be brought back if he tries to abscond, if necessary, by use of coercion or assistance from public authority (The Penal Code, chapter 7, § 45 c and in the old Penal Code § 39 g). In Norwegian this is commonly referred to as “refusjonsordning”, meaning that the prisoner is given early release under the condition that the need for societal protection is safeguarded by an external part. In short, it involves housing in a municipal housing unit, where personnel can keep the parolee under constant surveillance. The target group is mainly legally sane persons that are intellectually disabled, but other groups can also be subject of this control, e. g. prisoners on preventive detention with a drug addiction or less severe mental disorders (Storvik, 2011). One of the informants in this study, Erik, was subject of this scheme and lived in a municipal housing unit with severe restrictions.
2 Research and theory

For the past three decades, we have seen an increasing focus on treatment and rehabilitation for people who have sexually offended and the issue of sexual abuse is now seen as a public health problem in most western countries (see e.g. Laws, 2000). Even so, persons who commit sexual offences are not necessarily seen by the public as someone who first and foremost needs health care. “Sex offender” is among the most highly stigmatized labels that exist in modern societies and research has shown that people hold more punitive attitudes towards this group than other groups of offenders (Kjelsberg & Loos, 2008; Rogers & Ferguson, 2011). Few groups of criminal offenders incite as much fear and disdain among the public as people convicted of sexual offences, leaving them with labels such as “monster”, “predator”, “evil pervert” or “the worst of the worst” (Breen, 2004; King & Roberts, 2015; Pickett et al., 2013; Tewksbury & Copes, 2012; Willis et al., 2010). Some have argued that these labels can lead us to see persons convicted of sexual offences as a qualitative distinct group, which can again lead to stereotyping where their stigma is more important than any other traits. This can potentially induce a negative Pygmalion effect, which means that the persons described start to see themselves as others see them – as inherently dangerous moral strangers who do not deserve a chance of redemption (Willis et al., 2010).

2.1 A few facts about persons who have sexually offended

First of all, individuals convicted of sexual offences are a very heterogeneous group, and both the offences that they commit and the victims that they offend against are qualitatively different (Babchishin, Hanson, & VanZuylen, 2015; Robertiello & Terry, 2007). They also differ when it comes to level of risk for new offences (Hanson, Harris, Letourneau, Helmus, & Thornton, 2017). Furthermore, so-called “stranger danger” is overrated, as the offender is most likely to be someone the victim knows than a stranger (King & Roberts, 2015; Pain, 2006). And most importantly, recidivism rates among persons convicted of sexual offences (as a group) are in fact low, especially when it comes to new sex offences (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson et al., 2017). In a meta-study including more than 23,000 individuals convicted of sexual offences, only 13% of the total sample were known to have committed a
new sexual offense within the average 4- to 5-year follow-up period (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998). A Nordic study suggested that the recidivism rates for this group in Norway were as low as 3-5% (Graunbøl et al., 2012). Despite generally low recidivism rates, the issue of rehabilitation for this group continues to raise public concern, and stigmatization towards them is widespread. The concept of labeling someone as “not like us” is crucial in theories of labeling and stigma. Such labels can have severe consequences for the possibilities of persons convicted of sexual offences to live good, crime-free lives after release.

### 2.2 The concept of stigma

In 1963, sociologist Erving Goffman published his seminal book “Stigma – Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity”. Here he describes stigma as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (Goffman, 1963, p. 9). A stigma is an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated, and the person with a stigma is believed to be “not quite human”:

> While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind – in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one (Goffman, 1963, p. 12).

Thus, stigma is a stain, an indication to the world that one has been singled out as a shameful, morally discredited human being (Goode, 2005).

Goffman (1963) mentions three different types of stigma. The stigma that manifests itself from physical characteristics he calls “abominations of the body”, the stigma linked to beliefs or behaviors he calls “blemishes of individual character”, and finally, there is the “tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion” (p. 14). When we’re discussing stigma linked to having committed a sexual offence, the second type is the most relevant. One cannot see the stigma (although people tend to think that they can (Hudson, 2005)), but once it is known the person who carries it will often be victim of stigmatization. This means that for persons convicted of sexual offences, dealing with the stigma can mean hiding the fact that one has committed such
a crime, to escape direct stigmatization. However, one cannot necessarily escape the general attitudes towards this group, and as a result one might feel stigmatized even if no one knows about one’s offending history.

Stigmatization results in the subsequent transformation of social status to one that is below the rest of society (Schultz, 2014). Furthermore, according to Goode (2005), highly stigmatized persons have two options. One is to resist or reject their stigmatized status by forming subcultures of persons who share their characteristic, and to treat their difference from the majority as a badge of honor – or at least, no cause for shame. For persons who have sexually offended, this option in most cases does not seem feasible (although there are certain groups of for instance pedophiles who claim that their views are inherently normal and well accounted for). However, the second option might. This is where the stigmatized person engages in *internalization*, meaning that he learns to hold the same negative feelings towards himself and his devaluated traits as the majority does. Feelings of self-hatred might occur, and in time he might accept the negative treatment and feel as if the majority has the right to stigmatize him for what he has done (Goode, 2005).

### 2.3 Labeling Theory

As early as in 1938, Frank Tannenbaum proposed that being tagged, identified and treated as a problem will have consequences for a person’s future behavior, and that “the person will become the thing the he is described as being” (Tannenbaum, 1938, p. 20). Later, Edwin Lemert (1951) pursued Tannenbaum’s insights, but with greater complexity and detail. He distinguished between what he called primary and secondary deviation and demonstrated how the social reactions from others to an individual’s behavior can be more important than the behavior itself. *Primary* deviation is simply the enactment of deviant behavior itself. But when primary deviation results in punishment, the individuals engaging in it tend to be singled out, stigmatized, and socially isolated. This isolation from mainstream society for engaging in deviant behavior can reinforce the individual’s commitment to unconventional deviant groups and the individual’s commitment to the deviant behavior itself. In other words, the person is forced to engage in further deviant behavior, or to engage in what Lemert (1951)
refers to as secondary deviation.

Both Lemert and Tannenbaum emphasized the ironic consequences of condemning and punishing rule breakers, as it can make further deviance more likely. Their theories have been elaborated by many, and what we today recognize as labeling theory was mostly spelled out in the 1960’s with Howard Becker as one of the main contributors.

Social rules define situations and the kinds of behavior appropriate to them, specifying some actions as “right” and forbidding others as “wrong”. When a rule is enforced, the person who is supposed to have broken it may be seen as a special kind of person, one who cannot be trusted to live by the rules agreed on by the group. He is regarded an outsider (Becker, 1963, p. 1).

Being caught in committing deviant and forbidden acts will thus leave the person with a label. We can say that the labeling or stigmatization process entails two steps. First, an audience labels an activity deviant, and second, it labels a specific individual as a deviant (Goode, 2005). According to Becker, labeling theory is not so much an explanation for why certain individuals engage in deviant behavior in the first place, as it is a perspective whose main insights tell us that the labeling process is crucial and cannot be ignored, as it can lead to further deviant behavior. One of the most crucial steps in the process of building a stable pattern of deviant behavior is likely to be the experience of being caught and publicly labeled as deviant. “Being caught and branded as deviant has important consequences for one’s further social participation and self-image. The most important consequence is a drastic change in the individual’s public identity” (Becker, 1963, pp. 31-32). Furthermore,

Possession of one deviant trait may have a generalized symbolic value, so that people automatically assume that its bearer possesses other undesirable traits allegedly associated with it (Becker, 1963, p. 33).

Thus, stigma and labeling are closely linked to stereotyping. Goffman explains how we “in social situations with an individual known or perceived to have a stigma, […] are likely […] to employ categorizations that do not fit” (Goffman, 1963, p. 31). When confronting someone with a stigma, we tend to raise the question of what kind of person this is that would break such an important rule. The answer to the question will typically be "one who is different
from the rest of us, who cannot or will not act as a moral human being, and therefore might break important rules” (Becker, 1963, p. 34). The person is left with a label, stating that he is not like the ones labeling him. The deviant identification becomes the controlling one and can give a person a new status, and a status as a deviant can in many cases override all other statuses. This “master status” leads others to treat the person as though he is generally, rather than specifically, deviant. Such labeling can in turn produce a self-fulfilling prophecy, shaping the person in the image people have of him. In the case of persons who have committed sexual offences, the status as “sex offender” will become the master status. According to Becker (1963), it will likely override all other statuses connected to that person, like father, doctor, or football player. People add characteristics to the person, based on the fact that he has previously committed a sexual offence. Further, the person will be cut off by family, potential employers, and the community. In short, how he is treated will deny him “the ordinary means of carrying on the routines of everyday life open to most people” (Becker, 1963, p. 35). In turn, the individual will internalize his master status as deviant, and be forced into further deviance. Thus, labeling can have important consequences for one’s further self-image and social functioning. This is the core of labeling theory.

### 2.3.1 Modified labeling theory

Becker (1963) recognizes that not everyone caught in a deviant act and labeled deviant moves inevitably towards greater deviance. Still, labeling theory has been criticized for being too deterministic in directly linking the process of labeling someone as deviant to the emergence of further deviant acts (Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994; Raybeck, 1988). Some critics also downplay the role of factors such as stigma and stereotyping. As an answer to this criticism, Link, Cullen, Struening, Shrout, and Dohrenwend (1989) introduced a modified labeling theory (MLT). While labeling theory would suggest that public labels and reactions from others can limit one’s life opportunities, the MLT suggests that regardless of experiences of direct discrimination based on an assigned label, an individual’s life opportunities can still be negatively impacted by the perceived threat of being stigmatized. It suggests that an individual may in fact limit his own life opportunities in order to avoid the potential consequences of being negatively labeled. The MLT was originally designed by Link et al. (1989) to capture mental patient’s experiences. Their main point is that the more patients (or in our setting, persons convicted of sexual offences) believe that they will be devalued and
discriminated against, the more they feel threatened by interacting with others. I will briefly present the five steps of this modified theory, and the coping strategies it includes.

In the first step, societal conceptions of what it means to be a member of a stigmatized group develop. This first step applies to all members of society, those who will in turn be labeled, and those who will not. How people picture persons convicted of sexual offences can for instance occur as a result of the media’s focus on sensational or stereotypical high-profile cases, which will be described later in this chapter. Through different sources, people internalize societal conceptions of what it means to be labeled mentally ill or a “sex offender”. These conceptions include the extent to which people believe that patients or offenders will be devalued or discriminated against. The second step involves an individual being officially labeled and becoming aware of societal conceptions. An official label, like a conviction for a sex offence (in Link et al.’s study, treatment contact as a mental patient) is important because “a seemingly innocuous array of beliefs becomes applicable to oneself” (Link et al., 1989, p. 403). It now matters whether one believes that people will devalue and discriminate against a person who is, in our case, convicted of sexual offences. Mingus and Burchfield (2012) explains how in this step, a person being placed on a sex offender registry is permanently establishing his stigmatized identity. However, a person convicted of a sexual offence may also become aware of how he is viewed by society through other sources, such as family or friends, media attention, or other stigmatized individuals (Mingus & Burchfield, 2012, p. 99).

In Norway, where persons convicted of sexual offences are not placed on a registry, they will thus still likely recognize that their status as a “sex offender” is unwanted by many and become aware of how others perceive someone with that label. The third step involves the individual’s response to the stigmatizing label. Link et al. (1989) present three possible responses or coping strategies – secrecy, withdrawal and education. These three responses are highly relevant when describing the strategies used by informants in this study to deal with their stigma. I will briefly present them here.

**Secrecy, withdrawal and education**

The first possible response is secrecy, where the individual chooses to hide his stigma from potential employers, friends and perhaps even partners and family members to avoid
rejection. The second possible response is *withdrawal*, which means that the individual chooses to only have contact with those who know about his offence and accept him already and avoid social interaction with others. In other words, the person will limit his social interaction to those who know about and tend to accept his stigmatized condition (Link et al., 1989). Goffman (1963) notes that this group often consists of persons he calls the “own” (those who are similarly stigmatized) and the “wise” (those who already know about and accept the stigma). The withdrawal response will protect the stigmatized person from the potential rejection he would face if he tried to apply for jobs, seek friends or the like (Link et al., 1989). The third response is *education*, also referred to as “preventive telling”. The purpose is to hopefully enlighten people to ward off negative attitudes. Mingus and Burchfield (2012) explains how the education strategy would apply for persons convicted of sexual offences:

In the case of sex offenders, this would entail voluntarily disclosing one’s status as a sex offender, while at the same time explaining why his offense was different, or why not all sex offenders are the same, or other information that could mitigate the impact of the disclosure (p. 102)

According to Link et al. (1989), trying to change others’ views through education, does not connote passive acceptance of others’ attitudes toward a label, as secrecy and withdrawal might. Still, “their need to educate suggests that patients consider stigmatization likely, a possibility that critics of labeling theory deny” (p. 403).

**Individual barriers and their potential consequences**

Step four in Link et. al’s MLT involves the consequences of the stigmatizing process on the individual. These consequences may occur as a result of the individual’s beliefs about societal attitudes, or as a result of the individual’s attempt to avoid the potential consequences by withdrawing. Either one can have a damaging impact on an individual’s efforts to rejoin society. Here, the MLT differs from the well-known labeling theories. MLT suggests that an individual may limit his own opportunities in order to avoid the potential consequences of being negatively labeled. Hence, it is not the labeling itself that limits his opportunities, it is his attempts to avoid the consequences. Burchfield and Mingus (2008) calls this “individual barriers” and found that almost one quarter of the 23 persons they interviewed, who were all
convicted of sexual offences, reported that they purposefully and voluntarily limited their interactions with others and distanced themselves from family, friends and neighbors. These respondents indicated that this self-imposed isolation was necessary to minimize risks of other people finding out about their designation.

The fifth and final step in the MLT suggests that the individual might be more vulnerable to further problems as a result of the occurrence of events in steps one through four. He might have trouble establishing healthy social bonds, and being isolated and stigmatized creates the potential for exacerbating the very issues that may have led one to sexually offend in the first place (Mingus & Burchfield, 2012). This is much of the same point as in general labeling theory. Both theories acknowledge that labeling can lead to further deviant behavior, or to what Lemert (1951) referred to as secondary deviation. However, the road there is different as MLT stresses that this process is not exclusively driven by external factors. One is not forced to a life in isolation or withdrawal, rather one limits one’s own opportunities. Still, whether or not this is an actual choice will be further discussed.

The reason for introducing MLT is not to place blame on the offender for the loss of life opportunities and social networks. Rather, the responses (secrecy, withdrawal, education) triggered in step three turned out to be quite useful in describing how the informants in this study cope with their label in a country where the label is not visible through registries and the like.

### 2.4 Defining deviant acts

Labeling theory grew out of a more general perspective in sociology referred to as symbolic interactionism. The premises for this approach is that people act on the basis of the meaning that things have for them, this meaning grows out of interaction with others (especially intimate others), and meaning is continually modified by interpretation (Goode, 2005). This means that all behavior, deviance included, is an interactional product. Deviance exists when we have something that violates a social norm or rule, a person to whom that violation is attached, an audience or a group who judge and evaluate the normative violation, and
likelihood that negative social reactions will follow the discovery of the violation (Goode, 2005). Hence, what is regarded as deviant can vary between cultures, societies and social contexts. However, there are some acts, and some crimes, that are more likely to be considered truly deviant in universal terms.

In most countries, including Norway, persons who have committed serious sexual offences like rape receive long punishments compared to other types of crime (Hansen, 2013). People still sometimes believe that the punishments are too mild or too short in length. It is probably fair to say that most sex offences that are regulated by Norwegian law are viewed as deviant by the majority. The nature of sexual offences awakes special feelings in most people and in most societies. However, some sexual offences might not be considered especially deviant, but they are still illegal. People tend to distinguish between the severity of sexual offences, and laws represent an imperfect reflection of attitudes and morality (Goode, 2005). One example is that different jurisdictions have different ages of sexual consent, which means that what is prohibited in Norway might not be prohibited in other countries and vice versa. In Roman law one distinguished between acts that are evil in their nature – *mala per se*, and acts that we think of as evil because they are forbidden – *mala prohibita* (Skilbrei & Stefansen, 2018). Few would think of driving over speed limit as evil, but it is still illegal. Taking it even further, having sex with one’s girlfriend while she is too drunk to respond might not be seen as an act as *evil* as raping a small child. However, both acts are legally rape, and both are considered sex offences. Sexual offences against children and other especially vulnerable victims are in a special position and are often seen as worse than sexual offences involving less “ideal” victims (Christie, 1986). Thus, some sex offences will be regarded as more heinous than others, depending on both the act and the victim involved. In cases where the public knows more about the sexual offence that took place than only the fact that it was a sexual offence, different groups of persons who have committed sexual offences can be seen and treated quite differently (King & Roberts, 2015; Malinen, Willis, & Johnston, 2014; Rogers & Ferguson, 2011).
2.5 Two types of “shaming”

To have a set of norms that contribute to sustain a level of social control is a must in any society (Ugelvik, 2019). In social control lies a set of norms and definitions of what is considered deviant. Through both formal and informal social control, society lets persons who commit sexual offences know that their behavior is unwanted and wrong. In other words, shaming is necessary for social control (Braithwaite, 1989). However, social control can be both inclusive and exclusive (Ugelvik, 2019), and shaming can take place without leaving the shamed person with a stigma. According to Braithwaite (1989) there are two types of shaming - reintegrative and disintegrative. The reintegrative type is, as mentioned, temporary, and can be useful. It sends a message to a person that what he has done is not appreciated, but also that if he discontinues the behavior he is welcomed back. Disintegrative shaming, on the other hand, is a more permanent and reoccurring shame, resulting in a master status that encourages stigmatization. Such a stigmatizing master status, for instance as “sex offender”, can ultimately break the bond between the offender and the community (Bailey & Klein, 2018; Becker, 1963). It leaves the person with a stigma. Although Braithwaite is not considered a typical labeling theorist, he shares the belief that disintegrative shaming leading to stigmatization can have great consequences for the individual being stigmatized. Furthermore, people’s attitudes towards persons who have sexually offended will necessarily have impact on society’s ability to practice reintegrative shaming instead of disintegrative shaming.

2.6 Attitudes towards persons who have sexually offended

Attitudes towards persons who have sexually offended could have implications for clinical and social decision-making (Harper, Hogue, & Bartels, 2017; Mancini, 2018). Researchers currently use different methods and different scales to measure attitudes towards this group, e.g. The Attitudes to Sexual Offenders Scale (ATS), The Community Attitudes Towards Sex offenders Scale (CATSO), and The Perceptions of Sex Offenders Scale (PSO). These are self-report scales composed of statements about so-called sex offenders, where respondents indicate their level of agreement with each statement (Harper et al., 2017). The ATS, developed by Hogue, is a modified version of the original Attitudes towards prisoners scale (ATP), developed by Melvin Gramling and Gardner (see Harper et al., 2017). Kjelsberg and
Loos (2008) conducted the only published study using the ATS in a Norwegian setting. They measured prison employees’ and college students’ attitudes towards persons who had committed sexual offences. Overall, the prison employees held more positive attitudes towards persons convicted of sexual offences than the group of young college students. This might be due to the fact that most college students have not been in personal contact with persons convicted of sexual offences, and thus might be more influenced by the stereotypes often presented in the media. I will get back to this below. However, the results from this study further showed that both groups held wrongful believes about this group of offenders.

First, both groups believed that the risk of re-offending is higher for persons convicted of sexual offences compared to persons convicted of violent offences. As many as 46% of the prison employees and 34% of college student held this belief. Furthermore, half of the prison employees and 72% of college students believed that sexual offences in society are increasing. Both groups also showed punitive attitudes towards persons convicted of sexual offences, as 78% of prison employees and 92% of college students stated that the punishment for sexual offences is too mild (Kjelsberg & Loos, 2008). This study was conducted before the increase in punishment levels for sex offences. Nevertheless, the study shows that people believe that this group of offenders should be punished hard, and that they are worse than other groups of offenders.

Kjelsberg and Loos (2008) also compared their results to a previous study where Kjelsberg, Skoglund, and Rustad (2007) used the Attitudes towards prisoners scale (ATP) to measure attitudes towards prisoners in general. The only difference between the ATP and the ATS is that in the latter the word “prisoner” is replaced with the word “sex offender”. By comparing results, Kjelsberg and Loos (2008) found that both prison employees and college students held more negative attitudes towards prisoners ho had sexually offended than towards prisoners in general. Rogers and Ferguson (2011) used a different method to measure attitudes towards “sex offenders” and “non-sex offenders”. They presented 355 students with depictions of sexual and non-sexual offences and found that punishment tendencies were stronger toward persons convicted of the former than persons convicted of the latter, even when the offences were matched on degree of legal severity. Where do these attitudes come from? Scholars have suggested that the media is an important source of information for most
people, and thus play an important part in shaping our attitudes through stereotyping.

### 2.6.1 Stereotyping and the role of the media

According to Link et al. (1989), in the course of being socialized, individuals develop negative conceptions of what it means to be, in Link et al.’s study, a mental patient. However, we develop the same negative conceptions of what it means to be a person convicted of a sexual offence. Being a “sex offender” is probably inherently worse than being a “mental patient”, but nevertheless, our perceptions of different groups of people are often based on what we have heard about them, what we read about them, and how we finally picture them. Thus, common stereotypes shape how we think about persons who have sexually offended. Hudson (2005) asked adult male persons convicted of sexual offences engaging in different treatment programs how they thought the public would define a “sex offender”. The dominant profile was that of a “child sexual abuser”. When a wider range of sexual offending was discussed, the “worst” case scenarios were considered to be accepted as the norm by the general public, for instance that a “rapist” is a stranger using a weapon.

Pickett et al. (2013) sum up how scholars commonly cite three specific stereotypes as integral to the conceptions of persons who have sexually offended as “monstrous predators”. These include the beliefs that individuals who have sexually offended 1) tend to be strangers to their victims; 2) commit their offenses because of personal immorality, deviant sexual desires, and selfishness; and 3) are, in all but the rarest cases, unreformable (Pickett et al., 2013, p. 734). Their study revealed that the stereotype of individuals who have sexually offended as unreformable may play the most prominent role in generating hostility towards persons convicted of sexual offences. People simply do not think that they are able to change. Thus, individuals who have sexually offended are seen as someone that is not like us, or as recidivistic, untreatable predators (King & Roberts, 2015). As described under section 2.1, these perceptions of persons who have committed sexual offences run contrary to the data supported by empirical research (Galeste, Fradella, & Vogel, 2012). In search for their origin, the mentioned stereotypes are sometimes explained as brought about by how the media presents sexual crime (Harper, Bartels, & Hogue, 2016).
The majority of people’s knowledge about crime and justice is derived from the media (Galeste et al., 2012; Laws, 2000), thus the press plays an educative role in informing the general public about sexual crime and the people that commit sexual offences (Harper & Hogue, 2014, 2016). In Norway, journalists and editors are expected to follow a set of guidelines or ethical standards presented in The Ethical Code of Practice for the Press (in Norwegian: “Vær Varsom-plakaten”). In this code, the focus on being respectful towards individuals and their privacy is expressed, especially through section 4.3: “Always respect a person’s character and identity, privacy, ethnicity, nationality and belief. Be careful when using terms that create stigmas” (Norsk Presseforbund, 2015). This code, and the journalistic tradition for taking ethical considerations when writing about sensitive topics, probably yield fewer negative descriptions or portrayals of individuals who have sexually offended. However, Norwegian newspapers tend to focus on high-profile cases with repeat violent offenders and many victims. Furthermore, when a Minister of Justice calls persons convicted of sexual offences for monsters, of course it makes headlines.

It has been argued that the media sensationalizes sexual crimes through its focus on exceptional cases, and contributes to an inaccurate representation of individuals convicted of sexual offences (Malinen et al., 2014; Mejia, Cheyne, & Dorfman, 2012; Thakker & Durrant, 2006). Furthermore, it has been claimed that the media coverage of child abuse exaggerates the notion of “stranger danger” (Cheit, 2003) and that the media’s presentation may intensify the perception of people responsible for sex crimes as less human (Jones, 1999). As a result of their recognition of being seen this way, persons convicted of sexual offences commonly report that they are ashamed of how they are viewed by others (Tewksbury, 2012). Of course, the news media has not alone created the public’s view on this group, that would be to claim that people are passive recipients of everything they are told (Hudson, 2005). However, they play an important part in maintaining stereotypical misperceptions that can lead to (further) stigmatization. Furthermore, the topic of sexual offending, often combined with brutal murders, are popular themes in crime books, podcasts and popular TV documentaries and reality programs, like for instance the American “To Catch a Predator”. Many find the sensational stories involving incredibly evil, sick, perverted offenders entertaining, but they are also said to feed people’s fear and the stereotypical perceptions, and they can increase
calls for harsher policies (Kohm, 2009). The stories presented in such programs often paints a wrongful picture of the “ordinary” person who has sexually offended.

To sum up, theories of stigma, labeling, and stereotyping are largely intertwined. A stigmatizing trait can easily turn into a person’s master status, leading others to erroneously believe that the person carrying it also holds a range of other characteristics. As described, these processes can have unfortunate consequences. Research suggests that they will not facilitate what we all want for persons who have sexually offended – desistance.

2.7 Desistance and protective factors

Different theories and factors have been used to explain why some continue their criminal pathways while others do not. The dynamic and often complex process through which individuals who have previously been engaged in patterns of offending instead refrains from or decrease their behaviors over time is generally referred to as desistance (McAlinden, Farmer, & Maruna, 2017). Thus, desistance is not the same as termination (Laub & Sampson, 2001). Although not easily defined (Laub & Sampson, 2001), desistance can be explained as a process rather than an event, which develops out of the interaction between a range of situational factors that foster social capital formation, external supports, and relationships – all of which enable a shift to a noncriminal identity (Fox, 2016). The literature on desistance from crime has become well established and is too extensive to serve full justice in this thesis. However, in short, in recent years two related bodies of desistance research has emerged (McAlinden et al., 2017). One is focusing in particular on the role of stable employment and the formation of intimate relationships (social/structural factors) as important factors for giving up crime. For instance, Laub and Sampson (2003) focused on the structural turning points that might provide the opportunity to enter a change process due to increased formal control. The other one has focused on changes in self-identity or “future selves” (subjective/cognitive changes). According to McAlinden et al. (2017),

this research demonstrates that the movement away from entrenched patterns of criminal behavior involves not just external changes of circumstances (jobs, housing,
etc.), but also a fundamental change in a person’s self-identity (p. 268).

Only recently has research on desistance from sexual offending emerged as a distinct area of study. McAlinden et al. (2017) found support for an integrated theory of desistance from sexual offending involving both structural/social processes as well as the internal subjective changes. They conducted in-depth interviews with 32 persons who had sexually offended against children, divided into two groups. The “desisters” group consisted of those who had been living in the community for at least five years without committing new sex crimes. The comparison group consisted of individuals who had received convictions for child sex offending on more than one occasion, the most recent within 12 months. Both work and relationships were found to be central to the desisters’ non-offending identities as they were widely used in their narratives to describe what had been important to them in their process of change. However, McAlinden et al. (2017) found that most of their interviewees, convicted of sexual offences against children, had already experienced stable and potentially rewarding careers prior to and during their sexual offending. Several also described desisting from further criminal activity despite losing their jobs as part of their convictions. Thus, the connection between work identity and desistance from sexual crime was not immediately clear in this study. However, two correlates of Braithwaite’s (1989) theory of reintegrative shaming emerged as important in the process of reintegration and desistance. One was the role of significant others, and the other was the need to break from the “sex offender” label by actively shaming the sexual offending behavior rather than the individual themselves. Having someone who shamed the offending actions, but still looked at them as a person, helped them embrace a new non-criminal identity (McAlinden et al., 2017). Thus, their master status was no longer defined by their “blemishes of individual character” (Goffman, 1963) or their “sex offender” status. In addition, both relationships and work appeared key to the formulation of a new future self. Although little research has been conducted in the area of desistance from sex offending specifically, the mainstream theories of desistance generally seem to apply to this group (McAlinden et al., 2017).
3 Methods

In this thesis I am interested in how persons convicted of sexual offences experience society’s attitudes towards them and what strategies they make use of to cope with or escape the attached stigma. The study is based on eight qualitative interviews with the same number of informants. The interviews were carried out between July and December of 2018. What the informants had in common was recent release after serving a sentence in prison for a sexual offence. In this chapter I will explain how I recruited informants, how I conducted the interviews and my analysis, and some of the challenges tied to these processes. I will also give a short description of the sample.

3.1 Background

First of all, many have questioned why I want to spend my time interviewing persons convicted of sexual offences for my master thesis. Although many have been supportive, I have experienced people being quite confrontational as to why I would bother to care how “these monsters” feel or what their experiences are. I soon learned that it was not a good idea to engage in conversations about the topic of my master thesis with persons I did not know. Among some people, the topic evokes strong reactions and feelings linked to hate, disgust and anger - not only towards persons who have sexually offended, but also partly towards me, for thinking that this group of offenders even deserve to have their voices heard. These reactions are not uncommon.

By the very fact of doing research with these offenders I have been accused of “re-victimising” those who were the targets of the crimes by giving a voice to the perpetrators. Those convicted of sexual crimes, it seems, should be neither seen nor heard. (Waldram, 2015, p. 217)

Waldram’s quote and people’s reactions underscore the main point of this thesis. For the record I would like to emphasize two important things: First, sexual offenses should never be excused, and I do not support any of the actions that the informants in this study are convicted of. Second, my rationale for engaging in this research is that I truly hope that by taking the perspective of the convicted person and understanding his or her situation, we can take steps
in the direction of learning how to end sexual abuse and sexual offending. I believe that to deal with a problem and to be able to solve it, we need knowledge about it on every level. In this context, that involves talking to persons who have sexually offended. The fact that I feel the need to write the section above is interesting in itself. There seems to be something fundamentally different between people who have sexually offended and other groups of offenders. Would I have felt the need to add a similar paragraph if I had chosen car theft of vandalism as my research topic? Would I have gotten the same reactions from people if I was interviewing robbers, drug traffickers or even murderers? Why is my conscience challenged, and why do I have to justify even talking to this group? These questions are hard to answer, but they are fundamental for understanding the stigmatization of persons convicted of sex offences as a group, and they will be discussed throughout this thesis.

My interest in the topic of sexual offending has developed through work and is thus not “randomly chosen” for this master thesis. It started when I was working in the Correctional Services, more specific at a probation office. Although I was not working directly with persons convicted of sexual offences, I sometimes came along on home visits to people who were still subject to supervision after being sentenced to preventive detention for sexual offences. During some of these visits, part of the job was to ensure that he or she did not have children under the age of 16 in their home. I remember that I wondered what it was like for them to be subject of such supervision, and furthermore what it was like to return to society with this kind of conviction. My interest was further strengthened when I started working administratively in a treatment project for this group in the health sector. The more I learned about the heterogeneity of persons convicted of sexual offences, the more I started reflecting around our attitudes towards them as a group.

Finally, the past few years’ media focus has also influenced my choice of angle. As mentioned, in 2018 the Norwegian Minister of Justice, Sylvi Listhaug, appeared in the media stating that child molesters are monsters. At the same time, scholars are preaching the well-known facts about the negative effects of stigmatizing a group or individual. A number of questions came to my mind as I followed the media debate and watched the news the following weeks: How do individuals convicted of sexual offences handle the negative attitudes they face after release? Are they affected by the obvious hostility towards them as a
group? How does it feel to be labeled a monster? And what is it like to return to one’s community carrying this kind of stigma?

3.1.1 Choice of sample

To answer these questions, I realized I needed to engage in conversation with individuals convicted of sexual offences. I decided to conduct my research in probation offices for two reasons. First of all, compared to the extensive body of research concerning the exceptional nature of imprisonment in Nordic countries, little research has been conducted among the population released from prison and about to resettle in the community (Todd-Kvam & Ugelvik, forthcoming). This is probably especially true when it comes to persons convicted of sexual offences. Second, I wanted to meet the informants at a stage where they had (more or less) recently been exposed to society after serving months or often years in prison. My thought was that this could generate valuable information about their immediate feelings and experiences when facing people’s attitudes on the outside. This information might get lost when time passes, and it is (in most cases, considering the low recidivism rates) not yet acquired when in prison. However, the informants prison experiences are also of interest when illuminating questions linked to societal exclusion. I further decided to do my research in the South-Eastern part of Norway, which is the most populated part.

3.2 Approval and the road to access

My first contact with Corrections was established in March 2018 when I e-mailed the management at Oslo probation office and presented my idea. I further contacted Akershus probation office. A formal application was e-mailed to the Norwegian Correctional Services’ Eastern region in May 2018, as they are administratively responsible for all probation offices in this region. The study was approved both by the Correctional Services and by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) in June 2018. Information meetings with executive officers at two probation offices (Oslo and Akershus) were held later that month. In the information meetings the executive officers received information about the project and were given the opportunity to ask questions. They also contributed with valuable input
regarding the interview guide and general information about their clients. All executive officers at the probation department were given a copy of the information sheet. They also received my contact information in case of questions.

The reason for engaging with at least two probation offices was twofold. First of all, the potential stigma and obstacles offenders face after release might be different when returning to a small town or community compared to a relatively large city (Garland, Wodahl, & Mayfield, 2011). Akershus has areas and small towns that are sparsely populated, a feature that might generate valuable information when comparing to a larger city like Oslo. Second, my wish was to interview at least six people. A small number of cases may be valuable and represent adequate numbers for a research project studying a hard to access population such as this, between six and a dozen cases may offer valuable insight (Baker & Edwards, 2012). However, released individuals convicted of sexual offences that are now on probation/parole already make up a quite small group. In addition, considering the fact that this is a stigmatized group, chances are that few will be willing to contribute to research (Lussier et al., 2016). Many do not wish to revisit the negative consequences linked to their offences (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008).

However, the process of recruiting was even more challenging than I thought. After three months of recruitment work, only three persons had agreed to participate in my study. I decided to expand my geographical range and contacted all probation offices which fall under the South East region of the Norwegian Correctional Services. I was invited to present my project at several locations, and the staff was willing to help me recruit among their clients. As a result, my final informants were spread around five counties; Oslo, Akershus, Hedmark, Oppland and Østfold.

3.3 Inclusion criteria and recruitment

During the last part of 2018, executive officers recruited informants based on their knowledge about their clients’ convictions. The inclusion criteria for participating were recent release from prison after serving either a set prison sentence or preventive detention for a sexual
offence. Informants could either be on parole/probation and still subject to restrictions including regular meetings at the probation office, or recently finished with follow-up terms. I also included one participant that had recently finished his community sentence after having served a short prison sentence. For practical reasons the informants also had to speak Norwegian at a satisfactory level.

Both women and men were of interest as informants. However, very few women are convicted for sexual offences in Norway (Statistikkbanken, 2017b) and even fewer are sentenced to prison and required to meet at the probation office after release. To my knowledge, no women convicted of sexual offences matched my inclusion criteria in the chosen region at the time of recruitment. Thus, no women were invited to participate. For this reason, I consistently use “he” or “him” in examples in this thesis. This is not to imply that no women commit sexual offences.

The executive officers presented my study during already scheduled appointments with their clients. Only in one case did a client have questions that the probation officer could not answer. She therefore contacted me for answers, and the client later agreed to participate. When a client agreed to participation in the study, an interview was scheduled by the executive officer. I was then invited to the probation office where I conducted all interviews.

3.4 Research design and planning the interviews

This study can be said to be of an inductive nature. In the Norwegian context there exists little research-based knowledge about how released individuals convicted of sex offences experience stigma and attitudes. Considering the small group of individuals convicted of sex offences on probation, a qualitative research method was chosen. I wanted to dig deep into the issues of stigma and exclusion, and a questionnaire followed by a quantitative analysis would be inadequate for my purpose. Qualitative interviews offer a unique chance to explore and possibly understand the complexities of human thoughts and perceptions. It also offers valuable insight even with a small group of informants. Using a semi-structured interview guide, the informants are given the chance to angle the conversation and the researcher is
freer to follow up on interesting information or details.

3.5 The sample

This study is based on a small number of informants, and the results should thus be interpreted with caution. The sample in my study mirrors some of the heterogeneity that individuals convicted of sexual offences represent. However, some groups are more difficult to recruit than others. The relatively few qualitative studies among individuals convicted of sexual offences can be seen as a result of difficulties related to recruiting informants (Skilbrei & Stefansen, 2018). A fair assumption is also that some groups of people convicted of sexual offences are easier to recruit than other groups of persons in this category. Furthermore, like the study conducted by Brantsæter (2001), my study is based on information solely from convicted men. This is a selected group, and it does not necessarily mirror the phenomenon of sexual offending or attitudes towards it in general (Skilbrei & Stefansen, 2018, pp. 179-180).

The sample in this study consists of eight men sentenced to prison for at least one sexual offence. Their age ranges from approximately 25 to 80 years. All are ethnic Norwegians. Two of the eight informants stated that they were wrongfully convicted. The other six fully or partly agreed with the details of their convictions. As described under section 1.3.3, sexual offences is a wide category. As I did not have access to any documentation regarding the informants’ convictions, I had no way of knowing if what they told me was true or not. However, my impression was that all informants spoke “their truth”, and that they really wanted their stories to be told and understood.

Two of the informants were sentenced to preventive detention and were on parole at the time of the interview. Five of the informants had been sentenced to regular prison sentences, ranging from two years to five and a half years. They had been released within the past year. One informant had been sentenced to a short prison sentence, in addition to 420 hours of community service. He had been released from prison about a year ago and had recently finished his community sentence and his mandatory post-release supervision period. Although not all informants formally had completed the punishment they were sentenced to in its full
length, all had been exposed to life after release from prison. The following presentation of the informants’ convictions is based on their own stories. Their estimated age ranges are based on my assumptions. I have changed some of the details that are irrelevant for the context to ensure the informants’ anonymity.

**Erik**, a man approximately in his fifties, was sentenced to preventive detention almost twenty years ago. Prior to this he had a history of sexual offending. His sexual offences involved offences against young, pubertal boys. At the time of the interview he had been released about five years ago but was still subject to severe restrictions and surveillance. Living in a municipal housing unit was part of the terms and conditions for his release. Thus, he did not move back to where he used to live before he was imprisoned. He now lives in a quite rural area, and he is not allowed to leave the house on his own. He lives alone, that means not with a partner or family, but he is almost constantly surrounded by staff. Once every two weeks he must meet with a probation officer at the probation office.

**Tom**, a retired man in his seventies, had recently served his very first conviction for a sex offence. The victim was an intellectually disabled woman. According to Tom he was not convicted of rape, but touching or other indecent activity with this woman. He could not remember or explain to me which paragraphs of the Penal Code he had violated. He received a five-year prison sentence for the offences, which he stated that he did not commit. According to Tom he had been wrongfully convicted after false claims. At the time of the interview he had been released from prison on parole approximately six months ago. After a period of weekly meetings with his probation officer, he now has to meet at the probation office every two weeks. He lives in a, by Norwegian standards, large city with his wife.

**Rune** was in his mid-twenties and had recently been released after serving his first prison sentence. He was sentenced to a five-years in prison for sexual offences against a young boy in his family. After serving part of the sentence in a high security prison, he was transferred to a more open facility and then to a half-way house from where he was released on parole.

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6 “Refusjonsordning”, described in chapter 1.

7 After serving 2/3 of the full sentence.
When returning to society after his stay in prison and the half-way house he moved to a different city than he originally came from. He lives alone. He must now meet with either a treatment provider or a probation officer at the probation office every week.

**Felix** was in his early twenties and had been convicted of a sexual offence against a woman slightly older than himself. In conversation with me Felix stated that they had been flirting for some time. He further confirmed the sexual contact between them, but he did not agree that it was an offence. According to him their sexual contact was voluntary. However, he was sentenced to two months of imprisonment and a community sentence of 420 hours (the law’s maximum for community sentences). He had been released from low-security prison a little over a year ago and had just finished his community sentence when I met him. His commitments to corrections and the probation office had thus recently ceased. He lives with his parents and siblings in the medium-sized city where he has lived his whole life.

**Finn** was in his seventies and retired. He was sentenced to two and a half years in prison for sexual offences against a young girl. This was his first conviction. The girl was the daughter of a colleague, and the accusations came up when the girl was a teenager, a few years after the alleged offence had taken place. Finn reacted with shock and claimed that he was innocent. However, he was convicted in court. Finn served the first part of his sentence in a high-security prison, thereafter he spent the last months in a half-way house. At the time of our interview he had been released two weeks ago. He had moved back to his home in the outskirts of a medium-sized city where he lives with his wife. He must now meet at the probation office every two weeks for three months.

**Karl** was about sixty years old and had been convicted of sexual offences for the second time. The first time was about twenty years ago, where he was sentenced to two months in prison. The most recent conviction sentenced him to eight months. Both convictions involved possession and possibly distribution of sexual abuse images of children. Karl had never been convicted of contact offences. During his most recent sentence he had been incarcerated in two different low-security prisons and was released two months ago. He must meet at the probation office for approximately one or two more months. As a result of his conviction(s)
he actively chose to settle down in a town where nobody knows him after his release.

Steinar was in his forties. Although he had never been convicted of a crime before, he was sentenced to preventive detention for sexual offences, including rape, towards many young girls, and for blackmailing. More exact, he lured young teenage girls to send him sexualized pictures and movies (with content that qualifies for rape), and later used these for blackmailing. Steinar had been imprisoned for seven years and was released about a year ago. He is still subject to terms and conditions set by the court, which involves therapy/treatment and regular meetings at the probation office. He has moved back to the mid-sized city where he used to live, and lives in the same house with his partner and child.

Christian was also in his forties. He was sentenced to two years of imprisonment for a sexual offence against a 7-year-old girl outside the family. According to Christian, he did not know this girl. This was Christian's first sentence. At the time of our interview he had been released on parole a little over a month ago. He must meet at the probation office every week for another six months. Christian used to live in a small town where most people knew him and now know what he has done. Therefore, he moved to a new city after his release. He lives alone.

3.6 Data collection - Conducting the interviews

I only conducted one interview with each informant, ranging from 37 to 102 minutes, with an average of 68 minutes. All interviews were conducted at the probation office where the specific client had their regular appointments. I started all my interviews by telling the informant a little bit about myself. After conferring with the executive officers, I was convinced that an open and honest approach was the right way to go about, and that it was important to let the informants know both where I work now and that I used to work in the Correctional Services. However, I thoroughly informed them that my current study was a student project, strictly separated from former or current employment.
During the interviews it was important to me to create a safe environment where the informants felt that they could talk while I listened. Conducting the interviews at the probation office could potentially create a setting that was perceived as “official”, where I was associated with the Correctional Service. However, I believe that conducting the interviews at “their” probation office was an advantage, as it was a familiar environment to them. They had been there before, while I was the guest.

I asked the informants if they had read the information sheet and went through it with them to ensure that they understood what they took part in. I encouraged them not to tell me about any crimes which they had not been convicted of, as that could leave me with ethical challenges. Further, I explained the purpose of my study, and that it did not matter to me whether they had actually committed the crimes they had been convicted of or not. In cases where the informants spent a lot of time explaining to me how they had been wrongfully convicted, I acknowledged their feelings but tried to bring focus back to attitudes following such a conviction regardless of their guilt.

Former qualitative studies have shown that interviewing someone about a sensitive subject like sexual offending can be challenging (e.g. Brantsæter, 2001), so in some way I was prepared that I was going to engage in difficult conversations. Furthermore, through my daily work I have read hundreds of sexual offence convictions, so I was not really worried about my emotional reactions to hearing about the details of the informants’ convictions. However, one can never be fully prepared for the interpersonal and emotional challenges that can potentially arise. First, to follow my interview guide turned out to be quite hard. As I was going to ask questions about a very sensitive topic, I had to feel my way around the interviews. Sometimes I felt as if I was making the situation uncomfortable or that I was pushing too hard or digging too deep into something that was sore or hard to talk about. For this reason, I tried to implement my topics in the conversation, without necessarily asking the same questions in the same order to all informants. In some of the interviews I did not ask all the questions I wanted to ask as I felt like I was intruding their privacy too much. There were a couple of situations where the informants’ response to questions made me moderate myself, because their reactions told me that I in some way had upset them. Sometimes they would
start defending themselves, and that was not the way I wanted our conversations to go about. As a result, I started defending myself, like in this conversation with Steinar:

Me: But when you read statements like that… If you look at yourself as a “sex offender”, which you say that you do, and then you read in the newspapers that someone states that all sex offenders are monsters (…). Then you are in many ways featured as a monster.

Steinar: Is that what you’re thinking?

Me: No, no, I was wondering if that’s what you’re thinking. If it gets to you, or if you’re able to think that this is about someone different from yourself, or that these are ignorant people talking or…

Steinar: Well, to call Sylvi Listhaug ignorant…

Me (interrupting): I don’t think like that. If I was, I wouldn’t be doing what I do!

Steinar: I’m thinking I don’t want to do that [call someone ignorant].

Further in this conversation Steinar and I started interrupting each other, as we clearly both tried to defend ourselves. When I have listened to the recordings, I can hear how our conversation suddenly became louder, and how Steinar asked the question “Is that what you’re thinking?” with a skeptical tone in his voice. It sounds like for a moment I had broken the trust that we had established during the first part of the interview, or disappointed him. He probably felt that I was confronting him in some way. However, that was not my intention at all, and I desperately tried to explain to him the background for my question. This shows how easily misunderstandings can emerge when two persons that do not know each other engage in conversations about a sensitive topic, and one of them is put in a vulnerable situation. Because that is what it is, to answer questions about the most condemned thing you have ever done is a vulnerable situation to be in. In retrospect, Steinar’s reaction was probably a result of years of trying to deal with his offences and reestablishing himself as a moral being. He must have been in many situations where he needed to explain or defend himself. Then I came along and pushed the wrong button, making him taste the skepticism that he must have met a hundred times before. It was like he wanted to get back at me when he pointed to me calling someone ignorant, and he explained that he did not think it was right to call someone ignorant. Perhaps he tried to tell me that he might be convicted of sexual crimes, but at least he would not call someone ignorant for having a different opinion. He still has morals.
Furthermore, some interviews were difficult because they were clearly painful for the informant. A few were so nervous and uncomfortable that they were shaking and sweating entering the room. One started off by telling me how he had been dreading for days before the interview. And even if I know about the dreadful actions these men have done, it is something really sore and emotionally challenging about sitting in a room with a grown man crying. During the interview with Christian we had to take a break midway to get some tissues and a glass of water because he was crying so much that he had trouble talking. This made me feel uncomfortable, but most of all it was emotionally challenging for me to see how he condemned himself, and how much pain he was in. Further, it made me sad to see that I, with my questions, could evoke such painful emotions. I felt like it was my responsibility to “fix it” and to make sure that I had not made things worse by asking my questions. Of course, I am not a therapist or a healthcare professional, so I would not know how to fix it if I did real damage. Even so, after all interviews I asked the informants how they felt and what it was like for them to be interviewed about this topic. I also asked if they felt that they needed a “debrief” or if they were OK. All informants told me that they were OK, and some even stated that it was good to let some of this out and talk about it:

I think I’ve been through a lot of the things I wanted to talk about here. I have of course thought a bit about this conversation [beforehand], and as I’ve already said, I think it’s great that you have chosen this topic for your master’s thesis. That’s why I wanted to participate. (Karl)

I think that you’re doing a good thing. And it wasn’t… I knew what it was going to be like. It wasn’t easy to say yes. […] Of course, you don’t like to be reminded of what you have done but I remind myself every day anyways. Thus, it was more important to me to kind of… maybe be able to help. (Christian)

It was important to me to hear from the informants that their experiences with the interview were OK before I left. After every interview I reminded them that they could send me an e-mail if they had regrets about participating or if they came to think about something they would like to add. I also told them that they could contact me if they wanted me to send them a copy of the final thesis. At the time of writing, none of the informants have contacted me for any of the above-mentioned reasons.
Finally, some of the interviews turned out quite long as I did not want to interrupt when the informants were shearing stories, even if these stories had nothing to do with my topic. I wanted to be respectful. I thought that if it is important to them, the least I could do was listen. However, sometimes I had to give them a friendly reminder that we were a little off track and try to steer our conversation back to the main topic. Furthermore, sometimes the informants would ask me questions, like “where do you live?”. I answered their questions as I wanted the conversation to come off as mutual, and not like I was digging into their lives without giving them anything in return. However, an interview does not require the same amount of reciprocity as an ordinary conversation, as other norms apply. Thus, I could easily have justified not answering their questions about me, but I did not receive any questions that I felt was too private or uncomfortable answering. I think my open and honest approach in some way contributed to them feeling appreciated, at least most interviews ended with a bit of laughter or them wishing me luck with my project.

3.7 Processing the data material

I have used NVivo 11 to organize and code the data. I transcribed the interviews before transferring them into the NVivo software. As this is an exploratory study, open coding was used. I went through the transcribed interviews one by one and divided the text into nodes like “self-image”, “family”, “prison”, “monster” and so on. I had to do this a couple of times, as new interesting nodes emerged. One example was the node “cover story” which I did not perceive as such an important theme until I had coded all the interviews and started analyzing. I soon learned that the true value of a data set is not necessarily discovered the first time you look at it. Furthermore, the analyses presented are my analyses, based on findings that I found the most interesting. The researcher will always get the last word regarding content and analysis, unless the participants in the study are invited to take an active part in the analysis (Brantsæter, 2001).

All quotes are translated from Norwegian by me. There will always be challenges linked to translating quotes from one language to another. Every language has sayings and phrases that are unique to that specific language, and The Norwegian vocabulary holds words that are not easily translated to English. An example is the word “lissom”. The word is not presented in
the dictionary in this form, but it is a version of the word “liksom”, which means “like”. Both “liksom” and “lissom” are sometimes used instead of “sort of” or “kind of”. However, “lissom” is used a lot in daily speech and is not always an operative word, it just fills in as a prefix wherever one lacks a better word. Although similar to the English word “like”, which is also sometimes used in similar ways, there is a difference. In such and similar cases, I have tried my best to reproduce the quotes’ original meaning. Some words have been edited to aid readability. Wherever a translation does not catch the full original meaning, the Norwegian word is written in parentheses.

3.8 Ethical considerations

This project has followed the guidelines for research ethics provided by NESH (The Norwegian national research ethics committees). As mentioned, all informants were recruited by officers working in probation offices, meaning that I did not know any details regarding their conviction before the interview. The informants were given information about the study both before the interviews, and in conversation with me. Written informed consent was gathered from all informants. They were able to withdraw at any time, both during and after the interview.

Individuals released after a conviction for a sexual offence differ, among other things, in regard to type of conviction, background and cognitive functioning. As mentioned, what they have been convicted of are actions that I strongly condemn. Despite this, I have tried to be as little prejudiced as possible in my engagement with the informants. Again, I am in no way trying to justify the informants’ actions or to take their side over the victims’ side. Still, I have done my best to keep in mind that what they have done does not fully constitute who they are. It has been important to me that through the interviews and the later presentation, the informants’ dignity is acknowledged.

One of the most important things I learned while preparing my study were the possible effects of using labels or stereotypical group names when referring to people. It is quite common to refer to individuals convicted of sexual offences as “sex offenders” or in Norwegian
“overgripe” (“molesters”). Other terms that are often used are “predators”, “child molesters” or “rapists”. First, these terms immediately turn our minds to a specific type of person. It is loaded with stereotypes and prejudice. The better terms to use would be “persons/individuals who have committed sexual offences” or “people who have sexually abused”. Studies have shown that how we review and talk about offenders matters for how we see them. For instance, Lowe and Willis (2019) found that offense-based labels like “sex offender” or “murderer” were associated with less willingness among community members to do volunteer work with these groups. Second, when an individual is released after serving a sentence, is he still a sex offender? The low recidivism rates suggest that it is more likely that he is now an ex-offender. I see no reason why we should continue to call someone the very thing we all want them not to be. Thus, I have tried to avoid the term “sex offender” and the like in this thesis, except for when these labels are part of the point.

3.8.1 Confidentiality and anonymity

The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recording device. I asked the informants not to share any personal information about themselves or others, and not mention any names of persons or places. In cases where names were mentioned, they were anonymized through the process of transcription. Other sensitive information has also been anonymized. During transcription the recordings were kept in a safe place. After transcription all recordings were deleted. To protect the confidentiality of informants each was assigned an alias, and a few irrelevant details have been changed. It has been extremely important to me that this process is done thoroughly, considering the small group of individuals convicted of sexual offences that are on probation.

3.8.2 Reflections

I have spent considerable time evaluating how I might have influenced my own research and the answers I got from my informants. To what extent am I able to gather true stories about their experiences? Have I succeeded in creating an environment where the informants could share their inner thoughts and tell the whole story? I have asked the informants about their perspectives and what they find important, but the gathering of data and the following
analysis is not an attempt to describe “Reality” with a capital R. According to narrative criminologists, a person does not have a story and it is never possible to tell the whole story. Rather, one makes a story in a particular context (Presser, 2004), and there are always several different possible stories that can be told about an event that are equally true, which is not the same as saying that ‘truth’ and ‘lies’ are meaningless concepts. In the context of a research interview there are several components that might affect the situation and the informants’ stories. I might have been one of these components. As mentioned, I did my best to meet the informants participating in this study with an open mind and not be prejudice. However, Presser (2004) suggests that by the time data collection has started, the researcher already knows her subject as a particular type of person:

We identify and interpret problems in [such] categorical terms, not just to society at large, but also to research participants. Constructions of who participants “are” pervade our studies through methodological practices. They pervaded mine, through informed consent forms, selection procedures, interview questions and prompts, and my unscripted remarks. Even the effort to remain neutral had me (appear to be) taking a position (Presser, 2004, p. 98).

Thus, it is impossible to engage in a research project like this without pre-conceived perceptions of the informants.

Furthermore, my appearance, age and other attributes are likely to have influenced the informants’ perception of me. I am a woman in my thirties and a student. The conversations I engaged in with the informants might have gone about differently if I was a male professor in my sixties. To some extent, we all try to customize our appearance in interaction with other people. However, Damsa and Ugelvik (2017) separately conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the same prison, studying foreign prisoners’ prison experiences. They found that their results were mostly the same even though they differed in terms of age, gender, ethnicity and experience. However, the nature of sex offences makes it more likely that my gender (woman) and my age (younger than most informants) would have an impact, as my topic involves talking about their sexuality, victims and feelings of shame. Of course, these are only speculations. Nevertheless, I do believe that the researcher’s attributes can matter more when discussing this type of sensitive topic. Furthermore, the fact that I have worked in the Correctional Services previously might also have influenced the information that the
informants decided to share with me. I did not notice any skepticism when telling them, but I cannot exclude the possibility that some informants saw me as an agent of punishment and were thus reluctant to speak freely about their experiences with the Correctional Services. And finally, the fact that I work in a treatment project for persons convicted of sexual offences has definitely shaped the way I perceive this group of people.

Hopefully, none of the informants in this study agreed to participate because they felt they had to. However, when on probation after recent release from prison there are expectations and requirements tied to being obedient, showing that one has changed and that one is willing to cooperate. As the informants in this study were recruited by their primary contact at the probation office, this might have influenced their decision to participate. However, my impression was that all participants understood that it was voluntary, and I reminded all informants of their right to withdraw at any time.

In the following chapters I will present my results on three different arenas – in prison, among family and friends, and in the larger community. I will tell the informants stories and analyze them drawing on theories of labeling theory and stigma. The three responses in step three of the modified labeling theory (secrecy, withdrawal, and education) will be important in analyzing the strategies used to deal with stigma, especially post-release. Finally, chapter 7 will focus on the informants’ self-image and their thoughts about the future.
4 Prison experiences

Initially I was interested in the informants’ experiences with stigma post-release, but as I started interviewing, it became obvious to me that their experiences while in prison can be an important foundation for how they cope after release. Prison is the arena where they have to come to terms with their new status as a convicted “sex offender”. It is where they are taught that they are now at the bottom of the hierarchy, and that almost no prisoners are worse (Minke, 2012; Ugelvik, 2015). As Lussier, Harris, and McAlinden (2016) put it:

The social stigma they experience in the community begins in prison where they are unwanted and seen as outcasts by other inmates; even some criminal justice professionals are reluctant to work with them because of the nature of their crime and/or for security reasons (p. 1714).

With the harshening of sentences for sex offences, persons convicted of these types of crimes spend months and often years in prison before they are released. For most, this is where they first become familiar with how persons convicted of sexual offences are treated. This means that what they experience in prison and how they cope in many ways can lay the foundation for life after prison. How the prison experiences can stay with former prisoners and impact life post-release has been referred to by Crewe (2015) as the ‘breadth’ of imprisonment.

4.1 Stories of exclusion, violence and threats

In February 2018 a person serving a sentence for a series of sexual offences against children was brutally murdered in a Norwegian high security prison. The prisoner who killed him was serving a sentence for murder and had also been convicted for attacking a prison guard (Newsinenglish.no, 2017). This fellow prisoner later stated that he wanted to kill the man because he had been sentenced for sexual offences against children, and because he was a “pedophile”.

Several studies have shown how persons convicted of sex offences are at the bottom of the prison hierarchy, and are victims of exclusion, threats or even violence because of their convictions (Minke, 2012; Ugelvik, 2015). Minke (2012) describes how the unit for
voluntary isolation in a Danish prison was the unit with the lowest status because the prisoners there were branded as among other things, “sex offenders”. This whole unit’s stigma was so strong that it was difficult for the prisoners to return to normal units afterwards. For persons convicted of sexual offences it was almost impossible to return, and consequently many of them would have to “voluntary” isolate for the rest of their sentence. They were unwanted and became victims of harsh treatment and sometimes violence.

Incidents like the murder described above are extremely rare in Norwegian prisons; as a matter of fact, it has not happened before that a prisoner has been killed in prison for being convicted of sexual offences. Nevertheless, stories of violence are suitable for creating fear among other prisoners convicted of sexual offences, and threats and violence do happen. Hanoa (2008) interviewed 13 prisoners in Norway about their experiences with threats and violence between prisoners. She found that the reasons why prisoners are in prison in many ways predict how others relate to them and treat them. The majority of prisoners stressed that persons convicted of sexual offences were especially exposed to threats and violence. The majority also described this group of prisoners as lowest in the hierarchy among prisoners, and that it is legitimate to give them a hard time. The violence the prisoners described was of different character, but social exclusion, bullying and harassment were among the most common forms. However, Hanoa was also told stories of more serious violence, where prisoners got beat up because of their conviction.

According to Ugelvik (2015), violence narratives among prisoners are quite common. He heard several stories of violence while he was conducting fieldwork in prison. For instance, one prisoner told him about a person convicted of sexual offences who was thrown into the washing machine before the other prisoners started it. This could potentially be deadly, and it shows how far some are willing to go to learn these offenders a lesson. However, stories that are told are not always true in the sense of what Presser (2009) refers to as “narratives as record”. They might be exaggerated, or they might be told in a way that favors either the victim or the ones performing the violence. Furthermore, the reasons for turning persons convicted of sexual offences into targets of violence or threats are complex.
My interview guide included questions about prison experiences, and whether the informants had experienced or witnessed any episodes of harassment, violence or threats. Although none of the informants had experienced physical violence themselves, a few had witnessed violence and exclusion of other prisoners convicted of sexual offences. Christian told me about a prisoner who had been severely beaten because he could not stick to a believable cover story:

*Christian:* So, it was in some way... To have it ready [the cover story] and stick to it. And at the end [of my prison sentence] I saw the result of those... or one who couldn’t do that. And he was severely beaten.
*Me:* Because he was convicted of a sexual offence?
*Christian:* Yes, but no one knew, no one knew what he had done, but since his story about why he was there changed depending on who he had been talking to, people will talk together in there too.
*Me:* And they draw conclusions...
*Christian:* They draw conclusions and it is not certain that he has done anything, but... He was beaten.

This is the only story in my data that involves physical violence. Some of the informants seemed reluctant to tell me a lot about what they had witnessed. A snitch is considered almost as bad as a person convicted of sexual offences in prison (Crewe, 2009; Ugelvik, 2015), so even though the informants trusted me with their own stories, they probably would not risk that someone else was recognized. However, many said that they had seen “some episodes” (Karl) or witnessed situations of “bad atmosphere” (Finn) when someone was recognized as a person convicted of sexual offences. Karl said that he did not dare to tell me about the details of what had happened to other prisoners, but he mentioned one prisoner that was given a hard time for being convicted of sexual offences and said “yeah, it probably wasn’t easy for him, to put it that way”. What the informants said between the lines indicated that even if physical violence is rare, these prisoners are given a hard time in other more subtle ways. This coincides with what (Ugelvik, 2015) observed in Oslo prison.

What the informants witnessed, combined with newspaper coverage about violent episodes like the recent murder at Ringerike prison, made them aware of the ever-present subtle threat.
towards them as a group. They were also very aware that they were lowest in the hierarchy. Rune put it this way: “You don’t have a lot of power in prison when you are bottom rung. You don’t get very far. That’s how it works”. When you know the potential consequences of coming forward with a sex offence conviction in prison, it is natural to try to escape these consequences by not disclosing it. Thus, the informants in this study mostly responded with secrecy while in prison. They made use of two main strategies to not be recognized as a person convicted of sexual offences. One was the use of cover stories; the other was simply to avoid talking about their own or other prisoners’ convictions.

4.2 Cover stories

One strategy to escape stigma and reprisals is to lie and say that you are in prison for something more acceptable than a sex offence; that is to make up cover stories that you can present to other prisoners in cases where the topic comes up. Recall the first strategy described as part of the modified labeling theory (MLT): secrecy. Almost half of the informants in this study had come up with some kind of cover story.

I had tried to find a cover story beforehand. So, I didn’t run into problems in prison at all, rather the opposite. Actually, I established a lot of good relationships with very nice people. (Karl)

As an example, I said that I had been speeding. Or that I had engaged in a fight. Because I didn’t want everyone to know, that could probably have ended with me being beaten to death or something. (Felix)

In choosing to make up a cover story lies a recognition that one should not come forward with what one has done. It shows that one understands the potential consequences, and that these consequences are so frightening that one is willing to lie to escape them.

For the men in this study it mostly worked out fine to stick to a cover story. Secrecy can, under certain circumstances, be a successful strategy for persons convicted of sexual offences in prison. Karl did not run into any problems with other prisoners. Neither did Felix. He made up cover stories because he was afraid that other prisoners would beat him up if they found
out the true reason for his imprisonment, but when he made friends in prison that he trusted, he told a few of them.

In the beginning I was afraid of other prisoners’ reactions. But then I kind of started trusting the others that were in my block. In my block there were some persons that I was spending time with during the day that I actually dared to tell. And that was a relief, to be able to tell them, and not hold it inside. (Felix)

Secrecy comes with a cost, however. Felix’ quote shows that in some way it was painful to him to lie and keep this secret. It is reasonable to say that for most people it is hard to lie about things that matter to them. There is no reason to believe that persons convicted of sexual offences differ from the majority on these foundational attributes, so for them too, it takes a lot of energy to pretend to be someone else and stick to a story that is not true. What I found interesting was that three of the informants unsolicited told me that they had been advised by prison officers, priests or treatment providers in prison to come up with a believable cover story. They were told that they needed one, and that it was smart to lie instead of coming forward with their conviction. Two informants who were given this advice, had taken it. One was Karl, convicted for possession of sexual images of children for the second time. The other was Christian, convicted of a contact sexual offence against a 7-year-old girl. This story came up when I asked him if he had run into any trouble or episodes of threats and violence while he was in prison:

Not while I was in prison. It was probably, given the fact that for the most part I isolated myself, it was probably suspicions in the beginning, but… I was lucky with the officers in the way that they were professional in their jobs and… I was told by the priest and the psychologist that it was approved of to lie if anybody asked [about my conviction]. (Christian)

In this way, Christian was told that it was OK to lie. He told me later that he was also advised more directly to come up with a cover story. As I will describe later, he struggled a lot with this while he was in prison and made new relationships. But he also told me that he isolated himself in the beginning. Isolation is a common strategy among prisoners convicted of sexual offences (Minke, 2012; Ugelvik, 2015). Although some informants said that they preferred not to interact a lot with other prisoners, Christian was the only informant that actively and totally isolated part of the time he was in prison. He said:
To begin with, my problem was that I isolated myself, I didn’t want to go out and be around people. Because of what I had done, and you know how… you get judged because of it. By other prisoners. So, I was afraid, I didn’t want any contact with other prisoners. Not just because of the fear, but you… You know what consequences it could have. (Christian)

Again drawing on Link et al.’s (1989) MLT, Christian started out by withdrawing, and then later changed his response from withdrawal to secrecy. He explained to me how staff constantly worked to get him out of his cell and take part in social activities at the unit. To be able to do so, secrecy and a cover story was the recommended option.

Tom told me that he did not bother to come up with a cover story, even if he was advised to.

    No, I was just told by an… an officer, nice, he was my contact officer later. He told me “if they ask you what you have done, tell them only one thing: Welfare benefit fraud”. (Karl)

Of course, prison staff have good reasons to give this advice. They have heard about the murder at Ringerike and witnessed the exclusion and threats that some prisoners experience. They want to protect prisoners and avoid violence between them. The informants’ stories indicate that staff know exactly who is most at risk and who to advice to make up a cover story. What the three informants that had gotten this advice had in common was that they were all convicted of sexual offences involving especially vulnerable victims without the possibility to defend themselves. This is probably the reason why it was these three, and not for example Felix, that got this advice. Felix had received a short sentence for offending against a girl slightly older than himself. Remember how Felix told a few of the other prisoners about his conviction after some time. I asked him about how the ones he told this to reacted:

    Well, for the most part they said that we are all in here for a reason, and the reason is that we’ve made a mistake. It’s as simple as that. […] Their reactions weren’t negative, like they said “you’re still young and you have a lot of your life left ahead of you, and there’s a lot of things you haven’t learnt yet. So, you just got to swallow the
bitter pill and get out of here and learn from what you have done”. So, the responses I got were actually quite positive. (Felix)

These reactions would probably not have been the same if Felix had offended against a child instead of an adult, or if he had been convicted of a violent stranger rape instead of an offence towards a girl he knew quite well. We know that some crimes pose a bigger threat of reprisals than others, like sex offences. However, as described earlier, it is also fair to believe that some types of sexual offences involve a bigger threat than other sexual offences, and that they are seen as clearly more “mala per se” than other sex offences. Felix himself presented sexual offences against children as worse than what he had done, or as worse than offences against adults.

You know, when it comes to kids… I don’t think it’s OK. Of course, sexual offences are never OK, but… That’s really crossing the line you know. Like really. That’s stepping outside the line. (Felix)

One could state that Felix said these words because he wanted to present himself as a more moral prisoner than persons who had sexually abused children (Ugelvik, 2015). However, these attitudes are common, both between prisoners in general and between groups of people convicted of different types of sexual offences. Ievins (2014) found that several prisoners in her study admitted that “peadophiles” were sometimes considered a “lower form of sex offender” (p. 19). This indicates that persons convicted of sexual offences are not just persons convicted of sexual offences, they can be bad, or they can be even worse. It is a category that holds different kinds of offences, and more importantly; different kinds of victims. Minke (2012) compared the prison hierarchy found in 2008 to the prison hierarchy seen in 1968. The ranking was based on who prisoners preferably would like to share a prison cell with and consisted of nine groups of criminal offences. Sexual offences were at the bottom in both 1968 and 2008. Persons convicted of sexual offences were clearly considered the least preferable cell mates. However, what is interesting is that in both time periods, rape was in 8th place and indecent exposure towards minors was in 9th place. Rape is punished harder than indecent exposure, and the act involves a physical offence. Thus, legally, it is a more serious crime. Still, persons convicted of indecent exposure towards minors was considered even worse cell mates than persons convicted of rape. Likely, this is due to the fact that a minor or a child was involved. Stereotypical views like “child molester” or “pedophile” comes to mind. This shows how some sex offences potentially pose a bigger threat of reprisals. Furthermore,
the similar ranking in the two time periods indicates that the prison hierarchy has not really changed a lot, and that it might be difficult to make it more horizontal.

4.2.1 The costs of lying

Being in prison for sexual offences involving children can be painful. Some of the informants were struggling a lot with what they had done, and at the same time they had to worry that someone would beat them up for it. The advice they got was: Hide it. Choose secrecy. Tell them that you did something else. By telling someone that they cannot reveal what they have done, we are implicitly telling them that what they have done is so horrible that other people will find it impossible to accept. Furthermore, if you tell people, you might be excluded, beaten, or worse. Some of my interviewees struggled with both what they had done (the sexual offences) and the fact that they had chosen to lie about it. Christian was one of them. First of all, he understood the other prisoners’ wish punish him.

Apropos what possibly happens to me or my like-minded in prison… I’m thinking the same about me as they are thinking about me. Regarding how it is possible to do such a thing. Had anyone touched my children, I would… do what many others get a taste of, like the guy I was talking about. (Christian)

Christian further told me that he did not find it strange at all, that people like him sometimes got beat up:

Christian: I don’t want to get beat up, but… I see it as… kind of a natural justice. Even if there are people sitting there [in prison] who have done things that have led to someone not getting their father or their son home, the justice of those kind of cases [sexual offences] is… not surprising.

Me: So it is actually worse… if you have raped someone or sexually abused a child or something like that, it is worse than most other things?

Christian: Yes.

He continued: “I have that feeling myself and that… what I have done is… It would have been easier for me to accept myself if I had done something else”. Then he started crying. He had on some level accepted the prison hierarchy, stating that he agreed that his offence was the
worst possible.

During my conversation with Christian I understood that he not only struggled with what he had done, he also struggled with feelings linked to being dishonest. He had been living a lie for a long time prior to his conviction.

There’s one thing I know, and that’s what it feels like to live a lie. And it rarely comes anything good out of that. My wish would have been that I could have been honest about it, get through it… But not necessarily get beat up for it. So, if one could have been, in a way… on some level accepted, it would have been… It would have been good to be able to front it. I couldn’t front it there [in prison], I got the clear message, and I also got to see a result of that… They didn’t need any concrete evidence; the suspicion was enough. (Christian)

Christian further told me about how he struggled with lying to persons he considered his friends in prison. He was working together with a janitor, a guy who was nice to him and whom he respected. He was probably not employed in the Correctional Service, as he did not have access to prisoners’ convictions. At one point, a conversation about why Christian was in prison came up.

I was working with that janitor, the nicest, most social guy ever. And… He’s not supposed to ask you what you have done, but… I can’t blame him for it, it’s the most natural thing in the world, after all I was working with him for months. […] It’s natural that it comes up. And then you’re supposed to, for someone who basically takes you for who you are and… He never had any problems with me. Yes, I’m in prison, but he didn’t care about that. But then the question comes up and you must ruin the relationship by lying, you know. (Christian)

Christian obviously wanted to be able to be open about what he had done. Perhaps he thought that he would have been able to process it better if he could talk about it. Or “get through it”, as he said. But it seemed too risky, and he was advised to lie. This can potentially contribute to feelings of being even more immoral. Not only are you convicted of sexual offences, but you are lying too. Again, secrecy comes with a cost. Being a prisoner, and especially a “sex offender”, comes with a tag of being immoral, and prisoners often spend their time in prison
trying to reestablish themselves as moral beings (Ugelvik, 2015). Having to lie might make this process more difficult.

Karl had also taken the advice of lying about his sentence. He struggled with the fact that he had seen another prisoner with the same type of sentence as himself being harassed without supporting him:

Many prisoners saw it and talked about it [that the prisoner was being harassed] and… I had a bit of a bad conscience for not being of more support to him, but… In that situation it was a difficult choice to make. I had some contact with him because we worked together in prison. But I kept it hidden anyway, that contact. And I was probably not much of a support to him, unfortunately. (Karl)

It is understandable that Karl did not want to support this man or be associated with him. He could not risk that his cover was blown. As described earlier, Christian had witnessed violence towards a prisoner that did not do a god enough job with sticking to a believable cover story. It shows that if you are to have a cover story, you must make sure that you stick to it and do your best to make it bullet proof. However, in some prisons it is difficult to hide what you are in for. In these prisons it can be very risky to lie. Ugelvik (2015) describes how a prisoner had told everyone that he was put on remand for his role in “a completely ordinary” episode of drunken violence (p. 33). By other prisoners, this was considered an act of a proper criminal, and he was included in the group of “moral” prisoners. However, when his court date arrived, newspaper reports provided enough information for the prisoner collective to understand that the news reports was about him, and that he had lied about why he was there. He was convicted of sexual offences. As a result, some prisoners got really upset and angry that he had tricked them into including him in the community of proper criminal equals. Furthermore, Hanoa (2008) describes how some informants in her study claimed that they would be socially excluded themselves if they hung out with persons convicted of sexual offences, and for these reasons they did not talk to persons convicted of sexual offences, even if they would not actively take part in the bullying or violence. It is important to show that one is on the right side of the moral fence. This importance of drawing this line between “us” and “them” is described in more detail by Ugelvik (2015). He observed a dynamic situation with several competing hierarchies, but with broad agreement that persons convicted of sex offences (called “rapists” or “sex offenders”) should be placed at the very bottom. In his
analysis, Ugelvik builds on Foucault’s theory of the techniques of the self and shows how subjects actively work to turn themselves into ethical subjects. He explains how “the rapist” is used as a symbolic boundary marker in other prisoner’s ethical self-work in their narratives, and how narratives and exclusion of persons convicted of sexual offences are used by prisoners to counter the ascribed stigma. Through these processes they can thereby symbolically reposition themselves as morally conscious proper criminals. No matter what harm they have done to end up in prison, they are not as bad as the “evil, perverse, sick, and insane” rapist (Ugelvik, 2015, p. 29), and they use this as a technique of the self to conquer negative feelings tied to being immoral. The person convicted of a sexual crime is always much worse; it might be looked upon as an evocation of the old mala per se/mala prohibita distinction.

It was clearly difficult for Karl to take part in the exclusion of the prisoner convicted of sexual offences while knowing that they were actually in the same boat. The only difference between them was that Karl had managed to keep it a secret. When Karl had actively chosen to keep his conviction a secret and present himself as a moral prisoner, he had to show that he was in fact part of the right group - the group of ethical subjects that condemns persons convicted of sexual offences and does not want to be associated with them. A conversation I had with Steinar supports the fact that it is more about being associated with persons convicted of sexual offences than about their characteristics alone:

Steinar: There was two or three of these MC guys that didn’t talk to me unless we were alone. Then everything was all right.
Me: Why only when you were alone?
Steinar: Well, they had a facade to keep.
Me: And that means that one shouldn’t talk to those who have a sentence like yours?
Steinar: Yes, but… You know, these rules don’t really work like that. It’s a myth that it’s all black and white because it really isn’t. It depends on who you are and how you do it.

It is not easy to understand the complexity of the prison hierarchy, or the concept of in-groups and out-groups in prison (Sykes, 1958). If you are not convicted of sexual offences yourself it is obviously, for some prisoners, important not to be associated with this type of offenders.
And these rules also apply when you are working undercover, to keep the facade. For these reasons it was too risky for Karl to be considered the friend of a person convicted of sexual offences. They could still work together, as long as Karl kept his distance when others were watching. However, it seemed to me as if Karl wanted to be his friend and support, and it was painful for him that he could not as he had chosen to lie about his own conviction.

To sum up, the majority of the men in this study did their best not to be recognized as someone who had committed a sexual crime. Three chose to lie and make up believable cover stories as described above. To some of them it was painful and difficult to have to lie. It can also be considered very risky. Is it possible in prison to hide that you are convicted of sexual offences and escape negative consequences without making up a cover story?

### 4.3 Trying to avoid the subject

Three of the informants in my study chose not to lie about why they were in prison, but they still wanted to keep their status as a person convicted of sexual offences hidden. They chose a different strategy to do so, they simply refused to answer questions about their sentences. We are still in the realm of secrecy, but with a slightly different strategy. The idea was not to tell a lie, but to refuse the topic of past convictions altogether. In a prison setting, this may be challenging, however. According to Minke (2012), Danish prisoners expect new arrivals to a prison wing to show court transcripts to document the nature of their criminal offences. In the prison where she conducted fieldwork, she found that it was very difficult to escape by saying that you did not want to tell, or that you had lost your court transcripts or make up other excuses. The other prisoners felt that they had the right to know, and it was common procedure to ask new prisoners about it. What Minke (2012) describes does not seem to be the case generally in Norwegian prisons, but the three informants who tried to avoid the subject told me that other prisoners were very interested in finding out what they had done to be sent to prison.

A few people were very interested in me, and everybody else too, what we were in for. I asked one guy “are you employed by the Norwegian judicial system?”. [He answers:] ”No, we just want to know what you’re in for”. “Well, why?”, I asked, “why do you
need to know that? I haven’t asked you what you’re in for. [...] And I’m not going to tell you what I’m in for, and I don’t give a shit what you’re in for”. (Finn)

Finn’s story shows how other prisoners almost feel like they have a right to know, and that it is common to ask. However, his strategy was to refuse to answer and say that he did not care why others were in prison, so why would they care why he was there. Finn told me that the other prisoners kept trying for a bit to make him tell why he was in prison, but he refused to answer and after a while he was left alone. He had seen how prisoners convicted of sex offences were excluded or made a target for threats, and I asked him if he feared that this would happen to him if the details of his conviction were revealed.

Yes, it was definitely something that I didn’t look forward to, if it was to happen. But I actually think it happened [someone found out], but that they didn’t tell me. I didn’t hear anything more about it. I was moved to a different unit after some time, the whole unit was moved because they were going to renovate. (Finn)

Rune also told me a similar story. “I never engaged in conversations about people’s convictions. I never said anything about the reasons for it, I guess it didn’t interest me”, he said. However, he still suspected that the other prisoners knew:

Me: Did the other prisoners now what you were in prison for?
Rune: Well, when you’re in a place like Ila⁸, I guess they get the general idea, and I don’t think you can get through your sentence without it [anyone knowing].
Me: No. Because the prison environment is so open, or because it's quite common [sexual offences], or…?
Rune: No, well, people have… No matter how you twist and turn it, there will always be persons who have access to papers. So, no matter what, if people want to find out they will. It’s not difficult.

Both Finn and Rune tried to avoid conversations about their conviction by claiming that they were not interested in other prisoner’s convictions. This is not uncommon. Ievins (2014) conducted fieldwork in a prison solely for vulnerable prisoners, mostly persons convicted of sexual offences, and found that prisoners tried to protect themselves from stigma by claiming

⁸ “Ila fengsel og forvaringsanstalt” is the largest preventive detention institution in Norway, but also a high-security prison for prisoners serving longer sentences.
not to be interested in people’s offences. That way, one has a legitimate reason to avoid talking about it.

In addition to Finn and Rune, Tom also told me that he never answered questions about his conviction, but he had a different approach as to why. Tom was a Christian and many times during our conversations he shared his belief in God and his Christian values. He told me that he conquered questions from other prisoners about his sentence by fronting his faith, and in that way avoided to talk about his conviction.

_Tom:_ It’s none of their business what I’m convicted of.
_Me:_ No. And they didn’t find out either?
_Tom:_ No. Well, they talked a lot. They said: “have you taken a girl now, have you killed her afterwards?”
_Me:_ Wow.
_Tom:_ “No”, I said, “I’m a Christian and I don’t kill people. I let them live under God’s blessing”, I said. And that was seen as strange. And if a guy asked me if I had been smoking weed or been doing drugs, I answered them “no”. “You haven’t? What’s wrong with you then?” [they replied]. “Well”, I said, “I’m God’s child”, I said. I just gave them a simple answer.

As described, Finn, Rune and Tom all used the strategy of refusing to answer questions about their convictions when they were asked. Finn still feared that someone would find out. Finn was a grown man in his seventies, and he seemed like a very confident and resourceful man. Not someone it would be easy to turn into a victim. And he managed to do his time without running into problems because of his conviction. Rune suspected that other prisoners knew, but he was still left alone. Tom also refused to answer and turned questions about his conviction into conversations about God. He was probably seen as a bit odd by other prisoners, considering that they asked him if he had been doing drugs. Norway is among the most secular countries in the world and it is not common to talk about God like that. In addition, Tom was a very old man, so he might not have been of too much interest for other prisoners. It sounded to me as they left him alone after a while.
During interviews, both Finn and Tom claimed that they were wrongfully convicted, but none of them used the strategy of trying to explain this to other prisoners. One possible explanation is that they did not consider it likely that other prisoners would believe them. Trying to explain would thus be too risky. Trying to keep it a secret probably felt safer. However, not everyone can choose to keep their offences a secret, leaving them with no choice but to come up with other strategies to yield off negative reprisals that comes with being a prisoner convicted of sexual offences. The next part shows how Erik and Steinar made use of quite different strategies to do so.

**4.4 Having no place to hide**

For some prisoners, lying or in other ways keeping their convictions a secret is not an option. Two of the informants, Erik and Steinar, were both sentenced to preventive detention. In Norway, that usually means serving most of your sentence at Ila or Trondheim prison, both high security prisons (Storvik, 2011). Few are sentenced to preventive detention in Norway, and the ones who are will, in all but the rarest cases, have a history of serious violence or sexual offences. Thus, as almost half of prisoners sentenced to preventive detention have committed sexual crimes (Statistikkbanken, 2017a), it is hard to make up a cover story for these prisoners, or in other ways hide the details of their conviction. When secrecy is not an option, other strategies for escaping or coping with stigma must be chosen.

Erik and Steinar told me that they were completely open towards other prisoners about their sentence. Steinar said that he did not really have a choice since his case was quite well known from the media. He never tried to hide his conviction from other prisoners in any of the three different prisons he spent time in during his sentence. He told me about negative comments in the beginning, but it did not really seem to bother him that much: “I soon learned that it is very smart to just ignore it”. His sentence was what he sometimes referred to as “quite electronic”. By that he meant that he had not been convicted of physically abusing his under-aged victims, it had happened on the internet and by phone. “The persons that I have met and that have liked me has been able to swallow my sentence more easily because it has been so electronic”, he said. Later in our conversation he elaborated this point:
Steinar: This went on electronically, so in a way it wasn’t as wrong.

Me: So, you’re thinking that the reactions had been different if you had physically raped someone?

Steinar: Yes, definitely. Definitely.

Here, Steinar makes use of techniques of neutralization (Sykes & Matza, 1957). The fact that he had not physically abused someone served as a technique for him to more confidently come forward with his offences, and he also thought that others would see his offences as less heinous. To him, the injury that he inflicted on his victims was not as serious as it could have been, had he physically raped them. Someone else was worse than him. Thus, drawing on Link et. al’s MLT, Steinar had the possibility to educate other prisoners about his offences.

The fact that Steinar could excuse his offences by saying that they were not as bad as many others’ contact offences might have eased his process of coming forward with his conviction. He also appeared as a very confident and resourceful man. Erik was not as resourceful and told me about a troubled childhood and many years of alcohol abuse. Perhaps even more important, his sex offences against young teenage boys were of a different nature than Steinar’s offences. When Steinar could excuse or justify his offences by saying that they were not as bad as other sex offences because they had happened electronically, Erik could not. He experienced a lot of bullying and threats because of his conviction, and he had to come up with a different strategy to cope in prison.

Erik had, like Steinar, served most of his sentence at Ila, which is the largest preventive detention institution in Norway. He told me that most of the other inmates knew why he was there. It is unclear to me whether this was a result of his own choice already from the beginning, or if the other prisoners guessed or understood because he had been sentenced to preventive detention. I asked Erik about other prisoners’ reactions to his conviction and how they treated him, and he told me:

Of course, in the beginning I experienced a lot of bullying. […] But I have been oppressed my whole life. I have been terrified of adults my whole life, […] and then to end up in an environment where there were only adults…. No adolescents. That’s why I was like that, with these adolescents [referring to his offences], because I felt safe
with them. I was safe, I was… You could say that I was about fourteen years old in my head. I was fourteen years myself. So, a lot of bullying, but then I went into a strong defense position […] which ended with me being the prison’s most hated man. Not because of what I had done, but because of the way I acted [in prison]. […] Because I developed into being a real troublemaker, a spitfire. And I said so many ugly things, especially to the officers. And I think it was a combination of … […] The bullying I can handle, but at the same time it was the combination of me being so far down [mentally]. (Erik)

Erik had never experienced physical violence from inmates because of his sentence, but a lot of bullying and threats. I asked him how it made him feel to be bullied.

In some way I took offence of it, but at the same time I had this “fuck off” mentality because I am kind of used to being bullied, I’m used to being oppressed. I’m used to it, all my life. To being oppressed and bullied, I’ve been bullied at school and bullied everywhere. (Erik)

The feelings connected to being bullied was obviously feelings Erik recognized and had experienced before, and I asked him about it. He continued his story.

Mm. Yes, yes, but the problem was that I… […] I think I went from being a little rickety kitten to become a furious tiger. […] I was challenging some of the bodybuilders to fights. I wasn’t afraid of them. I wasn’t afraid of anyone. One inmate told me “I’m gonna knock you right down”, he said. “Well, that’s fine by me. But remember that I have taken so many beatings during my lifetime that if you hit me four… four-five punches in my face, and I will just shake it off like… it bounces off. Because I can take a lot of beating. […] Even if you’re about to beat me up really bad I am sure I will be able to hit you two or three times as well, that’s no problem. And you will lay down on the ground and cry”. (Erik)

A few times during my conversation with Erik I used the word “scared” when I was trying to recap or understand his feelings. He resolutely told me that he was not scared, and it seemed important to him not to be linked to the feeling of fear. Both his response and his behavior while in prison can be understood as a way of highlighting his masculinity and stepping away from feelings linked to feminism or vulnerability. According to Messerschmidt (2014), men
construct masculinities in specific social situations. When they enter a setting, they undertake social practices that demonstrate they are “manly”. The hegemonic discourse of masculinity might not fit the feelings or expressions of fearing others. Being angry, challenging to fights or threatening with violence might be strategies of “doing” gender in an environment or setting where Erik did not see any other ways of doing this. Furthermore, Jewkes (2005) has suggested that as a response to the label “prisoner”, manliness, or what she calls “hyper-masculinity”, can conquer the feeling of powerlessness. Erik was convicted of sexual offences towards young boys, an act that is not likely to be considered manly. He did not want to come off as vulnerable and decided to transform from a powerless victim or someone that was scared to someone to be scared of – or from a little rickety kitten to a furious tiger. This strategy to escape stigmatization can be seen as a defense mechanism, distancing him from the victim role.

Erik had reached a point where he did not want to be stepped on anymore, and he became angry. He was rude to both prisoners and staff, a real “ball buster” (Sykes, 1958). And in some ways his behavior worked. He gained status through violence and a threatening image, a strategy that is not uncommon (Ievins, 2014). Later in the interview Erik told me that as time passed things changed and he was well respected and made friends in prison. After all, he was there for many years. In his own words: “I went from being Ila’s most hated man, to being Ila’s most respected man”.

4.5 Chapter summary and reflections

To sum up, although very few informants had witnessed physical violence towards prisoners convicted of sexual offences, they were very aware of the threat. They knew that revealing their sex offence conviction would put them in an exposed position, and the fear of threats and violence thus led the majority to keep their offences a secret. They tried their best to hide their convictions and had two main strategies for doing so – cover stories and simply not talking about their own or others’ convictions. Some informants were advised by prison staff to come up with a believable cover story. The ones that did sometimes struggled with feelings connected to dishonesty. Informants that instead tried to avoid conversations about their own or other prisoners’ convictions often experienced that the other prisoners felt like they had the
right to know what they had done. Only two of the informants were open about their convictions in prison, but they did not really have a choice. They were both involved in severe cases, and Steinar had his name and picture in the media. Furthermore, they were both sentenced to preventive detention. In many ways, the choice was made for them, and they could thus not respond with secrecy. Withdrawal was probably ruled out because of the terms and conditions set for preventive detention. To meet the requirements, one cannot isolate completely. The purpose of the punishment is to change the behavior of the prisoner and develop their social adaption skills. It is thus expected that the prisoner takes part in work training programs, treatment programs, school, or different recreational activities. The content of the punishment shall be adjusted to the specific prisoner, so that the prisoner can achieve gradual progression towards freedom (Storvik, 2011). Choosing to isolate would probably delay this process and was thus not seen as an attractive alternative.

The next three chapters will focus on experiences after release from prison. In most cases, a label as a person convicted of sexual offences is not visible. One cannot see who has committed a sexual offence and who has not, although stereotypical perceptions about what they look like exist (Hudson, 2005). Still, the described prison experiences of witnessing violence and exclusion towards this group, and the advises to keep quiet about one’s sex offence conviction, produce strong recognition among persons convicted of sexual offences that they are stigmatized (Tewksbury, 2012). In the next chapter, I explore how the informants’ relationships to close friends and family were affected by their sex offence conviction, and whether they experienced stigmatization and negative reprisals from this group of significant others. Furthermore, I will show how the lessons learned in prison can have an impact on how they deal with their stigma post-release.
5 Life after prison I: Significant others

Concerns with recidivism among persons convicted of sexual offences have a well-established research base, but to be able to address recidivism we need to establish what factors that contribute to desistance. In recent years, social support has been increasingly recognized as a key ingredient for successful transition from prison (Fox, 2016). Not surprisingly, as described in chapter 2, this also applies for persons convicted of sexual offences (McAlinden et al., 2017; Weaver, 2014). The desistance literature stresses that a factor linked to desisting from further criminal activity, including sexual offending, is having meaningful relationships with others and being part of a social group or network (Farmer, Beech, & Ward, 2012). In positive rehabilitation-oriented treatment these are focus areas, and specifically the role of families and relationships are seen as protective factors that can prevent relapse (de Vries Robbe, Mann, Maruna, & Thornton, 2015; McAlinden et al., 2017). For instance, in modern resource-oriented treatment approaches like The Good Lives Model, relationships in forms of family, friends and intimate relationships are seen as one of the primary goods that all human beings want and need (Ward, Mann, & Gannon, 2007). On the contrary, the collapse of social supports can be considered an acute risk factor for sexual recidivism (Brouillette-Alarie & Lussier, 2018). Furthermore, relationships of different forms are often the vehicle through which newly forming identities (such as worker, partner, or parent) are realized and sustained (Weaver, 2014).

For these reasons, one topic in my interviews covered experiences with family and other close persons’ reactions to the informants being convicted of a sexual crime. Some of the informants had been excluded by their families and/or friends, whilst others had received support from their social networks throughout the process of trial and sentencing. Why are some cut off by family and friends when others are not, and how does it influence them? Just to be clear, these results are based on a small sample and is thus not necessarily representative for all persons convicted of sexual offences. However, a few patterns arose when I started analyzing my data. The two most prominent groups I call “the ones who had lost the least” and “the ones who had lost the most”.

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5.1 The ones who had lost the least

Through the interviews it did not take long before I understood that both Felix and Steinar still had very good relationships to their closest family. Felix told me that both his family and his girlfriend at the time visited him in prison and supported him. Their views on him as a person had not changed.

My mom, dad and siblings look at me as the person I used to be. Like, they haven’t been looking down on me for things that have happened. They have kind of been there to support me the whole time. I’m pretty grateful for that. (Felix)

Felix had served a short prison sentence and was thus only away from home for two months. After that, he completed a 420 hours community sentence while living with his family.

Steinar on the other hand, had served in prison for seven years and then returned home to his partner and child. Steinar’s child was a toddler when he was sentenced to preventive detention but had visited Steinar in prison with Steinar’s partner throughout these years. Steinar’s little family had waited for him and welcomed him back when he was released from prison. He talked like everything was back to normal now. He described the way they had welcomed him back as “unique”. He also described coming home to his house where nothing really had changed as something strange.

It’s not a matter of course, you know. To be able to move back to one’s house. Going down… opening the garage door and there’s your car, you know. Been standing there for seven years. […] It’s very strange. It’s like nothing has happened and like everything has happened. (Steinar)

Even if Steinar’s family had stood by him, he recognized that it had not been easy for them:

My partner has kind of had to deal with this the whole time. And her parents and everyone else, everyone has had to deal with this. And it hasn’t been easy. On the contrary, it has been bloody awful. For my stupidity. So… It’s no fun and of course it’s… terrible. There are no winners here. All I have created is a pile of people that have lost something. (Steinar)

Steinar’s words imply that he blames himself for putting his family through suffering. For seven years he had been away while they had to deal with financial problems, media coverage
of Steinar’s case, rumors, and the like. However, unlike many of the informants in this study, his family was still intact.

For some, friends can be as important as close family. However, it is not uncommon to experience loss of close friends when you go to prison for a serious crime. What was stressed by many of my informants was that after their conviction, they had “found out who their real friends were” (Felix). “You know what friends you have when you’re sent to prison” (Finn) was a common first answer when getting into this subject. However, while some had lost most of their friends, others had only lost a few less important friends or acquaintances. Again, Steinar and Felix stood out as the one who had “lost the least”. They both told me that they had good social networks, and that they had not lost any of the friends that were important to them.

To understand why Steinar and Felix could tell these stories of success, we need to look at their offences and possible interpretations of them. Felix had offended against an adult woman and had received a quite short prison sentence. As described earlier, Felix did not agree that the sexual act that he engaged in with this girl was an offence. Considering the short prison sentence, there were probably some extenuating circumstances involved. His victim was not a stranger, the offence was probably not forceful or particularly violent, and his victim was not a child. For these reasons, Felix’ offences do not necessarily represent the stereotypical stories about rape. He told me that he did not think that he would have kept his many friends if he had offended towards a child. “I think their reactions would have been completely different”, he said.

Steinar had offended against many young girls and had received a quite long preventive detention sentence. However, the details of his conviction did not involve the classical or stereotypical hallmarks of sexual offences towards children. When hearing about his actions one can easily think that what he had done had more to do with money, control, or criminal excitement. The way he talked about his crimes resembles what Hamilton and Sanchez (2018) refers to as the narrative of the “professional” offender. Steinar’s own focus was on the economic part and the “seductions” or “thrills” of crime (Katz, 1988).
I lived in a world where I, during a very short period of time, needed a girl that could send me pictures. (...) I knew that she wasn’t going to be in on this for very long. In the moment it was exciting. And then I had to get enough [pictures] to be able to blackmail. And then I blackmailed, and then came the moment where I stepped out of the dark, you know, and received cash. It was like… a thriller. I didn’t need to read crime books. I was living in one. (Steinar)

This quote suggests that Steinar derived a sense of mastery from his crimes. He described the rush he felt, but talked calmly and confidently about it (Hamilton & Sanchez, 2018). If this is how Steinar educated family and friends about his crimes, they might be interpreted as more instrumental than sexual or predatory. At the same time, Steinar made use of neutralization techniques like stressing that he had not physically raped someone, it had happened electronically. These might have been factors linked to why Steinar, despite his very serious conviction involving numerous underage victims, did not experience loss of family or friends.

5.2 The ones who had lost the most

While Steinar and Felix described their relationships to family and friends as good and mostly unaffected by their conviction, this was not the case for all informants in this study. Rune, Karl and Christian had all lost contact with most of their families. They stood out as the ones that had lost the most.

Rune was convicted of a sexual offence towards a child in his close family. He told me that because of what happened he now had very little contact with family members. I asked him how he felt about that and he answered “well, I think it’s sad that it’s like that, but… I can’t use all the resources in the world to change it, if they absolutely don’t want any contact”. He said that he had talked to them a couple of times since he was convicted, but that the contact now was very limited. In many ways, this is not surprising. The fact that he offended against a child in the close family had obviously complicated the relationship he used to have with them. It is plausible that his family felt betrayed by him because of the damage he had done to a young child close to them. To continue their relationship with him would probably feel like they were taking sides. Thus, they had chosen to have as little contact with him has possible.
It was difficult for me to catch and interpret Rune’s true feelings about this, but that does not mean that he did not suffer. Some show their feelings in more subtle ways, and I sometimes interpreted Rune as bitter or a bit angry with them. “If they don’t want contact, well, good for them”, he would say. Experiencing stigmatization can damage one’s self concept and lead to development of negative views of others and society in general (Tewksbury, 2012). On several occasions during our interview I experienced Rune as somewhat in despair over “most people”, and he would say things like “I have little faith in humans in general”. However, he said that he still had a few friends, and that they visited him in prison. They had not talked about Runes sexual offences, and it was unclear to me how close they were.

Letting his family down and losing them was probably hard for Rune, but he did not show it to me in the way that for instance Christian did. As a matter of fact, the toughest talk about family I engaged in during my interviews was with Christian. He had literally lost everything that represented normality, including social and family bonds, as a result of his conviction. He cried a lot during our conversation. He told me that when the sexual offence that he was convicted of came to the surface he was a family father living with his wife and two kids. Now he has no contact with any family, and lives by himself in a different city. He told me that his wife (now ex-wife) visited him in prison five or six times, thus, she had not cut him off completely. I asked him why he thought she had chosen to visit him, despite what he had done. My initial thought was that she wanted answers to why he had committed the sexual offence.

Yes, probably to get some answers, but she has also said that… [sniffles] …she knows that there’s more to me than my actions. So, she is a fantastic woman. In every way. […] Of course, she knew nothing about this. So, the feeling of having disappointed her so badly… [voice breaks, crying] Yes, these are painful thoughts… And she still chose to come and visit me, so that says a lot about her. And I was the one saying that I didn’t want any further contact with her so… She still wants that [having contact] […], but… It wasn’t possible to have contact with the children, you know, Child Protective Services of course decided that, and that’s natural. (Christian)

Here, Christian told me that it was partly his choice to cut contact with his ex-wife. Thus, this suggests that a fourth response to perceived stigma might be added to Link et al’s MLT as Christian withdrew from his ex-wife despite the fact that she knew about his offending history
and seemingly still wanted (some) contact with him. Recall that Link et. al.’s response of withdrawal involves limiting contact to the ones that know about and accept one’s offending history. Here, Christian had cut one of these (few) people off. It did not quite add up for me, so I asked him why he did not want contact with her anymore.

I felt that it would be an extremely severe reminder of what it is that I have done. Every time I would have seen her [sniffles]. I realize that she was probably very disappointed by this. And I see in retrospect that it was a really selfish thought because… That I should not be able to deal with it when she has been able to visit me. I didn’t see it at the time. But when I have thought about it since… It was selfish. Right there and then it was right. She was moving on and she has a new boyfriend, and I’m very happy that she’s moving on [sniffles]. (Christian)

Christian wanted to spare himself for the pain of being reminded of what he had done. I further asked Christian if he believed that his ex-wife understands why he does not want contact with her anymore. He told me that he had tried to explain it to her in a letter, because he knew that he would not be able to tell her while in the same room as her. Then, while he was still in prison, she sent him a letter saying that she was going to try and visit him one more time before he got out. Christian explained to me how this letter, to him, was perceived as a possible way out of the relationship that he experienced as a constant reminder of what he had done. “But, of course, then she asked me if I wanted her to visit. Thus, in a way she gave me a possible retreat. And at the time I wasn’t able to think outside my own little bubble”, he said. In other words, Christian withdrew from the difficulties connected to having a relationship with someone who reminded him of what he had done and the things he had lost.

This conversation with Christian, of course a lot longer than what is presented here, was difficult for more than one reason. The pain that Christian seemed to be in when he was talking about these things in some way rubbed off on me. I felt sorry for him. He was crying intensely, and even if it was clear to me that he wanted to talk or explain more thoroughly, sometimes his crying stopped him. He could not get the words out. At the same time, I was wondering if I should feel guilty for sympathizing with this man who had sexually offended against a young girl. Was he putting on a show to gain my sympathy? Taking the role of a victim in pain and saying that one deserves being stigmatized and hated can potentially be used as a strategy to conquer stigma. Christian told me that today, he has no contact with
either his ex-wife or children. His close network is limited to two friends that he has known for many years. He presented these two friends as crucial for his ability to cope, and he said that it was very important to him that they accepted him despite of what he had done.

They came and visited me in prison, and they dared to… ask those difficult questions. And if they hadn’t, I wouldn’t have stayed in contact with them because I need to know that they dare to deal with the things that they must cope with, or with the choice they have made. Because… I have asked them and of course they have to defend themselves when it comes to why they bother to stay in contact with me. […] Hopefully, they see a little more, or at least that’s what they say, that they see more than… the case, you know. They see, they try to see the person behind and… I’m of course very thankful for that. (Christian)

What Christian described here is that it is important for him to be accepted despite the fact that he has been to prison for a sexual offence. McAlinden et al. (2017) found that having significant others who were able to shame the behavior rather than the individual was central in desisting narratives of the participants in their study. What Christian shared with me supported that this type of reintegrative shaming can be quite important. He did not want to have close relationships with persons he had to hide his history from. This can be seen in the light of Christian’s prison experiences. He was advised to lie about his conviction, but when he did, he struggled with emotions connected to lying. That might be why he wanted his friends to know everything, and he wanted them to ask those difficult questions although it was difficult for both parts.

It’s probably not easy for them, and it hasn’t been easy for me to answer, but again… I’m very glad that they dare to ask because it makes it OK to talk to them too, because I know that they are ready to handle my answers and… stand in the struggle they face with their families and… After all, they know a lot of local people from where I’m from. (Christian)

Here, Christian recognized that his friends would have to explain to others why they remained friends with him.
Karl told me that he had a very limited social network, but that he was still married. However, he and his wife did not live together anymore. They had contact on a practical level, about the house and their economy and the like. “Well, I am married, and I have family, but there’s not a lot of contact, to put it that way”, he said. He told me about several breaks with both family and friends. He said that some of these breaks were results of his own choice. At the same time, he said that he thought the reason for these breaks was his convictions. He believed that his convictions were enough for his family to cut him off. They did not want anything to do with him. “I know what they’re thinking and what lays behind what they’re saying and what they have done, but… Nevertheless, they have broken the bonds with me”, he said. Karl had never been convicted of any contact sex offences, but he had been convicted of possession of images showing child sexual abuse on two occasions. The first time was about twenty years ago. I asked him why he thought that his family had cut him off, when his sexual offences were in fact not as severe as many other sexual offences. He answered: “It’s the biggest imaginable taboo area in our society”. The fact that Karl was convicted for the second time, and that twenty years had gone by between the two convictions, could lead anyone to believe that he has a lasting, unhealthy attraction towards children. It cannot be explained away as something temporary or incidentally. Chances are that he is seen as a pedophile. And he is right, having a pedophilic disorder or being attracted to children (or “being a pedophile”) are one of the biggest taboo areas in modern society. It is what people fear the most (McCartan, 2010). Karl expressed that he struggled with the fact that his family had cut him off. “It’s very tough indeed, because you basically don’t have any support, you stand all by yourself”, he said. Clearly, he felt very alone. He did not mention any family members that he had contact with, and he had been living with the “sex offender” or “pedophile” label for all these years. I asked him if he thought that there was a chance for a better relationship with his wife in the future and he answered “no, I don’t really think so and… I kind of understand it too. So, in a way I have come to terms with it.” Furthermore, when I asked Karl if his wife had explained to him exactly why she had left him, interesting processes showing how stigma can rub off to family members came to the surface.
5.3 Courtesy stigma

Karl told me that the situation was very difficult for his wife and that “she has been told from persons in her closest family that she needs to make a choice”. This meant that they needed her to choose between Karl or them. Implicitly, they were telling her that she cannot be trusted as a proper human being if she chooses to stay with her deviant husband who is carrying this stigma. It is not uncommon that family members of persons convicted of sexual offences are stigmatized simply for being related to the stigmatized person. In their study of the effect of Megan’s Law in Florida, Levenson and Cotter (2005b) found that 19% of the respondents, all convicted of sexual offences and subject to notification laws, reported that people living with them were threatened or harassed in some way. Although probably more common in countries with SORN laws, such courtesy stigma (Goffman, 1963) can take place whenever the stigma linked to being convicted of sexual offences is known. Family members “are all obliged to share some of the discredit of the stigmatized person to whom they are related” (p. 43).

Tom was also married, but unlike Karl, he still lived together with his wife. He did not talk a lot about other family members, and it was generally hard for me to get him to answer my questions. He often changed the subject and got caught in stories that were of little relevance for the questions I asked. I do not know if he had children, but he never mentioned any. Thus, Tom has not been ascribed to any of the extreme categories (lost the most/lost the least) in my analysis. However, he did tell me that very few of his wife’s family members knew why he had been away. The few that knew had been encouraged to keep it a secret, as his wife could be negatively affected.

There are a couple of my wife’s cousins that don’t know. There’s only one or two [who knows]. They have been told not to tell, because it affects my wife. “Is that what he is? Is that how he is? Why don’t you get a divorce?” Yeah, that’s how it’s going to be. It affects her nerves. (Tom)

For choosing to stay with him, a man convicted of a sexual offence towards an intellectually disabled woman, Tom was afraid that his wife would have some of his stigma infect her. To protect her from courtesy stigma, although it had not yet happened, he turned to the response
of secrecy (drawing on Link et. al.’s MLT), concealing his stigma even from family members.

Finn was also married and lived with his wife. Apparently, they had a good relationship, and she had stood by his side through the process of conviction and imprisonment. I asked him whether she ever had any doubts, and he answered:

No, she has had, of course, she has had heavy days. […] She had serious doubts for some time, but then she came to me and said “Finn, we’ve been married for over 40 years, never in my life if I think you have done something like this”. I answered “no” and told her that I hadn’t. “Just so you know”, she said. Because she isn’t a person who talks a lot, like I am. (Finn)

Finn further told me that he felt extreme relief when she came to him and said these words.

She has been great. Indeed, she has been exceptional. Because not everyone agrees with us, you know. They don’t. But she’s there and… […] She visited me in prison [only] a single time, because I told her “I don’t think you need to come here and visit me. It’s not necessary, I will spare you for coming here. Because you don’t have to deal with all the shit in here”. (Finn)

In the beginning, Finn had told his wife to really think about if she still wanted to be with him or if she wanted a divorce. He told her that he would understand if she chose to leave him. However, she decided to stay with him and told him that they would get through things together. I asked Finn if his wife had experienced any direct negative reactions linked to her choice, and he answered “she has been advised to [leave me]. A woman told her “You can’t be married to him anymore”. And that’s understandable”.

These three men’s experiences show how family members also can be negatively affected by the stigma that comes with being convicted of sexual offences. They were affected simply because they chose to stay with, or in Karl’s case, considered to stay with, the convicted instead of rejecting him. Even if these men’s wives had experienced fairly “mild” forms of stigmatization, they still had to deal with other people’s reactions. McAlindien et al. (2017) found that persons convicted of sexual offences clearly expressed concern regarding the impact of their offending, and the stigma and suffering associated with it, on their family,
principally their wife or partner. Courtesy stigma can enhance the feeling of shame or negative thoughts towards oneself. Not only have one been convicted of a sexual crime and must deal with the aftermath, one must also deal with the fact that one’s partner and other family members are stigmatized as a result.

5.4 Somewhere in between the two extremes

Tom, Erik and Finn can be placed somewhere in the middle of the two extremes in this chapter. Even if Finn still had a good relationship with his wife, he had been excluded by other family members that he used to have good and close relationships with. His brother and nephews had made it clear that they did not want any contact with him at all. Finn told me that he had tried his best to fix this and even written them letters where he made attempts to explain that he was innocent. They never answered his letters. In the interview Finn spent a lot of time telling me about his nephews. He shared with me what they used to do together, his nephews’ great results in school, what they now did for a living, and so on. I understood that he was very proud of them, and that it was painful to him that they had cut him off. I asked him how it made him feel that they believed he had committed a sexual offence.

Well, it’s heavy. I don’t appreciate it, I can’t say I don’t care about them because that’s not true, far from it. Because I had wished for them all the best in this world, and… I imagined that they felt the same way about me, but I was stupid, and I was wrong. (Finn)

Remember that Finn stated that he was innocent. To him it was more about making his family believe that he had not committed the sexual offence against a child, rather than wishing that they would still accept him despite of it. He told me that no matter what he said, his family, except for his wife, believed he was guilty of the offence. They used the argument that the police and court system in Norway is never wrong. These agencies investigate thoroughly and hence, Finn would have to have committed the offence he was convicted of. His family trusted the welfare state, and it was enough for them to cut contact. They shut him out because of his conviction and made it clear that he was no longer part of the family. This appeared in several ways. As an example, Finn had been friends with a child in the family on Facebook, but when this child’s father found out that the child was talking to Finn, he was
immediately deleted from the friends list.

Erik did not seem to have any close family members like children or a partner but had siblings that he had some contact with. He told me that his brother’s wife stood in the way of him visiting his brother. She did not want him in the house. Erik told me how she once had said “that pig. I won’t have my grandchildren over if he’s here”. According to Erik, she was afraid that he would sexually abuse her grandchildren. Erik further told me that he had been married once, but that was many years prior to his current conviction. He stood out as the only one that did not seem to have a lot to lose when he went to prison. I do not know this for sure, but it was the impression I got from his all over stories. He had left home as a young teenager, and he had struggled with alcohol abuse. As mentioned, he was “terrified of adults” and described how he found safe relationships in young teenage boys. Furthermore, Erik had been incarcerated for about fifteen years, and moved to a new place after release. However, after release from prison he had joined a club or social network for men his age and described belonging to this group as truly amazing. He had been skeptical at first, but when I spoke to him, he talked about the friends he had made in this club as his family. However, he had not told them about his conviction. Most of them knew that he had been in prison, and that he lived in a municipal housing unit with staff, but they did not know why. Erik was scared that they would find out and feared that they would cut him off if they knew that he had sexually offended against children.

5.5 Chapter summary and reflections

The men in this study had quite different experiences concerning how family and friends reacted to their offences, and how they treated them after release from prison. Steinar and Felix stood out as “the ones who had lost the least”. On the contrary, Rune, Karl and Christian had lost contact with their closest family because of their conviction and were thus “the ones who had lost the most”. Finn, Erik and Tom were somewhere in between. The question is what characterizes these three different groups. Are there any patterns to be found that can explain why they experience more or less exclusion or stigmatization from their closest family and friends? Interestingly, Tom and Finn were the ones that claimed their innocence and none of them belonged to the extremes under this topic. More so than claiming their
innocence, I think this middle position can be attributed to their age and family situation. They were the two oldest informants in this study. Both were in their seventies, retired and still married to their wives. It thus seemed as they lived quiet and somewhat reserved lives, and they did not talk about friends.

Steinar and Felix had managed to maintain the good relationships they had with their families. I believe that the mentioned aspects of Steinar and Felix’s offences that are fit to neutralize the seriousness of their offences are important. They can, at least partly, explain why they ended up losing the least. Rune, Karl and Christian on the other hand, were all convicted of offences involving children with few obvious extenuating aspects. Furthermore, Karl had been convicted for the second time, a factor that can strengthen the mentioned stereotypical view that persons convicted of sexual offences are not able to change.

The next chapter widens the scope from close family and friends to the community and society at large. Research indicates that if released individuals convicted of sexual offences are provided with the resources to establish pro-social support networks, create intimate relationships, and are presented with opportunities for employment, they are less likely to sexually reoffend (Willis et al., 2010). Successful community re-entry and social reintegration thus can be said to rely heavily on social capital.
6 Life after prison II: The larger community and society as a whole

As mentioned, the desistance research suggests that forming new and meaningful relationships can provide individuals with the emotional and social capital they need to sustain a crime-free life. Although defined in many ways, social capital can be thought of as a resource that is derived from and facilitated by social ties and the possession of a durable network (Bourdieu, 1986; Burchfield & Mingus, 2008). And although recidivism rates among persons convicted of sexual offences are very low compared to other types of crimes, belonging to a social network is important for self-image and identity building, and potentially for desisting from further offending. Farmer et al. (2012) studied desistance among individuals convicted of child molestation and found that the desisters seemed to have found a place within a social group or network. In contrast, the still “active” or at-risk group described themselves as socially alienated or isolated from others. Close friends and family are obviously important for offenders after release from prison, but persons convicted of sexual offences, and persons convicted of any other type of offence for that matter, also needs to feel a sense of belonging to the wider community. For these reasons I wanted to explore whether the informants felt that they were welcomed back to their communities, or if they felt as they were being stigmatized or excluded in any way. Were they (again) acting and feeling as an ordinary citizen belonging to the wider community?

6.1 Feelings of being excluded or stigmatized

Only one participant, Erik, said straight out that he felt as he was being stigmatized for being convicted of sexual offences. He had been sentenced to preventive detention and served in prison for many years. Now he was doing his best to become a free man, able to leave his house on his own, and have friends over when he wanted to. However, because of his restrictions he felt as if he was being excluded from society and not given the opportunity to live a normal life. He had been living in the municipal housing unit with staff for the past few years and had applied for the possibility to be alone in the house, and to engage in activities outside the house without surveillance. The answer he told me that he received came as a surprise to me.
“Well OK, we will allow you to run your bike to your activities alone and you can be in your house alone for two or three hours, but we will notify the neighbors”, they said. Then, suddenly they are going to notify the neighbors! […] I was almost in chock, because this… Four years have gone by. More than four years. I have been out [of prison] for more than four years and then, all of a sudden, they will start notifying the neighbors. (Erik)

Not surprisingly, Erik did not want his neighbors to know about his conviction. He had moved to a new place and told me that he was ready to start a new life. I still had to ask him why he did not want his neighbors to be notified.

Imagine what catastrophic consequences that could have for me. […] Imagine that I have gotten to know my neighbors and gotten to know everyone in my street and in my community and so on. Then suddenly, it comes out that I’m a pedophile. Of course, I can’t live here anymore [if that happens]. (Erik)

Of course, Erik’s situation does not represent the typical case, as he was subject of very strict terms and conditions after conditional release from preventive detention. After regular prison sentences, there are no legal grounds that allow for notification of neighbors. Even so, what Erik describes is important for understanding what it is like to return to society carrying a sex offence conviction. One is constantly reminded, for instance through media, that persons who have sexually offended are unwanted and seen as outsiders or outcasts. As a result, one fears detection.

The other informants mostly said that they did not feel stigmatized, as others generally did not know about their sexual offences. None of them said that they had been called names or threatened. Only one informant said that he had experienced that people actively tried to hinder him in successfully reintegrating to society. I will get back to his story in section 6.3. When I asked informants straight out if they had experienced stigmatization after release, they mostly answered that they had not.

Well… No, I can’t say that I experience a lot of stigmatization, because everyone who knows about it has… The ones that I have that good contact with, they have… With
them, everything is OK, you know. Everyone else just doesn’t know [about my conviction]. (Rune)

No, my perception is that I don’t experience any stigmatization. But I don’t hear what people talk about when I’m not there. And I choose not to care about that. They probably talk, guaranteed, but I can’t... I really can’t pay attention to that. [...] I have my friends and I have my network which is absolutely fantastic. So, I’m thinking that stigmatization is something that happens inside one’s head, you know. So, I choose not to feel stigmatized. Of course, I meet people who doesn’t know who I am. And for them, I’m just an ordinary person. (Steinar)

Based on these answers, my impression was that when I asked participants if they experienced stigmatization because of their sex offence conviction, we had different perceptions of what this word can include. At the same time as the informants were saying that they did not feel stigmatized, some were saying that they knew that they would be if they were to come forward with their convictions. Thus, they had little faith that they would be treated as any other citizen. To me, this represents stigmatization. The question is, how can these perceptions affect behavior?

### 6.2 Strategies to avoid stigma

Returning to Link et al.’s MLT, which suggests that people who carries a stigma might in fact limit their own life opportunities as a result of perceived devaluing attitudes towards persons with the label that they themselves carry, I found that the informants made use of all three suggested responses; secrecy, education and withdrawal, vis-à-vis their local communities. They did so in different ways, based on their different convictions.

#### 6.2.1 Secrecy

Several of the participants in this study had moved to a new city after release from prison, and two of them explicitly said that they had done so to have a better chance at keeping their offending history a secret. This is a radical step to avoid stigma. It serves as an indication of how severe the threat is considered to be, and the lengths that some will go to escape it.
However, it is not uncommon. Robbers (2009) found that one fifth of respondents in her study had moved to communities that were not their own to live anonymously and not draw attention to themselves. For Christian, Rune, and Karl, family ties were already broken. Thus, they chose to start again somewhere new, and keep their offences a secret. In addition, Christian told me that he felt as a burden, one that his previous community did not want and should not have to deal with. “There’s no need to expose … the community for me and my presence”, he said.

Some tried to hide their convictions from new friends and social networks. Erik had joined a club or community where he had made a lot of new friends that he liked to spend time with. As described in the previous chapter, he considered them his family. However, he was very anxious that they would find out the real reason why he was living in a municipal housing unit constantly surrounded by staff. He was constantly on the lookout for people he used to know, like his ex-wife, when he was out with this new group of friends. He was afraid that if she saw him, she would reveal his status as a person convicted of sexual offences.

In many ways, secrecy interacts with withdrawal. By trying to keep one’s offences a secret, one also tends to avoid social situations. Erik mostly did not avoid social situations, but he told me about a situation that occurred when he was out with his new friends playing football, a situation he described as difficult and unpleasant.

I was going to the restrooms to pee, I really had to go. So, I enter the locker room where it says “men” and I go towards the door. I’m grabbing the door and I open it. Immediately, I can hear that the shower is running, and it’s… I hear children’s laughter. Boy’s laughter. Then, I just closed the door and went back [to the others] and they ask med “are you not going to pee?” “No, I didn’t need to go after all”, I said. The hell if anyone shall be able to… I’m not going to do anything that can throw suspicion on me. (Erik)

This suggests that there are different kinds and degrees of both secrecy and withdrawal. Although Erik was not avoiding social situations overall, he sometimes found himself in situations he felt the need to get out. During our conversation, several similar episodes came
Erik told me that he had once given his old PlayStation console to a group of boys living in an asylum center.

And they were over themselves with happiness, just so happy. And they wanted to give me a hug, you know… And at first I pulled away, but then I thought “fuck, I can’t be this cold”. And I reached my hand out. […] But no one, fucking NO ONE is going to have anything on me. (Erik)

Erik was convicted of sexual offences towards teenage boys. Here, he shows how his conviction was more or less a constant factor that he carried with him, even in situations where he was out having fun with new friends or in situations where he was truly just trying to be nice. However, Erik’s status as a person convicted of sexual offences did not prevent him from seeking out new social networks, but other informants shared stories with me that witnessed of withdrawal and possibly limiting opportunities for new friendships and social networks.

### 6.2.2 Withdrawal

When I asked the informants if they behaved any differently now than prior to their convictions, many said that they isolated more or avoided certain situations or places. The response of withdrawal means only having contact with persons who know about one’s history and accept it already. For some informants, this meant having little contact with people in general. Although none of my informants engaged in “full withdrawal”, stopping them from for instance applying for jobs, many told me that they would avoid places that they would usually go to. To my surprise, as Steinar was the one that seemed least worried about others’ reactions, he was one of them:

I don’t think a lot about it, but I wouldn’t put myself in a situation that can throw suspicion on me. […] I don’t go to the [name of place] forest and I don’t go to the big waterpark to swim with my child. I don’t bother. And that’s because of my child, I’m totally dependent on [him/her] not getting in trouble. That someone would say something, you know. So, then we’ll rather go somewhere else to swim. (Steinar)
Steinar also told me that he would avoid football cups, and that he would not go to such arrangements just to hang around. However, he argued that he avoided these situations because of his child. Steinar said that he was not afraid of reactions towards himself, but that someone would say or do something negative to his child if he was recognized. After all, he was convicted of sexual offences towards many young girls, and his case had been spread all over newspapers. As Steinar had moved back to where he was from, many knew, and he was afraid that they would say something about it when his child was present.

Other participants also told me that they would avoid places or isolate:

I don’t like big crowds. I’ve never had problems with it before. Not that I have ever been the center of the party, but I have never had problems linked to contact with people or in friend groups or… I’ve always taken part. And even if I don’t like to be the center of the party, it is far from that to the feeling that I have now. I’ve never felt anxiety for anything, so I feel that in a way I don’t know what anxiety is, but I think that’s what I experience now in regards of how I’m feeling when I’m out among people. (Christian)

I isolate myself more. Definitely. I’m scared to death to… Outside where we live, a bunch of kids are running around and everything. I don’t even dear to get near them. […] I’ve never had any problems with this before, rather the opposite. I’ve had a lot of fun with kids through the years, but that’s definitely gone. I make sure that I don’t… I don’t dare to go to a public beach. I don’t. The risk is that I’ll be accused of things. […] And that’s part of… I’m sure that others that are in the same situation as me experience the same thing. I’m sure. (Finn)

These quotes show how informants responded to perceived negative attitudes by withdrawing or, more exact, avoiding situations. Even Finn, who argued that he was wrongfully convicted, was scared to be around children. He was afraid of the risk that he would be accused of indecent behavior, based on his prior conviction. This shows how being labeled can lead to coping strategies even if the person himself does not believe that he is a “sex offender”. Finn’s experiences with family members who had cut him off and would not believe that he was wrongfully convicted, led him to the perception that others possibly would not either.
Thus, he was scared to end up in situations that could be misinterpreted.

Rune also told me “I think I might be avoiding people more now, on an everyday basis”. I asked him why he was avoiding people more after release from prison. He said that it depended on his state of mind, but that he sometimes was more paranoid. I asked him “when you say that you’re paranoid, is that because a part of you is scared that they’re somehow going to find out about your conviction?” Rune answered “yes, at bottom it probably is”. Even if it is not likely that people will find out about his conviction (considering that there are no sex offender registries in Norway), Rune was still worried that they might.

Christian had also become very paranoid after release from prison and felt as if he needed to be in control all the time, not letting anyone pass him on the street without him noticing their face.

I’ve become a really good “scanner”. When I go down the street I… There’s probably not a single head or face that passes by without me noticing it. Instead of just walking and looking down and just keep on walking, you’re so afraid to run into someone you know and just pass them. […] It’s very exhausting. (Christian)

Christian expressed that he was more afraid to run into someone he knew, than that someone suddenly would find out about his conviction. Karl shared similar thoughts. He was very uncomfortable in certain situations, like when entering the probation office. “When I approach the entrance here, I have eyes at the back of my head. It could be that others know what’s located on this floor”, he said. Both Rune and Christian had moved to new cities. Steinar on the other hand, had moved back to where he had always lived. Most people already knew about his offending history, and those that did not could easily find out through other people or the internet. In addition to episodes of withdrawal from certain situations, Steinar engaged in education to ward off negative sanctions.
6.2.3 Education

Steinar had a lot of new people in his social network, as he had changed jobs and gotten new colleagues. As his case was high-profile and he had moved back to the same city, chances were high that at some point his new colleagues would hear about his history. However, as many years had gone by since his conviction made news headlines, he could have tried to keep his offences a secret. On the other hand, he probably thought that they would find out sooner or later, thus the safest way for Steinar to avoid stigma was to educate people before they heard about his offences from somewhere else. He told me that he got to know people first, and then he told them after a little while. According to Steinar, their reactions were fantastic, every time. This was surprising to me. Unlike some of my other interviewees, Steinar described a considerable capacity to forgive and forget. Writing this thesis, it is almost hard to believe that people would have “fantastic” reactions when hearing about sexual offences serious enough to lead to preventive detention. However, remember how Steinar used the fact that his offences were “quite electronic” when he presented them to others. He also stressed that he did not physically rape someone and that his offences were more about the money or the thrill than about sex. Steinar probably understood that if he only told people that he was convicted of rape of a number of under-age girls, he would be stigmatized, and possibly unable to establish good relationships with new friends and colleagues. However, by forestalling people, by preemptively disclosing his stigma and educating new acquaintances, he could try to ward off the negative reactions. By coming forward with his offences, framing them as “less bad”, others might more easily accept what he has done.

Steinar was the only informant in my study that actively engaged in education as a response to perceived negative attitudes. Mingus and Burchfield (2012) on the other hand, found that education was the preferred coping strategy among the participants in their study. Furthermore, in the Mingus and Burchfield (2012) study, withdrawal from society was the least supported strategy, with secrecy falling somewhere in between the two. However, their study was American, using a sample from Illinois where all persons convicted of sex offenses must register. In Norway, it might be more likely that after release, persons in this group will use the strategy of secrecy in combination with withdrawal, because it is, except for in rare high-profile cases, possible. Here, structural information protection arrangements are in place to make secrecy a more viable option. The potential costs of engaging in education, and
failing, are greater than the costs of secrecy and withdrawal. My study thus suggests that the absence of restrictive policies and SORN laws does not necessarily eliminate the problem of stigmatization towards this group, but the coping strategies are different.

As described, the informants believed that they would be devalued and stigmatized if others found out about their convictions, but very few had experiences direct stigmatizing behavior after release from prison. The exception was Karl, convicted of possession (and possibly distribution) of sexual images of children. His story is worrisome, as it is definite proof that the “sex offender” label is a sticky one that does not let go when the prison time is served.

6.3 Informal notification

Many studies of prisoner reentry emphasize the importance of reintegrating them into local social networks and provide them with legitimate opportunities for success (Farmer et al., 2012; Willis et al., 2010). Burchfield and Mingus (2008) stress the importance for persons convicted of sexual offences of having local social capital when returning from prison back to society, underlining that they are perhaps particularly in need of the community support networks that this type of capital can provide. A potential barrier to local social capital originates in the efforts of local community residents to mobilize against persons that are known to have sexually offended and prevent them from engaging in community life (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008). This can be referred to as a form of informal social control, where individuals are hindered in their reintegration process, and it can appear through informal notification of both current and potential employers, or other community members.

In addition to loss of family and network described in chapter 5, one participant in this study experienced hindrances trying to achieve work opportunities and stable employment, a factor important for desistance from crime (Laub & Sampson, 2001). Although one is, in most cases, not forced to inform potential employers about criminal history in Norway, informal notification can stand in the way for some. Karl told me that after his first conviction, about 20 years ago, he had lost jobs. He suspected that it had something to do with his conviction:
I don’t really know how it happened, but… Later [after his conviction], when my name or picture appeared in the newspaper in a job context, it didn’t take long before my employer was approached or got an inquiry. I don’t know from who, or the background for it or anything. And that went on for a few years and I had to change a few jobs and make sure that I didn’t appear in the newspaper or elsewhere in the context of work or something else. (Karl)

If they found out that I had started working somewhere, my employer was immediately notified. I was called in and told that they had gotten an inquiry about my background, and that they didn’t want a further employment engagement. On two or three occasions I had to leave at once. (Karl)

Karl told me that his employers did not want to tell him who had contacted them. Karl was still unemployed when I spoke to him. He did some voluntary work to not isolate himself completely but carrying the experiences of losing jobs because of informal notification, he came off as somewhat discouraged.

When a person convicted of sexual offences returns to a community, neighbors and local residents might engage in informal social control to inform each other of his presence, distribute flyers informing others or engage in harassing behavior in an attempt to get him to move. Studies indicate that this type of local harassment is fairly common in the US (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Levenson & Cotter, 2005a). Karl believed that this had happened to him. He had experienced an episode where someone had distributed written notes about him in his neighborhood.

Well, the first time [twenty years ago] there was a situation with police cars and everything, and a lot of the neighbors noticed. And after that I know that something written was put in mailboxes around the neighborhood. I don’t know the full content, but it was about… sexual crime and all that. I don’t know the exact wording, I have just been told by neighbors. I don’t know if I was mentioned by name for that matter. (Karl)
As a result of these incidents, Karl had taken precautions after his newest sentence and following release. He had moved to a place where nobody knew him. Thus, informal notification had more or less forced him into secrecy.

[This time] I have tried to keep it hidden, moving to a new place and so on. Considering what happened the last time… It was constantly someone who found out where I was or what I was doing, so I have tried to keep it as well hidden as possible this time. […] I guess they had their reasons. (Karl)

Karl also explained how his experiences was constantly with him, even after moving to a place. “I don’t exactly isolate, that’s something different, but… Of course, I think about it all the time and I lay low, to put it that way”, he said. His experiences were so well embedded in him that they affected how he behaved and led to a constant feeling of stress.

The described examples of informal community notification challenge the thought of Norway or Norwegians as especially focused on inclusion and rehabilitation. Even if the system is built for reintegration, without any SORN-laws, there are people that will take the issue in their own hands and make sure that re-entry is not necessarily easy for this group. This can be persons that do not even know the convicted person. One reason can be punitive attitudes based on stereotypes, leading them to think that persons convicted of sexual offences do not deserve a chance of redemption. They might want to punish them even more.

Christian had not experienced informal notification, but he told me that during his trial, a police officer had prepared him that a group of people with vigilant-like intentions had come to record and take pictures. However, due to coincidences they did not witness his trial after all. Christian was very glad that they were not there. During our conversations, he shared some of his reflections regarding persons who wish to engage in this type of informal social control or take the law into their own hands.

There are some groups who publish as much as they can about persons… like me. I kind of get why they do it, but they are not necessarily able to put themselves in the situation we sex offenders are in. So, they don’t see what we have to struggle with anyways, you know. And it’s not expedient. I understand… their thoughts. That you
don’t deserve to kind of… well, have a normal life, you know. […] They might not want American conditions, but they obviously think that it’s a right way to do it. That your neighbor shall know that you live in the neighborhood, you know. (Christian)

Vigilante episodes are probably more common in for instance the US than in Norway, as the latter has very few episodes of violence towards persons convicted of sexual offences after they are released from prison. In the US, where the sex offender registry is open to the public, it is harder to hide. In Norway, secrecy is a more viable option. However, the informants in this study all understood that if they were to come forward with what they had done, they would likely be victims of discrimination or worse. In this sense, they felt that they carried a stigma in one way or another, as they recognized that their status as a former “sex offender” is not an appealing one. As described in chapter 4, interaction with the prison community was the first direct experiences with the stigma attached to being a person convicted of sexual offences for the informants in this study. Furthermore, as described in chapter 2, the general stigmatizing attitudes of the public are sometimes obvious through media.

6.4 The monster label

As explained in chapter 2, according to labeling theorists, being branded or labeled as deviant has important consequences for one’s further self-image and social functioning (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Goode, 2005). None of the participants in this study had been called names or directly labeled by their immediate surroundings. The exception was in prison where a few said that they had been bullied or called names like “pedo” or the like. As described above, Karl had also experienced a few episodes of informal notification which had unfortunate consequences for him. However, my main impression is that the participants had little experience with being directly labeled or called names. Still, they responded to other’s perceived attitudes through secrecy, withdrawal and sometimes education. This indicates that the stereotyping of persons who have committed sexual offences, as a group, can lead to feelings of being labeled, excluded, or stigmatized, if you are in fact part of the group that is being labeled.
I wanted to discuss Sylvi Listhaug’s “monster” outbursts in the media with the informants in this study. “If you rape a child, you are a monster”, she said. First, the statement contradicts the rehabilitative and reintegrative type of shaming. Second, being dehumanized in public discourse can lead to what Pratt (2016) refers to as “Othering”. It feeds stereotypes and builds upon the notion that persons who have sexually offended cannot change. Of course, and thankfully, Listhaug’s opinions are not representative for the whole nation. However, the following debate in Norwegian media indicate that Norwegians might not be that exceptional when it comes to forgiveness and the will to give persons convicted of sexual crimes a second chance. Thus, there is reason to believe that Norwegians (too) see persons convicted of sexual offences as fundamental Others or as our time’s “folk devils” (Cohen, 2011). Seven of the informants in this study had witnessed the media headlines linked to Listhaug’s statement. Some informants were strongly affected by them, some said that they were not. I was interested in finding out if they in any way seemed to internalize perceptions of themselves as monsters.

Erik brought up the subject himself. We were talking about how some of the men he had met in group therapy had lost their families because of their convictions, and he said “and that brings us into the fucking word that the fucking government claims that we are, that we are monsters. That’s bullshit”. I asked him what he was thinking when he saw on the news or read in newspapers that people, who had committed similar offences as him, were being referred to as monsters. He answered: “I would say that I agree ten percent. […] I think ten out of one hundred are monsters”. Erik further told me that he did not think of himself as a monster, as he was actually quite nice to children. People that were fantasizing about torture and murder on the other hand, and did not have the slightest touch of empathy, were monsters. “What I’m trying to say is that I, as I am now, I am no monster”, Erik said. I asked him how it made him feel to read or see this in the media, if he took offence of it:

It depends on the situation. If I’m in a good mood, I don’t care. […] Because I know what I am. At the same time, I think it’s irritating that, if people find out that I am convicted of a sexual offence, they think “Yes, you are a fucking monster”. I don’t want to call myself a monster. (Erik)

To him, some persons convicted of sexual offences were monsters, but he did not perceive himself as one. This resembles Ugelvik’s (2015) findings, where prisoners used others’ much
worse crimes to defend or justify their own actions and re-build a moral self. Later, I will explain how Erik experienced his self-image and if it he thought it was influenced by portrayals in the media.

Rune had also witnessed the recent monster headlines. When I asked him to describe how it made him feel to read or see on the news that this group was referred to as monsters he said:

Well, I feel like people have their heads stuck up somewhere where it’s really dark. […] You know, people act really surprised, like it’s the biggest shock ever, if something like this [offending] would happen again, but it’s like… It’s the most likely thing ever. (Rune)

It was a bit hard for me to catch what Rune really meant, more exact if he meant that people would react with shock to the fact that someone would sexually offend at all. He elaborated what he meant:

No, that it can happen again. You know, it goes without saying that if you teach a person to write the number “1” for example, of course he will always write that one number, it’s… If that’s what society absolutely wants to teach you, then it’s no wonder that you… It’s not hard to understand. (Rune)

Here, Rune argued that if you call someone a monster, they might become one. So, if we are interested in changing or rehabilitating an individual, it would be smart to use a rhetoric that reflects the thought that someone is not a monster (anymore). I asked him if he was in any way hurt when he read about sex offenders being called monsters. “Well, I have little faith in humans in general, but… It’s a bit hard, […] it doesn’t improve your mood, it doesn’t”, he answered. He further told me that he realized that he per definition had committed these types of offences himself, but he did not exactly relate the monster label to himself. He said it depended on his current mood, and that how such statements affected him varied from day to day.

Christian, on the other hand, had a different response when I brought up how persons who have sexually offended towards children were called monsters by Listhaug.
It is impossible to disagree with her. It just doesn’t make it easier for us sex offenders when we get out. In regards of being able to normalize our lives and get help. […] Your actions lead to you being pictured and seen as a monster, and I agree with that. I don’t disagree with… the picture that is pained. Not when it comes to what one has done to a little child. It’s kind of in the nature of the cause that… the designation [monster] is right for the action. (Christian)

The fact that he is saying that “it is impossible to disagree” indicates that he has internalized these thoughts about himself. However, we talked about this and he added:

Whether it was right for that specific person is… another discussion. Even if it is me that has done the act [the sexual offence], of course I have a wish to move on after this too. That’s why I said what I said earlier, that I would rather be in prison for any other crime. (Christian)

What Christian is saying here is that he wishes for a second chance. He knew that persons convicted of sexual offences, and especially those who have offended against children, rarely is given a second chance. He had experienced that both in prison and through losing his family and most of his friends.

The ones that did not admit to having committed a sexual offence did not have a lot to say about this. Both said that they did not feel as if they were the ones being featured in the media. However, Finn (wrongfully convicted of sexual abuse of a child, according to himself) told me that he used to be a great admirer of Listhaug, but that her monster statement was something that he did not appreciate. I asked him if he viewed persons convicted of sexual offences as monsters. He answered: “No. Definitely not, not at all”.

6.5 Chapter summary and reflections

Few informants said that they felt stigmatized by others as a result of their conviction. However, when digging a bit deeper it became clear that most of them experienced high levels of stress linked to their “sex offender” status. In prison they had learned that their status was the lowest. Through broken social bonds they had learned that forgiveness was not the
norm. And through the media, their unwanted status was confirmed. Thus, through different sources and arenas, they had learned that they should not reveal their status as a person convicted of sexual offences unless they had to. They responded by keeping their offences a secret, withdrawing from social situations, and in a single case – education.

In the next chapter I will try to resume the informants’ thoughts about themselves, more exact their self-image. I will also present their thoughts and hopes for the future. Are they hopeful?
7 Self-image and future hopes

In previous chapters I have shown how the “sex offender” or “monster” label and the perceived attitudes towards persons who have sexually offended can have great consequences for how this group of offenders act or limit their actions. These labels can also possibly influence how they feel about themselves and how they see their possibilities of living a good life in the future. Goffman (1963) distinguished between an individual’s actual identity (whom they know themselves to be) and their virtual identity (how they are perceived and responded to by others). He argued that one’s social identity is constructed, at least in part, by the virtual identity. This does not necessarily mean that one becomes what one is perceived to be in a deterministic labeling perspective, but it could still mean that one’s self-image is affected. Discrepancy between and individual’s virtual and actual identity spoils his social identity (Goffman, 1963). Thus, this discrepancy needs to be dealt with in order to (re)establish a positive self-image. Maruna (2001) has suggested that the establishment of a “true self” or “real me” is essential to every desisting narrative.

7.1 Thoughts about self

Through previous chapters, some informants’ feelings of shame have already been described. However, I specifically asked all participants about their thoughts about themselves and their self-image. They divided into three broad groups based on their answers; the ones who considered themselves innocent, the ones who could portray their offences as “less bad”, and the ones who had offended against children. However, my impression was that some of the participants in this study gave mixed signals regarding their thoughts about themselves, and I could see some contradictions in what they said. This could be due to neutralization techniques that have been developed since their offences came to the surface. Persons convicted of sexual offences have been found to experience feelings of shame (Marshall et al., 2011), and they need to find ways to curb these feelings.
7.1.1 The “wrongfully convicted”

Two informants in this study considered themselves wrongfully convicted and thus innocent. Overall, it seemed that these two had good self-images, despite the fact that they had been assigned the status as a person who has committed sexual offences.

I’m not going to brag about myself, but had all guys been like me I think there wouldn’t have been as many divorces. If their focus was whether the woman is good, nice, takes care of the children, is faithful, then… us guys should be the same way. That’s what I think. […] I’m humane, nice, humorous, polite. (Tom)

I stand well on my own two feet. I’m structured, I’ve had good jobs. […] And I have nothing to be ashamed of at all. But of course, my surroundings don’t know that. (Finn)

In previous chapters I have shown how Finn had struggled with the loss of important family members. However, his self-image seemed quite positive, and he underscored the things he has accomplished and the fact that he had nothing to be ashamed of. Nevertheless, he understood full well that his surroundings look as his acts, and in extension him, as shameful. I asked him more precisely what being convicted had done to his self-image and whether it had changed him in any way, as a person.

Well, of course, officially I’m convicted. And I have served a sentence and I have to deal with that. And of course, that hurts my feelings. A lot. Because I have been a proper human being my whole life, I have never done anything that society can reproach me for, rather the opposite. Of course, that part is heavy. […] I think about it every day. But I try to tell myself “stop that, you’re done with this now, stand up for yourself”, and at least I do that [stand up for myself] […] I’ve tried, but it’s not easy. I would lie if I said that. It’s not easy because it’s a terrible conviction to have to struggle with. I will carry it for the rest of my life. (Finn)

I will never know if Finn was wrongfully convicted or not, and I will not go into to the many theories of denial as a defense mechanism or coping strategy. However, research has suggested that denial is a way to maintain self-esteem and a positive self-image (see e.g. Ware & Mann, 2012). Nevertheless, what Finn was saying is that he is not done with his conviction even if he had served his time and soon will finish mandatory reporting at the probation
office. It just does not end. For him, claiming that he is innocent, this should have nothing to do with regret, feeling sorry for victims, or the harm that he has done. Still, he thought of his conviction as something he would have to deal with for the rest of his life. In that lies a perception that he will never be perceived as a proper human being again, if his surroundings were to find out about it.

7.1.2 The ones convicted of “less bad” offences

As a result of the nature of their offences, Steinar and Felix could portray their offences as “less bad”. They described their self-images as quite good.

I see myself as a very social person, when I’m out with friends I always talk to everyone. (…) So, I’m a happy and very social boy, and I take great care of everyone else before myself. I want others to be happy before I’m happy, you know. (Felix)

I’ve been a fool. […] But what I think about myself… Well, I talk to a lot… It probably sounds strange, but I have nice colleagues and I have contact with a lot of people. […] Being arrested was an adjustment of my self-image. And the process after has probably… I don’t know if it has changed me, but… I am the same person at the same time as I am not. If you know what I mean. In the period that I was sick, where I kind of chose to disregard common sense and chose kind of crazy solutions to financial problems… So, it was kind of exciting to put it mildly. (Steinar)

Here, Felix focuses on his characteristics as a person. He says he is social, takes care of people, and wants people around him to be happy. He does not even mention his offences. It seemed to me as if he had truly managed to come to terms with his conviction and reestablish his self-image and life in the way it used to be. Steinar on the other hand, also presented a good self-image, but he was focusing more on his surroundings and external factors. He did not mention any positive characteristics he held as a person. My first impression of Steinar was that he did not seem to struggle a lot with his conscience or bad thoughts about himself, even if he sometimes said that he did when I challenged him. However, his last quote (above) indicates that he still felt a need to neutralize (Sykes & Matza, 1957) his offenses and justify them by stressing that he was sick and had financial problems. The question is why. Possibly, the reason is to be found in the nature of Felix and Steinar’s offences. According to Sykes and
Matza (1957) techniques of neutralization can be more or less conscious or deliberate. On several occasions through our conversation, Steinar said that his offences were more about the thrills and the financial aspects, and he also stressed that he was not a pedophile. And he might not be, clinically, as we know that not all sexual offences towards minors are committed by persons with a pedophilic disorder or attraction (Richards, 2011). However, Steinar was still sentenced to preventive detention for severe offences against children. This is both officially and subjectively a much worse crime than Felix’s offence towards a woman the same age as him. He had received the mildest sentence among the informants in this study. On many occasions during our conversations, Felix expressed that he was at terms with it, he had done it, move on. Steinar might be in greater need of different coping mechanisms to be able to maintain or reestablish a positive self-image. These techniques of neutralization or coping mechanisms seemed so well embedded in his interpretation of his offences that they helped him to maintain a positive self-image. I do not think he noticed how he presented these techniques many times during our conversations, as part of his “success” story. Thus, my interpretation is that while Felix had managed to maintain a positive self-image where his offences were an included part of his history, Steinar needed ways to maintain his self-image despite of his offences.

7.1.3 The ones who admit having done “the worst possible thing”

I found that the ones who had offended towards children without obvious ways to neutralize their offences overall had poorer self-images. Some described their poor self-images as something that had been with them their whole lives. Thus, the topic of self-image and sexual offending was presented as a version of the old “chicken and egg” metaphor. As described, Erik did not recognize himself in the concept of the monster. I asked him about his thoughts about himself or more exact his self-image, and he answered: “It is as low as it can be. […] It has been like that my whole life”. So, to him, his poor self-image did not have anything to do with his conviction or being labeled as a monster, as it could not be any worse than what it already was.

Not only am I so fucking ugly, but when I get these bags under my eyes on top of it [after sleeping]… I look like I am taken straight out of a horror movie. Fuck… It’s…
I’ve had this with me all my life. That I’m so fucking ugly and fat and… You know. (Erik)

I asked Erik if this truly was what he thought of himself, as I was surprised that a nice and talkative guy like him could describe himself like that. He answered “yes. And I know I am right”. It struck me that what Erik described that he saw in the mirror in fact resembled the description of a monster. If your initial thoughts about yourself are so poor, you might not be further influenced by for instance being labeled a monster.

Rune also told me about how he had lived with a poor self-image his whole life. “Well, my self-image has never been all that, so it hasn’t exactly changed a lot”, he said. He also did some further reflecting considering what labels like monster could lead to. “Well, it’s not exactly part of a rehabilitating process. It’s not. It’s like they’re basically saying straight out “hey, just continue what you’re doing”, he said. Further, he had some additional thoughts around the topic of self-image. He was sure that at least 9 out of 10 of the ones that I was going to interview would tell me that in one way or another they would always have had a negative self-image.

A person with the best self-image ever will probably not commit a sexual crime. It’s not likely that you will commit these kinds of offences if you have a positive self-image. It’s an essential part of it. (Rune)

What Rune is saying is actually quite important. First of all, research has shown that there is a link between low self-esteem (or self-image) and sexual offending (Marshall, Marshall, Serran, & O’Brien, 2009). Second, although it is hard to determine if Rune is right about the numbers as my sample is small, what he is saying is linked to labeling theory and the role of the larger community. Feeling labeled, stigmatized or excluded will eventually lead to a negative self-image. And as Rune says, a negative self-image and processes of isolation and withdrawal can in turn possibly lead to (new) offences. Especially for persons convicted of sexual offences, stigma and isolation within communities are genuinely daunting obstacles (Fox, 2016). When one feels as an outsider that does not belong and is not wanted in society, one has less to lose. Even if there are no systemic barriers to reintegration after serving a sex offence sentence, the greater society can stand in the way for successful integration, perhaps
without even knowing it, through disintegrative shaming.

Karl had been convicted for the second time, and after release from prison he had moved to a new place. He told me that he struggled to find a job, and his situation seemed somewhat hopeless. Losing family, friends, and a sense of belonging, Karl did not have a lot of social capital. Gaining social capital requires that one is seen as a proper member of society.

I had a lot of time to think after my conviction and in prison and after that. […] Well, that brings us into to the premises for my conviction and, we don’t have to go too deep into that, but I was a little bit fooled so… I have been bitter both towards others and myself, especially myself. But of course, it affects you. Especially in the sense of lost job possibilities and the loss of family and social network… House and so on… It makes it really difficult. Of course, it has done a lot to my self-image. (Karl)

The hopelessness that Karl felt after losing work, family and friends had left him with a poor self-image. This was true for Christian as well. When I asked Christian what he thought about himself, he simply answered: “The same as everyone else think about me”. When I further asked him what he perceived “everyone else” thought of him he answered “well, to use a much-used word, it’s probably a monster”. This indicates that Christian’s self-image was in fact quite affected by the labels that are sometimes obvious through media and the like. He sometimes referred to himself as a “sex offender” or a “molester” (Norwegian: “overgriper”) in our conversations. I asked him why he did that, if he felt as it was part of his identity.

It has become a part of me. You don’t want to present others or yourself as [a sex offender] but then again, it’s hard to accept oneself for what one has done. So, what one uses as a nickname or label for oneself, or what other use…I’m not… I don’t disagree with the characteristics that are used to describe us. But… I wish it was different. (Christian)

I followed up on Christian’s answer by asking him if he in any way found it helpful to refer to himself using these terms. “Does it help?”, I asked.

No, it doesn’t. Not at all. […] It’s kind of a defense. If everyone else does it, you might as well do it yourself. In a way it’s easier to… As long as you’re able to say those things about yourself you have kind of… Well, it’s a bit easier. It’s hard to
explain it but it actually becomes easier. Possibly, the word in itself is defused when you’re able to use it to describe yourself. You don’t have to fear being called [a sex offender] because you’ve called yourself one. It doesn’t slap you in the face, you know, you’ve heard it before. (Christian)

Here, Christian explained how he felt the need to constantly remind himself that his master status might in fact be “sex offender”. He needed to be prepared for the negative reactions linked to this status, reactions which he knew would come. It is likely that such coping mechanisms can slow down the process of (re)establishing a positive self-image or build up an identity as a non-sex offender.

7.2 Picturing the future

Hope plays a key part in the process of change (Weaver, 2014). Previous chapters have indicated that carrying a conviction for a sexual offence can sometimes feel hopeless. For these reasons, my final question to all informants was how they pictured their future and what they hoped to achieve in life.

7.2.1 Hopeful and positive views

Again, Steinar and Felix stood out as part of the “successful group”. When I asked Steinar how he pictured his future, he simply answered “it’s nice”. Felix elaborated more and showed feelings of hope and enthusiasm when talking about his future.

I have put everything behind me now, so I just want to start fresh. Start where I left off, and just keep it going, really. [...] My life plans are the same as they used to be. Have the job I’m dreaming of, have a house, have a family. To be able to do the work I want to do and have a family and house and everything in addition, and then be able to keep busy with the hobby I like, that’s what I want to achieve. Then I would feel as if I have everything. (Felix)

Felix further presented support from family and friends as reasons for his positive future lookout.
[Without them] I wouldn’t be able to picture my future as positive. I wouldn’t. […] If family and good friends were to distance themselves from me, and you stand there all alone, there’s really not much left. […] Because of them, I’m still here, and I’m very grateful. (Felix)

By experiencing support from persons that were important to him, Felix had managed to put his past behind him and was hopeful about the future.

In the previous chapter I described how Erik was the only one stating that he felt as he was being stigmatized for being convicted for sexual offences. Due to his preventive detention sentence, Erik was still subject of very strict conditions. He had many hopes and plans for the future, but he did not know when his plans could be realized.

My dream is to become a free man, you know. […] And I will engage in more activities with my friends in the club. Hopefully, I can find a place closer to the city than now. […] I will engage in more activities and invite people home to my place. […] I’m not allowed to have overnight guests now, you know. (Erik)

What Erik described was basically being able to live a normal life and make his own choices. He had not been able to do that for at least two decades. He still presented quite positive thoughts about the future, even if he did not know when or if it would happen. The main reason was his new club and group of friends, where he truly felt welcome. He told me about the first time he was going to meet them after having been chatting online for a while. One of them recognized him and came to say hi. To Erik’s surprise, he put his hand on Erik’s shoulder.

Boom! I remember how I just froze. I’m not used to adult men touching me. I’m not used to it. It took months, and they understood. Today, they can approach me from behind and lay their hand on my shoulder. […] I made a joke, you know, and said “I wanna stay here [in this club] as long as I’m able to walk”. “Well, then we’ll just pick you up in a wheelchair”, one said. […] Fantastic. What a group of people. (Erik)

Erik spoke of the members of this club as his family, and every time he mentioned something about his future it included spending time with them. From the stories that Erik had told me about his childhood and teenage years, belonging to a group was new to him. For most of his
life he had lacked close relationships with adults he trusted. As described, feeling that one belongs to a social network is important in terms of desistance. It also seemed as this was crucial for Erik’s self-esteem. Marshall, Champagne, Sturgeon, and Bryce (1997) studied self-esteem enhancement procedures as part of a treatment program and found a clear link between increased self-esteem and reduced loneliness. Erik’s story supported these findings as his sense of (finally) belonging to a group had a positive effect on his self-esteem and gave him hope for the future.

These were the stories where I saw more hope than hopelessness. However, other informants had more modest thoughts about the future.

### 7.2.2 Just to get by

While young people often have great hopes and dreams for the future, Rune did not.

> I’m just going to get by and make some money so that I can live, that’s mostly it. If I have food on the table, there really aren’t any future plans. There are no… Well, to exist. (Rune)

Rune’s plan for the future was to simply exist, and it struck me as sad. I wondered if he used to have plans for the future and that they had simply diminished. However, “no… I never had any great hopes or dreams, I haven’t”, he answered.

Christian was also quite modest when it came to future plans.

> My dreams are different now. They are short term, very short term, it’s kind of just to make it through the day. And then it’s about making it through the week, the month… And then it’s about doing a good job. I know I’m a good employee. (Christian)

Christian’s plans and hopes for the future had changed drastically as a result of his conviction. He used to be a family father, married and living a normal life. Suddenly, his master status was instead a person convicted of sexual offences, and he had no family to support him. It was hard for him to plan more than a day or a week ahead. To him too, it seemed as if his
main goal was to get by. On several occasions Christian talked about how he could not picture that others would ever forgive him, and again see him as a human being, after what he had done. At one point he referred to his prison experiences. He told me that most prison staff were very professional and saw past his conviction. They treated him as a human being. However, he noticed that a few officers “would not even touch him with a barge pole”. Their reactions towards him, which he explained that he noticed through their body language and subtle signs, had an effect on his future lookouts.

I’m not going to sit here and feel sorry for myself, but [such reactions] make things more difficult. […] [In prison] there is a big group of staff that are supposed to be professional and this is their job, you know, they have chosen it as their profession. And then they are not able to… Not even all of them manage to be professional and forgive, you know. (Christian)

One way to understand this is that Christian is drawing a line between the well-known prisoner hierarchy and the wider community. As described in chapter 4, Christian was very aware of his status among other prisoners. However, staff were supposed to be helpers and representatives of the wider community. When Christian experienced signs that they too treated him differently because he was convicted of a sexual offence against a child, it affected his hopes for the future and people’s ability to forgive and forget.

Finn at first seemed positive when I asked him about his thoughts about the future. When he kept talking, however, I got the sense that he was in fact worried about his future.

Yes, the future… To put it this way, everybody complains about time passing by and I always say that time isn’t something that passes, it is something that comes. And that time, the time that is coming, you can’t do nothing about it before it comes. So, I’m basically still… on that level. If I run into problems, and it’s possible that I will run into problems of some kind, I will try and handle it as it comes. There’s really not a lot more to say about that, I think. […] Of course, things that can make it difficult can happen. It can. But like I said, I will have to deal with it if it happens. (Finn)

What I perceived that Finn said between the lines was that he was indeed worried that he would run into problems because of his sex offence conviction in the future. It was probably
more due to the tone in his voice, than his actual words, as I cannot really see it when I just read my own transcripts. However, my reply to the quote above was “I hope you don’t have to deal with too much pain”. Finn confirmed my perceptions by answering “Well… I probably won’t be able to escape it”.

Karl described getting a job as key for being able to have hopes for the future.

I hope that I find something to do… Stable employment or something like that, at least I need something to do. And preferably a stable income. Because if I get there, then… I will have hope for the future. But right now, it’s looking kind of greyish to put it that way, if you’re not just looking at things like black or white. […] Of course, if you have a working day that is filled with something positive, you get better economy. You can begin thinking about starting a new life. So, it’s kind of a basic need for me, to get a job. (Karl)

As mentioned, hope plays a key role in the process of change, and particularly in the early stages. It can give people a sense of confidence that they can exercise choice and control over their lives (Weaver, 2014). To me, Karl seemed almost hopeless, and that is understandable after the things he had been through many years ago when he experienced losing jobs as a result of informal notification. Now, he was in his sixties, and he told me that he struggled financially to make ends meet.

Through these conversations, many informants also had thoughts about what they thought had helped them to have better outlooks for the future. As an example, Christian focused on his two close friends that had stood by him despite of his conviction.

The fact that they bother and dare and want to have contact with me is good in regard to me realizing that there are possibilities. That they were able to forgive me and that there are possibilities in regard to… having a future, you know. So, even if there’s only two [friends] left… […] They helped me through a terribly dark period. (Christian)

In previous chapters I have described how Christian appreciated that his friends questioned what he had done to a young girl, and why he had done it. They clearly condemned his
actions, but despite of that they remained his friends. For Christian, this was what kept him going without losing hope. His friends showed him ability to shame his actions without shaming him.

7.2.3 Policy perspectives

Finally, some participants also had thoughts about what could have made things easier for them. Not surprisingly, stricter policies and registration laws was not part of it. None of the participants saw SORN laws as productive, in fact, some said that such laws would have fatal consequences for them.

From my perspective, I have read about it and seen it you know, but I wouldn’t be able to live with it. I wouldn’t even be interested in trying. […] It would have been very difficult to see any solutions or ways out. (Christian)

I think it means that you will be stepped on even more, if everyone can visit a webpage to see who has done this and that, or that you would have to have a sign outside your house [saying you are a “sex offender”]. You will be stepped on even more, and what is one supposed to do then? They might all of a sudden do it again [sexually offend]. […] ‘Cause they are thinking that they are so far down already, that it doesn’t make a difference if they do it again. (Felix)

At least I’m glad that there’s no, let’s say, public pillory where one can easily find information and… There have been some pretty grotesque things that have happened. (Karl)

On the contrary, what they wished for was that they did not have to live in fear that people would find out about their offending history, create barriers towards reintegration or cut them off for what they had done in the past. Like Erik said, “my dream is that the guys in [name of club] knew about my offending history […] That’s my dream, that everybody knew”. However, informants in this study felt far from achieving what they hoped for. Karl said “still, it’s easier to stigmatize than to maybe try and help in a way that… society can benefit from in a longer perspective. I think we still have a long way to go”.

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Christian repeated several times that he wished that he could come forward with his offending history and still be accepted. He told me that he had known about the low status of persons committing sexual offences or feeling attracted to children long before he committed the offence he was convicted of, and that he did not dare to talk to anyone about the things he struggled with. I will end this chapter by quoting him, as his thoughts in many ways reflect mine after talking to and trying to understand the situation of the eight men I have interviewed.

I have been thinking a bit about what one, or I, could have done. It would be to be able to get over the threshold of seeking help, you know, instead of things developing over so many years. […] I’ve been thinking that… By maybe normalizing… you know, to seek help. Instead of holding it inside, and in the end, everything goes wrong, and you do something that you shouldn’t do. It has to be a place different from your GP, someone who will actually do something. It’s horrible to say, it’s wrong to say that we should normalize seeking help for something like this, but… to create some kind of accept that the problem is out there, because there is no doubt that it is. […] Why can’t we try to facilitate that the threshold is a bit lower? For one day, no matter what we have done, we are going back to society and we will become someone’s neighbor. Whether you like it or not. (Christian)

7.3 Chapter summary and reflections

Informants in this study differed regarding both self-image and future hopes. Some still held quite good self-images while others almost condemned themselves. A pattern that occurred was that the ones that admitted to having done “the worst possible thing” held the least positive thought about themselves. They were all convicted of offences involving children. Research has shown how so-called child molesters generally have lower self-esteem than so-called rapists (Marshall, Marshall, Sachdev, & Kruger, 2003; Shine, McCloskey, & Newton, 2002). Of course, there is a difference between self-esteem and self-image, which I will not try to explain here. However, self-esteem is likely to influence self-image and vice versa. Furthermore, Marshall et al. (1997) showed how self-esteem can be affected by social bonds
and a sense of belonging. They found a link between reduced loneliness and increased self-esteem. This makes sense in a desistance theoretical perspective. Furthermore, future hopes were almost a perfect reflection of self-image among the informants in this study. The ones that presented a positive self-image also presented their futures in positive, hopeful ways. The ones that held more negative thought about themselves described their future plans as “just to get by”. The exception was Erik, who had become part of a new social network, a group of friends that he enjoyed spending time with. Furthermore, many informants had important thoughts about what had, or could have had, an impact on both their self-images and their future hopes. These thoughts are important in order to understand how persons and communities around the released person convicted of a sexual offence can play a part in successful reintegration. Drawing on the informants’ stories, it is likely that their self-images and hopes for the future, at least partly, had been affected by their prison experiences. In addition, they were affected by stereotypical labels and others’ perceived attitudes towards them as a group. Some struggled to believe that they could ever be seen as something else than a person who had committed a sexual offence.
8 Conclusion

Norway is a country known for its rehabilitative and inclusionary penal approach towards offenders. An important part of the punishment is to prepare prisoners for a normal, crime-free life on the outside. Thus legally, in Norway, everyone gets a second chance. As for persons convicted of sexual offences, the government has rejected sex offender registries on rights-based ground and opted for more inclusionary therapeutic interventions. Once an individual has served his sentence, he shall again be included in society as any other citizen. Thus, the whole system is based on what Braithwaite (1989) referred to as reintegrative shaming. However, the stories presented in this thesis witness that even if there are no systemic barriers to reintegration after serving a sex offence sentence, the greater society can stand in the way for successful integration. Persons convicted of sexual offences are in fact stigmatized. Sometimes through direct exclusion, but mostly through not being included as a proper human being. General attitudes towards individuals who have sexually offended were highly visible to informants in this study. They knew that they were unwanted. As I have shown in this thesis, the prison experiences of these offenders can lay the foundation for life after release. Some informants got advised from prison officers, health personnel or other staff that they should make up a cover story to stay safe and not be recognized as someone who is convicted of sexual offences. The question is whether this advice is actually counterproductive in the long run, as it can create self-images that are not easily converted. If part of the prison punishment is to rehabilitate offenders and help them establish new identities as non-offenders, one could wonder if prison staff is doing them a disservice by advising them to lie. Experiencing that dishonesty is necessary to be accepted can potentially delay the process of rebuilding a moral self.

Informants in this study experienced high levels of stress linked to being recognized as someone who had committed a sexual offence, even after release. In many ways they limited their own life opportunities as a result of trying to cope with the threats they perceived. The reasons why can easily be understood. In prison they learned that their offences could not be forgiven. They were told to lie to stay safe. After release, their families and friends cut them off.Courtesy stigma and episodes of informal notification taught them that there was no chance of redemption. And finally, through the media they learned that persons carrying the same stigma as themselves were considered monsters. As a result, and as a group, informants
in this study withdrew and isolated more, and their self-images were in some cases affected negatively. All this because of the label assigned and its stickiness. Once a “sex offender”, always a “sex offender”. Drawing on both labeling theories and theories of desistance, this is unfortunate because it creates barriers to society re-entry. Although recidivism rates among persons convicted of sex offences are low, stigmatization of this group might unintentionally increase the very risk society wants eradicated (Willis et al., 2010). If stress, anxiety and social marginalization are key factors linked to possible recidivism, it is important to understand how such feelings and experiences could be mitigated (Tewksbury, 2012). The question is, is there anything the society or community can do to break this vicious circle? Are there more productive forms of social control that can be used to let persons who commit sexual offences know that their behavior is unwanted and wrong? Or do released persons convicted of sexual offences need to hide, isolate and live in fear that someone will find out that they have been punished for committing a sexual offence?

In fact, I believe the answer to these questions relies heavily on the members of society and their will to change. It does not rely on the person who has served a sentence for a sexual crime. He has already served his time, and done his part. Fox (2016) argues that the potential role of ordinary community members in integrating offenders so far has been under-theorized and untapped. Their role is critical in order to facilitate desistance and enable persons convicted of sexual offences to build a new identity as a non-sex offender. McNeill (2014) describes desistance in three aspects. Primary desistance refers to a behavioral change, such as engaging in periods of desistance, perhaps because of new employment. Secondary desistance it what occurs as a result of an identity change, perhaps enabled by the steadying effect of employment or some other factor. However, tertiary desistance refers to the more cemented state of desistance that results from a genuine sense of belonging, or integration into a pro-social community. As a society, we need to help foster tertiary desistance by validating released offenders’ place(s) within a moral network by envisaging their worth and dignity. In other words, to be able to fully reintegrate persons convicted of sexual offences in society and contribute to desistance and future hope, we need to provide them with legitimate opportunities for success that do not involve returning to criminal activity. It is crucial to help them build a new identity as a non-sex offender and a proper human being. Furthermore, we can humanize individuals who have committed sexual crimes. By not referring to persons as
“sex offenders” or “monsters” and literally stating that their identities are linked to the worst thing they ever did, we can help to facilitate community connections and desistance from crime (Lowe & Willis, 2019). It is possible to condemn unwanted actions without dehumanizing the person that is responsible for them.

What most informants in this study wished for was to not have to live in fear of people finding out about their offending history, creating barriers towards reintegration or cutting them off because of their previous offense. They had served their sentences and wanted to be able to live as normal citizens. What they appreciated most were friends and family who saw them for the person they were, and not only as a person who had committed a sexual offence. Having this in mind, communities could take responsibility for signaling that the punishment has ended and welcome offenders back into the fold (Braithwaite & Mugford, 1994). If we were able to that, that would be reintegrative shaming in its full sense, how Braithwaite (1989) described it. In order to have a better shot at ending sexual abuse, it is time to practice what we preach – a re-inclusive policy and practice that involves a second chance for persons convicted of sexual offences.

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References


Attachment 1: Approval from NSD

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Tilrådning fra NSD Personvernbudet for forskning § 7-27

Personvernbudet for forskning viser til meldeskjema mottatt 30.04.2018 for prosjektet:

60568  Dealing with the stigma post-release – how (sex-)offenders in Norway experience society’s attitudes
Behandlingsansvarlig  Universitetet i Oslo, ved institusjonens øverste leder
Daglig ansvarlig  Thomas Ugelvik
Student  Ingeborg J. Sandbukt

Vurdering
Etter gjennomgang av opplysningene i meldeskjema og øvrig dokumentasjon finner vi at prosjektet er unntatt konsejonsplikt og at personopplysningene som blir samlet inn i dette prosjektet er regulert av § 7-27 i personopplysningsforskriften. På den neste siden er vår vurdering av prosjekttopplegget slik det er melet til oss. Du kan nå gå i gang med å behandle personopplysningene.

Vilkår for vår anbefaling
Vår anbefaling forutsetter at du gjennomfører prosjektet i tråd med:
• opplysningene gitt i meldeskjema og øvrig dokumentasjon
• vår prosjektvurdering, se side 2
• eventuell korrespondanse med oss

Meld fra hvis du gjør vesentlige endringer i prosjektet
Dersom prosjektet endrer seg, kan det være nødvendig å sende inn endringsmelding. På våre netsider finner du svar på hvilke endringer du må melde, samt endringsskjema.

Opplysninger om prosjektet blir lagt ut på våre netsider og i Meldingsarkivet
Vi har lagt ut opplysninger om prosjektet på netsidene våre. Alle våre institusjoner har også tilgang til egne prosjekter i Meldingsarkivet.

Vi tar kontakt om status for behandling av personopplysninger ved prosjektsslutt
Ved prosjektsslutt 31.05.2019 vil vi ta kontakt for å avklare status for behandlingen av personopplysninger.
Se våre nettsider eller ta kontakt dersom du har spørsmål. Vi ønsker lykke til med prosjektet!

Vennlig hilsen

Marianne Høgetveit Myhren

Pernille Ekornrud Grøndal

Kontaktperson: Pernille Ekornrud Grøndal tlf.: 55 58 36 41 / pernille.grondal@rbsd.no
Vedlegg: Prosjektvurdering
Kopi: Ingeborg J. Sandbukt, i.j.sandbukt@student.jus.uio.no
Attachment 2: Project review

Personvernombudet for forskning

Prosjektvurdering - Kommentar

Prosjektnr: 60568

FORMÅL
Formålet med prosjektet er å undersøke hvordan seksuellovbruddsdømte opplever samfunnets holdninger til dem etter løslatelse, samt hvordan de håndterer opplevd stigma. For å undersøke dette vil studenten intervjuer løslatte seksuellovbruddsdømte som er igang med oppsporing i forbindelse fra løslatelse fra dom eller forsoning. Prosjektet søker å kartlegge samfunnets holdninger til dem, både som gruppe og individuelt, og både holdninger som kommer frem i media (ref. "monster"-debatten) og opplevde holdninger fra mennesker i nærområdet.

ANDRE GODKJENNINGER
Studenten har fått godkjenning av Kriminalomsorgen Region Øst til å gjennomføre prosjektet. I godkjenningebrevet fremgår det blant annet at forskerne er underlagt tushetspolitikk i medhold av § 13 c og § 13 e. Personvernombudet forutsetter at prosjektet gjennomføres i henhold til vilkårene gitt av regionen.

UTVALG OG REKRUTTERING
Utvalget består av løslatte fengsels- eller forvaringsdomde seksuellforbrytere igang med oppsporing hos frisomsorgen. Forstå kontakt opprettet via den enkelte informant sin saksbehandler, som videreformidler informasjonskrivnet til annen informanter. Interesserte informanter kontaktar deretter saksbehandleren som videreformidler ønske om deltakelse til studenten. Studenten får ikke vite noe om informantene på forhånd, men nettopp at de er igang med seksuellovbrudd.

METODE OG DATA
Datainnsamling skjer via et dybdeintervju med den enkelte informanten. Studenten vil kun registrere indirekte ideologisierende bakgrunnsopplysninger som alder, kjønn, selskapshistorikk, domsopplysninger, om vedkommende bor i tettbebygd eller grusgrendt strøk. Intervjuene skal foregå på Friomsorgens kontorer.

INFORMATJON OG SAMTYSKE

Vi berberer at personvernombudet har foretatt en vurdering på bakgrunn av ågens lovverk. I løpet av august 2018 vil imidlertid nye personvernregler gjelde. Blant annet stilles det mer omfattende krav til informasjon og samtykke, og behandlingsansvarlig institusjon må løpende vurdere om informasjonen som er gjitt er tilstrekkelig etter det nye regelverket. Vi anbefaler derfor at du benytter vår nytt mal for informasjonskriv, som er lagt ut på vår nettside: http://www.msd.nh.no/personvernombud/help/informasjon_samtyske/index.html Oppdatert skriv sendes til personvernombudet@msd.no, slik at vi kan foreta en rask vurdering av skrivet for utvalget.
kontaktes. For mer informasjon om det nye regelverket, og en veiledere om samtykke, viser vi til Datasetsynets hjemmesider: https://www.datasetsynet.no/samfunnsomradet/overordnet-om-rettigheter-og-plikter/samtykke/

SENSITIVE PERSONOPPLYSNINGER
Det fremgår av meldeskjema at du vil behandle sensitive opplysninger om strafferettlige forhold. På bakgrunn av sporsmålene i intervjun, legger personvernombudet til grunn at du også vil samle inn personopplysninger om straffbare forhold.

INFORMASJONSSIKKERHET
Personvernombudet forutsetter at du behandler alle data i tråd med Universitetet i Oslo sine retningslinjer for datahåndtering og informasjonssikkerhet. Vi legger til grunn at bruk av privat pc er i samsvar med institusjonens retningslinjer.

PUBLISERING AV PERSONOPPLYSNINGER
Du har opplyst i meldeskjema at personopplysninger publiseres. I informasjonsskrivet har du imidlertid opplyst om at informantene ikke vil kunne gjenkjenne i publikasjonen. Det samme er funnet i godkjennelsesbrevet fra Kriminalomsorgen Region Øst. Vi legger til grunn at informantene vil bli anonymisert i publikasjonen, og har derfor endret meldeskjema til at informantene skal være anonyme i publikasjonen.

PROJEKTSLUTT OG ANONYMISERING
Prosjektsslutt er oppgitt til 31.05.2019. Det fremgår av meldeskjema/informasjonsskriv at du vil anonymisere datamaterialet ved prosjektsslutt. Anonymisering innebærer vanligvis å:
- skille direkte identifiserbare opplysninger som navn, fødselsnummer, koblingsnøkkel
- skille eller omkrave/gruppere indirekte identifiserbare opplysninger som bosted/arbeidssted, alder, kjønn
- skille lydopptak

For en utdypende beskrivelse av anonymisering av personopplysninger, se Datasetsynets veiledere:
Attachment 3: Approval from the Correctional Services (Kriminalomsorgen region øst)

Ingeborg Jensen Sandbukt
i.j.sandbukt@student.uio.no

Deres ref: Vår ref: Data:
201800396-35 11.06.2018

SØKNAD OM Å SAMLE DATA OM PROVELØSLATTE SEKSUALLOVBRUDDSDOMTE TIL ET MASTERPROSJEKT

Vi viser til din søknad mottatt ved pâg! av 30. mai 2018.

Søker skriver følgende; «Intemnasjonal forskning fokuserer i stor grad på hvordan såkalt SORN-lovgivning (Sex Offender Registration and Community Notification) påvirker den domte etter løslatelse. I Norge er seksuallovbruddsdømte imidlertid ikke underlagt regler om registriering eller vurdering av nærmiljøet. Det er derfor interessant å utforske hvordan seksuallovbruddsdømte i et liten land som Norge opplever metet med folks holdninger til dem. Dette prosjektet vil ta for seg følgende problemstillinger:

- Hvordan påvirker andres holdninger og fremstillinger i media løslatte seksuallovbruddsdømte selvfølelse og fremtidstro?
- Hvilke (forvand)mekanismer tar de i bruk for å håndtere stigmatisering? Er stigmatiseringsprosessene og håndlingsstrategiene de tar i bruk i samfunnet annerledes enn i fengsel?

Målet er å kartlegge og forstå hvordan seksuallovbruddsdømte påvirkes av samfunnets holdninger til dem, både som gruppe og på individnivå.»

Regelverk

Det følger av retningslinjer for behandling av søknader om forskning i kriminalomsorgen at regionalt nivå i kriminalomsorgen er ansvarlig for å avvise søknader om adgang til å rekuttere innsatte/domfelte og tilteile til forskningsprosjekter og for å behandle søknader om bruk av taudhetsbelagte opplysninger fra kriminalomsorgen til forskning hvor det kreves dispansjon fra taudhetsplikten. Alle søknader om forskning skal vurderes individuelt. Hvis søknaden ikke anses å tilfredsstille krav som er skissert i retningslinjene, må det innhentes nødvendig tilleggsdokumentasjon, jf. retningslinjene pkt. 5 – individuell vurdering.
Lokalt nivå skal få mulighet til å uttale seg om søknaden. De skal vurdere om de har kapasitet til å ta inot forskeren, om prosjektet er praktisk gjennomførbart og sikkerhetsmessig forsværlig, jf retningslinjene pkt. 1 – vurdering av lokalt nivå. Søknaden kan avvales av etiske, sikkerhetsmessige eller kapasitetsmessige årsaker, jf. retningslinjene pkt. 8 – avslag.

Vedtak
Søknaden om å kartlegge og forstå hvordan seksuallovoxbruddsdømte påvirkes av samfunnets holdninger til dem, både som gruppe og på individnivå innvilges. Forsknings innbærer kvalitative intervjuer med ca. 10 seksuallovoxbruddsdømte som på tidspunktet for rekruttering er ilagt møteplass etter løslatelse fra dom eller forvaring.

Begrunnelsel
Vi har forespurt Oslo og Akershus fylkessørskontor, som opplyser at de har kapasitet til å ta deg inot slik at du kan gjennomføre din forskning.

Krav til forskeren
Forskningsbrevet skal gjennomføres på en forsværlig måte og de ansatte og innsette skal ikke utsettes for personlige belastninger. Forskeren skal fremlegge bakgrunnsmaterialet og informere enhetene ut ifra behov.

Forskeren skal forholde seg til den enkelte enhets sikkerhetsmessige instrukser. Friomsorgen vil kunne innhente opplysninger om forskeren vandt fra det sentrale strafferegisteret. Dette er et rutinemessig ledd i sikkerhetsvurderingen.

Forskerens taushetsplikt
Opplysninger forskeren blir gjort kjent med kan være undergitt taushetsplikt, jf. forvaltningslovens § 13. Forskeren er undergitt taushetsplikt, jf. forvaltningslovens § 13 c. Av §13 e følger at forskeren plikter å hindre andre i å få tilgang eller kjennskap til opplysningene.

Overtredelse av taushetsbestemmelser er straffbart, jf. straffeloven § 121. Videre er det en forutsetning at forsker er kjent med lov om personopplysninger med tilhørende forskrift spesielt § 7.27 i forskrift til personopplysningene.

Det er et vilkår at forsker undertegner taushetserklæring med hensyn til bestemmelserne ovenfor for forskningen påbegynes. Slik erklæring uturbeides av den enkelen der forskningen skal gjennomføres, her Oslo og Akershus friomsorgskontorer.

Oppbevaring av materialet
Forsker skal passe at innholdet materiale blir oppbevart på en forsværlig måte og at det foretas anonymisering av personidentifiserbare opplysninger ved publikasjon. Innholdet materiale som inneholder slik informasjon skal makuleres så snart undersøkelsen er avsluttet. Ved unntak fra denne hovedregelen skal det foreligge en godkjennelse fra Datastyret.

Klageadgang
Vedtak om å anvende taushetsbelaste opplysninger til forskningsformål, kan påklages til Kriminalomsorgsdirektoratet. Klageretten er etter forvaltningslovens kap. VI § 28, omfatter den som ikke får medhold i sin søknad om forskning og den taushetsplikten er satt til venn for.

Vi ber om at du sender et eksempel av forskningsrapporten til:
- Kriminalomsorgen region Øst - Dokmentsenteret, Pbj 694, 4305 Sandnes
- Kriminalomsorgens utdanningsseminer - Postboks 6138 Etterstad, 0602 Oslo
Med hilsen

Brit Kari O. Kirkæslede
ass. regiondirektør

Ellen C. Bjercke
seniørrådgiver
Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet

“Dealing with the stigma post-release – how (s)ex-offenders in Norway experience society’s attitudes towards them”?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å undersøke hvordan nylig løslatte seksuallovbruddsdømte opplever samfunnets holdninger til dem, både som gruppe og individuelt. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltagelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål
Studien er et masterprosjekt i kriminologi ved Universitetet i Oslo, Institutt for kriminologi og rettssosiologi. I forbindelse med studien er det ønskelig å intervjue løslatte seksuallovbruddsdømte som er ilagt møteplikt etter løslatelse fra dom eller forvaring. Dette for å kartlegge hvilke erfaringer man gjør seg som nylig løslatt etter å ha sonet dom/forvaring for seksuallovbrudd.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?
Alle som forespørreres om deltagelse er plukket ut ene og alene på grunn av domskategori og påfølgende møteplikt. Masterstudenten har informert saksbehandlerne i friomsorgen om prosjektet, og bedt dem spørre kandidater med denne type dom om de vil delta i studien. Dersom du takker ja til å delta i studien vet ikke masterstudenten noe annet om deg på forhånd enn at du nylig har sonet straff for seksuallovbrudd.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?
Hvis du velger å delta i studien vil du bli intervjuet én gang. Intervjuet vil finne sted på friomsorgskontoret, og tar ca. 1 time - max 1,5 timer. Det vil ikke bli innhentet øvrige opplysninger om deg utover dem du selv gir i intervjuet. Masterstudenten vil ikke få tilgang til verken domspapirer, straffestest eller personopplysninger.

Spørsmålene i intervjuet vil omhandle samfunnets holdninger til deg etter løslatelse, hvordan media omtaler seksuallovbruddsdømte, samt spørsmål om opplevd stigmatisering, din selvfølelse og fremtidstro. Du vil også bli spurtt om hva du er dømt for. Dette for å kunne fange opp forskjeller i hvordan samfunnet forholder seg til ulike typer seksuallovbrudd. Det er ikke interessant hva du har
gjort eller ikke gjort, men hvordan det du er dømt for påvirker måten du blir møtt på av samfunnet og nærmiljøet ditt.

Det vil benyttes lydopptaker under intervjuet.

**Det er frivillig å delta**

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykke tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Dersom du ikke vil delta i studien, eller trekker deg underveis, vil det ikke ha noen innvirkning på ditt samarbeid med Kriminalomsorgen/saksbehandler i friomsorgen.

**Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger**

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidiensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

- Lydopptaket lagres på et sikkert sted inntil det transkriberes (overføres fra lydopptak til tekst). Etter at intervjuet er transkribert vil opptaket slettes. Ingen andre enn masterstudenten kommer til å høre på opptakene. Veileder vil kunne bistå etter at intervjuene er anonymisert.


**Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?**

Prosjektet skal etter planen avsluttes mai 2019. Alle personopplysninger og opptak slettes i forbindelse med transkriberingen, det vil si i god tid før prosjektslutt.

**Dine rettigheter**

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:
- innsyn i hvilke personopplysninger som er registrert om deg,
- å få rettet personopplysninger om deg,
- få slettet personopplysninger om deg,
- få utlevert en kopi av dine personopplysninger (dataportabilitet), og
- å sende klage til personvernombudet eller Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger.

**Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?**

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra Universitetet i Oslo har NSD – Norsk senter for forskningsdata AS vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

**Hvor kan jeg finne ut mer?**

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

- Universitetet i Oslo ved Thomas Ugelvik: thomas.ugelvik@jus.uio.no
- Masterstudent Ingeborg J. Sandbukt: i.j.sandbukt@student.jus.uio.no
Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet “Dealing with the stigma post-release – how (s)ex-offenders in Norway experience society’s attitudes towards them”, og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål.

Jeg samtykker til å delta i intervju.

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet, ca. mai 2019.

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)
Attachment 5: Semi-structured interview guide

Introduksjon:

- Informasjon om intervjuers yrkesbakgrunn og erfaring
- Informasjon om prosjektet, informert samtykke, anonymisering, lengde på intervju, står fri til å ikke svare på spørsmålene uten å oppgi grunn, båndopptaker.
- Påminnelse: Ikke fortell om lovbrudd du ikke er blitt dømt for.

Bakgrunn:

- Har du lyst til å starte med å fortelle meg litt om deg selv og din bakgrunn? Jeg har mange spørsmål, så hvis det er noe du vil si først så er det helt i orden.
- Kan du fortelle hvilke fengsler du har sonet ved gjennom dette forløpet, og hva du synes om disse fengslene?
- Er dette første gang du gjennomfører straff for seksuallovbrudd? (hvis nei, følg opp)
- Er det lenge siden du ble løslatt fra fengsel? Møtehyppighet hos friomsorgen?

Identitet, skam, stigma, fremtidstro:

- Hva tenker du om deg selv?
- Hva tror du andre tenker om deg?
- Har selvbildet ditt forandret seg etter at du ble domfelt? Har det forandret seg gjennom fengselsoppholdet, eller da du ble løslatt?
- Hvor ser du det andre innsatte så på deg da du var i fengsel?
- Visste de andre innsatte hva du var dømt for?
- Opplevde/så du noen gang episoder med vold, trusler e.l. i fengsel?
- Hvordan har du opplevd tiden etter at du ble løslatt?
- Er det noe som har vært spesielt vanskelig i tiden etter løslatelse? (f.eks spesielle situasjoner, på butikken, annet).
- Vet dine nærmeste eller folk i nabolaget at du har gjennomført straff for et seksuallovbrudd?
- Hva er deres reaksjoner?
- Hvordan er din kontakt med familien din?
• Tilpasser du deg andres holdninger på noen måte? Hva gjør du? (f. eks unngår visse steder, isolerer seg etc.) Hva gjør du annerledes nå enn før du fikk denne dommen?

• Kan jeg spørre deg hva du er dømt for? Du trenger ikke å fortelle meg hva du har gjort, det er domfellelsen som er interesserant for meg i denne sammenhengen.

• Hvordan opplever du å være ilagt møteplikt hos friomsorgen?

• Har du noen gang blitt kalt for seksualovergriper eller lignende? (Eventuelt, hvordan føles det for deg å bli kalt for seksualovergriper?)

• Har du lest eller sett noe i media om seksuallovbruddsdømte som påvirker deg? (TV, aviser, radio) Probe: For eksempel at mennesker som har begått overgrep kalles for monstre?

• Kjenner du deg igjen i det du leser/ser/hører?

• Hva om vi hadde SORN-lover i Norge? (fortell først om slike lover)

• Hva tenker du om fremtiden?

• Hva drømmer du om å oppnå i livet?

• Eventuelt: Du har lite/mye å si om dette. Snakker du med andre om det? Har du snakket med noen om det f. eks i fengsel?