

# **Black Men's Desistance**

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**The racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems  
and its impacts on the desistance process**

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## ABSTRACT

Desistance is increasingly conceptualised as a theoretical construct which is used to explain how offenders orient themselves away from committing crimes. Previous studies suggest that successful desistance occurs due to one or a number of factors. These factors include things such as: becoming a father and thereby recognising one's responsibilities to others (Maruna, 2011); faith based conversion that can give one's life meaning and purpose (Giordano et al, 2002); employment that can improve self-esteem, offer legitimate financial gain and enable development of a stronger sense of one's 'social capital' (Maruna, 2011), on account of psychosocial processes (Healey 2010), personal and social circumstances which are space and place specific (Flynn, 2010), vary by ethnicity (Calverley, (2013). Whereas (Giordano, 2002) examines the gendered nature of desistance, to date there has been little work undertaken to examine the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process. 'Racialisation' draws attention to the process of making 'race' relevant to a particular situation or context, such as criminal justice systems, (Garner, 2009). A key theoretical framework employed throughout this research is Critical Race Theory (CRT) that has been widely applied to law (Delgado and Stefanic, 2005); education, (Ladson-Billings 1995); and more recently sport (Hylton, 2005). This thesis used CRT as the analytical framework and developed a 'counter narrative' for the racialised voices of black men in relation to their perceptions of the desistance process. Drawing upon data from thirty one interviews with black men in the community from Birmingham, black men in the Therapeutic Community (TC) at HMP Grendon, and black men from the city of Baltimore (USA) this thesis explores how those perceptions of the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems impacts on the desistance process for black men.

This thesis concludes by arguing that to understand black men's desistance, the interrogation of race, gender, and other identity categories should not to be treated as separate entities, as that position denies the complexities of multiple identities in relation to black men's own understandings and insights into the desistance process.

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## TERMS OF REFERENCE

### **Black**

The use of terms to describe 'racialised identities' is an extremely contentious issue, where historically, issues related to the language that describes those racialised identities is not static but changes over time both within and between groups, (Serrant-Green, 2002). It is therefore important that any terms used to identify individuals in this thesis are defined at the outset and placed in context. The term 'black' therefore is used in this thesis as a term to identify peoples of 'African descent'. It is also a term used by many of the research participants to define themselves as a way of representing a 'unity of experience' in relation to racism, white privilege, discrimination, and prejudice among people whose skin is not white.

### **Racialisation**

Garner (2009) argues the concept of 'racialisation' is based on the idea that the object of study should not be 'race' itself, but the process by which 'race' becomes meaningful in a particular context. 'Racialisation' therefore draws attention to the process of making 'race' relevant to a particular situation or context, and thus requires an examination of the precise circumstances in which this occurs, who the 'agents' are and who the actors are. In other words, who does what and how?

## CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

Desistance is increasingly conceptualised as a theoretical construct which is used to explain how offenders orient themselves away from committing crimes. Previous studies suggest that successful desistance occurs due to one or several factors. These include: a 'rite of passage', such as an important 'life transition' whilst incarcerated (Maruna 2007); 'an event', such as the birth of a child (Farrall and Bowling, 1999); 'a current status', such as 'an illness' (Farrington, 1986); a decision, such as a faith based conversion (Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986); or if a criminal career is disrupted through getting 'too old' to engage in criminal activity or 'ageing out' or maturing away from criminal activity (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990); on account of psychosocial processes (Healey 2010), personal and social circumstances which are space and place specific (Flynn, 2010), vary by ethnicity (Calverley, (2013). To desist, a returning prisoner must be equipped with the necessary tools to successfully 'reintegrate' back into the community, contributing to its overall development by being reformed as a consequence of experiencing positive rehabilitative processes.

On concluding their prison sentence the offender will be also released and 'reenter' the community, hopefully prepared for a life free from crime, and to ultimately 'desist'. However, my doctoral research would reveal that this is not the case for many black men returning back to the community they left behind after being sent to prison. It is right therefore to assume that by privileging the voices of black men's experiences of both 're-entry' and journey towards desistance, there is a unique opportunity to expand these understandings in racialised areas of criminal justice policy research that are at best scant, under researched and under theorised.

In actuality, the visible absence of available academic information/data when looking at, investigating, or theorising black men's own understandings of their desistance not only weakens contemporary debates on 'race and crime', but criminology as a whole. Indeed, my observations and participation within prison rehabilitation programmes targeted at black men over 3 decades has led me to believe that seldom have the insights, understandings, and 'real lived' experiences within the UK and US criminal justice systems, been taken into consideration when contributing to the broader dialogue around the study of both re-entry and desistance. This state of affairs led me to believe that any future investigation into black men's desistance must give voice to a 'minority perspective' that challenges the dominance of white privilege within criminology itself, (Bowling 1999). This 'minority perspective' should acknowledge and validate the stories that black men themselves tell of their own understandings and insights into their desistance. It must also enable them to 'narrate' and 'interpret' their own reality by bringing coherence to their 'real life' stories, creating a 'counter narrative' that would challenge and contest what some white criminologists claim, (McAdams 1985 ). The research therefore started with several key questions:

1. What impact does the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems have on the desistance process for black men?
2. How do black men construct their own insights and understandings of their desistance in relation to being both black and male in white society that renders them subordinate?
3. What are the factors that contribute to black men's commitment to accepting or negating notions of their desistance?

## 1.2 The research

The research then started from an ‘interpretivist perspective’. That is, it focused on the meanings that black men gave to their lived experiences in relation to the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process, (McAdams 1985). The study involved 11 black men from the community from Birmingham (UK), 11 prisoners, located in HMP Grendon’s Therapeutic Community (TC), and 9 black men from the city of Baltimore, (USA). Semi-structured interviews and urban ethnography (Anderson, 1999) were methods used to gather the data. A key theoretical framework employed throughout this research was Critical Race Theory (CRT) that has been widely applied to law (Delgado and Stefanic 2005); education, (Ladson-Billings 1995); and more recently sport (Hylton 2005). CRT then became the foundation from which a ‘counter narrative’ was developed to privilege the racialised voices of black men in relation to their insights and understandings of the desistance process.

The research also examines ‘prison’ as a possible key site where the trajectory towards desistance possibly begins for black men. This assumption was motivated by the few prison studies that alluded to the possibility of ‘transformation’ and ‘change’ whilst in prison. Wacquant (2002) argues that researchers conducting research in prison should worry less about interpretation and start producing research that moves away from ‘state-centered’ approaches to ‘social inequality’ and focus more on the effects of penal policies and institutions. The research therefore also provided a focus from which to engage black men in a dialogue around the role of prisons which would hopefully add to this limited literature by bringing the lens of ‘racialisation’ to the desistance process. An example of how prison becomes a site for the trajectory towards desistance within a racialised context is in the conversion of Malcolm ‘X’.

Malcolm 'X's journey from prisoner to human right activist occurred during his time in prison. Haley (1965) highlights that Malcolm 'X's desistance was rooted in a 'faith based' conversion as a consequence of his desire to create a replacement 'self,' not shaped by 'white expectations', or notions of 'black subordination'. Likewise, I will argue that some black men construct insights and understandings of the desistance journey whilst incarcerated by occupying a liminal space, where transformation is part of a sustained period of 'ontological reflection', where the psychological 'masks' they wear are removed and replaced with a more positive self-image, (Turner 1969). The African American poet Paul Dunbar (1892) highlights if this 'ontological reflection' does not take place for black men, the result will mean having to 'wear the mask' when he writes,

we wear the mask that grins and lies;  
 it hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,  
 this debt we pay to human guile;  
 with torn and bleeding hearts we smile, (Dunbar, 1892: 167).

Dunbar's verse highlights a deep psychic challenge of 'wear (ing) the mask' that some black men face in a society in which they feel that their sense of being and abilities are undermined by racialised constructs, that in turn places restrictions on them becoming 'the authors of their own lives', (McAdams1988). Dunbar's image of 'torn and bleeding hearts' further suggests that in spite of the pain and burden of an oppressive history of slavery, colonialism, and racism, black men are forced to put on a brave face, and don a 'mask' in order to survive their oppression and subsequent subordination in a predominantly white society.

Echoing Dunbar's sentiments, the need to 'remove the mask' and reframe the context in which black men's desistance is defined in some criminological theorising is important here. Therefore, the need for black men to reveal their 'own truths' and to tell their own stories become significant if they are to contest, challenge, and transcend their 'racial subordination'. Denzin (2003) argues that for 'subordinated voices' to be heard, they must be helped to speak. It is therefore wholly appropriate that there is recognition of how the worldview of black men is distorted as they encounter racial injustices that are embedded in social networks, as the basis for creating a platform for those voices to be both heard and understood. This worldview is also shaped by negative beliefs that emerge from their lived experiences of 'racial subordination', (West 2002).

Robinson (2005) sees that the rules, resources, and language of society constrain black men by restricting access at all levels of their lives. For black men, racism, then, becomes a significant factor in restricting access to the 'social structure' that ultimately leads to the maintenance of their 'racial subordination'. African American philosopher Cornel West (2002) further declares that any discourse centring on how black men construct their lives must start with the flaws within society itself not with the problems of black men, but, in particular, white society. To date, much of what black men themselves understand around their insights into the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process remains invisible in the current criminological literature. However a key contribution that begins to unpack some of the complexities surrounding desistance has been in the examination of 'masculinities and crime', (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

That is, these studies have shown that often men commit crimes as a consequence of not having previously been able to realise their masculinities through legitimate means. However, as a consequence of the racialisation of criminal justice systems, black men face additional pressures, barriers, and strain surrounding their desistance based on the impact of white oppression on their lives. The problem here is in the lack of available data, understandings, and insights on racialisation and desistance in the literature that are conspicuously absent and those that do exist have been rendered 'invisible'. Even when the literature on desistance alluded to a racialised context it still generally failed to account for black men's own understandings and insights, which limited debates on 'race and crime' as a whole. The inability for this literature to examine how the racialising of criminal justice systems privileges some groups over others was also extremely troubling.

The irony of this situation is that there is an abundance of data that is readily available around racial disparities/disproportionality, and unsurprisingly, the overrepresentation of black men in the criminal justice system in England and Wales, (Bromley Briefings 2011). This raises another question. Namely, if data does exist, why is it not being accessed, analysed, and included in wider criminological debates? A deeper analysis of this situation also highlighted that the lens being used to examine racialisation for black men may also be flawed. I come to this topic in part through personal experiences of black men in prison insofar as black friends have been incarcerated. Some of these have, through particular experiences whilst in prison, developed strategies of desistance. Others however, did not. Moving beyond the confines of 'race' locates this research within a frame of reference that focuses attention on 'racial disparities'. ‘

### 1.3 Racial Disparities

Racial Disparities' denotes a difference in outcomes, indicating that discrimination is present, in areas such as policing, sentencing, etc, (Walker, Spohn & DeLone 2004). Where does this unequal treatment spring from and how does black men's oppression and shape their worldview? And how does this worldview enhance or inhibit the trajectory towards their desistance? Fryer (1984) suggests that any attempt to understand black men's worldview must take into consideration the history of oppression (slavery, colonialism, racism, etc), as this history demonstrates how racial disparities have been generated, maintained, and sustained. Bromley Briefings (2011) provides a statistical snapshot that further highlights the 'racial disparities' in relation to black men in the criminal justice system in England and Wales:

- On 30 June 2010 just less than 26% of the prison population, 21,878 prisoners, was from a minority ethnic group. This is slightly less than in 2009, but represents an increase on that recorded for 2005 (25%). This compares to one in 10 of the general population.
- Out of the British national prison population, 11% are black and 5% are Asian. For black Britons this is significantly higher than the 2.8% of the general population they represent.
- Overall black prisoners account for the largest number of minority ethnic prisoners (53%).
- At the end of June 2010, 32% of minority ethnic prisoners were foreign nationals. Higher percentage of those in BME groups were sentenced to immediate custody for indictable offences than in the white group in 2010 (white 23%, black 27%, Asian 29% and Other 42%).

- In 2010, the highest average custodial sentence length (ACSL) for those given determinate sentences for indictable offences was recorded for the black ethnic group, at 20.8 months, followed by the Asian and Other groups with averages of 19.9 months and 19.7 months respectively.
- There is now greater disproportionality in the number of black people in prisons in the UK than in the United States. The US prison population is commonly thought to be the most disproportionate with regard to the incarceration of black men (Alexander 2010).

The above statistics highlight the importance of engaging black men in a dialogue that will shed some light on their own understandings and insights into these disparities, in relation to their overrepresentation in the criminal justice systems, as well as what resources are available to them to support their trajectory towards desistance. As stated previously both personal and professional observations of and direct participation in prison rehabilitation programmes targeted at black men over the past 25 years has shown that seldom, if ever, has the racialised experiences within the prison system been considered by white criminologists, (Glynn 2005). These observations have prompted yet another question. How does the development of a 'racialised criminological perspective' that begins from an appreciation of racism in society create the scope for responding to these concerns? The consideration of the development of what African American criminologist Russell (2002) refers to as 'black criminology' became important here. Russell highlights how an independent sub-field, similar to that of feminist criminology, might open up so called 'mainstream criminology' in order to look critically at black men's relationship to the criminal justice system. It could also consider that black men are held captive in a system which acts and operates within a racialised context.

Glynn (2005) suggests that it is imperative that future research into 'racialisation and crime' should root itself within a paradigm that challenges the dominance of white criminologists, white privilege, and colour blindness within the criminology itself. Russell's position also suggests that it is the 'ivory', not 'ebony' tower that still dominates much criminological theorising. White (2009) seeks to improve the understanding of the ways in which the 'narrative of racialisation' is constructed by examining how the limited access to power in society according to white men's privilege, may result in criminal activity becoming a choice for some black men. It could therefore be argued that the ability to desist from criminal activity for some black men could be increased if they gained more of a foothold in the social structure in a way that would enable them to transcend their unfair treatment and ultimate subordination.

The thesis therefore seeks to reveal those truths by creating a platform for black men to speak and tell their own stories free from white subordination. As black men's accounts of the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process have largely gone unnoticed by scholars and the public to date, the research subjects' voices have been privileged by including and then analysing large segments of their spoken testimony in later chapters (especially Chapters 4, 5, 6 & 7). The need for a racialised analytical lens from which to give voice to black men's stories in relation to the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process is important here. The analytical lens used was Critical Race Theory (CRT).

## 1.4 Critical Race Theory

Delgado (2005) cites several tenets that locate CRT as an analytical framework for this thesis:

1. Racism is ordinary, not exceptional, and that it is the usual way that society does business. Its ordinariness makes racism hard to recognize and much less address.
2. The social construction of race, and the related idea of differential racialisation, holds that race and races are products of social thought.

Not objective, inherent, or fixed, races correspond to no simple biological or genetic reality; rather, they are categories that society invents for particular purposes, usually ignoble ones.

3. Building on this insight, differential racialisation calls attention to the ways in which the dominant society racialises different minority groups in different ways at different times in response to shifting needs, such as the labour market, with our system of laws following suit.

Valdes (2002) too acknowledges that CRT 'resists the subordinating messages of the dominant culture by challenging stereotypes and presenting and representing people of colour as complex and heterogeneous, (2002: 244). Valdes further suggests that CRT may not only enable the subordinated persons (black men) to narrate, to interpret events in opposition to the dominant narratives (white men), but also recognises the complexity of the issues being addressed. The narrative potential of CRT therefore lies in 'its ability to re-story the past and to then re-imagine the future much the same as black feminism has done, (Valdes et al: 246).

CRT not only offers new insights with which to explore and explain the understanding processes of the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process, but it uses storytelling as the basis of its analytical framing. This provides a unique creative opportunity for looking at black men's desistance previously not explored. CRT operates with two distinct storytelling paradigms. 'Majoritarian stories' told by privileged white people; and, 'counter stories' told by subordinated black people, (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). So too, Hill-Collins (2000) who sees the internalised oppression for black women as a journey that leads towards a need for self-definition. She further suggests that black women can gain a richer self-definition if they strive to tell their own stories as free from the oppressive gaze of white women. It could be similarly argued that the understanding processes of the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process is more effectively told if efforts are made to delink this telling from white oppression?

McAdams (1985) provides a further context that demonstrates that beginning the process of desistance requires black ex-offenders to make sense of their lives in the form of a 'life story' or 'self-narrative'. In essence, McAdams advocates that ex-offenders must gradually interrogate their 'own story' and create a space to rework it by providing a 'counter story'. hooks (1991) highlights that black men's 'counter stories' of the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process, could contest white men's accounts of maintaining their privileged position, and in doing so be seen as posing a threat to challenging their subordinate status. She suggests: 'often when the 'radical voice' speaks about domination, we are speaking to those who dominate', (hooks, 1991: 80).

hooks' assertion suggests it may be a better proposition for black men themselves to 'name their own reality' and to further consider how they can encourage and institutionalise 'outsider within' ways of seeing, to overcome the struggle to transcend their 'subordinate status', (Hill-Collins, 2000:29). 'Subordinate status' invariably means that some white men will have privilege over black men, (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). However, the problem may lie less in whether black men are subordinated, but more in the way evidence is gathered, analysed, and understood in relation to who is better placed to understand the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process. Halsey (2008) sees a future orientated vision that becomes the basis of a narrative of change that releases hope, without which desistance is hardly feasible.

## **1.5 Structure**

In this chapter I introduce the background and context of the research. It also locates itself within a racialised context and paves the way for a deeper exploration of understanding how black men construct their own insights and understandings of the desistance process. In chapter two I review current and past writings centring on racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its relation to the desistance process. Implicit in the review is the absence of a significant body of literature around the key premise of the research, and therefore represents the various components that attempts to give some coherence to the research questions outline in this thesis. In chapter three I highlight the methods used to conduct the study, including sections on, research design, the study sample, theoretical sampling, reflexivity, and extracts from my reflexive diary - field notes (Baltimore), and ethics.

As the research took place in 3 separate sites, and used a variety of methods, this chapter reveals some of the challenges and difficulties faced, whilst at the same time, exploring my own auto-ethnographic experiences as an ‘insider researcher’. In chapter four I focus on black men from inner city Birmingham (UK) who share their insights on the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process. The importance here was to look critically at how black men post-release have navigated their way through the difficulties of being a released prisoner, where the racialised social structure placed strain on the trajectory towards their desistance. In chapter five I focus on black men in HMP Grendon; a prison based therapeutic community (TC). It considers the role of therapeutic intervention and looks at insights coming from serving prisoners on the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process.

The key focus here was hearing the stories from black men about the role prison and in particular a TC can play in assisting the trajectory towards desistance. In chapter six I focus on black men in the city of Baltimore (USA) and consider those insights on the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on their desistance journeys. This comparative element of the study considers how black men’s desistance insights are located within a US context. The additional component here is in the use of ‘urban ethnography’ as a complimentary method of data gathering. In chapter seven I discuss key issues arising out of the results/findings, in order to begin to make sense out of the data, as well as creating the foundations of a ‘counter narrative’ that will build a Critical Race Theory of Desistance.

In chapter eight I conclude by suggesting that there is a need to transcend the ‘colour blindness’ within criminology that renders black men’s account of insights and understandings of the desistance process invisible within criminology as a whole. The chapter further concludes that the inclusion of an intersectional context when theorising the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process is also necessary to move beyond the confines of white men’s understanding of desistance as a whole.

## **1.6 Summary**

This chapter highlighted that this research inquiry grew out of a paucity of research information around the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process. It also examines how black men’s ‘subordinated voices’ must be helped to speak using their stories to better understand how they have ceased to engage in activity considered ‘criminal’, on account of the construction of a ‘counter narrative’ that will enable black men to reveal how ‘differential racialisation’ reveals ways in which the dominant society creates the conditions that restricts the trajectory towards their desistance. Chapter two looks at past and current writings on the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process, drawing specific attention to:

- Racialisation and criminalisation
- Desistance
- Desistance and racialisation
- Desistance and Critical Race Theory

## CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature relating to ‘racialisation and criminalisation’, ‘desistance’, ‘desistance and racialisation’, ‘desistance and critical race theory (CRT)’. The relationship between these various sections is symbiotic, inasmuch as they rely on the other, directly impact upon and are influenced by the other. It is also based on the paucity of literature in this area that is also a justification for presenting the overall review in sections. As stated previously the concept of ‘desistance’ is used in this thesis in relation to understanding why and how former offenders stop engaging in criminal behavior, (Maruna and Immarigeon 2004). It has also been previously stated that the racialised dimension of desistance has seldom figured in the current literature on desistance as a whole. It is hardly surprising given this absence that there has also been little work undertaken regarding the racialisation of desistance that significantly limits the understanding and theorising of desistance as a whole. In developing this position further we must first begin with a critical look at ‘racialisation and criminalisation’ to set the context for this review.

### 2.2 Racialisation and criminalisation

Webster (2007) argues that black offenders who end up in the criminal justice system and prison, have a disproportionate presence compared to their numbers in the population. He further argues that black men are disproportionately victimised, in part because they tend to live in poorer urban areas. Therefore, prison becomes a key site in relation to understandings and insights into the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process.

He further argues that in both Britain and the USA some minority groups are disproportionately harassed, stopped and searched by the police. Patel and Tyrer (2011) express the view that when race enters the 'othering' process, particularly within the context of crime and deviancy, it is important to consider the roots of racially charged concepts. Similarly, Gabbidon and Green (2009) so too argue that the disenfranchisement of black men involved in crime is ideologically driven as a way of bolstering the carceral estate. Lewis et.al (2006) also put forward the proposition that black men may experience the criminal justice system differently and experience 'disadvantageous treatment' on account of the racialisation of probation services that disable those same men's journey back into the community.

Hallett (2006) further sees that social injustices tend to follow clear racial, class, and gendered patterns, that emphasise the political power of identity categories themselves. Hallett's premise argues that 'whiteness' as a category is associated with access to power, whereas 'blackness' is associated with powerlessness and imprisonment. It is within these binary opposed categories where a power game is played out, subordinating black men in the process. Tonry (2011) sees these 'racial disparities' as unjustifiable and are about the maintenance of political dominance over blacks. He concludes by arguing that the visualisation of black people through the media, film, and television has created a culture that sees black people as criminals. Brown (2009) like Tonry, suggests that criminology in the way it looks at race, focuses too much on 'black criminality' in relation to 'white criminality' that falls prey to media persuasion, and ultimately perpetuates the dominance of whiteness by using a 'colour blind' lens when viewing criminal justice systems. She further suggests a reframing of a position that puts greater emphasis on how 'white criminality' impacts on 'black criminality'.

Alexander (2010) further expresses the view that we have not ended racial disadvantage, but have merely redesigned it. Unnever and Gabbidon (2011) apportion some blame to those scholars who haven't dedicated any time to looking critically at racial disparities in relation to theoretical formulations in criminology. Mauer (2010) strongly sees that the responsibility for alleviating these disparities falls not only on criminal justice agencies, but on society as a whole, and needs to be addressed appropriately through both policy and practice at all levels of government and the community. Black men in British prisons similarly account for the largest number of minority ethnic prisoners (52%) in the UK criminal justice system, (Bromley Briefings 2011). This level of disproportionality of black men in prisons would suggest there is a need to compare and contrast how the racialisation of criminal justice policies its impacts on the desistance process in both the UK and US contexts.

The perceptions of black and minority ethnic prisoners in HM Inspectorate of Prisons, surveys (2011) are more negative than those of white prisoners in key areas such as safety and relationships with staff. Black prisoners are consistently more likely than white British prisoners to be on basic regime, to be in the segregation unit for reasons of good order or discipline and to have force used against them. Hill-Collins (2005) and Alexander (2010) further see black men as being situated near the bottom of a social hierarchy revealing that not individuals when looking at the racialisation of criminal justice systems are seen and treated equally. Connell (2003) likewise sees those social scientists as flawed when failing to recognise on-going processes of racialisation within the study of crime. He further expresses the view that racialised masculinities in relation to the study of crime as a whole are significantly under theorised.

Marable (1993) suggests that inequality for black men involved in crime is based on stereotypes that white society imposes via institutions and the wider social structure generates the type of inequality that produces black male subordination within the criminal justice system. If racism underscores the plight of black men within the criminal justice system, then legitimate pathways towards desisting from criminal activity for black men will be blocked. Alexander (2010) like Marable puts forward the view that white men in power generally ignore the role played by slavery and colonialism in the over representation of black men in prison. She contends that criminal justice systems adopt a 'colour blind' position that renders black men subordinate. She suggests: in the era of colorblindness, it is no longer socially permissible to use race, explicitly, as a justification for discrimination, exclusion, and social contempt, (Alexander 2010:2).

Alexander further suggests that the resulting outcome will be partly responsible for the overrepresentation of black men in US prisons. She also points out that in spite of mass incarceration being seen as the new slavery, this overrepresentation is played down and rendered 'invisible' in the wider understanding of black men and crime, and in effect pushes black men further into a mode of nihilistic patterns of behaviour, (West 1993). Frazier (1968) considers that the gaining and sustaining of employment was a way to counter the impact of a subordinate position for black men found themselves in. Frazier echoing Dubois (1938) sees the so called 'American Dream', as being beyond the reach of many black men, based on the devastating impact of slavery combined with the failed attempts of America to include those citizens it had historically and systematically excluded. This he argues leads to a propensity for black men to be involved in criminal activity, based on the racialisation of the social structure.

Sampson and Wilson (1995) further view 'social isolation' and 'ecological concentration' of disadvantaged sections of the community as leading to structural barriers and cultural adaptations that undermine social organisation and ultimately the control of crime. Again West (1993) feels that white society should focus less on seeing black men as the problem, but more of the failure of white society to treat black men fairly. West's view highlights a painful reality, namely black men have to contend with additional strain in achieving an equal status in society. Marriot (2000) argues that the showing of black men as aggressive and hedonistic embeds itself into the consciousness of society and constructs racialised typographies of black men as 'criminal'. hooks (2004) challenges Marriot's assumptions and contextualises how black men historically did define their own sense of identity as a consequence of 'confronting the hardships of life without allowing their spirits to be ravaged' (2004:147). The evidence thus far would suggest that the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems has implications when looking at black men's desistance. To support this assumption requires an understanding of theories that underpin the understandings of 'desistance' itself.

### **2.3 Desistance**

Maruna & Immarigeon (2004) see the term 'desistance' in relation to understanding 'why and how former offenders avoid continued involvement in criminal behaviour'. They further declare that desistance has been defined and modelled in criminological research as the termination point at which offending ceases (2004:43). Other theorists offer a diverse range of explanations about notions of desistance. For example: a current status (Farrington, 1986); a decision (Cusson and Pinsonneault, 1986); or an inevitable stage in criminal career (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990); an event (Farrall and Bowling, 1999); as a process (Maruna, 2001); (Laub and Sampson, 2001).

Maruna and Farrall (2004) also acknowledge that ‘as desistance research grows and matures into a fully fledged programme of research, new areas of exploration such as looking at the desistance process in relation to prison will emerge from the research that will influence future criminal justice policies. Like Maruna, this thesis sees the need for black men to be active participants in their own reformation with specific reference to prisons. In arguing beyond the ‘looking glass approach’ when examining desistance Maruna opens a door in the discussions about the role of incarcerated black men in determining viable routes towards their desistance whilst being locked up. Giordano, et al (2002) sees that changing the way offenders think may assist them in conquering the barriers imposed upon them by racist criminal justice system. So too, Cusson and Pinsonneault (1980) suggest that the decision to give up crime is generally triggered by a shock of some sort a delayed deterrence process.

They make a link between the fears of punishment as a core factor in the desire to go straight. However, with the racialisation of criminal justice systems it is hard to envision how black men can undergo such a transformation whilst incarcerated. Carlsson (2012) too argues that processes of individual change in offending and desistance from crime are complex, ‘often involving multiple, and context-specific processes’ (2012: 2). He further argues that two concepts are often seen as central to understanding life course dynamics: ‘trajectories’ and ‘transitions’ (Elder 1985). A trajectory he points is a pathway over the ‘life span’ and is marked by transitions. Transitions, as Carlsson suggests, explores those events, stages and processes where changes in the trajectories towards desistance occur. He concludes by suggesting that the concept of turning points in qualitative inquiry lies in its ability to help us explore, analyse and understand these life course processes in (greater) depth.

Similarly, Siennick and Osgood (2008: 163) argue for a deeper analysis when looking at desistance as they feel that individuals who find the constraints of conventional role restrictions are the same individuals who tend to show high rates of offending'. Likewise, Serin and Lloyd (2009) argue that there are two elements necessary for desistance to take place: a history of multiple criminal acts and the subsequent cessation of all criminal behaviour. Thus, desistance is directly tied to the psychological mechanisms that drive changes in criminal behaviour patterns. Maruna (2001) further provides many powerful testimonies from ex offenders in a way that addresses how they reform and rebuild their lives.

The emphasis on narrative, redemptive rituals, and having a sense of purpose, reaffirms that desistance theory and practice can be located with notions of Rites of Passage (Gennep 1960) Maruna, S (2007) builds on his previous work with a position that argues that the reincorporation of social rituals designed to engage men through processes of holistic transformation. This idea sits comfortable with processes of rites of passage that define both manhood combined with a clear position and role within the community. Reno, R (2002) cites Redemptive Change can be achieved by offenders atoning from their past indiscretions by finding spiritual purpose and servitude as a basis of desistance. Reno's position addresses the issue of the pressure of modern living as the basis of moving away from core values rooted within a spiritual context. Wilson, D (2003) sees the need for participants to be acknowledged and respected individuals in their own right is another example of how the offender themselves can assist the understanding of what is required for successful desistance.

Bottoms, et al (2004) view the progression from conformity to criminality and the progression from criminality to conformity (desistance) as false. Their view takes the position that for many people the progression towards desistance is faltering, hesitant and oscillating. They also feel that the ex-offenders overall movement may be towards desistance be thwarted by the pressures of daily living, concluding with the understanding that desistance cannot be considered outside the social context in which it occurs. Giordano, et al (2002) see cognitive shifts that frequently occur as an integral part of the desistance process.

Cusson & Pinsonneault (1980) on the other hand root their ideas within a similar framework and feel that the decision to to give up crime is generally triggered by a shock of some sort, by a delayed deterrence process. They make a link between the fears of punishment as a core factor in the desire to go straight.

Maruna & Roy (2006) push the discourse in another direction by examining the process of 'knifing off' where; individuals can change their lives by severing links with places, people, and their past. A powerful statement in itself, which leads to a further questioning about how the process of 'knifing off' could be actualised in light of the systemic imposition placed on black men, whose social mobility is not guaranteed based on the lived reality around racism. Gadd and Farrall (2004) cite that 'knifing off' as desistance could begin when criminals re-evaluate their lives, make new choices and act upon them. However, Gadd and Farrall concede that 'yet how these stories connect to the conflicts and tensions many offenders experience in becoming parents and partners remains under researched and under theorised', (Gadd and Farrall 2004, p 125).

The continuing debate as to relationship between agency, structure and desistance also creates much confusion as it does clarity. Farrall, S & Bowling, B (1999) believe that the process of desistance is one that is produced through an interplay between individual choices, and a range of wider social forces, institutional and societal practices which are beyond the control of the individual. (p261). However, if those individual choices are thwarted based on process of racialisation it is difficult to see how black men can approach desistance free from oppression coming from the privileged position of white men. McAdam's (1988) presents a way of looking at the issue and suggests that 'storytelling' may provide a framework that reveals 'desistance' as a 'journey' travelled by the individual. Agnew (2006) builds on this notion by proposing that the key events leading up to a crime or series of related crimes, is what is referred to as 'storylines' (p120).

He expresses the view that 'storyline's may help us better understand why background, situational factors and variables, affect crime. He states that 'storylines begin with some event that is out of the ordinary, and this event temporarily alters the individual's characteristics, interactions, and/or settings in ways that increase the likelihood of crime, (p.119)'. Rather than being a linear progression to the state of non-offending, however, the process of desistance has been likened to a zigzag path and to a drifting in and out of offending (Matza 1964, Glaser 1964). Maruna (2007) highlights that desistance also requires that ex-offenders develop a coherent pro-social identity for themselves and feels that there should be recognition of the salience of involvement in 'generative activities' as critical to this process.

He specifies the varieties of civic participation that contribute to such an identity and their associated subjective meanings for desisters. They show how role transitions across socio-economic, familial and civic domains relate to identity shifts over the life course. However, Uggen et al. (2004) also emphasise the reduced citizenship status and the enduring stigma experienced by offenders, resulting in ‘the reduced rights and capacities of ex-offenders to attain full citizenship’. These status deficits undermine commitment to conformity and create new obstacles to desistance and the assumption of pro-social roles. Even where ex-offenders articulate a desire to assume such pro-social roles, they ‘often lack the resources and social relationships necessary to establish role commitments and solidify new identities’ (Uggen et al. 2006: 284–5). These obstacles represent a major problem because of the important role of societal reaction in supporting (or undermining) new self-conceptions and the reinforcement of pro-social identities (Maruna and Farrall 2004).

Healey (2010) argues that the majority of offenders eventually terminate their criminal careers, but feels little is known about the processes underlying it. Healey further provides a phenomenological account of the psychosocial processes involved in desistance. It focuses on a number of key questions that have not yet been fully explored in desistance research. What prompts prolific offenders to periodically cease their criminal activity? Are there different factors involved in the onset and maintenance of desistance? What impact, if any, does desistance have on the minds and lives of ex-offenders? And finally, can probation supervision support individual efforts to change? Flynn (2010) similarly examines the extent to which criminal desistance is affected by personal and social circumstances which are space and place specific.

Grounded in criminological spatial analysis, as well as more general social scientific investigations of the role of space and place in contemporary social, economic and cultural life, it examines why large numbers of prisoners in the United States and the United Kingdom appear to be drawn from and after release return to certain urban neighbourhoods. In doing so Flynn assesses the effect of this unique 'life course' experience on the pathways and choices open to ex-prisoners who attempt to give up crime. Including new data on the geographical distribution of offenders, interviews with serving prisoners, and drawing on theories about social context, identity and subjectivity, which offers fresh insights into developmental, life course perspectives on criminal desistance and prisoner reintegration encompassing pre, in and post-prison experiences. This section explored a range of competing and contrasting views on the general nature of the desistance process. However, a deeper examination of the process and how it is impacted by processes of racialisation becomes important here.

#### **2.4 Racialisation and desistance**

In spite of the significant body of literature on desistance Farrall and Calverley (2006) acknowledge that there are few studies into the area of desistance and ethnicity, but do acknowledge that some studies have attempted to rectify this situation. So too Laub and Sampson (2001) who also acknowledge that pathways towards desistance may differ according to race, but concede that the absence of available data inhibits a more representative view. It could be argued that without a clear understanding of the role racialisation plays in the cessation of criminal activity for black men, the contemporary understandings and insights of the desistance project could be both flawed and incomplete.

Calverley (2013) In contrast to the widespread focus on ethnicity in relation to engagement in offending, the question of whether or not processes associated with desistance, that is the cessation and curtailment of offending behaviour vary by ethnicity has received less attention. This is despite known ethnic differences in factors identified as affecting disengagement from offending, such as employment, place of residence, religious affiliation and family structure, providing good reasons for believing differences would exist. Calverley seeks to address this oversight. Using data obtained from in-depth qualitative interviews he investigates the processes associated with desistance from crime among offenders drawn from some of the principal minority ethnic groups in the United Kingdom. By exploring how structural (families, friends, peer groups, employment, social capital) and cultural (religion, values, recognition) ethnic differences affected the environment in which their desistance took place. He concluded that for Indians and Bangladeshis, desistance was characterised as a collective experience involving their families actively intervening in their lives.

In contrast, Black and dual heritage offenders' desistance was a much more individualistic endeavour. He further suggests a need for a research agenda and justice policy that are sensitive to desisters' structural location, and for a wider culture which promotes and supports desisters' efforts. However, Russell (2002) expresses the view that criminology has failed to cultivate a cohesive, continuous, and recognized body of research – what is termed 'black criminology'. Inasmuch as the theoretical framework of the discipline is limited by its failure to develop this sub field, policy recommendations proposed to and adopted by the criminal justice system are limited.

Russell's view underpins the need for developing relevant contemporary 'minority perspectives' within criminology when looking at black men in significant criminal justice issues, (Bowling 1999). Within criminological theorizing much is written about why black men commit crime and it's relation to high rates of incarceration of black men both in the UK and US. However, little is known about black men and their desistance. Devlin & Turney (2001) attempt to explain why criminals 'go straight' and cite a diverse range of factors that could be defined as desistance, but with an absence of a racialised context. It is important to state that the absence of a racialised context does not diminish the factors that generally lead towards desistance, but this invisibility increases the overall need to examine notions of the racialised nature of desistance, recidivism, and cessation from crime.

Grover, C (2008) investigates the complex relationship between crime and equality with a special reference to ethnicity. The overemphasis on poverty, unemployment, social mobility and barriers towards cessation from crime based on racism creates a somewhat confusing picture. Grover's expresses the view that black men struggle to desist from involvement crime and disorder, but does not root the analysis within a sound socio-historical context. Weaver & McNeil (2010) acknowledge that the dialogues around desistance, identity, and diversity are underdeveloped with a telling view on the way the current discourse frames notions of desistance, where they state: 'when we look more closely at the evidence around gender differences, ethnic differences, and the significance of religion, we find clear evidence that the common elements of the process can be differently experienced and constituted depending on the socio-structural, cultural, and spiritual position that people occupy and mover through and they negotiate their personal and social lives', (Weaver & McNeil 2010, p55).

Weaver and McNeil's acknowledgement has implications for how notions of diversity and race are located within the study of desistance. Grover's leaning towards quantitative evaluation of black men and desistance from negates the qualitative data from black men themselves to build a more rounded picture. Hughes (1998) cites several factors that have governed desistance for African American youth; children, fear of incarceration, reflection, and modelling. An important facet of this study was the acknowledgement that the investment in building young people's 'social' and 'human' capital can determine the outcome of future stability of the inner cities where many young black men reside. The acknowledged impact of racism on the lives of young black men that pushes them towards criminal lifestyles highlights that developing a positive approach to transcending racism and its impact could also play a significant role in desisting from criminal behaviour.

Kanazawa & Still (2000) articulate a perspective that examines the gendered nature of desistance by locating the problems as predominantly black and male. Although black feminism grounds some of its arguments around the gendered nature of crime, few studies have sought to bring together the intersection of race and gender as a way of developing a coherent understanding of being black and male in relation to offending, with specific reference to desistance. On the other hand Liebling & Maruna (2005) do present an important set of views designed to challenge the lack of coherent and balanced literature on desistance, but the omission of a clear race perspective makes their view problematic.

The acknowledgement that prison and its effects can seriously hinder or enhance processes associated with desistance is a powerful argument in principle, but the overrepresentation of black men in the UK prison system would suggest that the prison experience for black men may require further investigation to begin to understand the journey from incarceration to re-integration. Glynn (2007) suggests that much 'gang related crime' operates as defiant posture, combined with filling a ritual void in the lives of urban black youth who seek out ways of demonstrating their masculinity and toughness. This position has significant implications in understanding black men's desistance. Namely, if the bonds established through families, community, and in turn society are breaking down because of a racialised systemic oppression then the trajectories for black men's desistance are well out of the control of black men themselves.

The problem may then lie in the way in which we view desistance combined with a lack of awareness of 'who' gathers the data. Dunier (1994) sees white researchers as failing to understand black men on account of possessing an inadequate insight into the world and context of their subjects. He sees social analysts who fail to take into account the devastating impact of racism on black men and how it affects the construction of their desistance as being misguided. Bowling (2002) holds the view that criminology should take a greater role in addressing, answering, and investigating those processes, theories, and insights that will assist black men's desistance. Bowling highlights that a negation of the understandings and insights of racialised masculinities in relation to the wider study of desistance will further add to black men's subordination by white men.

It may be that criminology needs to acknowledge those sub-fields that are situated outside of the so called mainstream arena that represents the interests of black men's desistance. Could a sub-field of black criminology be relevant here? Brown (2009) argues that the discipline of criminology has failed to cultivate a cohesive, continuous, and recognised body of research that is termed 'black criminology'. Brown's view underpins the need for moving beyond white men's assumptions when looking at black men's desistance. Russell's perspective helps to create the context from which to theorise black men's desistance within a 'racialised' context. By far the most developed work around the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process has emerged from Unnever and Gabbidon (2011).

Their theory of African American Offending locates criminality for black men with a wider historical lens, rooted within notions of a worldview and self-concept shaped by a history of oppression. In doing so they have contested the views of neo-liberal criminologists, who are still clinging to views of black men and crime, operate through a colour blind lens that renders a 'black led' frame invisible. Their work not only expands the current discourse on desistance, but provides a new platform from which to develop a critical dialogue around the issue the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process. Brown further argues that an increase in the number of black criminologists might hasten the development of useful theories to explain black over-involvement in crime and more importantly desistance. Brown's position suggests that there is an urgency to move away from enabling the oppressor to continue to investigate those they oppress.

When referring to 'Hurricane Katrina' Brown also expressed the view that there was a general willingness, indeed readiness to blame victims who fall into the cracks of race, crime, and justice, (2002: 25). Brown knows that the experiences of being black in America are unique because of history and therefore deserve to be treated differently. Cruse (1967) also argues strongly that it is incumbent on both black and white intellectuals researching black life not to forget that 'the black experience is unique and the irrevocable imperative of cultural self-definition demands that it be treated as such', (1967: 5). Here Bhui (2009) reminds us of the constraints of taking such a position, and states: the difficulty of defining and measuring illustrates the ambiguities and interpretive problems that are inherent in trying to understand the relevance of race issues in the criminal justice process. Gabbidon (2007) points out that there is no singular theory that explains racial disparities in race and crime, and sees that the study of the role race and ethnicity needs to be pushed to the forefront of criminology.

He builds on his argument by expressing the view that scholars need to produce original qualitative and quantitative research that examines this important question. He further highlights that since the turn of the century a body of work by black scholars has examined race and crime in a social, economic, and political context (Gabbidon, 2011). Spalek (2008) however, argues that the concept of racialisation directs our attention away from the question 'What is the relationship between race and crime?' As race is socially constructed it seems to be a stronger proposition to interrogate racialisation, which also involves an intersection of class and gender. Again, where are the voices of black men considered in determining how they are seen and understood in relation to their own understanding and insights into their desistance?

Webster (2007) alludes to a racialised position in relation to black men's desistance. He states 'it is necessary to place racialised criminal justice processes in their social and economic context, and note their roles that the criminal justice system plays in a complex and continuum of social control institutions and practices, (Webster, 2007:200). Webster fails to acknowledge the voice of black men as a way of understanding how those same processes work to uphold white privilege. Barak (1998) points out that criminology stands to benefit from the integration of criminological perspectives, as traditionally race, class, and gender have been seen as separate variables in relation to the study of crime. According to Barak, an integrated theoretical perspective 'incorporates an appreciation of differences in the patterns of crime attributed to socialization, opportunities, and bias in the context that everyone's life is framed by inequalities of race, class, and gender, (1998:251).

In addition to the unique theoretical contributions that this framework can make to understandings of black men's desistance, the intersectional approach offers a broader context when looking at black criminality in a manner that goes beyond white hegemonic assumptions. Franklin (2004) contends that the lens through which we view black men ignores the intersectional oppressions black men face living in a white society, and therefore a realistic picture of black men cannot be built. Hughes (1998) does attempt to locate black men's desistance in a wider context, using an intersectional reference point that sees black men integrating back into a society that had previously excluded them, based on racialised, classed, and gendered divisions within society. So too Sampson and Wilson (1998), like Hughes tie their theory of race, crime, and urban inequality to the lived reality of inner city communities.

They comment on the fact that black men who are segregated by race and class within the confines of the inner city have significant restrictions placed on them, making it difficult to actualise strong social bonds, and are then forced back onto the corners as a way of validating their manhood, (see also Clark 1967). Therefore, in the concluding section it is important to examine a race centred approach that might realign the lens in which desistance is view. This provides scope for at least seeing black men's desistance through a more appropriate lens from which to draw stronger conclusions than currently exists.

## **2.5 Desistance and Critical Race Theory.**

McAdams (1988) for one suggests 'that stories represents critical scene and turning points in our lives, and that the 'life story 'is a joint product of person and environment. He states: 'the life story suggests developing a sense of who I am, what I am going to do in the future, and what do I need to do in order to generate a legacy, (McAdams 1988:19). McAdam's view presents a plausible argument that suggests storytelling or 'self-narrative' may provide criminology with a framework that identifies desistance as a journey best told by the individual making the trip. Therefore it could be argued that the understanding of the destination arrived, must be understood in term of the journey travelled. Could understanding what went before bring clarity to the journey towards black men's desistance? A theoretical framework that could offer new insights when looking at the racialised nature of desistance is Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT has been widely associated with law, education, are more recently sport, and uses storytelling as the basis of its theorising as a means of privileging the voices of those who are oppressed and subordinated by white privilege and supremacy.

Stories within a CRT framework are split between into two categories: ‘majoritarian’ stories, and, ‘counter’ stories’, (Solorzano & Yosso 2002). Majoritarian stories as the term suggests privileges the collective narrative of those who have the power to subordinate (white people), whilst the ‘counter narrative’ operates as an oppositional narrative told through the voices of the subordinated (black people). So why is the ‘stories’ associated with insights into the desistance process so important? McAdams (1988) suggests that if we can understand people in terms of their life stories, then we can make sense of the past and orient us towards a new future. McAdams further suggests that we can systematically analyse our stories that represents critical scenarios and turning points in our lives in relation to the social structure. His position is further evidence that stories are significant in understanding the role of racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process.

As the research principally centred on the gathering of black men’s stories in relation to the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process, CRT was ideally suited in this case, given CRT’s use of storytelling to challenge the maintenance of white privilege. Using the ‘counter-stories’ of black men it is intended to provide insights into those factors that have assisted or hindered black men’s ability to desist from criminal activity by enabling them to ‘name their own reality’. As already stated, black men’s stories have either been excluded from the wider social narrative, or have been under researched and theorised. As Fine and Weis (1998) argue ‘the stories we tell, and those we don’t derive from our position within social and economic hierarchies’ (1998: 442). Fine and Weis provide a conduit by which black men can not only tell their story but also address those who oppress them within those same social and economic hierarchies.

Delgado and Stefancic (2000) see the lack of acknowledgement of these 'counter-stories' as a process in which society subscribes to a stock of explanatory scripts, plots, narratives, and understandings that enable us to make sense of, to construct, our social world, (2000:229). They further develop a position that argues black men must understand and articulate their counter stories they will enable them to shape and determine who they are, what they see, how they select, reject, interpret, and order their subsequent reality (2000: 229). So too hooks (2002) argues by ordering subsequent reality, there may be opportunities for black men to create a new narrative that situates itself according to their own dreams, hopes, and desires, (hooks 2002:25). Bowling and Phillips (2002) however, express the view that the narrative of racism when it occurs in the criminal justice system can best be explained by examining the prejudiced, stereotyping and discriminatory acts of individual criminal justice practitioners; the cultures of criminal justice organisations; or, institutional racism.

Bowling and Phillips further argue that some British criminologists feel that the question of 'ethnicity and crime is unanswerable 'due to the methodological and conceptual problems inherent in defining and measuring crime, (2002:243). Likewise, Brown (2002) sees 'race and crime' as something 'where researchers consistently point fingers, and cover their eyes', (2002:1). CRT can therefore hold a mirror up to a society to render 'colour blindness' null and void, and allow for a reframing of black men's stories in relation to the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance. CRT sees colour blind approaches to race as suppressing personal stories of those affected in the pursuit of neutral and unbiased scientific inquiry.

West (2002) sees this colour blindness as part of an on-going liberal/conservative discussion conceals the most basic issue now facing black people. West primarily is asking a question of speaking to the issue of colour blindness that leads to a profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread, (2002: 10). West further argues that the rendering of stories of many black men are driven by a need to protect the liberal/conservative position. The need for CRT then is embellished in the understanding that when black men do speak they are constantly pushed to the margins of society and in doing so are not seen and remain invisible in the consciousness of society.

As Delgado and Stefancic (2006) articulate, ‘who would listen to, who would credit, a speaker or writer one associates with water melon eating, buffoonery (2002: 231). Dixon (2006) reinforces their position and sees the voices of people of colour are required for a wider analysis of the racism within the criminal justice system. Dixon further argues that experience revealed through the stories of people of colour must be subjected to a deeper analysis using a CRT lens and states, ‘the point we strive to make with this meta proposition is not that class and gender are insignificant, but that ‘race matters’ and blackness matters in more detailed ways, (Dixon, 2006:38). A challenge comes from Hallett (2006) who acknowledges that Critical Race Theorists ‘have been discontented with the overreliance on belated enforcement of minority’s civil rights, arguing that deeper and more fundamental changes are necessary for equality to be achieved, (2006:27). He further states: that ‘to be ultimately effective critically minded activists must anchor their work in the public sphere, (2006: 10). But if that public sphere happens to be controlled and run on a foundation of white privilege, then Hallett’s view will surely run aground.

Valdes et al (2002) argue that academics and activists must enable the subordinated person (Black men) to narrate, to interpret events in opposition to the dominant narratives, and to reinvent one's self by bringing coherence to one's life stories (2002:244); see also (McAdams 1985). The narrative potential of CRT therefore, lies in 'its ability to free us to move backward and forward in time, to re-story the past and to re imagine the future. In saying that the fear of academic retribution is a real threat to using CRT in the academy, when the lens may be turned inward and focus attention on the academy itself. Delgado and Stefancic, (2000) feel that understanding the impact of racism through a CRT lens, can find a way out of a trap of unjustified exclusion and when it is time to reallocate power. They extend their position by recognising the role of 'whiteness' in furthering the wider discourse around racialised identities.

Whiteness, as Franklin (2010) argues places black men at risk of not actualising a true sense of authenticity. Wilson (2009) so too argues that denied access to the social structure based on attributes of white men's power contributes directly to racial group outcomes such as different in 'social acts' and 'social processes'. By social acts Wilson means when individuals or groups exercise power over others. Whereas social processes refers to the machinery of society that exists to promote on-going relations among members of the larger group. Examples such as laws, policing, and institutional practices that operates from a position of 'white privilege'. He further argues that there are also cultural forces at work, where he views that national views and beliefs about black men, drive a sense of 'moral panic' that drives the collective experiences in these settings. Traditionally, racism is ideologically driven and has located black men in a subordinate role in relation to white men.

Hill-Collins (2000) argues that there is always choice and the power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be. She further argues that the hegemonic domain of power manipulates ideological leanings and acts a link between social institutions and the level of everyday social interaction. The relevance of the previous statements lies less in the traditional understandings of desistance and more in finding a way to let other voices that have been silenced, speak for themselves on this matter. In this case we are talking about black men. The Combahee River Collective Statement (1972) likewise argues that the subordination of black women in society has something to offer in terms of explaining the subordination of black men.

They see racialisation as a pervasive factor that does not allow black women, to look more deeply into their own experiences and, from that share and grow consciousness. They further argue the need to build a politics that will change their lives, end their oppression, and contest notions of whiteness. Dwyer and Jones (2002) locate whiteness in contemporary terms can enrich our understanding of a wide range of social practices and argue that racial identities can also be differentiated (2000:17). Akom (2008) also sees ‘whiteness studies’ as an outgrowth of critical racial studies and sees the need to get beyond the way we see CRT by broadening discourse centring on race to include an intersection of other forms of oppression. As such Akom challenges traditional claims toward objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, and neutrality and illustrates that traditional research methods often mask self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups, see also (Solorzano 1997). Akom (2008) also acknowledges that ‘critical reflexivity’ should consider how various formulations of whiteness are situated in relation to contemporary formulations of black people of identity formation, politics, and knowledge construction.

He further posits the view that researchers should examine how cultural practices are employed by white people, as they reconstitute, support, and maintain forms of white supremacy. Trainor (2002) sees the deconstruction of whiteness as a political construct that has more currency than CRT'S focus on people of colour. He states 'we may first have to find ways, paradoxically, to embrace discourses that we might have once 'preferred not to honor, even with our gaze', (Trainor, 2002:647). In conclusion, intersectionality offers a new possibility for gaining new insights and understandings of black men's desistance by recognising the limitations of seeing race, class, and gender and independent variables. As stated previously CRT has been widely associated with law, education, and more recently sport. Delgado (2001) states: Critical Race Theory provides a new and different lens from which to view underlying race and racism and to go beyond the ordinariness of racist action and treatment within criminal justice policy and practice', (Delgado 2001, p10). CRT uses storytelling as the basis of its theorising. Using these 'counter-stories' it is intended to provide insights into those factors that have assisted or hindered black men's ability to desist from criminal activity by enabling them to 'name their own story'. The use of CRT as a method of gathering the narratives of those most affected by discriminatory practice could offer a fresh insight that is required if desistance is to be part of the criminal justice lexicon in operational terms. However, Bowling & Phillips (2002) put forward a different proposition: 'Can racism where it occurs in the criminal justice system be explained best by examining the prejudiced, stereotyping and discriminatory acts of individual criminal justice practitioners, the cultures of criminal justice organisations or institutional racism. To what extent is racial discrimination systemic, cumulative or context dependent? (Bowling & Phillips xvi).

Bowling & Phillips argument is taken further by asking by that some British Criminologists feel that the question of 'ethnicity and crime is unanswerable 'due to the methodological and conceptual problems inherent in defining and measuring crime, (Bowling & Phillips:p243). Brown (2002: p1) has a swift response to the notion of others defining the reality for black offenders where she clearly sees the issue of race and crime as one where researchers consistently writing their hands, point fingers, and cover their eyes. Brown goes further by expressing the view that an increase in the number of black criminologists might hasten the development of useful theories to explain black men's desistance. Brown knows that the experiences of being black in America are unique because of history and therefore deserve to be treated different but equal.

Cruse (1967) also understands this position and calls for black intellectuals researching black life to remember that 'the black experience is unique and the irrevocable imperative of cultural self-definition demands that it be treated as such (Cruse 1967: p 5). As Gabbidon (2007) states, 'There is no singular theory that explains racial disparities in crime and justice Race and crime is an important area of study. It moves the study of the role race and ethnicity to the forefront of criminology. Scholars need to produce original qualitative and quantitative research that examines this important question. Criminology needs to remain innovative in its approaches, (Gabbidon 2007, p257). Gabbidon understands that race is a central feature that is required to capture a stronger understanding of those factors that enable black men to desist from criminal activity.

Gabbidon et al (2002, p 3) also present a powerful argument to support the need for a minority perspective (Bowling 2002) where they state

Since the turn of the century a body of work by black scholars has examined race and crime in a social, economic, and political context. Unfortunately most of these works have not filtered into mainstream criminology/criminal justice and are often omitted from textbooks and classroom discussions.  
(Gabbidon et. al 2002, p 3)

It could be argued that if the development of feminist criminology is any indication, the growth of black criminology will create its own sub divisions. The value of a black criminology can be said to parallel the value of feminist criminology, 'There should be a discipline wide recognition that how particular racial groups are treated in American society and how they internalise this treatment have some bearing on those groups involvement in crime', (Spalsek 2008, p 284). Spalsek feels the concept of racialisation directs our attention away from the question 'What is the relationship between race and crime?' Webster also alludes to the relationship between race and class, as a position that transcends just notion of race. Webster states, 'It is necessary to place racialised criminal justice processes in their social and economic context, and note their roles that the criminal justice system plays in a complex and continuum of social control institutions and practices, (Webster, C 2007, p 200).

Webster's view places a strong emphasis on the systemic response to processes of racialisation within criminal justice processes. However, who is best placed to articulate that position? It would suggest that CRT may be best placed to create a theoretical context, articulated by those who are on the receiving end of racist treatment and action. Wells (1991) reaffirms Webster's position in exploring the complex interplay of race and gender, and how race becomes gendered and how gender becomes racialised, when examining the horrors of lynching. McAdams (1988) suggests that we understand people in terms of their life stories and the personal story we create can help us make sense of the past and orient us towards the future. McAdams further suggest that we can systematically analyse our stories that represents critical scene and turning points in our lives. McAdams concludes with highlighting that the events in our lives can be given substance and meaning.

Bruner (1986, p139) also argues: 'ethnographies are guided by an implicit narrative structure, by a story we tell about the peoples we study. Ethnography is discourse, a genre of storytelling', (Bruner 1986, p139). As CRT sees the use of counter-narratives to explain and explore racist treatment and action Bruner (1986, p 140) also the transition from a story of assimilation to one of black liberation is seen as a shift in the way the ethnography is constructed, (Bruner 1986, p140). Bruner goes further by expressing the view that ethnographers have a problem in the way they document resistance and telling how hegemony is maintained; or threatened, (Bruner 1986, p140). This predicament revolves around Bruner recognizing that narrative structures organise and give meaning to minority experiences but they are not always told as part of dominant story.

Only after the new narrative becomes dominant is there a reexamination of the past, a rediscovery of old texts, and a recreation of the new heroes of liberation and resistance. (Bruner 1986, p143). The key elements in narrative are story, discourse, and telling. The *story* is the abstract sequence of events. ‘Discourse’ is the text in which the story is manifested, the statement in a particular medium such as a novel, myth, lecture, film, conversation, or whatever. ‘Telling’ is the action, the act of narrating, the communicative process that produces the story in discourse. Bruner’s understanding that stories give meaning to the present and enable us to see that present as part of a set of relationships involving a constituted past and a future is vital if desistance theorists are to provide equitable ideas centring on desistance in its widest context.

all of us, then, anthropologists and informants, must  
accept responsibility for understanding society as told  
and retold (Bruner 1986, p153)

Bruner’s position about accepting responsibility for understanding feels idealistic. If his view was in effect working, then there would be no need for CRT. One of the key tenets in CRT is the understanding that racism is normal and creates a society that is ‘colour blind’. Swann (1985p 27) in his report centring on black pupils underachievement found a widespread colour blind attitude, on the basis that within the teaching profession it was firmly accepted that to recognise differences between people of various ethnic origins is divisive and can in fact constitute a major obstacle to creating a harmonious multi-racial society.

A straightforward rejection of people with a different skin colour since both types of attitude seeks to deny the validity of an important aspect of a person's identity. Swann's view highlights that there is a need to find a way to connect the real lived experience of those most affected by racism, so that any hint of colour blindness removes the possibility of the sustainability of the majoritarian story (Solorzano & Yosso 2002, p10). Critical race theorists argue that traditional approaches to race suppresses personal narratives of those affected in the pursuit of neutral and unbiased scientific inquiry. West writes:

the liberal/conservative discussion conceals the most basic issue now facing black America: the nihilistic threat to its very existence. This threat is not simply a matter of relative economic deprivation and political powerlessness. It is primarily a question of speaking to a profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America (West 2002: 10)

West's assertion suggests that the narrative of many black men is driven by a need to protect the liberal/conservative position and nihilism almost guaranteeing the narrative space black men do occupy is enabled by a system that supports and encourages notions of hyper-masculinity, and then criminalises it for asserting that position. Therefore, it is right to develop a dialogue that starts with the need to have a Critical Race Theory of Desistance. Placing black criminological paradigms at the core of policies targeted at black people may begin to address the core not the symptoms of black criminality.

However, Delgado & Stefancic (2000: 228) recognise that racial change is slow, then, because the story of race is part of the dominant narrative that we use to interpret experience. The narrative teaches that race matters, that people are different, with the differences lying always in a predictable direction. It is important then to reaffirm the importance of narrative in CRT, and its importance to society as a whole, where they state: ‘we subscribe to a stock of explanatory scripts, plots, narratives, and understandings that enable us to make sense of, to construct, our social world. Because we then live in that world, it begins to shape and determine us, who we are, what we see, how we select, reject, interpret, and order subsequent reality, (Delgado & Stefancic 2000:229).By ordering subsequent reality, there may be opportunities for black men to create a new narrative that situates itself according to their own dreams, hopes, and desires (hooks 2002). Powerful as it may appear the normalising of racism means that any views that oppose or denounce the Majoritarian Narrative *will be ignored or have no audience*. It may also be the case that the privileged position of many white people in society may distort the narrative that will ultimately impede the cause of racial reform when elite groups use the supposed existence of the market place of ideas to justify their own position. They further argue:

Even when minorities do speak they have little credibility. Who would listen to, who would credit, a speaker or writer one associates with water melon eating, buffoonery, menial work, intellectual inadequacy, laziness, and demanding resources beyond his deserved share. (Delgado & Stefancic p 231)

They conclude with a cautionary piece of advice to black scholars who take a position centring on CRT. (Delgado & Stefancic: 233) express the view that

‘because of the way the dominant narrative works, we should prepare for the near certainty that these suggestions will be criticised as unprincipled, unfair to innocent whites wrong. Understanding how the dialectic works, and how the scripts and the counter scripts work their dismal paralysis, may perhaps, inspire us to continue even though the path is long and the night dark. (Delgado & Stefancic: 233)

It could be argued that CRT merely provides a new and different lens and way of systematising the search for knowledge the confines of race, as well as trying to go beyond the ordinariness of racist action and treatment. Herein lies another problem in CRT as a tool for looking at the issue of race and that is the devaluing of scholarship from people of colour (Dixson 2006: 36). The ethical argument thrown at Critical Race Theorists is how are objective can they be as assumptions are made about the ‘perceived lack of neutrality or overly subjective’ (Dixson 2006 p37). Dixson’s counter to that response is:

the voice of people of colour is required for a complete analysis of the system. The experience revealed through the stories of people of colour must be subjected to a deeper analysis using a CRT lens. The point we strive to make with this meta proposition is not that class and gender are insignificant, but

that 'race matters' and blackness matters in more detailed ways,  
(Dixson 2006 p38).

However, CRT is not without its critics. Darder et al (2003) argue that there is a need for a critical theory of racism, and to move away from notions of race into the realms of racialisation. They are quite attacking of CRT that does not address issue of class. They state: 'As a consequence, much of the literature on subordinate cultural populations, with its emphasis on such issues as racial inequality, racial segregation, racial identity has utilised the construct of race as a central category of analysis for interpreting the social conditions of inequality and marginalisation. Yet in much of the work on African American populations, an analysis of class and a critique of capitalism is conspicuously absent, (2003, p247). They also see the lack of a class analysis as a serious shortcoming and flaw of CRT.

They feel that understanding racism should be viewed through and 'understanding of racialised inequality, whilst simultaneously encompassing the multiple social expressions of racism, (p 260). Rodriguez offers a perspective about the way people of colour have been marginalised and oppressed in a race obsessed society that privileges white over black. Schenider, C (2003) sees an uneasy relationship that exists between critical race theory and postmodernism, as CRT theorists view postmodernism as damaging critical race theory tenets, based on steering clear of acknowledging race, class, and gender. Schenider, C (2003) argues that the significance of integrating the two bodies of knowledge is that the collaboration provides a crucial alternative to understanding the various complexities that arise in analysing race, class, and gender.

Similar to Darder et al, Schenider, C (2003) is critical of storytelling and feels that critical race theory teaches manipulation of emotions and plays out issue of race. Schenider feels that constructed narratives by black men are better placed within notions of class and identity that would better highlight the oppressive structures in society. Davis (1998) challenges Scheneider view by arguing that issues of race have undermined the ability to create a popular critical discourse to contest the ideological trickery that posits imprisonment of black men as key to public safety. The Combahee River Collective Statement (1972) also argue that race and not class is something that can be contested in competing for the understanding the position of black people in society. They see racial politics and racism as pervasive factors in our lives that do not allow most black women, to look more deeply into their own experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change their lives and invariably end their oppression. The collective's position talks about the need to '*naming our own reality*' as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. They conclude by stating:

We struggle together with black men against racism, while we  
also struggle with black men about sexism. (p4)

The intersection between gender and race adds weight to CRT as a way of not watering down 'race' as an ideological and political position. Dwyer & Jones (2000 p211) counter this position as they feel that locating whiteness in contemporary terms can enrich our understanding of a wide range of social practices and argue that racial identities are also differentiated, in that subjects never occupy a single system of difference. They further argue:

considerations of a racialisation are a fundamental aspect of geographical understanding. in much the same way that more and more geographers have recognised that no human geography is complete without a consideration for gender. (Dwyer & Jones (2000 p218)

Maybe CRT should by broaden its discourse centring on race to include an intersection of other forms of oppression such as class, gender, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and special needs, by illustrating how these forms of oppression interlock creating a wider system of oppression.

Akom (2008) views the intercentricity of racialized oppression as challenging traditional claims toward objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, and neutrality and illustrate that traditional research methods often mask self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups. Akom also feels that critical reflexivity should consider how various formulations of whiteness are situated in relation to contemporary formulations of black people of identity formation, politics, and knowledge construction. Akom further holds the view that researchers should examine how cultural practices and discursive strategies are employed by white people, as well as people of color, as they struggle to reconstitute, support, and maintain forms of white supremacy. Reconstitution of whiteness, as well as how white supremacy is resisted, has been a central focus of third-wave studies. Trainor (2002) sees the deconstruction of whiteness as a political construct that has more currency than CRT'S focus on people of colour.

Trainor states:

we may first have to find ways, paradoxically, to embrace discourses that we might have once "preferred not to honor, even with our gaze. (Trainor 2002, p647)

If stories hold the key to collective memory, define meaning and purpose, and assist in the development of communities themselves, then what does this proposition hold for the study of black men's desistance. Personal stories are a core element of processes that mark significant changes as part of an individual's life cycle. The social labelling of black men can at times be a barrier to meaningful and productive communication, as those narrow definitions deal with a set of ideas that seldom provides the opportunity for a common and shared value system.

This fractures the possibility of reconciliation and unity amongst those kept within those institutions. Unless those institutionalised communities can reclaim a sense of 'self', redefined in terms of 'dreams', 'desires', and 'sense of purpose', the result will be a narrative associated within the apocalyptic science fiction genre. Akbar (1991) states: The self is a kind of community. It has within it the specialists which one finds within any community. These specialists perform certain functions for the benefit of the whole community. The road to Inner peace is the same road to outer peace. Such peace is acquired by the harmonious cooperation of these members under a leadership of a common good, (p 15) When one analyses the contemporary life journeys of many black men living on the margins of society it can be seen as negative, oppressive, despairing, with no way forward.

However, if we see those difficult stages of their lives as part of a 'heroic' journey (as depicted throughout mythology and folklore) they may begin a process of personal reframing, where the obstacles they face are seen merely as barriers to becoming stronger and more self-determined individuals. By sharing and promoting successful personal narratives, it should be possible to celebrate and strategically plan a re-birth. This provides a template to go from coping to survival, survival to desistance. By reclaiming a new identity and consciousness, those individuals who reside within closed institutions like prisoners can learn how to live meaningful and productive lives again. Personal narratives could enable the subordinated person (prisoners) to narrate, to interpret events and to reinvent ones' self by bringing coherence to one's life stories (McAdams 1985 ).

hooks (2003) may provide an answer when she locates her desire to see a new future for black men, as determining what is right for them, as the basis of the argument that creates the need for CRT to provide a space for black men to voice their understanding of who they are, and to envision a new journey. The issue of class and other related components becomes important here. Rodriguez (2009) argues that we have to confront whiteness and privilege, both inside and outside of our classrooms. She further argues that transformative spaces will require pain, struggle, and an uncomfortable space, (Rodriguez, 2009: 503). Rodriguez offers a perspective about the way people of colour have been marginalised and oppressed in a race obsessed society that privileges white over black, and see whiteness as something must be faced. The competing views here not only creates some kind of 'theoretical confusion', but also reveals that with all the competing ideas expressed seldom is the views of those being talked about considered.

This in my view makes the case stronger in terms of using CRT to look critically at black men's desistance. However, Schneider (2003), like Darder et al (2003) pushes for a dialogue between CRT and postmodernism and argues that the significance of integrating the two bodies of knowledge is that the collaboration provides a crucial alternative to understanding the various complexities that arise in analysing race, class, and gender. Similar to Darder et al (2003) Schneider is critical of storytelling and feels that critical race theory teaches manipulation of emotions and plays out the issue of race. He feels that constructed narratives by black men are better placed within notions of class and identity that would more accurately highlight the oppressive structures of racist society. An examination of the intersection between race, class, and gender becomes important here. 'Intersectionality' refers to the connection aspects of identity, race, class, and gender that operate as independent variables and are inseparable. It may be that a CRT of black men's is an expression of how the racialisation of criminal justice systems affects and impacts the other variable of class, gender, culture, faith, etc. And to further seek how this understanding shapes new understandings and directions for the study of desistance as a whole.

## **2.6 Summary**

This chapter gave an overview of how the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process invariably affects black men in both the US and UK criminal justice systems. An exploration of Race, class, and Gender became important here, contrasted with a reflection on prison as a site to look at racialisation of criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process for black men.

Agency v Structure then became the next area that focussed attention on the importance of authoring your own 'story' and how that connects to black criminological theorising. This chapter has also argued that current discourse on desistance has paid little attention to black men's desistance. It also addressed a range of counter arguments against the use of CRT as a framework that could best understand the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process.

Chapter Three focuses on the methodology used during this research

## CHAPTER THREE - METHODOLOGY

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the methodologies used, combined with auto-ethnographic and ontological reflections the researcher. It also examines the role of CRT was used as the basis for the analytical approach to understanding the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process. It further highlights some of the methodological tensions that arose during the journey of the research itself. Milner (2007) argues that researchers should be actively engaged, thoughtful, and forthright regarding tensions that can surface when conducting research where issues of race and culture are concerned. Social science research is complex and diverse, where its goals and its basic assumptions vary significantly.

In any research inquiry, linking philosophical traditions or schools of thought helps clarify a researcher's theoretical frameworks, (Cohen, et al. 2000). The framework for any research includes beliefs about the nature of reality and humanity (ontology), the theory of knowledge that informs the research (epistemology) and how that knowledge may be gained (methodology). Ontology and epistemology influence the type of research methodology chosen, and this in turn guides the choice of research design and instruments. The ontology informs the methodology about the nature of reality and what social science is supposed to study where as the epistemology informs the methodology about the nature of knowledge or where knowledge is to be sought? About how we know what we know? Having the instruction from the ontology and epistemology the methodology prepares a package of research design that is to be employed by the researcher. Methodology is a research strategy that translates the ontological and epistemological principles in the process of research activity.

How research is conducted and constructed? (Fekede, 2010). In relation to the subjects of the inquiry the question of how black men understand their desistance could be linked to how they understand the nature of their oppression. Friere (1970) expresses the view that the oppressed are better prepared than to understand the oppressed. He further expresses the view that oppressed peoples in order to surmount the situation of their oppression, they must first critically recognise its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one that makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity, (1970:29). Hence the research started from an interpretivist perspective.

That is, it focused on the meanings that black men gave to their lived experiences in relation to the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process, (McAdams 1985). An interpretivist perspective accepts the social world is constructed through meaning, and that those meanings in this case are rooted within a raced, classed, and gendered context, (Zamudo et al 2011).As stated previously the research started with several key questions:

- What impact does the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems have on the desistance process for black men?
- How do black men construct their own insights and understandings of their desistance in relation to being both black and male in white society that renders them subordinate?
- What are the factors that contribute to black men's commitment to accepting or negating notions of their desistance?

It was then decided to conduct the research in three different sites:

- The community (Birmingham – UK)
- HMP Grendon’s Therapeutic Community (TC) (UK)
- The Community (Baltimore)

The objective here was to push the conventional boundaries of understanding in relation to desistance. Inasmuch, much desistance writing focuses on ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ desistance to draw its conclusions. This research wanted to explore some of the more searching and wider reaching issues concerning the complex nature of desistance trajectories themselves, not just in terms of point of cessation, but possible influences of location, time, and space, in relation to black men’s desistance. Much the same as (Flynn, 2010, Healey, 2010 and Calverley, 2013) but with a specific emphasis on racialised processes and their impact on black men’s desistance. The community in Birmingham was chosen as it has a significant population of black men within the community who had at some stage been incarcerated in local prison HMP Birmingham. The relevance here was engaging with men who both lived and went to prison in the local community. Choosing HMP Grendon was critical for slightly different reasons. Firstly, if desistance began whilst incarcerated and secondly, what role if any would be located in a prison based TC have on the trajectory towards desistance. Likewise, conducting research in inner city Baltimore provided both a comparative element to the research, alongside the deployment of ‘Urban Ethnography as the method for gathering the data, (Anderson, 1999). In itself this aspiration created a level of excitement and anticipation for pushing the boundaries in the study of desistance into new territory.

Although this position was important, but it was also grounded in the expectation of knowing that there would be some inherent challenges along the way. Central to this approach was in the accessing and selection of participants for the study.

### **3.2 The study sample - Participants**

#### **3.2.1 Participants from the community – Birmingham (UK)**

This strand of the study involved 10 black men from the community. Participants reflected a diverse range of offending behaviours, as well as representing several geographical locations from across the city of Birmingham. It is important to state that those selected was based solely on their connection to their desistance, as opposed to any ecological considerations. They were as follows:

- L is a 35 year old, black Briton, former gang member, has done several prison sentences.
- H is a 28 year old, black Briton, former gang member, has done several prison sentences.
- M is a 40 year, black Briton, former gang member, has done several prison sentences.
- R is a 41 year old, black Briton, former gang member, hasn't been to prison.
- J is a 25 year old, black Briton, former gang member, has been to prison several times.
- P is 32 year old, black Briton, former gang member, has been to prison several times.
- D is 32 year old, black Briton, current gang member, has been to prison several times.
- K is 27 year old, black Briton, current gang member, has been to prison several times.
- C is a 31 year old, black Briton, former gang member, hasn't been to prison.
- N is a 29 year old, black Briton, former gang member, been to prison several times.
- S is a 26 year old, black Briton, former gang member, been to prison several times.

#### **3.2.2 Participants from HMP Grendon**

Participants reflected a diverse range of offending behaviours, as well as representing several geographical locations from the UK, Africa and the Caribbean. HMP Grendon's research committee guided the research process throughout.

Participants were then drawn from the widest cross section of HMP Grendon's prisoner community, and which resulted in 4 men from G wing, 4 men from D wing, and 3 men from C wing. The participants were as follows:

- P is a 42 year old, African Caribbean Man, with a determinate life sentence, for attempted murder.
- N is a 43 year old, African Caribbean Man, with an IPP life sentence, for GBH
- D is a 49 year old, African Caribbean Man, with an IPP life sentence, for Robbery.
- S is a 45 year old, African Caribbean Man with a determinate life sentence, for firearms offences
- E is a 35 year old, African Caribbean Man, with an IPP life sentence, aggravated burglary.
- Y is a 28 year old, African Caribbean Man, with a mandatory life sentence, for murder.
- P is a 51 year old, African Caribbean Man, with a discretionary life sentence, for rape.
- L is a 31 year old, African Caribbean Man with a discretionary life sentence, for attempted murder.
- S is a 41 year old, African Caribbean Man, with a discretionary life sentence, for attempted murder.
- W is a 22 year old, mixed race man, with a mandatory life sentence, for murder.

### **3.2.3 Participants from Baltimore (USA)**

This strand of the research focussed on black men in the city of Baltimore (USA). The objective was to undertake a comparative analysis in relation to factors that enhanced or hindered notions of desistance. The US strand of the research was undertaken in Baltimore (USA) during Aug/Sept 2010, as part of a Winston Churchill International Travel Fellowship. Like the Birmingham strand of the research participants were chosen based on their connection to, and relationship with their insights and understandings of desistance.

The participants were as follows:

- N is an African American in his late 60's and spent a total of 16 years of his life in Angola, Louisiana State Penitentiary, and over 13 of those years were confined to a single cell CCR (Close Custody-Restriction – Solitary Confinement).
- A is an ex-offender; an African American in his late 50's and spent over 15 years in San Quentin State Prison (California).
- J is a 50 year old African American male, who served time in Green Haven State Penitentiary in New York State.
- 'B' is a 30 year old African American ex-high level drug dealer.
- 'I' is a 25 year old African American in his early 20's, and is a former gang member.
- R is a 19 year old African American, who is a current gang member
- T is a 40 year old African American, who is a former gang enforcer, and now church pastor
- BB is a 60 year old African American man, and ex-offender, who runs his own organization called F.O.X.O. (Fraternal Order of Ex Offenders). He has spent over 25 years in a range of US prisons.
- Bu is a 35 year old African American, and is one of Baltimore's gang leaders

All of the participants in the study occupied a variety of different positions within the desistance paradigm, ranging from those who had ceased offending for a short period of time (Primary desistance) combined with those who had had a significant period of time away from their last offence (Secondary desistance). Equally, as important were incarcerated men who in spite of not being free to commit more crime were important in understanding the psychological aspects of determining 'desistance readiness' prior to release. Once selected an important next step was in the way access was granted in all of the three sites. Once again there were some complications regarding uniformity of access, as will be outlined in this next section.

### 3.3 Access

#### 3.3.1 The community

The objective was to look at the role of community in relation to factors that enhanced or hindered the understanding and insights of the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process. As such key community informants and gate keepers were contacted in order to recruit participants. They were drawn from the faith communities, community organisations, and criminal justice agencies. All of the participants were then given relevant information about the research prior to taking part in the research. This aspect of the research took the form of initial meetings via phone calls, leading to more structured meetings that worked out the detail of the research being undertaken in conjunction with the participants themselves.

The selection of participants was made by compiling a short list of appropriate candidates, followed by a sifting process. Successful participants were then informed about the specific nature of the research in detail, before meeting up and signing a 'release form' where they were informed they could withdraw at any stage of the research. Many of those from the community revealed how they had previously experienced difficulties with other research inquiries and had on-going issues of trust or confidentiality, so personal safety became a key consideration in terms of where the interviews were taking place and how they were conducted. So key community contacts assisted in locating the subjects for the inquiry and established an initial dialogue. A range of meetings with each participant, prior to the interviews were arranged clarifying any details and establishing clear boundaries.

Once clarity had been established and the trust was built, each participant then read and signed a release form that stated clearly the aims, objectives, and expectations of the research. In the later section of this chapter there is a reflexive account of the researcher's position designed to highlights some of the challenges faced when trying to gain access to the research participants.

### **3.3.2 HMP Grendon**

HMP Grendon is the only prison in the country that operates wholly as a therapeutic community, (Genders and Player, 2010). HMP Grendon which operates as a Therapeutic Community (TC) was chosen (to be part of the research) for several reasons.

- Prisons are socially divided and hierarchically structured, whereas the TC is organised to minimise social divisions.
- Prisons operate with a rigid set of rules, whereas TC is self-regulating.
- Prisons depersonalise the individual, TC's promote the development of personal identity.

It was the contrast in differences between traditional prisons and a TC which provided the basis for HMP Grendon's inclusion in the research. Operating within the TC in HMP Grendon, the research process was subject to the prison's ethics committee. So too, whilst conducting the research, prison officers were on hand to ensure the timings were adhered to, as well as assisting in the managing of the schedule of the research itself. This strand of the research focussed on black men in a prison based therapeutic community (TC).

The objective was to look at the role of therapeutic intervention in prison in relation to the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process and to compare how the experience of TC in relation to desistance differed from that of the community. After lengthy negotiations with the prison, three days were allocated to conduct the field research. All participants were informed about the nature of the research, and were advised that at any stage of the research they could withdraw. Each participant was interviewed separately, and issues pertaining to confidentiality were also discussed and agreed. It was also agreed that prison officers would not present during the interviews as it was felt it would be an inhibiting factor for those taking part. However, Prison officers were consulted prior to conducting the research, as it was important their views were considered as part of the process.

In all cases prison officers were supportive to my request and supported me throughout. It was also intended to understand the role of the TC in enabling black men to reflect those understanding and insights of the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process differently from the prison estate as a whole. The interviews were coordinated in conjunction with the prison to ensure that they did not breach prison security. Moving from a paradigm of 'researching on', to one of 'researching with' prisoners laid a stronger foundation from which to build trust between researcher and interviewees, (Friere 1970). Meeting the prisoners for the first time required a small amount of negotiation in terms of establishing the scope and boundaries of the research. Once that was complete, each individual read and signed a release form that stated clearly the aims, objectives, and expectations of the research.

Similarly, the later section of this chapter there is a reflexive account of the researcher's position designed to highlights some of the challenges faced when trying to gain access to the research participants.

### **3.3.3 The Community – Baltimore (USA)**

A significant amount of liaison took place via email with Johns Hopkins University and key community contacts in Baltimore (USA). Both the university and the community contacts assisted in locating the subjects for the inquiry and brokered the initial connection. On arrival in Baltimore a range of individual and group meetings with potential participants were established, creating a connection, clarifying any concerns about the research, concluding by establishing clear boundaries. There was then a process of selection undertaken with colleagues at Johns Hopkins and key community informants, in relation to suitability for participation. Each individual then read and signed a release form that stated clearly the aims, objectives, and expectations of the research. Dubois (1938) points out, that 'car wash sociologists' operating from an ivory tower vantage point who does not venture into black communities cannot fully understand black men's social reality. He further argues that one must study black men first hand. Operating from a racialised context does remove some of the barriers between me and the subjects of the inquiry, but more importantly as explained previously, recognises the importance of not 'going native'. So although I was operating from the 'insider' perspective in relation to my racial identity, my position as a criminologist and researcher also placed me in an 'outsider' position in relation to the subjects of the inquiry.

Overall, the building of trust was paramount, especially as many of those involved in the research had experienced previous negative experiences with researchers, both black and white. It was also important to assert the role of being an ‘insider’ researcher to access a section of the community, who are seldom accessed. To take this position was not easy, but necessary in order to conduct research that is both challenging and controversial. A look at the tensions in relation to being an outsider-insider researcher is important here.

### **3.4 The ‘insider-outsider perspective’**

It is important to clarify my personal motivation for the research, especially for those utilising a qualitative methodology that employs the use of ‘reflexivity’, (Creswell, 1994). As a component of clarifying my role in the research, I positioned myself as either ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ to the research domain, (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002). Generally, ‘insider-researchers’ are those who chose to study a group to which they belong, while ‘outsider researchers’ do not belong to the group under study. In this case I identify myself as a ‘mixed race’ man, whose parents are both black and white. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) outlined three key advantages of being an ‘insider’ to the research domain:

1. A significant understanding of a group’s culture
2. The ability to interact naturally with the group and its members;
3. A previously established, and therefore greater, relational intimacy with the group.

In addition, as an ‘insider-researcher’ I am confronted with methodological and ethical issues that do not necessarily apply to ‘outsider researchers’.

Namely, striking the balance between the 'insider role' and role of 'the researcher', (DeLyser, 2001). Taking on the role of the researcher often acts as a barrier that separates the insider from those in the setting they are researching. A further difficulty encountered by relates to 'ethical issues'. Ethical issues arise on a continual basis, and need to be dealt with, on an individual and daily basis. Although ethical principles of privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent are able to guide the research, there is often an uneasy tension as to how these principles play out in community/prison based applied research, (Gerrish, 1997). The 'insider' positioning views the research process and products as 'co-constructions' between the researcher and the participants in the research; regard the research participants or respondents as active 'informants' to the research; and attempts to give 'voice' to the informants within the research domain, (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

As such, these perspectives allow the researcher to conduct research 'with' rather than 'on' their group, which contrasts starkly with 'outsider-research' perspectives. In embodying an insider role undertaking this approach to research creates particular challenges that require careful consideration and appropriate responses. It was impossible to avoid complete impartiality, but the ethical considerations (see later in chapter) demonstrated that there were no improper actions, or possibility of 'going native'. Being immersed in the world of the research subjects was required in order to access the data and in doing so generate new insights in an area that is under-researched, under-theorised, and misunderstood. Therefore, a range of safeguards needed to be put in place to reduce the amount of subjectivity that would lead to a contamination of the research process. This manifested in the use of a reflexive aspect of the research methods.

Reflexivity became an important tool in understanding my own levels of subjectivity in relation to the research as a whole.

### **3.4.1 Reflexivity**

The reflexive part of the research focussed on how my own racial identity impacted on my ability to remain objective. It also acted as an analytical tool to assess if my 'insider' position in the research would hinder my objectification throughout the journey. As stated previously total impartiality was impossible, but being 'on the inside' gave a unique insight into the world of these subjects. There were obvious risks involved throughout the journey but careful planning and consistent supervisory support not only minimised those risks, but ensured an academic focus was kept throughout. Reflexivity demands that the researcher relinquishes a certain level of control within the research process, as a way of enabling the voices of the participants to be heard, for as Dunier (2006) argues participants in research should 'become authors of their own lives' and in doing so should experience some dignity within the research process.

This is a view echoed by Becker (1967): we focus too much on questions whose answers show that the supposed deviant is morally in the right and the ordinary citizen morally in the wrong, (1967: 240). It was therefore wholly appropriate for black men who have been rendered invisible in many research studies not only to voice to their understanding of desistance, but to give a prisoner/ex-prisoner minority perspective, (Franklin 1997, Phillips and Bowling 2003). Therefore, the reflexive aspect of the research acted as a barometer designed to identify the on-going conflict between the objective and subjective aspects of the research.

Frequently the view has been expressed that occupying a ‘space’ where the individual does not have to defend their cultural perspectives, ‘linguistic codes’ or expressions of ‘blackness’, becomes a liberating factor within the interview process. Eight key elements were identified in my process as an interviewer. These elements were predicated on the notion that operating as with an ‘insider position’, my own sense of identification as a black man, would be important here. Those elements being:

1. **Connectivity** – My understanding of black/street vernacular enabled me to gain access to both the cultural and linguistic aspects of those black men being interviewed
2. **Perception** – My ‘rite of passage’ was rooted in the perception that those who I interviewed had of my politics, knowledge of black history, culture, and blackness. In doing so I gained a level of credibility that encouraged and increased the motivation to be interviewed.
3. **Mediation**- Based on my ability to gain credibility then the exchange of ideas felt less of a scientific process and one where the individuals being interviewed ‘told their stories’ in a relaxed and non threatening way.
4. **Negotiation**- Throughout the interviews there was a sense of on-going negotiation. Once again, the credibility I had gained, made negotiation that much easier. There were revelations that at times were private, painful, and awkward. Accommodating those who were interviewed was central to the process and exchange between interviewer and interviewee.
5. **Exchange**- There were times when those interviewed wanted to ask me questions. This tended to take place either before the interview started or directly after.  
The process research was respected but for many of those interviewed it was the first time they had been interviewed by a black person. As their curiosity was aroused they felt comfortable enough to ask me questions also.
6. **Discharge**- At times their views came out in a range of emotive ways. When telling their stories, there was at times some powerful things expressed that at times resulted in a few tears, angry outbursts, or long silences.

7. **Revelation**- When telling their truth's they became very vulnerable, which at times was hard to deal with, as I had to remain in interview mode. Keeping myself together was also an important part of reassuring them that it was a safe space to let out the deep feelings and strong emotions that came to the surface.
8. **Closure** – In the debriefing that followed each interview it was important to bring closure to the interview. Sometimes a small prayer would have been said, a hug may have taken place, or a few moments spent in silent contemplation.

Each one of the eight elements will invariably involve some aspect of value judgment rooted in a context that will reveal aspects of the researchers social, cultural, and political understandings. However, access to communities who have traditionally been marginalised or who feel subordinate will require a flexible approach that validates the difficulties that can be encountered when undergoing a positive experience. This position also highlights the importance of ethical considerations when involved in doing this type of research.

### 3.5 Ethics

The ethical considerations that underpinned this research were drawn from the BSC/BSA Ethical Principles and Birmingham City University Ethical Standards. Twelve areas were particularly important:

1. Compliance with the law – the work undertaken in the prison environment paid attention to safety and security. Any individual wishing to work with a prison is required to obtain security clearance. Accessing participants in the community also required a risk assessment to ensure the safety of the interviewer, as well as the participant. Prior contacts established over many years were used to obtain access to the subjects of the research inquiry.
2. Interviews in HMP Grendon required careful handling and needed to be coordinated in conjunction with the prison authorities to ensure that the interviews did not breach prison security. All steps were taken to ensure the prison would not censor the interview process.

3. The rights of research participants were negotiated and brokered throughout the field research for this thesis. Participation, wherever possible, was based on freely given, informed consent.
4. All of those involved were given a release form (see Appendices) regarding participating in the study. The release form contained relevant information about the responsibilities of both the researcher and participant. To reduce the harm to participants and the protection of their victim's careful consideration was given to confidentiality and anonymity through the use of pseudonyms.
5. Wherever possible it was agreed to include research participants in the dissemination of research findings. In HMP Grendon it was agreed that on completion of the study, a follow up meeting would be arranged to share the findings with those who took part. This was carried out in conjunction with HMP Grendon. In relation to the communities in both the UK and US, the possible on-line publication of the thesis would provide an opportunity for the participants to receive the research findings.
6. As the research focussed on the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process, care was taken to ensure that participants did not glorify the impact of their crimes on their victims.
7. Prisons can play a significant role in enhancing or hindering the research process dependent on a whole range of variables, such as restricting prisoner's access to the research process, security issues, and prisoner's visits by family and legal representation, etc. To keep the amount of restrictions placed on the research to a minimum it was important to keep the liaison and communication with the prisons as on-going throughout the duration of the process.
8. Likewise, operating in the community can throw up a whole series of ethical issues, such as personal security, familiarity with the subjects of the inquiry, occupying community spaces, etc. To keep the amount of restrictions placed on the research to a minimum it was important to constantly remind the research subjects about the work itself. The importance of this position is in the recognition that community based research does not have the level of security and structure when conducting interviews. However, in the interest of keeping the continuity of the process, it was important to create similar conditions to those undertaken in HMP Grendon.

9. Working in Baltimore required some additional ethical considerations in relation to access to participants, linguistic variations, combined with the experience of working with an overseas researcher. Another critical factor was ensuring that in environments where personal safety was an issue, there was appropriate support throughout.
10. Data storage and archiving complied with the requirements of Data Protection and best practice on confidentiality.
11. It was agreed with all participants in the research that the data gathered would solely be used for the purposes of the thesis and any other uses would have to be negotiated subject to the publication requirements.
12. Finally, a supervisory team advised and guided any arising difficulties within the research process.

Establishing the ethical codes provided important boundaries for both the researcher and those involved as participants. The ethics also locates itself within the type of methods chose to conduct the research. In this case qualitative research was being used. Unlike statistical research the protection of the participants from being harmed, combined with trying to ensure the researcher acts in the best interest of the research, is always a topic for discussion. Broadly speaking, two types of research methodologies dominate debates in criminological inquiry: 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' methods. Both methods require different approaches to acquire data. Therefore, the choice of the methodology that is used should be guided by the research questions and hypotheses that are being examined or developed. Quantitative methods are rooted in the scientific method that is derived from the physical and natural sciences. These methods are objective, formal, (Creswell, 1994). Using quantitative methods, values are removed from the research process, (Babbie, 2002). One of the strengths of quantitative research is the transparency that comes from the methods that are used to arrive at the findings. Quantitative methods capture and use numbers, (Babbie, 2002).

Qualitative methods on the other hand try to develop theories rather than test them. And use the language of the subject to provide the understanding and not the quantity of the subjects. Qualitative methods also allow the researcher to become part of the study by shortening the distance between him or herself and the research subject. One of the biggest conflicts between the two methods is that of reliability. Reliability is the consistency of a result over time (Babbie, 2002). The use of a quantitative method is more likely to generate results that are consistent over time—reliable, as a result of the controlled environment and the standardization that may arise from standardization in testing. Bryman (1988) argues that sometimes quantitative and qualitative may appear at odds with each other, when the data deriving from the two types of research appear to clash. Chilsa (2012) on the other hand argues that all research methodologies should centre on the concerns and worldviews of the research subjects so that they understand themselves through their own assumptions and perspectives.

Mills (1959) so too sees that whatever methodology is used the researcher should be a good craftsman: In doing so, Mills argues that researchers should avoid any rigid set of procedures and seek to develop and to use the sociological imagination. Mills feels that the conventions of research methods can limit envisioning ways of know and seeing that will contest conventional wisdom. Likewise, Goffman (1959) argues during the period in which the individual is in the immediate presence of the others, few events may occur which directly provide the others with the conclusive information they will need if they are to direct wisely their own activity. Denzin (2010) argues that mixed methods are important inasmuch as they assist the researcher to confront and work through the epistemological, methodological and ethical stance toward critical inquiry each generation must offer its responses to current and past criticisms.

Agnew (2011) maintains it is difficult to accurately measure this reality, particularly since individual reports of it are biased for several reasons. Some progress, however, has been made in developing 'reduced-bias' measures of this reality by using a mixed methods approach. Trahan (2010) argues that quantitative findings can give precision to qualitative data (see also Hanson et al., 2005). However, in light of the absence of available qualitative data to incorporate into a mixed methods approach to the study, it was decided to use privilege the voices of a small number of black men, as a way of laying the groundwork for further and large studies that would involve quantitative methods of inquiry. Again, in qualitative research conducting interviews is the vehicle by which data is gathered. When working with participants deemed 'high risk' or 'hard to access' requires significant skill and management if the data is to be gathered correctly in preparation for analysis.

### **3.6 Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were used throughout to collect the life histories on a range of themes, such as: childhood memories; involvement in crime; black masculinities; and understandings of the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process. In all three sites interviews were then conducted over a period of weeks, subject to the availability of the participants. In saying that interviews in HMP Grendon were conducted within a set time frame according to the rules laid down by the prison itself. As the interviews were about gathering the stories from the participants this situation did not have any bearing on the outcomes, but did reveal a discontinuity in relation to researching in 3 different sites and differing time spans.

All of those interviewed would be classified as individuals who had terminated their offending and represented a wide spectrum of offending behaviour: robbery; gangs; drugs; etc. The rights of the research participants were constantly re-negotiated and brokered throughout the research process as it was vital that community participants had some level of control within the research process. Each participant was interviewed separately at a venue of their choice (except HMP Grendon) and issues pertaining to confidentiality were also discussed and agreed. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour in duration. The use of a micro recorder at times became problematic. This was on account of previous experiences of being recorded whilst coming into contact with the criminal justice system. Care and sensitivity had to operate at all times. All the identities of participants in the research were kept hidden in the text, but for ease of reference they have been identified by a randomly chosen letters, even if some participants felt comfortable with being identified. Special permission needed to be granted to HMP Grendon to allow me to bring a recorder into the prison, which at times presented problems. Namely, the equipment including batteries would have to be checked each day. If for any reason the amount of batteries or ancillary equipment differed, there would be additional restrictions placed on the interview process. In itself it wasn't a problem, but if failure to gain access to the participants because of equipment failure had occurred, it would have severely hampered the overall process. Central to all of the interviews was in the creation of a 'safe space' here they felt free to share their experiences away from the observation of others. Especially in the case of prisoners at HMP Grendon.

### 3.6.1 Safe Space

Creating a 'safe space' for black men to talk freely about their understandings of the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process of desistance was designed to make the process open and transparent. Spence (2010) sees this 'safe space' as, serving an important function where black men do not have to defend their racial existence or humanity, (Spence 2010: 68). Many of those interviewed expressed reservations about working with 'insensitive researchers' based on previous experiences of being 'researched on' on numerous occasions. They expressed the importance of having a researcher who came from a similar background to their own. Gunarathum (2003) argues that the race of the interviewer and the space where the interview takes place can have a significant impact on the levels of openness and honesty of the research process.

Of note, unlike prison, the community is a place full of distractions. There was never a perfect place to interview, as well the nature of participants who at times would turn up late, express doubts, or struggle with their confidence throughout. Overall, the participants expressed appreciation with the approach taken. It was also very evident that black men who have been to prison and have re-entered the community needed a similar 'safe space' to voice and share their experiences, free from the judgement and suspicion. During the research process the participants who were being interviewed expressed a desire for the researcher to be sensitive towards their racial and cultural identity. The term used by both community participants and the prisoners to describe this type of interaction was 'keepin' it real'.

### **3.6.2 Keepin' it real**

Not only did 'keepin' it real' create and build trust, but also it validated these black men's sense of worth and boosted their self-esteem. In spite of the relative safety of HMP Grendon the occupation of space free from racialised judgements was an important consideration for all of those who took part in the research. In general the prisoners and ex-prisoners who took part in the research expressed the view that their lived experience in prison was rooted in a lack of trust, where most people (prison officers, ancillary staff, and criminal justice professionals) 'didn't keep it real'. They further argued that trust was something conspicuously absent within the prison regime and post release services itself, based on the lack of acknowledgment of their cultural identity. The lack of culturally competent services for black men in the research has implications for desistance as a whole, (Brookes, et.al, 2012). A critical point of reflection was in how the interviews started and concluded. It was important that the participants felt the way things were conducted met their own aspirations regarding how research with them is conducted.

### **3.6.3 Briefing and Debriefing**

All interviews started with a 'briefing' session and concluded with a 'debriefing session'. Both sessions were invaluable in raising and addressing any additional concerns. Participants further expressed the view that they had little space to address common issues, for fear of being seen as deviant and subversive and welcomed the approach taken. Many participants in the research expressed the view that the negation of race, ethnicity and culture whilst incarcerated brought out a range of adverse responses whilst being locked up.

Being acknowledged as ‘just men’ throughout the research process, not tied to issues of their ‘racial and cultural’ identities was seen as important by all participants, as they felt ‘humanised’ by the process. Similarly, many participants expressed the frustration of being labeled a ‘black ex-offender’ and felt this description was a continuing barrier in the journey towards desistance on account of not being treated fairly in areas such as education, training, or employment. It was expressed that in previous encounters with researchers there were no briefing and debriefing sessions, that considered arising distress that may have been triggered as a consequence of other issues being triggered off in the process. In the debriefing a significant question recurred. Namely, that of analysing their testimonies is important here. Giving reassurance that their testimonies would not be adapted, watered down, or manipulated meant using an approach that did justice to those concerns. In this case it was decided to use ‘grounded theorising’ as the instrument for the initial analysis.

#### **3.6.4 Grounded Theory**

All the interviews were transcribed and analysed using an ‘adapted form’ of ‘grounded theory’, (Strauss and Corbin, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed, 2007; Charmaz 2006). Grounded theory mean theory is derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis, and eventual theory stand in close relationship to one another, (Strauss & Corbin, 1998:13). The key components to Grounded Theory are:

1. Build rather than test theory.
2. Provide researchers with analytic tools for handling masses of raw data.
3. Help analysts to consider alternative meanings of phenomena.

4. Be systematic and creative simultaneously.
5. Identify, develop, and relate the concepts that are the building blocks of theory.

Once the data had been gathered, they were coded. Saldana (2009) argues a code in qualitative inquiry is a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing, or evocative attribute to the language of the data. Although there was software available to make the job easier, the route chosen was doing it the old fashioned way. This involved hours of painstaking work where categories were grouped and regrouped. The act of coding required me to wear my own researcher's analytic lens, where the interpretation depended on what type of filter covered the lens from which I was viewing. There was also a significant amount of preliminary jotting and the emergence of many analytic memos as additional thoughts and feelings sprung to mind.

The cumulative impact of this approach generated so many code categories that emerged in Birmingham and Baltimore USA, that I decided to use 'theoretical sampling' to complete the 'data gathering' that would strengthen the previous grounded theorising. Using theoretical sampling, a new set of questions emerged. It is important to state here that the theoretical sampling process cannot be planned before starting the analysis, and specific sampling decisions were made during the research process. Though statistical sampling aims to obtain accurate evidence on distributions, theoretical sampling aims to discover new categories and their properties to allow a theory to emerge.

When categories are saturated, the theoretical sampling process is completed; (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The logic of theoretical sampling emerges from the idea that the researcher develops a theory about a substantive area through the sampling process, (Locke, 2001). Eventually, the data gathering and analysis was complete, but as stated previously there were some challenges along the way which placed some level of strain and limitations on the overall study itself.

### **3.7 Limitations of the study**

‘Epistemology’ deals with the issue of knowledge and specifically who can be a knower (Tuli, 2010). Whereas ‘ontology’ deals with existence of and relationship between different aspects of society, actors, cultural norms, and social structures. In relation to the research there were significant challenges that emerged in relation to both epistemological and ontological concerns.

Those concerns being:

1. How did participants understand being black, male, and in relation to the racialisation of the criminal justice system? How would they apply that understanding to provide a true account of those insights?
2. How would I, as an insider researcher position myself in relationship to the epistemological concerns?
3. How much would my own reflexivity reveal ontological flaws within the process?
4. How were the standards of ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’ adhered to in relation to the study of the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process?

The reliability of the research was relative to the scope of the study. In the context of the aims of the research, the qualitative relationship between researcher/researched, in this case, provided a reasonable level of reliability, based on the subject matter, and methods used. However, as was stated previously, the research could not claim anything more substantive until a wider project is undertaken. If validity is rooted in notions of a 'truth', then the findings of the research were quite valid. To pathologise the truth by proclaiming a single version of events is 'real' and 'valid' is a flawed argument. The research quite clearly did not represent a huge constituency, but the collective 'counter narrative' did present a bundle of 'self truths', which in themselves are important.

However, to make any significant valid claims to the study of the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process, the research would have to be wider ranging, include more participants, and adopts methods and methodologies that would create a stronger validity within its findings. Here, I have tried to address some of my concerns by presenting an extract of my 'reflexive diary'. The purpose of this extract is to locate my own thoughts and feelings throughout aspects of the process. The objective here is not to try and justify my own level of subjectivity, but to reveal the difficulties of achieving objectivity, thus evidencing my claims that objectivity in this type of research is not possible. What is possible is the researcher's account for any level of subjectivity that occurs during the research.

### 3.7.1 Extract from my reflexive diary - Field Notes (Baltimore)

Sword (1999) argues that some qualitative investigators often do not acknowledge how among other things, their own background, gender, social class, ethnicity, subjective values, and beliefs affect the emergent construction of reality. Mertens (2007) so too argues all researchers should be cognizant of the philosophical and political assumptions that guide their work. For many of the black men in the research, negative experiences of incarceration had also damaged the confidence they had in a world where their views have been distorted in the name of criminal justice research. Creating an environment that was safe and relaxing was a crucial part of the dialogue with black men. The first tests I encountered were all about me developing ‘credibility’.

#### ***Credibility***

*I see myself as a critical researcher. By critical researcher I mean that I position myself in relation to research that is connected to social, political, and cultural transformation and change. Being grilled about my cultural awareness, black politics, and connection to the ‘streets’ was all part of my initiation into the world of black men in both prison and the community. Researching those who live in the same community or share a common cultural heritage can create its own pressure, as working on your objectivity is testing at the best of times. However, every researcher researching their passion will experience that difficulty. It’s in the management and handling of it that counts. All the men I talked to had a story to tell, but I tried not to let my personal feelings get in the way. However, there were times I did feel attached to the experience of those who looked like me, but were in a different zone. The meetings, interviews, and encounters, made me feel at times that I was being interrogated. Many of those in prison and the community would hurl questions at me, trying to assert an overt physical presence to see if I would squirm, or breakdown. I always made my position clear and gave a roll call of my work in prisons in order to be given some credibility.*

*The key to gaining access to their lives was through my own real lived experiences, which like theirs has also been fraught with danger and fear, although in my case not because of a criminal lifestyle. Another factor was my implicit knowledge of the world from which they came. My powers of persuasion, reasoned argument, and negotiation had to be honest and truthful. I had to continually deliver on promises made; turning up on time, making sure breaks were regular, etc. Failure to do this and you will lose respect and that would have been a disaster. There were times when inmates who were angry that I was out and they were in challenged me. I recognised the line between us was so thin, and part of society's on-going marginalisation of black and mixed race men. Deep down inside I knew that I could be the next person coming through those gates. However I also knew that it was important for my own sanity, to detach myself from the work once I had gone home. Imagine being an individual who has grown up in a system, which has encouraged you to rebel, react, and justify the criminal justice system by making you a prime candidate to scare society, and in the next breath you meet someone armed with ideas, which could help you? As the researcher it was difficult to be focussing, observing, and delving into their lives, when the process made me ask numerous questions about my own current reality. The overall experience was both collaborative and memorable. The dominant conservative research paradigms at times can be oppressive, disempowering, controlling, and can by default and design, marginalise a black researcher, whose 'blackness' is frequently contested, as a barrier towards researching the black community.*

### ***Blackness***

*Blackness' which is shorthand for 'black consciousness' centres on the understanding of the history of black oppression and subordination, combined with acquiring the psychic tools and ability to transcend its impacts. By using tactics of 'colour blindness', operating within a 'white privileged' position, any notion of 'blackness' is seen at times as lacking in objectivity, when researching the black community. Friere (1998) states 'I am not impartial or objective. This does not prevent me from holding always a rigorously ethical position (1998: 22). Becker (1967) further states 'the sociologist who favours officialdom will be spared the accusation of bias. (1967:243)*

*Both Becker and Friere locate their argument less within the research process, methodology, or analysis, and more in the politics of the research. So how does a researcher's expression of their 'blackness' gain or reduce the possibility of academic validation, when constantly having to confront 'whiteness' in both the research environment and the academy, that at times is oppressive and debilitating. The need therefore to develop a theoretical position that drew on the real lived experience of black men is important here. Unnever and Gabbidon (2011) locate their theory of African American Offending from a position that recognizes that the real lived experiences of blacks in the US as having a distinct and unique worldview based on a history of racial stratification. It is right therefore to assume that black men in the UK, who are disproportionately represented within the criminal justice system may also hold a unique worldview that should not be examined, looked at, or judged with a lens that does not locate it's framing within a socio-historical context that can be viewed with understanding and accuracy. It is therefore wholly appropriate to envision such a position in relation to black men's desistance. Therefore, what is my role as a researcher who on one hand is black and male, as well as being a criminologist?*

### ***Researcher role***

*On one hand I see my role as a researcher that recognises the need to contest and challenge the way the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems impacts on the desistance process, but I am also held captive by assumptions about me being an 'insider' researcher. For black men in UK and US prisons there has been a range of socio-historical experiences; slavery, colonization, race riots, etc, that will inform some of the worldview indirectly or directly both they and I possess. It is the duty of any researcher investigating black men to be sensitive to those issues. How then do I negotiate and balance my own interests and research agendas with those of my research participants, which may be inconsistent with or diverge from their own? In relation to notion of my blackness as a researcher, working with black men forces me to ask that question. Frequently black men demand that the person researching them have a level of 'blackness' that is both political and cultural as a way of gaining access to their hearts and minds.*

*It is also apparent that white researchers do not have to account for their 'whiteness' or demonstrate their understanding of 'blackness'. Therefore, if the researcher focuses purely on the research outcomes, without understanding that there are 'by-products' that emerge from that interaction, such as improved confidence, self-esteem, and improved self-concept, then something important is being lost. It could be argued that a researcher that possess notions of blackness with black men has more to offer subjects of inquiry who have traditionally felt powerless and subordinate to white researchers. I argue that offenders generating and creating their own agency involves confronting what society presents as both obstacles and aspirations. In doing so it is hoped that they will further interrogate the cultural context and examine and explore notions how to transcend society's limited expectations on their ability to desist. However, a white researcher with a hypothesis to test that centres of criminal activity, may not pick up or see the relevance of social, historical, and cultural factors that not only informed their criminal activity, but could enable it to terminate or desist.*

### ***Validation?***

*Where black researchers are involved in a fight for validation, not for the integrity of their abilities as researchers, but for the right to have a worldview that differs from their white counterparts, that is no less valid, just different. Much the same as feminist researchers, black researchers want freedom to operate within a context that validates notions of blackness, free from constantly having to defend themselves because of fears of the backlash coming from white academics. Foregrounding the question centring on blackness and the researcher is valid and important, to those who feel excluded, marginalised, and oppressed, as a consequence of taking a stand in relation to my 'blackness'. Therefore, I see my role as a critical researcher, who happens to be black, to make visible, denied or marginalised subjects, talk back, challenge, contest, and problematise, dominant representations, and assumptions made about them.*

***Whose voice is being privileged?***

*The privileging of desistance narratives from black men is not to promote the idea of a single definition of what it is to be black, male, and a desister or non desister. It is about engaging with a set of differences that are shaped by a range of situations, context, and experiences, race being one such issue. Black men's desistance in its construction and articulation does not represent an absolute truth, merely 'truthful according to the participants recounting. It also recognises there is no one version of the self but many self's. It is to this end that the role of the researcher is to enable and support the narrative of the individual as a diverse, complex, and three dimensional individual. When interviewing black men there is always a recurring event that has become part of the ritualisation with the research process. Namely, black men thank me for taking time out to listen to their views in an open and non judgemental way. They frequently expressed the view that they felt comfortable with the lack of bias in the pre-discussion and debriefing sessions. This suggests that safety for black men in the interview process is not just a case of signing a release form or having time out of their cell, but there are other considerations taking place. The theoretical context for my racialised positionality as a researcher is a 'counter narrative' that at times has to speak in opposition to the so-called 'majoritarian narrative', of so called white privilege, colour-blindness, and flawed black expectations and oppression within academia. Therefore it is wholly appropriate for me as a black man to be comfortable by possessing or and engaging with my own racial and cultural knowledge about myself, the community I come from, and the subject of the inquiry. Seldom is there a questioning if white men can research white men, but the continual battle I undergo where justifying my desire to research those who look like me, takes up energy I could better spend on my work.*

The research took a 'critical' position operating with a certain level of subjectivity, based on the connection to, and location with, the subjects of the inquiry. This position would be referred to as the 'insider-outsider perspective'.

The next stage was to look at the framework for looking at the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process. After much deliberation and additional research, it was considered important to identify an approach that would validate the desire to give voice to black men, within a racialised criminal justice context. The instrument that was chosen was Critical Race Theory (CRT).

### **3.8 Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

This study used CRT to better understand notions of the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process. At the same time it used CRT as the basis of an analytical approach to processes of racialisation and gender. It was planned that CRT would be used as a way of enabling the naming of 'one's own reality' so as to legitimise and validate black men's understandings of the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process. CRT would provide a 'counter narrative' designed to challenge and contest the privileged position of white academics who have rendered a black perspective in these areas invisible. McAdams (1985) maintains that abstinence from criminal activity requires ex-offenders to make sense of their lives in the form of 'life story' or 'self-narrative', and sees the use of 'narrative' as a tool for both understanding and theorising the understanding and insights into racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process. As stated previously Grounded theorising provided a crucial framework from which to build a Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the form of a 'counter narrative', (Solorzano & Yosso 2002).

The outcomes of developing a ‘counter narrative’ of black men’s desistance will be discussed later in this thesis. Constant reflection on the process as a whole meant there were a range of issues that had arisen as by-products of the research and associated processes.

### **3.9 Matters arising**

#### **3.9.1 The Community – Birmingham (UK)**

Researching black men in the community required me to become absorbed in the lives of the subjects of the research. As such temporary relationships were formed between the researcher and the researched. This was at times difficult, but there was a successful exchange of ideas. As the participants from the community had encountered few researchers coming from a similar racialised background, there were some additional obstacles to overcome. Hence the importance of meeting, sifting, and selection of appropriate participants. My own sense of identity was what appeared to underlie issues centring on the complex relationship between researcher and subject. Recognising and establishing my own relationship and position in relation to the participants is similar to any researcher regardless of their racial identity. Researching with and within a community who historically have been marginalised and placed in a subordinate position by previous negative encounters with other researchers, it was understood beforehand, that resistance may emerge as a consequence of those previous encounters. As stated previously, the ‘insider’ position was quickly limited by the participant’s empathetic recognition of my role as a researcher and was a role that they did not want to breach.

### **3.9.2 HMP Grendon**

Working in TC differed from working in the ‘mainstream’ prison estate and creates a strange paradox. On the one hand the researcher engages in a process of investigation and undertakes interviews, whilst at the same time the prison regime observes the researcher at all times in the name of security. Access to participants was made easier by HMP Grendon’s coordination and support. Being in a controlled environment means being constantly aware and vigilant in relation to prison security. Prison interviewing in HMP Grendon was very stressful at times as there was little in the way of emotional support before, during, and after. Overall, there was a strong sense of satisfaction in the approach taken, although there were at times a smaller gap in terms of the emotional distance between the participants and myself. At times the harrowing nature of the stories caused me to question my own position in their lives.

### **3.9.3 The Community – Baltimore (US)**

Baltimore was at times challenging, frightening, and in some cases quite harrowing. Not being from Baltimore or being an African American, all had some level of impact in terms of gaining access, trust, and more importantly, credibility. On a street level, interactions were not in a controlled environment, whilst the opposite was true whilst working in HMP Grendon. Similarly, working on a street level on the streets of Baltimore meant that the researcher was scrutinised and viewed with suspicion and caution. Although that legacy did create some level of reactive resistance, overall, those who assisted in the brokerage, in relation to participants, enabled me to gain credibility quite quickly. There were occasions I was subjected to a series of tests, rituals, and ordeals to see if I was fit for purpose to conduct interviews in the community. Like any piece of work on a street level, there is an element of personal risk.

Using semi-structured interviews combined with urban ethnography were not only suitable methods, but necessary to access the participants who at times were living in precarious situations. It is also true that other forms of research may bring a different sensibility to the so-called mainstream research agenda, but the approach taken was both relevant and appropriate in light of the circumstances being faced. As stated previously there were many ethical dilemmas that needed to be addressed. Interestingly, it was when I was faced with dangerous situations that the 'ethical considerations' were called upon and tested by the participants themselves. Declaring my intentions when viewed with suspicion became a powerful way to share and validate my ethical standpoint. Working with black men in Baltimore was not a joyride, as it was often painful, unrewarding, and scary.

Much rested on my temperament, attitudes, and 'street knowledge'. Being a so-called 'good researcher' counted for nothing if there was little or no understanding of black men's social reality. Being black was also not a pre-requisite. It is the type of black person I am that mattered. Handling participants in difficult circumstances, and having a sense of honest commitment to representing the issues you're there to represent was at the core of gaining credibility in Baltimore's most dangerous neighbourhoods. However, prison and community outreach can at times be dependent on factors that are outside of the control and scope of the researcher. Using a semi-structured interview approach at times may have limited the amount of emotional attachment to the process but empathy with the situation of the participants was at times hard to escape. As the interviewees journeyed through the research they were at times interested in my own views on the subject. Familiarity with black men has its pros and cons. However important empathy may be it can cause some level of distraction.

How much that influenced the outcomes cannot be directly measured. It is a factor that could at times influence not what was said, but how some of the guys felt. In an area where there is little precedent regarding interviewing black men, there is no doubt things that can be done to improve or strengthen the methods used. It is evident that black men need a space to voice and share their experiences. Sensitivity must be key element in relation to the ethical considerations when accessing these testimonies. At all times openness and transparency were the values that inform the core component of the research if it is to be successful. The findings will highlight some significant and key meanings that will bring some new understandings towards the understanding the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process.

#### **3.9.4 Summary**

This chapter highlighted why the research operated from an interpretivist perspective and explained why it used CRT as the basis for the analytical approach to understanding the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process. It also highlighted some critical methodological issues pertaining to the researcher's reflexive account of his own journey contained within the research. Milner (2007) argues that researchers should be actively engaged, thoughtful, and forthright regarding tensions that can surface when conducting research where issues of race and culture are concerned. The aim of interpretative analysis is to explore in detail how participants make sense of their personal and social world. The approach involves detailed examination of their world; to explore personal experience and is concerned with personal perception. At the same time, it also emphasizes that the research exercise is a dynamic process with an active role for the researcher in that process.

Essentially, the researcher is trying to get close to the participant's world from an 'insider's perspective'. This perspective as I have argued depends on, and is complicated by, my own conceptions. In essence the participants are trying to make sense of their world; whilst at the same time researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world. Moreover, it concluded that researchers should possess or should pursue deeper racial and cultural knowledge about themselves and the community or people under study if the interpretative analysis concerning black men's desistance is to bear fruit.

Chapter Four now looks at the results/findings of the community strand of the research as a way of looking critically at what was said and how this responds to creating deeper insights and understandings of the impact of the racialisation of criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process for black men.

## **CHAPTER FOUR – RESULTS/FINDINGS – THE COMMUNITY**

### **4.1 Introduction**

It will be suggested in the findings of the research how black men articulate their own understanding and insights into the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process. These findings concretely countered persistent views made by white criminologists and gave rise to a narrative that was rarely smooth, uniform, or free from contradiction. In attempting to reveal a truth regarding black men's own insights, these findings have not been shaped by black men internalising the consciousness of white people. The findings in this thesis also highlight the impact of racialised social processes on the lives of many black men, which is partly responsible for pushing them towards criminal lifestyles, and ultimately places a restriction in the way they can desist from criminal behaviour.

### **4.2 Triangulation**

The results within this chapter have been 'triangulated' with two significant studies dealing with trajectories towards desistance. Triangulation refers to the use of more than one approach to the investigation of a research question. The type of triangulation used in this chapter is what Denzin (1970) refers to as 'data triangulation', which entails gathering data through several sampling strategies. Data is gathered at different times, in different situations, with a variety of people. Healy (2010) investigates the pathways to and from desistance, exploring the processes by which the individual and social context interacts within the desistance process. Secondly, Flynn (2010) examines the 'change process' in relation to desistance, and how it is affected by personal and social circumstances that are space and place specific.

The findings of this research have built on their work by exploring black men's insights and understandings into the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impacts on the desistance process.

### **4.3 Participants**

As stated previously this strand of the study involved 11 black men from the community drawn from across the West Midlands region. Although the participants in this section of the thesis would be defined as primary desisters, inasmuch they have had a period of time away from contact with the criminal justice system, several of those who identified themselves as current gang members are continuing to engage in criminal activity, but have yet to be arrested and sentenced for crimes committed.

- L is a 35 year old, black Briton, former gang member, has done several prison sentences.
- H is a 28 year old, black Briton, former gang member, has done several prison sentences.
- M is a 40 year, black Briton, former gang member, has done several prison sentences.
- R is a 41 year old, black Briton, former gang member, hasn't been to prison.
- J is a 25 year old, black Briton, former gang member, has been to prison several times
- P is 32 year old, black Briton, former gang member, has been to prison several times.
- D is 32 year old, black Briton, current gang member, has been to prison several times.
- K is 27 year old, black Briton, current gang member, has been to prison several times.
- C is a 31 year old, black Briton, former gang member, hasn't been to prison.
- N is a 29 year old, black Briton, former gang member, has been to prison several times
- S is a 26 year old, black Briton, former gang member, has been to prison several times.

### **4.4 Emergent Themes**

Using an adapted form of Grounded Theorising (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Corbin and Strauss 1998) the following themes emerged from the interviews:

- Lack of fathering
- Fatherhood
- Hyper - masculinity
- Gangs
- On road
- The system
- Towards desistance

#### **4.4.1 Lack of fathering**

‘Father Absence’ as the interviewees saw it was about the impact of growing up without a father in their lives. Many cited this absence as being directly linked to the problems they have encountered; their poor opinions of themselves; and, a cause of their involvement in gangs and criminal activity. Many felt they grew up in communities where they felt marginalised, undervalued and frustrated at their lack of social status by not having a father. Without proper guidance and support, their world view became distorted, leading them into both anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. The responsibility ultimately fell onto their mothers, who struggled with bringing sons to manhood, as articulated by ‘L’.

L                    Growing up as a boy in a so called ghetto it was hard for mum. Dad left when I was 4. I’m the first child so it was up to me to kind of be the man of the house. I felt like I had a lot on my shoulders.

'L' highlights how the absence of his father becomes the catalyst for the emergence of having to grow up too soon, bypassing his childhood. 'L's mission to 'be the man of the house' at such a young age thwarts a significant positive transition in his life course. Similarly with 'H' his father's absence at a young age pushes some young people to see crime, not as a personalised goal, but as a way of providing for himself what he feels his mother has failed to provide for him.

H                    At the age of 8 I first found myself in the police system for shoplifting. I then started stealing to buy all the good things that all the other kids had the latest trainers and other stuff coz my mum never had the money to buy all the latest gear.

'H' locates part of his motivation for involvement in crime as a consequence of not having the means of acquiring 'stuff' other children had. Maybe if his father had been around, this situation would not have arisen. 'H' takes on the role of a father figure before experiencing the benefits of having a childhood. Another aspect of the impact of a lack of fathering is highlighted by 'M' whose father had a history of imprisonment.

M                    My dad was always in and out of prison. I had to lie to people at school saying my dad's gone on holiday because I was too ashamed to say he was in jail.

'M's feelings of shame begin his journey towards involvement in crime from a young age.

M                    Maybe if my father was around, wasn't in prison, or stayed in touch, I might have made some different choices in my life.

'M' sees his father's pattern of behaviour as partly responsible for his own criminal choices, as the lack of developing a strong social bond with his father had consequences later in his life. Namely, it pushed him into a criminal lifestyle. Similarly, 'R' reflects on having to make choices that would have been best supported by his father, if he had been part of the household.

R                    I had to face the reality of the issue of my lack of fathering and how I would deal with it. You had to do what you had to do. Dad wasn't there, so you had to step up and get what you could, when you could. If crime was the way to do, then so be it. My Dad wasn't there; I needed stuff, so I needed to get it.

'R' sees his father's absence as a void that subsequently led him to get involved with anti-social behaviour and criminal activity at a young age to provide for his mother. 'J' on the other hand goes back a further generation and acknowledges that his father also suffered from father absence.

J                    My father never knew his father. I never really bonded with him as a child. I had a fearful respect for him, based on his size and status within the family, but never felt close to him. He shared very few of his life experiences with me.

He never sat me down for talks about boyhood, manhood, relationships, life goals, and so on. I feel cheated, afraid, excited and dejected. People say, “It’s never too late”, but sometimes I think it really is.

‘J’ is articulating a pattern of handed down ‘father absence’ that has left him feeling angry and carrying a burden of loss. ‘J’ clearly articulates the need for a father to show him things about how to navigate life, as well as giving unconditional love, none of which was present here. It is clear that father absence is a symptom of a deeper issue in relation to the establishment of security, guidance, and love that an experience of positive fathering can bring. For the black men interviewed, things have further been compounded by having to navigate themselves around a system that they deemed racist and unfair. Invariably, the impact of a lack of fathering has implications regarding their own parenting. As Roy (2006) argues, fatherhood improves human agency and gives meaning to black men’s lives. He further argues that the negative social context in which black fathers operate can result in increased criminality or gang related activity. This has significant implications for black men’s insights into the desistance process. The next section looks at the issue of fatherhood and its impacts on the lives of black men.

#### **4.4.2 Fatherhood**

A key theme that emerged was the impact that incarceration had on their children, as well as their ability to re-connect to their children as a father. A mixture of shame and embarrassment was underpinned by their reflections on the inability to provide for their families. ‘P’ highlights several difficulties in his role as a father, especially being an ex-prisoner, cutting off his past, moving into a predominantly white community, and having a mixed race son.

P                   It's not easy bringing up a mixed race son in a white community. Plus finding employment as a black man is not easy.

When you've been to prison you're not accepted for who you are, so it's hard to achieve your full potential and be a proper father.

Here, 'P' identifies the need to move away from his past, and identifies the struggle with trying to gain employment. In acknowledging himself as an ex-offender 'P' sees the raising of a mixed race son in a white community combined with the task shaping his son's identity clearly impacts on how he feels about his ability to be a 'proper father'. 'R' also illustrates how the 'prison code' creates a barrier to meaningful communication between fathers serving time.

R                   There was no one to discuss my problems within prison so I didn't discuss stuff about my kids as it is considered a weakness to express what you feel. Even on visits you don't really open up, so you keep stuff you're concerned about to yourself. In prison you have to lock your feelings about being a father deep inside. That's the case for lots of us when we're banged up

The inability to discuss parenting issues freely and openly is not specific to black men, but 'R' highlights how the 'prison code' of being 'tough' and 'desensitised', compounds the problems associated with being a prison parent, inside a system that is both restrictive and racialised.

‘R’ highlights that even when he had contact with his children whilst serving time, he tends to keep things to himself. Prison parenting clearly is distressing for both the prison parent and the child on account of not having the space to be open with each other. ‘H’ on the other hand has a supportive family network outside of the prison, whilst serving his sentence. ‘H’ reveals the importance of having a community connection that maintains a positive link with his children.

H                    My mother looked after my son when I was locked up, so I didn't have to rely on anybody for anything. I relied mainly on my family and other relatives. I suppose I was lucky in that respect. If it wasn't for my family I don't know what I would have done.

‘H’ highlights how having a supportive, extended family provided some respite from the separation a father goes through when incarcerated. ‘H’ had clearly benefited from having such support. ‘J’ on the other hand highlights another significant aspect of prison reality, namely parenting whilst locked up.

J                    I made sure they have full knowledge of drugs and gangs, warning them about the consequences. I taught them about the pitfalls I have faced and tell them what education is about and how you can get somewhere in life with the right qualifications. I also don't lie to my kids. I don't tell them everything, but I don't want them to think that I've been a great person, when I haven't. I want them to have a better chance than I did.

'J's emphasis on educating his children during visits demonstrates how he sees his responsibility as a parent, in spite of being locked up. 'J' also uses his own negative experiences of life as a tool for guidance to his children. The importance here is in the assumption that incarcerated men as fathers are 'feckless'. However, 'J' demonstrates that he did not abdicate all of his responsibilities as a father on account of being locked up. 'J' is clearly someone who sees his past transgressions as a tool for informing and educating his own children about the right and wrongs of life choices. It could be argued that 'J' is acting as a good father given his circumstances. Similarly, 'M' sees education as a key point of entry in terms of his parenting from prison. The importance here is that men like 'J' and 'M' do not excuse their past behavior and see their obligation to their children as a way of signposting them to make better choices than they did. These views would suggest that black men can act as fathers, even when they are physically unavailable to their children.

M                    When I was locked up I let my children know that a good education can lead to a successful life. I pointed out to my children all of those role models who have achieved status through education. I told my children they would be able to access the good things in life with the right education. I also told them that I screwed up my education and it landed me in trouble.

'M' also uses his past as a way of reinforcing the importance of education as a positive choice for his children.

Overall, the men who were interviewed saw sustained communication with their children, even if it became difficult, as both a way of still acting as a father, as well as providing a context that gave them a positive motivation as part of their trajectory towards desistance. Indeed the desire to become a better father was a motivating factor in the pursuit of terminating their offending behavior and criminal activity. In some respects this desire to be a father from a difficult position within a prison provided both aspiration and incentive to stay out of trouble. ‘D’ illustrates this point well.

D                    I had to put my own life on the back burner when it came to my children. I kept the contact and love flowing. I wrote to them and kept constant communication. I know it wasn’t the best way to do things, but it was better than nothing. I know certain men inside prison had no contact with their kids. I refused to go that way. Even though I was in prison, I didn’t want my kids thinking I didn’t care about them

‘D’ acknowledged the importance of staying in touch not just in terms of contact, but as a demonstration of his love for his children. He also demonstrates that strong parental bonds do not diminish whilst incarcerated. ‘K’ on the other hand focuses attention on being a black father, who is ensuring that his children are equipped with a strong sense of their ‘racial identity’.

K                    I would tell them that they must know where they are coming from and where they are going. Without it they will die from ignorance, as there is no balance in this biased world. I told them that black people have lived in the darkness for

too long. We need to know what contribution we have made to this world, expose the fraud, and replace it with balance and truth. I don't want white people telling lies to my kids, the way they did to me.

'K' sees the significance of trying to ensure his children not to succumb to notions of 'white superiority', and goes further by urging them to question things. It was very evident that the men in this strand of the research had strong desires to see their children succeed in spite of the barriers they faced as prisoners, and still face as ex-prisoners.

However, despite these positive desires they had for their children, the scope of this research does not address the wider issues of being a prison father and the emotional impact this had on their children. However, the next section addresses the issue of the relationship between being a father and an ex-offender who has returned to the streets, and suggests that in many cases that prison masculinities constructed whilst inside, is re-converted to 'hyper-masculinities' on re-entering the community on release, based on returning to an unchanged world that remains hostile to all returning prisoners.

#### **4.4.3 Hyper Masculinity**

A recurring feature of those interviewed was the connection made between being a father and reclaiming their status on the streets. In many cases their response to this situation was 'hyper-masculine' on account of having to revert back to a form of masculinity, as a way of regaining the status they had lost when going to prison.

The construction of an aggressive and militant form of masculine identity was seen as a way of gaining respect and status back on the streets. hooks (2003) takes the position that black men themselves must take a stronger position on challenging their hyper-masculine status. However, for those black men interviewed the ability to take a stronger position was constantly undermined by blocked opportunities, racism, and the pressure of being on the streets. An example is 'J' who has a strong sense of remorse and recognition that he never intended to get involved in crime.

J                    You want to know what made me what I am? My environment and most things in it were to blame. I never planned to be bad or end up as a gangster. So I don't have nothin' to lose. They treat me like shit then I'll give it back.

'J's response reveals a deep sense of anger and retribution. Sampson and Wilson (1995) argue strongly that urban inequality will invariably create militant responses from men like 'J'. Indeed, it is hard to see how men like 'J' can avoid constructing a hyper-masculine identity if they have no alternative ways of validating their manhood and further avoid continued involvement in crime. Chevannes (1999) too argues that the difficulties of cultivating a positive masculine identity for black men like 'J' is about countering a past that is continuously thwarted by inner city deprivation and a failing social infrastructure that renders black men subordinate to those structures that privileges white men. In contrast 'C' sees control as a variable that distinguishes those who are strong and those who are weak. He equates notions of control with being a 'real man'. 'C's view reveals a deeper challenge for black men. Namely, that of cultivating a different identity as a black man living in a white society, as 'C' reveals.

C                   It's frustrating at times because you like to be in control. I think every man or somebody that's on the journey to become a man would like to be responsible for their journey, responsible for the decisions that they make and the things that are not made for them. So I think it can be very frustrating and very stressful at times when someone's not in control. I like to be in control, so no one can fuck with me. If I have to hurt a man, I will.

How then do young black men like 'C' assume a healthy position in a society that systematically has relegated them and their aspirations to the margins of society create a new template for living? A significant feature in the construction of black hyper-masculinities is the need to be self-sufficient and not dependent on anyone, as illustrated by 'R'.

R                   So throughout me time I maintained don't do the crime if you are not going to get away with it and decision had to be made, so yes I had to fend for myself, look after myself especially when you come alongside older criminal heads.

'R' is trapped inside a world of self-imposed isolation where he has to fend for himself. The desire to fend for one's self comes as a consequence of having to adopt a survival mentality, in an environment that is not available to black men returning back to the community from prison. This position could fracture 'R's ability to build stronger and more cohesive social bonds within his family, the community, and in turn society. 'R's sense of social disorganization could have significant impact on his overall well-being if he operates from a single isolated individual as opposed to being part of a wider community.

‘H’ illustrates this point in reference to his isolation

H                    I can’t deal with the feelings attached to my emotions, the feelings of abandonment, of being let down, seeing the one you love over a table. So I block it out. Don’t think about it. If I think too much I get depressed. And I hate being depressed. It ain’t good to be that way. Makes you weak.

‘H’s notion of his self-concept highlights how desensitized he has become. It could be further argued that the pressure brought about by not having time to heal, or have the headspace to think positively for black men like ‘J’ may create the level of internal distress that results in projected anger, rage, and social conflict. Alternatively, ‘N’ counters notions of black hyper-masculinity by offering a different solution and cites the acquisition of a faith as a way forward.

N                    I was a bad man, didn’t care for no-one, but it didn’t get me anywhere. But I found God and that chilled me out. Emotionally, I am a lot stronger, more determined. Through that experience I have a greater bond and deeper understanding of God and the relationship with him being sincere and truthful towards other people is what has turned me around.

By developing a new and improved value system ‘N’ has not only changed his life around, but has reconfigured his masculine identity. Where it was once hyper masculine, it is now grounded in values that are not aggressive or violent. In effect by finding God, ‘N’ has become a better person and a responsible member of society.

Unlike 'N' who sees faith as a way forward, 'M' expresses the view that what he calls 'services' should incentivize black men away from being angry and negative.

M                    We need provisions and services that actually reflect what's happening within the community. Within the communities you've got churches, you've got gangs, you've got bad man's, you've got decent upright self-respect citizens, you've got academics, you've got professionals, you've got a diverse mix of different people within the services that they're providing, that's what they need.

'M' issues a stern warning for failure to address his concerns. He continues,

M                    If you don't provide us with proper things, we're going to kick off, big time. We're tired of watching everyone get things and we get left out. That's why some man's behave the way they do. I don't blame them. If you ain't treating me good and given me what I need then I'm gonna go on the rampage. Standard!

'M' reveals the impact of limited services available to him.

M                    The young people out there they need help and to me no-one is doing anything. They're just allowing young people to go out there and destroy their lives around drugs and everything that are out there. At the end of the day all this

time while the policy makers and politicians are sitting down and trying to decide what's best for the young people, they could actually be out there doing something to help. That's my final thoughts.

He further recognises the limitations on those services in being able to provide the whole solution and places some of his problems firmly at the feet of policy makers and politicians, with a stark warning at the end of it. 'M' and 'N' articulate the on-going internal struggles to be in control of their lives. Attaining manhood for black men is an active process, where they must continually penetrate barriers and overcome opposition in order to maintain a masculine posture that is not rendered subordinate by white men. 'K' returns back to his sense of racialised identity, as an explanation and justification for his hyper-masculine identity.

K                    Being a black man is all about struggle. What you've got to understand is that in this society and in this day and time, a lot of the things that happen to black people are negative. That's why we behave the way we do. Society already sees me as a bad man. So I might as well behave that way. I don't give a fuck.

'K's state of being emerges as a consequence of operating under the oppressive conditions of society where black men find themselves in situations where they have internalised negative masculine scripts, poor definitions of self, and inadequate coping styles. He further continues,

K                    I come from a smashed up background to tell the truth and if there is one thing that is going to make me feel whole and strong is to have someone love me for

who I am and that's it. I just need a chance to prove myself but no point being given a chance for someone expecting you to fall. I'd like to be given a chance for someone to really have faith in you and I'll prove that when you give me that chance yeah I'll take it no matter what.

'K' is part of an angry legion of black men who 'ring fence' space in their communities and will defend the right to occupy it by 'post code' designation. However, lingering in the subtext of his argument is a deeper desire to be given a chance and made to feel included and needed. On the flip side of this situation we have 'S' who, for one reason or another, does not want to be accessed or engage with structures he doesn't trust.

S           As black men we have so much pride and we got to be seen the ones to be the protectors and the gangsta. Yeah, I'm a gangsta. I'm not interested in that rehabilitation shit. It ain't worth it. Even when you get a job or go college, you're still seen as a black man and viewed with nuff suspicion. So if they don't like me, then I don't them. Simple as. You get me?

'S' rests his arguments of a self-fulfilling prophecy where he takes on the role he thinks society has prescribed for him. When asked about the term 'hard to reach', used by services who brand black men as big, bad, and dangerous, 'S' was scathing of the term.

S           I ain't hard to reach. My bredrins know where I am. The police know where I am. So how the fuck do they tell me I'm hard to reach. They turned me like me

into this, so it's their fault. To me, badness is a way of life. I enjoy it. It's better than having nothing to do. It's also a way in which I get respect.

'S' feels that the definition of 'hard to reach' is too simplistic, and used as a technique designed to remove any responsibility from those professionals or institutions who use it as a term almost as a throw away comment in meetings and public forums. 'S' also reveals his alternative life values that is a significant reason for his involvement in a gang. It is also apparent the importance 'S' feels of gaining respect 'by any means necessary'. It could be seen that 'S' is seduced by being 'bad in gang', as the alternative is to remain subordinate to a society that has rejected him. Katz (1988) argues people like 'S' embrace the seduction of criminality, as it gives them a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives. 'J' reveals how the inability to acquire positive values can have an adverse effect, resulting in more turmoil and even greater challenges to finding a gateway towards his eventual desistance.

J                    People in the community walk around like they're invincible; one of the things that we as black men don't talk about is pain. We talk about how we can deal with pain, what I'd like you to do just to kind of round up is just for a few moments to reflect on the times when you haven't been coping, how bad it feels, because this same youth listening, he doesn't know that you've cried or shed tears, or that you banged your fist on the wall, and I think what he wants to know, whether or not this experience affects you on that emotional level or you just become hard and you just don't feel it.

‘J’ talks about his pain of incarceration that despite its claim to rehabilitate, still favours of punitive approach. These interviewees at times found solace in the confines of street based extended family networks such as ‘gangs’ and ‘crews’. The lack of social involvement, the persistence of family breakdowns through father absence, and increasing nihilistic tendencies articulated by some interviewees created an almost religious connection to the streets and into a gang. This next section examines the issue of ‘gangs’ in relation and its impact on the desistance process.

#### 4.4.5 Gangs

Pinnock (1997) suggests that gangs provide more emotional support than dysfunctional families. He further suggests that racialised criminal justice systems pushes some black men to join gang gangs, and in doing so further pushes them away from envision a trajectory towards desistance. All of this is illustrated by ‘J’ and ‘M’.

J                    When you can’t get nothin’ as a black man in this society, you can roll with da manz dem and feel strong. Trus’ me blood, it’s a family ting. You feel me? Some of this gang shit is bullshit as I don’t like some of these geezers. But I don’t like hearing my bredrins gettin’ killed. I don’t like hearing the other side gets killed either but some of them fuck knows ain’t got no sense

M                    You have gang members who have nothing to do with drugs at all; they don’t take drugs or sell drugs so drugs don’t have nothing to do with a gang. Obviously there’ll be individuals in a gang who might use criminal activities to

get to their revenue, selling drugs, robbing banks, robbing old women or whatever you want to do to raise money, there will be gangs like that and each gang will have its different mentality of how they raise their money. For me I see the gang as filling in the gap left by my dad and not having a proper family.

‘J’ and ‘M’ see the gang as part of their lives, but they also highlight the futility of the losses that are encountered with such a risky lifestyle. It could be argued that if the gang becomes part of a normal socialisation for black men, then this position will obstruct any notions of contemplating a life free from crime. Gang culture also has historical roots across several generations that in itself highlights that gang affiliation is passed from one life course to another, creating a pattern, where the next generation inherits the previous generation’s gang legacy that further places a burden on the trajectory towards desistance. As he says:

R            They live after a reputation of people like me who were like the forefathers of badness. The challenge was always the older guys looking on us as the younger crew. People need to understand the history of gang culture in Birmingham, there were three stems of the roots and we were in the middle. I came back as a young man amongst older men and it was the first time that I was really close to older men and hearing their stories and their upbringing and I suppose I was analysing what they were saying.

Some of the interviewees not only saw the gang as an extension of their families, but a counter-cultural response to block opportunities. ‘J’, ‘M’, and ‘R’, had significant social aspirations, but felt they had little or no way of achieving them. Nowhere was this more demonstrated by occupying the streets, which in street vernacular is referred to as ‘on road’. The next section deals with ‘on road’ as a site where there is an intersection between black hyper-masculinities and gangs. It will further explain how the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems, not only impacts on the desistance process, but instead poses one of the greatest threats towards black men desisting from criminal activity.

#### 4.4.6 On road

‘J’ illustrates the ‘on road’ mind set that revolves around violence and respect.

J                    I had a couple of fights coz man’s think they try rob me, and shit like that coz I’m from Handsworth and I didn’t take anything lightly. I have got rushed a few times but I don’t have it. So it escalates and escalates. It’s hard escaping this bullshit but some man’s don’t make it better for themselves.

‘J’ sees ‘road life’ as an inescapable reality. For guys like ‘J’ the world in which he lives is full of fear and violence, which means he acquires ‘wisdom’, although not the sort that guide you through life, but rather ‘street wisdom’ designed to assist in navigating life on the streets. ‘C’ has a similar take on road life, but also sees it as a major challenge.

C                    Road life is hard when you're involved in it. Nuff people are on the road thing for different reasons. Some bout money, some for name, and some jus' trying to get by.

Although 'C' sees 'road life' as a difficult choice and highlights some of the motivations that attract those who get involved.

R                    To people on the road ting I would say are you prepared to go to jail, and if they feel like they ain't got any other options and you can handle jail.

'R' reveals a paradox in relation to being 'on road'. The desire not to go to prison is made all the more difficult knowing that you may have to defend yourself and your territory. 'R' also gives a word of caution and reaffirms the old maxim 'if you can't do the time, don't do the crime'. 'M' blames the streets for his situation and cites family breakdown as a motivating factor for his affiliation to the streets.

M                    I grew up in a ghetto area, what I would call inner city. I grew up in a family where I experienced domestic violence by my dad on my mum. So I grew up vex and angry. I used to kick off and then I found my crew. I suppose in some respects I repeated the cycle.

Roy (2006) points out that if we are to engage in a serious discussion about young black men and their activity in gangs, we must interrogate the relationship they have with their own fathers.

Roy further sees that the inability to look at conflict across the generations as limiting the overall understanding of why young black men join gangs. The importance here is to acknowledge that joining a gang may be informed by other background factors. Agnew (2006) refers to these background factors as 'storyline's. Storylines, Agnew argues, builds a stronger picture of criminality if background factors are taken into consideration. 'J' cites the background factors of growing up black and being from the inner city as partly responsible for his connection to the streets.

J                    Growing up as a black youth in the inner city I had bredrin's from all about all the inner cities are interlinked so we all had things coverage and we all use to go around with each other and face the same issues so when a man was doing his thing, a man was doing it with his crew anyway.

'J' sheds light on the social bonds he has generated whilst being 'on road'. In essence he has created a new, extended family, which is the converse of a loving family. 'J's family operates with menace. The importance here is those who engage with the 'code of the streets' and 'on road' also find important personal connections that they may not have with their family or community. 'W' illustrates this point and sees 'on road' as more of a street university, where you learn the rules of survival.

W                    Where we live is where its drug infested, prostitutes are about the place, crime was high, no jobs, so what do you expect, what are we going to get involved in. It not like there's college for us to go to, there's nothing for us to do.

‘W’ offers a sad insight into the social reality that some black men ‘on road’ face. Namely, the routes to creating a meaningful life are blocked and not available to them. ‘L’ also highlights that by being ‘on road’ there is a significant disconnect between black men in prison and the community they return back to.

L                    Ignorance is the main barrier to community involvement in prison and to integration of ex-offenders into the community.

There should be more opportunities for dialogue and rapport with the community, and for skills development by prisoners. How else are we supposed to not go back into the badness?

‘L’ illustrates how a lack of awareness in relation to community signposting can thwart the journey towards desistance and enhance further involvement with gangs. By returning to a restricted environment, facing oppressive forces such as gang culture, and being constantly exposed to a crumbling inner city infrastructure, the level of social disorganisation will only increase the propensity towards continuing involvement in gangs, (Sampson & Wilson (1995). As illustrated by ‘M’ limited community engagement and weak social bonds inhibits the possible trajectory towards desistance on account of not having the tools to navigate the pathways towards desistance.

M                    More contact between the wider community, family members and prisoners within the prison environment could deter others from offending; family ties

are broken up by placement in prisons far from home. So I have to depend on the gang for survival.

Here 'M' also alludes to another important issue, that when family ties break down, the alternative family kicks in. In this case that alternative family is 'a gang', which confirms Pinnock's (1997) notion of a replacement family. 'D' sees the need to want to reconnect to the community as a way of moving towards his desire to desist. He is aware of how his label as a gang member is an inhibiting factor in his desire to desist.

D                    More opportunities for face-to-face contact between community members and prisoners within the prison. If I saw people from the community I wouldn't mind, but when you're seen as a gang member, people get frightened and don't want to approach you.

Being a gang member is a complex issue which has no easy solution. Those interviewed presented a range of testimonies and issues that form a narrative that suggest there is a need for further investigation. The cumulative impact of negative experiences faced by black men re-entering the community would suggest that there may be some structural forces at work here. It is questionable that agency alone for black men in relation to a social structure that is racist, can guide them successfully towards desistance pathways. This concluding section therefore looks at the role of the system in relation to black men's desistance.

#### 4.4.7 The System

It was evident that the level of frustration with the system, blocked opportunities, and restricted access brought out a range of hostile responses. 'L' illustrates the difficulties he faces when with the cumulative impact of the criminal justice system and talks about his racialised identity as a factor that makes it worse for him.

L. I feel like I've been kidnapped by the system. I feel held down by the system. The benefit system to the court system probation system prison system all one big system and I now feel that I will never get out the system. I've come to know this you cannot beat the system. I also realise as a black man it's going to be worse for me than it is for white guys.

'L' possessed a strong awareness of his situation and located the reality of his existence firmly at the feet of the way the racialised aspects of the criminal justice system is unfair. 'L's sense of helplessness is a clear indicator that creates a significant barrier in his trajectory towards his desistance. Likewise, 'D' expressed a view that locates his reality in a 'liminal' context. By liminal, he feels dislocated from the community and trapped in the prison environment.

D I get mad angry and frustrated to know that the system is a trap. They say jail is for rehabilitation, so why people always come back and how dare they tell us who we can and can't talk to. Where we can and can't go. I am a proud black man, but in prison I am made to feel like I'm rubbish. I get shit from white screws and racist inmates.

'D's story is one of anger and despair and here his racialised identity comes into the frame, where he sees his oppression as having a direct impact on his racial pride. 'P' also saw the system as the enemy but chose to be defiant as a way of managing the situation.

P                    The system is getting away with liberties. Until we get together and fight the system we can't make it a better place for our kids to be. As black people we've always had to fight for our rights. This is no different. I can't let white people take away my freedom to be human.

The issue of 'P's racialised identity has become a rallying cry from which to attack the system directly. R' in contrast suggests that taking on the system is futile and confusing.

R                    I am a black youth being controlled by the system, told the wrong information, and told no information whatsoever to keep me muddled up so I can't make any concrete decisions about anything. So what's the point? They win either way. I don't have the energy to fight it. I just play fool to catch wise.

If 'R' accepts his subordination as inevitable it is hard to see how he can plot a pathway towards desistance, as his agency will be dependent on the structure that oppresses him. 'J' pushed 'R's point further by seeing the system as wilfully operating to fail him, and drew on the analogy of slavery to illustrate his point

J                    This system is set up for us to fail. Come on, you think people who had slaves back in the day ever goin' to see us equal as them. I'm a black man in a white man's system. If they can't get you one way, they will get you another.

'J's almost fatalistic viewpoint situates his plight in the context of slavery. In short he feels he is still enslaved. A case of damned if you do, damned if you don't, a point made by both 'R' and 'J'. 'J' also seemed resigned to the fact that being enslaved is inevitable, but gave a warning to his oppressors.

J                    We're still slaves. Some of us are house slaves, whilst others are in the field plotting to escape. I'm a field slave. I will burn the masters' house with him and all the other slaves if I got the chance.

'J's desire to get retribution on the system suggests that desistance for black men in a white society is impeded based on the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems. So is desistance inside a racist system a realistic consideration for some black men? 'C' illustrates this point with a gesture that clearly is fatalistic.

C                    I think these systems have made me more aware of the impact on black youths. Fuck the system, the government doesn't do anything for us, this is how we're living, get rich or die trying.

‘C’ clearly had arrived at a point of no return where he saw the options for him are limited, and which have forced him to adopt a reactionary position that could land him back in prison. ‘D’ on the other hand is slightly more reflective and sees the navigation of black men in the system as a need to acquire a raised awareness towards the workings of the system itself.

D                    For me I think it’s all about awareness and going through the system and seeing how these systems affect black men. I’m at a stage of how do I work with that inside and outside of the system. If not I’m gonna kick off, but I’m kinda frustrated with the whole damn thing.

‘D’ highlights what Cohen (1958) refers to as ‘status frustration’ and desires to be compliant. But he also recognises he is frustrated and confused about where his future lies. ‘R’ extends ‘D’'s position by citing being ‘knocked back’ as the basis for his exclusion and subsequent offending behaviour.

R                    The enemy is definitely the system because the system gave me a blow. The system was the one that excluded me, was the one that wouldn’t express and give me opportunity to learn in a different way to other folks. I saw all the white kids being treated different from me, and that wasn’t fair.

‘R’ highlights how blocked opportunities leads to anger becoming a central focus, based on the cumulative deficits and negative encounters that they have experienced throughout his life.

He also recognised how his racialised identity differentiated his treatment from the white children around him. 'K' like 'R' noticed how he was treated differently and saw the system as having no respect for black men like him.

K                    The way I see it, society in general have got no respect for our kind. Anything that we do no matter if it's good or bad we still get criticised, you can't win. Being a black man has its benefits, but when it comes to the system its shit. We ain't got a cat in hells chance of making it through

'K's 'no way out' scenario seems like a common thread running through all the interviews reported on in this chapter.

#### **4.4.8 Towards Desistance**

Within this section it is evident that the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems does impact on the desistance process for black men. The difficulty here is that in spite of staying out of trouble, the continuing problems associated with re-entry, are compounded; housing, family re-connections, access to training/education, and other related restrictions. Therefore the following testimonies fall short of claiming that those interviewed have fully desisted. It is better to see them as harbouring the desire to desist. As illustrated by 'L',

L                    To me, it all about juggling. Don't get me wrong I ain't intending to go back to prison, but I've got to do what I've got to do. Some of it might not be legit, but if I keep my head down, then maybe something will turn up.

‘Juggling’ refers to a state of being where you have to do anything to survive. ‘H’ on the other hand sees building on his skills in prison as a way forward.

H                    There’s nothing out there for anyone. But I learnt some new skills in prison, so I’m going back into education. I’ve got some good people around me. I know the pitfalls, as I’ve fouled up before. I’m not going to say I ain’t going back, but I’ve got to stay focussed. I suppose be more like an athlete. Train myself to do well.

‘H’s insistence on being focussed is common throughout. Developing a discipline can also be attributed in part to the prison experience where there is a significant amount structure that converts some people into focussed individuals. This point is illustrated by ‘M’ who sees being an entrepreneur as a possible way forward.

M                    I’m gonna try my hand at business. I don’t want no handouts from no-one and I don’t really see the system giving me anything. I also know there’s a lot of people out there who want me to fail, so I’m going to prove them, all wrong. But being a black man who’s come out of prison and been in a gang. It’s not a good position to be in.

‘R’ on the other hand sees having a faith as significant enabling factors towards his desistance.

R For me, I've got my faith. I believe in God and no matter what happens that's the only system I'm accountable to. Being a black man in this society is hard. Going to prison is hard. Living in the inner city is hard. Life's hard. But if you got faith, you can overcome it. Martin Luther King did.

Unlike, 'R', 'J's strategy is a little more patchy, with no real plan. His casual acceptance of what will be, will be, suggests that he is taking each day at a time.

J For me, it's about how 'on road' pans out. I can do all the things to stay out of trouble, but when you've done what I've done, anything can happen. It's beyond my control. So I'll be okay until someone gives me reason to go back to the badness.

'P' is clearly intent on cutting off those things from his past that may block his progress, but he does recognise that they are all in a similar position as him, isolated with limited opportunities.

P Right now I'm trying to manage my freedom. I'm not sure about the future. I've got some good people around me, but I need to focus. Prison don't prepare you for coming back. So I'm still focussed on finding my way back. The problem is my old bredrins are still around. I'm trying to stay away from them, but they just like me.

'D' like 'P' recognises the need to think and act smart and expresses the view that he will not go back to prison.

D                    I'll do whatever I got to do to survive. If I can't get it one way, then I'll get it another. All I know is I ain't going back to prison. Need to think and act smarter.

However, without a clarity about his purpose in life, it is questionable how attainable 'P's aspiration is. 'K' is the only interviewee who sees the value of using education to move towards possible desistance.

K                    I wanna continue my studies and get more qualified. In the meantime I'm doing some volunteering, coz I don't have to deal with CRB checks and revealing my past. I'm trying to stay under the radar and keep out of trouble.

'K' sees the route towards his desistance rooted within going back into education, as a way of negotiating ways of operating his own agency towards his desistance. Similarly, 'C' and 'K' has found purpose and turned his experience into something meaningful and productive.

C.                    All I want to do is help young people not make the same mistakes. Prison has given me a purpose in life. I wanna make sure no more young people turn out like me. It's what gets me up in the morning and keeps me out of trouble.

N I'm trying to keep my head clear. I go down the gym, bang some weights, and focus on my music. If I work hard, maybe one day I'll make it. A lot of guys in the US have made it big and they were involved in crime. So if they can do it, so can I.

Whereas 'C''s motivation is to serve others, it is contrasted with 'N' who focuses attention on his own personal goals and aspires to be involved in the music industry. It is clearly evident that the stories in this section form the basis of a wider narrative that are constantly being restructured in the light of new events, because stories do not exist in a vacuum but are in effect shaped by lifelong personal, communal, and social narratives. We all have a basic need for story, for organising our experiences into tales of important happenings. In stories, our voices echo those of others in the world, and we evidence cultural membership both through our ways of crafting stories and through the very content of these stories. Our stories should not be looked upon as separate from real life, but as forming meaningful connections to that life. Therefore, how might black men construct a new story designed to replace their experiences of oppression with one of internal liberation and a new identity, free from racialised judgements? One that is fashioned through processes designed to bring a new identity and ultimately a commitment to a crime free life.

#### **4.5 Summary**

This chapter highlighted the complex nature of looking at the experiences of former incarcerated black men, who are constantly renegotiating the impacts of a racialised criminal justice system. Their collective narrative indicates a desire to desist, but the evidence is far from conclusive

based on the pervasive oppressive nature of the impacts of racialisation on the desistance process for black men. At times the systemic blockages leads to significant levels of distress and built up resentment. This is also contrasted by a general desire for black men not wanting to engage with the system on a range of levels. The level of anger, frustration, and defiance, coming from some of those interviewed has invariably led many of them to continue finding solace in the confines of their gang, whilst at the same time, trying to seek new ways to stay crime free. Mauer (1999) argues that without understanding the inequalities faced by black men in relation to incarceration and reentry, told in their own words, there can be no real justice. The pressure of expectation placed on black men coming from their families and the wider community on re-entry can be made worse as the racialisation of a 'social structure' can and does block access to meaningful and productive opportunities for black men.

This in turn leads to structural barriers that undermine the level of social organisation that is required to enable black men to successfully desist. It is suggested that by reconnecting to the streets on release, some black men use the 'structured action' of criminality to challenge existing social structures that exclude them, (Messerschmidt, 1997). This street gang is both hyper-masculine and nihilistic, meaning membership requires black men to possibly lose their lives in exchange for the gains from criminal activity and increased street status. Becoming a full member of the 'on road' community, black men are governed by the 'code of the streets', where respect, toughness, fearlessness, and loyalty, are the benchmarks for measuring the masculine resources black men have to possess in order to survive.

Black men who subscribe to this way of being justify their decision by citing that the available routes to becoming men are blocked, and therefore crime becomes a way out of their dilemma of accomplishing their duties as men, in spite of the risks involved. It is also probable that some black men may also be seduced by 'code of the streets' and 'on road', where they do draw some pleasure from outwitting the forces of law and order, alongside exercising control over those who try to stop them from doing so, (Katz 1999). Unfortunately, the engagement with the streets is short lived as many black men are further caught in criminal activity and go back to prison. Adjusting to life outside of prison; meeting old adversaries, combined with encountering numerous obstacles and barriers that emerge from his past life of criminality, makes desistance for many black men an awkward choice to pursue.

A case of damned if you do or damned if you don't. Therefore, the ability to successfully negotiate the challenges black men face will determine whether they continue the journey towards desistance or push them to recycle the old patterns of behaviour that will land them back inside. It is also important to understand the role of prison regimes in playing a greater role in equipping black men with the tools required to navigate the hurdle of re-entry back into the community, whilst they are locked up. It is clear that many black men would give up their previous identities as lawbreakers, if they perceived this identity to be unsatisfying, thus weakening their commitment to it. However, with the obstacles they face, giving up the previous identity feels like a risk, many are not prepared to take.

To promote a successful, positive return of black men to their home communities, we must first change their value systems in ways whilst in prison that will increase their appreciation for the challenges facing the communities they have affected and then connect them to real and meaningful opportunities to make a difference and affect positive change. It could be argued that when black men do propel themselves successfully towards desistance the response to the maintenance and enforcement of white privilege becomes part of the motivation for the sustainability of the subordination of black men. In essence black men who threaten the social order that protects the interest of white people must both contest and challenge their subordination at every turn. It is therefore incumbent of all criminal justice agencies to be consistent in reducing the amount of racialised processes that still privileges white men, to the detriment of black men. A further questioning about what it means to be a black man who has been to prison in a racialised society may be required here, as a form of 're-othering'. Where new and improved notions of 'self' may assist in countering the negative self-concepts imposed by white society. Mutua (2008) argues that black men are oppressed by gendered racism, because they are both black and men. She further argues that this gendered racism accounts for representations, or stereotypes, and practices directed toward black men. It may be that alternative sites may offer a new vantage point from which to view the issues outlined in this chapter.

It is against this backdrop that the next chapter aims to look at the role of the Therapeutic Community (TC) in prison and to assess what impetus, if any, it plays in creating a meaningful pathway towards transcending the impact on the desistance process in relation to the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems.

## **CHAPTER FIVE – RESULTS/FINDINGS – HMP GRENDON**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The results in this research have been triangulated with two significant studies dealing with the experiences of incarcerated black men. Wilkinson and Davidson's (2010) centre on a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) prisoner in-reach project based at HMP/YOI Doncaster, while Franklin and Franklin (2000) have developed a clinical model of the effects of racism on African American Males. As stated previously this strand of the study involved 11 black men from the community drawn from across the West Midlands region. Although the participants in this section of the thesis would not be defined as desisters on account of being incarcerated they have an important contribution to make regarding how prisons become a space that can operationalise their desistance.

### **5.2 Total Institutions**

This research project has built on these studies and attempts to broaden their findings by placing the narratives of black men at the heart of the analysis. Goffman (1961) suggested that when prisoners are placed in a 'total institution' such as a prison, the barrier between the inmate and the wider world marks the first attack on notions of self. For Goffman, 'total institutions' create and sustain a particular type of tension between the home world and the institutional world and use this persistent tension as strategic leverage in the management of men, (1961:23). This assertion has many implications for the penal system generally, and prison therapeutic communities specifically, in being able to meet BME residents' identity needs. Indeed at Grendon, which opened in 1962, there have been consistently relatively low numbers of BME prisoners, (Parker 1970; Newton 2000; Newberry 2010).

These low numbers have also been commented upon during recent prison inspections (Home Office 2004, Home Office 2006, and Ministry of Justice 2009). Possible reasons for the low proportion of BME prisoners were considered in a Grendon Winter Seminar of 2007, with a key feature of the day being an input by BME residents, (see Sullivan 2007). This seminar was convened and opened by the then governing Governor of the prison. In his presentation he questioned the ethnocentric nature of therapy, the issues that might arise from this and stated that these would need to be addressed if Grendon was to successfully recruit and support BME prisoners, (Bennett 2007). A paper on culture and psychotherapy was also given by the Head of Psychotherapy, (Mandikate 2007).

### **5.3 Current situation at HMP Grendon**

This research seeks to push further an understanding of why there are few BME prisoners at Grendon. It does this in both a theoretical and practical way. This chapter attempts to connect and re-connect the personal stories of BME residents at HMP Grendon to see what contribution they can make to the issue of the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process. Maruna & Matravers (2007) place importance on the 'life narrative' as a conduit from which to gain insights that other types of research may negate or ignore. These stories also provide a context to investigate how black men construct their own understanding of desisting from crime, (Maruna & Immarigeon 2004). LeBel et al (2008) consider how there is a need to understand the subjective changes such as self-concept as well as the social changes that may help sustain abstinence from crime. The present study was therefore predicated on the fact that BME residents at HMP Grendon would have something to offer in terms of 'telling and naming' their own stories, in relation to their racialised experiences at the prison.

Allowing black men to tell their stories may enable them to create a new and improved self, by bringing coherence to their 'life stories', (McAdams 1988). By using these stories the research aims to provide insights into those factors that have assisted, or hindered, black men's ability to positively engage within the TC at HMP Grendon, and in doing so offer some suggestions to the prison as to how they might encourage more BME prisoners to apply to go to the prison, and then succeed whilst in therapy.

### **5.3.1 HMP Grendon**

HMP Grendon is a prison run entirely on therapeutic principles and takes long-term prisoners with personality disorders. The prison is divided into separate therapeutic communities, where group therapy sessions take place that is designed to challenge offending behaviour. The primary interest in these interviews was to look critically at the issue associated with black men's understanding of the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process, whilst being located within a TC.

## **5.4 Study Sample**

The study involved 10 prisoners, all identifying themselves as 'black', who had committed a range of offences, as well as representing several geographical locations from the UK, Africa and the Caribbean. These interviewees came from three wings within the prison. An adapted form of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin 1997, Charmaz 2006) was used to code the data collected from these interviews. All of those interviewed were currently serving 'life sentences' ranging from, 'IPP', 'Determinate', and 'Indeterminate'.

#### **5.4.1 The Life Sentence.**

Unlike a prisoner with a determinate sentence who must be released at the end of that sentence, those sentenced to life imprisonment or an indeterminate sentence of Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) have no automatic right to be released. This punitive period is announced by the trial judge in open court and is known commonly as the "tariff" period. No indeterminate sentence prisoner can expect to be released before they have served the tariff period in full. However, release on expiry of the tariff period is not automatic. Release will only take place once this period has been served and the Parole Board is satisfied that the risk of harm the prisoner poses to the public is acceptable. This means that indeterminate sentence prisoners could remain in prison for many more years on preventative grounds after they have served the punitive period of imprisonment set by the trial judge. A release direction can only be made if the Parole Board is satisfied that the risk of harm the offender poses to the public is acceptable.

#### **5.4.2 The interviewees**

The interviewees were as follows:

- P is a 42 year old, African Caribbean Man, with a determinate life sentence, for attempted murder.
- N is a 43 year old, African Caribbean Man, with an IPP life sentence, for GBH.
- D is a 49 year old, African Caribbean Man, with an IPP life sentence, for Robbery.
- S is a 45 year old, African Caribbean Man with a determinate life sentence, for firearms offences.
- E is a 35 year old, African Caribbean Man, with an IPP life sentence, aggravated burglary.
- Y is a 28 year old, African Caribbean Man, with a mandatory life sentence, for murder.
- P is a 51 year old, African Caribbean Man, with a discretionary life sentence, for rape.

- L is a 31 year old, African Caribbean Man with a discretionary life sentence, for attempted murder.
- S is a 41 year old, African Caribbean Man, with a discretionary life sentence, for attempted murder.
- W is a 22 year old, mixed race man, with a mandatory life sentence, for murder.

## 5.5 Themes emerging

The following themes emerged from the interviews and are discussed in more detail below:

- Grendon
- Father deficit
- Self – Concept
- Desistance – ‘Knifing Off’

### 5.5.1 HMP Grendon

It was evident throughout the interview process that prisoners found being at Grendon beneficial in looking at and addressing their offending behaviour, in spite of the difficulties faced. However, there were some contrasting views:

- C.                    They want you to do things differently, they want you to challenge people and be challenged but they are not willing to be challenged and challenge themselves. To be honest with you I wish I never come here, that’s how I’m feeling at the moment.

‘C’ sees his entrance into HMP Grendon as one where he is caught within a ‘binary opposition’ (Perea 1997) in the form of an ‘us’ and ‘them’ scenario.

His sense of regret is rooted less in the reality of being in a TC than in feeling powerless to challenge those in power. Another complaint and fear was the isolation of being a minority within the prison itself. Prisoners experienced this sense of isolation from their arrival at Grendon continued throughout, and which could last as long as two years.

S                    When I came here I think I was the only black person on the induction wing and these things do matter to me. I do pick up on these things and I could tell straight away that the ethos of this place was that they want you to fit in with their middle class white people – I picked that up straight away.

‘S’'s perception of HMP Grendon being mainly white made him feel powerless as his sense of identity was inadequately recognised. Other prisoners, whilst acknowledging that HMP Grendon did impact on their cultural identity, felt that the TC experience would afford them the opportunity to look into themselves.

P                    You’ve got to think about other people – if you don’t think about other people you’re not going to care about yourself and then you’re going to create more victims.

‘P’ reveals how the TC at HMP Grendon has pushed him to acknowledge his victims. ‘L’ also understands the root of his offending behaviour is linked to an understanding of his personal identity.

L                    Another reason for being at Grendon is so I can learn a bit about myself, why I do these things, to try and change my thought process and my behaviour to a better way. To stop doing things that make me end up in trouble.

In other cases, the search for ‘self’ became a difficult exercise of self-discovery and at times also led to other realisations that some prisoners referred to as ‘culture stripping’.

D                    When I first came to Grendon I found it a struggle because I was the only West Indian there. I felt lonely and lost. I use Jamaican patois and I’ve had to change the way I talk.

‘D’s experience of isolation in HMP Grendon caused him to modify his whole demeanour. This in turn led to anxiety and identity questioning resulting in major bouts of self-doubt that at times brought on depression. However, ‘R’ felt that HMP Grendon provided a welcome opportunity that other prisons did not.

R                    The good thing with Grendon is that because it’s a therapeutic community you have community members, you have psychologists, who always challenge your practices. In other jails you don’t really get challenged. When you come into a therapeutic community, because people are confident to challenge you, you do get a lot of times when you have to reflect on your behaviour.

Overall the black men interviewed adapted quite well to entering into a TC and experienced positive outcomes in addressing their offending behaviour.

### 5.5.2 Father Deficit

Various interviewees described the impact of father deficit, though this is also the experience of many white prisoners (Mandikate 2011, pers. comm.), and how this has created a void within their lives, although this seemed to be seldom addressed as a therapeutic need.

N                    My dad didn't actually think I was his and he had lots of issues dealing with that so I had problems with people and trust and in relationships. I never got this recognition from my dad and I feel like I got....from him.

'N', like many black men interviewed, struggled to confidently express his feelings on this issue. However, the impact of this part of his life was clearly visible and could be seen in restless body language, long silences and awkward facial expressions.

C                    Maybe it was the way I was raised – my mum and dad split up when I was four and mum was in and out of relationships and whilst in and out of relationships we were moving around a lot. We never stayed anywhere any longer than say five years – I was moving around a lot so I was never stable in one place.

As a young black man 'C' was rootless with no sense of security. He observed and experienced racism, combined with never having had any adequate guidance from a father figure.

This lack of stability generated the level of internal distress that pushed 'C' to find solace in the streets. In effect the streets became 'C's extended family and that indirectly led him to prison. Anderson (1999) refers to this situation as 'Code of the Streets' and considers that it is the cumulative impact of poverty, race, and social isolation that pushes many young black men into a subculture of violence and criminality as a way of achieving respect and acquiring 'street manhood'. When analysing the journey of these black men in prison as fathers and sons, words such as 'absent', 'negative', 'deadbeat', 'useless', recur and manifest themselves in a growing legacy of 'father deficit' that can and does lead to those same young men searching for replacement fathers within the confines of 'gang culture'. 'W' illustrates this point:

W                    I grew up in Manchester and my dad was a drug dealer. I lived with my mum but I stayed with my dad every weekend and I looked at my dad as my role model. He lived in Moss Side and for me growing up in that area it was gangs. I had no brothers or sisters so I found my family in the streets and was out there selling drugs through my dad, so it became like a natural progression for me to go out onto the streets, roll with man and hanging, that was my life. Aged 14/15 I dropped out of school, didn't do any exams, hustling on the corner. I got my first jail sentence when I was 16.

'W' talks about 'rolling with man', a term that describes hanging out with older men, which could be seen as a metaphor for the absence of a father/son relationship. Pinnock (2003) considers that the absence of cohesive and stable families, like the one outlined by 'W', creates an alternative sub-cultural replacement in the form of a gang.

### 5.5.3 Self concept

The sense of a 'loss of identity' or notions of 'invisibility' featured heavily in the way black men in HMP Grendon felt disempowered and oppressed. Ellison (1947) cites invisibility as a conscious act by white people designed to render black self-concept obsolete. Franklin (2004) sees this deficit as a form of extreme social exclusion that he refers to as 'the invisibility syndrome' which severely limits black men's self-actualisation. Black prisoners said they experience a similar invisibility in many areas of the prison regime: food provision (lack of cultural foods), reading material (black literature), staffing (little diversity) and little or no sense of being a culturally diverse community (small numbers of black men).

C                    It's hard, very up and down. You are judged straight away, for your colour and me for my size, for the way you talk, for the way you act. I feel that they don't really understand where I'm coming from and a lot of them don't really care either. If I'm honest I don't really know who I am. They are trying to make us like them, they're not letting me still be black, they're not letting me still have my culture, and they're trying to take that away from me.

'C' locates his current situation in HMP Grendon as having his racial and cultural identity eroded over which he has no control. Being in a minority situation is something that white staff and white prisoners may have very little understanding of, or sympathy for. This state of affairs caused many of the interviewees to suppress their cultural and racialised identities, forcing them underground, combined with a built up resentment and inner tension at the privileged position of white officers rendering those same identities subordinate.

Y I've been here for three years and what I am aware of is this is a majority white male prison or white people prison. There is a minority of black or ethnic inmates here and there is a lack of understanding of us because there is not enough ethnics or blacks they don't understand me, I've got to lower my lingua, I've got to lower the way I speak, the way I socialise.

'Y' highlights how the lack of validation of their racialised and cultural identities sets up a level of distrust that can, and does, create barriers to meaningful relationships with officers and other prisoners. Solorzano & Yosso (2002) argue that racism 'distorts and silences the experiences of people of colour' (p.31). This situation could explain why black men retreat, stay in the confines of the black community and do not want to defend their racial existence (Spence 2010).

P You'll get a group of black guys walking on the yard and they're automatically labelled as, 'ah look at them they're back into their gang culture behaviour, loud, walking with a bit of a swagger and so forth and so forth'. You get a number of white people walking in their group but it's not an issue, when they do it.

The construction of 'racialised prison masculinities' at times generates stereotypical, negative, assumptions in some prison staff that can restrict the development of a positive self-concept for black men in Grendon.

#### 5.5.4 Desistance – Knifing Off

The primary interest with this stage of the field research was to discover issues surrounding desistance and how a TC could aid this process. Within the interviews themes related to ‘knifing off’ emerged. ‘Knifing off’ is about the means by which individuals are thought to change their lives by severing themselves from detrimental environments, undesirable companions, or even the past itself. Here ‘S’ expresses his desire to not return back to his old ways based on the acquisition of new skills. However, it is underpinned with a strong sense of self-doubt. On the other hand, ‘Y’ believes that letting go of his past is something that is difficult based on the embedding of his previous life in his sub-conscious.

S                    I would like to say 100% that I am not going to go back to crime but you can never say never, and I don’t know how things are going to pan out and you are in control of your own destiny so how can you say that. It doesn’t sound like sense but within myself I am not 100% convinced but I know I’ve learnt a lot from being inside. I’ve gained a lot self confidence.

Y                    It’s impossible to cut the whole thing off because whatever I’ve become, I’ve picked that up from somewhere, whether it’s the street knowledge things that I picked up from home and outside the home, I can’t forget everything.

To successfully ‘knife off’ the past, one may need to develop a new template for living, where issues of race, ethnicity and culture can be important considerations in the process of re-entry back into the community.

Sampson and Wilson (1995) argue that race and urban inequality are significant factors that inhibit notions of 'knifing off' for black men who invariably have to return back to an unchanged community. Understanding black men's subordination, based on the impact of racism requires regime delivery at HMP Grendon to be more sensitive towards how black men can be blocked in relation to their trajectory towards living crime free lives. Alexander (2010) suggests that the prison experience for many black men may impede the possible journey from incarceration to successful long-term societal reintegration.

W                    That's the struggle I'm going through now a lot of my old associates have been cut off. They've been killed through beefing on the streets. There's still a lot of people, family members, my dad, cousins who are still out there and they're part of me, so I would like to get out and totally go in a different direction because I'm sick of that life. If I move out of Manchester and move to London I'm still going to be in the ghetto, I'm still going to be around certain people because I've never lived around 'normal' people, everyone I've lived around have been gang bangers, drug dealers, weed smokers, go to the blues, that's my life, so I've never known any different.

'W' describes a life that is full of pain, loss, and trauma. He is clearly at odds with his previous life and has a strong awareness of his current situation, and sees the enormity of the task of being to let go of his past.

'D' on other hand has developed a focussed strategy that involves a significant amount of trimming down in his life. The implications here are that he has no way of knowing if cutting his 'brethrin's off' will enhance his life, but internally he knows it may be for the better.

D                    In my mind I have a plan in my head that I just want a quiet life. When I think back to my early days I'm thinking if I was to cut everything off that I believe in, because I use to believe in my brethrens, my so called brethrens, I think I would also cut them off from what kind of person I would be.

Maruna et al (2004) argue the need to enable offenders to be active participants in their own reformation while Farrall and Bowling (1999) believe that the process of desisting from offending is one that is produced through interplay between individual choices (Agency), and a range of wider social forces (Structure). This highlights a potential problem for black men in Grendon. Namely if the ethos within the institution does not provide adequate structural guidance, then black men, by both design and default, may not have sufficient agency to fully desist. All of this suggests that the synthesis of agency and structure (Giddens 1984) may hold the key to facilitating desistance as desistance partly involves moving away from one's former identity as an offender and beginning to form a new identity as a law abiding citizen.

N                    I think I'm preparing myself for all of that, Grendon is talking about resettlement thing and the resettlement thing that they're talking about I know it's got to do with accommodation and all that, but they're not talking about mental resettlement back into the community for instance.

‘N’ reveals a deeper psychic need to free himself from his past, but locates his desire for knifing off, less in the realms of the physical world, but more in the psychological. He clearly feel unprepared to return, as he feels there has been a lack of attention paid to his mental well-being in relation to his re-entry needs.

### **5.5.6 Psychological Functioning**

Many black prisoners interviewed reflected on their TC experiences at HMP Grendon noting that there was little acknowledgement of how they were going to psychologically function when returning back to the community. This left many feeling that a crucial aspect of their story was missing as it wasn’t talked about or addressed within the TC. McAdams (1988) suggests that stories represent critical scene and turning points in our lives, and that the ‘life story ‘is a joint product of person and environment:

the life story suggests developing a sense of who I am,  
what I am going to do in the future, and what do I need  
to do in order to generate a legacy (p, 19).

It could be argued that the understanding of the destination arrived at must be viewed in terms of the journey travelled, highlighting that for black men in HMP Grendon, their participation in the TC may in effect be a racialised ‘liminal space’ (Turner 1969), where the development of a new and improved sense of racialised identity is part of a wider ‘rite of passage’, (Gennep 1960, Maruna 2010). ‘R’ illustrates this point.

R                    My life in the future will have nothing to do with my past. I'm being deported back to Jamaica where I am going to be thrown right back in the deep end and I can't afford to get back inside or go back to the same way of living.

How is 'R', a Jamaican national being prepared to leave prison, as well as having to return back to a country he has not lived in for many years since being incarcerated?

## **5.6    Summary**

This chapter has been concerned with exploring with a small sample of black men their experiences of the therapeutic process and how this might contribute towards desistance. In doing so, we have tried to establish if anything can be learned to redress the under-representation of BME prisoners. Listening to their life stories, it appears that although black men found being at HMP Grendon beneficial in looking at and addressing their offending behaviour, they nevertheless experience identity difficulties through being minority members of the community. This leads to feelings of isolation and powerlessness combined with a sense that their cultural identity is insufficiently recognised. However, it does not prevent them from wanting to challenge their cognitive processes and become better people so that they do not create more victims. Father deficit had created a void within their lives and contributed to their sense of social isolation which, for some was addressed through gang membership. Living within HMP Grendon enabled this to be achieved through more legitimate means as 'there are greater openings for prisoners to be creative, to experience friendship, community, happiness, agency and inner peace', (Brookes, 2010).

There is an important need for the prison to address the impact of ‘double consciousness’, an ‘outsider within’ perspective and ‘black invisibility’ to enable black men to be confident in, and able to satisfactorily express, their black identity and culture in order that a positive self-concept/construct may be achieved. This would then assist their trajectory on their release towards desistance from engaging in criminal activity, by establishing a pattern of life that takes account of their past lifestyle and provides a culturally acceptable alternative. For black men who have been labelled and stereotyped there is a need for them to create a new template for living. Counter narratives from black men in HMP Grendon would as Zamudo, et al (2011) suggest,

- Challenge dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding black men’s ability to name their own reality.
- Utilise interdisciplinary methods of historical and contemporary analysis to articulate the linkages between societal inequalities and give voice to the experiences of black men in prison.
- Develop counter discourses through storytelling, narratives, chronicles, biographies, etc that draw on the real lived experiences of black men in relation to desistance.

A prison regime that does not see, acknowledge, or understands the impact of race and processes of racialisation on black men will only serve to perpetuate the difficulties that some black men experience. The narratives of black men in HMP Grendon lay the foundation not only for improving the regime but also for providing a culturally competent lens from which to do so.

However, a more disturbing feature of those interviews is the negation of the impact of the TC for black men on release.

Not only do these men have to deal with the racialisation of criminal justice systems, but the therapeutic experience adds to their dilemma, based on the possibility of returning to communities who may not understand or have any awareness of the changes they have undergone whilst being incarcerated.

The concluding section of the results/findings looks at how African American men understand notions of their own desistance in the city of Baltimore (USA).

## CHAPTER SIX – RESULTS/FINDINGS - BALTIMORE

### 6.1 Introduction

The results within this strand of the research have been triangulated with two significant ethnographic studies exploring the experiences of black men in US inner city areas. Glasgow (1981) writing about ‘the black underclass’ examines, poverty, entrapment of ghetto youth, and black men on the margins of urban society, whilst Elijah Anderson (1990) investigates the understandings and insights of race, class and social change in an urban black community. Each study explores the impact of the stigma of race, social alienation, and the racialisation of crime /criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process in relation to black men.

Although the participants in this section of the thesis would be defined as primary desisters, inasmuch they have had a period of time away from contact with the criminal justice system, several of those who identified themselves as current gang members are continuing to engage in criminal activity, but have yet to be arrested and sentenced for crimes committed as mentioned in the community section of this thesis. Although the triangulation of this strand of the research provides a rich and complex picture of phenomenon being studied, they do not provide a clear path to a singular view. Instead, they form the backdrop for a wider narrative, which is explored in this chapter. The findings in this chapter therefore ask two questions, ‘how do African American men understand notions of the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process? And secondly, how those understandings compare to black men in the UK?

‘Urban ethnography’ is used to look at the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process in Baltimore (USA) during a field trip that took place in Aug/Sept 2010. Urban ethnography involves up close and personal observation and listening to people in the context of their everyday lives. It centres on the analyses of urbanity and research strategies of the urban landscape, namely urban ethnography, (Anderson 1999). Pryce (1979) feels that an understanding of black men comes not from an intellectual account or the cold analysis of social science statistics but requires the researcher to become more actively involved and let go of notions of neutrality. A position shared by Clark (1965) who moves beyond the ‘participant observer’ and more of an ‘involved observer’ that requires ‘participation in rituals and customs, as well as the social competition with the hierarchy in dealing with the problems of the people he is seeking to understand’, (Clark, 1965: xvi). Charmaz (2006) also argues that urban ethnographers bring different approaches to their studies and feels ethnography has to play a role in social action and transformation. Anderson (1999) however provides a word of caution when he argues that the urban ethnographer’s work should be as objective as possible, but knows that to achieve this is not easy as it requires researchers to try and set aside their own values and assumptions.

### **6.3 The Interviewees**

All the interviewees agreed to be involved in the research process as they felt it was an opportunity to share their stories, where they felt their voices had been previously been rendered invisible by previous encounters with other researchers.

It was also apparent that not being a native of Baltimore, there was a strong sense that the research would not be judgemental and more objective. In saying that gaining access was still subject to rigorous community codes and rituals as a way of gaining credibility. The interviewees were as follows:

- ‘N’ is an African American in his late 60’s and spent a total of 16 years of his life in Angola, Louisiana State Penitentiary, and over 13 of those years were confined to a single cell CCR (Close Custody-Restriction – Solitary Confinement).
- ‘A’ is an ex-offender; an African American in his late 50’s and spent over 15 years in San Quentin State Prison (California).
- ‘J’ is a 50 year old African American male, who served time in Green Haven State Penitentiary in New York State.
- ‘B’ is a 30 year old African American ex-high level drug dealer.
- ‘I’ is a 25 year old African American, in his early 20’s, and is a former gang member.
- ‘R’ is a 19 year old African American, who is a current gang member.
- ‘T’ is a 40 year old African American, who is a former gang enforcer, and now church pastor.
- BB is a 60 year old African American man, and ex-offender, who runs his own organization called F.O.X.O. (Fraternal Order of Ex Offenders). He has spent over 25 years in a range of US prisons.
- Bu is a 35 year old African American, and is one of Baltimore’s gang leaders.

#### **6.4 Themes emerging**

An adapted form of grounded theory was used to code the data, (Charmaz, 1993:3). The following themes emerged from the interviews:

- Code of the streets
- Effects of incarceration



‘I’                                Yeah, I want out, but what am I supposed to do? This is America. It ain’t no place for black people. We don’t have anything. At least on the streets I can have some level of control over my life.

‘I’ illustrates that the streets in spite of being a dangerous space to occupy, gives some purpose to his life. He also intimates that he would like to get off the streets. The problem with the ‘code of the streets’ is that it demands loyalty and creates very few exit strategies. ‘R’ illustrates this point.

‘R’                                It’s hard, this street hustle. Real fuckin’ hard, but it’s got to be done. No-one here’s gonna give you shit.

Although ‘R’ acknowledges the difficulty of street life, he also accepts that there’s no way out, as well as accepting that no-one cares about his plight. Another feature of the code of the streets is the way many black men in Baltimore struggle in school. As ‘T’ points out, poor schooling drove him onto the streets.

‘T’                                I felt the white teachers looked down on me as they had low expectations. Something that followed me throughout my education. I suppose then I discovered the seduction of the streets. Street life became more exciting and gave me a sense of belonging.

'T's seduction of the streets was less of a conscious choice, but one that came about as a consequence of being rejected by white teachers. Katz (1988) also argues that some individuals are seduced by street life and criminal activity. He further argues that researchers who have never engaged with those individuals at times fail to look critically at that seduction, and spend more time trying to disprove any notion that some criminals actually like being involved with crime. An example here is 'B' who sees himself as a soldier, defending his territory.

'B'                    You gotta defend you're territory. Like soldiers we go out on the streets.  
                         Its dog eat dog out there. And I ain't gonna get eaten for no-one. You feel  
                         me? You can't be actin' all soft an' shit.

By equating his role as a soldier, it could be argued that 'B' sees himself as an alternative police force, designed to keep order in his community, with a strong sense of duty and loyalty. This sense of purpose, albeit flawed, highlights the importance of 'B' to establish a role in the community, where society has not enabled him to acquire one. 'B's hyper-masculine posture also reveals a darker element to the 'code of the streets'. Namely, notions of strengths and weaknesses. Being physically and psychologically tough is the currency of survival on the streets of Baltimore. 'I' explains why being tough is an important part of the 'code of the streets'.

'I'                    I see young brothers all around me dyin for a beef, slingin' rocks. Ain't no  
                         way out. No-one cares, so why should we? You can't be showin' fear.  
                         You have to lock it off. Can't think too much. This is too fucked up. You  
                         wanna survive out here, you can't be weak.

I's nihilistic view is borne out a sense of helplessness and despair, where death is ever present.

Death seems to be casually accepted as a by product of occupying the streets. So the ability to be around death without it affecting you is important here. Here, 'R' recounts his experiences of loss.

R                    I've lost a lot of my friends out here. Too many. It hurts, but you gotta maintain. Yeah it's stressful, but they're family. They've always got my back. So I gotta have their's. You feel me?

'R' sees losing his friends as a price that has to be paid. On the flip side 'B' reveals a darker truth, 'kill or be killed'.

B                    Whoever steps to you does so at their own risk. I have no problem puttin' a cap in someone's ass. The streets ain't a nice place. It's survival of the fittest. It's how we roll. It's just the way it is.

'B's casual acceptance of death as the 'norm' is painful as it is disturbing. This would suggest life on the streets equates to playing a game of chess that requires the development of a clear and achievable strategy of reducing the possibility of dying by the code of the streets. 'R' reveals the implication of violating the code.

‘R’                    You cross me and it’s on. I’ll do whatever I have to do. If you can’t take pain, don’t get in the game. That’s all I say. On the streets, it’s ain’t about actin’ bad. You gotta be able to do it.

‘R’s view reveals the importance of gaining and maintaining a ‘street reputation’. As ‘T’ explains.

T                    When I got involved in crime I felt I was someone. People looked up to me and quickly I built a strong crew. I was living large. I had guns, money, women, and most of all status. Growing up I felt I was a nobody. Then I became a somebody.

‘T’ highlights the deeper need to become someone at all costs. Using menace to gain status would not usually be seen as a legitimate way to gain respect, but the ‘code of the streets’ places the same value on achieving respect, but according to the rules of street survival. ‘T’ continues:

T                    The problem with it all is when you want to come out of the game, and you have left so much destruction out there. You’ve hurt people really bad. How can that be good. How do they get into the side of the community that’s doing good? Now things are different, but you can’t bring back the past. If you look around the city it’s getting worse because young guys looked up to people like me and developed their way of being bad. So we don’t really have a sense of community.

With so much crime, poverty, drugs and violence, communities are being destroyed. I suppose I saw myself as an outsider to the community and have to establish myself and surround myself by my own community.

Most interviewee's lives in this section are tinged with loss, sadness, and a search for a sense of identity. The streets provides a refuge for 'bad' men; those who exert extreme control over the lives of others, as well as giving rise to a culture of street respect, that requires individuals to risk their lives in order to do so. In spite of the desire to terminate their criminal behaviour, the overwhelming view was the barriers towards desistance were too great to consider, when the seduction of crime was seen as a simpler option. However, for those who do not end up dead, or have the protection of gangs, prison becomes a site where many black men end up. This next section explores the experiences of black men who have served time in the US prison system.

#### **6.4.2 Effects of Incarceration**

'A' spent many years in San Quentin and the experience of incarceration has had a significant impact on his life.

A           It makes no difference if you committed the crime or not, you are still denied every human right. Chained and shackled, I was taken away from my family, away from my freedom, shipped, stripped, stacked and packed into small cells of a jail where my true test of mental survival would be tested and my endurance for sadistic torture would be put under experimentation.

I was told when to shit, shower, and shave, fed slop not worthy of feeding pigs, psychologically abused and misused, in some cases beat upon and then even killed.

‘A’ reveals a system that is unfair where the loss of liberty ultimately diminishes his psychological state and mental well-being, creating a very isolated individual. ‘N’ questions whether the system works and suggests that incarceration has a more sinister motive, to damage the psyche of prisoners.

N                      Few prisoners get better in these overcrowded compounds. Often they vegetate in whatever level of psychosis they are beaten into, and they never change, never worse, never better, for year after year.

‘N’ highlights yet again how prisons generate and maintain a sense of ‘psychic deprivation’ that in itself can push prisoners, as ‘N’ highlights, to vegetate. Alexander (2010) argues a different point, citing prisons for black men as creating ‘a new slavery’. Her analogy rests on an understanding that destroying the minds of slaves made them compliant, controlled, and incapable of contemplating any challenge to their captors. ‘N’s reaffirms Alexander’s view with the recounting of his own experiences of incarceration. ‘B’ expresses the view that prison is worse than the streets, but appears to carry on the same type of behaviour in prison as he did when he was free.

B                    Prison was fucked up. Worse than the streets. Can't get no peace. You can't escape the shit of street life in there. People up in ya business and shit. Fuckin' hustle in prison like the streets. That's all you can do to stay alive when ya locked up.

However perhaps the difference in 'B's prison behaviour was that it was motivated by the need to preserve his mind from being overtaken by the oppression of the prison system and, ultimately, becoming sedated by his deteriorating psychic condition. 'A' also highlights the importance educating the mind whilst incarcerated.

A                    It is a time of educating oneself on surviving on little or nothing and developing shameful habits. I found killing time is no art. Keeping yourself sane while doing time is.

'A' shows how sanity on the streets and in prison have parallels. They are both ruled by fear, codes of violence, and respect. 'N' also reminds us that prison is supposed to be, about providing rehabilitative opportunities, but gives us a cold reality of what it is really like being locked up as a black man in a US prison.

N                    If you provide them with nothing but walls and bars, then you create a very frustrated and troubled human being.

However, you give them an education, job skills, forgiveness and caring, in general rehabilitate them, what is created is; someone you will not fear but respect because they have learned how to respect themselves and others.

'N's view sees rehabilitative processes that can enable a prisoner to learn about respect as a possible factor required in the trajectory towards desistance. However, BB brings out another aspect of the impact of incarceration, which sees the prisoner separated from friends and family.

BB            There are numerous adverse psychological effects which result from incarceration, but none quite as devastating as those which result from the separation of family and friends. It is not just a problem for friends and family, but society as a whole.

BB sees this separation as a form of control as part of an on-going conspiracy around black incarceration in the US, and is eager to point out the human aspect of being locked away that at times is missed. Likewise, 'A' views this state of affairs as a form of regression.

A            Prisons and jails, like no other institutions, have a way of reducing a person to a form of adolescence, which takes years to recuperate, and regain consciousness of self as a functioning adult. They create a sense of dependency, through certain forms of brainwashing, reconditioning of the mind and sadistic treatment.

‘A’ highlights how continuous exposure to the prison environment can lead to a shift in mood that at times would be seen as depressive. It could be argued that by producing this state of being acts as a form of social control or sedative, designed to disable prisoner’s minds from contemplating freedom, escape, or challenge. ‘N’ likewise, sees incarceration as a slow death.

N                    The slow, meticulous march towards death a prisoner experiences daily is far more uncivilized and criminal than the acts for which we are charged and eventually executed for.

The experience of incarceration has forced ‘N’ to question the criminal justice process. By equating his crimes on the same level as those of flawed criminal justice agencies, he is questioning who the real criminals are.

A                    No one desires to exist in this imprisoned state, though with some, it may be the only state of existence in which they can function properly. But if we are to ever reach a state of rehabilitation and reconciliation, then the circumstances surrounding our existence within the prison environment must drastically change to promote a positive atmosphere for re-entry into society.

‘A’ cites the factors that will position him in relation to re-entry back to the community and, clearly identifies what is right for him. He continues,

A           With the present influx of incarceration, the conditions of jails and prisons continue to decline. The overcrowded, stuffed cells, the inability to provide decent hygienic care, the brutal treatment and the sadistic and violent behaviour of the guards rob an inmate of his/her dignity, pure and simple, makes me ask a question, how are we supposed to do better, if better is not done to us.

‘A’ is obviously angry about his incarceration and demonstrates an eloquent and insightful view of life as ex-offender. His statement raises another deeper question about the role of the ex-offender in looking effectively at pathways towards desistance. ‘A’ like other interviewees seem to know the experience of incarceration intimately, which would suggest they have something important to contribute to what would enable them to understand how the racialisation of the US prison system impacts on the desistance process. However, ‘BB’ reminds us of the wider structural concerns that render the possibility for ex-offenders pointing the way towards their own desistance obsolete.

BB           Imprisonment rates for black people stems from the nature of black imprisonment in the US. It is a major social problem. While the entire social fabric is disintegrating, schools and hospitals are closing, housing is increasingly unavailable, jobs are disappearing, life expectancy for young black men is low, and more prisons are being built

BB raises an important question, 'how many criminologists have ever sat down with men like Brother Bey, as a way of understanding the impact of incarceration and the difficulties of re-entering the community?' He continues,

BB            In California an inmate appears before a board, who then evaluates his behaviour. If he fails to perform he will be sent to an institution which is hundreds of miles from his home. This practice serves as a control mechanism in terms of inmate behaviour.

'BB' highlights the unfairness of the system and sees it as a furthering of control exercised by the system. 'N' pushes the argument further when he slams the attempts to rehabilitate prisoners as empty gestures.

N            Whilst I was inside I thought about things long and hard. Now I'm released, I still don't feel free. They made a mockery of any meaningful attempts at rehabilitation, which is after all, the so-called purpose of incarceration. If anyone is callous enough to say, "Who cares?" Please be warned that these degraded souls will return to society in time, and we will then reap what we have sown.

'N' sees the prison experience as creating space for him not only to reflect. He also grounds himself in the reality of where he's at. He also warns of what will happen to returning offenders who have had no rehabilitation.

‘A’ also reminds us of the humanity of those who have offended and argues that incarceration is not always as a result of a conscious act of criminality, but as the result of poor choices.

A                    Inmates have aspirations just like everyone else. They desire to take care of family doesn’t escape their consciousness. We are people, we have loved ones, we have people who love us, this makes us people, not unlike yourself. Some prison inmates are not really bad they just made a bad choice and ended up in prison.

The men interviewed in this section remind us that being incarcerated for a long time inside a hostile prison environment can and does take its toll on prisoners. Like most encounters with released prisoners who have served long sentences there is a reluctance to revisit their pasts. As Alexander (2010) points out prison is a control mechanism which has as its purpose the goal of subordinating people of colour and other disaffected sections of the community. This suggests the need to consider the importance of social and community bonds in relation to creating a stronger pathway towards desistance than incarceration.

### **6.4.3 Street Cool**

With looking at the ‘code of the streets’ and the ‘negative effects of incarceration’, how do black men rise above these experiences to chart a pathways towards desistance? Although it’s clear that many of those interviewed are coping, managing, and surviving, There is also something deeper clearly operating below the surface, and would best be described as ‘street cool’. This section hears from individuals who are operating with ‘street cool’.

N I grew up in the South where there were very strong community connections. Life was slower and easier. When my parents moved into Baltimore it was a rougher place. People weren't as friendly. Life was tough. Baltimore was place where black and white didn't get on, drugs flowed freely and everyone was on the hustle.

'N' reveals that where once there was a sense of belonging in his life, moving to a big city changed that dynamic. It is evident that the weakening of social bonds can increase the likelihood of an individual into a life of crime and constructing notions of 'street cool' to cope with the pressure. 'A' likewise focuses on the importance of having a sense of community.

A Inner city living wasn't and still isn't good. In the world I lived you had to have strong connections for personal safety. It was a 'dog eat dog' way of living. Community connections were about fear, control things, and being cool in the way you managed it. The more fear you generated the more street respect you generated, and the cooler it made you.

'A' reflects on how his community used to be, revealing the notion that the 'code of the streets', almost becomes the norm. He highlights being bad isn't enough, but there's a style that accompanies it that in turn gains the respect.

T                    Growing up I couldn't see the point of being positive. I suppose what I was doing is rebelling against what was right. Doing right was for fools back then. No-one on the streets respects you ain't carrying yourself correct.

This benchmark of 'street cool, masks another important issue, like in UK, that of 'father absence' as 'R' reflects,

R                    I wasn't born this way. I was made this way. No pops, like most around here. Mom did several jobs, sisters ain't around. What chance did I have. Fuckin' racist place like this forces you out onto the streets. It's like you ain't gotta a choice. I'm a survivor.

The desire to be a man without being given adequate guidance can lead to the kind of destructive behaviour outlined by both 'T' and 'R'. However, normalising negative type of behaviour in the name of 'father absence' and being cool can only serve to create more tension on the streets, the community, and society as a whole. 'I' questions the role of parents in his life.

I                    In Baltimore there ain't shit for us. Everyone talks about gangs as negative. At least they take care of business. They're like my family. Sure it's harsh, but they keep shit tight. What can parents do? We ain't got not sense of community out here.

'I' highlights a deeper problem, namely having no sense of community creates a legion of isolated individuals, connected by loss and no sense of belonging. Hence the propensity to join a gang. If the gang then becomes the replacement family and part of the normal socialisation of young men like 'I', then this situation will fracture the possibility of developing meaningful and positive social bonds required to create a successful pathway towards desistance. Here 'B', 'R', and 'J', talks about the need of the love and security of a family.

B                    Never had no family or security in my life. That's when I became the devil's child. The daily struggles of life on the corner prepared me for this life.

Yeah, I'd like a better life, but who's gonna give me one? More importantly whose gonna show me?

R                    I've lost a lot of my friends out here. It hurts, but you gotta maintain. Yeah it's stressful, but they're my family. They've always got my back. So I gotta have their's. You feel me? We all need a family, but when you don't have yours at hand, you have to create one.

J                    Future, what future? I take things a day at a time. Out here every day could be ya last. Never had a good start in life. It's like an epidemic. I don't know anyone with a secure background. They say you don't miss what you don't have. That's shit! I miss my moms and pops.

The issues facing 'B', 'R', and 'J', are complex, as they feel powerless, alienated, and disaffected from society. By constructing a street persona that they define as cool can be seen as a coping strategy in light of their circumstances, but the absence of guidance from family and community only drives them further into seeing crime as a way out. As 'R' argues,

R                    Yeah I'd like an older man to talk to, but round here they're either on drugs, drinkin' fuckin', and that ain't good. We're all fucked up. I blame the older guys.

Sustainable intergenerational development could be a way to assist the hunger 'R' has for older teachers who support, mentor, and guide. He continues,

R                    For lots of guys, they have no reason to live. They also come to a point in their lives where they can't face doing one more prison term. So they wanna get off the streets and the corners, but they don't know how to. I didn't know what I was going to do, but then I remembered my parents and my brothers. I had a family that I had rejected. Shock, fear of death, and other stuff helps you make that decision.

'R' highlights an important point here about the aspiration to go straight can be thwarted by not having the appropriate tools to do so. Prison provides little in the way of rehabilitative processes, as already outlined, and this is all combined with an absence of meaningful family and community guidance and support.

It then becomes hard to see how an individual can develop coherent strategic pathways towards desistance. So a closer examination of the constraints or opportunities that can be created by re-entry back to the community is important here

#### 6.4.4 Re-entry

This section focuses on the journey back to the community, referred to as re-entry. ‘J’ reflects on how he felt on release and the importance of gaining his freedom.

J            On my first day of freedom I was engulfed in the silence of my thoughts, treasuring the collected memories of the morning's experiences, and abhorring the thought of the reality which awaited me around the next few turns in the road. As I returned back into the reality of leaving prison behind the sights and wonders of the day slowly settled into that dimension of time and place known as memories, where only such dreams will allow me to visualize, retrace, and enjoy the world beyond those walls that was home for such a long period of my life.

Although ‘J’ revels in the experience of being released, ‘N’ highlights the problems that lead to recidivism.

N            As life seem to always have its up and downs, my down fall was just around the corner, I had been out no more than a couple of months, then I was back into trouble again this time myself along with some other guys who would pull

off a robbery. We would then go around spending money having fun and not realising that we are slowly becoming what was soon to be hoodlums.

‘N’s lack of preparation or ability to adjust to a new situation would suggest that rehabilitative processes if they were present whilst incarcerated were not in place on release. ‘A’ sees the inability to manage the prison experience as another possible threat to maintaining a successful re-entry back to the community.

A                    Then these so-called authorities release people like into a demanding society and then expect them to function and act as independent individuals. Let in an incarcerated society such as this, it is far wiser to fall and remain, than to rise and be knocked down repeatedly. I've seen many break, both mentally and physically and go straight back to prison.

‘A’ sees a culture of neglect and a failure to provide a duty of care to returning prisoners as fuelling the failure of US prison. ‘R’ also highlights this position.

R                    When I got out I became more restless, and started to get deeper in criminal life. There was no support, no guidance, nothing for me to do. I never had the chance to do stuff in prison, so hell called me back.

'R' further suggests the level of anxiety that can arise when there is a lack of available support post release. Not having anyone to meet you on release is also another factor that can be debilitating for men returning back to the community. As 'B' reflects,

B                    My first day of release from prison was hard. I had no family, no-one to meet me at the gate, and an uncertain future. In the past I have expressed my sadness at not being able to see any forms of plant life and growth, as well as other such things and experiences which every free person sees and experiences within the travels of everyday life on the outside.

'B's state of affairs is also compounded when the returning prisoner, excited by the prospect of a new life, realises that he is in effect returning to an environment that remained unchanged since being locked away. 'A's testifies to how demoralising it can be knowing that things have got worse and not better?

A                    Returning to the community I noticed my old neighborhood was over-fed with narcotics, supplied and controlled by the very same so-called law enforcement officers, our schools no longer held the vitality of academic education, but rather a formal introduction into the criminal element.

Again, 'A' reflects on an unchanged community and feels even more isolated. 'R's scathing attack on the community is even more damning, when he cites his own community as inflicting more damage on his already broken li

R                    On my release I tried to re-connect to the so called community. Those fuckers who come around here and want to put us into programmes, and shit, they're just like the police. Those black motherfuckers who come around here tryin' to tell us to behave. Fuck off, that what I say. That's why the hustle and the streets become the place where you have to make it. Many don't come back. Here one day, then you're gone.

'R's view is painful as it highlights a more disturbing feature and a challenge to black men's desistance. Namely, if the community remains unaltered, which had originally led to the justification for involvement in criminal activity for men like 'R', how do they then motivate themselves to consider a life free from crime? 'T' comes to the conclusion that sometimes re-entry is a dead road, with no come back.

T                    I'd been gangster, done lots of bad things, and actually never got caught. I was living large. I had everything. When it came down to it no-one was there. And still aren't. Most of my friends are dead

These testimonies highlight how the agents of criminal justice agencies are determined to show offenders that they're in control and will get tough on anyone who breaches their boundaries. This brings us into one of the most significant interviews that took place in very difficult circumstances. Without exception the notorious and feared gangs the 'Crips' and 'the Bloods', pose one of the biggest threats to the trajectory towards desistance.

This final section recounts a meeting with Baltimore Bloods leader 'Bu', and takes the form of a reflexive account of the encounter. Even though I had to declare my intentions up front and reveal to 'Bu' what I was doing, why I was doing, and other related ethical concerns, it was mutually agreed for me to listen to him, and then reflect on the experience. 'Bu' told me that so many people have attempted to interview him and made pre-determined assumptions that at times clouded the interview. Based on 'Bu's' senior gang member status, I also felt gaining important insights may emerge with a less structured, but no less ethnically grounded approach. Access to 'Bu' was mediated through a gang mediator. Based on his profile and possible risk in terms of my own safety, it was important to demonstrate to 'Bu' that my motives were honourable and not part of a deeper plot of entrapment. The following testimony attempts to engage a serving senior gang member in a serious dialogue about the racialised context of why gang members in Baltimore exist, and become a serious threat to activities designed to enable other to journey towards their desistance.

#### **6.4.5 Bu's story**

*Night has descended; me and 'T' are in a car park, face to face with a man sporting a red bandana. My first encounter with a member of the 'Bloods' gang is surreal, challenging, and insightful. Being granted an audience with him, followed by a meeting I will never forget was one of the most powerful experiences of my life. He was charismatic, intelligent, and truly a leader. The conversation did not focus on gangs, but more on fatherhood and society in general. The mixture of fear and exhilaration ran through my veins. I was truly impressed not only by 'T's' unswerving commitment to trying to make Baltimore a better place, but the gang member's openness to reasoning and dialogue. Be under no illusion, any US gang member affiliated to the Crips and the Bloods is not a saint.*

*However, they are men and fathers, who have made a choice that many find offensive, scary, and wrong. Be that as it may, they exist alongside us, occupying the same space, going to the same shops, taking their kids to school, and trying to survive in their own way. We can all have an opinion, view or judgement as to what is right and wrong. What I would say until you have stood face to face with someone like the guy I have just met, we will continue to believe the hype and moral panic that surrounds gang culture. Yes they are menacing individuals that have done all sorts of stuff. The truth is the solution for changing them will not be found in more incarceration, biased media coverage, or ignoring their existence. Gangs are a complex social phenomenon that requires more than just rhetorical posturing to sort it out. I don't have the solution, but what I did learn today, it starts with dialogue. But first you have to gain access. That access was created by 'T'. The sad fact remains there are many guys like 'T', who don't get paid, supported, and validated for what they do. Yet he saves as many lives as any paramedic or surgeon. After 12 hours on the road 'T' says his will drop me home. Suddenly 5 White police officers arresting a young black woman forces 'T' to stop, pull over, take out a video camera and record what they're doing. 'T' archives stuff that happens on the streets as he wants to make a documentary on the abuses that take place on a regular basis. Low and behold it is taking place opposite Little Melvin's shop front in East Baltimore. We stop off and talk with Little Melvin for about an hour before making our way home. I am thoroughly exhausted and take several hours to re-ground myself.*

## **6.5 Summary**

Analysing these interviews indicate that while the process of desistance is a gradual one, when the offender's identity has changed, he has, in a metaphorical sense, 'broken with the past'. In this way things that once mattered now do not (or matter much less), and things that did not matter before now do (or matter a little more). When interacting with others people project an identity of who they are, and a primary vehicle for communicating to others who "one is" is through one's behaviour.

Desiring to break from crime may be motivated at first by a strong aversion to viewing one's self as negative and not liking who and what they have become. Before one is willing to give up the identity as a lawbreaker, one must begin to perceive this identity as unsatisfying, thus weakening one's commitment to it. The relationship to the process of criminal desistance is clear. Offenders seeking to break from crime, slowly begin to consider a new identity and move towards a more pro-social life. They develop new, non-criminal preferences and slowly begin to realign their social networks to include more conventional people. Those wishing to quit crime are more likely to be successful at desistance if they are embedded in social networks that not only support their new identities and tastes, but also isolate them from those who would oppose them quitting crime or induce them to continue in their criminal ways. This would suggest that success in desisting from crime is more likely when offenders who have made the decision to leave crime become more pro-social. The first movement toward desistance would be to strengthen their relationships with pro-social others and distance themselves (emotionally and physically) from those who would oppose their new identity. Cognitive shifts may also explain why change can occur in the absence of structural supports for change, and why some who have pro-social structural supports for change fail to take advantage of them.

The next chapter engages in a discussion emerging out of the issues raised in Chapters 4, 5, & 6.

## CHAPTER SEVEN – DISCUSSIONS

### 7.1 Introduction

In chapters 4, 5, & 6 the results/findings painted a vivid portrait of key issues associated with important insights and understandings of the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process for black men. Whilst these insights were varied and detailed, the need to discuss new and emerging themes is important here. To do so I intend to draw similarities and differences between the three research sites. Indeed, the differing forms of black vernacular, urban reality, their socio-cultural/socio-historical influences, and to paint a vivid portrait into the lives of black men in Birmingham, HMP Grendon, and Baltimore. Winn (2011) argues that discussing the ex-prisoner's voice should be located in the centre of any discussion chapter. It is therefore appropriate to compare and contrast these differences using more data supplied by the participants in this study.

However, in spite of revealing those differences in relation to the impact of the racialisation of the criminal justice systems for black men, their stories suggest a commonality of experience that is uniform, common, and disturbing in spite of being separated by distance and cultural context. The importance here is to highlight that certain aspects of these discussions are 'intersectional' in nature. Intersectional in this case is used to describe a unity of experience. Romanoff (2012) argues that interpretative approaches such as the one outlined in this thesis supplements statistical models when studying the real world of black men involved in criminal activity, (Pogrebin, 2004a).

Using this approach as stated previously I have sought to understand how black men experience understanding and insights into their desistance that includes the impacts and importance to their cultural, social, and political environments in relation to their desistance, (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Similarly, like Mears (2007) I have argued that social science research must include rich and personal accounts that are informed, systemic, and fluid. The stories contained thus far not only justify this position but in the final analysis may yield more insights than impersonal statistics of quantitative studies, (Silverman, 2004). I further suggest that although many qualitative research methods provide rich and detailed personal accounts of particular problems and societal issues, interpretative studies such as the one undertaken are particularly appropriate for addressing specific knowledge of participants' detailed subjective experiences such as black men's desistance. This discussion chapter therefore draws inference on some of the clear distinctions as well as similarities in relation to the insights and understanding of issues in relation to black men's desistance. For ease of reference each participant will be identified with the same letter as used throughout this thesis, followed by a suffix that relates to their location:

- Participant (Com) – Community
- Participant (Gr)- Grendon
- Participant (Ba) – Baltimore

The following issues emerging out of the findings for discussion are:

- Fatherhood Arrested
- Invisibility Syndrome
- African Centred Worldview
- Conceptual Model of the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process

The chapter concludes with discussing some key issues relating to the thesis itself, including:

- Contribution to the study of desistance
- Social Capital and desistance
- Recommendations for future research

## 7.2 Fatherhood Arrested

This part of the discussion addresses impact of ‘absent fathers’ on the lives of the black men in this study and to assess the possible influences on their desistance trajectories. Nurse (2002) expresses the view that the disproportionate incarceration of black men ensures that communities will be stripped of black fathers. Harper and Maclanahan (2004) likewise point out that black men from father absent families experience higher levels of delinquency and receive greater punitive responses from a racialised criminal justice system that unfairly targets black men. By far this was one of the most extremely painful and difficult issues for all the participants involved in the research regardless of their location.

The term ‘fatherhood arrested’ encompasses issues of black men who have not been fathered, alongside their own inability to provide positive ‘fathering’ for their children as a consequence of criminal lifestyles and incarceration. Interestingly, the vernacular used to describe this situation differed according to each research site. For example in Baltimore African American’s would frequently say that ‘poppa was a rollin’ stone’, whereas in HMP Grendon, black men were a little more forgiving as the therapeutic experience had equipped them with the capacity to talk about their pain openly, meaning the word ‘father’ was used. However, in stark contrast the participants from Birmingham used the term ‘waste man’ to describe a feckless father, who is labelled a ‘waste of space’.

The diverse use of the vernacular highlighted different ways black men expressed notions of their own lack of fathering, yet the men at HMP Grendon had a stronger sense of balance concerning the issue mainly because the exposure to the therapeutic community whilst being incarcerated gave them space to work through the complex feelings that emerge when addressing the issue of not having been fathered. On the other hand black men in the community do not find space to go through a similar transformation of negative feelings into positive ones. As illustrated by L (Com)

L (Com)            Why can't you be a fucking man? What makes you not want to be involved in your own son's life? My dad's a 'waste man'. I have no respect for him.

Whilst 'L' (Com)' loses respect for his father, 'C' (Com)' blames his father for him going to prison.

C (Com)            He's a waste man and it's all his fault I went to prison. From day one he hasn't said anything to me. What am I supposed to do but just get on with my life?

Although 'L (Com)' and 'C (Com)' put some of the blame for their plight at their father's doorstep, this assertion suggest that they see the importance of having a father masked by their anger reflecting a deep sense of hurt and loss. Daley (1993) expresses the view that without strong 'father figures' to guide their behaviour, young black men like 'L (Com) and 'C (Com)' will create new models of what it means to be a father when they themselves have children. In their case there is the connection to a darker extended family, namely, the gang.

J (Ba) I haven't really had a father son relationship that any normal child would have with their dad. I don't like him and I hold it against him. He could have taken time out to see me but my man still don't business about me.

Likewise, 'J (Ba) too is resentful at not having a connected relationship with his father as he feels robbed of not having someone to guide him. This would suggest that the feelings of upset are underpinned by the rejection experienced by a father that plays a limited role in the lives of their children. 'D (Com)' also highlights how not having a father played a role in him going to prison.

D (Com) If my father was around I could be in a better position than I am now. I could have avoided situations being 'on road' and getting locked up. He could have helped me, talked to and shown me things from his past, like how he was and what he was involved in.

hooks (2003) suggests that if a father is absent then the vision young children will have about who they are will be flawed. Here, 'Y (Gr)' focuses on the issue of what a present father should be,

Y (Gr) Not having a father is negative. He should have told me stuff. If he had I wouldn't be in the position I'm in now. A father can help by just being there. You should still look after your son. See your son grow and being there would have make a big difference, trust me.

‘Y (Gr)’ reveals the importance of a father just being there and to spend time with. ‘K (Com)’ on the other hand reflects on his father’s absence in a touching way regardless of his absence.

K (Com)            I wanted him to pick me up from school, go park, these thing are strange to me  
                          I’ve never had it

K (Com) highlights that in spite of being a grown man, he has missed out on something that he should have had as a child. hooks (2003) also points out that unless there is a collective response to the crisis of black fathers in society, a feeling of despair and hopelessness will continue to embed itself into the consciousness of subsequent generations. Her view underpins the need to address this issue to reduce the possibility of father absence becoming the norm in black communities. ‘R (Com)’ points out the psychological pain of not having a father and demonstrates his coping strategy for this state of affairs is to in effect, cut his father out of his life.

R (Com)            I missed out not having a dad in my life. If I see him I see him. It hurts cause  
                          obviously when I’m on road and I see him, it’s not like he’s even my dad, he’s  
                          just another person on the road.

Although ‘R (Com)’ refuses to use the term ‘father’, he does acknowledge the pain of his absence, which suggests that he really misses him. On the other hand ‘J (Com) reveals a darker side to the way some black men respond to their father’s absence, namely the construction of a hyper-masculine identity.

J (Com)            Without a dad you have to be bad, I have to be masculine and ready for anything, I've had to grow up quick time. I ain't had no fathering so I gotta fill that void and I fill it myself.

'J (Com)' demonstrates how the lack of a positive experience of fathering can push an individual into a nihilistic frame of mind. The context here is the paradox between the need and hunger for a 'present and engaged' father, and the implications when the absence creates a void. 'J (Com)' continues,

J                    Maybe being 'on road' is not the best thing but this is all we know, we ain't had no guidance, we ain't had the father or the positive role models who society would say was positive, there's no other form of good role models so we just look after each other.

'J (Com)' identifies that without adequate role models in his life, he is faced with turning to life on the streets with others like him. Here, 'I (Ba)' once again illustrates the difficulty of not having a father as a role model present to guide, shape, and mentor his son,

I (Ba)            Absent fathers is a big issue with black people. Look at it like this all of us have absent fathers, we haven't really had anyone we had to teach ourselves.

'I' (Ba) is placed in an impossible situation. Without his father's presence he has no alternative than to act alone. Belton (1995) argues that black men are not monoliths and experience the impact of their father's absence in many different ways. This in turn, he further suggests, will leave many black boys feeling emotionally neglected or abandoned as illustrated by 'B (Com)' and 'R (Ba),

B (Com)            My dad not being around has caused me lots of problems. I know if my dad was there for me I would not have done the things I've done.

If my dad was about he would have been that authority figure in my life, so I had to provide for myself. All my friends are like me, we come from broken home. We come from rough life no money, no dad, no education surrounded by crime.

R (Ba)            My father ain't no male role model. I just need to survive. Its either your with the gang, if not how are you gonna survive? If he was there then maybe I would have made a different choice. We all need family

To build meaning into their involvement with children, men reflect on how other important family relationships have changed over time. In this process of meaning-making, men's relations with their own fathers take on new significance. Reflection on these father-son relationships suggests that, during the course of personal development and family transitions, the older you get, the more you need your father, (Wideman, 1994).

This is consistent across all three sites. Sampson & Laub (1993) so too argue for a deeper understanding of the role of absent fathers in providing a turning point in men's narrative identities and subsequent criminal behaviour. McAdams (1989) also expresses the view that these type of narratives require a unique integration of past, present, and anticipated future. So what happens when there is no anticipated future as expressed by 'B' (Com) and 'R'(Ba)? Where does that take them in relation to a crime free future? 'R' (Ba) does not see his father as a stable influence in his life and has no ready-made image to construct a story of involvement.

R (Ba)            Not having a father is bad. I don't love him and he don't love me. I don't want nothing from him. All he's done is bring pain to my family. I've taught myself not to care, its survival.

Men like 'R (Com)' who has never known the love of a father only has a model of complete absence resulting in rejection and anger. In doing so he has also decided that his father doesn't deserve any love from him. It is clear that absent fathers have a significant impact on the lives of their sons who feel at times lost, and bereft of any sense of belonging. It could also be that the level of anger based on issues of abandonment pushes some black men to creating their own rules in relation to their manhood. Although not conclusive, this section highlights that experiencing positive fathering may result in some black men making choices away from engaging with crime. But for some of those interviewed there is a 'disconnect' between these 'lost sons' and their fathers, where there is a lack of a secure family network.

It could be argued that for black men to desist from crime, they must overcome not just external barriers, but the internal battles that lurk in the sub-conscious as a consequence of seeing the world in a negative way. The continuing separation from father and their children, then become a battle ground, played out on the streets, culminating in levels of extreme social disorganisation, where spaces occupied by some black men become toxic and dangerous places to be. One marked difference in the wider experience of the pain of 'father absence' was rooted in notions of distance. For example in the US the sheer distance between prisons, combined with the cost of travel, made it impossible for some families to stay connected. On the other hand men who were HMP Grendon felt stigmatised and shamed by being in a therapeutic community, and tended to distance themselves from family and loved one. Interestingly, many of those interviewed in the community in spite of not having restrictions of space chose to disconnect fully from their fathers and their children, for a variety of reasons ranging from fear of rejection, reprisals, and the longevity of separation.

It may be in the improvement of how black men see themselves in relation to their fathers absence is one way of transcending negative self-expectations brought about by their absent parent. How then does the issue of father absence impact on the wider issue of black men's self-concept? Furthermore, how does the notion of a poor self concept for black men increase or decrease their propensity to commit themselves towards the trajectory of their desistance? Akbar (1991) argues that black men must structure their world in such a way that they are constantly reminded who they are and what they want to be. Hill (1992) also argues that black men must create, develop, and sustain and transform their lives that will address those needs that have suffered at the instigation and maintenance of 'black invisibility'.

He further argues that any model designed to address these issues must penetrate the racialised norms which permeate society, and in turn, subordinates black men. Allen (2001) argues that individuals possess many self-concepts that operate in particular situations producing multiple self-conceptions. He further argues that black men should develop a more resilient self-concept that enables the transcendence of external importations of a history of 'white oppression' and 'black subordination'. However for many of those interviewed, the feeling of 'invisibility' in prison, in the lives of their families, and well as the communities they came from, was acute. The concept of invisibility was put forward by African American novelist Ralph Ellison. Ellison (1947) states, 'I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who ' haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fibre and liquids - and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible; understand, simply because people refuse to see me, (p 7). Ellison's notion of invisibility becomes a metaphor for how black men perceive their self-concept to be in the eyes of some white people, as illustrated by 'C (Gr)'.

C (Gr)            They're not letting me be black. They're not letting me have my culture.  
                          They're trying to take that away from me.

'C (Gr)' feels the control over the projection of his black identity is not within his grasp and is being eroded. Porter and Washington (1979) argue that black men tend to define aspects of their identity with regard to economic and social status issues, but use the black community as a frame of reference for their self-esteem and worth.

If 'C (Gr)' is separated from the black community, then it is understandable that he is fearful of having his sense of identity eroded in a predominately white environment such as a prison.

According to Demo and Hughes (1990) being a black man in a white society means occupying a subordinated racialised status within society, as 'W (Com)' comments,

W (Com)            I'm a black man. Not a white man. My family is black. The community I lived in was black. That's all I know. So why do I feel I'm not treated equal? You tell me. My parents came here from abroad to do better, but I don't feel I've done better. I don't feel like a proper man. Being a black man never feels like being a proper man. You're always fitting into someone else's agenda. Why should I always have to do that? White people don't fit into our way of doing stuff.

'W (Com)' sees acquiring a positive black self-concept may enable him to transcend negative social expectations. 'S (Com)', also highlights how the pressure to assimilate can remove traces of a positive black identity,

S (Com)            When I came to prison I was the only black person on the induction wing. I could tell straight away that the ethos of this place was that they want you to fit in with white people.

‘S (Com) highlights how being a minority person in a prison can be a very isolating experience based on having to contend with being both a prisoner, as well as being a minority person in the institution itself. Encountering problems, arising from stereotypical judgments based on cultural differences, and a general lack of understanding of black male social reality is also revealed by ‘D (Gr)’,

D (Gr)            I know that I’m supposed to be here to look at what I’ve done, but I didn’t know that I would lose my identity. Being a black man is important to me. I don’t want to give that up for no-one. Being black keeps me grounded and gives me a sense of pride that white people can’t take away from me.

‘D (Gr)’ reveals, like others that at times the negation of their cultural heritage compounds an already deep sense of isolation and loneliness within the ethos of the prison regime. Like many of those interviewed black men occupy several differing linguistic communities - street, cultural and prison. They all struggled in negotiating the language of authority and power within both prison and the community. ‘L (Com)’ illustrates the importance of having language as a sense of personal power

L (Com)            As black men we speak differently. My parents were from the Caribbean. They spoke different and it affected the way I spoke. I also grew up on the streets and we speak different there too. In here you can only speak that way in front of others that understand it. My language is part of who I am. If you take that away from me, I feel I would be lost.

The use 'street slang' and black vernacular enabled black men to both speak and express freely. In essence the participants expressed the importance of not having to defend their racial or cultural identity when immersed in their own linguistic communities. 'N (Ba) states,

N (Ba)           As an African American from the south, my accent differs from other African American's, but to white people we all sound the same. In fact we are stereotyped because of how we speak. The police think we're all rap artists. Bullshit!

'N (Ba) highlights that even if there is recognition of having a different linguistic patterning, white people do not make the distinction. Wilson (1991) argues that black man like 'N (Ba) with poor self concept will be motivated by self alienation, exhibit an ignorance of his blackness, engage in hedonism that will manifest in an erosion of positive masculine feelings. So too, 'A (Ba)' sees being in an exclusively white environment whilst serving time in prison as a factor that forced him to conceal a sense of his black identity and pushed it underground.

A (Ba)           Whilst inside I was aware of being in a majority white male prison where there was a minority of black or ethnic inmates. Because they didn't understand me I've had to change the way I spoke and the way I socialised.

The negation of 'A (Com)'s cultural heritage made him feel invisible. Those experiences have had a profound effect on how he attained a positive self-concept on release from prison. In essence he had to operate as one thing in prison and another in the community.

The lack of consistency in terms of self-concept would suggest that men like 'A (Com)' at times would struggle to know which identity would be deemed positive in relation to re-entering the community. Here 'R (Com)' talks about how his Rastafarian beliefs are compromised and sees himself as becoming 'de culturalised', when he was in a predominately white prison regime,

R (Com)            Psychologically I've been deculturalised because I have limited access to my culture. Rastafarian is a subculture when you're in prison that you're been denied. The first thing I heard when I came here was that you couldn't speak my language because they say it's aggressive. I've seen white inmates get more privileged jobs and get out of the system easier.

'R (Com)' sees the system as unfair and has a clear understanding that when his difference is visible it is seen as subversive, which is similar in orientation to many black men in HMP Grendon. Here we see that the inability to share thoughts, be listened to, or to feel understood, generates the kind of internal oppression that all too often leads to isolation and withdrawal. This can and does develop internal negative perceptions of 'self'. This 'absence of being' is made worse by being held captive inside a racialised system that treats black men differently to white men. Goggins (1996) argues that the process of discovery and appraisal of one's talents, character, relationship to the cosmos, and purpose is the basis for one's sense of self is best rooted within a framework that recognises a historical past free from white oppression. Here 'R (Com)' reflects on life as a black prisoner.

R (Com) As black people we can be lawyers, doctors, and teachers, it may take a long time but you can succeed. But I do know it's going to be hard, as white people don't really want us to succeed. However, I'm not going to let that stop me from pursuing my dreams. I've come too far to turn back now.

'R (Com)' clearly sees that achievement is possible and begins to envision a new future where they will be treated equally within a society that has traditionally created disadvantage and blocked opportunities for him. By reframing and altering a worldview that is restrictive and closed then there may be more of an openness to consider new choices in relation to the journey towards desistance. Spence, (2010) also argues that black men need to have space in which they do not have to defend their racial existence or humanity. Spence further advocates that this space is essential for building a reconstructed black identity, defined in terms of a black man's own vision on how he should be. Most of the participants in both the UK and US expressed the view that the impact of being held within a racist environment in prison drove the need to be part of a culturally diverse community in the prison itself, and at times exclude themselves from mainstream activities that at time were pathologised by the prison itself. 'W (Gr)', 'Y (Gr)', 'P (Gr)' and 'T (Ba), have a view on this:

W (Gr) It's hard when you're not around your own people. It's not that I don't like the white guys here, but it's not the same as being with your own.

- Y (Gr) I had racism at school, when I left school, and I get it in here. It wears you down, and makes you forget who you are. Although there's a few of us in here, you can't deal with the crap you have to face. They just don't get us.
- P (Gr) Too much racism in here. It's subtle though. I get on with the white people here, which ain't that bad. But we don't get our food, books, or learn anything about our history and culture.
- T (Ba) In the US we have a history of segregation. In the schools, in the community, in church, in society. We grow up not mixing. I didn't make the rules. It's just the way it is. All I've known is white people treating me differently. I feel that's why I began to act differently. They saw me as evil and bad, so that's what I did, act wild.

These black men's combined narrative illustrates the subtle aspect of racist practices that can go undetected by a regime that does not see its expression, or impact on black men. It is also evident that a majority white prison population or a regime predominately run by white people was seen as an inhibiting factor for some interviewees who struggled to integrate into the wider prison ethos. Very often the issues presented by black men in prison appear to be no different from those of other prisoners and are therefore often misinterpreted, not addressed or dismissed. More importantly the experience for black men in this area is uniform, but differs only according to the harshness of the regime, not be geographical location. In essence racism does not discriminate because of distance.

However, coping strategies do differ according to where the individual is located within their respective community.

S (Com)            I need to be around my own people. It makes me feel better. White guys don't have to worry about that as there's more of them than us.

'S (Com) also highlights that having a sense of community is also about numbers. Even if there are a few black men amongst a small group of white men, it can erode a sense of belonging, as the minority group feels they are now part of a 'subordinate community. Also as important was that some black prisoners in HMP Grendon at times suppressed both cultural features of their identity on account of being stereotypically labelled as 'yardie', 'gangster', 'thug' and so forth. This suppression forced many of them to 'opt out' of programmes and other related services important for their rehabilitation, as the negation of their racial and cultural identity is a risk they were not prepared to make. What this situation revealed is that the prison environment places additional strain on how to cope with this type of labelling.

Where being located in community networks can enable black men to retreat into the comfort of their darkness. Dubois (1938) argues that black men who are constantly defined in the gaze of others will end up in a state of confusion. For men who occupy an oppressive space, stripped of identity and status, the search for a space just to be, can become a priority. Hence many black men interviewed in HMP Grendon, Birmingham, and Baltimore retreated into their blackness, with others who shared the same worldview. This retreat provided a comforting experience away from the constant defense of their racial and cultural identities.

The importance here that for those black men who successfully desist, being validated for who you are is an important feature that helps when returning to friends, family and in the turn community, where there are no judgments, combined with not having to defend who you are, what you eat, what you listen to, or how you express your cultural and racial identities. ‘T (Ba)’ falls back on his faith as a way of bolstering his self-concept,

T (Ba)            My faith as a Christian is what brings me peace and it helps me to become a calmer person. I got tired of walking around with hatred in my soul and needed a different outlet. Having a faith goes way beyond my colour.

                         However, the way black people worship God is different, so we still get viewed with suspicion. No-one really questions white people’s beliefs.

‘T (Com)’ highlights the important of having a faith as strengthening his self-concept, whilst at the same time revealing a paradox. Namely, he feels that white men are seldom if ever challenged about their right to conform or integrate into groups of black men. Not seeing oneself reflected in a prison regime or community that is racialised can have a detrimental effect in the way that some black men perceive themselves in relation to others. The recurring issue here is one of ‘invisibility’. Invisibility is defined as ‘feeling that one’s genuine persona is not seen, respected, or considered of value’, (Franklin 1993:23). Many of those interviewed talked about the impact of black or racialised ‘invisibility’ throughout their lives and how this experience left them feeling powerless. This in turn had inhibited many of their desires to be compliant within a society that they cited as creating the conditions to keep them in a subordinated position, as illustrated by ‘W (Gr),

W (Gr) I'm tired of the way there was nothing for us. No food like ours, no books, nothin'. Makes me sick. I'm a black man, so why can't they treat me like a human being? Tired of bein' stereotyped.

'W (Gr)' talks about being continuously bombarded with negative images of himself that fed into already created negative stereotypes. Therefore, if the cultural and racial identity of black men is driven underground, then their subordination by white men will be inevitable.

'R (Com)' however takes the view that being invisible or hiding his true self is a better option than having his blackness judged.

R I can't show who I really am. They might see me as too black. You know what happens then? It's like they don't see us as black men, until we do something wrong.

'R (Com)' reveals something even more disturbing. If black men suppress their identity for fear of being judged, the resulting outcome will by default, maintain and sustain a 'colour blind' approach to both their prison, social, and cultural reality that makes the oppressive nature of racism both hard to detect and see. This may then push their level of 'invisibility' into a psychic space, making some black men angry and reactive. Establishing acceptance and a feeling that one is a person of worth plays a significant role in countering notions of invisibility, especially within the TC and the community, both in the UK and Baltimore.

However, 'Y (Gr)' reminds us of the importance of understanding, not just acceptance of one's racial and cultural identity, which is central to maintaining a positive self-concept.

Y (Gr)            It's harder for us. I have to put my culture aside and adopt the British culture in order to survive. Because a lot of people in here do not understand my background or my culture, they think Jamaica is only about drugs and smoking weed, that's all. So there is a limited view or expectation from somebody with my background.

Hearing and validating black men's stories told through their own words reaffirms a sense of humanity that will enable them to consider different ways of constructing new and improved being that could act as enhancing factor towards their desistance. However, for some black men the desire to stop playing the fool for the sake of gaining acceptance from white men, who want them to be non-questioning, can and does push many further into a state of liminality, (Turner 1969). 'Invisibility' and 'colour blindness', work hand in hand to create a level of internal distress for black men who can spend a significant amount of time trying to get white people to see them. 'I (Ba) has a more confrontational view on the issue,

I (Ba)            Fuck white men. They think I'm bad, then that's what I'll be. I ain't gonna surrender who I am coz of them. Yeah I like my gangster rap, reggae an' shit, but that's part of my culture. They ain't gonna take it away from me, no way.

'I (Ba) projects a self-fulfilling prophecy, where the stereotypical assumptions about black men will prevail. The need to become 'visible' at all costs would suggest that for men like 'I (Ba) 'Invisibility' is neither fictional nor made up, but is more of an option not to be considered, even if it leads towards an increase in criminal activity.

Nyati                    Pure stereotypes. That's all we're seen as. Yeah I know I did wrong, but white men do wrong things too. Here in the US, its white people who take the big decisions, not us. But we're still as the bad ones.

Many participants saw black stereotypes as leading to white people feeling a direct 'threat' from assumptions that were not only distorted, but designed to create blocked opportunities in crucial areas of their lives, both in prison and the community post release. Steele and Aronson (1995) defines this as a 'stereotype threat'. They define a 'stereotype threat' as, 'being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group', (1995:797). They further suggest that stereotypes can disrupt personal performance, produce doubt about one's abilities, and cause an individual to dis-identify with one's ethnic group. A term used to identify the actual features of the stereotype threat is 'self-handicapping', which is a defensive strategy by which black men erect barriers to their performance to provide attributions for failure. As Steele and Aronson reasoned, this identity distancing reflects a desire not to be seen through the lens of a racial stereotype. As this 'stereotype threat' arises from negative expectations black men at worst can underperform if the situation brings attention to their threatened identity. W (Gr) highlights this position,

W (Gr)            Sometimes I have to play fool to catch wise. When I'm with the other black guys and I can be myself, but if they see us all talking together they think we're plotting something. They don't do that with the white guys.

In other words, black men's identities like W (Gr) can become threatened when stereotypes are invoked, either blatantly or subtly, in a range of settings such as prison or in the community. Situations in which black men believe that his ability in a stereotypical way will be evaluated can create a strong sense of group identity and 'stereotype threat'. 'Stereotype threat' may also lead to distraction and loss of motivation which, in turn, can negatively affect black men's performance. If black men expect to do poorly at something, they might not be able to perform as well as when confidence is high. These experiences highlight that activating gender stereotypes can undermined positive masculine identity development for black men. The battle to counter stereotypes for black men was on-going and was managed badly. As articulated by 1 (Ba), R (Ba), and S (Com),

I (Ba)            They think I'm a bad man, so I act like one. It don't serve no purpose to act cool, if you ain't treated like that.

R (Ba)            Damned if you do, damned if you don't. Don't make no difference if you act proper, you're still gonna get treated like a piece of shit.

S (Com) I got treated like shit in school, on road, and now prison. How is a man supposed to be positive if the only treatment you get is negative? I ain't gonna let them push me around. I'm not a dog.

'I (Ba)', 'R (Ba)', and 'S (Com)' reveal how at times they played up to the stereotype as an act of defiance, when they felt tired of being judged by others. The significant problem associated with black stereotypes was how the media used, promoted, and maintained them. Some of the participants argued that the press prejudiced the public's perception of them by distorted or exaggerated reporting of their cases.

It could be argued that black men with poor self-concept, who feel powerless and disconnected from themselves and each other at times can result in a disabling of motivation towards personal change, a central tenet of the trajectory towards desistance. How can this state of affairs be challenged by black men themselves? Sanyika (2001) sees the need for initiation of black males and goes on further to argue that the lack of 'a confirming community' leaves the individual stranded in a liminal state. Once again it is evident that the experiences of living in a racialised context is uniform, consistent, and omnipresent for black men in this thesis. A new ontological position may be required here if black men are to move beyond the confines of a racist construct that blights their lives. Asante (2002) cites a move away from Euro-centric hegemonic knowledge into a grounded form of Afro-centricism that may start to bring some significant change within the current 'misplaced consciousness' of men of African descent.

Hare (1985) suggests that there is a need to develop African centred ‘rites of passage’ programmes and ceremonies as a counter to the socially reactive way many black youths live their lives. P (Com) , T (Ba), and I (Ba) reflect on the important of culture and history in their lives,

P (Com)            I didn’t learn about my culture and history at school. If I did I probably wouldn’t have ended up involved in badness.

T (Ba)             What little I knew about black people came from my parents who were involved with the Civil Rights movement.

I (Ba)              I didn’t really go to school. I learned about my history from people on the streets, but it didn’t mean shit, as it never helped me get a job or anything constructive, so I didn’t see it as important.

However, the exposure to different worldviews and historical legacies if not handled correctly can create confusion amongst black men as highlighted by ‘P (Com)’, ‘I (Ba)’ and ‘T (Ba)’. On one hand they’re are told that black history will be a tool for liberation and challenge in relation to hegemonic assumptions, but the reality of the imposition of white privilege undermines any positive momentum towards desistance. Once again there is a uniformity of experience which suggests black oppression is constant wherever black men reside. As ‘N’ (Com) and J (Ba) recounts,

N (Com)            Sometimes I get confused about who I am. I'm a black men in a white society, but I don't know anything about my past. All the black men I know are involved in street runnings. I've read a bit, but I need to know more.

J (Ba)             it don't make any difference what you know. You're black and that's it. We were born slaves and we're still slaves. The difference is we're slaves to drugs, money, badness, and all that shit. White people still control us, but now they control our minds, which is worse than our bodies.

Both N (Com) and 'J (Ba) highlights that in order for black men to begin to create a new template for living, they will have to disrupt that part of their journey which is still controlled by the racist constructs that continues to subordinate them. Challenging negative values and codes of behaviour must therefore become a priority for black men. Developing a stronger sense of being black and male involves learning how to organise their world, make appropriate decisions, and create meaning and purpose from things that affect their lives. Under the oppressive conditions of society, code of the streets and prison, many black men find themselves in situations where they have internalised masculine scripts and definitions of self, and coping styles that is restricting the trajectory towards desistance (Anderson, 1999). Black men need to develop a sense of identity that is grounded in their own soul and is not simply a reaction to racism or to stereotypical roles he is expected to act out. Spence (2006) and Hill-Collins (1986) advocate that space where one doesn't have to defend who one is should be enshrined within the overall ethos of any institution that prides itself on good race relations. ‘

P (Com)' comments,

P (Com)           Why can't we have more things for black people in this jail? It's the same in all the other jails I've been. It's like they don't care about what we need.

'L (Gr)' expresses the desire to be part of a culturally diverse community in prison but also recognises that some white people may be interested to. Could giving white prisoner's access to black culture provide a tipping point for more regime sensitivity towards black needs?

L (Gr)           We should be able to listen to our music, learn about our history and culture. There's also some white guys in here who wanna know about our culture as well.

'L (Gr) has an interesting proposition, by expressing the view that white prisoners appropriating black culture, could assist validating his own desires to have his culture recognised. 'I (Ba) and 'T (Ba) however, highlight how white appropriation of black culture can at times make it difficult for black men to develop a strong culturally appropriate identity and positive sense of self. The lack of seeing oneself in a positive light may be responsible for driving many black men back to the street corners, where in spite of engaging in dangerous and risky activities, there is a sense of the familiar, which creates a sense of safety and belonging.

T (Ba)           On release you're hungry to learn about your culture, but there is nothing in the community to help you, as most of the projects are run down and don't offer

stuff to ex-offenders. Also a lot of black projects are at times run by black people, but controlled by white funders.

I (Ba) Black history to me is like what the Chinese do. They never serve you real Chinese food. Most of the stuff we get told is what white people want us to know. If you can't read, how do you know what's in books about us. Most of the history books are written by white people. So they can see how we are from their version of events.

Important here is the understanding of the importance that the ownership, production, and distribution of one's own image and cultural context is important to black men, both in the UK and US context, in community and prison alike. Many of those interviewed expressed the wish to see African centred processes in operation whilst in prison. Again, in the UK and US, the desire to be free of the oppression of white men, created a unified cultural position of wanting to shed the attachment to their country of origin. However, whereas in the US the term African American is enshrined in the vernacular of communities and the consciousness of America, the UK constituents felt that black had limited use in terms of positive perception. Therefore, there was less emphasis on a term that defined notions of blackness, but more of a cultural identification with either African or Caribbean roots, expressed through cultural activities such as music, dance, and literature. The need to develop an 'African centred worldview' as a way of countering racism was universally accepted as both a counter cultural response, combined with positioning it as an act of defiance for not being or 'acting white'.

### 7.3 African Centred Worldview

Oliver (1989) sees African centred socialisation as an interactive process that promotes values of love of self, via awareness of one's African cultural heritage as the conduit. Developing a stronger black self-concept must involve the re-organisation of damaging beliefs and values. Since the late 1960s, African-American psychologists have been examining the development of ethnic awareness as a culturally based empowerment process that reaffirms self-worth and enhances personal efficacy in black men. Karenga (1968) created a set of values that has become enshrined in the movement towards African centred rites of passage. The following principles underpin his theory, which are used across the world in communities that feel that African values have more to teach and offer than engaging with a system that continues to marginalise black aspirations:

1. Umoja (Unity) - Striving and maintaining unity within the family, community, nation, and race
2. Kujichagulia (Self-determination) - Defining own needs, goals, aspirations, etc
3. Ujima (Collective work/Responsibility) - Collective working designed to solve problems in maintaining the community
4. Ujamaa (Cooperative economics) - Community centred enterprise. Recycling community monies.
5. Nia (Purpose) - Build, develop, and cultivate position in the community.
6. Kuumba (Creativity) - Improving the community intrinsically and aesthetically
7. Imani (Faith) - Steadfast determination and belief in ourselves

Karenga (1968) suggests a shift in the values acquired by black men that have been shaped by a history of racist oppression may offer a solution.

However, the impact of white oppression that leads to black subordination may push African centred approaches that will assist black men's desistance to the margins. This was particularly noticeable in HMP Grendon where prisoners felt that asserting an African centred approach to their prison reality would label them even further. In essence this is 'double consciousness' personified (Dubois, 1938). As 'BB (Ba)' argues,

BB (Ba)            I'm a Muslim. I know my African heritage, but it doesn't help you survive the white man's onslaught of oppression in relation to your soul. If they have your soul they have your mind.

'T'(Ba) also highlights that well intentioned African values are, they are not strong enough when dealing with racist oppression. He states,

T (Ba)            My parents taught me about Africa and I grew up with feeling proud of my past, but my experiences with white people who didn't understand or respect my history made me realise that it makes no difference what you believe in. Once a nigger, always a nigger.

Both 'BB (Ba)' and T (Ba)', see knowledge of Africa as positive, but acknowledge it's not being able to arrest the onslaught of racism. 'J (Ba) so too sees the futility of acquiring a new value system, by confronting the reality that the power of the system outweighs anything that a cultural value system might offer.

J (Ba)            Out on the streets Africa don't count for anything. This is America. The only colour that matters is green. I know my ancestors were great, but slavery got in the way. So how I see it knowing about my ancestors ain't goin to help a brother deal with the Ku Klux Klan, the police, courts, the prisons, or another gang.

'J (Ba) reminds us that a history of racial subordination clearly makes black men more vigilant and defiant in the face of continuing and sustainable pressure coming from forces designed to keep black men down. Having to seek permission, gain access, go through intermediaries, and negotiate with gatekeepers clearly has a negative impact. Human beings who are denied a voice will speak without fear of recrimination, others will break unjust laws, whilst freedom will be the pursuit of individuals who refuse to obey the dictates of those in power whose motivation is to control and oppress. Central to this proposition is in the way the black men in this thesis produced and produce change. Without a clear, precise, and focussed approach to challenging power within society, it may be that some black men will merely replicate a reactionary approach to our oppression, and not a transformative one. L (Com) brings home a stark reality echoed by many black men in this study.

L (Com)            I can't be arsed to try and change things. Where am I supposed to  
Go to change who I am?

For black men like L (Com) to seek transformation as a way of transcending their subordination, they must seek transformative spaces where the interrogation of the obstacles and barriers to freedom are given voice, complete with the development of an action plan designed to push a counter narrative into a strategy for change. This strategy must not replicate a structure that has keeps black men down, but instead create a more equitable and empowering way to function and live in a society that still privileges different groups over each other. Prison does not seem to offer that space. Likewise, the tough inner city communities of Birmingham and Baltimore seems to offer no respite from the constant struggle for validation inside a racialised social structure.

P (Gre)                      It's hard out there. Being a black man inside a white system means that when you rebel you end up inside like me.

Black men like P (Gre) may require a greater level of self investigation into the different ways they experience the everyday world from their position in society and how that impacts on their relationships with white men. Therefore, the complexities of black men in prison and community must also be more fully comprehended. Nowhere is this more important than in expanding the understanding and perspectives around Desistance studies that have routinely focused on issues such as family links, employment prospects and moving away from criminal friends, but have said less about the structural issues that might facilitate or impede the transition of black men to the status of more mainstream members of civil society.

Yet, in light of the interaction between 'agency' and 'structure' in producing processes of desistance, a consideration of racialised social structures and the implications of changes in structures is clearly of some importance here. Gadd and Farrall (2004) argue that the 'risk-based' criminal careers literature is so preoccupied with statistical prerogatives that it often makes generalizations that are either vague or not typical of any particular case existing in reality. Similarly, Maruna (2010) argues that reintegrating prisoners back into the community that act as a form of justice ritual that are meant to reaffirm and strengthen the wider moral order. N (Ba) has a cautionary point,

N (Ba)                      The community should be a place to change, but hell, we're all in the same struggle. So what can they do. They're trapped just like me

One way to ensure that men like N (Ba) thrive may be for community members to play a key role in the reintegration rituals themselves, hence strengthening the possibility of building social capital for black men. To do so 'culturally competent' services will be required to do the majority of actual reintegration work. However, if the strict controls in prisons, where the maintenance of white privilege becomes the dominant feature in many black men's experience of incarceration, it is questionable whether the community will be able to mount a credible challenge to racialised blocked opportunities. A deeper questioning of the role the building of social capital plays in assisting black men to desist is relevant here.

#### 7.4 Social capital and desistance

Rose and Clear (1998) argue that it is commonly accepted that in the absence of effective controls, crime and disorder flourish. They further argue that controls operate at the individual, family, neighborhood, and state levels; and the safest neighborhoods are thought to be those in which controls work at each of these levels. As stated previously in this research the racialisation of criminal justice processes can and do impact on all of the categories mentioned above. How do the racialised state social controls that are typically directed at individual behavior have important secondary effects on family, neighborhood structures and the desistance trajectory for black men reentering the community after release from prison? H (Com), N (Gre), and A (Ba) have some insight,

H (Com)                      In and out of prison the system gets you. If ya black turn back.

N (Gre)                      You can't get a job, place to live, you can't do shit. Although I'm in prison, there ain't nothin' here for me either. It's crap.

A (Ba)                      When I came out it was worse than it was before I went in. So what  
Did I come back to? Nothin, absolutely nothing!

Thus, at the ecological level, the side effects of policies intended to fight crime by controlling black men may exacerbate problems that lead to crime in the first place. How does this state of affairs affect the trajectories towards desistance for black men if the journey is disrupted as previously outlined? 'Social capital' therefore refers to the social skills and resources needed to effect positive change in neighborhood life. It is the aspect of structured group that increases the capacity for action oriented toward the achievement of group goals.

Goals are accomplished by transforming resources gathered in one forum for one purpose, into resources for another forum and for another purpose. High levels of social capital augment the ability and efficacy of the community to sanction transgressors. Sampson and Laub (1993) concluded that social capital in institutional relationships dictates the salience of informal social control at the individual level. More important, they found that trajectories of crime and deviance can be modified by these bonds. It follows that communities rich in social capital also will experience relatively low levels of disorganization and low levels of crime. Social capital relies upon (and in turn promotes) human capital. Human capital refers to the human skill and resources individuals need to function effectively, such as reading, writing, and reasoning ability. It is the capital individuals acquire through education and training for productive purposes, (Hagan, 1994). In a sense, social capital contextualizes human capital (and vice versa) because neighborhoods rich in social capital exert more control over individual residents, thus helping to produce more highly educated, employable, and productive members of the community. But what happens if there are no social networks, support structures, tools for change, etc. M (Com), D (Gre) and J (Ba) reveal more compelling testimony that contests the possibility of black men being able to build successful social capital on account of the wider erosion of the communities racialised social structure.

M (Com)                      Shops are shut down. Churches don't want us, and our families don't want nothing to do with us.

D (Gre)                        I can't do nothin' from here. I've got so long to go. So I can't do anything to help me get back in the community. That's in the hands of others

J (Ba) I got in trouble coz the way I had no sense of community. It ain't changed.  
All that's happened is I've got older.

As their truths would testify neighborhoods deficient in social capital are areas conducive to crime because they are characterized by many individuals who are undereducated, unemployed, and more likely to be criminal. Events that disrupt the relational networks and systems so fundamental to the development and maintenance of social capital reduce the neighborhood's ability to self-regulate and in turn will invariably affect the capacity of black men to develop a coherent strategy regarding their desistance trajectories. It is my view that many disorganised communities have more networks disrupted through incarceration and the impact felt may be more devastating than flourishing communities on account of having a lower threshold due to depleted supplies of social capital. It could be argued that the rebuilding of social capital requires a conceptual framework from which to build the kind of human resources required to aid and compliment the trajectories towards black men's desistance.

Societal constraints and individual choices in the process of desisting from criminal activity may depend on opportunities and resources to support black men in relation to desistance. Considerations within the desistance process might see the acquisition of 'social capital' as a critical element in the process of transition from offender to desister. As argued previously social capital can provide opportunities and linkages to those aspects of society which can support a decision to desist, they may not be available to some black prisoners on release.

The issue of the acquisition of sufficient 'social capital' for it to be useful in a movement away from crime, raises a number of issues about the availability of social capital and other supports for desistance to, for example, members of marginalised groups, such as black men. Can black men therefore acquire sufficient social capital in prison to assist in overcoming the structural constraints which may operate as barriers to successful desistance on release? Are the opportunities to desist, and access to resources available to all whilst serving time in prison? What aspects of black men's life history, personal circumstances and social conditions make available recognisable opportunities to desist?

What influence, if any, does racism have on both the broader distribution of opportunities across society, and the ability to recognize them as such as opportunities to desist? By eroding employment and other related opportunities based on racism, incarceration may also provide a motivation and subsequent pathway back into crime. In this context, the experience of imprisonment by black men emerges as a key social division marking a new pattern in their lives. If black men have not been able to realise their potential as men or have not been guided to a place where they feel a strong social or community connection, then it is hard to see how they can vision a new future, if their current situation does not reflect optimism and light. The lack of social involvement, the persistence of family breakdowns through father absence, and increasing nihilistic tendencies articulated by some black men in this study would suggest that the understandings of desistance whilst in prison is patchy and requires more investigation. Akbar (1991) sees prison as a way of arresting black men's development and in doing so, destroys the type of consciousness required to live a crime free life. This next section therefore presents such a conceptual framework.

### 7.5 Conceptual Framework- The 'D' Code.

This conceptual framework suggests that the processes associated with black men's desistance are bound up in making successful 'transitions' within the confines of the racialisation of the criminal justice system. It is further argued that these transitions are situated and contextualised within the worldview of black men that is a result of the negative experiences they have faced within the criminal justice system. The data confirms that black men in this thesis understand that the criminal justice system treats them less fairly. The conceptual framework suggests that black men who do not build 'social capital' after being released from prison struggle with making positive transitions that in turn has a negative impact on their ability to desist. This assumption is based on the notion that an individual who is blocked from accessing the benefits of a racialised social structure, may continue to recede back into a life of crime. This conceptual framework therefore attempts to put forward the proposition that black men's desire to desist is part of an on-going 'rite of passage', that becomes a search for a reclamation of a 'new self', combined with finding a newly defined role in the village (community).

Van Gennep, (1968) argued the significance of a 'rite of passage' as a transitional stage of a man's life, acts as a process of pro-social transformation. Pinnock (1997) further argues that a 'rite of passage' is part of a wider process of community restoration and provides liberation for the returning offender, as well as providing much needed healing for the community who have been affected by destructive behaviours. Maruna (2010) also sees that ex-prisoner reintegration should focus on the development of notions of a 'rite of passage' as a symbolic element of 'moral inclusion', (Maruna 2010: 1).

It could be that key 'life events' and 'socialisation experiences' in adulthood can counteract, at least to some extent, the influence of early negative life experiences, and that desistance from criminal behavior in adulthood can be improved by strengthening strong social bonds in adulthood. However, the racialising experience of incarceration suggests there is a need to challenge white criminologist's assumptions in relation to the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process, before making any claims around black men's desistance as a whole. As part of a process of rehabilitation, incarcerated black men should engage with institutional processes and practices that are 'pro-social' that will not only challenge their criminal values, but also prepare them for life on the outside.

The outcome is that some black men may leave prison transformed by the experience, never to return again. In essence if prison can be effective, then desistance could be a natural outcome of positive rehabilitation and re-entry. Nonetheless, for other black men who are exposed to a criminal justice system that is racially oppressive then there may be a need to reframe the context in which they desist. Glynn (2005) argues that when black men have reflective time and space (whilst in prison), that not only can they change the way they think and act, but that space can form the basis of developing a new life strategy. Therefore, as stated previously prison becomes an important consideration for examining if the trajectory towards desistance for black men starts whilst in prison. The participants in this study who had desisted drew heavily of their experience of prison, as a significant factor that either hindered or enhanced their understanding and experience of the 'journey' associated with black men's desistance.

How then can black men begin to construct a new identity that will carry them forward towards a journey that will enable them to be crime free? And does the journey towards black men's desistance start whilst they are locked up? Is black men's desistance starting whilst in prison a realistic proposition when the barriers imposed seem out of their control? McNeill (2012) argues for a more interdisciplinary understanding of desistance and sees rehabilitation as a social project as well as a personal one. He further argues that desistance requires 'psychological rehabilitation' (which is principally concerned with promoting positive individual-level change in the offender). McNeil's perspective resonates with black men's trajectory towards desistance as there has to be recognition of the impact of invisibility, colour blindness, and white privilege has on the 'psychological rehabilitation' of black men.

This conceptual model of the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process argues that black men make sense of their lives according to the narratives available to them. Therefore, changing one's narrative requires embarking on a new journey, articulated through making significant and successful transitions. It is referred to in this context as 'The 'D' Code'. The 'D' Code has emerged from the research and is conceptualised here as a form of contemporary 'rite of passage', complete with a pre-determined set of rules, principles, or expectations that will enable black men to negotiate the barriers to their desistance based on the racialisation of the criminal justice systems. Through the introduction of processes designed to improve the qualities or characteristics to improve their 'self-concept', it may be possible for some black men to redefine notions of purpose and meaning that will transcend negative social expectations, as well as reincorporating them back into the 'village' they were removed from,

- *PURPOSE* – Black men should be encouraged to establish a clear sense of meaning and purpose that will enable them to ground who they are, where they're at, and where they want to be.
- *To do this would require intensive work around working on improving the damage that has been inflicted whilst being incarcerated. Engaging in activities such as learning about black history, combined with serving the community via volunteering, would also be encouraged.*
- *OWNERSHIP* – Black men need to be encouraged to take responsibility for shaping their journey in life, and to own its formulation, development, and implementation, beyond negative social expectations. This would involve black men studying and acquiring the skills and abilities required to become self-determined. In essence it is about enabling black men to undergo an intensive period of self work, designed to remove the shackles of institutionalization.
- *SUSTAINABILITY* – Black men need to be able to sustain the development of their journey in a transformative and holistic way, via the acquisition of a faith/cultural value system rooted in a reality that enables black men to manage negative social expectations.
- *EVALUATION* – Black men to regularly update, reframe, and rework aspects of their personal journey, using creative forms of expression that will enable the processing of new needs, thoughts, and visions required to transcend negative social expectations.

This new journey aims to push them beyond the boundaries of that scared child hiding in the corner, to a child who wants to explore new things without living in fear of taking risks. Like an adrenalin rush new desires, thoughts, and feelings need to push their curiosity to new heights, where mediocrity has no place in their lives. Like marathon runners they are poised to begin a long arduous journey where the route is mapped out, but their training whilst being locked up hasn't prepared them well. Black men need to become more philosophical, gain new wisdom, and acquire a mind not held captive by oppressive and dark forces.

The need for validation and self acceptance is more important than the emptiness of seeking the approval of others who oppress. Evident in those black men who had successfully desisted was in the improvement of their self-concept where they had spent time working out their 'status frustration', (Cohen 1965). In essence they have been able to:

- Connect a sense of meaning/purpose in their lives, combined with an achievable aspiration.
- Develop a framework for managing invisibility in their lives and created a sense of self and refused to allow themselves to be rendered invisible based on negative social expectations.
- Sought Elder's input and wisdom to satisfy their intergenerational hunger. The need for Wisdom tended to outweigh the material and externals of life. Many of those interviewed recognised the internal shifts in their consciousness and managed to move forward by seeing out elders who assisted them in untangling the anxieties and uncertainties that were generated by having to confront and challenge negative social expectations.

## **7.6 Contribution to the study of Desistance**

This study has contributed in many ways to the study of desistance as a whole. Firstly, the study has contested what many white criminologists know or don't know about the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process. It has highlighted how many black men face a dilemma in relation to their desistance that rests on the uncertainty about pursuing a new future (desistance), or to stay on the familiar road of re-offending after re-entry.

Secondly, the thesis has established that we need to reframe the understanding of the actual journey towards desistance for black men. A returning black prisoner who has transgressed and been placed in a 'den of shame', called prison, is seen very differently, based on the continuing onslaught of racialised processes that continues to blight their lives way beyond release. Maruna (2010) as stated previously argues that reintegration of prisoners back into the community requires well orchestrated rituals. He further states ' I argue that ex-prisoner reintegration , as it currently practiced, is one such failing ritual that should be re-examined', (pp 21). This research would suggest that Maruna's comments have some merit and highlights one of the overriding problems black men's desistance faces, namely the rituals associated with re-entry are empty, and in turn create more barriers towards the trajectory towards desistance. This emptiness is based on a series of systemic failures (structure) that restricts how the individual (agency) can actualise their journey through engaging with flawed rituals.

Thirdly, this research has demonstrated the barriers that need to be overcome both in and out of prison that black men face, would suggest there needs to be a revision of expectation, combined with envisioning new models for black men's desistance that will alleviate the negative impact of racialised criminal justice processes has on their lives. It could be argued that without a relevant and appropriate lens for looking at black men's desistance, which applies the same standards, values, judgments, and insights to that of white men, then criminology will fail to account for the role that race plays in thwarting black men's desire to be crime free. Fourthly, this research has provided a unique access into a world where few white criminologists have gone. This gives the outcomes a significant resonance in relation to the study of desistance as a whole, as it reveals a world previously unknown in the study of desistance.

Lastly, this thesis has revealed a flaw within the study of desistance. Put simply there are not enough black criminologists and, where they do exist, they are subjected to similar racialised barriers to those of black men in prison. It is this flaw that suggests that there is a greater need to call on the services of black researchers operating from an 'insider' perspective to provide some balance to the overrepresentation of the 'outsider' perspectives that do little to change the understandings and insights of the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process.

### **7.7 Recommendations for future investigation**

This chapter has highlighted several key areas of concern that need to be developed for future investigation:

1. To conduct a wider quantitative study into black men's desistance. This would enable a wider analysis to be undertaken, that would move beyond the confines of barriers for black men's desistance, and focus more attention on those factors that contribute to the understanding of those to those black men who have desisted.
2. To look critically at the desistance process and its relationship to re-entry for black men, and to consider what are the considerations with the intersection of the two.
3. To investigate 'life beyond desistance' for black men. Life beyond desistance in this instance is referred to as the 'Golden Fleece'. The 'Golden Fleece' rests on the assumption that although desistance is predicated on the notion of terminating one's offending, this in itself poses significant problems when looking at black men's desistance. Inasmuch, as once black men have desisted, it could be argued that the job of the criminologist is complete.

However, desistance may be only one facet of the desire to return to a normal and balanced life. To this requires the attainment of more than just terminating the criminal behavior

## **7.8 Summary**

This discussion looked at how the racialisation of criminal justice processes and the disproportionality of black men in both the UK and US criminal justice system has enhanced or hindered black men's journey towards desistance? It also considered how those experiences have blocked the path towards desistance for those same black men. It focussed on looking at how the slim economic opportunities and turbulent life styles of many of the participants in this inquiry have lead many of them into criminal activity and ultimately incarceration. This chapter also presented 'a conceptual model of black men's desistance' referred to as the 'D' Code. This conceptual model suggested that black men's desistance is bound up in making successful 'transitions' within the confines of the racialisation of the criminal justice system. It further argued that these transitions are situated and contextualised within the worldview of black men that is as a result of the negative experiences they have faced within the criminal justice system. It concluded by reflecting on the limitations on the study; its contribution to the study of desistance; and finally recommendations for future investigations.

The final chapter draws on the previous chapters and offers conclusions on the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process.

## CHAPTER EIGHT – OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

### 8.1 Introduction

This thesis suggests that the constructs of ‘differential racialisation’, in criminal justice systems draws attention to the ways in which the dominant society subordinates black men in response to the maintenance of white privilege as alluded to by black men in this thesis. This thesis further suggests that some black men’s experiences, insights, and understandings of the racialisation of crime/criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process are best understood by exploring how they themselves understand those experiences, which adds to the extant literature. Hill-Collins (2000) understands this position and cites when the validity of black women’s self-definition is created within a ‘safe space’ to talk freely, those same women begin to envision a new future free from oppression coming from white women.

The stories told during field research by the black male participants in this study likewise suggest that central to their journey towards their own desistance has been their awareness of how racism and racialisation of the society in which they live, and how that reality subordinates them, in engaging in a ‘safe space’ way of telling and knowing their stories. For many black men in this thesis ‘To desist or not to desist?’ was a constant throughout. This state of affairs was recurring dilemma for black men to face regarding the uncertainty about pursuing a new future (desistance), or to stay on the familiar road of re-offending knowing the racialised barriers they encounter at all levels of the criminal justice system may erode their capacity for change. dis-empower them.

How then did black men the black men in this thesis overcome this dilemma and make a choice that pushed them towards sustaining desistance and leading lives filled with new hope? In some cases it was the way in which some of them reframed the understanding of the actual journey of desistance. For many of those who took part in the study the label ex-offender did little to intimate that the journey towards desistance would be full of twists, turns, fears, obstacles, tests and ordeal. In the lives of those who no longer were involved in criminal activity they had overcome in the face of adversity and are seen as heroic and celebrated, via the ritualisation of that experience, that gave significant meaning in the eyes of the individual, their families, and in turn the community. By removing the stigma attached to such a journey, some black men had their journey towards desistance validated as less of a further punishment and more of one of symbolic heroism by the returning community. The journey of this research would also suggest that one of the overriding problems black men's desistance faces, is the rituals associated with re-entry are at times empty, which in turn creates more barriers towards the trajectory towards desistance.

This emptiness is based on a series of systemic failures (structure) that restricts how the individual (agency) can actualise their journey through engaging with flawed rituals. Even though some of the former prisoners in this thesis did undergo skills development training in preparation for work, they did not get work on release. They got social skills training; training on how to be a good parent; how to have healthy relationships; how to control their anger, etc without any work being done to remove or mitigate the stigma having been to prison. In short, the rituals were empty. The onus on black men to desist through the use of services designed to broker a qualitative change in their lives (personal transformation) were sadly lacking.

So how then do black men 'experience' this project of personal transformation? What does it mean for the onus of desistance to be placed on the ex-offender, without having any material means of re-incorporation? The ability or inability for black men to make the transition from ex-offender to member of the community requires the acquisition of a new value system, based on the principles of responsibility for self, family, and community, combined with the increase in social capital. However many black men in this inquiry felt 'trapped' and held captive in a society where they cannot actualise their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Transcending this liminality required making healthy transition into new state of being. Many black men interviewed also struggled to find a sense of purpose within their families, community, and the wider society and believed that criminal peers could provide them with what they needed post release. Similarly those men who were identified as primary desisters still relied heavily of the proceeds of criminality from other peers to survive.

At times as explored in this thesis some black men were written off as individuals who showed no interest or little motivation to engage in processes designed to assist them in some way. This research argues against the continuing negative labelling of black men as those set of assumptions and definitions are at times simplistic, not thought through, unhelpful and at times used as a technique designed to remove any responsibility from those professionals or Institutions who use those terms as throw away comments that continues to subordinate them.

The reaction to that situation at times meant that crime has for some black men become both a weapon of social opposition, combined with an increase in the construction of black 'hyper-masculinities'.

This position poses a serious challenge as to whether a contemporary 'rite of passage' designed to improve negative black 'self-concepts' or 'African centred socialisation', is a realistic option. The findings of this study suggested that the privileged position of criminology continues to render 'minority perspectives' invisible. Unnever and Gabbidon (2011), Russell- Brown (2002), and Phillips and Bowling (2003) all argue for the need to develop 'minority perspectives' within criminology, alongside the call for a 'black criminology'. Likewise, the black men in this inquiry found themselves constantly having to defend their 'racialised identities' throughout their engagement with, and journey through the criminal justice system. The need to challenge white privilege by validating the black contribution to criminology is also on-going, whilst occupying space with those who fear black assertion continues to throw up challenges. As an insider researcher I experienced the irony coming from the field of criminology that on one hand profits from identity politics by acknowledging there is disproportionality and overrepresentation of black men in the criminal justice system, but as the men in this inquiry attested there is little understanding or desire to see things change. This state of affairs lingers like a bad smell.

Many black men in this thesis believe there is not an appreciation of what it means to be black and a male in both UK and US society. They also believe the inner conflicts they experience grow out of living as a Black man with the recurrent theme of 'invisibility' and the consequences of managing its impact. This 'invisibility' was defined as an inner struggle with the feeling that one's talents, abilities, personality, and worth are not valued or even recognised because of the racialisation of their lives. Consequently, black men's reliance on the black community for recognition and validation may be adequate, but not sufficient, given to transcend negative social expectations based on the level of racism directed at them.

Manifestations of a negative black identity at earlier stages of many black men's lives with the absence of a father figure was also prevalent amongst participants. It was also explicit amongst the black men in this thesis that any notion of their racial identity is significantly influenced and impacted by experiences of white society. Equally as important was how the internalisation of a differing 'cultural ideology' or 'world view' amongst many black men means they must also investigate how to restructure their primary institutions to insure that they will internalise those values. In the case of Afrocentric socialisation the interactive process requires a re-structuring of values that emphasises 'love of self', 'awareness of traditional African cultural heritage', and a personal commitment to the economic political development of other people of African descent.

Moreover, it was expressed that Afrocentric socialisation might encourage some black men to define self and group-destructive behavior; (e.g., drug abuse, drug dealing, exploitation of other blacks, and violence), in opposition to the interests of the black community, (Asante 1980). In Baltimore, extreme violence, poverty, social neglect, and the acknowledgement of racialised oppression was clear, contentious, and impacted all sections of the community. As Alexander (2010) argues prisons here in the UK and US are in danger of becoming the new slavery as a way of maintaining white privilege to the detriment of black aspirations. In moving beyond the confines of colour blind criminology black men may be able to dream and envision of new reality, where defending their racialised identity is not an issue. Significant here is in the understanding of how the prison experience made many black men in prison feel pressurised by the prison code to resort to violence to prove their masculinity. Black men in the research also expressed the problems associated with not having a sense of self, of who they were, where they came from nor where they were going.

This has been the plight of the participants who felt they had been stripped of their identity. To re-frame the negative black masculinity of black men who are transformed by the impact of the criminal justice will require men who are willing to go through a process that will be uncomfortable, unfamiliar and exploring uncharted areas of their lives. The reason being is that black masculinity is a very complex and difficult issue that does not have a single solution. According to West and Zimmerman (1987), gender is a performed activity which is characteristic of situations and interactions. Based on cues and stereotypes, actors display certain genders within interactions, and perceivers interact on the basis of these expressions of gender. It is right to assume that different masculinities do not sit comfortable alongside each other as there are definite relations between them. Typically, some masculinity's are more honoured than others. Some may be actively dishonored. Some are socially marginalised. The research revealed complex, intricate social processes, and new patterns of masculinity emerged within some black men.

## **8.2 Desistance and Racialisation**

The research inquiry raised some important and significant issues for future investigation into the study of desistance as part of a wider contribution to the criminological discourse. The diversity of views, perspectives, and insights around desistance highlights the importance of the continuing struggle within the discipline to grapple with the complexities that hinder or enhance the pathways towards the termination point of offending. This situation is further complicated by the acknowledged absence of an accurate lens that addresses race, racism, and racialisation within the studies of desistance. This state of affairs has implications for criminology as it must do more to avoid subordinating theoretical ideas that differ from the so called mainstream.

The absence of a racialised context desistance must be contested, based on the disproportionality of black men within the criminal justice systems in both the UK and US, combined with the lack of visible profile and insights of black researchers and theorists who bring additional understandings that can challenge some of the traditional thinking around desistance. In the course of this research black men talked about the difficulty of being treated equal in their lives.

It could be argued that white men have little interest in talking to black men about the lived reality of crime, as the review of literature highlighted. It was apparent that many of those interviewed criticised some previous work with white researchers for cultural insensitivity towards them. To counter this position some black men expressed the view that they needed to develop a stronger black self-concept that would involve the re-organisation of damaging beliefs and values. In light of the findings of this research a new questioning has emerged; 'where should black men and desistance be located?'

A more multi-dimensional approach to understanding black men's experiences of criminal justice processing, and working within the criminal justice system is necessary in future research. A starting point could be the need to validate criminological data within the 'lived experiences' and embrace notions of black men's subjectiveness using interpretative methodologies. This should be combined by using processes of knowledge production by and for black men. What influence, if any, do racism, poverty, ethno-cultural group membership, etc. have on both the broader distribution of opportunities across society, and the ability to recognize them as such as opportunities for black men to desist?

It is also important that as part of a process of rehabilitation, incarcerated black men should engage with institutional processes and practices that are 'pro-social' that will lead to a challenge in their criminal values and behaviour, designed to increase their capacity to consider desistance. The ultimate outcome here is for those same black men to leave prison transformed by the experience, never to return again. In theory if prison is 'effective', then desistance should be a natural outcome of positive rehabilitation whilst incarcerated. However, for a criminal justice system that is racialised there may be a need to reframe the context in which black men can be rehabilitated, that can also lead towards desistance. Glynn (2005) argued that when black men have reflective time and space (whilst in prison), that not only can they change the way they think and act, but that space can form the basis of developing a new life strategy.

Engaging black men in processes that will liberate them from the pain of social neglect and denied access will play a significant role in taking them from a social position of being seen as a liability into the realms of being acknowledged as an asset to themselves, their families, and in turn the community. A journey towards desistance 'by which individuals come to know themselves and their purpose may assist the possibility for personal transformation and ultimately desistance to take place. By doing so black men could be reintegrated back into community and in turn the society without prejudice or labelling.

### **8.3 The Counter Narrative**

A recurring theme within the research was 're-entry' back to the community from prison. The inability for some black men to achieve legitimate success was based on blocked opportunities that at times pushed the potential of desistance further away.

When failing to gain employment, training, or continue with their education, many of those interviewed felt the only way to reclaim lost masculine pride was to adopt a survival mentality or ‘code of the streets’ where the street corner became the gateway to provide for their families. This position also had implications for their relationship with women, on account of unrealistic expectations coming from their partners, family, and children. This situation provided an additional level of strain that tended to bring out a layer of ‘hyper masculinity’ where black men subordinated women as a way of bolstering their masculinity in the eyes of their peers and the streets. When taking this position not only was the possibility of desistance impeded, but it damaged the relationship with community by default.

Sampson and Wilson (1995) see the systemic failure of the system on black men as creating the conditions that converts black men into reactionary beings, rooted within an ecological failure that strips them of securing a purpose in their community. With no sense of belonging legions of black men wander around aimlessly with little purpose and meaning to their lives. In capturing the experiences and privileging of the voices of black men, it was evident that their stories were in essence reflexive in orientation. Critics could argue that representing your story or ‘personal narrative’ is subjects to edits, omissions, and distortion. For many of the subjects of this inquiry the system was seen as the enemy and many saw their criminal behaviour as a ‘metaphor’ for defiance, much the same as slaves did. The understanding of marginality as a position and place of resistance that needs to be navigated if they are to liberate themselves from an oppressed social position.

As argued throughout this thesis many black men have been traditionally denied a voice and a stake within UK and US criminal justice system, there is a need to create a 'counter narrative' as an act of political transformation. Therefore, privileging the voices of black men in relation to desistance may be something for criminology to consider. This position would not abandon existing theories around race and crime, but instead would provide a complimentary framework designed to increase insights and knowledge in an under theorised area of criminology. The justification is borne out of the acknowledged negation of white criminologists to engage in a significant dialogue around issues of race and crime. It is only through a critical examination of black men's understanding of their behaviour can desistance be appropriately identified and understood. It was identified that a persistent weakness of previous research is its failure to examine how processes of racialisation in desistance do not privilege the voices of black men.

A researcher who is sensitive to the needs of black men, who desire them to be the 'authors of their own lives', is also an important consideration in enabling black men to speak free judgement or recrimination. The inability of black men to acquire a positive self-concept as a causal factor in the way black men engage in criminal activity gives white society the justification for extreme punishment. Researching with black men should be both political and transformative as a way of challenging the dominant narrative that places black men disproportionately in the confines of the criminal justice system. The difficulties for black men to challenge, address, and transcend their differential treatment could be partly to blame for the creation and sustainability of stereotypes of black masculine identities, as aggressive and threatening.

This distortion and absence of a racialised narrative for black men to flourish highlights a flaw and a significant gap within the current knowledge base and ultimately the understanding of black men in its widest context. For those black men who have both been labeled and stereotyped, there is a need for them to create a new template for living, as well as providing society with solutions that transcend hegemonic assumptions. A way to address this situation is to create a 'space' for black men to share their experiences on being involved in criminal activity, combined with the stories that explains how they terminated their offending (Desistance). Privileging the voices of black men would create new, and reframed 'life events' that have meaning and significance rooted within a symbolic, metaphoric, and allegorical context. The occupation of a different personal space to 'be' creates a newly constructed 'self' that could be articulated using performance as the conduit. Performance not only provides opportunity for 'self-reflection', but scope for transforming into a new 'constructed self'.

Glynn (2005) described how enabling black male inmates to explore and narrate their own social realities in dramatic form in prison assisted in confronting hostility, racism and opposition by white prison officers. Belton (1995) expresses the view that the duty of black men is to alter the relationship of power that makes them subordinate to white men. The real may lie in the construction of a criminology that deals with notions of intersectionality, in terms of race, class, gender, and sexuality. The black men in the research explored who they are; gang affiliations, attitudes towards violence; and how contact with the criminal justice system is having an impact on their masculinity. They highlighted that there are many characteristics and experiences that define black masculinity but their personal struggles to attain and define their manhood in relation to desistance is both misunderstood and under researched.

The research exposed the physical, mental, and structural conditions impacting on notions of manliness and manhood for black men. The research also highlighted some of the dilemmas of black manhood and how black men have developed coping mechanisms to assist them towards the trajectory towards desistance. The black men in the research also highlighted their frustrations, their desires for both male and class privilege, combined with a desire to have recognition as just men. The complexity of black men's lives, combined with the lived experiences of black masculinities therefore demands to be placed in a context not governed by white privileged theorising. The roles, definitions, notions, and theories of masculinity told through the eyes, the lives and experience of black men involved with the criminal justice system was a key driver throughout the research.

The thesis was critical of how black masculinity has been pathologised and labelled as 'bad-man', 'hyper-masculine', violent, and further argue that by denying black men's voices, negates the context of their resistance to oppression for a perceived loss of power and manhood in the wake of the whiteness that controls some aspects of their lives. Some black men in the research failed to see the problem of the dominant culture's norms of masculinity on their lives. Some of the men in the research argued that their masculinity must undergo a radical change to counter the construct of masculinity that white men feel is acceptable. It was also acknowledged that the masculinity of some of the black men in the research has been significantly undermined by a racist society that has eroded the self-identity of the black men. The resulting outcome has been to racially emasculate black men that in turn have led them to become subordinate to the dominant culture in hope of their being some acknowledgment of acceptance.

#### 8.4 CRT and desistance

A CRT of black men's desistance identifies that the perceptions and experiences of black men within the criminal justice system shapes their worldview and ultimately their motivation towards desistance as an agency choice. A CRT of black men's desistance argues that to fully understand black men's desistance, those experiences and perceptions must be located and situated within individual stories and a collective narrative that has been impacted on by racism, colour-blindness, white privilege, and invisibility. The cumulative impact of the previously mentioned symptoms have formed the backdrop through which the systemic way black men have been stigmatised, over-represented, leading to overt disproportionality within the criminal justice system. For black men it is in the belief that criminal justice processes are inherently racist, placing a significant barrier on the desire to desist from criminal behaviour.

The importance of a 'counter narrative' becomes an important way of validating and naming your own reality, as well as contesting and challenging white privilege. This in effect means that the counter narrative acts as catalysts for 'politicising' the struggle not just for black men's desire to desist, but more importantly as part of a wider campaign for social justice. Using culturally sensitive research methods where participants hear their own stories and the stories of others assist this process of transcending black subordination. Much the same as music and dance operated during slavery. By doing this black men can develop coping strategies, and respond more effectively to exploring pathways towards desistance. The findings within thesis would suggest that rarely are the social, political, and historical experiences from which black men have emerged taken into consideration. All of this is compounded by the absence of available academic information/data which is also a continuing, unaddressed problem.

Put simply black men's desistance is undermined by a criminal justice system that treats black men unfairly based on race. It may also be apparent that the promotion of stereotypes of black men can create the kind of psychic response that manifests in anger defiance, that when expressed becomes criminalised. The negative portrayal and labelling of black men via the media may also reduce the interaction black men develop with white institutions. Unable to find a place to be respected and validated, crime becomes a way of 'getting back' at a society that rejects you. It could be argued that black men offer more resistance in relation to their gendered enhanced racial subordination, based on early racial socialisation and the constraints of being negatively gender stereotyped. Central to any rehabilitative process is for individuals to make sense of their world and organise it, in a way that will enable them to terminate their offending and make different choices.

It may be right to assume that some black men may start the journey towards desistance (termination of offending) whilst being incarcerated and experience a transformation into a 'replacement self'. In prisons like the community, stories hold the key to memory and purpose. Everyone must participate and submerge themselves in stories to process the world around them, and make sense of it. Stories open up our world, boost imagination and give us self-knowledge. Without stories we cannot function adequately in understanding who we are and why we're here. Stories bind people together and allow each individual to better comprehend what their place is in the world, and how their place holds everything else together. Hearing and making their stories told through their own words reaffirms a sense of humanity that enables them to consider different ways of constructing new ways of seeing the world.

Likewise, the occupation of a different personal space to 'be' created a newly constructed 'self' that acted as part of a 'rite of passage' Within the findings in this thesis it is clear that the current positioning of black men within prisons provides very little outlet for articulating the trauma of historical misrepresentation, denied access, social exclusion, and disaffection. Hence black men have little or no opportunity to reframe notions of their self-concept. This CRT of black men's desistance underpinned created a template of understanding that was familiar to the men who were the subjects of this inquiry. Much of the research structure were based on shared societal and cultural values, and reflected my personal values too. The labels 'black prisoner', 'black offender', 'black gang member', and so on were at times unhelpful and did not assist black men 'naming their own reality'. This CRT of black men's desistance has challenged those assumptions by arguing that a sense of racial pride and improvement of self-concept is necessary for black men to be motivated towards their trajectory towards desistance.

The CRT of black men's desistance revealed that prison is an under researched site when looking at black men's desistance. It revealed that black men in prison do not have the same lived realities as a white man, even on a class basis, so the ideology and framing is flawed. From a theoretical perspective, this study adds to the growing body of research on critical race theory and studies in the field of criminology. The development of a counter story, and a critical narrative offered insights into how black men construct their own understanding on desistance in relation to a racialised and gendered context. Lastly, this study addressed the critical role that positionality of the researcher plays in the politics of race.

The CRT of desistance will also build its methodology on the idea that racism and power oppress black men, and in doing so create the conditions where the outcomes to that oppression at times result in criminal activity. This CRT of black men's desistance has attempted to:

1. Fore-ground racialisation, in relation to crime/ criminal justice systems, black men, and its impacts on the desistance process.
2. Challenge the traditional research approach in theory when explaining the experiences of black men in relation to their desistance from crime.
3. Offer a transformative solution that will contest, challenge, and remove the racial subordination of black men by white men in relation to the racialisation of criminal justice systems.
4. Focus on racialised, gendered, and class based experiences of black men in relation to their desistance from crime.
5. Create a counter-narrative to highlight and contextualise black men's experiences of the racialisation of criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process.

This CRT of black men's desistance highlighted the stories of black men's desistance operated as a counter-story, inasmuch stories of black men whose experiences are not often told or heard. These counter-stories exposed, analysed, and challenged stories of racial privilege. They further challenged the dominant discourse on race within criminology, and called for significant change in terms of the struggle for racial reform in the criminal justice system. To create these counter-stories data has to be found.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) use a concept called 'theoretical sensitivity' and refer to it as a personal quality of the researcher. It indicates an awareness of the subtleties of meaning of data. One can come to the research situation with varying degrees of sensitivity depending upon previous reading and experience with or relevant to the data. It can also be developed further during the research process. Theoretical sensitivity refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand, and capability to separate the pertinent from that which isn't. Counter stories not only reiterate dominant meanings or power relations, but through retelling also contribute to the process of social change. It is also important within the development of counter stories to examine, explore, and expose notions of colour blindness.

All of this is intended to move beyond the narrow confines within criminological research that struggles to validate, acknowledge, and indeed understand that the racialisation of crime is something that cannot be ignored. By examining the colour-blind perspective more closely, this analysis teases out the differences within the colour-blind position. Colour-blindness ignores racism and bolsters White privilege. Colour blindness hides in unspoken landscape of human and social relations distorting racial discourse and preventing awareness of knowledge that already exists in the real lived experiences of black men. Stories are a quite powerful way to explore socially constructed racial positions and to understand the thoughts and assumptions they generate and reinforce. This CRT of black men's desistance therefore provided a wealth of material for analysing how racism operates in the culture and for understanding how individual experiences link to and reproduce broader social patterns.

If we are ever to alter the social institutions that compel racism, then we must come to grips with the mindsets of the systemic contexts that perpetuate it. How can we begin to imagine new stories, ones that move beyond the divisions that shape our lives and toward a society where the pains inflicted on some of our citizens and enabled by the adopted blindness of others, are once and for all acknowledged, mourned, atoned for and healed? Might we then imagine the kind of story that recognizes and celebrates our diversity while embracing our common humanity? Without any access to the voices of black men, we could easily formulate solutions that are out of sync with the realities of their lives and that would be ineffective or outright destructive. Without hearing their stories, we lose sight of those who hold real hope for the future, whose visions for community embrace peace and nonviolence. This is why hearing their stories told through their own words are important.

This thesis also points to a need to consider a different palette of approaches to violence, poverty, masculinity and nonviolence that might eventually yield enduring results for change. Now is the right time to hear the voices of black men and involve them as central participants in formulating solutions. As such the thesis developed CRT assumptions and arguments located within a criminal justice context, with specific reference to desistance in relation to black men. A CRT of desistance for black men asserts that factors associated with race, racialisation, and racism operate within a UK and US. A CRT of desistance also understands that these factors help explain racial inequality in the wider criminal justice system. CRT in this context has also been used as the methodological tool of analysis in its connection to black men and desistance from criminal activity.

Before black men are willing to terminate their offending behaviour they must begin to perceive what they are doing is unsatisfying, thus weakening their commitment to the sustainability of criminal activity. In essence black men seeking to break from crime must fashion a new identity and develop a more 'pro-social' life. Black men who desire to quit crime are more likely to be successful at desistance if they are embedded in networks and activities that not only support their new identities but keeps them away from those who are opposed to them quitting crime or have a vested interest in enabling them to continue in their criminal ways. The future for researching black men and desistance lies less in creating more theories and listening and hearing the counter-narrative of black men themselves.

This counter narrative must address itself to the process of both social and political change for black men in relation to their involvement with the criminal justice system. How do black men acquire and tell their own authentic narrative when it has been shaped by a history of oppression? It is therefore right to assume that meaningful reintegration of incarcerated black men back into communities requires a deeper commitment to culturally competent rehabilitative processes, that could lead towards a culture of desistance. Any future research for black men in relation to desistance should provide participants with opportunity not just for 'self-reflection' but scope for transforming into a new 'constructed self', (Glynn 2005). It may be that black men have to re-frame what is right for black men. In other words the creation of a space where black men are free to represent themselves. This is a process which involves seeing themselves less as outsiders and more of experiencing life from differing perspectives, not defined according to the dictates of white privileged positions.

### **8.5 Black men's Desistance –Future considerations**

Much of today's prisoner re-settlement discussion is cast in terms of public safety, recidivism and law enforcement. However, future dialogue around the understandings of desistance must locate its vision around researching and theorising how rehabilitative processes can create greater opportunities to former inmates to prevent them from re-offending. It is also incumbent on criminology as a discipline to transcend its current 'colour blind' framing of desistance, in reference to black men. The challenge of returning black ex-offenders is much more than their physical relocation into their home community places, as discussed within this thesis. Instead, the real challenge is reintegrating 'all' former prisoners into their home community fabrics, but for black men there are additional barriers. It is more than a matter of providing assistance that will prevent recidivism.

Rather it is providing the encouragement, the opportunity and the structures through which they can function as full and bona fide members of the community and as positive contributors to community life, free from racism and racialised barriers that create barriers and obstacles towards living a crime free life. The reintegration aspirations of black men are built on two premises: first, that black ex-offenders have skills, abilities and talents that can and should be utilised for the benefit of the community to which they return; and consequently second, that rather than seeing black men as 'community liabilities', communities if they are worked with properly should view them, and enlist and deploy them, as 'community assets'. Successful re-entry is about providing what has been missing in the lives of most of the prospective returnees – a strong sense of, connection to, and respect for their communities as places where their children and families will either flourish or founder.

To promote a successful, positive return of ex-offenders to their home communities, we must first connect them to real and meaningful opportunities to make a difference and affect positive change. For black men who are unable to find a place in the community to be respected and validated, crime then becomes a way of 'getting back' at a society that rejects them. It could be argued that some black men offer more resistance in relation to their gendered enhanced racial subordination, based on early racial socialisation and the constraints of being negatively gender stereotyped. If we're going to engage and change black men in order for them to feel supported on their journey towards desistance, then we must begin to build on those cultural norms that they relate to.

By getting black men to connect to their own peers and to build capacity within community networks, then there is a complimentary 'informal' bonds working alongside the 'formal' networks such as probation. If you can then connect the 'informal' to the 'formal' to public and social policy concern, you have the potential for a model that is truly community centred. This connection is important and overlooked when looking at equitable criminal justice policy for black men. Whilst the black male prison population is increasing; the level of gang affiliation is increasing; and the length of sentences is increasing, it is important to questions how black men can re-enter the community. This research inquiry has already raised some important and significant issues for future investigation into the study of desistance as part of a wider contribution to the criminological discourse. The diversity of views, perspectives, and insights around desistance highlights the importance of continuing struggle within the discipline to grapple with the complexities that hinder or enhance the pathways towards the termination point of offending.

This situation is further complicated by the acknowledged absence of an accurate lens that addresses race, racism, and racialisation within the studies of desistance. This state of affairs has implications for criminology as it must do more to avoid subordinating theoretical ideas that differ from the so called mainstream. The absence of a racialised context desistance must be contested, based on the disproportionality of black men within the criminal justice systems in both the UK and US. This is combined with the lack of visible profile and insights of black researchers and theorists who bring additional understandings that can challenges some of the traditional thinking around desistance. In the course of this research black men talked about the difficulty of being treated equal in their lives.

It could be argued that white men have little interest in talking to black men about the lived reality of crime, as they themselves may be implicated as a symbol of black male oppression. How then do desistance researchers grapple with investigating black men in relation to the streets? The streets are precarious and dangerous places to be. Therefore, it may be that the traditional qualitative approaches used within the study of desistance, need to give voice to research methods that can accommodate a challenging environment, such as inner city communities. It would be wholly appropriate to consider 'Urban Ethnography' as an appropriate research method when looking at black men's desistance, (Anderson 1999). How then do white social researchers investigating black men's desistance approach this area of their work. Likewise, how do black researchers who may also not come from a street background cope with the rigours of urban ethnography? In essence, what is the nature and scope of the modifications that researchers have to comfortably accommodate the presence of black men in the research?

For many black men in prison, the inability to share thoughts, be listened to, or to feel understood, generates the kind of internal oppression that all too often leads to isolation and withdrawal. This can and does develop internal negative perceptions of 'self'. This 'absence of being' is made worse by being held captive inside a system that despite its claim to address opposed to a clear intent to rehabilitate through a more holistic approach. Racism as an oppression within itself that restricts black men's development must be acknowledged as a key component that erodes, devalues and deconstructs the true nature of black men's self concept. Therefore, to see crime as a poor choice, one must perceive one to be better than making such a poor choice in the first place.

Are there opportunities for black men to desist, and access to resources? Do black men recognize these as opportunities and are they encouraged to take advantage of them? What aspects of black men's life history, personal circumstances and social conditions make available recognisable opportunities for them to desist? What influence, if any, does racism, poverty; ethno-cultural group membership, etc. have on both the broader distribution of opportunities across society, and the ability to recognize them as such as opportunities to desist? If desistance involves an act of 'self-change' what happens if racism is the barrier to that change? Where is the accountability for such a structural barrier that is beyond the control of black men themselves? As suggested previously those wishing to quit crime are more likely to be successful at desistance if they are embedded in informal social networks that not only support their new identities and tastes but also isolate them from those who would oppose them quitting crime or induce them to continue in their criminal ways.

It is our obligation to make our voices heard, and we must do this for future generations. Denzin (2010) argues for a civic, participatory social science, a critical ethnography that moves back and forth beyond biography, history, and politics. This would involve the critical, performance ethnographer who is committed to producing and performing texts that are grounded in and co-constructed in the politically and personally problematic worlds of everyday life. By performing ethnography politically means research becomes part of process of social and cultural transformation. Important ways of gathering insights under this paradigm would involve community members in the overall discussions of the research focus.

## **8.6 Summary- Final Thoughts**

The journey of the research started by acknowledging that desistance is conceptualised as a theoretical construct which is used to explain how offenders orient themselves away from committing crimes. It also highlighted that previous studies suggest that successful desistance occurs due to one or a number of factors. These factors include things such as: becoming a father and thereby recognising one's responsibilities to others (Maruna 2011); faith based conversion that can give one's life meaning and purpose (Giordano et al, 2002); and employment that can improve self-esteem, offer legitimate financial gain and enable development of a stronger sense of one's social capital (Maruna 2011). In expanding the discourse on desistance, it was also apparent that little work has been undertaken to examine how the racialisation of crime and criminal justice systems and its impact on the desistance process.

A key perspective emerged from the research that has suggested that the study of desistance is far from complete, and more importantly requires a deeper probing into how the role of subordination of black men is a key indicator not only of a significant barrier in their trajectory of desistance, but raises some deeper questions about the society in which we live. Why do black men in prison and those returning to the community continue to accept this subordination? Why do they accept this oppression seemingly without question? A history of racial subordination should clearly make black men more vigilant and defiant in the face of continuing and sustainable pressure coming from forces designed to keep them down. One explanation is that black men are rendered powerless in a system that privileges one group over the other, where policy responses, legislative changes, and other responses do not provide black men with having a sense of equal justice. Those who are denied a voice might speak without fear of recrimination, while others will break unjust laws. How then do black men who have been to prison and want to return to a crime free life maintain the balance between challenging the status quo, whilst at the same time not being sucked in to the very machinery that grinds their energy down, forcing them back into crime and ultimately back to prison?

The inability of those black men who suffer racial disparities in the criminal justice system to successfully operate independently of street level bureaucrats, policy makers, and strategic agencies is also problematic and requires a new approach that provides those men with a platform that has power. Central to this proposition is in the way the narrative of oppressed people is produced and produces change. The dominant narrative that restricts and renders counter narratives invisible would suggest that a reframing of what constitutes a counter narrative.

Art, music, theatre, poetry, dance, all give rise to the exploration of subordinated people's experiences, but have limited impact on contesting the very power structure that continues to reign supreme. Without a clear, precise, and focussed approach to challenging power within our society, we will merely replicate a reactionary approach to our oppression, and not a transformative one. If black men are to seek transformation as way of transcending their subordination, then they must seek transformative spaces where the interrogation of the obstacles and barriers to their freedom is given voice, complete with the development of an action plan designed to push their counter narrative into a strategy for meaningful and productive change. This strategy must not replicate a structure that has kept them down, but instead create a more equitable and empowering way to function and live in a society that still privileges different groups over each other. In the course of this study, the helplessness of many black men became obvious. Watching them break down as they had their hopes and dreams destroyed was painful. It was clear that many black men were crippled by emotional pain that was held captive by a system that fuels and maintains that pain, indefinitely.

The racialisation of the criminal justice leaves little room for personal growth, when these very definitions create a powerless and subordinate group who languish in the prison system. If these men are taken away from their families, community, and in turn, society, then desistance as a construct designed to assist us in understanding how we can experience more cohesion and harmony, when men terminate their offending, will be lost forever. It is for this reason that the fight for validating the narratives of subordinated black men must continue.

This thesis concluded that CRT was used to better understand notions of desistance for those black men who were the research participants. It also concluded that the current discourse on desistance has paid little attention to black men and the understanding of the termination point of their offending. It explored past and current writings on masculinities; black masculinities; race and desistance; and CRT. Future research into black men and desistance must acknowledge the central and intersecting roles of racism, sexism, class and other related fields in maintaining inequalities in the study and understandings of desistance. Future research must also challenge dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding black men's ability to name their own reality in relation to desistance. In doing so any future research into black men and desistance must develop counter discourses through storytelling, narratives, chronicles, biographies, etc that draw on the real lived experiences of black men in relation to desistance.

A paradigm shaped by notions of intersectionality would provide a complimentary theoretical lens and pedagogical orientation that helps us better comprehend the issues associated with black men and desistance that would also challenges the dominant and hegemonic narrative that has denied black men's voices through operating through a lens that is both colour blind and privileged in favour of white men. This thesis has further argued that black men are situated at a point of intersection being black and male, where race and gender create a framework that operates independently of each other, as well as together. It is therefore right to assume that when looking at black men's desistance then it is important to look closer at how these systems of inequality come together and converge.

Finally, this thesis has argued that a CRT of black men's desistance embraces and fully supports interrogation of race, gender, and other identity categories not to be treated as separate entities so as to reveal the complexities of multiple identities in relation to 'intersectionality'. In the final analysis, the ultimate destination for CRT as a 'counter narrative' is to become redundant. Until such time the 'counter narrative' may be the only avenue open to researchers to give a platform to those voices rendered invisible by the continuing imposition of white privilege. Richeson (2009) argues that black men are victims of gendered racism, and that black masculinities are subordinated as a consequence of the interplay between racial and socio-economic prejudices that prevents black males from reaping the full benefits of society. Wacquant (2002) also argues that advocates of state centred approaches to social inequality have neglected prisons as a site for the deployment and effects of penal policy and institutions. The vision of this research is to investigate 'life beyond desistance' for black men referred to as the Golden Fleece'.

The Golden Fleece rests on the assumption that although desistance is predicated on the notion of terminating one's offending, this in itself poses significant problems when looking at black men's desistance. Inasmuch as once black men have desisted, it could be argued that the job of the criminologist is complete. However, desistance may be only one facet of the desire to return to a normal and balanced life, which requires the attainment of more than just terminating the criminal behavior. As black men are situated differently in relation to the economic, political, and social worlds, using intersectionality as a framework could provide a new position for the future study of black men's desistance. In doing so it is hoped that criminology as a discipline will grow and become relevant to this area of study.

# APPENDICES

## Introductory Letter

My name is Martin Glynn, a criminologist and PhD student based at Birmingham City University in the Centre for Criminal Justice Policy and Practice. I am currently doing my PhD centring on

### **British Black Men and Desistance Towards a Critical Race Theory of Desistance.**

The aims of my investigation are:

- 4 *To develop a critical race theory of desistance using black men's narratives to understand how they have persisted or desisted in activity considered 'criminal'.*
- 5 *How do black men construct their own understanding of desistance in relationship to being both black and male?*
- 6 *What factors influence their commitment to accepting or negating notions of desistance?*
- 7 *How does racism in criminal justice processes impede the termination point of criminal activity for black men?*

In order to bring the aims of the research to fruition I need to open a dialogue with prisons who would like to be included in this important piece of research. Currently I have prepared **a release form** and **relevant interview questions** for those prisoners willing to take in the research. I am looking for 10 prisoners (5 sentenced, 5 non sentenced) to take part. In order for me to move forward with the research I will require the prison to:

- Grant permission for me to conduct interviews
- Select inmates to participate in the research process
- To give me dates and times for me to conduct the interviews combined with relevant protocols.

I am available to meet with you and your colleagues at a mutually convenient time and date, to discuss my research in more detail.

I look forward to hearing from you soon

Yours sincerely

MARTIN GLYNN (Cert.Ed, MA)

## Consent Form

**INTERVIEW – British Black Men and Desistance  
Towards a Critical Race Theory of Desistance  
For the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy**

As researchers we operate under a strict code of ethics and as such we cannot interview people unless we have their signed consent. Please read carefully each of the seven points below. If all these points are acceptable to you, please sign and date the consent form.

1. *You must confirm that the aims of the study have been explained to you and that you are willing to participate.*
2. *Any information given will be completely confidential - a secretary will type the tape recording out. However, if you are currently serving a sentence the prison service may exercise its right to look at or listen to any material produced.*
3. *The information you give me will be presented in a report in such a way that no one can identify you. Your participation in the study is completely anonymous.*
4. *If at any stage of the interview you decide you don't want to participate any more, you are free to say so and withdrawn.*
5. *You need to agree that you are happy for the interview to be tape recorded*
6. *I promise to send you a copy of the final report/thesis.*
7. *Are there any questions you want to ask about the study before signing the consent form?*
8. *The interview should take about 60 minutes.*

Name: ..... (Participant)

Signed: ..... (Participant)

Date : .....

Name: Martin Glynn (Researcher)

Signed: ..... (Researcher)

Date : .....

## Interview Questions

### **British Black Men and Desistance Towards a Critical Race Theory of Desistance For the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy**

1. How do you define 'being a man'? And how did you arrive at that understanding?
2. Describe some of the major events in your life as "*turning points*"
3. Please describe in detail a peak experience that you have experienced.
4. Please describe any experiences in which you felt a real sense of mastery or competence in doing something?
5. Describe in some detail an experience from your life which was experienced as emotionally negative (causing anger, sadness, disgust, guilt, or shame).
6. Describe your first involvement with crime.
7. Please think about your life and try to remember a specific experience in which you felt a sense of disillusionment and/or despair.
8. What factors have influenced your commitment to accepting or rejecting notions of desistance?
9. How does racism in criminal justice processes stop you from considering desistance?
10. What barriers have you encountered in terms of desisting from criminal activity?
11. Any other comments



## \*\*\*\*\* LOOKING FOR INTERVIEWEES \*\*\*\*\*

### STUDY TITLE: BLACK BRITISH MEN AND DESISTANCE – TOWARDS A CRITICAL RACE THEORY OF DESISTANCE



*Desistance* is defined as  
*offending ceases*'

*'the termination point at which*

#### **Aim:**

*To develop an understanding of how black men in HMP Grendon  
have ceased (**Desisted**) to engage in activity considered 'criminal'.*

I am looking for 10 black British/African Caribbean men in HMP Grendon to take part in this piece of research. The interview will last no longer than an hour and will be confidential. Interview questions are available to help you decide if you would like to participate.

I THANK YOU

*Martin Glynn*

Martin Glynn (Cert.Ed, MA, Doctoral Student)

**BLACK BRITISH MEN AND DESISTANCE –  
TOWARDS A CRITICAL RACE THEORY OF  
DESISTANCE**



## **Theoretical Sampling Interview Questions**

1. How do you feel that being at Grendon relates to desistance? Do you feel that being at Grendon is the beginning of desisting from crime and if so why/how?
2. How did the issues that led you in criminal activity make crime an option in your life?
3. How did/does being involved crime affect the way you see yourself as a man?
4. How does being involved in crime assist or hinder you developing strong community connections?
5. How easy would it be for you to cut off your old life completely and make a fresh start somewhere else?
6. How does crime and incarceration impact on your own decisions in terms of staying out of trouble?
7. How does the physical and psychological separation from friends, family, children, and partner influence the desire to desist from criminal activity?
8. How much does being involved in crime restrict the possibility of leaving a positive legacy behind for the next generation?
9. Do you feel that you need to develop a different consciousness to White people when living in a predominantly White society?
10. What guides you in breaking down and understanding your journey in life?
11. Any final questions

**BLACK BRITISH MEN AND DESISTANCE –  
TOWARDS A CRITICAL RACE THEORY OF DESISTANCE  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**



## Consent Form- Interview

**As researchers we operate under a strict code of ethics and as such we cannot interview people unless we have their signed consent. Please read carefully each of the seven points below. If all these points are acceptable to you, please sign and date the consent form**

1. You must confirm that the aims of the study have been **explained** to you and that you are **willing** to participate.
2. Any information given will be completely **confidential** - a secretary will type the tape recording out - and no one will have access to the interview transcript apart from the researcher .
3. The information you give will be presented in such a way that no one can identify you - your participation in the study is completely **anonymous**.
4. If at any stage of the interview you decide you don't want to participate any more, you are free to say so and **withdraw**.
5. You need to agree that you are happy for the interview to be **tape recorded**
6. The interview should take about **60 minutes**.
7. I promise to send you a copy of the research '**results**'
8. Are there any questions you want to ask about the study before signing the consent form?

Name: ..... (Participant)

Signed: ..... (Participant)

Date : .....

Name: Martin Glynn (Researcher)

Signed: ..... (Researcher)

Date : .....

**BLACK BRITISH MEN AND DESISTANCE –  
TOWARDS A CRITICAL RACE THEORY OF DESISTANCE  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**



## **Debriefing Form**

Dear Participant,

If you feel a need to speak to a professional concerning any uncomfortable feelings from your participation in this research, you may contact your **wing therapist**. You also have the choice of either having your data **included** in the research study, or to be **withdrawn** from the research study. If you choose to withdraw from this research study, your data will be shredded and disposed of. If you have any further questions please contact me via HMP Grendon's therapy team.

Yours sincerely

*Martin Glynn*

Martin Glynn

I have been fully debriefed and the researcher has offered to answer any and all of my questions related to this research study.

Print Name \_\_\_\_\_

Sign Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## Biog - Martin Glynn



Martin is a criminologist with over 25 years' experience of working in prisons and schools. He has a Cert. Ed, a Masters degree in criminal justice policy and practice, and is currently in the final year of his PhD at Birmingham City University where he is also a visiting lecturer teaching:

- Youth and Crime
  - Victimology and Restorative Justice
  - Crime and the Media
- As a writer and theatre director, Martin has gained a National and International reputation for his commissioned work in theatre, live performance, radio drama, children's books, and performance poetry.
  - In Jan 2010 Martin was awarded a Winston Churchill International Travel Fellowship where he spent several weeks in the city of Baltimore and Johns Hopkins University (USA) looking at issues of fatherlessness, father hunger, and father deficit amongst young black men.
  - In Oct 2010 Martin was also awarded a prestigious local heroes award by 'The Association of Jamaica Nationals' (Birmingham). Martins intergenerational one-act play about the physical and emotional effects of glaucoma, *Kind of Blue*, will be featured in the book (*Ethno theatre: Research from Page to Stage*, edited by Johnny Saldana, Left Coast Press (2012).
  - During Oct/Nov 2011 Martin facilitated 'Colours', a documentary video project this used creative writing and music workshops to capture the real experiences of young offenders in prison (HMP Wetherby) and in the communities of Wakefield and Huddersfield,. 'Colours' is a voice and influence project designed to give young people the opportunity to inform and change the way practitioners and decision makers interact with them.

### PhD Studies

- To develop a 'critical race theory' of desistance using black men's narratives to understand how they have ceased to engage in activity considered 'criminal'.
- To investigate how black men construct their own understanding of desistance in relationship to being both black and male.
- To explore how racism in criminal justice processes impedes the termination point of investment in criminal activity for black men.



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