

## Aberystwyth University

### 'What the f\*\*k Is Maturity?'

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*This article contributes to the ‘dissection’ of maturation by advancing previously overlooked, subjective aspects of the concept. The article draws upon life story research with twenty young adults in Belfast, Northern Ireland. An analysis of their accounts and narratives highlights the importance of maturity as an adaptive narrative coping mechanism for young adults who are structurally disbarred from achieving normative expressions of adult status. The analysis further explores the relationship between subjective maturity and desistance from crime, indicating the potential risks that a selective criminal justice policy focus on an absence of maturity among eighteen to twenty-five-year-olds may have on young adults coming into contact with the criminal justice system.*

Keywords: maturity; young adulthood; desistance; infantilisation

### *Introduction*

Within the discipline of criminology, ‘maturity’ has often been viewed as unproblematic; synonymous with ageing itself (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990) or an inevitable product of the ageing process (Glueck and Glueck, 1940; 1943). As such, maturity is simultaneously considered a cause of desistance from crime (Sampson and Laub, 1993), as well as an outcome (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010), while a lack of maturity ostensibly precipitates widespread delinquent behaviour (Moffitt, 1993). Attempts to consistently define maturity across a range of disciplines have been faltering and variable, limiting its explanatory contribution to issues of crime and desistance (Prior *et al.*, 2011; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011).

A burgeoning interest in life-course criminology, coupled with increased academic attention on the complexities of ‘young’ adulthood, has brought the concept of maturity back into mainstream criminological discourse (Maruna *et al.*, 2015). Additionally, the concept has become central to the work of the Transition to Adulthood Alliance (T2A), with an ever-growing body of research and recommendations regarding how an apparent deficit of maturity among young adults should be dealt with across the UK criminal justice system (CJS) (T2A, 2013; 2014; 2017).

More than ever, researchers across various disciplines are responding to the Gluecks' (1940: 270) call to 'dissect maturation into its components', highlighting developing physiological, psychosocial, neurocognitive, and sociocultural domains of maturation (Prior *et al.*, 2011; Roque, 2015). However, prevailing conceptualisations of maturity give little consideration to 'the manner in which the concept is employed in an individual's personal outlook and philosophy', particularly in relation to young people's experiences of crime, criminal justice, and desistance (Kyvsgaard, 2003: 241).

This article aims to highlight the role that subjective aspects of maturity play in the transition to adulthood among a sample of young adults from working-class communities in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Drawing on a sample with experiences of multiple deprivation and marginalisation, the article allows for an enriched understanding of maturity by advancing previously overlooked maturational subjectivities, exploring how these interact with young adults' experiences of becoming an adult and processes of desistance from crime. Consequently, it provides a counterpoint to an ongoing criminal justice policy focus on an *absence* of maturity among eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds (Justice Committee, 2018; T2A, 2013; 2017), and considers the impact this may have on the outcomes of young adults coming into contact with the CJS.

### *Why Young Adults? Why Maturity? Why now?*

An increasing amount of academic attention has focused on an apparent disruption and prolongation of the transition to adulthood in late modern societies (Hayward, 2012; 2013). For some, this represents the construction of a distinct new phase of the life-course between adolescence and adulthood, described by Arnett (2000; 2007) as 'emerging adulthood', with a growing number of researchers turning their attention to evidencing this distinction in the fields

of neuroscience and psychology (Farrington *et al.*, 2012; Johnson *et al.*, 2009). For others, any blurring of the traditional boundaries of adulthood is consequent on fluctuating socio-economic, cultural and historic circumstances (Côte, 2000; Hall *et al.*, 2008; Hayward, 2013; Smith, 2014). Beyond the conceptual ambiguity surrounding young adulthood, Shapland and Bottoms (2011: 261) note the experiential complexity of this transitional period of ‘mistakes’ and ‘false starts’, during which identities fluctuate and consolidate.

The call for young adults to be recognised as a distinct category within the UK CJS has been championed by the T2A. Drawing upon research across several disciplines, this coalition is dedicated to evidencing and promoting ‘the need for a distinct and radically different approach to young adults in the criminal justice system...proportionate to their maturity and responsive to their specific needs’ (Heylar-Cardwell, 2009: 1). Such efforts are not without justification: identified as simultaneously the most likely to both commit criminal offences and commence processes of desistance from offending behaviour, young adults, representing less than one-tenth of the British population, account for approximately one-third of the UK criminal justice caseload each year (Grimshaw, 2017). The numerous reports produced by the T2A have significantly influenced the development of criminal justice policies and practices that recognise the proposed need for a unique approach to dealing with young adults in contact with the CJS.

In seeking a ‘radically different approach’, there is now pressure for the concept of maturity to become an active consideration at all stages of young adults’ contact with the CJS (T2A, 2013; 2015; 2018). For instance, the Sentencing Council for England and Wales (2011: 5) indicated that ‘age and/or lack of maturity’ should be considered where it might affect the responsibility of an adult defendant. The Crown Prosecution Service also approved a new Code

for Crown Prosecutors (2013) that explicitly mentions maturity as a factor in determining whether an individual should be considered fully culpable for an offence. Most recently, HMPPS has developed a ‘maturity screening tool’ based on Steinberg and Cauffman’s (1996) model of psychosocial maturity, focusing on the components of responsibility, temperance and perspective (Wakeling and Barnett, 2017). Designed to screen for ‘low maturity’, this tool has been made available to prison and probation service providers in order to identify any young adults ‘lacking maturity’ under their care who ‘are likely to require services or interventions to promote maturation’ (Justice Committee, 2018: 16).

The impact of these developments remains stymied by an impasse relating to how the concept of maturity can be adequately applied in practice. In 2016, the Justice Committee (2016: 33) expressed reservations regarding how well the concept was understood in prosecutors’ and sentencers’ deliberations concerning young adults’ culpability. They concluded, ‘it is likely...that maturity is only considered primarily in cases where there is extreme immaturity’ (*ibid*). Similarly, a recent report into probation practitioners’ use of the ‘Taking account of maturity’ practice guide (T2A, 2013) in their application of the Offender Assessment System indicates difficulties compartmentalising a complex concept like maturity into discrete risk factors (Grimshaw, 2017). The report also briefly addresses the potential difficulties of working with young adults when any judgements of psychosocial immaturity during assessments might ‘imply childishness, stupidity or lack of self-reliance’ (*ibid*: 14). Wakeling and Barnett’s (2017: 3) analytical summary of the screening tool further suggests that the tool is ‘not intended to be used on an individual level’ and that any young adults deemed as having ‘maturity issues’ should receive additional in-depth assessment.

Upon review, what becomes apparent is that commentary on this subject principally focuses on the impact that an *absence* of maturity may have on the outcomes of young adults coming into contact with the CJS. For instance, Marder (2013: 8) argues that, ‘Maturity...is significant and relevant to criminal justice professionals...who need to respond appropriately to its absence among some members of this age group’. Indeed, the T2A’s ‘maturity agenda’ remains largely focused on evidencing the need for criminal justice policy makers and practitioners to recognise young adults’ relative immaturity (T2A, 2013; 2017). This supports Maruna’s (2001:35) observation that the term maturity ‘is most often applied to those whose behaviour is *not* in accordance with age expectations’ (see also, Massoglia and Uggen, 2010). Additionally, the concept of maturity has arguably remained ‘dangerously vague’, to be used ‘cautiously and sparingly’ in matters relating to development, crime and desistance (Maruna, 2001: 34-35). This article presents a timely addition to current conceptualisations of maturity by exploring how subjective aspects of maturation among a sample of young adults in Northern Ireland may contribute to the ‘dissection’ of the concept.

### *Methodology*

The current research set out to explore the subjective definitions and perceptions of maturity among a sample of young adults<sup>1</sup> making the transition to adulthood in Northern Ireland. The study was designed to explore the subjective meaning that participants attached to maturation and in particular to their experiences of crime and delinquency. The primary goal was, therefore, to provide a better understanding of the relationship between the subjective, experienced realities of maturity and processes of desistance from crime.

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<sup>1</sup> Variouslly described as ‘the invisible early twenties’ and the ‘lost generation’, young adults in this study have been defined as those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five (T2A, 2017).

Research data was gathered via a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with twenty young adults in Belfast (Figure 1). Having taken place over the course of 2013 and 2014, these interviews explored subjective definitions and perceptions of maturity, examining the significance that participants ascribed to various aspects of their life stories. A narrative approach was adopted in order to link the relatively abstract and uncertain concept of maturity as it exists in criminological and sociological literature to the personal theories of maturity that individuals held to, as well as the personal experiences that have helped to shape these perceptions. This approach allowed for an interactionist perspective on how individuals viewed themselves and their actions as mature or immature, and an examination of the commonalities in the types of actions and events that are seen as eliciting maturity across the various respondents.

(Figure 1 here)

To gather rich self-narratives and allow for the ready categorisation and interpretation of the data, the interview protocol used throughout the fieldwork was an adapted version of McAdams' (1993) Life Story Interview<sup>2</sup>. While maintaining the integrity of the original interview design in accessing the dynamic, contextual nature of the young adults' identities and 'personal myths' (McAdams, 1993), several modifications were implemented to explore participants' perceptions of maturity, experiences of the justice system, and desistance from crime.

### *Research Process*

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<sup>2</sup> McAdams' Life Story Interview protocol is available here: <https://www.sesp.northwestern.edu/foley/instruments/interview/>

Young men from poor or working-class backgrounds in their late teens or early twenties make up the majority of criminal justice caseloads in the UK (Garside, 2010). The over-representation of young people from similarly deprived backgrounds in terms of contact with the CJS is replicated in Northern Ireland (DOJNI, 2018; Prison Review Team, 2011). Accordingly, a sample of predominately working-class young men was sought via a range of cross-community youth, restorative and criminal justice organisations throughout Belfast, including a carceral sample interviewed in Hydebank Wood College. Consistent with the demographics of Belfast and Northern Ireland, the sample included few individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds (NISRA, 2010).

The sample was selected on the basis of sharing critical similarities relating to issues regarding crime, desistance and maturity with which the research sought to engage. Rather than attempting to seek out a sample which would be representative of the entire population, a sample was recruited that would be suitably stratified with regards to likely involvement in criminal or delinquent behaviour, as well as probable contact with various aspects of the CJS. As a result of the empirical material gathered, the research is somewhat limited in terms of exploring how the primary areas of focus intersect with issues of ethnicity and, in part, gender. A comparative analysis that would fully and adequately take these intersectional dimensions into account lies largely beyond the limits of the present article. This does not render these issues unimportant; rather, they will require more in-depth scrutiny in future research into subjective aspects of maturation.

In adopting an appropriate methodological approach that would allow for the exploration of contextually stated subjectivities, a psychosocial position of sorts was assumed during the inductive analysis of the narrative content generated throughout the research process. However,



the study refrains from the manner of psychoanalytically informed psychosocial analysis developed by Gadd and Jefferson (2007), among others (see e.g. Hollway and Jefferson, 2000). Rather than paying close attention to the ‘latent or unconscious meanings embedded in offenders’ narratives’ (Gadd and Farrall, 2004: 148), the present research sought instead to gain perspective on thematic commonalities in the predominately manifest meanings presented by the participants in their life stories (Presser, 2009).

### *Research Setting*

Set against the backdrop of segregation, multiple deprivation and sectarian conflict, the young adults’ narratives highlighted the individual complexities of making the transition to adulthood and becoming ‘mature’ in a unique and frequently challenging environment. Numbered among ‘the first generation of young people to grow up in a post-ceasefire (1994) post-Agreement (1998) [Northern Ireland]’, the participants are experiencing a process of development and maturation in a society still undergoing ‘a period of significant political, economic and social transition’ (McGrellis, 2011: 7). Living in areas of multiple deprivation in Northern Ireland, the transition to adulthood is uniquely complicated, ‘as they navigate the aftermath and legacy of the Conflict in the context of limited opportunities’ (McAlister *et al.*, 2009: 5). For many young people, the legacy of the Conflict continues to affect the day-to-day negotiation of transitional moments. For example, McGrellis (2011: 5) notes that, ‘although the ceasefire remains in place, sectarianism and paramilitary activity continue to have significant impact on the lives of young people, particularly those living in working-class areas’. For many, principally young men from working-class areas in Belfast, this manifests in an acute awareness of paramilitary activity and sectarian violence (Crozier, 2001). However, for the majority of young individuals, the legacy of the Conflict in Northern Ireland more commonly

results in feelings of exclusion and marginalization, coupled with a mistrust of those in positions of authority (McAlister *et al.*, 2009).

Although the focus group and one-to-one interview protocols did not specifically seek to stimulate discussion relating to the legacy of the Troubles or the specificities of participants' local communities in Belfast, the responses of the young adults remain socially and culturally situated in the context of each individual's community and locality. However, while legacy issues inevitably coloured aspects of their narratives, more striking were the range of experiential and perceptual commonalities across the traditional ethno-political divide with regards to maturity, desistance and the transition to adult status. A range of common patterns emerged across the sample in terms of housing careers, education, work and leisure experiences.

A number of the young adults described instances of parental alcohol abuse as well as experiences of violent or emotionally traumatic relationships with family members during their childhood. These domiciliary circumstances often culminated in multiple experiences of institutional care, with themes of instability and insecurity featuring heavily in the young adults' narratives. Additionally, many participants became involved in criminal behaviour and problematic drug use at an early age. As a result, a significant portion of the interview sample repeatedly experienced the chaotic transitions associated with the committal to, and release from, various carceral settings.

The majority of participants admitted to educational disengagement during their primary and secondary school experiences, with many having withdrawn from education at the earliest opportunity. A dominant pattern emerged regarding participants' school-to-work careers, with

few entering into vocational training, educational courses or stable, long-term employment following their exit from secondary education. More recently, a number of participants had secured full-time employment, or had started engaging with the training or education necessary to achieve their employment goals. However, a similar number remained unemployed and were not in education or training. Finally, although several participants were living in independent and financially stable circumstances when the interview took place, the majority were living in supported accommodation or with family members and peers.

Given that the narrative methodology employed here 'is best suited for exploring similarity, not for establishing systematic differences' (Maruna, 2001: 51), the present article focuses on the range of transitional commonalities experienced by participants on both sides of Northern Ireland's traditional ethno-political divide, in favour of a more thoroughgoing exploration of the manner in which the legacy of the Troubles differentially informs the transition to adulthood in Northern Ireland.

#### *Subjective maturity and adult identity*

In unpacking the various subjectivities and personal meanings of maturity, the following passages examine how individuals' definitions and perceptions of this nebulous concept relate to their views on the variety of fluctuating collective norms, expectations and evaluations that have come to define the transition from adolescence to adulthood (Furstenberg *et al.*, 2003). Significantly, for some researchers in the area of youth transitions and development, maturity is analogous to adult development and the transition to adult status (Roque, 2015). As a result, previous attempts to conceptually extract 'maturity' from 'adulthood' have been criticised as exercises in tautologous futility that do not adequately justify considering maturity as distinct

from traditional formulations of adulthood (Côte, 2000). The accounts of the young adult participants go some way towards defying this critique.

### *Maturity, adult status and normative expectations*

The sequences which have helped develop normative social attitudes regarding the transition to adulthood still exist, but the timing and significance of traditional markers has completely changed (Hall *et al.*, 2008; Hayward, 2012; Smith, 2014). In spite of these changes, the traditional ‘social clock’ (Neugarten *et al.*, 1965) retains its influence on the social consensus of what it means to be an adult (Massoglia and Uggen, 2010). Furstenberg and colleagues (2003) evidence the widespread belief in the importance of financial independence, a completed education, full-time work and supporting a family in adulthood. Similarly, Settersten and Hagestad (1996) demonstrate the emphasis that many continue to place on traditional transitional milestones such as marriage and homeownership. However, this is despite the fact that the stability provided by the transitional routines of education, apprenticeship, marriage, parenthood and homeownership has been reduced, making the entry into adulthood a more ambiguous, gradual, complex and less uniform process than it once was (Furstenberg *et al.*, 2005).

Following the ‘collapse of economic scaffolding that previously enabled transitions to stable and secure working-class adult life’ (Webster *et al.*, 2004: 36), young people now follow a range of different pathways during their late teenage years as they leave school, attempt to enter the shrinking labour market and endeavour to cement their adult identities (Côte and Bynner, 2008). Although the majority of contemporary research in the area is steeped in an American context, the research on young people’s transitions to adulthood in the UK has reflected trends in the US, with significant social and economic shifts severely disrupting

previously established patterns of transition, but not eradicating them entirely (Catan, 2004; Jones, 2009).

The normative expectations regarding what is required for a young person to become an adult can have a complex and often inconsistent relationship with personalised accounts of what it means to be an adult on one hand, and subjective views on maturity on the other. Much in the same vein as the results presented by Furstenberg and colleagues (2003), the vast majority of participants frame their views on the transition to adulthood in terms of traditional norms such as completing education, entering full-time employment, getting married and becoming a parent. When asked to prioritise some of the most important features of becoming an adult, the traditional rites of passage never failed to make it into discussion:

**Aaron:** Gettin' out of school and into work. That's it, you're an adult. Then you're able to look after yourself and not have to rely on anybody.

**Sarah:** I reckon becoming a parent is a big one for becoming an adult. Like, if you become a parent it sorta' forces you...you have to grow up, you've no choice.

**Paul:** If you get a house then you've worked for it, you've earned it. like, you'd have had to be able to do things for yourself. If you've got a house, you're an adult, like.

Some of the gendered dimensions of the transition to adult status are partially revealed here. In articulating their commitment to an entrenched normative timetable, the small number of female participants tended to emphasise relational features of the transition to adulthood, with parenthood most frequently cited as the key transitional milestone (Johns *et al.*, 2018). Alternatively, the male participants were more likely to express a common desire for autonomy and independence, to be 'active participants in constructing their lives' (Laub and Sampson, 2003: 281). Carlsson (2013: 662) proposes that 'the meaning and importance of one's gender grows out of structured social practices in specific settings, influencing the agencies and

constraints of individuals'. As such, attempts to adhere to seemingly conventional, but structurally bounded transitional milestones can present an array of complex identity challenges, particularly in relation to individual gender projects (Connell, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2005)

Daniel summarises a frequently shared perception that meeting certain age-based expectations alone does not imbue an individual with a sense of adulthood. Rather, meeting such expectations are unavoidable requirements in the transitional process:

**Daniel:** You just have to get those things, it's a necessity, like. You need the job when you leave school so you can pay your own way. Then you end up with the family and you need the house to keep them. It's all just part of life, like.

These excerpts reflect the socially inculcated expectations of the life-course: for most individuals, the process of becoming an adult is structured by the exigency to pass through a 'sequence of culturally defined age-graded roles and social transitions that are enacted over time' (Caspi *et al.*, 1990: 15). Many of the views on passing milestones and engaging in particular adult roles are anchored using boundaries demarcated by age. Settersten and Mayer (1997: 236) describe this process as 'informal age structuring', where 'individuals go about dividing the life-course into meaningful segments, what kinds of behaviour are considered appropriate for individuals of different ages, and what notions exist about the proper timing and sequencing of life events and transitions'. The young adult participants frequently demonstrated a series of age-graded expectations of when certain milestones should or should not be reached.

*'Full' adulthood and retrospective self-infantilisation*

Following from their consideration of persistent age-graded expectations regarding status and behaviour, the majority of participants did not consider themselves to be ‘fully’ adult, perhaps ‘because they [were] not ready or able to perform the full range of adult roles, and they have not forged a stable identity of who they are and where they fit into society’ (Furstenburg *et al.*, 2003: 1). Responding to a portion of the adapted life story interview relating to perceptions of development relative to peer associations, Thomas provides some perspective on a transition that can be uneven and unstable:

**Thomas:** In my head, well, I know I’m a lot maturer than your average twenty-year-old male...Asking me now, I’d say yeah, I’m still...I’m a young adult, or a matured adolescent, but I’m not an adult. I couldn’t, I’m not dependent on myself, I still live with my parents, I’ve no job, I’m in college and that’s reality. Some people might see it differently, like in their eyes, “aww, I’m eighteen, I can do what I want”. You can’t. You can’t really. Legally, some things you can do, but in your head or you experience something, you’re going to know you don’t fit in there...

The normative timetable is again used to frame a discussion on whether a participant feels like an adult (Johnson *et al.*, 2007). Whilst accepting the legal significance of turning eighteen, Thomas indicates the difficulty of achieving constituent components of adulthood ‘in reality’. Thomas uses his parental dependence and unemployment to underline his lack of identification with adult status, instead opting to define himself as a ‘young adult’ or ‘matured adolescent’. However, although he does not subjectively define himself as an adult, he believes that he is ‘maturer’ than other individuals of his age. Notably, maturity in this case is not directly tethered to subjective feelings of adulthood.

Most participants’ definitions of their developmental status are far from straightforward, with ‘false starts, backward steps, unpredictability and circularity’ characterising their subjective transitional process (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005: 35):

**Conor:** I was in a relationship, I wanted the house, the car, the family, the job...and then, when I moved out of the relationship and that environment and started thinking like a twenty-year-old, my future just became a lot bigger and a lot more what I wanted to do.

**Jack:** When I was sixteen and trying to provide for my Ma, I thought I was a young man at sixteen because I was providing and I was thinking to myself I'm a young man, that's me. But I wasn't, I was just a sixteen-year-old kid. I would say I'm a twenty-four-year-old man now. Or a twenty-four-year-old young man, I'd put it that way.

The uncertainty of these speakers represents one of the themes that emerged throughout the interview process: unable or unwilling to place themselves in the category of 'adult', participants opt to use various transitional epithets to define their developmental status. In his account, Jack claims he 'grew up too quick' due to 'what [he] seen and what [he] went through'. From an area of multiple deprivation and with a series of insecure family attachments, Jack felt that he was forced to prematurely undertake certain responsibilities, such as providing for his mother. It was to this role of 'provider' or 'family man', with clearly embedded notions of 'doing masculinity', that he tethered his developing identity (Carlsson, 2013; LeBel *et al.*, 2008). However, Jack ultimately lacked the necessary resources to adequately deal with these burdensome roles and responsibilities due to his structural circumstances, resulting in a 'masculinity challenge' that he previously sought to resolve through criminal means (Messerschmidt, 2000: 13; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). 'Fast-track transitions' of this nature were experienced by many of the other participants in similar socio-economic circumstances and environments (Jones, 2005):

**Paul:** But for me, I felt like I grew up very fast living in this area, especially...

**BC:** What was it about the area?

**Paul:** You know, you hear things that some people would say that a child shouldn't hear, or you see things that people say a child shouldn't see, you know? And you kinda, it's puts years on you as they say, you know...But for me, when I was growing up that was like normal, so you kinda had to grow up quickly and be



streetwise as well because there's so much drugs and underage drinking and all, you know?

This reflects a strain of research that characterises the transition to adulthood as a differentially experienced process, with the extended transitions of those in “privileged”, socially supported environments on one hand and the ‘fast-track transitions’ of those individuals in “unprivileged”, unsupported environments on the other (MacDonald and Marsh, 2005; Wilson *et al.*, 2008). Brought up in socially excluded and marginalised communities, many of the participants were forced to confront issues of deprivation, violence and criminality at an early age. Consequently, they developed a sense that they have “seen and done it all”, resulting in a transitory perception of adult status and maturity. The earlier, adult selves that had ‘grew up fast’ are often subsequently dismissed in participants’ prevailing narrative structure to be replaced by a more wise or mature persona:

**Matthew:** When I was younger, [I] thought I could stand on my own two feet, but I couldn't. I was too young and naive and I couldn't do it. Couldn't cook for myself, couldn't do anything for myself, couldn't f\*\*king boil an egg. [Now] I just knew I was ready. I know I'm ready. I am ready, I know I'm ready in the heart and in the mind. I know I'm ready to stand on my own two feet and I'm doing it now... In my mind I'm more mature, so I'm taking things and looking at things in different ways and seeing things a lot clearer, my mind's a lot sharper.

Reinforcing a subjective sense of development, the younger self's infantile lack of independence and autonomy is contrasted with agentic, masculine ideals of self-reliance and control, anchoring Matthew's conception of maturity (Connell, 2005). This tendency to diminish a previous conception of adult status when the participant was ‘just a kid’ gives credence to the new, mature statuses and identities presented by the participants. By engaging in a process of comparison and diminution, the participants are arguably ‘neutralising’ their previous or current inability to attain the normative standards of adulthood (Sykes and Matza, 1957). However, despite being structurally precluded from a range of adult status markers and,

perhaps as a result, refusing to use the term 'adult' as a definitive part of their identity, participants are still able to place the notion of maturity at the centre of their current self-perception. This adaptive narrative method of maintaining a positive self-concept in the face of challenging personal and structural circumstances represents a form of retrospective self-infantilisation: the diminution or neutralisation of a previous conception of self through the use of specifically infantilising language.

Barry, having previously felt like an adult at the age of sixteen "cos [he] had his own house and responsibilities and stuff", similarly uses the concepts of maturity and immaturity as crucial elements in his schema:

**Barry:** [What is maturity?] Just make good decisions in life...That's something I've started to do now. I didn't make the right choices in life before, but I think I'm starting to now. So I think I'm starting to mature a bit now. I was totally immature from I was twelve until a couple of years ago. Totally immature in the decisions that I was making and what I was doing.

With their transitions to adult status ultimately bounded by their structural circumstances, every individual must face the challenge of reconciling their subjectively perceived developmental progress with a personal imperative to feel that one has progressed in some way from a past self. This challenge can be exacerbated by a failure to pass the prescribed, interrelated milestones on the road to adulthood, with the individual being unable to subjectively affirm their status as adults (Furstenberg *et al.* 2003). This is particularly true for individuals whose experiences of social and economic barriers impede their engagement with these 'culturally determined institutional bases' (Hogan and Astone, 1986: 125). Maturity thus becomes a narrative tool to allow the individual to justify their inability to adhere to the socially and culturally constructed transitional process, whilst concurrently presenting a more evolved and mature contemporary self.

When applying the terms ‘mature’ and ‘immature’ to themselves, participants engage in the narrative process of attempting to construct a cohesive portrait of their developmental status in relation to their perceived progress, or lack thereof, towards adult status. Maturity comes to represent a part of their ‘reflexive project of the self’ (Giddens, 1991: 214), in an ongoing struggle to reconcile a series of conflicts between norms, expectations and the subjective realities of making an ‘on-time’ transition from youth to adulthood. Participants ‘neutralise’ the immaturity of their formative years, embracing new, mature roles and identities that they have adopted to accommodate their circumstances. In spite of the structural hindrances forestalling their adoption of an adult identity, most participants are still able to present a mature current self. In doing so they are able to perceive a desirable and attractive future self and identity that is neither subsumed by the strictures of adult status, nor dominated by the irresponsible attitudes and behaviours associated with their youth.

#### *Maturing out: Processes of maturity and desistance*

Maruna (1999: 1) proposes, ‘that most young offenders eventually ‘mature’ out of deviant behaviour is one of the most well-known findings in criminology’ (see also Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Sampson and Laub, 1993). However, the nature of the relationship between the interactive and unpredictable processes of desistance and various conceptualisations of maturity is difficult to unpick (Roque, 2015). With periods of non-offending often interspersed with lapses and instances of re-offending, desistance is most frequently characterised as a fluctuating and faltering ‘maintenance process’ rather than a specific moment or ‘termination event’ (Maruna, 2001). Shapland and Bottoms (2011: 257) further propose that ‘desistance in one’s early 20s includes maturation, not a passive, time-serving maturation but an active construction of a different lifestyle’. Given the apparent relationship between potentially

tentative processes of desistance and the seemingly mercurial transition to adulthood (see Maruna *et al.*, 2015; Massoglia and Uggen, 2010) the voices of the young adults in this study prove invaluable in helping to illuminate how these processes relate to conceptions of maturity as a reflexive autobiographical project of self and identity.

### *Subjective (im)maturity and desistance from crime*

Outlined in the preceding section, many participants sought to diminish previous behaviours no longer congruent with their current self-perceptions. Engaging in processes of rationalisation and neutralisation, the former self is presented as immature, allowing the young adult to present a mature self and identity untarnished by past behaviours (Sykes and Matza, 1957). It is this cognitive relocation of one's identity away from undesirable behaviours towards the new role or identity of a "changed person" that is the critical element in what Maruna and Farrall (2004) describe as secondary desistance.

For participants, the notion of immaturity is specifically employed as a means of distancing their prevailing narratives from incompatible actions, events and behaviours in their past. This narrative technique of separating past actions from a prevailing storied identity is common across the sample, with participants presenting an array of critical indictments of their former immature selves:

**Liam:** I was just doing everything. Anything. Didn't think about it, just went ahead and did whatever. Didn't give a f\*\*k about who was telling me what, even if they were looking out for me. I used to give a f\*\*k about nothing, no-one. I was a f\*\*kin' immature wee brat.

**Brian:** Normally I would just lose the head...when my dad told me he wouldn't give me any money I decided to smash his windows when I was blocked. I was just a f\*\*king stupid wee bastard. That was probably the most immature thing that I've done. It was just one of them big childish things when I just f\*\*king threw the dummy out the pram. Smashed his windows just 'cos he didn't give me a fiver for

a bottle of buckfast when I was seventeen. No thought in my head about anything else. That was probably the most immature thing I've ever done.

While both participants concede the negativity of the behaviours and perspectives that they describe, any responsibility for perceived indiscretions is ultimately attributed to a disconnected, immature persona situated in their past. Positioned as moral authorities in each case, the participants engage in retrospective self-infantilisation, focusing on immaturity in order to neutralise the significance of these behaviours with regards to their overarching 'storied self' (McAdams, 2001). Daniel also diminishes the severity and significance of his offences through the use of infantilizing language:

**Daniel:** I used to go into building sites when no-one was there and stuff and you know, just doing stupid things. Just making trouble and stuff, being a wee idiot...I just started getting in to all stupid s\*\*t, getting involved with the police...most of the bad times was because of me being an eejit, you know like, getting arrested and stupid s\*\*t.

In a pattern common to the majority of participants' narratives, Daniel engages in a 're-biographing' process (Rotenberg, 1987; Maruna, 2001), relying on conceptualisations of maturity and immaturity to frame the construction of an offending persona situated in his past. In doing so, not only is he able to neutralise his previous criminal activities, preserving any positive and mature future self-concept, but also provide an effective counterpoint against which his current self and identity can be measured.

*'I've changed so much already': Achieving maturity*

Inevitably, the subjective, storied constructions of immaturity outlined above are narrated in conjunction with antithetical depictions of perceived maturity. Following from their accounts of immature, offending former selves, the majority of the young adults continue their narratives by depicting gradual processes of personal development. In doing so, participants often utilise

their subjective definitions and perceptions of maturity in establishing processes of change within their narratives. One predominant thematic motif emerged from the interview data in typifying this sense of progress, change and direction: the centrality of achievement in subjective processes of maturation.

Across much of the academic literature relating to maturity, desistance or the relationship between the two, phrases like ‘*achieving* maturity’ and ‘*achieving* desistance’ appear with considerable regularity (McNeill *et al.*, 2011; Prior *et al.*, 2011). Such phraseology might imply a static sense of finality to what are frequently characterised as unpredictable and variable phenomena. However, it also serves to highlight the objective and subjective significance that can be attached to an engagement with processes of desistance, or the passing of various personally constructed milestones individuals associate with becoming more mature (LeBel *et al.* 2008).

Several participants demonstrate the potent effect that a sense of achievement can have in the creation and maintenance of a mature self-concept. Permeating their narratives with agency and purpose, achievement is subjectively determined and can take a variety of forms: from tangible, measurable successes, to somewhat more abstract, personalised accomplishments. For Harry, a change in his identity is, in itself, an important personal achievement:

**Harry:** Experiences change you... Like, I’m the classic ugly duckling story. I was an immature wee brat, angry, stupid...and it was that s\*\*t that got me in here [Hydebank Wood YOC]. But now it feels like that’s all changed. People when they see me now always go on about how much I’ve changed... I’m proud of who I am now and what I do. I feel like I’m really starting to achieve something with my life. I’ve grown out of all that old s\*\*t. I suppose I could be a bit more mature like other people and look up to them that way, but I think it’s important for me to reflect on myself at the minute in here.

Harry's subjectively defined achievement of personal evolution has resulted in a sense of pride and a fortified impression of development, despite the inherently static nature of his carceral environment. Significantly, the achievement derived from Harry's perceived movement away from the behaviours and characteristics that he describes is rendered measurable through the appraisals of others. Following the interactionist notion of a 'looking-glass self' (Maruna *et al.*, 2004), the recognition of change by others helps fashion, sustain and amplify Harry's narrative of change, contributing to his consideration of the process as important and valuable. These appraisals provide both the audience and narrator with grounded affirmation of a more positive and mature self-identity. Significantly, Harry does not present his conception of maturity as a finite accomplishment, indicating that it represents an ongoing process of personal development.

In the majority of cases, the achievements which come to form a central part of participants' storied selves are unfamiliar in the prevailing context of the narrative. Unanticipated achievements of this nature can provide individuals with an opportunity to create and maintain a mature and desisting self-schema, separate from an offending history (Maruna, 2011):

**BC:** So then, what do you think it is that makes you feel mature?

**Michael:** I went and done my drivin' test, got my license. Never in my life would I have thought I'd be runnin' about with a license...I never would have put in for my license until someone [probation officer] says to me, "we'll pay for it, we'll put you in for it"...I went and done it, went down, done my theory and all...took four lessons in the car, just to get the bad habits out of me, and then I said to your man, put me into the test. He done it. I done it. A week after, I went out and done it and that was it. Sweet.

**BC:** But you never saw that coming?

**Michael:** Never...I would never have done until your man says, "we'll pay for it". Here's me, "right, no sweat".

**BC:** Why is it, then, that you didn't think that would happen for you?

**Michael:** Sure I'm in and out of jail all my life. But I haven't done nothin' in a load of years, and I'll not be doin' anythin' either...I'm just gettin' these charges done with and that's me. I couldn't be f\*\*ked with that s\*\*t, I've other things to be doin' now.

Established as particularly important for Michael due to his history of criminal activity and numerous custodial sentences, the unforeseen personal triumph of attaining a driving license bears the hallmarks of what Maruna (2001: 159) describes as a 'redemption ritual': an out of the ordinary and unexpected achievement, attained on individual merit, and formally supported by individuals in a position of social authority. Presented as the first step towards a changed identity, the process of obtaining a driving licence provides the audience of Michael's narrative with physical and symbolic proof of his new, desisting self. It is this corporeal achievement, and ultimately redemptive turning point in his narrative, that forms the basis of Michael's definition of maturity.

The interconnected themes of achievement and redemption are frequently situated in the participants' accounts of desistance and descriptions of maturity. While these themes impart a sense of finality to the cessation of offending behaviour, they also provide momentum to narratives of personal development. For example, Jack describes his recent accomplishments and how they have come to affect his perspective:

**Jack:** There's more to life than running about doing the bad things when you can do it the right way if you put your mind to it...I never done my GCSEs or anything 'cos I left school so early, so now I'm doing my maths and my english literacy. Once I do all that I want to study psychology and better myself. I've took myself away, I've changed my friends, I've changed my environment, all to better myself and try to stand on my own two feet...I'm doing the mature thing, now. I've already been down the bad road, the wrong route in life with crime and drugs and drinks



and all that. So I want to go down this route and try this way. And I think this way, the right way, is the best way.

Jack presents an account full of agency and control, professing mastery over his circumstances, his movement away from criminal activities, and his highly affirmative future prospects. Directing his perspective towards his future, Jack especially focuses on the attainment of qualifications and the desire to further his education. Furthermore, part of his subjectively defined process of proactive achievement has involved extricating himself from a criminogenic environment, thus achieving a greater degree of independence and assisting in a nascent process of desistance. Carlsson (2013: 14) notes that certain aspects of ‘doing masculinity’ are not age-contingent such as being ‘autonomous, rational, in control, and independent’. By depicting his current, pro-social actions as a novel means of access to these resources, Jack is able to propound not only the degree of masculinity and social consequence he had previously accrued through criminal means, but create and reproduce a subjective sense of maturity which can be integrated into his current self-schema. Although influenced and constrained by his structural circumstances, his achievements in moving away from his offending past represent the foundation of Jack’s understanding of maturity, as well as the basis for his integration of a new, “better” and mature self.

*‘It’s just the start’: Maturity (and desistance) as an ongoing process*

Contrasting accounts of maturity are most frequently presented by the participants as unfinished personal projects. In narrating the portions of their life stories that address future goals, plans and ambitions, several participants combine their visions of both a mature and desisting future self:

**Aaron:** I’m not on the drink, no drugs, none of that s\*\*t. And that’s it now, no more s\*\*t, like. Now I care about what people think of me, especially my family. They’ve been supporting me this whole time, so I want to show them it was worth it. Hopefully I’ll be even more mature than now.

**Barry:** [I'll be] completely different [in the future], definitely more mature, more grown up. As I've said, I've only been off drugs now a year and a couple of weeks, so this is just the process of change starting now, you know what I mean? It's taking that big step first to come off everything and then take the smaller steps. It's just the start.

Although both describe themselves as mature at a previous point in their narratives, neither Aaron or Barry consider maturity a fixed achievement. Rather, maturity is presented as a recently commenced and ongoing process directly linked to the commencement and maintenance of desistance from previous offending behaviours. Thus, their envisioned, prosocial 'replacement selves' (Giordano *et al.*, 2002) are at least partially defined by the perceived outcomes of seemingly concurrent and intertwined processes of desistance and maturity.

Adam's account further highlights the connection between the conceptualisation of maturity as a continuous process and the depiction of desistance as a 'maintenance process':

**Adam:** [Maturity is] just about getting more knowledge in. The more years that you'll be at this game, the more knowledge you get at it, you know what I mean? But, in a sense where you just don't cross the line any more. You can be to the point where there's that line, but as soon as you cross it, that there's a different story, you know what I mean? So, I'd rather just be behind that line and just thinking to myself, "right, this is where I want to go, let's be having you", you know what I mean?

A cumulative and active undertaking, Adam's subjectively defined maturity affords him control over his unfinished story, allowing him to maintain a process of desistance and not 'cross the line any more'. For Ryan, although the process of maturity is underway as a result of distancing his current self from his former criminal identity, the prospect of constructing an adequate 'replacement self' results in a degree of ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1991):

**Ryan:** So, I'm more mature, yeah, but like...I'm still trying to find out who I am as a person and what I am all about, you know? Like, they say, "who's he?" He's a doctor. "Who's he?" He's a postman. "Who's he?" He's a policeman, he's an office man. "What are you?" I don't know. So, I'm trying to do everything I can and learn everything I can on a daily basis and just take my time and do something I like, and then I can become whatever it is I like.

Paternoster and Bushway (2009: 1105) propose that when 'life dissatisfactions become linked to one's criminal identity, they are more likely to be projected into the future, and the person begins to think of his or her "self" as one who would like to change to be something else'. While Ryan's current conception of a 'more mature' self has been precipitated by his efforts at maintaining desistance, the subsequent process of imaginatively reconstructing a conventional self and identity through legitimate means has only recently commenced. Importantly, despite his apparent crisis of identity, Ryan remains sanguine about his ability to 'fashion an appealing story "ending" that will generate new and good beginnings' (McAdams, 2001:117).

As an ongoing, self-constructive process, many participants' perceptions and definitions of current or prospective maturity are premised on their ability to commence and maintain processes of desistance from a variety of offending behaviours. Inextricably linked processes for many of the young adults, both maturity and desistance seem to be predicated on the capacity to engage in a reflexive process of re-biographing: diminishing and retrospectively self-infantilising those portions of the life story which run contrary to the prevailing narrative and personal imperative to achieve an untarnished, mature and desisting self and identity. This narrative process of using the subjective binary of maturity and immaturity as an adaptive means of creating, maintaining and protecting a desisting identity is of particular importance to those young adults who are structurally impeded from attaining adult status through prosocial means and within conventional social strata.

## *Conclusions*

Colourfully expressed, Jack's statement at the conclusion of his life story interview reflects much of the uncertainty which has long surrounded notions of maturity and maturation across a wide variety of disciplines:

**Jack:** It's interesting, maturity. It's playing on my mind now. You're going to have me going away from here thinking, what the f\*\*k is maturity?

In *Walden*, Thoreau (1854: 255) proposes that, 'if a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer', critiquing the manner in which individuals are ceaselessly constrained by normative standards and expectations. This seems resonant with 'maturity', a process clearly influenced by socially and culturally ingrained norms, but also a subjectively understood and individually experienced phenomenon that can play a significant role in developing notions of self and identity. As a result, maturity's integrative relationships with transitional moments and processes of desistance are exceptionally complex, and worthy of continued scrutiny.

The contemporary criminal justice focus on an absence of maturity jars with this article's key finding: the subjective notion of maturity can represent a critical, active element in young adults' narratives of personal development and desistance. Therefore, although the potential contributions of the research are restricted by its localised setting and sample size, the current study bears some important implications for the current approach to young adults and maturity in the UK CJS. Subjective conceptualisations of maturity play a role in providing liminal and disadvantaged young people the opportunity to anchor their developing identities without access to traditional milestones associated with adult status. Where these tangible expressions of developmental progress are unavailable during the years of so-called 'emerging adulthood', young individuals are still expected to make a successful transition to adulthood. The concept

of maturity thus allows young adults to ‘make things happen’ (Matza, 1964: 189) in spite of difficulties accessing the traditional, normative standards of adulthood. Any criminal justice policies, processes or practices that actively focus on the relative immaturity of young adults consequently run the risk of alienating young adults, and disrupting fragile, but important processes of identity development.

Although there have been a series of steps towards ensuring more effective criminal justice interventions and outcomes for young adults, there must be further endeavour to consider individual, subjective maturity in relation to young adults and their experiences of criminal justice processes. Subjective maturity can be critical in young adults’ construction of a desisting self and identity. Therefore, through making the effort to understand and engage with individualised notions of maturity, criminal justice processes can better support young adults in the commencement and maintenance of processes of desistance. Importantly, any application of the current research to criminal justice policy and practice would first require a significant amount of further research in order to establish a more comprehensive understanding of the role that subjective maturity plays in experiences of crime and desistance, particularly in relation to a wider range of intersectional dimensions.

While this article has contributed to the ‘dissection’ of maturation by exploring previously overlooked, subjective aspects of the concept, it is primarily hoped that the content can add an alternative voice to the growing body of criminological, sociological and psychological research into the various, interrelated components of maturity. There is a deep vein of transitional complexity and developmental confusion underlying many of the stories of the young adult participants of the current study. Therefore, returning to Jack’s question, perhaps the best means of achieving a deeper understanding of the long-witnessed, but little-

understood, relationship between maturity and crime is to have academics, policy makers and practitioners continually and reflexively respond to the question, ‘*what the f\*\*k is maturity?*’.

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Figure 1: Participant Information<sup>34</sup>

Participant	Age	Ethno-political Orientation	Multiple Deprivation Measure	Approx. Number of Arrests/Convictions	Interview Setting
Aaron	20	Catholic	2	20/5	YOC
Adam	21	Protestant	19	30/5	YO
Barry	23	Protestant	6	50/20	PBNI
Brian	24	Protestant	6	20/5	YO
Conor	23	Protestant	4	100+/100+	YO
Daniel	23	Catholic	2	50/20	YO
Harry	23	Protestant	444	1/1	YOC
Jack	24	Catholic	3	20/5	PBNI
James	22	Protestant	4	0/0	RJO
John	21	Catholic	9	1/1	YOC
Katie	22	Protestant	18	5/1	YO
Liam	20	Protestant	18	10/2	PBNI
Lucy	19	Protestant	4	1/0	RJO
Matthew	22	Protestant	18	10/3	PBNI
Michael	21	Catholic	3	100+/100+	YO
Paul	22	Protestant	18	50/10	PBNI
Robert	20	Catholic	9	5/0	RJO
Ryan	24	Protestant	19	10/2	Home
Sarah	22	Protestant	4	1/0	RJO
Thomas	20	Protestant	6	2/0	YO

<sup>3</sup> The 'Multiple Deprivation Measure' figures have been taken from the 2010 Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (NISRA, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> RJO: Restorative Justice Organisation; YOC: Young Offender Centre; YO: Youth Organisation; PBNI: Probation Board for Northern Ireland Office.