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The ‘Chicken and Egg’ of Subjective and Social Factors in Desistance from Crime

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ABSTRACT

It is now widely acknowledged that progression from persistent offending to desistance from crime is the outcome of a complex interaction between subjective/agency factors and social/environmental factors. A methodological challenge for desistance researchers is to unravel the differential impacts of these internal and external factors and the sequence in which they come into play. Towards this, the present investigation draws on a prospective study of 130 male property offenders, interviewed in the 1990s (the Oxford Recidivism Study), and followed up 10 years later. The analysis supports a ‘subjective–social model’ in which subjective states measured before release have a direct effect on recidivism as well as indirect effects through their impact on social circumstances experienced after release from prison.

KEY WORDS

Agency / Desistance / Recidivism / Reintegration / Resettlement / Stigma / Structure.

Introduction

Most persistent offenders eventually abandon criminal activity (or ‘desist from crime’) as they get older. Qualitative research on the lives of former

prisoners has underscored the need to understand the *subjective changes* (e.g. in motivation or self-concept) as well as the *social changes* (e.g. in marital or employment status) that may help sustain this abstinence from criminal offending. Questions remain about 'which comes first'. For instance, some theories suggest that 'subjective changes do not simply accompany changes in the objective sphere of life, but trigger them as well, and determine how external events or physiological states will be interpreted and acted upon' (Gartner and Piliavin 1988: 299). Others have argued that subjective changes in mindset or cognition are largely irrelevant in comparison with structural and social factors (e.g. Sampson and Laub 1993).¹

Unravelling the differential impacts of internal and external factors has been a 'thorny methodological point' in the empirical study of desistance (Laub and Sampson 2001: 41). Longitudinal studies can statistically control for unmeasured, stable differences across individuals, but fail to take more dynamic individual-level factors – including personal goals and motivation – into account (Uggen and Piliavin 1998). This is problematic since recent research suggests that within-person changes at this level of identity and cognition may be crucial in sustaining desistance (see Giordano et al. 2002; Maruna 2001). As such, even prospective, longitudinal designs have difficulty ruling out the argument that changes in the external circumstances were triggered initially by subjective changes in the actor's orientation (or the actor's own choices). Reviewing the desistance literature, Laub and Sampson (2001: 41) noted that there is currently 'no way to disentangle the role of subjective vs. objective change as the cause of desistance' and proposed that 'a creative integration of quantitative and qualitative research methods in this area could lead to a major contribution to our understanding desistance' (2001: 55).

As a prospective, longitudinal study of motivations for change, the present study provides an opportunity to explore some of the long-term consequences of these internal and external interactions in the life course. These findings may be particularly valuable because of the critical junctures in time when the original data were collected. The research project on which this analysis is based, the Oxford University 'Dynamics of Recidivism' Study (Burnett 1992, 2004) involved face-to-face interviews with individuals at two crucial points: in the waning days of a prison sentence, and approximately four to six months after release from prison.

Recently, the subject of 'what works' in ex-prisoner re-entry has become among the most pressing issues in criminology (Morgan and Owers 2001; Travis et al. 2001). Re-entry researchers are particularly interested in how best to predict the success or failure of prisoners prior to their release (see Gendreau et al. 1996) and what post-prison factors are most closely

¹ Though see the revised version of their theory (Laub and Sampson 2003), which we refer to later.

related to success or failure (e.g. Nelson et al. 1999; Social Exclusion Unit 2002). In addition, a considerable amount of prison-based treatment focuses on cognitive restructuring and the development of new patterns of thinking and making decisions (Andrews and Bonta 2003; McGuire 2000). It is hoped that our research can contribute to all of these areas of study by suggesting how in-prison measures of self-beliefs and motivations interact with measures of social circumstances (employment, housing, etc.) collected soon after release to influence subsequent offending patterns, over a 10-year period, in a sample of repeat property offenders.

Background

Recent research suggests that recidivism after a prison sentence is the norm rather than the exception. In England and Wales in 2002, 67 percent of people discharged from prison were reconvicted of a further offence within two years (Cuppelitch and Evans 2005). There is 'no disagreement in the criminological literature' about the most powerful, static predictors of recidivism – age, gender, criminal history and family background factors (Gendreau et al. 1996). On the other hand, the more dynamic factors related to success or failure after prison are less well understood and such variables are rarely included in predictive reconviction research (see Zamble and Quinsey 1997).

Dynamic change factors are often divided between 'social' and 'subjective' variables, so we will repeat this dichotomy (although it should be clear from our analysis below that we do not assume that the two are necessarily separable or wholly independent of one another). We will use the term 'social' to refer to institutions, developmental events and processes that can be fairly reliably measured (e.g. marriage, employment, parenthood). In describing 'subjective' changes, we will use words such as 'cognitive', 'internal' and 'identity' to refer to changes in the way individuals experience, understand, interpret and make sense of the world around them. We will also use the term 'subjective' to refer to what are sometimes called 'agentic' changes (choices, values, goals and motivations). We realize these are imprecise uses of all of these words. What we mean to capture, however, is the difference between social institutions/practices such as marriage and subjective states such as optimism or a desire to change.

Dynamic social factors in the desistance/recidivism process

The social and structural challenges involved in the transition from prison to the community are well documented and widely known (see e.g. Lewis et al. 2003; Petersilia 2003; Social Exclusion Unit 2002; Travis et al. 2001).

Often released with only a meagre sum in gate money and no personal savings, ex-convicts struggle financially (Hagell et al. 1995; Nagin and Waldfogel 1998) and have difficulty affording reasonable accommodation (Lewis et al. 2003). Because of their time out of the workforce and the stigma of conviction, they have trouble finding and maintaining meaningful employment (Western et al. 2001). Ex-prisoners also face challenges in re-establishing family ties (Lanier 2003; Richie 2001) and many struggle with the temptations of alcohol and/or drugs (Belenko 1998). All of these problems are thought to increase the likelihood of recidivism for released prisoners (Austin and Irwin 2000; Richards and Jones 1997).

The experience of conviction, and especially of subsequent incarceration, itself might increase the likelihood of repeat offending. Prisoners become cut off from prosocial opportunities at the same time that they become exposed to new, antisocial opportunities in the infamous 'schools of crime' that naturally emerge in prisons and juvenile offender institutions (Clemmer 1970). This contributes to the process of 'cumulative disadvantage' whereby the consequences of delinquency and drug use 'build' over time (Krohn et al. 2001). In this way, criminal behaviour generates its own continuity by spawning a 'chimera' of action–reaction sequences (Patterson 1993) and incrementally mortgaging the individual's future by generating negative consequences for his or her life chances (Sampson and Laub 1995: 147).

Sampson and Laub (1993) have suggested that the primary route out of this cyclical trap is through a variety of 'turning points' in the life course – especially the development of cohesive marriages and attachment to the labour force. The development of these social bonds in adulthood explains pathways to desistance independent of prior differences in criminal propensity. These turning points 'serve as the catalyst for sustaining long-term behavioral change' (Laub and Sampson 2003: 149) by allowing offenders to 'knife off the past from the present', by providing opportunities for social support and attachment and by providing routine structure (2003: 148–9).

Crucially, Sampson and Laub emphasize the qualitative (even subjective) nature of these social bonds. They argue, for instance, that employment 'by itself' does not support desistance; rather, 'employment coupled with job stability, commitment to work, and mutual ties binding workers and employers' reduces criminality (1993: 146). Similarly, it is not marriage alone but the strength and quality of marital bonds that predict desistance. 'A quality marriage may be a turning point for some men because of the event itself, their subjective state, and the behavior of others around them as well as subsequent events that result because of the fact that they are now married' (Laub and Sampson 2003: 281). Still, these turning points are theorized to be largely independent of pre-existing factors. Laub et al. (1998: 225) argue that turning points 'are "triggering events" that are, in

part, exogenous – that is, they are chance events' (see also Horney et al. 1995). If these turning points were entirely the result of the reasoned decisions or personal predilections of individual actors, one could not argue for 'an appreciation of the role of chance' in shaping behaviour (Laub and Sampson 2003: 35). In other words, according to Laub et al. (1998: 237), "Good" things sometimes happen to "bad" actors'.

Subjective factors in the desistance/recidivism process

The argument that turning points are exogenous events has proven to be among the more controversial aspects of the social bonding explanation of desistance. For instance, in her review of Sampson and Laub's (1993) *Crime in the making*, McCord argues that, '[m]arital ties and work histories . . . are not randomly distributed' and that the authors' own qualitative case histories 'seem to show that attitude changes precede the attachments which Sampson and Laub emphasize in their theory' (1994: 415). Indeed, in the revised version of their theory Laub and Sampson emphasize that 'personal agency looms large' in persistence and desistance trajectories (2003: 280) and that 'the men studied were active participants in constructing their lives' (2003: 281). Similarly, other investigations into desistance have emphasized that the same 'turning point' event may have a different impact depending on the actor's level of motivation, openness to change or interpretation of the events (see Giordano et al. 2002; Maruna and Roy forthcoming). For instance, Uggen (2000) found that a work programme targeting ex-prisoners appeared to be effective only for participants who were 27 years old or older. Based on this type of evidence, Bushway and Reuter (2001) suggest that the work programmes, particularly those that do not contain substantial additional support services, might be effective only for those who are committed to 'going straight'.

In what Uggen and Kruttschnitt (1998) refer to as 'motivational models of desistance', the dynamics of this personal commitment take centre stage. Adams (1997: 334–5), for instance, writes:

Thinking of criminal reform as self-initiated socialization highlights a side of the equation often ignored by researchers. Substantial and lasting changes in criminal behavior rarely come about only as a result of passive experience, and such changes are best conceptualized as the outcome of a process that involves significant participation by the offender, who, in many respects, acts as his or her own change agent.

Of course, the idea that rehabilitation involves changes in an individual's thinking and personal outlook is among the oldest ideas in corrections. What are relatively new are systematic efforts to uncover just *how* desisting ex-prisoners think and how these thinking patterns differ from those of

active offenders (e.g. Giordano et al. 2002; Maruna 2001; Zamble and Quinsey 1997). In this underdeveloped research, four highly interrelated areas seem to stand out as the best-developed, subjective-level themes in the desistance literature (see especially Giordano et al. 2002):

- hope and self-efficacy
- shame and remorse
- internalizing stigma
- alternative identities

Each will be discussed below.

Hope and self-efficacy

The word 'hope' has many connotations and might appear a 'fuzzy' concept, but it has specific meanings in the psychological literature relating to an individual's overall perception and confidence that personal goals can be achieved (see especially Stotland 1969). In a reformulation and review of this research, Snyder et al. (1991: 570) define hope as 'the perception of successful agency related to goals' and 'the perceived availability of successful pathways related to goals'. Having hope, then, is different from just wishing that something would happen. Hope, as we will use the term, requires both the 'will and the ways': the desire for a particular outcome and also the perceived ability and means of achieving the outcome (Burnett and Maruna 2004).

Cognitive research with ex-prisoners suggests that long-term, persistent offenders tend to lack just such feelings of agency, experiencing their lives as being largely determined for them in a fatalistic mindset that Maruna (2001) refers to as being 'doomed to deviance'. On the other hand, some research suggests that desisting offenders maintain a distinctly optimistic sense of control over their future and strong internal beliefs about their own self-worth and personal destinies (see Maruna 2001).

Shame and remorse

A more substantial body of evidence suggests that desistance is supported by the 'acquisition of an altered perspective on their youthful self and activities' (Shover 1996: 131). Specifically, former prisoners begin to reconsider and regret their criminal behaviour (Giordano et al. 2002). Paternoster (1989), for instance, found that changes in moral beliefs and moral tolerance for certain low-level offences had consistent and strong effects on patterns of desistance. Similarly, Leibrich (1996) argued that shame was 'the primary reason' that members of her probationer sample said they were

giving up crime. The impact of shame on recidivism, however, is not thought to be a direct, inverse relationship. Especially among serious, recidivist offenders (unlike the participants in research by Paternoster and by Leibrich), the deep internalization of shame may trigger feelings of depression and powerlessness (Maruna and Copes 2005).

Internalizing stigma

Braithwaite (1989) argues that there are two types of shame: reintegrative shame (whereby the criminal act is regretted but the actor's sense of internal worth is preserved) and stigmatizing shame (whereby both act and actor are degraded). He argues that, whereas the first type of shame will encourage desistance, the latter will lead to defiance and further recidivism from outcast subcultures (see especially Ahmed et al. 2001 for the application of this theory to desistance). In short, if a person perceives him or herself as being 'a discredited person facing an unaccepting world' (Goffman 1963: 19), he or she is unlikely to respond well to deterrent or rehabilitative efforts (see Sherman 1993). Importantly, stigma in this context is defined from the target's perspective (see Harvey 2001: 187; LeBel 2006), making stigma a subjective rather than a social variable.

Alternative identities

Stigma is often deflected through the development of a new, prosocial identity that is 'fundamentally incompatible with continued deviation' (Giordano et al. 2002: 1001). Most frequently, this new identity takes the form of the 'good parent', 'provider' or 'family man'. In their qualitative analysis of interviews with the now elderly participants in the Gluecks' research, for instance, Laub and Sampson (2001: 50–1) write: 'It seems that men who desisted changed their identity as well, and this in turn affected their outlook and sense of maturity and responsibility'. Maruna (2001) also found that desisting ex-offenders were significantly more care oriented, other centred and focused on promoting the next generation than were active offenders.

Interactions between social and subjective factors

Criminologists have had relatively little to say regarding the interplay between these subjective factors and the better-known social variables in the process of desistance. For instance, Shover (1983: 210) highlights both subjective (e.g. 'changes in definitions of oneself') and social (e.g. 'an objective change in one's social relationships or networks') factors in the desistance

process but argues that these changes cannot be disentangled at this time. 'The imposition of a rigid temporal and causal order on this process would violate its dynamic nature, and given our present state of knowledge, would be arbitrary and premature' (1983: 214; see also Laub and Sampson 2001). Most discussions, however, exclusively focus on either subjective changes, as in 'rational choice' explanations of desistance (Cusson and Pinsonneault 1986), or social changes such as marriage or military service on desistance (e.g. Horney et al. 1995). This contrast led Farrall and Bowling (1999: 258) to conclude:

The empirical research on desistance from offending has treated individuals as either 'super-agents' who are free to act as they choose and can directly influence the outcome of their lives through their decision making, or as 'super-dupes' who react to wider social forces and situations rather than helping to create these situations through their own actions.

Following Farrall and Bowling's review, it appears that there may be three possible models of how social and subjective factors interact: a strong subjective model (super-agents); a strong social model (super-dupes); and a combined subjective–social model (interactional).

Strong subjective model

The argument here is that one's mindset (willpower, motivation) is what matters. One need only decide to change and envision a new identity for oneself in order to go straight. Within this framework, external events are either completely unrelated to success or completely correlated with the subjective mindset. In the first case, going straight is uncorrelated with other life events. Once someone decides to desist, social factors such as unemployment are irrelevant. In an empirical model of this case, one would expect to find significant coefficients on subjective events and non-significant coefficients on any social event. The second case essentially argues that the life events that happen are important but they are mainly within the control of the individual. With the right mindset, one is more likely to select into transitional events such as marriage, employment and parenthood. Without this pre-existing mindset, these events are unlikely to happen in the first place. In this model, the events themselves have no causative power to change the behaviour – they are merely what happen when a motivated individual decides to change. Good things happen to positive people, and bad things happen to negative people. In an empirical model with both subjective and social variables, we would expect that it would be difficult to distinguish between these two sets of variables owing to multicollinearity. In both cases, the subjective mindset is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for going straight.

Strong social model

In the strong social model it is social circumstances that matter most in whether or not a person is able to desist from crime (e.g. Farrall and Bowling's 'super-dupes'). In this model, turning points in the life course are exogenous events that occur at least partially at random. Although some events may be the product of conscious effort, what matters most in terms of desistance is whether good things (e.g. a quality job, a quality marriage) happen. It is the arrival of these events, which are largely outside of an individual's control, that will best predict success after prison rather than the mindset of the individual (see Lin 2000). From this viewpoint, the subjective mindset of the released prisoner is not important for going straight. In empirical models, subjective variables should have no impact on the outcomes even in models that do not include social problem variables, but rather life events should predict behaviour.

Subjective–social model

This third model grants that both subjective perspectives and social life events can have an impact on life outcomes. This can happen in two distinct ways. First, both subjective perspectives and social problems can each have an independent impact on recidivism. In this framework, subjective perspectives matter but do not completely determine recidivism, and life events (i.e. social problems experienced after release) have an independent impact on behaviour. This model is different from the strong subjective model because the social factors can have an independent impact on the outcomes. It is also different from the strong social model because the subjective perspectives will matter when the social factors are not included in the model.

Secondly, the subjective perspective can have an indirect effect on outcomes through the social events that happen afterward. So, for example, the individual's mindset prompts greater persistence in seeking employment with eventual positive results. These better employment outcomes then lead to a lower likelihood of recidivism. In this framework, the impact of the social factor depends on the level of the subjective characteristic. With the right subjective mindset, the person may be capable of taking advantage of the good events in life that come along and/or will not be thrown off course by social disappointments. In other words, the subjective mindset is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for success after release from prison. Social events need to occur that support and encourage desistance.

Some causal models of behaviour are not necessarily able to distinguish between the 'strong social' and this type of 'subjective–social' interaction because the models are primarily interested in estimating the causal impact of the social factors. Empirical tests of this type (for example

Horney et al. 1995) pay particular attention to eliminating individual differences from the model, often with statistical controls for unobserved heterogeneity, since these individual differences might explain both the arrival of the event and the subsequent behaviour. From this perspective, social events have a causal impact only if it can be proven that the effect is independent of any individual characteristics. Note that this latter type of model does not say that the subjective factors do not have indirect impacts through the social factors, only that the social factors also have an impact that is independent of the subjective factors.

This subjective–social model is the least well developed of the three, both conceptually and empirically. Most of the existing literature ignores the possibility of indirect effects, and we are aware of no analysis that explicitly tests an interaction model. We believe our attempt to disentangle these three models empirically represents the major contribution of this paper. We present our models after introducing the data and measures in the next two sections.

The study

In our analysis we have sought to disentangle the differential impacts of subjective and social factors in the experiences of a unique sample of ex-prisoners. The Oxford University ‘Dynamics of Recidivism’ study (Burnett 1992, 2004), funded by the UK Home Office, involved multiple interviews with 130 male repeat offenders in the United Kingdom. Research participants (who were approaching their release dates) from nine UK prisons were chosen specifically because their criminal records suggested that they could be considered persistent or ‘career’ offenders, and this population was deemed the most interesting for understanding the process of desistance. The majority had three or more previous convictions for property crimes, but many also had additional convictions for other types of offences. Another criterion was a home address within reasonable travelling distance of Oxford.

The in-prison Wave One interviews focused largely on their aspirations and expectations for life after prison, and what they saw as the chief stumbling blocks to desistance from further offending. Most (90 percent) of those asked to participate took part in the pre-release interview. Four to six months after the initial prison interview, 99 (76 percent) were re-interviewed in their home community. Wave Two interviews focused more specifically on the ex-prisoners’ social circumstances, with an emphasis on problems and experiences in their lives since returning to the community.

Finally, 10 years later, the 130 original sample members were retraced through their official criminal records. Permission was obtained to search

the Home Office Offenders Index (OI) and the Police National Computer (PNC). The two databases were searched for full criminal history data on our sample, dating from 1963 up to the end of 2001. Both the OI and PNC are subject to omissions owing to human error; by combining both, however, we have better confidence in these data (see Francis and Crosland 2002).

The sample size for this wave slipped to 126. Three of the men died early in the follow-up period and one individual, for whom we had self-reports of reconviction, was untraceable through the databases we used. Rather than consider any of these to be desisters, we removed them from the analysis.

Measures

Dependent variables

We include two dependent variables in this study. The first is a dichotomous variable representing whether or not the released prisoner has received any further convictions² over the entire 10-year follow-up period. This is a particularly stringent test of desistance or 'success', especially when one considers that sample members had a mean of 10 previous convictions prior to the prison sentence when they were interviewed. As such it is no surprise that only 23 (18 percent) of the men managed to avoid reconviction in the 10-year follow-up period. This variable (RECONVICT) is coded dichotomously, with 1 assigned to the 103 respondents who were reconvicted. The second dependent variable is a dichotomous variable representing whether or not the released prisoner was re-imprisoned over the entire 10-year follow-up period; 47 (37 percent) of the men in this study managed to avoid re-imprisonment. This variable (REIMPRISON) is coded dichotomously, with 1 assigned to the 79 respondents who were re-imprisoned.

Background characteristics

Among the static characteristics in our analysis, we include the two variables that are consistently identified as among the strongest predictors of recidivism – age and prior convictions (Gendreau et al. 1996). The age of the sample has been coded as continuous and ranges from 20 to 44, with a mean of 26.5 and a standard deviation of 5.41. Prior convictions are a continuous variable with a range from 0 to 45, a mean of 9.67 and a standard deviation of 6.47. We also include a variable for the amount of time served,

² We included only new crimes (not technical violations of probation orders) and did not include minor traffic violations or court appearances resulting only in a conditional discharge or fine.

representing the number of continuous months spent in prison for the latest conviction. This variable has a mean of 15 and a standard deviation of 14 months, with a maximum of 84. The variable has been log transformed in order to account for positive skew. Finally, we have a race/ethnicity variable of the sample, with 0 representing those of white European heritage and 1 representing those of Afro-Caribbean descent. Of the 130 in the original sample, 22 (17 percent) were categorized as Afro-Caribbean. This is roughly twice the proportion of persons identified as black in the overall British system in the early 1990s (see Kershaw and Renshaw 1997).

Subjective variables

In order to explore the impact of subjective mindset on patterns of recidivism, five variables representing the four key areas of subjective research described above were collected in the first wave of face-to-face interviews conducted immediately prior to the prisoners' release dates.

Hope/self-efficacy

The HOPE (or optimism) variable is a scale constructed by adding together the scored responses to four questions: 'Do you have the ability to go straight?'; 'What is the chance that you will re-offend?'; 'Will you be able to dismiss a (criminal) "job" opportunity?'; and 'Will you be able to dismiss a risk-free "job" opportunity?'. Each question was coded using a six-point Likert-type scale, with higher scores indicating greater confidence in one's ability to desist. The summed scores for this variable range from 0 to 20, covering the full range of possible responses to the series of four questions. The mean for this variable is 12.04, with a standard deviation of 5.57. A principal components factor analysis indicates that all four variables load on one factor (called HOPE) with an eigenvalue of 2.58, explaining 64.38 percent of the variance. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the HOPE scale is .81.

Regret and shame

Prisoner participants were asked to describe how they felt about their past criminal careers. Over half (52 percent) of the sample indicated that they felt their involvement in crime was not worth the trouble it caused them (REGRET); 22 percent of the sample went further than this, indicating also that they felt ashamed (ASHAMED) about their past lives in crime. Both variables, indicating different levels of shame and shame management (see Ahmed et al. 2001), were coded as dummy variables, with 1 reflecting that the person either regretted or was ashamed of their past life of crime.

Internalizing stigma

In the prison-based interview, each of the respondents was asked the question, 'What could make it difficult for you to go straight?'. The respondents were able to indicate a variety of perceived difficulties, one being the social prejudice against ex-convicts. This variable (STIGMA) is coded dichotomously, with 1 assigned to the 40 (32 percent) respondents who believe stigma will make desistance difficult for them.

Alternative identities

Respondents were asked to list and describe both positive and negative identities during the prison interview. The FAMILYMAN variable represents those who identified themselves as being a 'good partner', a 'good father' and/or a 'good provider'. This variable was dichotomized, with the score of 1 assigned to the 26 percent of the sample who listed at least one of these three positive family roles as being an important alternative identity.

Social problems

Respondents were asked to describe their social situations, focusing on seven life circumstances thought to be strongly correlated with recidivism: housing, employment, finances, relationships (partner/spouse and family), alcohol and drugs (see especially Travis et al. 2001).³ Importantly, respondents were asked to describe the existence of these problems at two distinct points in time – prior to release concerning problems before their last offence and again at the second interview four to six months after release to describe current problems. People with supportive social connections are more likely to be hopeful and less likely to have social problems when they are released from prison; failure to consider this possibility might lead to bias. We therefore utilized a self-report measure of the quality of social bonds prior to their last offence. In the prison interviews, participants were asked whether they were satisfied with their past circumstances in each of the seven areas, or if they had a problem in any of them.⁴ Each dichotomous variable for a specific life circumstance was coded, with 1 indicating a problem, and then added together into a summed scale

³ It should be noted that the 'social' variables are rather subjective in nature. The questions address the participants' perceptions of difficulties in these areas, which might not correlate with an objective standard. On the other hand, individuals are arguably the best authority on whether they have a stable relationship, a good job, and so forth.

⁴ The wording of the question is as follows: 'Take yourself back to how things were for you just before you committed your last offence. Did you have any personal problems of any kind – family or relationships, employment, accommodation, and so on?'

variable. The mean number of previous problems (PREVIOUS PROBLEMS) in the sample is 2.80, with a standard deviation of 1.61.

In the Wave Two interviews, respondents were asked to describe their social situations, focusing on the same seven life circumstances. Unsurprisingly, for a sample of recidivist ex-prisoners, the level of problem areas was even higher after prison (REENTRY PROBLEMS). The mean number of unmet needs (e.g. social problem areas) in the sample is 3.74, with a standard deviation of 1.63.⁵

Analytical method/strategy for analysis

The goal of this section is to create an analysis strategy to differentiate between the three models thought to predict recidivism described in the literature review – the *strong subjective model*, the *strong social model* and the *subjective–social model*. The primary advantages we have in this enterprise are that we have several subjective measures that correspond well with major theoretical constructs in this debate, collected before the person was released. We also have a good measure of the social problems faced by prisoners, both before their last offence and four to six months after release from prison. Finally, we have two very strong measures of official recidivism from two sources over 10 years.

Before we attempt to tease out the differential impacts of subjective variables and social problem variables, we need to control for time stable individual differences or selection effects. We are helped by the fact that this is a sample of serious property offenders (all male) with multiple prior offences, i.e. a relatively homogeneous group. Yet there remains considerable variation in prior criminal activity, and these differences in criminality could explain recidivism rates. A common response to this problem is to use controls for unobserved heterogeneity, such as random effects models (e.g. hierarchical linear modelling). With only two time periods, such controls are not possible. Even if they were, we would not want to use them for fear that they would subsume our subjective/mindset variables, which we assume to be somewhat time stable and individual specific, at least for the four to six months between the first and second interviews. On the other hand, completely ignoring all other time stable factors and including only subjective characteristics runs the risk of claiming that the only meaningful individual

⁵ In order to avoid having to limit the sample to those who were present in Wave Two, the 31 men who were not re-interviewed were coded as 0 and combined with the summed score variable for re-entry problems. To control for these missing cases, a dummy variable indicating that an individual was not interviewed in Wave Two was created and included in any model with REENTRY PROBLEMS.

differences are those that are related to an individual's subjective perspective. This seems equally problematic. Fortunately, we include the number of previous convictions and the time served on the current offence (a proxy for the seriousness of the current offence). We also have age and ethnicity. These controls are consistent with previous research on desistance and recidivism.

The major constraint we face is small sample size.⁶ With four controls, five measures of subjective mental states and two variables capturing social problems, it becomes immediately clear that we will not be able to run a valid complete model with all measures simultaneously. Instead, we will consider each subjective factor (and previous social problems) independently, so each of the following steps will include separate regressions for each variable of interest. Ultimately, this limitation of these data means that we cannot say anything about the relative impact of the subjective characteristics when compared with one another. Instead, we focus on comparing pre-release subjective states with social problems after release in an attempt to identify whether there is a relationship between them and how they may interact to impact recidivism.

In order to disentangle the role of subjective and social factors in the desistance process we break our analysis into four steps.⁷ Here we are capitalizing on the fact that the subjective factors are measured before release from prison, and the social factors are measured at four to six months after release. In the first step, we run five multivariate logistic regressions predicting reconviction and re-imprisonment with the four control variables and each subjective variable, as well as one with the controls and previous social problems. We use logistic regression to explain our dependent variables because they are dichotomous. In this step, preliminary evidence for the strong subjective model requires that each factor be a significant predictor of recidivism. Also, if subjective factors predict recidivism, this will undercut the strong social model.

In the second step, we use logistic regression to predict recidivism using the four control variables and social problems experienced four to six months after release. Social factors must be a significant predictor for evidence of the strong social model, as well as for both versions of the

⁶ We have only 126 cases and a dichotomous dependent variable fairly close to 1 in the sample – only 18 percent (23) of the sample were not reconvicted. Taken together, these facts limit the number of explanatory variables we can include in any multivariate regression without running the risk of over-fitting the model. If we use as a rule of thumb that we need five observations in the 'rare' group for every independent variable, we are limited to approximately five independent variables. Our final model specification has seven variables. We feel we can defend this model because we compared it with one in which two non-significant control variables were dropped and found no clear signs of over-fitting.

⁷ Our approach is similar to Baron and Kenny's (1986) three-step process to determine if a variable functions as a mediator.

subjective–social model. These first two steps will allow us to examine the impact of each of the factors separately and serve as our baseline specification.

In the third step, we use ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to predict social problems experienced after release with the five subjective variables and previous social problems. This step will allow us to determine if subjective factors affect social problems experienced after release. Any subjective factors that predict the number of social problems experienced at four to six months could have an indirect effect on recidivism through their impact on social problems.

In the final step, we use logistic regression to predict recidivism and include the four control variables and each subjective variable separately with the social problem variable after release. This step will allow us to draw some conclusions regarding our three models discussed above: the *strong subjective model*, the *strong social model* and the *subjective–social model*. If the strong subjective model is right, the coefficient on the social problem variable should drop in magnitude and become insignificant. Motivated people will be able to surmount the difficulties that come their way, and unmotivated people will succumb to failure. As a result, social problems are irrelevant and should not be significant in this model. A slightly less stringent version of this model would find that social problems could have an effect on behaviour, but the magnitude of the effect would be swamped by the effect of the subjective variables.

In terms of the subjective–social model, this last step will be able to determine if both subjective perspectives and social problems have an independent effect on recidivism or if one's subjective perspective has an indirect effect on recidivism through the social problems that occur after release. If the independent effects model is correct, the coefficients on the subjective variable and the social problems variable should remain virtually unchanged from the baseline specification. Thus, the subjective variables that are insignificant in step one would remain insignificant, and those that are significant would stay significant and have similar magnitude. That is, social problems have an independent impact on behaviour, regardless of an individual's subjective state. If the interactive model is correct, we would expect the coefficient on subjective state to decline in magnitude to zero (or non-significance), suggesting that the impact of the subjective state on recidivism occurs indirectly through the arrival of social problems and their subsequent impact on behaviour.

Results

Tables 1 and 2 report the results for each of the seven baseline regression models. These models use each of the five subjective factors and the two

Table 1 Logistic regressions predicting any reconviction through 10 years after release from prison

	<i>Regression coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Odds ratio</i>	<i>Significance</i>
<i>Subjective factors</i>				
HOPE	-0.10	.05	0.90	.05
REGRET	-1.01	.54	0.36	.06
ASHAMED	-0.25	.61	0.78	.68
FAMILYMAN	-0.73	.52	0.48	.16
STIGMA	1.98	.80	7.22	.01
<i>Social problems</i>				
PREVIOUS PROBLEMS	0.22	.17	1.24	.19
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.74	.24	2.10	<.01

Note: $N = 126$ for all regressions, which include four static background variables (age, race/ethnicity, prior convictions and time served) – results not shown.

social problem variables, separately, to predict reconviction and re-imprisonment, while controlling for age, ethnicity, prior convictions and time served in prison.⁸

Table 1 indicates that the subjective variables for HOPE and STIGMA are each significant predictors of reconviction (at $p < .05$), and the REGRET variable approaches significance ($p < .10$). In order to avoid the high risk of making a type II error (resulting from the small size of the study sample), it makes sense to consider large but marginally significant effects.⁹ However, the use of this relaxed criterion means that some of the results will be interpreted more cautiously. The odds ratio for HOPE is 0.90, meaning that the odds of getting reconvicted diminish by a factor of $1/0.90$ (1.11 or 11 percent) for each unit increase in the scale. A released prisoner with regret for his past crimes (REGRET) has odds of reconviction 2.78 ($1/0.36$) times less than the odds of a person who did not express regret. Furthermore, the magnitude of these coefficients is substantial. Because odds ratios are difficult to interpret, we provide estimates for changes in outcomes for a hypothetical individual with

⁸ In each regression, the number of prior convictions is always positive and significant ($p < .05$), while age is negative and significant in each regression for re-imprisonment ($p < .05$) and marginally significant in many of the regressions for reconviction ($p < .1$). Time served and ethnicity are never significant predictors.

⁹ Type II errors indicate the rate of 'false negatives'. Essentially, this represents the chance that a researcher will miss the effect and conclude that there is no significant effect when in fact the effect is present in the population.

Table 2 Logistic regressions predicting any re-imprisonment through 10 years after release from prison

	<i>Regression coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Odds ratio</i>	<i>Significance</i>
<i>Subjective factors</i>				
HOPE	-0.07	.04	0.93	.08
REGRET	-0.22	.41	0.80	.58
ASHAMED	0.52	.53	1.68	.32
FAMILYMAN	-0.71	.44	0.49	.10
STIGMA	0.83	.45	2.30	.07
<i>Social problems</i>				
PREVIOUS PROBLEMS	-0.10	.13	0.91	.44
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.33	.15	1.38	.03

Note: See note to Table 1.

a 50 percent probability of reconviction. Expressing REGRET leads to a 23.3 percentage point decline (to 26.7 percent) in the probability of reconviction, while the perception of stigma against ex-convicts (STIGMA) leads to a 37.9 percentage point increase in the probability of reconviction (to 87.9 percent). In the sample, only 2 out of the 40 (5 percent) participants who felt stigmatized were not reconvicted of a crime, versus 24 percent (21/86) of participants who did not perceive stigma against them. Moreover, a one standard deviation increase in HOPE leads to a 14.0 percentage point decline in the probability of reconviction for our hypothetical individual (to 36.0 percent).

Table 2 shows that re-imprisonment is predicted by HOPE, STIGMA and FAMILYMAN. None of these variables is significant at $p < .05$, but each is marginally significant at $p < .10$ and the effects are large. The odds of a released prisoner who considers himself a FAMILYMAN being re-imprisoned are about 2.0 times (1/0.49) less than the odds of a participant who does not have this identity. Meanwhile, the perception of STIGMA more than doubles the odds of becoming re-imprisoned, and a one-unit increase in the HOPE scale reduces the odds of being re-imprisoned by 7.5 percent. For a hypothetical individual with a 50 percent probability of re-imprisonment, thinking of oneself as a FAMILYMAN leads to a 17.0 percentage point decline (to 33.0 percent) in the probability of re-imprisonment, whereas the perception of STIGMA leads to a 19.6 percentage point increase in the probability of re-imprisonment (to 69.6 percent). Lastly, a one standard deviation increase in HOPE leads to a 9.3 percentage point decline in the probability of re-imprisonment for our hypothetical individual (to 40.7 percent).

The net result of the first set of models is that we have two subjective variables (HOPE, STIGMA) that have a significant impact on the probability of reconviction and a marginally significant impact on the probability of re-imprisonment, while REGRET has a marginally significant impact on reconviction and FAMILYMAN has a marginally significant impact on re-imprisonment.

Tables 1 and 2 also show the impact of social problems on recidivism. In an effort to consider the effect of social capital, we first estimated models including previous problems before incarceration (PREVIOUS PROBLEMS). The findings indicate that PREVIOUS PROBLEMS are not a significant predictor of recidivism when controlling for age, ethnicity, prior convictions and time served. In contrast, REENTRY PROBLEMS are a significant predictor of both reconviction and re-imprisonment. Each additional social problem increased the odds of reconviction by 110 percent and increased the odds of re-imprisonment by 38 percent. Therefore, someone reporting six problems has odds of reconviction over the 10-year follow-up 330 percent higher than someone reporting three problems, and the odds of re-imprisonment would be 114 percent higher for a person experiencing this many re-entry problems. Stated in another way, for a hypothetical individual with a 50 percent probability of recidivism, an additional unsatisfied life circumstance after release leads to a 17.7 percentage point increase in the probability of reconviction (to 67.7 percent) and an 8.2 percentage point increase in the probability of re-imprisonment (to 58.2 percent).

Tables 1 and 2 provide convincing evidence that social problems after release have a large and significant impact on the probability of both reconviction and re-imprisonment. However, the strong social model is not the appropriate model choice because several of the subjective perspective variables also have an impact on behaviour. The effect of the subjective variables may disappear when included in the same model with the social problem variables. Yet this would be evidence of an indirect effect of subjective perspectives given that, for example, HOPE appears to matter if life events are not included in the model.

The next step is to examine how well the subjective variables explain the number of social problems experienced after release. Table 3 shows the results for the OLS regression analysis explaining REENTRY PROBLEMS with the five subjective variables and the summed scale variable for previous problems.¹⁰ We found that this model had an R^2 of .18, suggesting that the subjective variables explained a significant amount of the variation in REENTRY PROBLEMS. Table 3 shows that both the HOPE and the

¹⁰ To conserve power, the four control variables (none of which is a statistically significant predictor) were not included in the regression.

Table 3 Ordinary least squares regression predicting number of social problems experienced four to six months after release from prison

	Coefficient		Standard error	t	Significance
	Unstandardized	Standardized			
HOPE	-.09	-.30	.03	-2.91	<.01
REGRET	.24	.06	.34	0.67	.51
ASHAMED	.02	.01	.43	0.05	.96
FAMILYMAN	-.75	-.22	.34	-2.21	.03
STIGMA	.20	.06	.34	0.58	.57
PREVIOUS PROBLEMS	.09	.09	.10	0.92	.36
CONSTANT	4.60		.59	7.82	<.01

Note: $R^2 = .18$, $F(6, 98) = 3.37$, $p < .01$.

FAMILYMAN variables are negative and significant predictors (at $p < .05$) of REENTRY PROBLEMS. Interestingly, these subjective variables were better predictors of social problems after release than were social problems experienced prior to their incarceration.¹¹ This makes it possible for REENTRY PROBLEMS to mediate the impact of these two subjective factors on recidivism. That is, HOPE might have an indirect effect on both reconviction and re-imprisonment through social problems experienced after release, while FAMILYMAN might have an indirect effect on re-imprisonment. In contrast, the impact of STIGMA and REGRET cannot be mediated by social problems, although these subjective factors may have an independent effect on recidivism when REENTRY PROBLEMS are included in the same regression model.

The final step is to predict recidivism with both the subjective variable and the social problem variable after release included in the model at the same time. These results are reported in Tables 4 and 5. We are primarily interested in the comparison of the coefficients for both variables in the combined model with those reported earlier for the baseline specification (Table 1 for reconviction and Table 2 for re-imprisonment). The first thing that strikes us when we examine Tables 4 and 5 is the complete absence of any support for the strong subjective model. The coefficient on REENTRY PROBLEMS is significant in every model and virtually unchanged from Tables 1 and 2. The

¹¹ Previous problems are correlated with social problems after release ($.222$, $p = .03$) and are a significant predictor when included in a regression equation with only the four control variables.

Table 4 Logistic regressions predicting any reconviction through 10 years after release from prison with both a subjective factor and social problems

	<i>Regression coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Odds ratio</i>	<i>Significance</i>
HOPE	-0.06	.06	0.94	.27
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.70	.24	2.01	<.01
REGRET	-0.96	.58	0.38	.10
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.71	.23	2.03	<.01
ASHAMED	-0.20	.67	0.77	.82
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.74	.23	2.09	<.01
FAMILYMAN	-0.12	.60	0.89	.84
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.73	.24	2.07	<.01
STIGMA	2.07	.85	7.91	.02
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.72	.25	2.06	<.01
PAST PROBLEMS	0.08	.18	1.08	.67
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.71	.24	2.04	<.01

Note: $N = 126$ for all regressions which include four static background variables (age, race/ethnicity, prior convictions and time served) and a control variable for persons not re-interviewed – results not shown.

net effect of Tables 4 and 5, combined with the results discussed earlier for Tables 1 and 2, is to rule out both the strong subjective and the strong social models. This leaves us to choose between some version of the subjective–social model.

The first version of the subjective–social model states that both subjective perspectives and social problems can each have an independent impact on recidivism. Table 4 shows that the impact of STIGMA on the probability of reconviction remains significant (at $p < .05$) after REENTRY PROBLEMS are controlled for, and the impact of REENTRY PROBLEMS is virtually unchanged from the baseline model. In a similar vein, the impact of REGRET on the probability of reconviction remains marginally statistically significant (at $p < .10$). The finding that two of the subjective variables remain significant in a model with social variables implies that the first type of subjective–social model in which the two factors have an independent impact on reconviction with no connection between the two of them is true for STIGMA and REGRET. Table 5 indicates that, after controlling for REENTRY PROBLEMS, the only subjective variable with a marginally statistically significant independent effect on re-imprisonment is STIGMA (at $p = .08$).

Table 5 Logistic regressions predicting any re-imprisonment through 10 years after release from prison with both a subjective factor and social problems

	<i>Regression coefficient</i>	<i>Standard error</i>	<i>Odds ratio</i>	<i>Significance</i>
HOPE	-0.04	.04	0.96	.30
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.29	.16	1.34	.06
REGRET	-0.18	.43	0.67	.84
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.33	.15	1.39	.03
ASHAMED	0.58	.55	1.78	.29
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.33	.15	1.39	.03
FAMILYMAN	-0.35	.47	0.71	.46
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.31	.15	1.36	.05
STIGMA	0.85	.48	2.34	.08
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.29	.15	1.34	.06
PREVIOUS PROBLEMS	-0.14	.14	0.87	.30
REENTRY PROBLEMS	0.37	.16	1.44	.02

Note: See note to Table 4.

The second version of the subjective–social model suggests that subjective perspectives can have an indirect effect on recidivism through the social problems that happen soon after release. Table 3 showed that the subjective variables for HOPE and FAMILYMAN can possibly have indirect effects on recidivism through REENTRY PROBLEMS. In Table 4, we see evidence of this for reconviction because the coefficient on HOPE (-0.06), which was significant in Table 1, becomes insignificant once REENTRY PROBLEMS are added to the model. The coefficient on REENTRY PROBLEMS (0.70) remains significant. Table 5 shows similar results for re-imprisonment because the coefficient on HOPE (-0.04), which was marginally significant in Table 2, becomes insignificant once REENTRY PROBLEMS are added to the model. These results suggest that the effect of HOPE on the probability of recidivism works indirectly through its effect on the existence of social problems four to six months after release from prison. The same indirect effects process holds for the FAMILYMAN variable in the equation predicting re-imprisonment in Table 5, as it becomes insignificant once REENTRY PROBLEMS are included in the model. This latter conditioning effect appears to be reasonably consistent with Sampson and Laub's interpretation of the interaction between the individual and social events such as marriage and employment (Sampson and Laub 1993; Laub and Sampson 2003).

In summary, the insignificant coefficients on HOPE and FAMILYMAN in Tables 4 and 5 suggest to us that *these subjective states work indirectly through REENTRY PROBLEMS by actually causing these problems not to occur for individuals*. These findings provide some direct evidence that social problems do not in fact arrive randomly, but can be caused or exacerbated, at least in part, by the subjective state of the individual before being released from prison.

Discussion

A better understanding of the complex interrelationship between social and subjective changes in the desistance process has been identified as one of the key issues for investigation in desistance research (Kazemian forthcoming). In particular, reviews of the desistance literature frequently discuss the need to better understand which comes first: internal or external changes. This issue has particular relevance in the applied world. For instance, there would seem to be minimal value in motivational counselling during incarceration if social transitions almost always precede and lead to motivational shifts.

It might reasonably be argued, however, that a quest to identify the sequencing of cognitive and external influences is both impossible and pointless because these operate through a dynamic, interactive process. Indeed, it is commonly argued that, on a micro level, subjective and situational influences occur simultaneously (Le Blanc 2004) and cyclically (Bottoms et al. 2004). This partly reflects a lack of conceptual clarity in analysis of subjective variables. A distinction should be made between transient, subjective factors (mood, thoughts, interpretations) and relatively more enduring and stable cognitive variables (such as personal identity, self-narratives and mindsets). Although the latter group still qualify as non-static variables, they typically change more slowly and incrementally and serve to organize and guide behaviour (Caspi and Moffitt 1995). It is these more robust, socio-cognitive characteristics that have been explored in phenomenological studies of desistance, providing insight into inter- and intra-individual differences in responses to the same set of circumstances and deepening our understanding of the subjective contingencies that accompany crime persistence and desistance (Maruna 2001; Shover 1996).

The Oxford Study of the Dynamics of Recidivism similarly set out to explore the subjective constructions of self and situations that impinged on pathways into and out of further crime over a two-year period. One of the most marked findings of the original analysis of these data (Burnett 1992) was the discrepancy between prisoners' criminal orientation and their expectations at the time of imminent release. As with other samples of men

recently released from prison (e.g. Nelson et al. 1999), the men in this study struggled with numerous social obstacles and disadvantages, including homelessness, addiction, unemployment and separation from their families. The accumulation of these problems – all of which reasonably could have been exacerbated by time in prison – seems to have a direct and powerful influence over one's ability to go straight.

At the same time, the results of this 10-year follow-up analysis seem to indicate that measures of the mindset of men about to leave prison are at least marginally significant predictors of post-imprisonment outcomes as well. For participants in this study, regret for one's past involvement in crime and self-identification as a 'family man' seem to contribute positively to the desistance process. In contrast, feelings of being stigmatized (or 'doomed') predicted both reconviction and re-imprisonment, even after controlling for the number of social problems an individual experienced after release. Self-characterization as a 'family man' was linked to new identity ('I see things differently now that I am a father'); whereas anxieties about social prejudice induced a sceptical appraisal of future prospects or a sense of powerlessness ('You never know what might happen'). These patterns correspond, in turn, with cognitive themes in redemption scripts of desisters and the condemnation scripts of persisters (Maruna 2001).

The analysis also revealed that belief in one's ability to 'go straight', or belief in self-efficacy (which we termed 'hope' following Snyder et al. 1991), may be a necessary if not a sufficient condition for an individual to be able to desist from crime. Hope (combined with self-identification as a 'family man') may even condition the experience of social problems after prison. With an adequate sense of hope, a person may both select into and take advantage of positive social opportunities, such as employment or marital attachment. He or she also may be better able to weather disappointments or setbacks in these areas, so long as the problems are not excessive. This potential for self-concept to overcome obstacles is, of course, applicable more generally, away from the field of criminology. Bandura writes:

There is a growing body of evidence that human attainments and positive well-being require an optimistic sense of personal efficacy. This is because ordinary social realities are strewn with difficulties. They are full of impediments, failures, adversities, setbacks, frustrations and inequities. People must have a robust sense of personal efficacy to sustain the perseverant effort needed to succeed. (1989: 1176)

This is definitely the case for ex-prisoners, who need to overcome tremendous handicaps in order to survive, let alone succeed, on the outside (see Petersilia 2003).

Of course, it bears repeating that these results should be interpreted with some caution. Establishing the generalizability of the findings from this

study, or the lack thereof, is a priority for future research. This study included only 126 male property offenders released from prison in the United Kingdom. The small sample size prevented us from considering all subjective conditions simultaneously and from adding too many other control variables. With these data we were also unable to examine a social–subjective factor model of sorts where anticipated social problems after release may have an impact on subjective factors such as hope before release. In addition, because only one dichotomous variable was used to measure several of the subjective variables, these analyses appear to be weighted in favour of finding (the accumulation of) social problems to be the most important factor in explaining desistance from crime. Therefore, future research can improve upon this study by including a more diverse sample of released prisoners, by examining whether or not anticipated social problems after release affect attitudes before release, and by developing more comprehensive measures (i.e. scales) of subjective variables. Finally, because this study examined only reconviction and re-imprisonment, future analyses should examine other dependent variables such as the number of reconvictions and/or re-imprisonments over the follow-up period as well as time to failure (i.e. hazard analysis).

Despite these caveats, the findings provide some support for the importance of individual cognitions and meaning systems prior to release from prison, in accordance with the proposed subjective–social model. The findings suggest that subjective changes may precede life-changing structural events and, to that extent, individuals can act as agents of their own change. This prior influence of internal logic, or cognitive scripts, works in both positive and negative directions: positive ‘mind over matter’ helps the individual to triumph over problems and make the best of situations, while a negative frame of mind leads to drift and defeatism in response to the same events. We encourage more robust analyses to further disentangle the sequencing of subjective and situational changes.

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