

# “I’m Going to be Successful Someday:” Women’s Personal Projects to Improve their Lives and Implications for Clarifying the Nature of Agency in Criminological Theories of Desistance

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## Reasons for Research on System-Involved Women’s Agency

Women’s agency to construct prosocial lives is understudied in research on desistance from illegal behavior. **Agency** refers to an individual’s power to exercise control over the course of their lives, within contextual limits. Most existing desistance theories were established from research with primarily or entirely male samples and do not explain the role of agency throughout the desistance process. To address these deficits, **the aims of the present study were twofold**: First, it examined women’s agentic efforts to avoid illegal behavior and improve their lives, including facilitators, barriers, and outcomes of their agentic efforts. Second, it applied psychological theory on personal projects (agentic efforts) as a precise measure of agency to understand how agency functions throughout the desistance process.

## The Study

This qualitative research explored the nature and outcomes of women’s personal projects, which reflect agency. In up to five interviews, 401 women on probation and parole were asked to explain what efforts they were making to improve their lives since supervision started (or since the last interview). Psychological theory on personal projects guided the analyses of the most common personal project types that women reported, which revealed information on project meaning and facilitators and barriers to project pursuit and outcomes. This included analysis of the following project characteristics that facilitate positive outcomes:

- **Project Meaning**: Perceived importance/value of the project.
- **Project Manageability (Attainability)**: Self-efficacy to achieve the project.
- **Project Community**: Social support for the project

## Key Findings: Women’s Agentic Projects to Avoid Crime & Improve their Lives

Women in the study shared a motivation to avoid trouble and establish prosocial lives. The most common projects the women described during each of the 5 interviews suggests they generally prioritized avoiding crime-related thoughts and behaviors, education, and employment early on in supervision; as time passed, they eventually prioritized employment above most other projects.

TYPES OF PROJECTS WOMEN PURSUED TO IMPROVE THEIR LIVES		
<i>Avoidance Projects</i>	<i>Interpersonal Projects</i>	<i>Achievement Projects</i>
• Stop Illicit (Criminal) Thinking	• Gain Prosocial Relationships	• Work at a Job
• Avoid Drugs/Alcohol	• Take Care of Children	• Go to School
• Avoid Crime-Involved People		• Seek a Job/Education
• Substance Use Treatment		

- **Meaningful avoidance projects served as steppingstones for women to pursue other prosocial projects and reap more of the associated benefits.** Projects that involved sobriety were linked to women's prosocial changes in thinking, education, and employment-related projects, and improved interpersonal relationships. Projects focused on cutting off antisocial relationships were associated with building prosocial relationships. In turn, prosocial relationships helped women to maintain sobriety and improved outcomes of other projects.
- **Project community was important for many women's personal project pursuit, self-efficacy, and well-being.** Social support aided women with a variety of projects, such as avoiding trouble, caring for children, and gaining employment. Social support was linked to improved happiness, self-efficacy, and prosocial opportunities. Project outcomes were improved by social support and prosocial opportunities.
- **The data revealed project facilitators and barriers specific to women on probation and parole.** Facilitators of sobriety included substance abuse and mental health treatment, the undesirability of additional legal sanctions, concerns about aging, health concerns, and moving away from crime-involved people and places. A number of barriers to women's projects were linked to women's social and economic marginalization. A lack of resources was a major barrier to some women's project pursuit, particularly meager financial resources and lack of transportation. Some women struggled with insufficient education, skills, and work experience in pursuing achievement projects. Offense records were barriers to achievement projects and limited women's prosocial opportunities, which reduced women's self-efficacy to pursue achievement projects.

## Recommendations for Practitioners and Policy Makers

- 1) **Personal projects can be utilized as a practical tool for supervising probation/parole agents to understand women's prosocial motivations and build effective case plans.** Collecting periodic information on women's personal projects may better equip agents to assist women with navigating challenges during supervision and achieving their project goals. This recommendation aligns with the gender responsive supervision model, in which gender-responsive services are based on empirical evidence of the unique realities and voices of women, and tailored to address women's strengths, priorities, and needs (see Bloom et al., 2004).
- 2) Women's projects benefit greatly from social support. **To identify projects that are insufficiently supported and compensate for such projects, supervising agents can assess the level and sources of social support women have for various projects.** Supervising agents are uniquely situated to facilitate women's projects by providing support, encouragement of women's engagement in prosocial relationships, and gender-responsive practices designed with the connection between the quality of women's interpersonal relationships and their well-being and substance misuse in mind.
- 3) Few women in the study discussed social support to gain education beyond a GED. To address this deficit, **supervising agents can provide support for women's educational aspirations and help direct them towards desirable careers.**
- 4) Offense records were barriers to women's achievement projects and prosocial opportunities. **Women can benefit from policies to prevent educational institutions and employers from conducting criminal background checks.**
- 5) Findings suggest that **women benefit most from community-based correctional interventions centered in substance use and mental health treatment services,** rather than from incarceration.

**Source:**

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