**“Relax lads, you’re in safe hands here”: Experiences of a sexual offender treatment prison**

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**Introduction**

Life for an individual convicted of a sexual offence will not be easy. Such offenders are despised by all sections of society for what they have done. They may have lost, or fear losing, the support of those who care for them and are likely to live in constant fear of being identified as a “sex offender” whilst in prison (Ware & Blagden, in press). Sexual offenders often find that the public vilification they face carries over into the prison setting, where they occupy the lowest social position and are extremely vulnerable to physical and verbal abuse (Schwaebe, 2005). However, despite the context in which such offenders find themselves, many still volunteer for sexual offender treatment programmes; 5398 prisoners completed sex offender treatment programmes between 2009 and 2013 (MoJ, 2014). Sexual offender treatment programmes address empirically-based risk factors using risk, need, and responsivitity (RNR) principles. Indeed, there is a growing body of research that has demonstrated that sex offender treatment programmes can reduce sex offence recidivism (Hanson et al., 2002; Hanson et al., 2009; Losel & Schmucker, 2005). Hanson et al. (2009), for example, found that programmes using RNR principles produced significantly lower recidivism rates (10.9%) than comparison groups (19.2%). Furthermore, Losel and Schmucker (2005) found that sex offender treatment provides a 37% reduction in sexual recidivism.

However, while there is now an established body of knowledge regarding sex offender treatment effectiveness, there remains a lack of attention on the environment/context in which treatment takes place (Ware, Frost, & Hoy, 2009). Furthermore, there has been no systematic empirical research exploring the climate/context of the prisons in which such treatment takes place. Indeed, Woessner and Schwedler (2014, p. 4) assert that “few researchers have ventured to question whether therapeutic prisons actually provide a therapeutic climate”. This is surprising given the amount of research that suggests that social and therapeutic climates influence clinical and organisational outcomes in forensic mental health services (Willets, Mooney, & Blagden, 2014; Tonkin et al., 2012). Given the great social harm that is caused by sex offending, it is important that the context of sex offender treatment is synonymous with rehabilitation and change. Despite sexual offenders comprising a significant proportion of the prison population, there is a paucity of research exploring sexual offenders’ perceptions of their prison environment (Ievins, 2013).

Evidence from the therapeutic community (TC) literature highlights the importance of context and the environment for offender rehabilitation. Jensen and Kane (2012) found that completing a sentence in a TC had a significant effect on reducing the likelihood of rearrest for prisoners. Marshall (1997) conducted a large-scale evaluation of the effectiveness of TCs for sexual offenders. In his 4-year follow-up, he found that 18% of treated offenders (with two or more previous convictions for sexual offences) were reconvicted, compared with 43% of untreated sexual offenders. Such environments have also been found to bolster treatment goals and contribute to prosocial modelling. TCs have been found to have a positive effect on self-identity and enable prisoners to construct positive identities (Miller, Sees, & Brown, 2006). They have also been found to improve quality of life for prisoners (Shefer, 2010), and prisoners are less likely to receive an adjudication in a TC prison (Newton, 1998). This has led some to argue that TCs, or at least environments that have an explicit therapeutic focus, are ideal for “doing” sexual offender treatment (Ackerman, 2010; Ware, Frost, & Hoy, 2009).

At present, little is known about prison climate and its relationship with treatment processes and especially treatment gains. Conversely, a number of features in correctional facilities have been found to be detrimental to therapy (Woessner & Schwedler, 2014). Beech and Hamilton-Giachritsis (2005), for example, found that therapeutic climate relates to treatment outcome and found that staff attitudes and clear goal-setting have an impact on treatment effectiveness. Similarly, Beech and Scott-Fordham (1997) found that the atmosphere of treatment groups (a set-up exclusive to TC prisons, whereby prisoners form a peer-support group that surrounds each prisoner) had an important effect on treatment outcome. Group climate has been consistently found to improve treatment effectiveness (Marshall & Burton, 2010). Furthermore, context in which treatment happens has been found to be more influential than the actual treatment procedures (Marshall & Marshall, 2010). This is not only true of the offending literature but also of the general psychotherapeutic literature (see Hornsey, Dwyer, & Oei, 2007). While these are important findings, they refer to a within-group climate, rather than the broader institutional climate. This highlights the need for research that examines the rehabilitative and therapeutic climate of the correctional institution as a whole. Such research will shed light on what it is about rehabilitative climates that might enhance treatment gains. Emerging research appears to raise the question of whether or not prison climate should be regarded an aspect of the responsivity principle (Howells et al., 2009).

Understanding how sexual offenders’ experience prison and its environment is important because such experiences can impact on rehabilitation outcomes (Blagden et al., 2014; Day et al., 2012). In many jurisdictions, sexual offenders are often isolated for their own protection due to the dangers they face. In England and Wales, this often means segregation into ‘vulnerable prisoner units’ (VPUs) or transfer to prisons that deal predominantly with sex offenders. Recently, there has been a move to co-locate sex offenders, i.e. re-rolling prisons into sex offender only sites. However, even in specialised units, sex offenders still experience threats and fear from other prisoners and, at times, staff (see for e.g. O’Donnell & Edgar, 1998). The purpose of this research is to investigate the experiences and perspectives of sex offenders and staff who are located in a specialist sex offender treatment prison. The research will focus on the participants’ experiences of the prison, i.e. its regime and climate. The analysis will explore how the prison differs from other prisons (in which the prisoner participants may also have been incarcerated) in terms of the opportunities available for personal growth and the rehabilitative ideals of the prison. Understanding such experiences will add to current understandings of the risks and benefits associated with co-locating sexual offenders, and will illuminate the type of prison environments most conducive for sex offender rehabilitation.

**Method**

***Participants, recruitment and sampling***

A total of 31 interviews with prisoners (n=15 - untreated n=6 and treated n=9 sex offenders) and staff (n=16) were carried out in this research. It should be noted that a final sample of 31 is considered large in qualitative research (Willig, 2008). Prison staff participants were recruited through email, research posters, and presentations during staff briefings. Participants were provided with the contact details of the lead author and instructed to express their interest in taking part if so they wished[[1]](#footnote-1). The final sample included members of senior management (n=3), psychologists (n=3), prison officers (n=5), group therapists/trainee psychologists (n=4), and a prison librarian (n=1). The final sample was purposefully comprised of participants with varied job positions in order to capture the range and diversity of staff experience in the prison. Similarly, prisoners were recruited through posters and contact details were left on all wings in order to facilitate a form of snowball sampling. Participant information for the prisoner participants is detailed in table 1.

Table 1: *Prisoner participant Information*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Participant** | **Age** | **Treated/untreated** | **Offence** | **Risk** |
| Prisoner Participant 1 | 56 | Treated | Contact – Child | High |
| Prisoner Participant 2 | 46 | Treated | Contact – Child | Low |
| Prisoner Participant 3 | 44 | Treated | Contact – Adult | Low |
| Prisoner Participant 4 | 33 | Treated | Contact - Adult | Med |
| Prisoner Participant 5 | 47 | Untreated | Contact – Child | Low |
| Prisoner Participant 6 | 50 | Untreated | Contact – Adult | Low |
| Prisoner Participant 7 | 53 | Untreated | Non-Contact (internet) | Low |
| Prisoner Participant 8 | 42 | Untreated | Contact – Adult | Low |
| Prisoner Participant 9 | 23 | Untreated | Contact – Adult | High |
| Prisoner Participant 10 | 46 | Treated | Contact – Child | Medium |
| Prisoner Participant 11 | 55 | Treated | Contact - Adult | High |
| Prisoner Participant 12 | 28 | Untreated | Contact – Adult | Medium |
| Prisoner Participant 13 | 38 | Untreated | Contact – Adult | Low |
| Prisoner Participant 14 | 58 | Treated | Contact – Child | Medium |
| Prisoner Participant 15 | 41 | Treated | Contact – Child | Low |

Following ethical clearance, semi-structured interviews were conducted in the purpose-built interview rooms at the prison. The interviews focused on the following areas and were broadly similar for both staff and prisoners.

• Purpose/regime of the prison, experience of prison life, relationships in the prison

• Rehabilitative ideals/orientation of the prison

• Opportunities for personal development and access to constructive outlets for prisoners

As this research used in-depth interviews, steps were taken to minimise researcher bias. Firstly, questions were open-ended and designed to be nondirective, allowing participants to describe their experiences in their own words without the views of the researcher being imposed on them. In addition, participants’ own words are used to describe the phenomena of this investigation (Phillips & Lindsay, 2011). In order to try and minimise selection bias, the researchers actively recruited a mix of offenders and prison staff and attempted to reach as many prisoners and staff within the prison as possible.

***Qualitative data analysis***

Data were analysed using thematic analysis; a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns and themes within a data set. It aims to capture rich detail and represent the range and diversity of experience within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It differs from other qualitative methodological approaches in that it is not tied to an explicit theoretical assumption or position. Thematic analysis has been described as a ‘contextualist method’, sitting between the two poles of constructionism and realism. This position thus acknowledges the ways in which individuals make meaning of their experience, and, in turn, the ways in which the broader social context impinges on those meanings. As such, thematic analyses are seen as reflecting ‘reality’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis adhered to the principles of qualitative thematic analysis as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). Data analysis commenced with detailed readings of all the transcripts, and then initial coding of emergent themes. A process of sorting initial patterns then took place, and this was followed by the identification of meaningful patterns in the data, and then an interpretation of those patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data was organised systematically and themes were identified and reviewed. The final themes were representative of the sample as a whole. A form of inter-rater reliability was performed on the data, which involved the analysis being ‘audited’ (Lincoln & Guba, 1985 as cited in Seale, 1999 p. 467) by the co- author as well as an independent researcher. This process ensured that the interpretations had validity.

**Results**

Following analysis of prisoner and staff interviews, four superordinate themes and several subordinate themes were identified. All of these themes relate to the climate of the prison, how the prison contributes to personal change, the experience of the prison, and the relationships between staff and prisoners. Table 2 presents a summary of the themes derived from the qualitative analysis. It is the aim of the following analysis section to unpack all of these themes via a fluid analytical commentary. As such, prisoner and staff extracts are presented alongside each other.

Table 2: *Superordinate and subordinate themes*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Superordinate theme | Subordinate theme |
| Facilitating change | **Reducing risk, addressing need** |
|  | **Headspace** |
|  | **Promoting change** |
| Well-being, purpose and reciprocity | **Purpose and meaning in prison** |
|  | **Experiencing safety** |
| Feeling human | **Relational cohesion** |
|  | **Personal freedoms** |
|  | **Respect** |
| Stumbling blocks | **Frustration and negative attitudes** |
|  | **Complacency** |
|  | **Conflicted beliefs** |
|  | **Balancing personal freedoms** |

The data revealed a set of themes that naturally related together and overlapped. This meant that several sub-themes influenced several others in different ways. As such, in order to enhance fluidity and clarity in the analysis, the superordinate themes will be broadly unpacked, and the individual subthemes will not be addressed singularly. Instead, the superordinate themes will guide the analysis and subordinate themes will be embedded throughout the analysis.

**Superordinate theme 1. Facilitating change**

An important theme emergent in the prisoner participant data that related to ‘facilitating change’ was the notion of headspace. The prison environment appeared to allow offenders the latitude to reflect on where they are and where they want to be. Prisoner participants spoke of being able to “exist” in this prison without fear of being harmed or denigrated. This was a new experience for most prisoner participants and it often took some time to acclimatise to this.

Extract 1. Prisoner participant 8

The experience I have had in this prison is by far the best place you can be in, definitely out of the 3 I’ve been in…there’s more freedom, I’ve never had any problems, I don’t think there are many people who don’t make the most of the opportunities here.

There was a sense from the participants, as illustrated in extract 1, that sex offenders at the prison felt that the environment was viable and that ultimately, they felt safe and secure in their environment. The majority of prisoner participants preferred the prison to other prisons they had experienced. This was mainly attributed to the fact that they were no longer living in constant fear and having to portray a different identity or “constantly having to look over their shoulder”. This links with findings from previous research that highlights the importance of the prison environment for sexual offenders (Ware et al., 2010; Schwaebe, 2005). Overwhelmingly, participants (treated and untreated prisoners and staff) in this study viewed the prison environment as positive, constructive, and safe. Feeling safe was a recurrent and important theme; all participants felt safe in the prison and this appeared to contribute to them being able to address other aspects of themselves (e.g. those related to their offending behaviour) which they previously did not have the ’headspace’ to deal with.

Extract 2. Prisoner participant 7

You’re going from looking over your shoulder, fearful of being attacked like it was in X to just “morning”, it’s a big weight lifted off your shoulders being here… [as Listeners] we give a talk on the induction wing and I say to them relax lads, you’re in safe hands here.

Extract 3. Prisoner participant 11

It doesn’t matter what you’ve done you’re accepted here and you accept people here…This place gives you the headspace you need to think about things to work things through, and if you need that time to be alone you’re given it

All participants discussed how feeling safe in the prison meant not having to deal with the anxiety or threat of being ‘outed’ as a sexual offender. Extracts 2 and 3 illustrate how prisoner participants were able to ‘be’ in the environment, as they were not constantly in fear. Feeling safe and having anxieties reduced gave participants additional ‘headspace’ to think and reflect upon the self in transition (self in relation to past and future selves) and the changes they want to make. This psychological space is important for prisoners and can help prisoners make sense of their current environment (Martel, 2006). Crewe (2011) has argued that headspace in prison can allow offenders to reflect and discover that change is possible and desirable. Most participants discussed feeling ‘at ease’ in the prison and that the environment allowed for personal change. This notion of headspace has also been alluded to in research exploring peer-support roles in prison (Perrin & Blagden, 2014). The research suggests that having a meaningful role in prison enables prisoners to “counter negative prison emotions” (Perrin & Blagden, 2014, p. 913), gain perspective, and forge supportive relationships. This in turn allows prisoners to buffer feelings of extreme loneliness and isolation and create the ‘headspace’ required to take stock of their position. This appears a very important element for a rehabilitative climate for sexual offenders; safety appeared to help prisoners create headspace.

**Well-being, purpose, and reciprocity**

The purpose of the prison appeared to facilitate opportunities for prisoners to gain meaning and purpose whilst serving their sentences. Indeed many participants discussed the varied opportunities they had from work, education, leisure, and behavioural programmes. This allowed participants to have ‘meaningful’ lives while at the prison, rather than wasteful ones whereby nothing constructive is done with their day.

Extract 4. Prisoner participant 1

It feels as though you’re doing something purposeful…there’s a purpose to it. I’m the only one in prison who’s allowed to do X and it means a lot, it feels good that I can be trusted...even though you’ve done terrible things we trust you.

The participant discusses how his job role within prison gives him a sense of purpose and how being trusted represents a measure of self-validation. Embedded within participants narratives of purpose were narratives of change; they did not view themselves as irredeemable. Research has found that ‘purposeful activity’ in prisons (e.g. schemes that enable offenders to make positive contributions towards their own rehabilitation) have a positive impact on self-identity (Herbert and Garnier, 2008). A recent paper by Stevens (2012), for example, highlights the importance of removing stigma in prisons and the value in prisoners maintaining ‘rep jobs’ (where some responsibility for a specific task or function in assumed). Stevens outlines how rep jobs assist the development of prosocial identities. Such jobs require superior communication, interpersonal and organisational skills, enacting roles involving the community, and being responsible and reliable (Stevens, 2012). When prisoners experience such roles and uphold the appropriate requirements, they commit to the normative behaviours and attitudes associated with those roles and with wider society. This can result in a sense of accomplishment, enhanced self and social identity, and improved self-confidence. These enhancements are reinforced by recognition, from staff and peers, of the individual’s positive achievements (Stevens, 2012). Extract 4 highlights this notion well. Edgar, Jacobson and Biggar (2011) have emphasised the importance of prisoners being able to acquire a positive self-image, earn the trust of others, and have a chance to give something back. The authors argue that such outcomes are important for successful reintegration.

There was consensus from all participants, both staff and prisoner, as to the purpose of this prison. Every participant believed that the prison was about ‘rehabilitation’ and reducing reoffending, given the focus on treatment programmes in the prison. Indeed the focus on programmes gave the prison a clear identity with the prison regime orientated around that focus. Prisoner participants articulated that this was a prison you came to rehabilitate yourself and to change your way of thinking.

Extract 5. Prisoner participant 11

It’s about rehabilitation and changing your beliefs erm changing and looking at your offending behaviour so when you get out you don’t repeat your mistakes. Programmes has taught me a hell of a lot about myself. These were life skills that I had ignored and erm I’ve changed now…

Extract 6. Prisoner participant 11

I’ve changed loads since getting here, when I got here yeah I was bolshie, arrogant, but through being here, doing the courses I’ve changed…this officer was even saying to me how much I’ve changed and that when I first came in I was a bit like this and that and I was. It means a lot that he can see that, they can see how much I’ve changed

Extract 7. Prison staff participant 5

They’re human beings like us, yes they’ve committed an offence, but my starting point is that they’re human beings

The relational dynamics of staff-prisoner interactions seemed an important aspect of this ‘direction’ (towards positive change and rehabilitation). Extract 5 highlights that while the participants’ feel as though they have changed, it is important to them that this change is recognised and reflected back to them. This is very important particularly for sexual offenders who will experience high levels of shame and stigma (Blagden et al., 2011). Participants spoke of reciprocal relationships with both staff and fellow prisoners that were based on respect, mutual helping, and learning. Most prisoner participants discussed the reciprocal nature of their interactions with staff. These relational interactions appeared to represent a testing ground for relationship building post-prison. Indeed, establishing social relationships is vital in terms of triggering, enabling, and sustaining change (Weaver, 2013). Furthermore, Vaughan (2007) has argued that change narratives require continuous validation. This validation provides desisting offenders with hope and belief when things become especially difficult. The reciprocal nature of interactions within the prison constituted a source of validation for the prisoner participants. This points to the relational properties in the ‘self-change’ process (Mead, Hilton, & Curtis, 2001). Extract 6 demonstrates that prison staff interact with prisoners not with an eye to their difference, but instead with an eye to their similarity; they are “human beings”. This perception seemed to allow prison staff to cultivate constructive relationships with prisoners. Extracts 6 and 7 allude to another important aspect in offender rehabilitation in terms of prison staff expectations of prisoners. There is a body of research that highlights the importance of pygmalion effects (high expectation produces higher outcome) and interpersonal expectancy effects on prisoner outcomes (Lebel et al., 2008). Maruna et al. (2009), for example, argue that self-change occurs not only through self-appraisals and attributions but also from the reactions and reflected appraisals of others. A recent study exploring the Listener scheme highlights this notion well (see Perrin & Blagden, 2014). The study found that through Listening, prisoners were able to re-story their lives. The Listeners reported in some way or another that when they became Listeners, their own and other people’s views of them changed. These altered views were characterised by trust, respect, and appreciation. This enhanced expectation and trust appeared to increase the likelihood of offenders living up to ‘good selves’, because they now had something to lose. The prisoner participants in this study spoke of their interactions with staff in similar terms; they all had something to lose.

**Feeling human**

The experience of stigma, stereotyping, and restriction of personal freedoms is well documented in the prison literature (see for e.g. Dirkzwager & Kruttschnitt, 2012; Gross, 2008; Hemmens & Marquart,

2000). Animosity, power struggles, and interpersonal conflict between prisoners and prison staff is also well documented (Hemmens & Marquart, 2000; Morris et al., 2012). Such experiences often make prisoners feel unhuman, and inhibit their chances of personal growth and ultimately desistance. However, in the present study, almost all participants felt that the relationships in the prison, between both staff and prisoners, were constructive and positive. All prisoner participants spoke of experiencing stigma in previous prisons and spoke of the experience as “dehumanising”. This was not the case in this prison, as highlighted in extract 8.

Extract 8. Prisoner participant 7

It comes down to respect, they treat us like human beings. I haven’t seen an officer here who thinks of me as just a number, that’s Mr X, you’re not just a number here you’re a person and that’s the feeling you get.

All participants alluded to the notion that social interaction with officers made them feel as though they were human beings. This type of environment is especially important for prisons accommodating sexual offenders. One particularly important relational aspect between prisoners and staff was that relationships were perceived as genuine.

Extract 9. Prisoner participant 1

RSP: I think they are really excellent here [staff-prisoner relationships] excellent erm they’re interested, you know, they’re interested in helping, they care…they’re positive it is rare you’ll get a negative relationships with officers

IV: What makes them positive relationships?

RSP: The honesty, the honesty, that all comes from you and the courses we’re doing, it spreads and the fact that we are able to talk freely about how we’re feeling, you know, and feeling that someone will care and not like it’s oh it’s a waste of time.

Staff were construed as being genuinely interested in prisoners’ lives and their problems. This appeared, from participants’ narratives, to go beyond superficial notions of ‘pleasant or nice’ relationships, but instead seemed to be more constructive. Rogers (1951) outlined how genuineness in relationships can promote personal growth and development in individuals. It is interesting to note that in extract 9 relationships are described as ‘honest’ and how he can speak freely in this prison with people who care and listen. This is perhaps a natural by-product of the programmes that prisoners participate in and the general focus on programmes in the prison. Prison staff were also construed as helpful, in that if prisoners requested help the staff would try and accommodate. One participant (prisoner participant 2) recounted in his interview how the bulb in his cell kept blinking and he reported it to an officer who dealt with it straight away. While this may seem trivial, it was meaningful to the participant because the officer not only recognised his basic needs but actually prioritised them. It was these small gestures and modes of interaction that appeared to transcend ‘good’ relationships into ones characterised by humanness and meaningfulness. This was also reflected in the prison staff interviews.

Extract 10. Prison staff participant 16

The fact also that the staff know the prisoners and take time to know what they are about erm and care…it’s about respect and decency and leading by example

Extract 11. Prisoner participant 3

You’ve so much freedom.. “where you going”, “library”, “here’s a slip, off you go”.. in other prisons, you have to have an officer take you… but in [this prison] you’ve so much freedom to walk to where you want to go, you’re not took there, you’re not brought back.. erm.. I’ve got another 2 years to do, and I’ve actually told my wife… I’m quite willing to do my time here

Prisoner-staff relationships being construed as genuine and “human” was a recurrent theme in the staff interviews. Demonstrating empathy in that the prisoners are also humans and deserve to be treated with respect and decency underlined all prisoner interaction for prison staff. Participant xxx expresses the impact of this type of environment, stating that he would prefer to serve the rest of the sentence at the prison, despite it not being located in his local area.

Extract 11 also highlighted a recurring theme in the data that related to prisoners having greater personal freedoms within the prison. Again, this contributed to the prisoners feeling more like humans and feeling trusted. The issue of trust and being afforded trust in a prison context is important for prisoners and can help offenders move towards personal growth (Blagden et al., 2014; Perrin & Blagden, 2014). All prisoner participants contrasted the amount of freedom they were afforded in this prison, compared to that in others. There was a strong feeling in the data that freedom for prisoners represented a chance prove themselves and be trusted again.

Extract 12. Prisoner participant 7

There, you were let out at 3 o’clock, you were banged back up at 4 o’clock, you were let out for your tea at 5, half past 5, banged back up… here, it’s a little bit more, freedom wise, when I said I was coming where this morning, 10 o’clock, they banged us up at quarter to 9.. gave him my slip and he said “oh, might as well leave you open then so I don’t forget”.. so I’ve been open, all morning. But it’s trust from the officer side to you, and we, don’t abuse it.. if we abuse it, it’s taken away from you… …you’re given more freedom, and 99% of the lads here don’t abuse it.

Extract 12 discusses how in a previous prison, the regime was very strict and prisoners were given very little personal freedom. Conversely, this prison is much more flexible. The prison appears to place a certain amount of trust in prisoners, and in doing so, sees rewards in that “99% of the prisoners don’t abuse it”. This type of environment enables prisoners to actually ‘do’ trust, not just feel trusted. Having opportunities to practice prosocial behaviours in this way is fundamental in offender rehabilitation. Once again, the prison appears to be creating an environment whereby prisoners have opportunities to enact ‘good’ and ‘moral’ selves. This enables prisoners not only to think about changing, but to actually evidence that change and transformation is taking place.

**Superordinate theme 4. Stumbling blocks**

While many of the participants spoke positively about the prison climate and the prison regime, participants did articulate some frustrations and these appeared to be having a detrimental impact on some of the positive work in the prison. Some of the frustrations were ‘uncontrollable’ or context-specific in that there was not much the prison could do to change certain things. The main frustration was the waiting times for the treatment programmes.

Extract 13. Prisoner participant 6

The frustration with this place is the courses, that’s the frustration with everyone getting on the courses, if you ask anyone their frustration and what’s the worst things about this prison they’d say the courses

Extract 14. Prisoner participant 1

and I heard from X that it looks like like the end of 2013 beginning of 2014 to get on it, so that’s 2 years being warehoused, because that’s really what it is…

The perception that some prisoners were being ‘warehoused’ was a source of tension within the prison and this threatened to undermine its positive therapeutic culture. Although the focus on this prison was on rehabilitation, its purpose appeared to affect the expectations of the prisoners, who just assumed they would be admitted onto a programme with minimal delay. The other main issue was with sentences, e.g. IPP sentences, which seemed to represent a big problem in this establishment.

Extract 15. Prisoner participant 1

I’m four years over tariff on a 9 month sentence (IPP), I’ve been trying to get on HSF for a while…I could end up doing a 10 year sentence on a 9 month sentence which 3 weeks after I got it was illegal because it changed to a minimum of 2 years.

Many of the frustrations with the prison came from system-wide issues, for example the changes to sentencing and not having the capacity to run more offending behaviour programmes. Prisoners were acutely aware that they needed to demonstrate reductions in risk in order to progress, and participation on courses was seen as the best way to achieve this. This presented an anxious catch-22 scenario for participants, especially for those on IPP sentences, who believed that they would not be released before completing a programme. This was creating tension and frustration in some participants and leading to feelings of being ‘warehoused’.

Another important subtheme within the superordinate theme of ‘stumbling blocks’ was that of ‘balanced roles’ for prison staff. Participants described a difficult internal conflict that many staff can face when dealing with sex offenders. This conflict was characterised by wanting to enable offenders to make progress and interacting with them accordingly, whilst also trying to remain aware of the potentially dangerous prison environment.

Extract 16. Prison staff participant 4

You have to bear in mind that you’re working with some of the most reviled men on the planet. So that’s something you have to keep in mind. But something you have to do is be non-judgemental… but at the same time, you are always aware of where you are and who you’re working with… and what some of the guys are capable of.. erm.. not outwardly but inwardly.. and there is the danger really. You must never be taken in by… the niceness of anything… but always be professional, but keep that in the back of your mind. But outwardly, you’re friendly, you want them to relax, you want them to enjoy their learning. You want them to learn... you want them to improve and you want them to be confident, so that when they are released they’ve got a chance.

Extract 16 describes how it can be difficult to find a balance when interacting with prisoners; it is important to remain non-judgemental and supportive within a rehabilitative climate prison, but it is also important to remain aware of the reality of prison and the potentially dangerous people within it. This conflict represents a stumbling block for prison staff, who are required to continuously balance and assess their position. One potentially problematic issue to consider here is the extent to which this internal conflict might be externalised and might impact on the aims of the prison. For example, staff who are unable to effectively manage this balanced role may be at risk of either compromising their relationships with prisoners, or becoming too complacent. In terms of the former, research highlights the importance of prisoners’ relationships with prison staff, especially in treatment establishments (Lea et al., 1999). In order for prisoners to be able to address their offending behaviours and make positive changes, they need to be able to cultivate relationships with prison staff that are founded on trust, empathy, and openness (Moulden & Marshall, 2005; Shelton, Stone & Winder, 2013). There are, of course, many challenges that can hinder the development of such relationships (see for e.g. Bosworth et al., 2005; Liebling et al., 2010). One of these challenges appears to be the conflict described above. Developing a relationship founded on trust, empathy, and openness with a convicted sex offender (the most ‘reviled’ of all) in a context characterised by potential danger and a need to be on constant alert is a tall order for prison staff. This is compounded further by the fact that sex offenders make up a sample of offenders who find it particularly hard to trust and to develop honest and meaningful relationships (Serran et al., 2003; Blagden et al., 2011). How both parties identify and perceive these relational boundaries might determine how successfully an honest, open, and trustful relationship can be cultivated.

Participants also discussed the issue of complacency in the prison. Whilst most staff participants expressed that they felt safe working in the prison, some expressed concern about the manipulative abilities of the prisoners. Indeed the problems with this population were not so much centred on the possibility of violence or aggression, but instead centred on relational boundaries. This relates to research which has found that sex offender populations are less prone to violence but more prone to manipulation including sexual manipulation (Ievins, 2013).

Extract 17. Prison staff participant 7

It’s very easy to become complacent here, you know, because they are very dangerous men still. It’s unlikely that you’re gonna get hit on the back of the head by something or stabbed here but there’s a high risk of being groomed because that’s part of the nature of these men, and they used that as part of their own offending… erm manipulation…and they condition you for different reasons than say a prisoner would in a cat A establishment…erm maybe for sexual purposes and…there’s been a few cases over the past few years where staff have been sexually assaulted or touched or groped or whatever...erm but I think, overall, as long as you’re aware of that, it’s relatively safe.

There were concerns expressed by some prison staff participants which emanated from a belief that prisoners can actually be very Machiavellian in their attempts to get what they want from staff. Extract 17 describes how there is a ‘high risk’ of being groomed by the prisoners, for sexual or other purposes. There is a suggestion that the rehabilitative environment of the prison, more liberal in nature, lends itself to heightened risk in terms of complacency, perhaps due to the lack of violent and aggressive acts. The “relaxed” atmosphere of the prison meant that prison staff had to consciously remind themselves of the dangers the prisoners can pose rather than overtly being reminded of those dangers. This places prison staff in a difficult position, as literature suggests that manipulation tactics such as being overly friendly, being helpful, cooperating with staff and prison rules, giving compliments etc. (see Cornelius, 2001; Worley et al., 2010) can be innocent and very positive. This blurs the line between rapport building and complacency. Managing this balance can be problematic and whilst this was a concern for many participants, all staff members were able to give examples of how they protected themselves against becoming complacent. In this respect, the data painted a picture of the prison, and its staff, as solution-focussed and reflective.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Broadly, this research set out with the aim of exploring the rehabilitative climate of a UK prison using the experiences of both prison staff and prisoners. More specifically, this research aimed to establish precisely what it is about a ‘rehabilitative climate’ that might enable prisoners to progress through their sentences more constructively. Via interviews with prisoners and prison staff, this research has found that the prison’s climate is experienced as one conducive to rehabilitation. One important aspect of this climate was that prisoners “experienced safety”. This was important in terms of allowing individuals the headspace to deal with their problems, engage in treatment programmes, and in turn develop in personally meaningful ways. These findings sit in contrast to a broad body of research exploring traditional correctional settings, in which sexual offenders live under constant fear of attack and are often unable to address their offending behaviour in a safe and constructive environment (Schwaebe, 2005). Indeed, there are numerous limitations for treatment programmes delivered in environments that sexual offenders perceive as unsafe (see Schwaebe, 2005).

The research revealed how participants were making meaning and achieving purpose within the prison. Prisoners spoke about how the prison provided a variety of opportunities via which prisoners could invest in their own personal growth and development. This is important as research has found that finding meaning within prison and accepting positive experiences can help erode some of the negative life experiences offenders may have been through. As such, meaning and purpose can act as a buffer for prisoners and allow for the development of new positive self-identities (see Perrin & Blagden, 2014). This is especially important for sexual offenders, who often experience multiple stigmas that inhibit their personal change processes (i.e. lead to treatment refusal) (Mann et al., 2013).

In terms of prisoner-staff relationships, previous research has found that prison officers have detached and more punitive attitudes toward prisoners. However, this was not the case in this prison (Dirkzwager & Kruttschnitt, 2012). Rather, the participants in this research described positive and constructive prisoner-staff relationships. These relationships appeared to be a natural bi-product of the philosophy of the prison, which one staff participant articulated as being about having “high expectations of offenders and believing that they can change” (prison staff participant 16). Maruna et al. (2004) have highlighted Pygmalion and golem effects in offender rehabilitation. They have argued that external factors like the appraisals of others (e.g. prison staff) are important in fostering change in offenders. The ‘golem effect’ (low expectation of people leads to poor outcome) has been linked to recidivism, whilst the Pygmalion effect (high expectation higher outcome) has been linked with better reintegration outcomes for offenders. This study found that the climate of the prison was more synonymous with the Pygmalion effect, in that it was focussed on encouraging transformation in prisoners. The prison seemed to instil a feeling in prisoners that they were not ‘doomed to deviance’ and that they and others can change.

Importantly, the results of this study serve as a reminder that cultivating meaningful relationships with sexual offenders requires carefully balancing a number of roles. The challenges with this client group are seldom centred on aggression and hostility, but instead revolve around manipulation, grooming, complacency, and relational boundary blurring. Whilst all staff participants spoke of such challenges, the prison appeared to be very reflective and solution focussed; staff members actively evaluated their position and had strategies in place to deal with any ‘stumbling blocks’. This philosophy seemed to be benefitting the prison as a whole, and contributing to the rehabilitative strength of the environment.

This research has explored the perspectives of both prisoners and staff located in a therapeutically-orientated sex offender prison. While this research has illuminated pertinent issues relating to the experience of the prison’s climate, it is necessary to broaden the scope of this research. As such, further research in this area should explore other sex offender prison sites in order to compare sex offenders’ and prison staff perspectives of ‘treatment climate’. This research is important as experiencing a positive rehabilitative climate can lead to positive outcomes for incarcerated sexual offenders (Blagden et al., 2014). Understanding the context in which sexual offenders reside in prison and the context in which their treatment takes place can allow for a greater understanding of treatment gain in prison-based programmes (Schwaebe, 2005).

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1. Due to the specialised nature of prison staff participants’ job roles and, thus, the increased potential that participants could be identified, the description of participants’ characteristics have been purposely limited. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)