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Peer Support and Individuals with Sexual Convictions: Complementing Traditional Rehabilitation Strategies

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Abstract

This chapter reports on recent research which explored the impact of incarcerated individuals with sexual convictions upholding meaningful roles while serving time. These roles took the form of voluntary prison-based peer-support positions. Peer-support has existed in prisons both in the U. K. and abroad for decades, primarily in the form of discernible 'programs' or 'schemes'. Through these programs, prisoners can access support from fellow prisoners for issues ranging from emotional distress and addiction problems to practical and educational needs. Peer-support, as a general 'help resource', is underscored by the principles of mutual reciprocity, empathy, and shared problem solving. Although this resource has existed in prisons for decades, research focussing explicitly on those who uphold peer-support roles is very scarce. The research being discussed here focused on 15 peer-support role holders in one sexual offender treatment prison. The aim was to cultivate insight into the dynamics of such roles and how they might alter experiences for those serving time in a sexual offender treatment establishment. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was performed on all 15 of the participants' semi-structured interview transcripts. This revealed many personal and experiential benefits of peer-support and the importance of meaning-making in prison. However, analysis also revealed specific benefits of peer-support for individuals with sexual convictions, such as the chance to earn self-forgiveness and consequently move away from harmful labels. There were also some important implications which suggested peer-support schemes may be best-embedded in prison environments that are rehabilitative and conducive of personal change.

Introduction

Peer-support programs across the globe have typically operated in socially problematic environments, such as areas with high rates of crime, unemployment, poverty, and gang conflict (Devilly, Sorbello, Eccleston, & Ward, 2005). Research has consistently revealed positive effects of peer-support programs in such distressed communities. These benefits include enhanced community cohesion, reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness, and increased perceptions of social and emotional

support (Bean, Shafer & Glennon, 2013; Field & Schuldberg, 2011; Walker & Bryant, 2013). For example, some research has positively assessed the use of effectively structured neighbourhood watch programs because they provide members of local communities with a sense of control over the crime and deviance occurring near their homes (Wong et al., 2014).

Perhaps the best recognised peer-support program though is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The AA program encourages recovering alcoholics to share their stories of alcohol addiction and their transitional experiences that led to sobriety. Individuals who are in recovery invite newcomers to share their stories and adopt a mentoring role that involves guiding new members through the Twelve Steps program. The mentors themselves benefit from this exchange, in that they remain in a position of heightened self-awareness regarding their own history with alcohol, and are surrounded by people who can support them, should they relapse or lose hope.

Experts have suggested that this system of giving and receiving help lies at the heart of peer-support (see, for example, Devilly et al., 2005). A review of the literature most commonly depicts peer-support as a variation of social and emotional support that rests on the core tenets of mutual reciprocity, shared problem solving, and empathy (Dennis, 2003; Solomon, 2004; DeVilly et al., 2005). Some scholars have attempted to embed expectations of support into definitions, with the aim of clarifying what constitutes 'mutuality' and 'sharing' for the parties involved in peer-support. Consequently, perhaps the most wholesome definition is one offered by Mead, Hilton, and Curtis (2001), who have delineated peer-support as "a system of giving and receiving help founded on key principles of respect, shared responsibility, and mutual agreement of what is helpful" (p135). One of the central justifications for the research being discussed in this chapter is that such a resource may be especially beneficial within the prison context – one which is characterised by deprivation and a vast array of social problems (Dye, 2010).

Research has consistently revealed positive effects resulting from peer-support schemes in problem communities (Field & Schuldberg, 2011; Walker & Bryant, 2013; Bean, Shafer & Glennon, 2013). This, and the well documented problems associated with prison populations and prison culture

(Dye, 2010), has led to the introduction of peer-support programmes in prisons, where many have been and continue to be trialled. Indeed, peer-led programmes in prisons that take focus on a variety of issues have been documented. However, the larger scale peer-support programs in operation in prisons across the UK focus primarily on the areas of HIV/AIDS and health education, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual assault/offending, prison orientation, anti-bullying and anti-racism, and suicide/violence prevention (Devilly et al., 2005). In general, peer-support in prison envelopes a range of different structures and approaches including peer training, peer facilitation, peer counselling, peer modelling, or peer helping (Parkin & McKeganey, 2000). Within prison settings, peer programs have been commonly described as 'prisoner Listener' or 'prisoner befriender' schemes. The common theme across such schemes is that they are principally founded upon the core tenets of mutual reciprocity, shared problem solving, empathy, and experiential exchanges. There is evidence to suggest that the presence of these dynamics in prisons may have somewhat of a magnified impact. For example, research has convincingly argued that prisoners who uphold peer-support roles internalise them and identify with 'being' a 'supporter'. Consequently, findings have been reported of peer-support volunteers experiencing profound internal changes and attitude shifts, and also developing a range of skills and attributes while incarcerated (Foster & Magee, 2011; Boothby, 2011). Other findings have suggested that prisoners find perspective through supporting others who experience despair, and accordingly utilise their work as a coping strategy (Perrin & Blagden, 2014). However, why peer-support might 'work' in this regard, and what it is about the interactions and experiences prisoners can have via peer-to-peer helping that can galvanise change remains largely under-explored.

Perrin & Blagden (2014) found that prison peer-support volunteers were able to re-story their own worries and concerns and take stock of them, as a consequence of gaining perspective from listening to others. The criminological literature provides reason to be optimistic about the willingness and likelihood of prisoners becoming peer-support volunteers while serving time. For example, researchers have recently acknowledged a trend in former drug users and ex-offenders seeking opportunities to become a "professional ex" (Brown, 1991) or a "wounded healer" (LeBel, 2007; LeBel,

Richie, & Maruna, 2015; Maruna, 2001). Brown (1991) has described the professional ex as an individual who expresses a desire to re-route and utilise their experience of crime and criminality for good, or to 'give back'. Applied evidence of this phenomenon is the growing presence of initiatives that welcome ex-prisoner volunteers, such as youth crime prevention programmes (Liem & Richardson, 2014) ex-prisoner reintegration mentoring schemes (Rhodes, 2008), and a variety of restorative justice interventions (Maruna, 2016). Scholars exploring desistance from offending behaviour have argued that such initiatives are important in providing offenders with opportunities to 'make good' (redeem themselves) and broaden their prospects of reintegrating back into society. Maruna (2001), for example, has surmised that "the desisting self-narrative frequently involves reworking a delinquent history into a source of wisdom to be drawn from while acting as a drug counsellor, youth worker, community volunteer, or mutual-help group member" (p. 117). Herein lies one of the ways in which peer-support roles might help to galvanise offenders' movements away from crime and towards desistance. This chapter outlines numerous ways in which finding meaning behind bars via the adoption of a peer-helping role can be impactful and constructive for prisoners.

Method

Participants

Following an extensive National Offender Management Service project approval process, this research was also approved by the Governor at the research site (a U. K. category C sexual offender treatment prison). Data collection was facilitated by the Safer Custody department at the prison. Participants (N = 15) were screened by Safer Custody staff and letters were dispatched outlining the research. All participants were required to have relatively substantial experience of their peer-support role (6 months or more) and be active volunteers. Participants were offered no benefits in exchange for their involvement and participation was purely voluntary. All participants were individuals with sexual convictions and their time spent in prison ranged from 2 years and 4 months to 27 years. Further demographic information is presented in table 1.

Table 1: Participant information

	Pseudonym	Role*	Age	Offence details	Sentence (years)	Time served (years, months)
1	Jason	ST	39	Possessing indecent photographs	7	2, 5
2	Charles	ST	60	Sexual assault	Life (99) (extended)	27, 6
3	Jamie	ST	64	Sexual activity with a child	IPP	7, 6
4	Ash	I	32	Sexual assault on a female under age 13	IPP	2, 6
5	Stewart	I	59	Rape	15 (extended)	6, 6
6	Simon	I	28	Rape on a female under age 13	IPP	7, 6
7	Charlie	I	56	Murder	Life (99)	27, 6
8	Drew	I	33	Rape	10	5, 6
9	John	L	59	Rape on a child	Life (99)	8
10	Ryan	L	47	Rape on a child	IPP	6, 6
11	Tom	L	44	Sexual assault	IPP	5, 6

12	Nick	L	64	Sexual assault on a child	12	3
13	Patrick	L	62	Sexual assault on a male under age 13	IPP	7
14	Darren	L	52	Attempted rape on a child under age 13	Life (99)	10
15	Gary	L	42	Murder	Life (99)	23

*ST = Shannon Trust Mentor; I = Insider; L = Listener

Peer-support roles

Peer-support programs vary from prison to prison, both in terms of those that actively run and how they operate. Identifying which programs should be in place is usually done on a demand basis. The prison site explored in this research naturally ran a lesser variety of programs, given that it housed only individuals with sexual convictions. Peer-support in this prison had an increased focus on the emotional welfare of the inmates, with the Insiders and Listener schemes (see table 2) having the most volunteers and being well-used. This is perhaps not surprising, given the shock and aftermath trauma associated with being convicted of and labelled a 'sexual offender' (Schwaebe, 2005). These programs, along with the Shannon Trust reading program, were the only three that met the inclusion criteria for exploration in this research. Further details of these programs are provided in table 2.

Table 2: Peer-support scheme details

Role title	Nature of support	Description

Shannon Trust Mentors	Educational	The Shannon Trust is a UK charity that regulates a reading mentorship scheme. Through this set up, Shannon Trust mentors help students through a reading program often over a period of several months.
Insiders	Emotional & practical	The Insiders scheme is primarily in place to address bullying issues in prison. Those who are suffering at the hands of prison bullies can come forward and speak to Insiders, who can then mediate between the victim and prison staff. Though the initial inception of the scheme was premised on anti-bullying, Insiders can also be paired with new prisoners who may require emotional support as they adjust to prison life.
Listeners	Emotional	Volunteer Listeners who are trained by the external charity Samaritans provide face to face emotional support to prisoners who request help.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. Interviews were recorded using a password protected Dictaphone and later transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted 1.5 hours on average, and as a rapport building protocol, no notes were taken during interview. The interview schedule covered the following areas:

- Introductory questions – arrival into prison, initial perceptions of prison life, first encounters with peer-support schemes.

- Views and attitudes regarding peer-support work – initial perceptions of peer-support schemes, first involvement, motivations for volunteering.

- Impact of scheme involvement on the person – thoughts and feelings regarding peer-support role, exploration of how the role impacted on the individual and their experiences of imprisonment.

- Future – views of future in the context of the peer-support role, exploration of how this role has shaped thoughts about future self.

Analytic technique

This research adopted interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), as described by Smith (1996). The sample size (N = 15), while sitting at the top end, is considered appropriate for IPA studies. Though IPA studies deal only in small numbers, the priority is the generation of rich phenomenological data over generalisability (Smith, 1996). Phenomenological inquiry rests upon the assumption that how things appear to us in consciousness should be the focus of inquiry (Ehrich, 2003). IPA is therefore concerned with the meanings that particular experiences, events and states hold for participants (Smith & Eatough, 2007). As such, in order to generate a phenomenological understanding of a concept, researchers must be able to glean insights from the subject expert (the participants) and seek to illuminate the insider perspective (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). The participants in this sample were all serving time for sexual offences, and as such represent a population of individuals who are publicly denigrated in the extreme (often inside and outside of prison) and fear they will never be accepted by society ever again (Levenson & Cotter, 2005; Schwaebe, 2005). This reality places great importance on the internal identity narratives that individuals with sexual convictions construct (Blagden, Winder, Thorne, & Gregson, 2011). One of the aims of this research was to explore the mechanics of these narratives further, and how peer-support roles might influence their formation. To this end, IPA, with its emphasis on the sense-making processes of the participants, was considered most appropriate.

The phenomenological approach adopted therefore strives to obtain individuals' thoughts about how peer-support roles influence their experiences of prison and their views of themselves. These accounts were rigorously analysed in order to develop an understanding of the participants', and of peer-supporters', "life worlds" (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Crucially, this understanding necessitates the participants themselves to articulate their personal narratives, which are then systematically analysed by the researcher. In this sense, a form of double interpretation is utilised in IPA, which sees the researcher attempting to make sense of what the participant is making sense of (Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon, 2010). This objective is why phenomenology requires such devoted attention to the data, and why phenomenological researchers must cautiously maintain awareness of the distinctions between the participant's account and the researcher's interpretation (Smith, 2011). Here, as a quality assurance measure, it is recommended that a form of inter-rater reliability is performed on the data, which involves the analysis being 'audited' (Armstrong et al., 1997) by the co- author as well as an independent researcher. The data discussed in this chapter was subjected to such measures to ensure that any interpretations held validity.

Analysis and discussion

Following transcript coding and analysis, two super-ordinate themes comprised of numerous subordinate themes were identified. These are presented in table 7.

Table 3: Superordinate and subordinate themes

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes
Experiential gains	Headspace
	Feeling human
	Addressing deficits
Implications for policy and practice	Laying fertile ground

	Construing rehabilitation

Superordinate theme 1: Peer supporters' experiences

Headspace

A significant step for participants was to engage in self-reflection. In this subtheme, they enabled themselves to do this through carving out some headspace as a product of being peer-supporters. Through enacting mutually reflective roles, participants were allowing themselves to live in the moment, and to resist setting unrealistic expectations and becoming anxious. Rather, they were reflecting calmly and philosophically upon their self in transition. Blagden, Winder & Hames (2014) have tagged this type of process 'headspace', and have suggested that this is a crucial element in desistance because headspace in prison can allow offenders to self-evaluate and discover that change is possible and desirable. For all participants in this research, peer-support roles appeared to be reducing anxiety and helping volunteers to carve out some headspace.

> *I see this as, you know…a stepping stone in my life, of, how I've been in my past, how I am now, and how I want to be in the future…you know, these are three different stepping stones…and I'm making the right choices now to make that first stepping stone even easier, and that's the key thing…taking each day as it comes…and being able to support people and being able to get support has helped with that stepping stone and it's given me more positivity in life, more hope, and more realistic goals to reach, you know, and making that difference inside here, and making a difference when I get outside…is gonna be a big thing. And that's thanks to the support and the mentoring scheme that we have here.* Simon (Insider)

Simon describes how he views his role as a stepping stone; one that is allowing himself to reflect upon who he used to be, who he is now, and who he wants to be in the future. Simon's Insider role certainly

appears to be prompting deep self-reflection, and the concept of headspace and consequential consideration over the self in transition is well illuminated in his extract. "Taking each day as it comes" epitomises what Simon's role seems to be offering him – a chance to live in the moment, not become so consumed with and anxious about what is uncontrollable, and instead to focus on generating positivity where possible, and crucially to keep stepping forward. Ultimately, Simon's extract portrays hope; his role is enabling him to keep 'on track'. Hope is heavily discussed in the desistance literature, and is conceptualised as one of many tools that offenders use to adjust to imprisonment, serve sentences constructively, and work on 'going straight' (Dhami, Ayton, & Loewenstein, 2007). All participants involved in all schemes described the benefits of their roles in very similar ways.

> *I can liken it to…ascending, erm a cliff edge, not a cliff edge I suppose but…scrambling up the side of a mountain. When I go hill walking I struggle with heights, but I like hill walking, so there's a problem there. So what I used to have to do was, I used to have to rest at the point before the next scramble up so, if you're going up to Wales or wherever, it's not a climb…there's not ropes and stuff, but you scramble up…and as long as I sit and I look at it, it takes me time to settle and to understand what's going to have to happen next. So I'm not gonna go back down, I am going to ascend, that's gonna happen. But you just get to that point there, and I suppose that's what the Listeners did…that purpose in the sense, to rest me in that place.* Tom (Listener)

Again, Tom's extract appears synonymous with the idea of headspace. Tom describes how his role enables him to reach metaphorical safety holds, from which he can gather power and begin to negotiate the next move upwards. What is evident here is that Tom appears to be bringing his situation under his control, and making sense of it in his own terms. This was a very encouraging benefit for all participants, who all spoke of their roles as enabling them to regain control over their situations and personal challenges. Criminal behaviour has been attributed to low locus of control –

to an inability to effectively manage challenges, internal and external stressors, and deprivation. Ineffective coping strategies in these areas can detrimentally effect levels of awareness and impulse control, which can successively bring about fear, frustration, anger, and antisocial behaviour (Gullone, Jones, & Cummins, 2000). Simon and Tom describe in their extracts how their roles appear to enable them to bring challenges and potential stressors under their control.

I've grown up a lot. I could be quite immature before, I mean I'm thirty-eight and sometimes I'd act like fourteen still…erm but with the responsibilities of, sort of having to be…not strict but being in a sort of authoritative figure when you're helping people to read…we work to their scale we don't push them, you have to have certain boundaries, professional boundaries erm with a reader…so, for me I think it's made me definitely grow up…mainly, and look at life differently. In the short time that I've been doing it I've discovered a lot about myself. I'd say I'm on a journey with it, definitely on a journey. Jamie (TBT)

Jamie's extract exemplifies how peer-support roles can promote self-reflection for volunteers. Jamie is able to verbalise specifically how he thinks he has changed as a product of his role. He talks about growing up and becoming more mature and more responsible. He goes on to say that he now looks at life differently and that he's "on a journey with it". Jamie's extract once again illustrates how peer-support roles appear to inject a sense of present-moment-focus for participants, but also how they can enable role-holders to steadily cultivate forward momentums through which gradual change can happen.

Feeling human

Participants were vocally and visibly relieved at the prospect of being able to resist "doom" labels, and extracts pertaining to this notion depicted the importance of internal and external modes of forgiveness. In its most primitive form, however, the dataset with regard to these dynamics pointed

to the fundamental importance of participants feeling more like human beings. 'Feeling human', though, interlaced with many under dynamics described by participants; it appeared to be the overarching result of participants earning trust, receiving appraisals from others, developing a sense of achievement, and consequently enhancing their self-esteem. As such, earning trust, doing good work, and removing labels appeared to represent tools that participants could use in order to feel more human, less 'prisoner'.

> *It just brings it back to normality that…you're not a prisoner in a sense, although you are a prisoner, to be able to have that trust…it's something that can only be earned…you don't just get it…but it kinda just makes you feel, "OK, I'm not as much of a prisoner", in a sense, and it just it brings you back to the normality of what it's like outside.* Stewart (Insider)

Here, Stewart neatly describes the interplay between earning trust, using the resources available to him via his Insider role, and in-turn feeling human. It is important to Stewart, as it was for all participants, to move away from the isolative label of 'prisoner'. Indeed, the experience of stigma, stereotyping, and restriction of personal freedoms is well represented in the literature on imprisonment (see for e.g. Dirkzwager & Kruttschnitt, 2012; Gross, 2008). There is also a body of research that reports on problematic relationships between prisoners and staff. Such relationships have often been typified as conflictual, unconstructive, and defined by power imbalances (Hemmens & Marquart, 2000; Morris et al., 2012). Such experiences can result in prisoners feeling unhuman, and can bring about what has been termed the 'golem effect', via which low expectation in individuals produces low outcomes (Maruna et al., 2009). However, for the peer-support role holders in this research, prisoners seemed to be able to avoid these types of dynamics and move into a much more constructive environment. Participants attributed this to their ability to 'do good', earn trust with prison officers, and gradually return to a state of 'normality'.

It's quite an honour in a sense…it's nice. Erm…I've been here nearly 4.5 years now, so I'm not one of the longest here but I'm kinda getting towards that, and it's nice that although I've been here 4.5 years, I know a lot of the staff…and a lot of the staff know me.. and I get on with most of them…so to be part of the Insiders scheme, especially being a coordinator, means that I can go round and see the other Insiders…and I see staff on other wings and things like that, so it's kind of a nice feeling. Stewart (Insider)

Both extracts above demonstrate how important it was for participants to 'do good', 'go the extra mile', and build rapport and earn trust with staff. It appeared that these experiences were helping participants distance themselves from simply being a prisoner, and move towards some sense of normality. A broad body of literature highlights the importance of prisoners being able to do this, as it enables them to build hope and strengthens their ability to change (Vaughan, 2007; Maruna et al., 2009; Perrin & Blagden, 2014). What was particularly striking about the extracts within this theme was the need for prison staff approval. Some of the phrases used by the participants in this research suggest that appraisals from prison staff were enabling them to move away from prisoners as a group, and towards the pole construct of that group – prison staff. As such, perhaps peer-support role holders are engaging in a form of self-regulation – a process of self-checking against desirable groups or desirable sets of behaviours. The fact that prisoners are getting on with prison staff might act as a form of validation that they are 'doing good' and therefore 'being good'.

Most importantly it's making me feel better about myself, making me know that I am a good person deep down even though I've made mistakes. Erm… and that I still have a life, I can still make choices, whereas if you're not doing something you…your choices dictate you all the time where as if you go that extra mile and do that something independent form the prison regime and it's for the good you still get that, you've still got part of your independence there. I do that for Shannon Trust, you do work out how you're gonna approach every single reader at

every single lesson and so you are making decisions which normally are taken off you, so for me I think that I benefit mostly from that, that I still feel that I'm still human being. I'm still a citizen even though I'm incarcerated in prison, and I think that's what's most important…I think it's because it's one of those sort of positions where you take away your prison number. Jamie (Shannon Trust Mentor)

All participants spoke of experiencing negative labels prior to becoming peer-support volunteers and how this changed as a product of their roles. Jamie's extract illuminates how he has been able to re-story his identity as a person, and how can still 'have a life', 'make choices', and be autonomous. What Jamie is talking about here is being a human. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) argues that humans intrinsically set out to achieve autonomy, connectedness, and mastery and are designed to have an impact on the environment around them, rather than simply exist within it. These basic needs need to be fulfilled for psychological wellbeing. When individuals are deprived of these needs, there can be a tendency to resort to illegitimate means and this can result in deviant behaviour. Conversely, when such needs are satisfied, individuals can become motivated to pursue legitimate goals and positive change (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For all participants in this research, peer-support roles represented a source of basic human needs, and this enabled participants to feel more human, engage in self-reflection, and focus on the self in transition. For Jamie, this entire process seemed to start with his ability to exist independently from 'the regime', which resulted in him feeling more like a person rather than a prison number.

Addressing deficits

There was an indication across all participants' transcripts that peer-support roles provide opportunities to develop social and emotional skills. When participants spoke about such skills, they contrasted who they are now with who they felt they used to be, and spoke about development and growth. It seemed that participants were cementing new ways of dealing with their social

surroundings via their peer-support roles, and these adjustments seemed to be filling deficits or addressing prior problem behaviours. As such, this theme refers here to the experiential learning and growth that participants seemed to enjoy from their peer-support roles, and how they were applying this to situations that they may previously have found difficult to manage.

In terms of patience, in terms of respecting other people…it has changed my life…, because it could be any time in the future you know…and I'm actually given the opportunity to work towards getting out, erm…It's kinda hard to sorta pin point, but…in my past relationships, I've always been very demanding, always needing things done my way and never allowing my partner to have their say, their opinion. I was never interested. The Shannon Trust…they've given me…allowed me to see the amount of patience I have. It's affected everything. And I believe that, should I have, erm, another relationship, I'll be completely different, you know, I will, instead of telling my partner that I need that and that this needs to be done, and expecting it to be done…sit down with them, speak to them about it, listen to what they've got to say. My word is not law, I'm not the be all and end all of things. Charles (Shannon Trust Mentor)

Charles speaks of his development of patience and how this has allowed him to reflect on past relationships and where problems have arisen. He describes his self, prior to being a Shannon Trust mentor, as egocentric, demanding, and lacking in ability to compromise and empathise. Charles describes the way in which he feels he'll be completely different in relationships now that his mentoring role has instilled some patience in him. He recognises the importance of negotiation and compromise in relationships and that it is unreasonable to consider his own needs as paramount. Egocentrism, selfishness, low empathy, and consequential relationship difficulties were commonly spoken about where participants' extracts illuminated past selves. These character traits were often contrasted against those that were developed following peer-support experience, and analysis of

these extracts revealed the emergence of a qualitative shift in the self for participants. Peer-support roles were instilling a variety of positive and desired traits in those who upheld them.

It's made me become a better person, it's made me look at how it'll affect other people, because before when I was on the outside…I was a selfish person…I was all about myself, I want what I want, forget about what you want, forget about how you want, this is me, listen to me, this is what I want…so being this listener has actually made me become a better person and understand what I've done and what it's caused on other people. You know, the victims, the victims' family, my family, my friends everybody who's associated or knew me it's affected them. Gary (Listener)

Again, with much resemblance to several other participant extracts, Gary connects his Listener experience to a strand of self-development that is incongruent with his 'old ways'. While he was once a "selfish person, all about myself", he now feels he's become a better person who is perhaps more able to appreciate the gravity and consequences of his own actions and behaviours. The outputs Gary describes here are reminiscent of those a prototypical sexual offender treatment program would encourage (Hanson et al., 2002). Being able to view the 'self' in positive terms and building a sense of personal value are important factors in the treatment of individuals with sexual convictions (Mann, Hanson, & Thornton, 2010). Through peer-support programs, individuals seemed empowered to be able to do this.

Superordinate theme 2: Implications for policy and practice

Laying fertile ground

This subtheme illustrates what participants envisioned would make the perfect environment for peer-support to thrive. Participants consistently expressed that there needed to be some commitment to forging a prison climate that welcomes peer-support and enables it to flourish. While it was articulated

that this was a task for everyone, participants pointed to the importance of staff encouraging peer-support, and the prison taking such roles more seriously in general. Words such an "community" and "climate" featured strongly across this theme, and seemed to lie at the foundation of overcoming some of the stumbling blocks identified earlier.

I think it goes back to having, erm…the backing of staff, and management. You know, with each new government comes new policies, erm, new ill-thought innovations. Erm, so, it becomes the point that the boy cries wolf, where the really good innovations fall flat on their face because staff and management will have the attitude of "well, we've seen it fail". So, if you steady a prison environment, where it's not the worst place in the world to be…then the tensions will lift off the staff as well. They will be more inclined to support peer-mentoring, and invest in that climate…and it will all be a lot safer. Mickey (Shannon Trust Mentor & Buddy)

There was acknowledgement from participants that prisons are constantly in a state of change and volatility. While there was often a level of fatalistic acceptance expressed alongside this (i.e. a general feeling that prisons were powerless to change), there were also some optimistic and constructive ideas emitted. In his extract, Mickey describes how everchanging government landscapes can create a cynicism within the prison estate that 'nothing works'. This can manifest itself in what Mickey tags a "we've seen it fail" mentality from staff. While his recommendation of steadying the prison environment may seem vague and ambitious, he identifies that prison atmosphere and climate are key to improving the outlook of peer-mentoring. In the literature surrounding therapeutic community prisons (TCs), 'rehabilitative climate' is framed as an environment in which both staff and prisoners are aligned to the goals of the prison (ultimately to reform its inhabitants) (Blagden & Perrin, 2016). While Mickey is not explicitly alluding to academic tags such as 'rehabilitative climate' or 'therapeutic community' in his extract, he recognises a need for a more positive atmosphere that is safer and less

tense. He also believes that in this kind of environment, staff would be "more inclined to support peer-mentoring".

It would work better if the prison…if each wing had their own community, and the community decided what does and doesn't go on…we are adults, and we have got sensible people in here, some more sensible than the officers!…it can run…and that's what happens in therapeutic community prisons. The prisoners decide, if you wanna put in for a family visit, have you behaved yourself that month to have that family visit? And they have a vote, and if they decide, well I don't think he should have that visit because last week he was talking to someone disrespectfully, and this is the prisoners deciding it. That can work! Jeremy (Listener)

When asked about the kind of environment peer-support would work best in, Jeremy makes the explicit connection to therapeutic community prisons. Indeed, there appears to be a degree of conceptual alliance between the tenets of peer-support and the theoretical underpinnings of the therapeutic community. While the typical secure setting presents considerable drawbacks for encouraging personal growth and undertaking constructive therapeutic work (Dhami, Ayton, & Loewenstein, 2007), some have argued it may also represent opportunities and potential benefits, particularly if it is characterised by therapeutic and rehabilitative goals. In TC environments, these goals are driven by emphasising prisoners' personal agency and responsibility for themselves and their social environment (Frost & Connolly, 2004). Jeremy expresses the importance of this, asserting that "the prisoners deciding…can work!". Jeremy places peer-support alongside the tenets of the therapeutic community, and indeed, there is a growing body of literature that suggests TC prisons are successful because they typically revolve around peer-to-peer and group psychotherapy interventions that hinge on shared problem solving (De Leon, 2000; Ware, Frost, & Hoy, 2010). Theoretically then, peer-support may be well-placed in TC prisons, or at least prisons that emphasise a rehabilitative climate in which inmates are given support and opportunities to change. Furthermore, integrating

features of TC environments into mains prisons might be useful for enhancing the utility of peer-support.

Construing rehabilitation

It has been argued that prisoners are too often passive recipients of rehabilitative initiatives that are mandated upon them by those who know better (Devilly, et al., 2005). Despite this claim, which alludes to the importance of prisoner-led rehabilitation and the value of the "insider perspective", research on prisoners' views of rehabilitation is scarce (Blagden et al., 2017). Little is known about how prisoners experience rehabilitation, and what their ideas regarding its reform might be. This subtheme bridges this gap to some extent; it explores the viewpoints of the experts (the participants) on what rehabilitation means and how it can be experienced. To this end, questions put to participants during this stage of data collection aimed to generate an understanding of what rehabilitation means to them, how it should be done, and what this means for the utility of peer-support.

> *Now, with rehabilitation, it's like drug addiction, you can only be rehabilitated if you want to be. If you don't want to be, nothing's gonna stop you or make you change, whatever you do it's not gonna happen. So you've got to want to change, you've got to work at it. That's why this peer-support stuff is a good thing...you're actually doing something. But go and look around on the wings, people sitting about, doing nothing. Is that rehabilitation? Warehousing people, and giving them stupid mundane jobs, giving them 10 pounds a week...How is that gonna rehabilitate you? Someone tells you on that day, you're forced to do a course, SCP, resolve. You haven't got a choice to do it, you're forced to do it. And I know many people who actually want to do it, and can't get on it! But...the people who don't wanna do it, they're in there doing it. It's a selection process surely?* Jeremy (Listener)

Me personally, I think rehabilitation has gotta start at home, that person has gotta want to do it and do it the way they want. If he doesn't want to, it's a waste of time. These courses they put inmates on, biggest waste of money ever. You're not gonna change someone who doesn't wanna change. All they're gonna do is bullshit you to get outta the door. Change has gotta start at home. They can try and try and try as much as they want, but it's not going to happen if that person doesn't wanna change. Jamie (Shannon Trust Mentor)

When discussing rehabilitation, participants' transcripts were saturated with the assertion that rehabilitation is a personal thing and that the motivation to achieve it has to come from within. There is indeed much theoretical support for this claim, with the literature surrounding program and treatment readiness consistently emphasising the importance of prisoner characteristics (states or dispositions) which are likely to promote engagement in therapy and thus behavioural change (Day et al., 2009). A key protocol in determining whether an offender is ready for an intervention is assessing their motivation – i.e. do they genuinely want to change (Ward, Day, Howells, & Birgden, 2004). However, Jeremy alludes to the idea that people may be motivated to 'do' change through their peer-support roles, but not necessarily wish to enter a course or program. The implication here is that prison-led programs and courses may not be for everyone, and that prisoner-led change through peer-helping could be a viable alternative. "Being forced" to do a program or course was considered pointless in that prisoners will only change when they want to. Crucially, peer-support roles can represent structures that encourage natural change in offenders. This may be important as a response to participants' assertions that change has to come from within. Peer-support seems to encourage organic change that stems from prisoners' own decisions to begin helping others. Such change, for participants in this research, was typified by realising new skills, finding hope and optimism, and garnering self-esteem and self-efficacy from legitimate sources of activity. Some participants alluded to how this in itself was a form of rehabilitation.

I think the prison system should focus on what people are good at…if people can improve even more on those things then that would give them some hope and self-belief, and that will probably take them away from the bad things they were doing, that they probably didn't even want to do but they were just doing because they had to fit in or whatever. But once they have the worth and they have an identity, they don't need to be part of that anymore, they can be an individual. So I think prison should really look at focusing on peoples skills and abilities, whether they be innate or learned or whatever. I think the prison needs to spend more time and resources, identifying people skills and abilities, and harvesting them. That can happen through peer-support…and it would make people feel a lot better and that would be true rehabilitation. Nova (Buddy)

Nova describes a strengths-based approach to rehabilitation that echoes the theoretical tenets of the Good Lives Model (Ward, 2002; Ward & Brown, 2004). He urges the prison system to be more responsive to offenders' individual needs, skills, and goals. Focusing resources on identifying people's natural abilities and providing opportunities for them to be practiced and honed would be "true rehabilitation". In this research, participants were discovering new skills and capabilities through their peer-support roles, and they were continually crafting them as a product of the routine reciprocal reflecting they were undertaking with fellow prisoners. Being able to harvest these benefits from peer-support work meant that, for many, there was no need to engage in other methods of esteem-boosting. Nova mentions that people who are able to cultivate hope and self-belief from legitimate channels and "thing's they're good at" may position themselves on routes away from "the bad things they were doing". He attributes this to self-worth and identity, and indeed, the participants in this research were constructing positive individual and social identities as a product of 'being' peer-supporters.

Discussion and concluding remarks

This chapter has reported on recent research that investigated the potential impact of peer-support on the prison experience for individuals with sexual convictions. Encouragingly, participants spoke about their peer-support work very constructively, and alluded to cultivating an array of benefits that not only benefited them personally but also made the prison experience more conducive for prosocial reflection and change. An especially discernible output that participants described related to 'feeling human'. Participants portrayed a deep fear of forever being labelled 'sex offenders', and peer-support appeared to help participants resist such harmful labels. This was a crucially important contribution of peer-support, given that those with sexual convictions find it especially difficult to adjust to and live through prison, and also to reintegrate after serving time (Levenson & Cotter, 2005). Upholding peer-support roles provided some level of solace to the participants in the research described here and this seemed to be centred on the feeling that they could one day be regarded as good people again. This has implications for the experience of sexual offender treatment prisons but also the reintegration of individuals with sexual convictions, given that hopelessness, social isolation, and low self-worth have been shown to enforce cycles of offending behaviour (Jeglic, Mercado, & Levenson, 2012). 'Feeling human' in this study was energised by the ways in which peer-supporters could find headspace through the development of meaning and purpose and consequently address personal deficits. This cycle of positive outcomes appeared to characterise peer-support roles for participants and may be of unique importance in terms of the prison environment and how it can be experienced.

Another important finding was that peer-supporters in prison appeared to garner the opportunity to 'practice' new skills and consequently build protective traits and behaviours. This sits in line with calls to provide opportunities for individuals with sexual convictions especially to "do desistance" (Perrin et al., 2017) and demonstrate effective risk management methods (Davey, Day, & Balfour, 2015; Olver, Lewis, & Wong, 2013). The peer-support volunteers appeared to be addressing risk factors through the enactment of prosocial selves characterised by better coping, effective emotional regulation, empathy, mutual helping, and active citizenship. All of this was made possible through the prosocial work that peer-support roles demand, but might also have been aided by the

enhanced rehabilitative and therapeutic environment that characterises sexual offender treatment prisons; it may be possible that the participants were engaging more therapeutically with their roles through a conjoining of their learning from treatment and their experience as 'active citizens'. Future research might therefore explore the clinical utility of peer-support roles in the context of treatment and rehabilitative climate.

Regarding the potential utility of peer-support, the final superordinate theme presented in this chapter was derived from participants' views about the future of peer-support, and what else might need to change for it to be fully utilised. Here, prison courses and programs were spoken about in negative terms. It was debated that while programs are integral to the development and reformation of offenders, they should not be employed as the sole source of intervention. Participants repeatedly lauded peer-support for offering prisoners a chance to do something that is led by them and personally meaningful. They juxtaposed this by reiterating that "you can only be rehabilitated if you want to". This appeared to be a unique and important contribution of peer-support, given that many formalised rehabilitation interventions have struggled to account for diversity, differentiation, and personal motivation (Wormith & Olver, 2002). The participants in this research called for a prison climate that encourages peer-support and consequently encourages prisoners to carve out their own rehabilitation pathways.

The research described in this chapter will hopefully aid further research and help to construct policy and practice around peer-support in prisons. Including prisoners directly in the formulation of these implications is an important contribution of this research. It is hoped that this feature of the research has ultimately represented chance for prisoners to inform some of their own directives. After all, "continued bypassing of the prisoner's perspective can serve only to harden the apparent resentment and contempt for a criminal justice system predicated on brass-bound policy ideals" (Juliani, 1981, p122). Indeed, prisoners should not feel like they are mere spectators of the CJS but rather active participants in its development (Casper, 1972, cited in Erez, 1987). In such an environment, prisoners are plausibly more likely to respect and adhere to the initiatives and

interventions that they themselves helped formulate (Juliani, 1981). Conversely, disenfranchisement undermines rehabilitative goals and efforts to socially reintegrate ex-offenders (Dhami, 2005). As well as illuminating the important implications surrounding the utility of peer-support in prison, it is hoped that this research, more generally, has demonstrated the value of listening to the prisoner voice. Experiences of sexual offender treatment prisons can and should only be understood through those who have served time in them. This chapter represents a small portion of what can be learned from such individuals and how such learning can shape the experience and effectiveness of prison and ultimately rehabilitation.

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Glossary

"Desistance" – A psycho-criminological term which refers to the process an individual with a criminal conviction goes through when beginning to or successfully abstaining from crime

"Goods" / "Meaningful Goods" – Positive and prosocial states or qualities that a person with a conviction possesses or attains which enables them to socialise more effectively in the conventional world

"Locus of control" – The extent to which people feel they have control over the events that occur in their lives

"Peer-support" – Emotional and/or practical helping that takes place between two people who share a social context and/or experience similar problems

"Re-story" – Narrative criminological term which refers to the process through which a person with a criminal conviction begins to reshape a deviant past into something more socially constructive

"Therapeutic climate" – The notion of a prison structure being designed around and encompassed

by clinical and therapeutic work with individuals with convictions

Index key terms

Peer-support	Offender change
Mentoring schemes	Prison programs
Desistance	Wounded healers
Good lives model	Prisoner empowerment
Making good	Emotional support
Rehabilitative climate	Prisoner-led rehabilitation