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Why do therapists work in prisons, and what is their lived experience of doing so?

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Abstract: The aim of this study is to uncover the lived experience of psychotherapists and counsellors working in prisons and their motivations for doing so. A series of semi-structured interviews with three therapists who have worked in the English prison system were undertaken. An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) method was chosen for this study as it facilitates an understanding of the meanings attributed by participants to their unique lived experience. The close analysis of each interview identified three group experiential themes: the draw to working with prisoners, the need to adapt, and the view of people who commit crimes. Participants felt a strong draw to the work before having any experience working within a prison setting, explicating a specific draw to the types of clients they would be working with. Working in a prison environment was found to be challenging but worthwhile, with a unanimous felt sense of empathy for the people they encountered. Participants believed lived experience to be significantly linked to offending, and their experience of working in prisons enhanced this view. The findings of this study highlight the challenges faced by both therapists and prisoners within prisons, implicating systematic changes which could improve the experience for both.

Keywords: Work in prison, interpretive phenomenological analysis, therapy, lived experience

Psychotherapists and counsellors working in prisons operate in environments that differ significantly from traditional therapeutic settings. This study explores their lived experiences and motivations, aiming to shed light on the psychological and systemic challenges of prison-based therapy. By understanding both conscious and unconscious factors that draw therapists to this work, the research may inform how therapeutic relationships are formed and sustained in restrictive environments, with potential relevance

for similar settings such as NHS inpatient units. Findings may also support practitioners considering forensic roles by providing insight into the unique demands of the work. Given the limited literature on therapists' experiences in prisons, and even less on their motivations, this study seeks to address a notable gap.

The term client is used throughout to refer to therapy participants in prison, in recognition of the dehumanising connotations of the term prisoner. The term prisoner is used only when referring to individuals not engaged in therapy.

Prisons are often described as the largest mental health facilities in any given country, with 50–64% of prisoners meeting criteria for personality disorders, compared to 5% in the general population (Huffman, 2006; NICE, 2014). This, combined with the harsh prison environment, contributes to issues such as violence, self-harm, and recidivism, underscoring the need for psychological support. Despite limited provision in UK prisons (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2011), interventions such as CBT, psychodynamic, person-centred, and mentalization-based therapies are available and have been shown to reduce self-harm and reoffending (Morgan et al., 2012; Bourgon & Armstrong, 2005). However, therapeutic services remain underprioritized (Bennett & Shuker, 2017). The following review draws on literature to explore therapists' motivations for and experiences of working in prisons.

The mission of the prison service in England and Wales is to "keep those sentenced to prison in custody" and to help them "lead law-abiding and useful lives" during and after incarceration (GOV.UK, 2014, p. 1). Notably, custody takes precedence. This has been criticised as a contradiction between the aims of security and rehabilitation (Morris, 2001). HMP Grendon stands out in the UK for offering a fully therapeutic community (TC), where group therapy is standard and both staff and prisoners are trained to support it (Shuker & Newton, 2008; Akerman & Shuker, 2022). The prison has low staff assault rates (Ministry of Justice, 2017) and significantly reduced reconviction rates for residents who stay over 18 months (Taylor, 2000). Staff and prisoners alike are trained to facilitate this TC, and group therapy is the norm, providing "good results with a very difficult client group" (Jones, 2004, p. 197).

Outside of Grendon, the contrast is stark. Kita (2011) highlights the irony of delivering psychotherapy in environments lacking basic therapeutic conditions. Saunders et al. (2001) list key challenges, including the absence of designated therapy spaces, breaches of confidentiality, and the power imbalance created by therapists carrying keys to clients' cells. In the past, it has been argued (Schlesinger, 1979, p. 307) that "psychotherapy in prisons does not and cannot work, that it may be an unethical endeavour, and that it should not be routinely practiced".

Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal (2011, p. 344), who carried out a study regarding psychotherapists and counsellors working in prisons in an English context, identified a common theme about their work in prisons as "facing the specificities of the prison environment". Here, they discuss not only the issue of power over their clients, but also the power the prison exerts on them and their work. Prison is a total institution (Huffman, 2006) and there are parallels between therapists and clients in the way they must operate under the

institution's culture. Reilly (2017, p. 26), who carried out a similar study in an Irish context, identifies a similar theme on the impact of "being inside", with therapists experiencing "the institution being present in the therapy room". Reilly's (2017) study recognises further environmental issues such as the violent atmosphere, feeling in a state of hypervigilance and how the therapy rooms were experienced. In line with these themes, Sağbaş's (2022, p. 42), in a Turkish prison study, identifies prisons as a "more challenging working environment" with issues such as invasive security checks, working with bars on the windows and the feeling of being able to leave when their clients cannot.

Beyond environmental barriers, the psychological climate poses further challenges. Akerman et al. (2017) argue that therapeutic change relies on fostering connectedness. Kupers (2005) notes that gender dynamics intensify in prisons, especially among men, where vulnerability is discouraged and anger becomes the default expression. Jones (2004) describes prisoners wearing emotional "masks" to avoid being seen as weak. Similarly, Saunders (2001, p. 28) highlights how difficult it is to promote the therapeutic conditions of honesty and openness in an environment that breeds "deception, secrecy, corruption, conspiracy, and the denial of reality".

Having considered the challenging nature of the prison environment, psychotherapists' and counsellors' motivations to work in such a place evoke curiosity. People's true reasons for being therapists are said to be mostly unconscious and ignored as a subject for scrutiny (Maroda, 2021). Hamman (2001, p. 350) hypothesises an illusion experienced by therapists that "in repairing the relationships of others, one's wounded self or one's own relationships will be repaired or healed"; Jacobs (1993, p. 28) suggests that "we originally entered this profession in an unconscious effort to assuage our guilt". It has often been postulated that motivation arises significantly from childhood experiences (Jacobs, 1993; Kite, 2016; Maroda, 2021). Whilst most therapists are aware of and acknowledge the obvious positive reasons for this choice of work such as wanting to help others, the deeper needs being met are often unexplored (Maroda, 2021). The motivations for therapists specifically working in a forensic setting has been less commonly examined within the literature.

Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal's (2011, p. 346) study reveals a theme that "working in prison is not a coincidence". Participants indicated that it was part of their identity, a passion, and a calling, and that not everybody has what it takes to work in a prison (Ibid, 2011). Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal (2011) hypothesise that working in a prison might make people feel special with an ability to cope with and experience things many others never will. It was also linked by some to previous experience working with and visiting prisons (Ibid, 2011). When asked directly what their motivation for

working in prisons was, Reilly's (2017) study uncovered reasons such as a non-strategic "chance" career move, being interested in crime and its origins, finding the "darker side" of humanity intriguing, and experience of growing up around crime and wanting to help stop the developmental trauma from continuing. Sağbaş's (2022) study, although related to clinical psychologists, identifies similar themes to Reilly such as a personal curiosity in forensics, and an unintentional choice. Other themes noted were an influencing person and that it is different than just being a psychologist. This could arguably be seen as reminiscent of Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal's (2011) findings that not everyone can work in a prison.

Tucker's (2019) quantitative U.S. study found therapists were more likely to consider prison work if they knew someone who had been incarcerated or believed therapy had a role in rehabilitation. Panckhurst (2019) echoed these themes in New Zealand, adding that some therapists felt drawn to people who had lived hard lives or saw themselves as outsiders, with many citing formative childhood experiences, supporting earlier claims by Kite (2016), Jacobs (1993), and Maroda (2021).

Unconscious motivations remain largely unexplored in the literature (Maroda 2021). Components reviewed here could be linked to unconscious motivations such as "it's a calling" and "childhood experiences", however, little exploration has been undertaken explicitly regarding the unconscious motivations for working in prisons. Sağbaş (2022) suggests therapists may unconsciously feel absolved of guilt through the role, with prison bars offering symbolic comfort: "If someone is inside, then I am outside" (p. 94). However, this was derived from latent analysis rather than direct participant accounts. Therapists who engage with the unconscious in their work may have more awareness of these drivers (Jacobs, 2012; Masson, 2013), while those from differing modalities may not. Modality may therefore influence insight into motivation.

It does not seem uncommon, that humans, as a species, have a view that some people are just bad or evil (Gilbert, 2022). Gilbert (2022, p. 110) suggests that "these are unhelpful concepts and labels which allow us simply to distance ourselves from them as if they are aliens". If, on the other hand, people hold a view that lived experience might have led them down this path, and that perhaps they are just fortunate to not have experienced the same events, "we will find it easier to empathically connect into dark minds of those we try to help" (Ibid, 2022, p. 110). This suggests that therapists working in prisons might think differently to others, with an ability to offer empathy and even unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957) to people who many would disregard as "all bad" (Klein, 2002). This study aims to explore this suggestion, and what it might be that makes it possible.

The objective of this study is to explore how therapists working specifically in forensic settings came to work there, if they believe this was noncoincidental, and if so, what their felt reasons and motivations are for this choice. This will be proceeded by an exploration of their lived experience, with specific focus on what they feel makes prison work unique. To address this, the following research question was used:

Why do therapists work in prisons, and what is their lived experience of doing so?

To the researcher's knowledge, Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal's (2011) study is the only other English based IPA research undertaken on psychotherapists' and counsellors' experiences of working in prisons. In line with their suggestions for future research, this study will be conducted using fewer participants, with the aim of providing findings which delve deeper into participants' lived experience. There is also a more specific objective: to understand what draws psychotherapists and counsellors to the work.

Methodology

The underlying epistemology of qualitative research makes it well suited to fulfil the aims of this research, which explores how therapists' life experiences lead them into prison work and how they experience it. Given the complexity of delivering therapy in UK prisons (Harvey, 2011), qualitative methods, specifically semi-structured interviews, were chosen to capture these nuanced perspectives.

Reflexivity

In qualitative research, the researcher is the primary instrument (McLeod, 2022), and inevitably influences the study. A reflexive stance is therefore essential from the outset (Finlay, 2002). Acknowledging one's motivations and assumptions enhances critical evaluation. Prior experience can deepen the researcher's understanding and increase credibility (McLeod, 2022). The researcher's background as a prison officer reduced the need for participants to explain prison-specific terminology and fostered a shared understanding of the environment. Nonetheless, care was taken not to assume others' experiences mirrored their own, maintaining a phenomenological stance (Husserl, 1999).

At the planning stage, the researcher consulted with a research author who is experienced in this area, having undertaken their own IPA study on therapists working in UK prisons several years ago (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal,

2011). This meeting was solely influential in the planning stage, ensuring the results of this study were guided by the data retrieved only. Initial assumptions included a link between therapists' motivations and childhood experiences, and that their work would be challenging and chaotic. To support reflexivity, the researcher consulted with supervisors and peers to critically reflect on their positionality and ensure that the interview questions were appropriately framed. A reflexive journal documented assumptions, emotional responses, and reflections throughout the process. Unexpectedly, participants' deep passion for their work had a significant emotional impact on the researcher, prompting greater immersion in the data to better understand how their lived experiences shaped such commitment.

IPA

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) explores how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. Rooted in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Smith et al., 2022), IPA allows for both depth and subjectivity (Smith, 1996), making it well suited to this study's aim of understanding therapists' experiences before and during their prison work. Thematic Analysis (TA) was considered but deemed less appropriate, as its focus on broader patterns across larger samples may limit closeness to individual accounts (Freeman & Sullivan, 2019), which was essential for this research.

Participants

In line with the method of research, purposive sampling was used because it offers insight into a particular experience (Smith et al., 2022). Three participants were recruited for interviews, which is an acceptable sample size when conducting an IPA study (Smith et al., 2022). Two were recruited through opportunity sampling via the researcher's own networks, and one through an advertisement on a forensic therapist mailing list. Each participant was provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the research and the type of questions they could expect. A sample of participants was collected for whom the research question would be relevant and meaningful. Relevant demographic information of the participants is displayed in Table 1 below.

Name (pseudonym)	Gender	Level of qualification	Modality	Years working in prison
James	Male	Postgraduate Diploma	CBT	1.5
Mary	Female	Master's Degree	Art psychotherapy	3
Estrella	Male	Master's Degree	CBT	1

Table 1. Information about the participants

Data collection

When using IPA as a data collection method, it is important that participants are provided an opportunity to offer a rich, detailed, first-person account of their experiences (Smith et al., 2022). To facilitate this, data was collected by conducting a semi-structured, one-to-one interview with each therapist, enabling a rapport to be developed, offering participants the space to think, speak and be listened to. Interviews were conducted online and recorded through the online platform used. Each interview was transcribed verbatim.

Before interviews, participants signed a consent form confirming their right to withdraw at any time. They also completed a demographic form to provide context for the sample. The interviews were structured using a pre-formed list of open-ended questions, enabling the researcher to set a "loose agenda" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 55), aiming to facilitate participants to tell their stories in depth and in detail. Participants were encouraged to talk at length about their experiences, with minimal verbal input from the researcher to facilitate space for participants' stories to evolve.

Data analysis

In line with IPA (Smith et al., 2022), the first step taken when conducting the analysis was immersing myself in the first interview transcript. This was done by reading, and re-reading, followed by exploratory note taking, providing a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data. Deeper analysis followed, engaging in analytic dialogue with each line of the transcript, seeking to understand what the word, phrase, sentence, etc. means to the researcher, and attempting to understand what it means for the participant. The next step involved articulation of the exploratory notes, reducing the volume of detail, whilst maintaining complexity. This necessitated condensing the detailed notes into concise phrases that the researcher felt captured the essence of the participants' experiences, producing several experiential statements (Ibid, 2022). These experiential statements were then mapped out and organised into related groups, drawing out the most important and interesting aspects of the participant's account. These were separated into clusters of connected statements, which were then given a title to describe their characteristics, becoming the participants Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) (Ibid, 2022). This process was repeated in full for the remaining two participants. Once PETs had been identified for each participant, patterns of similarity and difference were identified between them, creating a set of Group Experiential Themes (GETs) (Ibid, 2022). A sample of transcript extracts for each GET that emerged from the participants is included in the results section, accompanied by the researcher's detailed analytic

interpretations of the text. The overarching aim of this analysis is to give an account of, and offer an interpretation of the data, presenting a case for what they all mean.

Trustworthiness of the study

Credibility is essential in qualitative research. To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher monitored personal biases throughout, using reflexive journaling to bracket preconceptions and allow the data to emerge authentically (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). IPA was used as a structured, transparent method of analysis, supporting replicability. The researcher’s prison experience deepened understanding and rapport with participants, though this dual role may have altered interpretations. Nevertheless, careful reflection mitigated this risk. It is believed that the study offers a distinctive contribution to the existing literature on therapists’ motivations for working in prisons, an area with very little research, making it original and valuable for those studying this field. The trustworthiness of qualitative research often comes under scrutiny, but as McLeod (2022, p. 73) states, “any research that has been carried out with integrity, and from a position of genuine curiosity, will almost always have something interesting to offer”.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Roehampton ethics committee, and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) (2019) ethical research guidelines were followed throughout. Only qualified therapists participated. Informed consent included the right to withdraw at any time before data analysis. A debrief sheet was provided with support contacts. At the start of each interview, participants were re-consented, reminded of their rights, and invited to ask questions. They were informed they could pause the interview or request a transcript at any time.

Findings

The aim of this study was to explore therapists’ motivations to work in prisons and how they experience the work. The researcher was interested in what drew them to the work, how they found it and what the rewards and challenges were. In this section, having cross-analysed the interview data, GETs and accompanying subthemes are identified and justified using IPA. Table 2 documents the final master table of resulting GETs.

Group Experiential Theme (GET)	Subthemes
The draw to working with prisoners	Helping marginalised people Not your average client Identifying with prisoners
The need to adapt	The prison environment Interventions need to be tailored Awareness of time restrictions
View of people who commit crimes	Perpetrators are also victims Increased empathy A product of their environment

Table 2. Master table for all participants

The draw to working with Prisoners

The first GET describes participants’ original motivation to work in prisons. All three participants described a compelling draw to the demographic involved in prison work.

Helping marginalised people

A significant factor in participants’ choice to work in prisons was a sense of helping people that would usually be excluded from the opportunity to undertake therapy. This was articulated in several ways. Estrella uses the word marginalised when conveying his draw to working with this client group:

But yeah, that it was very much, an, a call to wanting to work with, you know, I don't want to say marginalised, but just otherwise un-thought of people.

Here, Estrella uses the word “call”, suggesting that it was more than just a job, it was something he felt metaphorically called to, perhaps more closely related to destiny than choice. There is an innate need to help those who might be forgotten by society. The way Estrella references marginalisation gives a sense of his dissatisfaction with the way people are treated by society and evidences his care for clients in that he does not want to brand them with a potentially offensive title (marginalised). James echoed the lack of needs being met when discussing his draw to work in prisons:

I was just seeing this kind of tiny fraction of people from that population that really needed something.

James also felt drawn to helping the smaller, less thought of, groups of people. He refers to their need for something and felt that he might be able to meet this need. This might infer a sense of meaning derived from working with these clients in

that he is doing something to make a difference. Mary's reference, although less explicit, also implies an innate draw to people who others might disregard:

I've always favoured the underdog.

The word "underdog" is used in place of marginalised or unthought of. Mary's use of language might indicate greater meaning to her, an enhanced connection to those marginalised groups. She is not simply stating an awareness of their need, but that she favours them over the majority. James elaborates on his draw to the marginalised:

But I suppose when someone's got a history of being in prison or in and out of prison and then the associated issues with work and potentially housing, family relationships, all the things that come along with that, it can really preclude someone when it comes to a service's inclusion criteria. So I was drawn to that.

James conveys an understanding of how people can become marginalised with an increasing sense of empathy for these people who become precluded from receiving the help they need. James' use of the word "drawn", could be viewed as similar to "a call", suggesting that he too felt some sort of innate need or destined path he needed to follow. A key similarity noted here between all three participants is a felt sense that they care about those less favoured by society, and that these clients fit that category.

Not your average client

An important feature in the draw to prison work is the sense of working with clients who would not usually be in therapy, and that many therapists would or could not work with them. Mary explains how working in a school led on to prison:

Where do people not wanna do art therapy? They don't want to do it in a prison. OK, that's where I want to do it then. Umm, I think I've always liked the underdog. I've always liked working with the kind of the children that people don't wanna work with and I guess I thought, well, if you carried that further, you're gonna get to prison, aren't you?

Mary has specifically explored the areas where most people do not want to work as a therapist and has purposefully sought this work out. It seems she is driven by going against the grain, twice referencing where people do not want to work being the place where she does. There is perhaps a sense of feeling different to the usual therapist. Estrella also refers to being different:

So I started sniffing out different experiences where you know client groups that were, or patient demographics where you know it was, it was a bit more on the fringes, it wasn't spoken about. And and and and, a prisoner or inmates, you know, working in a prison environment very much fit that bill.

Estrella similarly found himself actively seeking out something different. He references prison work as being something that isn't talked about, which again might link to being different to the usual therapist. And in his experience, the prison environment did provide something different, and met this need well. James speaks to the type of clients prison enables you to see:

I kind of liked that they weren't really the usual therapy candidates as well. It felt like when we had one of these people coming in or on my caseload, it felt like I kind of got someone who you don't normally reach and I'm a big believer in that it's not the patient's that are hard to reach, it's the services.

James takes solace in the way prison facilitates people who would not usually be able to reach the services to do so. This alludes to a fulfilment in knowing that he can provide opportunities to those who might otherwise go without. James also references difference as an important factor in his draw to prison work, relishing the opportunity to work with clients who were not your average therapy candidates. James proceeds to specify how the clients are different:

I like these people that aren't your usual candidates, so the younger, inner city state guys were not the typical therapy customer, but I really like that about it, it's the thing that drew me to this work.

This exemplifies the importance to James of experiencing working with the clientele prison work provides him, and that it is the key draw to the work. All three participants describe how prisons provide an opportunity to work with different clients to that of an average therapy client, and that they experience this as a significant factor in their motivation for prison work.

Identifying with prisoners

Two of the participants described having undertaken much self-exploration to understand their draw to prison work, and this involved, at some level, identification with their clients. Mary describes how this helps her in understanding them:

I think it's when you when you feel like the underdog, and you then see other underdogs then you can vicariously understand them.

Mary identifies with clients by way of a shared understanding of what it feels like to be an underdog. Her experience of feeling like the underdog enables her to understand the hardships they too have suffered, which provides a sense of connection, and perhaps a feeling of fitting in better with those who usually do not. Estrella describes how his experience of abandonment gives him a sense of identification with clients:

A sense of that abandonment that probably came with that. And then, perhaps, being very much drawn to people that have experienced, some sort of real and symbolic abandoning. You know how a prison inmates abandoned, well, they're abandoned very much by values and judgment.

Estrella also experiences a sense of shared understanding with clients, but for him, it is a shared sense of abandonment. He speaks passionately about prisoners' abandonment by society's values and judgement, possibly in the same way he has experienced being treated by society himself. Like Mary, Estrella is drawn to working with people who have been through a similar experience to himself. Mary describes the motivation that relating to clients provides her:

It motivates me to work because I relate to some of the feelings they bring in that we change our behaviour to try and hide what we want to not show.

The feeling of shared experience is built on here, with Mary sharing a more in-depth connection about how she has felt the need to "hide", and experiences clients as having to do the same. She experiences a sense of shared feeling with clients, enabling her to relate to them, which motivates her to do the work. For James, a direct experience of identification is not described, however, there is some connection implied to the need for help:

I think there is a bit of that who needs the help element, in an unconscious way.

James is aware that it might not simply be the clients who need help, and it may be that he identifies with their need. James' experience of this is at a less conscious level, however, his ability to speak on it suggests he is aware of some sort of connection with clients. James does not state this experience as a key motivator or draw to the work, although there is a suggested sense of unconscious motivation.

The need to adapt

The way in which prisons are run, and the environment they must work in, greatly affect the way therapy must be

delivered. The way therapy is taught, and the frame that accompanies this, cannot be synonymous with prisons.

The prison environment

The distinct nature of the prison environment was acknowledged by all participants. Estrella acknowledges how clients themselves must adapt to the environment:

They did suppress, you know, maybe kind of vulnerability, and it did, you know, biologically and physically, keep them on the straight and narrow. It might not help their mental health, but it kept them alive. What, what can I say about that, you know?

Estrella experienced clients as having to adapt to survive. He appears contrived, knowing that suppressing vulnerability is not good for their mental health, but that it was essential for their physical health. He understands their need to do this for their own safety, and therefore felt he could not dispute it. Estrella describes further considerations the prison environment demands:

Can we be sure it's PTSD? When there is this primary sense of current threat, you know, that's still ongoing.

Estrella further draws light on the prison environment being one of "current threat", creating difficulties in deciphering diagnoses such as post-traumatic stress disorder, experiencing prison as a very much ongoing traumatic experience, not past. Mary raises issues more related to the practicalities of the environment:

We're so risk averse. It's like we'd rather than the conversation, we'll just say no, you're not coming. So that's a challenge.

The need to manage risk creates issues in clients getting to the therapy room. Mary is frustrated with the seemingly inbuilt culture of being quick to deny requests when there could be alternative ways of doing things. In divergence with Estrella, James has experienced the environment as having a positive effect on clients:

Actually, there's a huge amount of people where actually prison is potentially the most settled that they are, they've got stability, they've got routine, they've got people helping them out.

James experiences the environment as conducive to mental health in that it provides a level of stability for clients which the outside environment did not. James goes on to describe a sense of safety the prison environment offers him:

Very rarely, if ever, concerned about risk to myself, because again, with prisoners, they are a known quantity in a way, whereas actually people could be quite dangerous in the community, but you don't have a button that calls ten prison officers. Actually, I think it's for them and for us, it's actually much safer here.

James highlights the security offered by working in a prison environment, experiencing a felt sense of safety in the way that he knows who he is dealing with, and that physical support is quickly and easily available if needed. James feels prison provides a safe environment for both therapist and client, in contrast with the public, where there are more unknown phenomena and less readily available support.

Interventions need to be tailored

All participants discussed the vitality of adapting their therapeutic interventions to fit in with the prison environment. A common obstacle participants experienced was that clients could be transferred out of the prison at a moment's notice, be this to court, or to another prison. James conveys his way of adapting the work pre-emptively:

Rather than doing a full course of complex PTSD work, I might just do some early management work and psycho-ed and kind of get used to the fact that it's ok that we don't finish, so more the CFT skills and that kind of thing.

Here, James describes how he has found his own unique way of delivering interventions so that if a client cannot finish the work, it will not be so detrimental to them. James has had to accept the fact that this is how the work must be done and has found his own unique way of managing it. James has experienced a significant need to be realistic in his approach to offering interventions. Estrella echoes this need:

You know it was really very much like right, we need to get cracking now, and what can we do that's really, really accessible, and you know, is it realistic? See adaptations were highly, highly important. Certainly. Yeah. There was no manual that I saw.

A sense of urgency is experienced here. There is an acute awareness of the potentially little time they might have together, creating the need for an immediate beginning to the work. Estrella also experienced the need to decipher what can realistically be achieved whilst working in a prison environment with its unique differences to the outside world. There is a reference to there being "no manual", suggesting that he had to come up with these adaptations himself, and did not experience any specific training on how to best adapt his therapeutic interventions to a prison environment. Safety provided a further consideration regarding interventions,

which was also described by Estrella when considering the dangers a prison environment can evoke:

Devising safe behavioural experiments where the prisoners were not exposing themselves to further risk if they tried. If they would try something new, or we were trying to test something out.

The consideration of safety is increased in the prison environment, with standardised behavioural experiments having the potential to put clients in real danger. Estrella is experiencing a sense of higher stakes with the interventions he offers and a need to "devise" something specific to keep clients safe from their surrounding peers. Regarding safety, Mary discusses the aids she would normally use in art therapy which are not permitted in the prison, therefore requiring adaptations to the work:

I can't have a pair of scissors in the therapy room. I can't use clay. I would love to line up cotton. Can't do that. Plasticine, playdough, all that stuff, that kinaesthetic stuff that you really desperately want. Na, that's a no, and I don't need to explain to you why.

Mary experiences a sense of longing to be able to use these objects as they are very important to her work. It appears she might agree with the restrictions, stating "I don't need to explain to you why", which would imply an obvious safety concern around these items entering a prison environment. The result of these obvious safety issues, means Mary too must adapt her interventions, only using permissible items in her work, needing to be creative in sourcing alternatives.

Awareness of time restrictions

Time was something which all participants experienced a particular awareness of, whether that be the length of time they can work together, or the practical restrictions that arise from the prison regime. James speaks to both aspects:

I have to be very aware here of not opening up the whole can of worms of different traumas and then they've gone, or we've run out of time. So that's probably the main adaptation, the real awareness of time.

Psychological safety is experienced by James as an important consideration when thinking about how in-depth he can go in his work with clients. James experiences time as a key aspect he needs to adapt to and hold in awareness, if he does not, he is risking client safety. He refers to the potential for them to be transferred out of the prison, or for the number of sessions offered to limit their time together. Estrella directly conveys how the number of sessions offered is limiting to the work:

So yeah, adaptations were really, really, you know, we had 6 sessions as well, so we couldn't go for a really in-depth detail plan.

The question of how deep to take the work is also experienced by Estrella as an important consideration to make. He refers to the time limit on the standardised number of sessions offered to clients, experiencing it as insufficient for in-depth work. Estrella suggests that adaptations were required to correlate with the limited time they had. Mary describes the practical issues regarding time which can arise in a prison environment:

And just, you know, stand fast roll check, and so that happens before your session cause your sessions the second one in the afternoon but then your session runs on, but your session can't. It starts late but it can't finish late.

Mary speaks of a 'stand fast roll check', a standard prison procedure for when all prisoners cannot be accounted for (usually occurring due to miscounting), which halts all prisoner movements until resolved, resulting in sessions beginning late. However, things still need to end on time, in-line with the prison regime. Mary conveys a sense of frustration with this rigid process, which might be essential for overall prisoner/staff/public safety but does not consider the negative effect this might have on clients' therapy sessions due to lost time. James explains how aspects of the prison environment can be used to make better use of time than what would be possible on the outside:

It's just having that awareness of the clock ticking down. But then in some ways as well we can utilise the time quite well like if someone doesn't come, I just walk the two minutes and I'm at their door.

James has found a way to utilise time by making the most of being stationed nearby to where his clients reside. Here, the prison environment is experienced as a positive, offering the opportunity to speak in person to a client who otherwise might have been unreachable on the outside, or which an unrealistic amount of time would have been required to have the same conversation.

View of people who commit crimes

Whilst acknowledging that some people have committed serious crimes, all participants believed they had an understanding around why and how people come to be imprisoned, and that it is significantly linked with their life experiences.

Perpetrators are also victims

When sharing their outlook on people who commit crimes, all participants referred to the adversity suffered by prisoners in the past and felt this was a clear link to their offending. James expresses this explicitly:

Kind of being forgotten a bit by the system has led to this stuff and like I said at the beginning, I think a lot of the adversity that people have been through that leads to mental health problems or PTSD are the very same things that have led to their offending behaviour in the first place.

James refers to "the system" when explaining his view of how adversity links to mental health problems and offending behaviour, which might suggest that he experiences the system as flawed. For James, his experience working within prisons, and in mental health generally, has enlightened him to the seemingly common pattern which evolves from the infliction of adversity. James uses robust language when expanding on these adversities, referring to them as abuse:

Often abusers have been abused and I think shame and the shame that people have had in their lives and carry forward has a huge amount to say for offending behaviour.

Use of the word "abused" suggests that in James' experience, perpetrators began as victims of abuse themselves. James has worked with many clients experienced to be carrying shame from the abuse inflicted upon them, which has manifested itself in an urge for them to inflict this abuse on others, ultimately resulting in them becoming the perpetrator. In unison with the above extract, it appears James experiences offending behaviour as significantly linked to systemic norms, resulting in a cycle of adversity and abuse being passed on to the next victim. Both Mary and Estrella use extreme, real-life narratives to illustrate the suffering their clients have been through. Mary conveys the impact such abuse might have:

I did a safe space with someone whose every meal was given to him on the floor in a dog bowl. How do you grow up to be a healthy brained human being when your parent is treating you like a dog?

Mary uses a short but powerful example of serious victimisation on behalf of a client's parents. Her use of a rhetorical question suggests that the abuse suffered by this client is obviously linked to their inability to be a healthy, law-abiding member of society. Estrella shares the story of a client's first-hand experience of the extreme lengths he had to go to in halting his father's abuse:

His dad once was so awful to him the only way that he could really, the only way that he could get out of his out of his

father's tyranny was to put his arm in the blender, and to blend his own arm, blend his own arm off in it, turn on the blender took the lid off, and he put his arm in the blender so his dad stopped what he did, and he had to call an ambulance, and he, and then he was able to get away from his father. Shows you the length of what someone had to do, or felt they had to do to escape the tyrannical father.

The way Estrella emphasises each aspect of this story, ensuring each part is reiterated, suggests that it had a powerful effect on him. He needed to ensure he shared this experience with the interviewer in a way that enabled them to understand the magnitude of what he had been told, and what that meant to him and for the client. He uses this example as a direct answer to the question around views on people who commit crimes. This conveys how his experience of working with such clients has enlightened him to the hardships they have endured, which may ultimately be the root cause of their offending. This parallels Mary's experience who was conveying perhaps the very same thing.

Increased empathy

All participants expressed a foundation level of empathy for prisoners before entering the job, which appeared to increase in relation to their experiences of the work. Mary describes this increase from before, to after beginning her work:

So I think in my, I had a heart understanding that there must be more. But now I have a head understanding. I have a lot of empathy for a lot of these men. And what surprises people is when I say things like, they never or rarely make excuses for their own behaviour. They, they're desperate to understand it and they want to make, make those connections with us, and try and go back in time and understand what led to this? how did this happen? But there's never any, "it wasn't my fault", "she made me do it".

Mary's use of language "heart understanding", suggests she experienced some sort of innate understanding of people who commit crimes, but would not have been able to explain this feeling before undertaking the work. The description "head understanding" appears to express an ability to understand on a more cognitive level. She is now able to put words to why she has empathy for these men, experiencing admiration for the way they take ownership of their crimes, and noticing their desperation to understand themselves. When describing a client who reoffended to intentionally get back into prison, Estrella imagines what that might feel like:

I just thought, gosh! You imagine that you had to be in a situation where you wanted to get back in the cell, to feel safe, and to feel that you had some meaning in your life.

That's never ever discussed in the outside world. It's always much about, you know, you know the, the connotations that are portrayed.

The client's account of feeling safer in prison is experienced as shocking. The thought of feeling safer in a cell appears to be a powerful insight into how hard their life must be on the outside. These things are not discussed in the "outside world", suggests that without prison experience, Estrella could not have achieved the same level of empathy for prisoners. Estrella experiences society as damming of prisoners, inferring that they have generalised negative assumptions placed upon them. He speaks to how his assumptions have changed based on his experience working in prison:

But it in terms of my assumptions about people, understandable, understandable.

First-hand experience of how people are living in prison, the lives they have come from and the experiences they have had has facilitated a new-found understanding, and perhaps a shift in previously held assumptions. For James, his experience working with clients has not necessarily increased the empathy he has, but has more confirmed his previously held assumptions:

Hurt people hurt people and you see that a lot. I think it's much more of a rarity that someone that's fine harms someone else. It's a hurt person that goes on and hurts another person.

There was previously the view that adversity leads to offending behaviour and experiencing his clients as "hurt people" has enhanced this view. Use of the word "hurt", which is often used to describe physical pain, might convey a sense of empathy for the severe suffering they have been through.

A product of their environment

An important feature of the participants' views on people who commit crimes was the sense that the environment they were exposed to is a significant contributing factor in their journey into the prison system. Estrella discusses the impact of living in a deprived area:

If you've not got much money, you try and get it as quick as you can, but what does that bring with it? Mental health problems, anxiety, depression, and a propensity for theft and for petty crime.

Here, Estrella points to a link between lacking financial stability, to theft and other petty crime. The need for money creates the motive for committing crimes in an attempt to alleviate this problem. Estrella conveys the sense of

desperation experienced on behalf of these people living in poverty and suggests that this in itself causes mental health problems, and perhaps offending is the only felt way things can improve. Mary uses decisive language to express her sense of how people come to commit crimes:

People don't just commit crimes in a in a vacuum. They're not just born bad.

There is no deliberation here, Mary experiences a strong sense that crimes are never independent of other factors. The suggestion that people are not born “bad” implies that it must have something to do with the environment they are born into, affecting how they live their lives. It might be interpreted that Mary believes the word “bad” to be nonsensical when describing a person. James conveys a similar view:

I've always had the view that, I don't really subscribe to the idea of good and bad people, I think it's the good and bad hands that you're delt in life.

In a more direct manner, James also expresses the inappropriateness of words such as “good” and “bad” in describing a person. In his experience, it appears to be luck of the draw in the choices life provides you. It is therefore implicit that the environment people are born into is out of their control, and if it is “bad”, their chances of committing crimes are increased. Using the same metaphor, Estrella echoes this sentiment:

I can make sense of the choices they've had. They've been dealt a bad hand, and they're playing the cards they've got.

Here, there is a direct reference to choices being provided by life. In Estrella's experience, when considering the “bad” choices his clients were provided, it makes sense that it led them to committing crimes. So, for all three participants, it is unequivocal that people are not born destined to commit crimes, and that the environment people happen to be born into is significantly related to their chances of offending.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of psychotherapists' and counsellors' experiences of working in prisons, and what drew them to the work. The methodology implemented was an analysis of three semi-structured interviews using IPA. Three GETs were identified; “the draw to working with prisoners”, “the need to adapt” and “view of people who commit crimes”. This section presents the

research themes and compares them with the existing literature.

The draw to working with prisoners

All participants strongly connected their initial attraction to prison work with the type of clients it enabled them to see. A shared motivation was the opportunity to work with people marginalised by society. Terms like “draw” (James), “call” (Estrella), and “favoured” (Mary) reflected their feelings toward this client group. This aligns with Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal (2011) and Panckhurst (2019), who found participants linked their prison work to a general sympathy for marginalised individuals. Supporting Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal's (2011) theme that “working in prison is not a coincidence”, all participants offered multiple reasons for choosing this path, contrasting with studies by Reilly (2017) and Sağbaş (2022), where prison work was sometimes described as coincidental. The difference may relate to participants' motivations to engage in this study, likely influenced by their pre-existing interest or insight into their draw to prison work.

Participants intentionally sought out non-traditional clients, with some making concerted efforts to enter the field. One explicitly expressed no interest in private practice, and none were currently in private practice, implying a common preference.

All participants identified with their clients to some extent, with two explicitly linking this to previously unconscious motivations. This resembles Panckhurst's (2019, p. 64) finding where one participant felt they did “not quite fit into a box themselves”, and Sağbaş's (2022, p. 56) theme of “identification with the inmate”, though the latter was based on the researcher's interpretation rather than direct participant statements. This contrast may stem from differences in questioning or participants' levels of self-awareness regarding unconscious motivations. That all three participants in this study recognised such identification suggests it may be a significant factor in therapists', and potentially other prison workers', attraction to the prison environment.

The need to adapt

The prison environment challenges the therapeutic frame, necessitating adaptation. Psychological safety was a key concern, with participants highlighting the risks of using certain interventions in a setting where threats are ongoing. Consistent with Kita (2011), participants acknowledged the paradox of offering psychotherapy in a setting lacking basic therapeutic conditions found outside. While much literature

discusses the unique constraints of prison work (Bertrand-Godfrey & Loewenthal, 2011; Reilly, 2017; Panckhurst, 2019; Sağbaş, 2022), a divergence emerged: participants in this study did not express significant frustration. Instead, they reported feeling able to adapt and work effectively and safely, perhaps due to their strong intrinsic motivation and acceptance, even desire, for the challenges prison work entails.

One participant even viewed the prison environment as offering more stability than the outside world, aligning with Saunders' (2001) idea of prison as the "ultimate container." These findings support Burns' (2017) assertion that prison can be conducive to change due to the stability it provides. All participants emphasised the necessity of adapting their approach to maintain safety and efficacy, echoing Broderick's (2007) conclusion that adaptation is fundamental for therapeutic work in prison settings.

View of people who commit crimes

Participants' views on crime and those who commit it revealed strong consensus. All attributed criminal behaviour to environmental and experiential factors rather than inherent traits. None believed people are born criminals. This contrasts with Gilbert's (2022) observation of a widespread belief that people are inherently bad, which serves as a simplistic explanation for crime. Through their training and, more significantly, their direct work with "criminals", participants developed a deeper understanding of how adverse life experiences can lead to offending. Two participants shared harrowing client histories that enhanced their empathy, echoing Reilly's (2017) finding that perceiving perpetrators as victims supports compassionate therapeutic relationships.

Similarly, Gilbert (2022, p. 110) emphasises the value of recognising the lived experiences behind criminal behaviour to better "empathically connect into dark minds of those we try to help." Bertrand-Godfrey and Loewenthal's (2011) findings also highlight therapists' understanding of offending as rooted in abuse and neglect. Overall, both this study and existing literature suggest that working in prisons fosters insight, understanding, and empathy toward those who commit crimes.

Critical Evaluation

As with most qualitative research, this study has limitations. The small sample size limits generalisability, though this aligns with IPA's idiographic focus. All participants were based in prisons in the south of England, so regional diversity may be

lacking. While participants came from varied therapeutic modalities, none had more than three years' prison experience, which may have influenced their perspectives. Additionally, psychologists, who represent a significant proportion of prison-based practitioners, were not included.

This study offers insight for therapists considering prison work, helping them make informed decisions and potentially increasing role retention, which benefits client continuity. Findings suggest a need for tailored training to help therapists adapt interventions to the prison context, improving service quality and practitioner confidence. Consistent with prior research, the prison environment presents therapeutic challenges, reinforcing the call for more psychologically supportive settings. Understanding professional motivations may also enhance therapist self-awareness and client impact. Finally, reframing offenders as victims of circumstance could shift societal and policy perspectives toward rehabilitation over punishment.

It could be beneficial to conduct a similar study but from a client perspective, focusing on their lived experience of receiving therapy in a prison environment and what they feel might help to improve it. Further research on how psychotherapy relates to recidivism rates might be beneficial in understanding its effect and the types of people it benefits most, potentially building a case for psychotherapy in prisons to be made more widely available. Exploring the link between lived experience and offending behaviour might generate better understanding for the wider society and the systematic processes in place, providing an opportunity for the necessary help to be provided for people most at risk of committing crimes.

Conclusion

The findings from this research show that working in prison as a therapist is not a coincidence, and that there is significant personal meaning behind the decision. This is the essence of the first theme from this IPA study, "the draw to working with prisoners". An innate draw to helping those who are marginalised by society was a key motivator in seeking out prison work. Participants recognised their unconscious motivations which contributed to this draw, acknowledging a felt sense of identification with the prison demographic. The most challenging and unique aspect experienced in the work was related to the environment. This brought about the second theme, "the need to adapt". The prison environment requires therapists to be flexible and adaptive in the way they work and to have an increased awareness of psychological safety outside of the therapy room. Consequently, participants

had to find ways to adapt their interventions to practise safely, effectively and manage time restrictions. The final theme “view of people who commit crimes”, involved a strong sense that therapists’ clients were also victims. Lived experiences such as environmental factors and past traumas were felt to be significantly related to clients’ offending behaviour. Experience of working with clients and hearing about their lives enhanced this feeling and contributed to an increased empathic understanding. Overall, despite the varying challenges working in a prison brings, all participants felt the work was meaningful and motivating.

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