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Working with sex offenders: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of therapists' experiences

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ABSTRACT

Harmful consequences of working therapeutically with sex offenders have been widely reported, with less research into the rewarding aspects of the work and coping strategies therapists use. The present study qualitatively investigated how facilitators of the UK Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP) construct their experiences of working with sex offenders, focussing most closely on their motivations, the perceived consequences of the work, and their use of coping strategies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 8 facilitators and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Analysis revealed 4 major themes: (a) the personal significance and meaning of the work; (b) challenges of working with sex offenders; (c) the balance between distancing and desensitisation; and (d) support, or lack of, in the workplace. The first 3 themes are discussed in detail. It was found that participants struggle to find a balance between distancing themselves from the work in order to cope and not becoming desensitised to the extent that it becomes a harmful consequence. Implications for training and support of therapists are discussed.

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Therapeutic work with sex offenders has been posited as one of the most difficult occupations within the mental health field (Abel, 1983). The work arguably presents a number of distinct challenges, including exposure to information about sexual offences (Severson & Pettus-Davis, 2013) and delivering therapy to a client group that has been described as secretive, resistant and manipulative (O'Connell, Leburg, & Donaldson, 1990; Strasburger, 1986). A growing body of literature has examined impacts this work has on therapists. Existing research is heavily weighted towards its negative consequences, with a few studies in recent years beginning to investigate rewarding aspects. In depth understanding of therapists' experiences is essential to ensure adequate support structures are provided in this challenging field.

Challenges of Working with Sex Offenders

One reported challenge of working with sex offenders is the client group itself. More than half of practitioners surveyed by Jackson, Holzman, Barnard, and Paradis (1997) reported being verbally or physically assaulted by clients, while professionals in Lea, Auburn, and Kibblewhite's (1999) qualitative study stated that sex offenders' tendency to minimise and deny their offending made the work more challenging. A further reported difficulty is that sex offenders are usually mandated to therapy by social agencies, resulting in tension between the therapist's dual role as authority figure and counsellor (Farrenkopf, 1992). Such portrayals of the client group as reluctant, threatening and manipulative are suggestive of an adversarial and difficult working environment.

Therapists also report difficulty in defending the treatment of sex offenders to those outside the field, especially in challenging stigmatised views of sex offenders (Kearns, 1995; Scheela, 2001), resulting in a degree of isolation for therapists whose views often diverge from the social norm. Further reported stressors include frequent exposure to graphic information such as offence accounts (Bengis, 1997; Way, VanDeusen, Martin, Applegate, & Jandle, 2004) along with constant awareness of the ongoing risk of clients' recidivism (Shelby, Stoddart, & Taylor, 2001).

Negative Consequences of Working with Sex Offenders

Farrenkopf's (1992) seminal investigation into the experiences of North American sex offender therapists was the first to attend to the impacts of the work. Surveying 24 therapists he found effects, mainly deleterious, across the attitudinal, emotional, and behavioural domains. A key finding was a gradual change in attitude toward the work, with some therapists reporting diminishing hopes and expectations for successful rehabilitation and frustration with the correctional system. Later studies also found apparent changes in therapists' general attitudes, with some reporting a loss of trust and innocence, accompanied by increased suspicion and hyper-vigilance (Bengis, 1997; Freeman-Longo, 1997; Jackson et al., 1997). Such findings indicate that working with sex offenders can result in increasing pessimism.

Significant emotional impacts have also been associated with this work. Farrenkopf (1992) found that these ranged from a hardening or dulling of emotions, along with loss of humour and emotional distancing outside of work, to a rise in emotions such as anger and frustration. Some therapists reported symptoms indicative of deteriorating mental health, such as exhaustion, high stress levels, and depression. Therapists in Scheela's (2001) study reported that their clients' recidivism risk caused them constant worry, while Edmunds (1997) found that therapists had become desensitised to hearing about sexual abuse.

Cognitively intrusive experiences have been reported by therapists, whereby they have experienced flashing images of sexual abuse, often outside of work (Ellerby, 1997; Jackson et al., 1997). Behavioural impacts reported by practitioners include sleep disturbances, altered sex lives, and discomfort around children for fear of their behaviour being perceived as inappropriate (Edmunds, 1997; Farrenkopf, 1992).

It is clear from Farrenkopf's (1992) study and from similar research since that working with sex offenders can have serious, detrimental impacts on therapists' lives. It is not so obvious how to understand these experiences. A number of conceptualisations of the consequences of providing sex offender therapy have been proposed.

Farrenkopf (1992) used his findings to construct a framework of four 'phases of impact', describing a transition over time for sex offender therapists. He suggested that therapists firstly experience 'Shock', before a sense of 'Mission', which develops into 'Anger', before therapists arrive at either 'Erosion' characterised by exhaustion and depression, or 'Adaptation', where they regain their motivation by detaching from the work and lowering their expectations. Farrenkopf's framework suggests that all therapists experience a period of disillusionment and negative affect, however he fails to detail what distinguishes those therapists who experience 'Erosion' from those who experience 'Adaptation'.

'Occupational burnout' has also been used to explain negative consequences of the work (e.g. Edmunds, 1997; Farrenkopf, 1992; Shelby et al., 2001). Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter (1996) define burnout as involving emotional exhaustion, increased depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment in individuals who work closely with people, and Senter, Morgan, Serna-McDonald, and Bewley (2010) found that North American Correctional Psychologists experienced significantly more occupational burnout than psychologists in other fields. Other researchers have applied the concept of vicarious trauma (VT) to working with sex offenders. McCann and Pearlman (1990) define VT as a transformation of a therapist's world view caused by exposure to their client's experience of trauma. Rich (1997) has suggested that sex offender therapists experiencing intrusive images of abuse is a symptom of VT.

Alternatively, Lea et al. (1999) used a professional-personal dialectic to characterise some difficulties experienced by sex offender therapists. They found that therapists discussed a tension between their need to develop a professional relationship with clients, while negotiating a desire to avoid such a relationship because of their personal abhorrence of the crimes. This dialectic was expressed as particularly salient when aspects of the crime provoked strong personal feelings such as when the victim's characteristics resembled the therapist's own child, or when the offence was particularly severe. This tension permeated the professionals' work and was seen as a significant stressor.

To date, conceptualisations of sex offenders therapists' experiences have largely focussed on negative consequences of the work, with only Farrenkopf's (1992) phases of impact suggesting the possibility of an optimistic outcome for therapists.

Rewards of Working with Sex Offenders

Until recently, the positive aspects of working with sex offenders have rarely been focussed on in research, with effects such as increased empathy and compassion (Ellerby, 1997; Farrenkopf, 1992) and the satisfaction of witnessing positive changes (Freeman-Longo, 1997) mentioned briefly in studies concentrating on negative consequences. Scheela's (2001) qualitative exploration of American therapists' perceptions took a more balanced approach than most, finding that therapists were excited about working in a challenging area, and found pride and gratification in their work. However, Scheela's participants all worked in the same outpatient setting which the author notes was a particularly supportive workplace.

Kadambi and Truscott (2006) used a wider sample of 82 professionals from different work settings across Canada to conduct the first published study solely investigating the rewards and motives of sex offender treatment providers. These participants found benefits for themselves, society, and clients, with benefits for society being more important to them than benefits for clients. While this research was influential in highlighting the need for investigation of positive aspects of the work, it did not explore how these benefits related to widely reported negative consequences, for example, whether they outweighed the harmful impacts or if they were used as coping strategies.

Slater and Lambie (2011) qualitatively explored the experiences of New Zealand sex offender treatment providers. Their participants reported an optimistic ethos that drove them in their work, including wanting to make a difference and being compassionate toward clients. Therapists discussed witnessing change as their primary reason for staying in the field and persisting despite resistance from clients. This research begins to illuminate the interactions between rewarding and challenging aspects of this work.

Coping Strategies

To date, no published research has focussed solely on coping strategies used by therapists working with sex offenders. Coping strategies have been explored as part of broader studies of therapists' experiences, and workplace supports such as adequate supervision, receiving further training, and talking to colleagues are frequently referred to as methods of coping (Ellerby, 1997; Lea et al., 1999; Scheela, 2001), while a lack of official support can be experienced as adding to stress (Farrenkopf, 1992; Lea et al., 1999). A need for 'self care' has been highlighted for therapists to monitor their own wellbeing (Chassman, Kottler, & Madison, 2010; Freeman-Longo, 1997), and keeping a distance by decreasing contact with sex offenders (Farrenkopf, 1992; Lea et al., 1999; Scheela, 2001), detaching from client outcome (Farrenkopf, 1992), separating home and work lives (Jackson et al., 1997), and avoiding media related to sexual abuse (Scheela, 2001) have been discussed as ways to cope with the content. Such detached coping skills have been associated with positive outcomes for sex offender therapists (Clarke, 2004). The limited research in this area suggests that collegial support and distancing from the work are coping strategies commonly implemented by sex offender therapists.

Her Majesty's Prison Service Sex Offender Treatment Programme

In the UK, the most common form of therapy provided to sex offenders is the HM Prison Service suite of Sex Offender Treatment Programmes (SOTP). SOTP is run throughout the prison service by multi-disciplinary teams of psychologists and prison officers, and in 1998 was the largest of its kind in the world, with more than 1,400 staff trained in its delivery (Clarke, 2011; Perkins, Hammond, Coles, & Bishopp, 1998). A similar Sex Offender Group Programme (SOGP) is run in the community by the probation service (Ministry of Justice, 2012). SOTP and SOGP apply a cognitive-behavioural therapeutic approach in a group setting to assess and treat convicted sex offenders in the UK Criminal Justice System (Beech, Fisher, & Beckett, 1998).

While the majority of research discussed above has been conducted with North American or Australasian therapists, a small number of British studies have focused on the experiences of SOTP facilitators. Soon after the introduction of SOTP, Turner (1993) found that SOTP facilitators reported negative effects of the work on their relationships and altered behaviour with their own children, mirroring findings of North American studies. However, SOTP facilitators in Crighton's (1995) research reported feeling that offenders used offensive language in an attempt to embarrass therapists and that they struggled with the ethical and practical considerations in preserving client confidentiality. These difficulties are not commonly reported in American studies, suggesting that SOTP might present distinct difficulties and therefore warrants investigation in its own right.

Since these early findings a handful of studies have further investigated SOTP facilitators' experiences (e.g. Brown & Blount, 1999; Clarke & Roger, 2007). Dean

and Barnett's (2011) study of the experiences of facilitators of the Healthy Sexual Functioning Programme (HSFP), a one-to-one SOTP, found some novel experiences alongside the commonly reported intrusive thoughts, increased suspicion of others, and overwhelming sense of responsibility. The researchers found that facilitators felt delivering HSFP made them question their own identity. They also found that facilitators coped with intrusive thoughts by separating or detaching, for example, by separating their work and home life and separating themselves from other people.

Clarke (2011), whose research has heavily influenced the training and official support of SOTP facilitators, has criticised the existing conceptualisations of the impacts of delivering therapy to sex offenders. She suggests that frameworks such as VT and burnout present as fixed outcomes of the work and pathologise the impacts which could in fact be a "potentially normal response by normal people to abnormal situations" (p. 340). Clarke suggests that as these conceptualisations have been adapted from existing theories in other fields such as trauma and victim research, they negate attempts to fully understand the experiences of sex offender treatment providers. She developed the Model of Dynamic Adaptation to highlight factors that contribute to likelihood of negative psychological consequences and stages at which intervention is possible and desirable. Clarke suggests that negative outcomes are not inevitable for therapists, but there is a complex interplay of factors which need to be understood in order to increase likelihood of positive outcomes.

Present Study

To date, the majority of research into the experiences of sex offender therapists has been conducted in North America and Australasia, with only a handful of studies focussing on the thousands of trained SOTP facilitators trained in the UK. Additionally, many previous studies used participants providing therapy to sex offenders in outpatient settings, rather than in correctional settings such as prisons and probation services, as SOTP is delivered. While an abundance of research exists into the negative effects experienced by sex offender therapists, there is substantially less on the rewarding aspects of the work and coping strategies used. As Clarke (2011) argues, depth of understanding of experiences of SOTP facilitators is required in order to conceptualise their experiences.

The aim of the present study, therefore, is to explore how SOTP facilitators construct their experiences of working with sex offenders, focusing most closely on their motives for the work, the perceived consequences, both rewarding and challenging, and their use of coping strategies. Qualitative methods have been advocated in attempting to understand personally sensitive issues (Walker, 1997), as well as with populations about which little is known (Ezzy, 2002), and were therefore deemed appropriate in gaining understanding of the experiences of SOTP facilitators.

Method

Design

Data were gathered using one-to-one semi-structured interviews, which were considered an appropriate method as they allow flexibility to tailor interviews to individual participants (Willig, 2001). Semi-structured interviews are also compatible with the chosen method of analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA aims to gain understanding of how participants experience the world, whilst acknowledging that direct access to participants' worlds is impossible (Willig, 2001). Its aim to produce knowledge of what and how people think about certain phenomena identifies it as a realist approach. This is appropriate for the present study given its aim to learn how SOTP facilitators think about their experience of the work. IPA's idiographic approach, that is, the exploration of the experiences and understandings of a particular group, suits the focus of this study on a specific sample of people in an atypical working environment (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995).

Participants

Eight SOTP facilitators participated in the study. Six were employed in an English HM Prison Service prison and two in a Welsh Probation Trust. A purposive sampling technique was employed and the sample was limited to current or past SOTP facilitators in the prison or probation service. Recruitment of participants ceased when data saturation was achieved, that is, when no new information relevant to the research question was being obtained (Sim & Wright, 2000).

Table 1 illustrates participants' occupational disciplines, experience of facilitating SOTP and age. Equal numbers of males and females participated. All participants were White British and the median age bracket was 36-45 years. Seven participants were employed as SOTP facilitators at the time of data collection, while one, 'Martin', had ceased facilitating SOTP five years prior to interview.

Materials

During the recruitment process an information sheet was sent to prospective participants, with a letter of invitation to participate in the study (see Appendix 3).

The opening questions of the interview schedule were relatively practical in nature to introduce the topic before more sensitive topics were discussed (see Appendix 4). Questions 1-11 comprised the main interview and addressed the aim of the research. A number of neutral 'wind down' questions were included at the end of the schedule (see questions 12-15), with the aim of the participant feeling relaxed at its conclusion.

Participants signed a consent form, attached to which was a short demographic

Table 1

Demographic Information

Participant (pseudonym)	Occupation	Experience facilitating (years)	Age
Julia	Psychologist	14	36-45
James	Prison Officer	2	46-55
Hannah	Psychologist	5	26-35
Rob	Prison Officer	15	46-55
Martin	Prison Officer	3	46-55
Thomas	Psychologist	5	26-35
Claire	Probation Officer	8	36-45
Amanda	Probation Officer	6	36-45

questionnaire (see Appendix 5). The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and digital recordings backed up on a laptop. Following the interview, participants were provided with a debrief sheet and a 'Right to Withdraw' form (see Appendices 6 and 7).

Procedure

Interviews with prison service staff took place in May 2012 while participants from the probation service were interviewed in September 2012 (see Appendix 8 for timetable of interviews). Recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim into individual Microsoft Word documents. Smith and Osborn (2008) suggest that transcription for IPA does not require inclusion of prosodic features, but features such as false starts and laughs are worth recording. Transcription was conducted in line with these guidelines. Each recording was listened to once prior to and again following transcription to ensure accuracy.

Each interview was subject to in depth analysis in line with IPA principles (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Rough notes were made to record the researcher's initial thoughts about the text before precise individual codes were generated, listed and grouped together to form themes. Some codes formed obvious natural themes, for example, those concerning a particular aspect of the work, while others were grouped together due to the language used by the participant that indicated a shared meaning between the codes. Themes were further organised into larger, overarching clusters which illustrated the nature of the individual account as a whole. Throughout the process, the text and the initial notes were referred to, ensuring that connections made between themes were reflective of the participant's account (Willig, 2001).

Once each interview had been analysed, connections between cases were noted at the level of cluster, theme and code to create an inclusive list of master themes, each of which was representative of the accounts of at least three participants. These master themes were then grouped into four higher-order theme clusters

reflective of the data set as a whole. This process was conducted in a cyclical manner, with emerging themes checked against the texts to ensure they were grounded in data (Willig, 2001).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Bath Psychology Ethics Committee (see Appendix 2) and by the head of psychology at the prison in which data were collected. The primary ethical consideration for this project was confidentiality to ensure the participants' working relationships with offenders and colleagues were not compromised. Confidentiality was ensured by assigning participants pseudonyms and excluding their real names, and the name of the prison or probation service where they worked, from all documents associated with this project. Digital voice recordings are stored on a password protected computer and will be destroyed once the result of the dissertation is confirmed.

Analysis

Integration of themes revealed four higher order theme clusters; 'the personal significance and meaning of the work', 'challenges of working with sex offenders', 'the balance between distancing and desensitisation', and 'support, or lack of, in the work place'. Due to the constraints of an undergraduate dissertation, the last theme will not be discussed as it was deemed least relevant to the research question.

The Personal Significance and Meaning of the Work

A key theme in participants' accounts of working with sex offenders is the meaningfulness they attribute to their work. In the extracts below, James, a prison officer, reflects on how 'meaningful' the work is in comparison to other jobs or achievements in his life, while Thomas, a psychologist, stresses the positive nature of their endeavour:

> I would have to say that it's probably the most meaningful job I've ever done. If you're successful at it then it's gonna have a bigger impact on society than anything else I've ever done. (James, Prison Officer: lines 409-411)

> But in many ways, this sort of work is actually really, really positive. You know, it sounds a bit daft but if you look at the end game of what you're trying to achieve, there's not a lot that's more positive than that I don't think. (Thomas, Psychologist: lines 363-365)

James' extract demonstrates the high stakes participants set on the outcomes of their work, highlighting the significant and far-reaching consequences it could have, but only 'if you're successful'. This suggests pressure to be successful at rehabilitating sex offenders. James' reflection on the meaningfulness of the work in relation to other aspects of his life suggests that it is constructed as one of his

greatest personal achievements. Thomas uses emphatic language to argue that the potential results of the work and the aspiration to achieve such outcomes could not be more positive. Below, Julia, another psychologist, describes how a spirit of teamwork contributes to a sense of importance in the work:

> And I think for much of the time, nationally there's been quite a cohesive kind of team of people working on SOTP so you've kind of known the people at headquarters and had quite a lot of contact, lot of support, so had a sense of being part of something kind of nationally important I suppose (Julia, Psychologist: lines 58-62)

Julia's account depicts feeling belonging to something akin to a mission. She describes a group of people with a common aim working together to undertake work of national importance. She states that communicating with this group "reminds you of the benefits of what you're doing" (line 65), suggesting that this sense of shared aspiration reinforces the meaningfulness of the work.

Participants also discuss core beliefs and values they hold that are central to their rehabilitative work. In the following extracts, James explains the principles that drove him to move from working on the landings to facilitating SOTP, and Thomas describes some long-held beliefs that have remained pertinent throughout his career:

> 'Cause for me, to go into programmes, it's part of not just wanting to sort of lock people up and shut them behind a door but also to try and give some sort of hope that there is another, that they, you know, that they can get back out there and they can live a decent life. (James, Prison Officer: lines 25-28)

> I still believe very strongly in the fact that I think people can change, and the positive side of people can, you know, live offence free lives, and that no matter what someone's done there is still good within inside someone. And I think if I were to lose that then there would be no point in doing this job. (Thomas, Psychologist: lines 143-147)

This extract demonstrates how James' work is entwined with his personal values. He indicates that delivering SOTP is 'part of' a wider belief system which influenced his decision to undertake the work. For James, the motivation for working with sex offenders is to help them share in his ideals and hopefully realise them. Thomas ardently expresses his belief of the good within everyone and talks in absolute terms to depict the importance of having such beliefs to be able to carry out the work, as he states, without them there would be 'no point'. These extracts highlight the enmeshment of beliefs which are core to the participants as people, and beliefs which are seen as necessary to carry out the therapeutic work.

Throughout their accounts, participants make references to a level of personal investment in their work. Below, Amanda, a probation officer, explains her 'personal

reason' for doing the work, and Rob, a prison officer, describes how he forms relationships with offenders when undertaking group work:

> What about, what do you find rewarding about it then? (Interviewer: line 156)
> That's gotta be when you see change really, which is ultimately why I, my personal reason for doing it. If that wasn't there, I don't think I could. It doesn't happen as often as we'd like, but when it does happen it can be very rewarding. I guess the positive affirmation we have as well sometimes off people, if we're helping them to change their lives, that's rewarding. (Amanda, Probation Officer: lines 157-161)

> you form some relationships with people I think. I think you have to. I think it's unavoidable. I think people that don't form some relationship with people they're in therapy with probably are a little bit not fully on board with the programme, I think. (Rob, Prison Officer: lines 39-42)

Amanda's description of seeing change as her 'personal reason' for doing the work suggests that she identifies rewards of the work at a personal as well as professional level. Like Thomas, Amanda claims that there are elements of the work without which she could not continue. She describes it as "where I think my vocation lies" (lines 461-462), implying that working with sex offenders is more than just a job to her. Rob's account suggests that some degree of personal investment in group members is essential to running a good therapeutic programme with sex offenders.

Pervasive throughout participants' accounts of working with sex offenders is a sense of overlap between their personal sense of selves and their occupations. The meaning they attribute to their work is perceived at both an individual level, for change in individual offenders' lives, and a societal level, in reducing reoffending. Participants hold strong, core prosocial values regarding the good within everyone and the ability to change, which are interlinked with their desire to undertake the work. Rehabilitating sex offenders is constructed by participants as a significant and meaningful aspect of their lives.

Challenges of Working with Sex Offenders

One difficulty participants discuss facing in their work is exposure to information about offences. Claire, a probation officer, explains how she no longer reads offenders' court depositions in detail for fear of seeing images of child pornography which have recently been included in probation files:

> because this thing with images coming through on the deps [court depositions], I don't know why they do that, these graphic, we tend to just, with iSOTP [internet-SOTP], we just have a look for the theme, we don't necessarily look all the way through now because sometimes you find what you don't want to see. There's no need for us to see the images, we know what an image must be like, you know, you can best

> guestimate in your head what it must be like (Claire, Probation Officer: lines 173-178)

Claire's extract highlights the distinction participants make between imagining what sexual abuse must be like when hearing or reading about it and being visually exposed to images, experiencing the latter as far more distressing. It could be argued that reading about offences maintains a greater distance between them and the therapist than viewing images does. Claire also stresses that she does not understand why the images are included, indicating that this contributes to her negative reaction.

Participants also report that working with sex offenders impacts on their home life. All participants other than Thomas discuss a certain degree of crossover between their work and home lives and the discomfort they feel about this. A common source of uneasiness is the experience of reading or hearing about victims who remind participants of their own children. In the extract below, Claire describes writing her first report following her return to work from maternity leave:

> dealing with somebody who'd abused, who'd downloaded thousands upon thousands of very young, young children being abused and the detail was quite graphic and that really impacted on me because it was the same age as my son, his preference was the same age as my son and that sort of made a link a little bit. I couldn't, well that was a horrific weekend because I did the report on the Friday and there was nobody here, only me, so until the Monday that was going round and round in my head. (Claire, Probation Officer: lines 155-161)

Claire's account suggests the process of associating victims with therapists' own children brings about a connection that is not necessarily present when reading about other offences, and therefore makes hearing about them more difficult. Claire recalls ruminating about the link between her son and an offender's victims, indicating a degree of anxiety about the situation. Julia and Amanda report similar experiences to Claire's, with Amanda suggesting that it affects her more because it is "closer to home" (line 189). Martin, a prison officer who stopped facilitating SOTP and moved to a different position in the prison five years prior to the interview, recalls how working with sex offenders made him question his own behaviour with his children:

> you do the most innocent of fatherly things with your children and you get to sort of thinking well if this was in a SOTP sort of environment should I be doing this sort of thing? You know, i.e. bathing your baby daughter and stuff like that, you know. And you think, well, you know, you get this, you get this sort of little devil in the back of your mind sort of talking to you and saying to you "should you be doing this?" (Martin, Prison Officer: lines 77-82)

Martin describes how immersion in information about child sex offences began to taint innocent fatherly activities with his daughter and affect his relationship with her. He explains that hearing about abusive fathers caused him uncertainty about the appropriateness of his own behaviour, which disrupted the quality of his family life. Martin's account is suggestive that having thoughts about sex offences while at home can lead therapists to experience detrimental impacts to their relationships outside of work.

Some participants discuss other ways in which working with sex offenders impacted on their thoughts. Both Julia and Rob describe how certain stimuli in the environment trigger thoughts about sex offences. Below, Julia provides an example:

> it did impact slightly when I first had children. I had things, worked with someone a long time ago, I think on my first programme actually who was a fairly awful individual who had described offending against his, well all his children. But one, a very young child as well, and abusing a child in nappies and when I first had children I thought about him just about every time I changed my baby's nappy to start off with. (Julia, Psychologist: lines 186-191)

Julia's account depicts a personal family situation in which recalling sex offences is likely to be particularly disconcerting. Such thoughts could be an indication of participants' immersion in the work and the resultant difficulty in keeping it from invading aspects of family life.

The extracts above provide examples of the difficulties participants experience in keeping their home lives and work lives separate. Participants describe how thoughts about their children occupy them when reading about sex offences, and how thoughts about sex offenders intrude on their family time, with effects ranging from brief flashbacks to impacts on familial relationships. Keeping a distance between work and home is constructed by participants as one of the biggest challenges of working with sex offenders.

The Balance between Distancing and Desensitisation

Participants' accounts illustrate their attempts to switch off from the meaning of much of the information they are exposed to in order to minimise negative consequences for themselves and to be able to work efficiently. Below, Rob summarises the attitude most participants express toward reading offence information:

> on those occasions when we do have to read through deps [court depositions] it's very much about keeping our distance from the offence, you know, it's purely about reading that information because you need to and you need to understand why the offence happened (Rob, Prison Officer: lines 72-75)

Rob's emphasis on the need for understanding demonstrates how the purpose of the work is often constructed as superseding any personal reaction to the content. This clinical manner is perceived as the default approach to working with graphic offence information in order to get the job done. Keeping a distance is also presented as a means by which therapists protect themselves:

> I think as long as you don't get too emotionally involved in what you hear, keep relationships with prisoners on a very professional basis. So I think they're the best kind of coping strategies. (Rob, Prison Officer: lines 263-265)

> Do you think you have any coping strategies that you use to deal with the more negative sides of it? (Interviewer: lines 292-294)
> Yeah. Detaching, I suppose, is definitely one of them. So just trying not to kind of, yeah, not to engage with the meaning of something too much. (Julia, Psychologist: lines 295-296)

Remaining emotionally detached from information about offences is suggested to be an effective coping strategy for exposure to graphic information, and in this way is conceived as an active process which therapists see value in and choose to engage in. While participants construct themselves as active agents in the process of detachment, they also describe the more passive process of desensitisation as having happened to them. The extracts below demonstrate how psychologists Julia and Hannah perceive this to have occurred:

> you hear so much from people that actually after a while there's nothing that you read that's particularly new because it tends to be just, you know, just different variations of the same thing. So it's not generally a problem. (Julia, Psychologist: lines 109-112)

> there's less and less new things the longer you spend in a field. (Hannah, Psychologist: line 127)

Julia and Hannah attribute the process by which therapists become less shocked by offences they read about to the lack of newness in information they are exposed to. The implication is that therapists are shocked when they read unfamiliar things and the more information they read, the less this occurs. Julia's attitude towards this process is one of acceptance, noting the benefit that it prevents the reading of offence information being a problem. Echoing Rob's view of actively detaching oneself, Amanda and Hannah portray passive desensitisation as a process which is essential for their work:

> sadly I think, sadly, I say sadly, on the one hand we're desensitised to it but I guess you've gotta be desensitised otherwise you wouldn't be able to do it. So it's not sadly really, I guess that's part and parcel of it (Amanda, Probation Officer: lines 198-201)

> Whereas now, you read some horrendous stuff and it's just very matter of fact and you just get on with it, it doesn't affect me and in many ways that's needed to do the work, you need to be able to separate the emotional reaction. (Hannah, Psychologist: lines 105-107)

Initially, Amanda constructs desensitisation as a 'sad' occurrence, however swiftly concludes that this is not so as it is imperative to being able to read the information. Hannah acknowledges that some information she reads is 'horrendous', suggesting that desensitisation does not prevent therapists from knowing the atrocity of crimes, but rather prevents them from feeling the associated emotions. She again emphasises the need to avoid emotional reactions in the workplace, and the way in which desensitisation aids this. However, while acknowledging its value, Hannah also argues that desensitisation is not necessarily something which should be accepted:

> But I do also sometimes wonder if that kind of desensitisation is actually a good thing because we shouldn't get used to that kind of stuff, it's not something that we should just kind of accept as "oh well, he's done this, he's done that" and that really is how it is. It's just like reading, you know, what Cheryl Cole's been up to, you just kind of read it and you don't blink an eye and you just keep going (Hannah, Psychologist: lines 108-113)

Hannah expresses concern over the ease with which she reads information about offences and her comparison of them to stories in a gossip column demonstrates the neutrality with which such information can be processed. Hannah places emphasis on how she thinks she should and should not feel, and later describes feeling "a bit ashamed" (line 118) about being unmoved by news reports about sex offences, suggesting an awareness of how other people might perceive her desensitisation. Julia echoes Hannah's concern, to the extent that her lack of emotional reaction leads her to question her own humanity:

> I kind of think after a while when you don't have an emotional reaction to reading awful stuff you kind of wonder whether, you know, you're still human or whether, you've kind of, I don't know, something awful has happened to you when this horrific stuff doesn't mean anything anymore. (Julia, Psychologist: lines 157-160)

Julia depicts a level of desensitisation where not only does she lack emotional reaction to offences but where she struggles to attribute meaning to them. She describes it as having happened to her, despite her discussion of detaching as an effective coping strategy she makes an effort to do. Julia's account indicates that while her lack of an emotional reaction towards offences is functional, it also causes her concern about her responsiveness as a human being. For Julia, this detachment not only relates to hearing about sex offences, but her habit of actively detaching has made her emotionally detached in her life in general:

> I think because in a way the best way of coping with things, or I find anyway, is to kind of detach from them I think it's then quite hard to un-detach from things. I think it makes, personally, it makes me quite detached in life in general. So I think, I think because you spend your day constantly just not engaging with the kind of emotions that go along with whatever you're doing and presenting in a way that, you know, it doesn't matter what you're hearing in group, you present positively and empathically and warmly, that I think it's quite difficult to stop doing that when you're outside of work. So, I think it means quite often you don't, I'm more detached about stuff emotionally outside of work as well, where I think actually it would be nice not to be. (Julia, Psychologist: lines 421-430)

Julia describes how detaching from her emotions has become a habitual and automatic process. She indicates the use of a facade to present herself in work which overlaps into her home life, suggesting a sense of abnormal emotional response. Julia appears to have a dilemma whereby a strategy she constructs as essential for work is viewed as having a serious detrimental impact on her home life, with the potential for causing difficulties in her personal relationships.

Rob expresses the theme pervasive throughout many of the participants' accounts; the struggle for balance between maintaining a distance from the meaning of offences in order to conduct necessary work, whilst maintaining empathy for victims and understanding the realness of offences:

> Do you think it's [desensitisation] useful in any way or do you think it's a negative thing? (Interviewer: line 291)
> I think it's gotta be fairly useful to a certain extent but I think you also have to also kind of monitor yourself that you're not actually becoming so detached from what you're doing that you kinda just kinda go through the motions really, you know. I think you need to keep a degree of compassion, I think you need to still maintain some sense of what the victim went through in order to perhaps ask the right questions, perhaps during victim empathy role plays for example I think if you were completely detached and just saw it as a process, then you perhaps wouldn't be able to ask the right questions in order for the prisoner to develop their victim empathy. But obviously it has to be kept on the balance. You obviously can't just burst into tears if you're directing a victim empathy role play because you're so overcome by grief, you know. But yeah, I suppose a certain amount of desensitisation is a useful coping strategy as long as it doesn't go too far. You've still gotta keep compassion, stay human I guess. (Rob, Prison Officer: lines 293-305)

Rob articulates why detachment is essential for the work, indicating the consequences of unprofessionalism that could occur if one were to engage with emotions too much. However, he suggests that a level of self awareness is needed

to monitor detachment and ensure compassion is preserved, another demand on facilitators in an already challenging line of work.

Conclusion

The themes discussed above indicate that participants struggle to negotiate the distance or overlap between their work self and home self. Participants appear to want more distance between the two in order to reduce negative impacts on their home lives, while their sense of involvement and passion for the work means that their work and home selves are, by nature, entwined. The difficult balance between detaching to cope and not becoming too desensitised further complicates this, as participants must attempt to balance an appropriate and helpful level of desensitisation against the harmful impacts of becoming too detached, both at work, and in their personal lives.

Discussion

The aim of the research was to explore how SOTP facilitators construct their experiences of working with sex offenders, focusing on their motives for the work, the perceived consequences, and their use of coping strategies. IPA generated four higher order theme clusters: (a) the personal significance and meaning of the work; (b) challenges of working with sex offenders; (c) the balance between distancing and desensitisation; and (d) support, or lack of, in the workplace. The first three themes were discussed in detail and conceptualised by the notion that participants struggle to negotiate the distance or overlap between their work and home lives.

Comparison with Existing Literature

Similar to Slater and Lambie's (2011) participants, SOTP facilitators in the present study reported optimistic personal values that contributed to their desire to work in the field. Slater and Lambie's finding that this ethos was viewed as essential in working with sex offenders is also reflected in the present study, whereby Martin, the one participant who had chosen to stop facilitating SOTP, was the only participant to indicate that he did not believe in the potential for sex offenders to undergo positive change. The research indicates that Slater and Lambie's findings about motives for working with sex offenders can be generalised from their limited New Zealand sample to SOTP facilitators working in the UK.

Challenges of working with sex offenders reported by participants in the present study were largely supportive of challenges reported in existing literature, such as the distress of being exposed to graphic offence information (Bengis, 1997; Way et al., 2004). However, this is the first study in which participants have reported being exposed to images of child sexual abuse, an apparently new and distinct stressor for SOTP facilitators working in the UK probation service. The uneasiness reported in the present study regarding the crossover between therapists' work and home lives

is largely reflective of previous research. For example, the association of an offenders' victim with one's own child was reported in Lea et al.'s (1999) study as part of the professional-personal dialectic that therapists found difficult to negotiate. While the dialectic is partially supported by the findings of this research, for example in the difficulties participants described in remaining professional with certain offenders, the experiences of SOTP facilitators in this study is more appropriately conceptualised, along with intrusive images of sexual abuse and discomfort around children, in participants' challenge of negotiating the distance between their work and home lives.

The most novel and important finding of this study is the theme of the balance between distancing and desensitisation. While distancing or detaching oneself from the work has previously been conceptualised as a coping strategy (Dean & Barnett, 2011; Farrenkopf, 1992; Jackson et al., 1997), and desensitisation as a consequence of working with sex offenders (Edmunds, 1997; Farrenkopf, 1992), the concepts have rarely been focussed on and it has not been acknowledged that the two could be related. However, based on the narratives by participants in the present study it seems sensible to propose that for sex offender therapists, there is an ongoing need for a balance between detaching in order to cope and not becoming too desensitised. The present research also acknowledges the complexity of the concepts. For example, detaching to cope has previously been suggested to increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for sex offender therapists (Clarke, 2004), with little attention paid to the potentially deleterious implications of becoming emotionally detached, such as the impact on personal relationships experienced by Julia. Desensitisation is discussed in the existing literature as a negative consequence of the work, with little acknowledgement of its potential value for therapists as reported in the present study.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study have practical implications for SOTP in the prison and probation service. It has been suggested that sex offender therapy training programmes should include formal training on understanding and preventing the negative effects of working with sex offenders (Skorupa & Agresti, 1993). Brampton (2010) attended an SOTP training course and found that it only devoted a brief session to the effects of the work on the final day of week one, when participants were tired and eager to leave. Participants' reports of the effects along with their questioning of their feelings regarding desensitisation in the present study suggest that a more in-depth session about the effects facilitators can expect to experience would be beneficial, with the aim of normalising the experience and initiating a culture of support and openness around such issues.

The research indicates that intrusive images of sexual abuse remain an issue for sex offender therapists 15 years after this impact was first reported (Ellerby, 1997; Jackson et al., 1997). Future research could investigate whether this is a symptom of

a trauma disorder as has been suggested (Rich et al., 1997). However, it is questionable whether this would bring about any practical preventative measures, and it could be argued that normalisation of such effects through discussion would be more beneficial than labelling them as a symptom of a disorder, which could pathologise normal responses to an abnormal situation (Clarke, 2011).

The study highlights one challenge of the work that is entirely avoidable, namely, the inclusion of images of child sexual abuse in files read by probation officers. Given the multitude of reported difficulties in working therapeutically with sex offenders recorded in this study and previous research, it is advisable that avoidable stressors are identified and eliminated wherever possible. Such images can be redacted from court depositions before they are sent to the probation service for reading, thereby eliminating one source of distress from an already challenging line of work.

A final novel finding is that of harmful consequences of emotional detachment which questions Clarke's (2004) assertion that a detached coping style is beneficial. While a detached coping style may be related to decreased distress, the findings of this study suggest that it is not straightforwardly beneficial to facilitators and perhaps should not be advocated until further research on its advantages and disadvantages has been conducted.

Strengths and Limitations

This research has clear strengths which give weight to its findings. Firstly, this is the first known IPA study of the experiences of sex offender therapists. IPA is a particularly effective method for gaining rich understanding of participants' lived experiences and how they think about them (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Given that one of the most pertinent questions in research on sex offender therapists is how they perceive their work, IPA seems an appropriate method with which to research the area, and subsequently has produced some unique findings. Secondly, this was one of the first studies of sex offender therapists to explore both the rewarding and challenging aspects of working with sex offenders, with the vast majority of previous studies focussing on one aspect or the other. This generated a more holistic picture of therapists' experiences. A third strength is the inclusion of a participant who has chosen to stop working with sex offenders. Whilst in depth comparison of his experience to that of other facilitators was beyond the scope of this study, it provided a crucial insight into qualities that maintain therapists' motivation for their work, along with aspects of the work that prove too difficult to overcome. Finally, the sample of participants was demographically representative of SOTP facilitators, including 50% female facilitators, participants from all occupational disciplines involved in SOTP, and a wide range of experience.

Despite such strengths, some limitations of the study must be noted. Whilst the sample was demographically representative, one obvious limitation is that six of the eight participants were recruited from the same prison, and therefore the

experiences reported might be particular to this workplace. However, the inclusion of two participants from a probation trust, whose accounts also corresponded with the themes discussed, indicates that the findings are generalisable to a certain extent. To further investigate this, copies of the report could be sent to other facilities where SOTP is delivered along with a questionnaire to examine whether other facilitators identify with the themes discussed.

The relationship between the author and participants could also be perceived as a limitation. The participants recruited from the prison were colleagues of the author at the time of interview, and the participants from the probation service were colleagues of the author's father. This could be construed as a weakness of the study as participants may not have been comfortable disclosing personal information to an interviewer who they knew outside of the research setting, for example, no participants reported alterations in their sex lives as has been reported in previous research (Farrenkopf, 1992; Severson & Pettus-Davis, 2013). However, IPA emphasises the need to get as close to participants' world as possible for an insider's perspective (Smith & Osborn, 2008) and so the fact that the researcher worked with sex offenders alongside some of the participants could enhance phenomenological understanding of their experiences.

Future Research

The key finding regarding detachment and desensitisation warrants further research to investigate how widespread the use of detached coping strategies and the experience of desensitisation are, along with how they are perceived by a wider sample of SOTP facilitators. This will help determine whether the struggle to negotiate the distance between home and work lives through detaching and desensitisation conceptualises the experiences of SOTP facilitators as a whole or is specific to the sample of the present study.

A more focussed investigation of coping strategies used by SOTP facilitators would also be beneficial. A large scale survey-based study of the coping strategies facilitators use and how beneficial they perceive them to be could be informed by information on coping strategies reported in existing literature, and results could be incorporated into SOTP training to advise future facilitators of the advantages and disadvantages of different coping methods.

The fourth overarching theme of 'support, or lack of, in the workplace', exploration of which was not possible within the confines of an undergraduate dissertation, also warrants investigation. In fact, alternative methodology to that used in the present study could be imperative in this area, as an IPA study of the workplace support experienced by participants who were predominantly from one prison could be descriptive of the collegial dynamics of one specific organisation. Methods which incorporate a sample from various establishments would be more useful to further investigate this theme.

Conclusion

Sex offender therapists are in a unique position where in conducting meaningful work with individual offenders to help them make positive changes in their life, they are simultaneously making a significant contribution to society by attempting to reduce the rate of recidivism. In order for them to do this, the challenges and stressors of the work must be understood and alleviated wherever possible. One such challenge is the difficulty in negotiating the distance or overlap between work and home lives, particularly with regard to therapists' personal investment in the work, the impact the work has on their personal lives, and the balance between detaching sufficiently from the work and not becoming too desensitised. These findings are important in providing depth of understanding of the experiences of sex offender therapists in order to conceptualise their experiences without categorising or pathologising them. It is hoped that these findings can be used in order to further inform support services and training provided to SOTP facilitators in the UK prison and probation services.

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