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Manchester
Metropolitan
University

Using semi-structured interviews to explore employer attitudes towards recruiting ex-offenders.

Alishba Dar

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ABSTRACT

The current research aimed to explore attitudes of employers towards the employment of ex-offenders. The research also aimed to provide an insight into the underlying causes of specific negative views and how they can be challenged. A thorough literature review revealed that research in this topic was predominantly quantitative. A lack of research exploring the causes of attitudes highlighted a gap in literature, which provided a rigid rationale for the current research. Seven participants (five females and two males) were recruited through purposive sampling and interviewed using semi-structured interviews (SSI). Thematic analysis (TA) was used to extract five main themes from interview transcripts. These included: employers' perception of ex-offenders, perceived risk, desistance from crime, willingness to hire and a need for social change. The identified themes indicated that negative attitudes were held due to offence-specific characteristics and employers' concern regarding re-offending. Employers reported that negative attitudes could be challenged through policy change and increased awareness. A unique relationship between employers' experience of crime and attitudes towards crime was found. Further research into this relationship can provide contemporary ideas of reducing the stigma around ex-offenders within the workplace.

KEY WORDS:	EX-OFFENDER	THEMATIC ANALYSIS	OFFENCE SPECIFIC CHARACTERISTICS	DESISTANCE FROM CRIME	ATTITUDES
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Introduction

In September 2017, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) reported a 7% decline in criminal proceedings since 2007, while the custody rate for indictable offences (serious crimes) and custodial sentence lengths increased (MOJ, 2018). Prison populations have increased by 82% in the last 3 decades and although the rate of successful release is rising, recall figures are also steadily increasing. Suggesting that a high percentage of offenders are taken back into custody, shortly after being released. In 2016, almost 68,000 individuals received a prison sentence during a 12-month period, however, imprisonment is not the only method of dealing with crime. Summary offences (less serious crimes) may receive a non-custodial sentence, i.e., exclusion orders, fines or suspended sentences (Prison Reform Trust, 2017).

'Ex-offender' refers to an individual who has been convicted of a crime. Sentencing is entirely dependent on the committed crime; however, it is a common assumption within the general population, that every person with a criminal record has been to prison. Statistical interpretation indicates that there is currently over 10 million people living in the UK, with a criminal record (Business In The Community [BITC], 2013). Contemporary researchers have questioned the negative language associated with the term 'ex-offender' and the attention it draws towards an individual's past, rather than supporting their rehabilitation (Farrall, 2013 ; Hercules, 2013). The Rehabilitation of Offenders Act (ROA) protects offenders who have not re-offended, from 'the unauthorised disclosure of their previous convictions, to amend the law of defamation'. For certain offences, after the rehabilitation period (determined by the sentence) is complete, the conviction becomes 'spent'. This means that individuals are no longer obliged to list their prior conviction history in a job application or legal proceedings, although, some offences and employment roles are exempt from this legislation (Rehabilitation of Offenders Act, 1974: 2).

Reintegration back into society can be a multidimensional process, successful offender rehabilitation requires action from prison and probation services. Additionally, the individual them self must actively make positive lifestyle changes and desist from crime. Ex-offenders require support post-release, in various aspects of their life, which are expected to be discussed and resolved with a probation officer (Maruna, 2004). Engagement with non-formal educational programmes within correctional facilities, has been highlighted as an area of support, as it promoted empowerment and identity recognition (Ngozwana, 2017). Successful ex-offender reintegration is often debilitated by the denial of child adoption, removal of rights to vote and problems in obtaining accommodation. Homeowners and housing agencies rejected applicants based on their disclosed criminal convictions (Schneider, 2010). Moreover, ex-offenders must also overcome the negative societal views on offending behaviour (Sinko et al., 2016).

Though the listed barriers to reintegration have significant negative impacts upon the rehabilitation of ex-offenders, difficulties in securing employment has been directly associated with re-offending behaviours. Without employment, offenders may struggle to provide for their family and become accepted citizens in community (Mullings, 2014). Andrews et al. (1990) developed a risk-need-responsivity (RNR) model which highlighted the key areas in offender-treatment relating to offender risk, criminogenic needs and response to treatment. Providing offenders with support corresponding with

their level of risk has proven to be highly effective. Measuring and directly targeting an offender's needs can reduce return to maladaptive behaviours, such as, substance abuse or criminal activity. Ensuring that the offender is engaging with the given treatment is also a crucial part of offender rehabilitation, if treatment is ineffective, an alternative must be implemented. Although the initial model was devised as guidance for offender-treatment within correctional facilities, it can also be effectively applied to probation services and community settings. Meticulously monitoring an ex-offender's risk, need and responsivity can boost their chances at successful rehabilitation post-release and encourage future crime prevention (Andrews et al., 2011).

According to Mullings (2014), regardless of legislations such as, the ROA, it is becoming increasingly difficult to conceal an existing criminal history due technological advancements and organisational policies. Barriers to employment are not only experienced by ex-prisoners, but also those who have been convicted with a summary offence. Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checking was introduced in 2002 which gave employers access to an individual's criminal background, as part of the application. If convictions were present, employers had the authority to discover 'spent' convictions, with the intention of ensuring workplace safety for colleagues and consumers (Mustafa et al., 2013). The issues surrounding ex-offender employment are complex, on one hand, employers' persistence to access prior criminal history indicates a deeply rooted stigma against ex-offenders in workplaces. On the other hand, failure to disclose their criminal history may cost an individual a potential employment role. While agreeing to CRB checks may also risk an offender a chance at employment, due to the negative stigma associated with ex-offenders. Despite of the existing barriers, ex-offenders are expected to secure employment, become financially sustainable and lead a crime-free life (Pape, 2014). Nally et al. (2014) reported high recidivism rates within the first 12-months after imprisonment and ex-offenders struggled to obtain employment due to employment gaps, poor skills and inadequate education. Another barrier to employment is employer attitudes regarding ex-offenders' hostility and incompetence. Research reported offender-characteristics as the primary barrier to unemployment, while other researchers revealed external barriers such as organisational policy and employer attitude. There is however, a noticeable agreement in the claim that, an association between unemployment and recidivism exists (Matsuyama and Prell, 2010).

Young and Powell developed an integrated theoretical model, which combined the effect of ex-offender characteristics and the severity of their crime on employer's attitudes towards offenders. This model proposed that employer attitudes were moulded by their personal characteristics, organisational policies and workplace diversity. An applicant's suitability for specific roles and awareness towards employment of ex-offender also had an influence on the final hiring decision (Young and Powell, 2015). Empirical research investigated the role of qualifications and offence-specific characteristics on employability, which provided partial support for the effectiveness of the model. Results revealed that an ex-offender's skills, such as problem-solving and work-experience, increased employability for non-sexual and non-violent offences. For sexual or violent offences, higher skills had no significant impact on ex-offender employability. However, the sample for this research involved college students, who read scenarios and rated applicant employability. One of the main concerns with this method was that it did not capture the view of employers, which makes the application of these results to real-life settings difficult, due to lack of

representativeness (Cerda et al., 2015). Richardson and Flower (2014) discussed the gender differences in barriers to employment for ex-offenders. While females' ability to work was limited by childcare and household responsibilities, male suffering of psychiatric disorders prevented them from maintaining occupational roles.

Employers' hiring decisions remained unaffected by large ex-offender populations within a community, as their conviction had to be carefully considered. Employers exhibited willingness to hire ex-offenders with drug or driving-related offences but were less willing to hire individuals with a history of murder or violence. Age played an essential role in employer hiring decisions, as older ex-offenders were perceived as less threatening (Atkins and Armstrong, 2013). This research provided unique results, but was limited by its quantitative nature, which prevented a further exploration of employer attitudes. Attribution theory is concerned with the way in which human arrive at judgements about events or individuals based on the information available. Internal attribution is related to attributing causes of social behaviour to personal characteristics or traits. External attribution, on the other hand, is the process by which individuals associate the causes of behaviour with environmental factors of the given situation (Fiske and Taylor, 1991). This theory can be used to explain the way in which attribution formation against ex-offenders has developed into a deeply rooted societal stigma.

Fixed attributes and attitudes can be challenged and potentially changed by ex-offenders' justification for their convictions. An online-experiment designed to investigate employer attitudes questioned participants regarding type of crime, ex-offender explanations and re-offending behaviour. Results found that when ex-offenders provided excuses for their crime, with minimal explanations, employers' perceived likelihood of reoffending was significantly higher. Whereas, when ex-offenders provided justifications, displayed remorse and apologies for their actions, employers were more likely to consider them as an applicant (Ali et al., 2017). Using online questionnaires as a method of data collection may generate unreliable results, as researcher absence may lead to incomplete answers which can produce futile data (Jones et al., 2008). An additional causal factor of employers' reluctance in employing ex-offenders is organisational policy, implemented to ensure workplace safety. Employers have an obligation to assess the risk associated with ex-offender employment, however, disregarding an applicant due to an existing criminal history is considered discriminatory. This complex issue poses a perpetual paradox which places pressure on employers to simultaneously assess risk, while avoiding discrimination penalties (Scales, 2002).

An extensive literature review has revealed that various factors including working skills, educational abilities and offence characteristics, impacted the way in which ex-offenders are perceived by employers. The present research study explored the way employers perceive ex-offenders and the attitudes that contribute to their hiring judgements. This research intended to build upon quantitative studies which identified a clear negative association between criminal history and employment. It aimed to fill the gaps within literature by introducing explanations behind stigma amongst employers or hiring managers. The current study adopted a qualitative approach, using SSI for data collection. By exploring a range of employer attitudes, this research answered meticulously developed questions through the acknowledgement of research gaps, limitations and recommendations.

Research Questions:

- 'What type of attitudes do employers hold regarding hiring ex-offenders at their organisation?'
- 'Why do employers hold particular attitudes towards ex-offenders?'
- What can be done to reduce negative attitudes towards ex-offenders?'

Methodology

Study Design and approach

The current research implemented an exploratory approach to provide a detailed understanding of employer attitudes towards hiring ex-offenders. A content-driven TA provided insight into the reasons behind attitudes. The entire data set was thoroughly read, coded and refined, which resulted in the development of five key themes (Guest et al., 2011). Semantic themes were identified based on the descriptive narratives given by participants. Reoccurring themes were interpreted, which allowed the application of theoretical framework to research findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Sample

Purposive sampling was used to recruit seven participants, which included hiring managers and business owners within the local and regional area, apart from one international participant. This sampling strategy was used since employers hold varied beliefs about ex-offenders, in comparison to the public (Robinson, 2014). The inclusion criteria required participants to be in a managerial or recruitment role and be held responsible for reviewing applications and hiring employees. This research was not limited to a specific type of workplace or an employment role, a relatively flexible inclusion criterion assisted in demonstrating the attitudes towards ex-offenders at a larger scale. Participants were not invited to take part if they did not meet the inclusion criteria. Five females and two male participants, each with non-identical career backgrounds, were recruited. Employer backgrounds included catering and hospitality, care work, customer services, fundraising organisation and the tattoo industry. Moreover, managers from a local law firm and an international government organisation were interviewed for this research.

Since qualitative approaches seldom have strict guidelines, sample sizes are often left unexplained by researchers. Saunders and Townsend (2016) clarified that research aims must be considered before deciding a sample size. Although fifteen to twenty participants are commonly used, the quality of collected data and must ultimately dictate the number of participants involved. The current research involved seven participants as rigorous refinements to coding framework no longer revealed unique or substantial data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Data Collection

The researcher contacted a range of employers by telephone and email invitation, the initial interaction outlined the purpose of this research. Employers who showed interested were given additional details and a meeting was arranged to conduct the interview. Some participants were known to the researcher prior to interviewing, which meant that the interview took place in informal environments, for example, a cafe. Other participants, who were unknown to the researcher, were formally approached and the interview took place at their workplace.

Upon meeting with participants at an agreed location, they were given an information sheet, describing the purpose of the research in depth and asked sign the consent form. These documents were emailed to the international participant and instead of written consent, verbal consent was given. Additionally, the interview for this participant was conducted over Skype and recorded. All participants were debriefed.

Participants engaged in SSI, as it is commonly used within qualitative research to yield rich and meaningful data from participants. Data-collection meticulously investigated the research questions and invited participants to discuss contemporary topics which were not explored in previous literature (Galetta, 2013). Additionally, SSI encouraged response depth and enabled the researcher to closely attend to non-verbal information, such as, tone of voice and body language (Kallio et al.,2016).

Each interview was recorded using a Dictaphone, to be transcribed later. Interview questions encouraged participants to voice their opinion on both, general and specific offending behaviour. The existence of a participant-researcher relationship led to a notable variance in the quality of data, as participants felt more comfortable sharing certain views (Robards, 2013). After the interview was completed, each participant was given (or emailed) a debrief sheet, which included information about withdrawal, complaints and support services. Participant data was anonymized by self-allocating pseudonyms.

Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, recorded interviews were transcribed which was time-consuming, however, it allowed the researcher to engage with data from an early stage and produce accurate transcripts (Bron and Thornburg, 2015). The current research focused on an inductive, data-driven approach to TA, in which semantic themes were extracted from the data. This approach provided an experiential account, in which, the themes were directly linked to the issues discussed during the interview (Braun and Clarke, 2014). Interview data was read multiple times post-transcription, after which, initial codes were generated by assessing predominant features of the data.

After a rigorous refinement of initial codes, similar codes were clustered into a theme. Even at an advanced stage of analysis, it was crucial to continuously read the data, as it gave the researcher an opportunity to identify meaningful themes. Each theme was then reviewed to ensure it was relevant to the aims of the research, and then an original name was assigned to each key theme (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Extracted themes were finally interpreted and correlated with existing theoretical framework to lend support to demonstrate employer attitude towards ex-offenders. Previous literature suggests that TA is highly beneficial for using an in-depth analysis of text structure and participant perspectives to produce purposeful findings (Sullivan, 2012). Flick and Metzler (2014) supported such claims by stating that TA is useful for making textual comparison between transcripts and allow the researcher to determine in-text similarities and differences.

Ethical considerations

Informed consent was obtained from each participant, in either written or verbal form, as it protected participant information and safety. To obtain valid informed consent, participants were given sufficient information about the research and reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation, through the information sheet (Hardicre, 2014).

Researcher and participant safety was ensured by selecting safe interview environments, research supervisor and employer colleagues were informed about the interview location and duration. Although the interview schedule was designed to correspond with research aims, discussing ex-offenders may have been difficult for some individuals, due to being victimised by crime. To prevent emotional distress, participants were given the contact information for support and counselling services. However, participants were not questioned about their personal experiences of crime, therefore, did not display signals of discomfort.

Maintaining anonymity was essential for this research, as it involved sensitive information about participants, for instance, their workplace, job role and organisational policies. To ensure all data was anonymised, each participant selected a pseudonym to protect their own and their organisation's identity (British Psychological Society, 2013). Moreover, during transcription, details such as job roles or workplace were generalised, and career backgrounds were discussed only when necessary. It must be noted that this research was not truly confidential as quoted extracts were presented in the research report, however, it was ensured that sensitive information remained confidential (Gibson et al., 2012). All data was securely stored on an encrypted laptop and was destroyed after the final analysis had taken place. Ethical guidelines provided by the Psychology department at Manchester Metropolitan University and British Psychological Society were adhered, to produce an ethically-sound report.

Analysis and Discussion.

Interview transcripts were rigorously analysed using the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke, a data driven approach was adopted which produced latent themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Each theme derived from the data was carefully refined and named, to ensure it accurately encapsulated participants' opinions and was consistent with the research aims. A total of five main themes were identified: employers' perception of ex-offenders, risk of re-offending, desistance from crime, willingness to hire and need for social change. Various stages of thematic refinement occurred throughout the process of this research, Figure 1. shows the final thematic map.

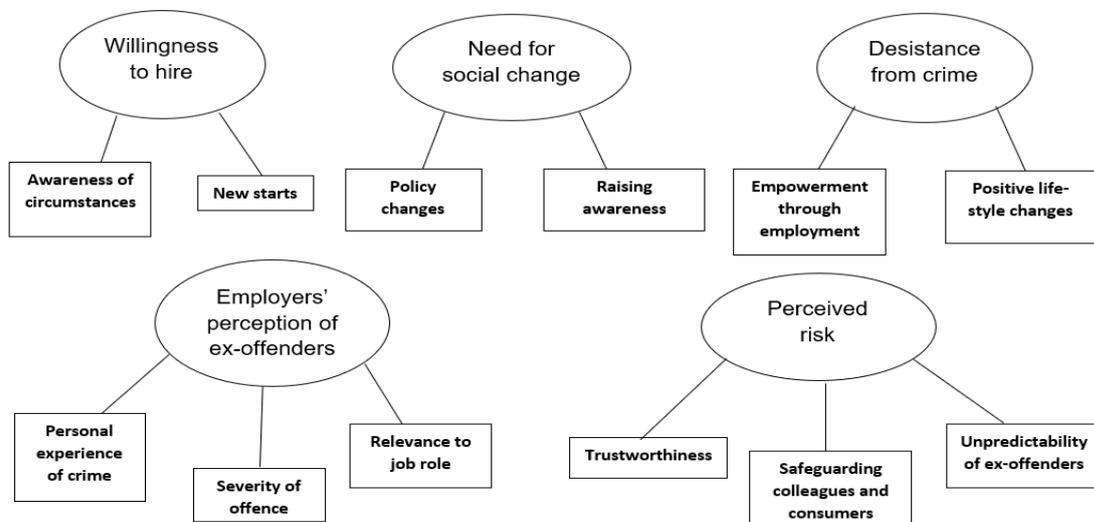


Figure 1. A final thematic map showing 5 main themes.

Employers' perceptions of ex-offenders

A deep exploration of employer attitudes provided an insight into issues that contributed to the formation of ex-offender perceptions. Employers' personal experience of both direct/indirect crime heavily shaped the attitudes they held. Participants who had been a victimised by crime held strong negative beliefs.

"I think most of it stems from the fact I have been a victim of a sexual crime in the past. I mean now, I am comfortable to speak about it, but it is one of those things that alters your perception of the world entirely. A rapist not only lacks the cognitive ability of the word 'no', but also lacks self-control. These offenders will pose a threat to customers, I definitely would not want to be responsible for anything of the sort taking place in my organisation." (Kim, line 88-92)

Levenrentz (2011) reported a strong correlation between personal victimisation and retributive attitudes, suggesting that victimised individuals are more likely to keep distance from ex-offenders. Kim expressed her opinion but also provided a justification of her beliefs, as well as, a concern for customer-wellbeing. Previous research can be used to support this finding as Kim later discussed her stance on the chemical castration of sexual offenders.

Severity of a committed offence was a recurring topic mentioned by every participant, which indicated an essential role in sculpting employer perceptions. Each participant was willing to overlook minor offences, but the notion of a 'minor offence' differed for participants.

"In the workplace, a drug addict would raise more concerns than a drug dealer, simply because of the lack of trust and irrational behaviour. I feel like a dealer isn't directly affected by the drugs they sell." (Roy, line 81- 83)

Research connoted that public attitudes towards drug suppliers were harsher towards individuals charged with drug supply, as opposed to drug possession (Kirby and Jacobson, 2014). This participant discussed a dissimilar outlook regarding the severity of drug use or possession over drug supplying. It was later revealed that the participant had experienced the loss of a close friend to drug addiction.

The relevance of an offender's convictions to the employment role they may have applied for, also has a considerable impact on employer perceptions. Several participants stated very little reluctance in hiring an ex-offender with driving offences, unless it influenced their work performance.

"The job does not necessarily involve a need to be able to drive or the requirement for a clean driving licence, it's kind of irrelevant. The only time I would have a problem is if their inability to drive would make them late for work on multiple occasions, to me, that is unprofessional." (Roy, line 48-51)

"As long as the sentence has been served, whatever type of sentence is, and as long as it doesn't affect their ability to drive. Most of the care workers at the company do drive to service users home, so I think the ability to drive is crucial to an extent. But with that been said, not all our employees drive and are still able to work, so it isn't always a problem." (Cathy, line 46-50).

The extracts indicated that both participants were likely to hire ex-offender with a driving-related criminal history, so long as their ability to work efficiently remained unaffected. Support was provided by literature which confirmed that employers often hire ex-offenders of driving offences (Rade et al., 2016).

Perceived risk

Some participants believed that there were distinct risks of hiring ex-offenders, which would not be present when hiring individuals without a criminal history. For instance, the issue of trustworthiness was spoken about in more than several interviews. While some participants directly expressed their perceived inability to trust an ex-offender.

“For me, it is that they understand that, if they do have any convictions on their record which are fairly recent, there is a possibility that we may not take that application further. Since we deal with vulnerable people and we also handle with service users’ finances, I cannot simply ignore their criminal history. I need staff who I able to trust and who will follow the correct protocols” (Cathy, line 18-22)

The participant spoke about a reluctance in trusting ex-offenders, due to the organisation’s close contact to individuals with mental health issues, protection of their safety was paramount. Application of attribution theory to this phenomenon helped to understand the way in which individuals, but specifically employers, utilize pre-existing knowledge to make judgements or predictions (Taylor and Fiske, 1991).

Other participants spoke about trust in a slightly different context, in which they were open to trusting ex-offenders, given that they displayed the appropriate behaviour.

“We are not there to judge an applicant's past, but it could give an indication of potential risks. They may not be allocated money-related tasks, so they may not oversee bucket collections and instead use their skills for advertising for example leaflet distribution and online communications.” (Zaya, line 70-73)

This participant spoke of an openness to hiring ex-offenders, and while they still acknowledged the risks, an inclination towards ways of risk-management or reduction was expressed. The allocation of minor tasks was thought to provide ex-offenders with an opportunity to make changes and build their level of trust and ability to handle major tasks. The differences participant’s perspective can be reduced to the differences in organisational conduct. While both participant professions dealt with interaction with vulnerable members of society, care work was much more sensitive (Lukies et al., 2011).

Every participant identified the risk to workplace safety, which came with the employment of ex-offenders.

“Due to the nature of the organisation, it would risk people’s personal details including social security numbers, home address, home occupants, age, date of birth and lots of other private information. Employing an individual who has committed crime in the past puts this personal data at risk of exposure, which is why we cannot hire them. In this country, all applicants who apply to work at

our organisation must provide a statement of no criminal history.” (Dana, line 16-21)

“...things that may risk to the safety of personal data, so I guess online crimes such as hacking or any type of identity or money-related fraud. If somebody has been convicted of online crimes, that would definitely be a red flag.” (Stan, line 17-21)

It is evident from the extracts that this nature of perceived risks is heavily associated with organisational policies and employer's' legal obligation to protect personal data. 'Ban the box' scheme allows to conceal their prior convictions, to avoid being subjected to employment prejudice, however, employers believed that the concealment of offences may have dire costs in relation to finance or sensitive data (Human Resource, 2018).

Several participants believed that violent offenders, specifically, may display a likelihood of becoming stressed or irritated under pressure and would be unable to control anger.

“I would worry about their anger, since that is usually the cause of violence in most cases. We have a lot of people call in frustrated, I can't put someone on the phones if they are prone to lashing out. From a customer's point of view, it only takes one bad experience to develop a bad opinion about a company.” (Michelle, line 81-84)

“When they've been involved in conflict, they are more likely to lose their temper or get aggressive can't and I be having that behaviour occur towards colleagues or customers.” (Roy, line 91-93)

Flake (2015) found that the presence of any criminal history had an inevitable influence on employer attitudes, as the ex-offender was a predominant factor in perceived as a risk, even in the absence of re-offending. All participants who expressed a concern about behavioural aggression held a generalised opinion, however, research suggests that the heterogeneous nature of violent offenders must be identified, for effective risk-reduction (Widom, 2014).

Desistance from crime

Some participants outlined the importance of employment-seeking in ex-offender populations to provide financial sustainability, which in turn can reduce recidivism.

“It is really important for them to get back to work, because it keeps them occupied, and when they are occupied, their mind is less likely to get occupied by thoughts of committing crime” (Stan, line 172-174)

Stan understood the intricate issues ex-offenders may be subjected, the most common one being employer discrimination. He previously highlighted that the discrimination by employers may lead to unsuccessful employment, nevertheless, securing employment can contribute positively to future convictions. This account corresponds with research findings which revealed that ex-offenders who fail to secure employment often are led back to criminal activity (Mullings, 2014).

Many participants claimed that they would be willing to hire ex-offenders with non-recent offences, as well as drug-related offences, if the offender displayed positive changes. Participants considered drug treatments and filled employment gaps as active improvements.

"I would ask them to explain the offence, and the reasons for committing, I personally think that reasons are really important, because they say a lot about a person's character and such." (Michelle, line 109-111)

For this participant, changes as little as self-realisation and accepting accountability for offence were sufficient for them to consider their employment. This finding is supported by literature which indicated that a remorseful and accountable attitude towards offence, increased the likelihood of employers' acceptance (Ali et al., 2017). While other participants required concrete evidence that ex-offenders were committed to their rehabilitation and would not pose a risk, if employed.

"I have actually hired people in the past who had dealt with drug addiction at some point in their life. It was handled in a professional way, they were honest about it and told me it has been dealt with and they completed their treatment." (Roy, line 121-123)

Segments of the RNR model can be applied to this particular extract, as the employer primarily determined the low risk of the applicant through evidence of completed drug treatment. Their needs had been met through the treatment they received, and the participant disclosed providing emotional support to that employee during low periods, while monitoring their responsiveness to advice (Andrews et al., 2011)

Willingness to hire

Participants who had a previous understanding of the relationship between socioeconomic status and criminal behaviour had increased likelihood of employing ex-offender.

"We need to alter our opinions as a society, because think about it, why do people steal or sell drugs? Financial gain. If they are given the opportunity to obtain that in a legal manner, then the likelihood of their reoffending could be decreased" (Zaya, 177-179)

"I know some friends who have had their children get in with the wrong crowd and get addicted to substances, but does that mean they are evil people or fell a victim to their poor choices? It's not always so black and white." (Kim, line 30-32).

Wetherburn and Schnepel (2015) correlated financial adversities during childhood as a related factor to criminal behaviour during adolescence and childhood. This extract combines the employer understanding about crime as a source of financial gain with the importance of allowing those individuals a new start in society.

Surprisingly, employer's historical offences led to a better understanding of why ex-offenders may commit crimes, this led to an increased likelihood of ex-offender employment. This can be linked to Young and Powell's (2015) model of employer hiring decisions, in which it was clarified that employer characteristics may influence

their hiring decisions. Employers' criminal history was not a repeated pattern during TA, with only one participant disclosing an offending history. However, according to the researcher, it was a valuable and unique finding, which had not been highlighted by previous literature.

"I was convicted for driving without insurance, in 2009, technically, you could say that I also have a criminal record. I received a fine and got points on my license, but I haven't done it again since, and now I'm a manager at a well-known company. So, what I am trying to say is that I wouldn't have any concerns about driving offences, because it doesn't mean that people cannot provide good customer service." (Michelle, line 48-52)

As mentioned, previous literature has not yet explored the correlation between employers' offences and their perspective on crime. There is however, research articles which suggest that an interpersonal relationship with offenders has reduced negative attitudes towards offenders and ex-offenders i.e., probation workers (Rade et al., 2016).

Need for social change.

This theme was a collection of methods suggested by participants, which could potentially aid in the reduction of negative attitudes towards ex-offenders, within the community and workplaces.

"It is very important to help people to get back on their feet. Once an offender is released from prison, they are matched with a supervisor who helps them with employment and accommodation. I think employers who are not restricted from hiring ex-offenders, should adopt a positive attitude towards people with criminal histories." (Dana, line 130-134)

This participant summarises the need for employer acceptance of ex-offenders as employees, it is highlighted in the extract that not all organisations are at liberty to hire ex-offenders due to strict policies.

"Education. Raising awareness about these things is the only way forward. I think people do change, and after finishing their prison sentence, they should have the accessibility to employment, to make a living independently." (Kim, line 140-142)

This participant advocates the use of increased awareness and education about criminal consequences, as a tool for crime prevention. In England and Wales, offender age has drastically decreased, because of which, the number of young offenders has increased. Crime-related education programmes at schools have proven to reduce crimes such as property damage. Additionally, providing young adults with an opportunity to build their skills has a positive impact on crime reduction (Machin et al., 2011). A limitation of this research is that it is increasingly difficult to change the fixed attributions adults may hold against ex-offenders (Fiske and Taylor, 1991).

"I think the prison system needs to take a degree of responsibility in preparing offenders for employment during their time in custody, perhaps some sort of programme that will train them up. Because the prison should be preparing

prisoners for the 'real world', it should really be the government's responsibility to make ex-offender's more employable.” (Stan, line 180-183)

This participant draws upon the crucial role of prison services in the rehabilitation of ex-offenders. Prisons must introduce employability programs which provide the ex-offender with a skill set that prepares them for employment in community, and that these programs must be made readily available. A plethora of research supports the rehabilitative role of prisons, but it can still be difficult to encourage offender engagement (Rogge et. al, 2015). Some researchers argued that although there is an availability of treatment programmes as well as skill workshops in prisons, offenders experienced multifaceted issues which prevented engagement. A few of these issues included an unstable mental health and drug dependency, failure in active engagement contributed to increased recidivism (Bosma et al., 2016). Effective use of the RNR model within prison settings can improve programme engagement by assessment of risk, provision of needs and observed responsivity (Fiske and Taylor, 1991).

The present research provided previously supported, as well as unique insights into employers' attitudes towards hiring ex-offenders. TA identified the themes 'employers' perception of crime' and 'desistance from crime' as a response to the research question exploring employer attitude. TA findings indicated that employers held understanding attitudes regarding individuals with criminal histories and were willing to offer employment opportunities, dependent upon the offence-type. 'Willingness to hire' and 'perceived risk' discussed that personal experience of crime and reluctance about an individual's re-offending behaviour shaped the said attitudes. Finally, the final research question explored how negative beliefs could be challenged, 'need for social change' was extracted as a theme. This theme considered the positive influence of education, policy change and acceptance as a method which tackled stigma.

Limitations

A primary limitation of this research was its broad inclusion criteria, anyone with the responsibility of hiring individuals were able to participate. Although this provided a broad spectrum of employer attitudes, a criterion limited to a single profession may have provided specific rather than generalised attitudes. Salkind (2010) described that in qualitative research, a diverse participant pool was proved advantageous as it allowed the researcher to determine sample size through maximum variance in findings. The flexible nature of data collection implemented in the current research, meaning the use of Skype for one an international interview. The main limitation associated with this method was that wi-fi had to be monitored, as it would have influenced video and audio quality. Additionally, there was a limited opportunity to observe body language as the participant maintained a formal posture throughout. The use of online technologies for qualitative data has proven to be beneficial in obtaining deeper responses, as the physical absence of the researcher invoked reduced stress and increased comfort (Hanna, 2012).

The interview schedule did not encourage participants to reflect on specific offences, but rather offence categories. Although, this limitation resulted in several employers stating that their attitude would be shaped by offence-type, other participants used the general questions to discuss meaningful experiences (Dikko, 2016). This could have been associated with a pre-existing relationship of some participants to the

researchers, but not others. This limitation led to a minimal difference in the richness of data collected throughout this research (Robard, 2013). During data collection, ethical mindfulness was considered to ensure each participant was treated equally and felt comfortable in sharing their opinions (Guillemin and Heggen, 2009)

A unique relationship between employer's personal experiences of crime and their attitude towards ex-offenders was found by this research, which helped to fill a gap within literature. However, this relationship must be further explored through both quantitative and qualitative research, to provide insights into the extended impact it may have on attitude formations. Additionally, future research may benefit from offence-specific questions, by using scenarios or case studies to promote participants to provide specific answers.

Reflexive analysis.

A qualitative methodology was utilized to the current research, which allowed the researcher to ethnographically explore employer attitudes, within a natural setting to encourage rich data. Qualitative research is widely used amongst academics, as it provides an elaborated comprehension of concepts identified through empirical findings (Ejimabo, 2015). The current research was directed by an undergraduate, with considerable prior experience in conducting SSI. The researcher had little experience in approaching organisations outside university for research purposes. The lack of experience was initially a challenge, as a formal yet approachable manner in inviting employers to participate in the research was to be maintained. The researcher was quickly able to develop a unique style of addressing employers within their workplaces. It allowed the acquisition and development of several research skills such as effective communication, non-judgemental attitude and adherence to ethical guidelines.

Using SSI, as opposed to focus groups or other collection techniques, allowed the researcher to build a positive rapport with the participant, which later led to the discussion of personal topics, which may not have been discussed had that rapport not been built. This allowed the researcher to steer the interview, while allowing the participant sufficient flexibility to discuss indirectly related topics, i.e. personal experiences of crime (Newton, 2010). When participants began to discuss personal topics, it was ensured that they felt comfortable with the discussion. After the interview, participants were thoroughly briefed, those who had discussed personal issues were reminded about available support. However, due to the professional manner used to conduct the interview made participants feel relaxed, indicators of psychological distress were not observed (Bahn, 2013).

Reflexivity allows a researcher to consider their epistemological role in the conducted research and identify any areas in which personal assumptions or intuitions. In the current study, the researcher assumed that employers would hold strongly negative views regarding the employment of ex-offenders with a criminal history. This assumption was however kept discreet and was not discussed with any participants during the interviews. Therefore, it could be inferred that research assumptions did not influence the findings (Ibrahim and Edgeley, 2015). However, a methodological issue which arose from data collection was the inconsistency in the researcher-participant

relationships. Some participants were well known to the researcher (previous employers), while others were acquainted (local employers) and some were strangers recruited through email invitations. These inconsistencies may have slightly influenced the depth of data collected (Goldstein, 2016). Avoidance of inconsistencies will produce rigorous results in future research, which can be achieved by ensuring all participants are either known or strangers, not a combination.

Conducting an independent research project allowed the researcher to gain valuable skills which will aid in future psychological research. The process of reflexivity will ensure that similar problems are avoided in the future.

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