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Working with transgendered sex offenders: Prison staff experiences

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Abstract

Purpose – *The aim of this paper was to gain an insight into the experiences of staff working with transgendered sex offenders in a prison setting.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The study took a qualitative approach to investigation and used semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of staff (n=6). Data were analysed using thematic analysis.*

Findings – *Three themes were identified in the data relating to the experiences of staff working with transgendered sex offenders. The first relates to how staff become educated on transgender issues and the content of this information. The second describes situations in which boundaries are overstepped by both transgender offenders and others in the prison. The third relates to the ways in which staff manage change, such as tailoring treatment to specific needs and being mindful of what adaptations may be required.*

Research limitations/implications – *The main limitation of this research is the specificity of the sample; female staff working with (male to female) transgendered sex offenders. Future research may benefit from expanding this research to encompass both males and staff working in other prisons.*

Practical implications – *The research illustrates the utility of staff collaboration with transgendered sex offenders on transgender issues but also suggests some additional guidance is required when it comes to determining the boundaries. Staff may also benefit from more education on the possible ways in which a transgendered identity can impact on criminogenic needs.*

Originality/value – *The present research offers insight into the current state of care and management of transgendered offenders in custody and the nature of interactions between staff and this minority group. At present, there is limited research in this area.*

Keywords *Transgender, Transgendered Sex offenders, Staff experiences, Thematic analysis*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction

Within the UK, the term 'transgender' is used to describe a range of individuals who cross gender boundaries (Department of Health [DoH], 2007), from those who experience some form of gender variance, to those that experience ongoing identification with the opposite gender, leading to strong and persistent feelings of discomfort with the gender role they were assigned at birth (DoH, 2008). The latter is termed transsexual, or more recently, gender dysphoria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; DoH, 2008). Often these individuals seek medical support to resolve the feelings they experience, with some wishing to complete gender reassignment to change their physical appearance and sexual characteristics. Gender reassignment is the change of social gender roles, whether through hormonal treatment or surgery (although not all that change their role will elect these treatments; Eyler, 2007). In the UK, estimates vary; with some suggesting up to 500,000 individuals experience some form of gender variance (Trans Media Watch, 2011).

Gender reassignment is a protected characteristic under the *Equality Act* (Great Britain, 2010), giving individuals legal recourse to protect themselves from discrimination. Transgendered individuals are also protected by the *Human Rights Act* (Great Britain, 1998) under Article 8: the right to respect for private and family life. These rights promulgate the freedom of every individual to choose their sexual identity, and to dress and look as they wish, free from media intrusion (Department for Constitutional Affairs, 2006). This protection is necessary, considering 73% of transgendered individuals report having experienced some form of harassment (Whittle *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, transgendered individuals have become the focus of a particular type of hate crime (see Dittman, 2003), but may additionally suffer difficulties with friends and family, with 45% of transgendered individuals reported having experienced family rejection and/or breakdown as a result of their transgender and 20% feeling ostracised from their communities and neighbourhoods (Whittle *et al.*, 2007). These findings suggest that many transgendered individuals may lack traditional social support (of families and friends), a known factor for helping to counteract stress and improve psychological well-being during times of difficulty (see Thoits, 2011). Unsurprisingly there are higher rates of distress, depression, risk of suicide and comorbid psychological problems among transgender individuals (DoH, 2008; Hartmann *et al.*, 1997), particularly as they often experience significant gender discomfort for many years.

Along with concerns over the care of the transgender population as a whole, specific concerns over the care of those that come into contact with the Criminal Justice System (CJS) are rising. Research in the UK indicates that transgender offenders are overrepresented in prison (in comparison with the community; Poole *et al.*, 2002). This is also the case in other nations, including the United States (Brown and McDuffie, 2009). In an attempt to understand this, US research describes how the harassment, abuse and rejection that transgender individuals face

increases known risk factors of crime such as depression, mental health difficulties, substance misuse, school absence, unemployment and economic hardship (Feinstein, et al., 2001; Marksamer, 2008; Okamura, 2011). In support of this, Sexton et al. (2010) highlighted that homelessness, unemployment, mental health needs, HIV, victimisation and substance abuse are higher among transgender offenders in prison when compared to non-transgender offenders and transgender individuals in the community. A higher prevalence of some of these factors (employment, homelessness and victimisation) has also been found in a non forensic transgender population in the UK; however, there is a paucity of UK forensic research in this area (Whittle *et al.*, 2007).

Given the above, it is not surprising that the incidence of depression, self harm and suicide is higher among transgender offenders (Coleman et al., 2012). This may be partially explained by the specific problems transgender offenders face in prison. In the US, Brown (2014) reported that some of the most frequent problems were related to lack of access to healthcare for diagnoses or support and suffering from sexual and/or physical abuse (also supported by Edney, 2004). Lack of access to healthcare can result in feeling neglected and rejected by the prison system, leaving individuals potentially vulnerable to self-harm and suicide (Coleman *et al.*, 2012). Jenness *et al.*, (2007) stated that transgender individuals are 13 times more likely to suffer sexual assault or rape in prison and it seems widely recognised that this group are at a much greater risk of this type of abuse in the US (Blight, 2000). It seems fair to conclude that, within the US, custody is particularly challenging for transgender individuals. Although UK research is lacking, Whittle *et al.* (2007) support this, reporting that seven out of eight UK transgender prisoners were victims of violent assault by other prisoners. In addition, although not within a prison, McKeown and McCusker (1996) report a case study of an individual within a UK secure hospital that suffered friction with staff regarding her desire for transgender status. The report highlights some of the unmet needs for this individual due to opposition from hospital staff including refusal to the right to dress as a women at all times or to receive hormone therapy.

Notwithstanding the challenges for transgender offenders themselves, this population also presents challenges for prison authorities, including protecting the safety of individuals in custody from the predatory behaviour of other prisoners (for example, female transgender individuals serving sentences in a male sex offender prison), ensuring staff do not become complacent in assessing the risk of such individuals, working out how to deal with adjudications or rule infractions relating to individuals' changed gender role (e.g. with clothes, hair, make up) and health considerations (Brown, 2007). There is also an increased need for medical and psychiatric specialist care, as well as gender identity specialists (Brown and McDuffie, 2009). Indeed, being seen by experts regarding gender identity concerns is an important issue for transgender offenders (Chaplin *et al.*, 2014) and this may be an important bridge to gap between prison

authorities and transgender offenders, particularly as lack of support can leave them potentially vulnerable to self-harm and suicide (Coleman *et al.*, 2012). Despite the US research demonstrating these needs, reviews of the legal efforts highlight an ongoing struggle for transgender individuals to secure basic human rights (Simopoulos and Khin, 2014); Brown and McDuffie, 2009).

Within the UK, transgender research with forensic populations is lacking. In a non forensic, mixed method UK study, transgender individuals' experiences of discrimination and inequality were explored. The study highlighted trigger points for discrimination and inequality (such as in the workplace and during gender reassignment treatment) and such information should be used to inform staff working with these groups (Whittle *et al.*, 2007). A UK review of transgender research by Mitchell and Howarth (2009) supported these findings and also argued that there is a need for further research on transgender populations in prisons. One of the only UK studies exploring transgender offenders was conducted by Poole *et al.* (2002). They conducted a small scale survey exploring probation officers experiences working with this group. They concluded that there is limited information concerning transgendered offenders in the CJS in terms of how to address transgender issues and officers expressed concerns about how to appropriately deal with prejudice and discrimination of this group and their own feelings and assumptions on transgender. They also discussed difficulties with re-integration and increasing social capital with transgender offenders, due to the social isolation felt by this group as well as difficulty in dealing with comorbid psychological problems. This study highlighted the need for guidelines to be available for staff in order to appropriately accommodate transgender offenders' needs. It was also noted within this study that officers still considered addressing the offending behaviour to be the most important factor and expressed that in many ways these offenders are similar to other prisoners. Research with staff working with transgender individuals is a useful way to explore how best to inform their care and management, however the study by Poole *et al.* appears to be the only one of its kind.

Within a US healthcare setting, Lurie (2005) reported that the lack of resources relating to the care of transgendered individuals led to frustration among workers and general concerns. Staff believed that insight from transgendered individuals themselves would be invaluable to improving services and training for health-care workers. An issue highlighted was the need for more research in this area, however lack of funding and lack of interest by researchers have caused barriers to this. Recommendations of how staff should endeavour to work with male-to-female transgendered clients in a US speech-language environment were made by Freidenberg (2002). These included familiarising oneself with transgender literature, ensuring to maintain an open-mind, establishing ground rules before treatment and allocating female staff to clients when possible to promote modelling. However, these recommendations are specific to the experiences of just one clinician. Hanssmann *et al.* (2008) evaluated US training packages for health-care professionals working

with transgendered individuals in the US. They made a number of recommendations such as advising staff to gain insight into both the positive and negative experiences of transgendered individuals in the health-care system, mirroring the views of staff in Lurie's study (2005).

Despite a long standing need, it was only in 2011 when the first prison service guidelines for the management of transgendered offenders were released in the UK (Ministry of Justice [MoJ], 2011). The guidelines issued instructions detailing the care and management of transgender prisoners, for example guidance on medical treatment, the right to dress appropriately to the assigned gender, and the location of prisoners to male/female prisons. In addition, there are a number of guidelines available for professionals working with transgender individuals, for example the British Psychological Society published guidelines in 2012 for psychologists working with these clients. Jones and Brookes (2013) provide a useful summary of the available guidance and recommendations for professionals working with transgender individuals in the UK. Although this is a positive step, research on transgender offenders in the UK is limited and due to the multitude of difficulties transgender prisoners' experience, further research needs to be a priority (Jones and Brookes, 2013).

The aim of this study was to use qualitative methods to explore the experiences of staff working with transgendered individuals in a prison setting. Given the multitude of needs and challenges when working with this group, gaining an understanding from the staff perspective was considered a useful way to inform guidelines and best practice. As there is a paucity of previous research and due to the complexity of the topic, qualitative methods were deemed most appropriate (Jones and Brookes, 2013). This methodology allowed for rich explorations of the knowledge and information available to staff on transgendered offenders, the nature of interactions between staff and this group and the equality and diversity issues surrounding their work. Qualitative design is also appropriate as despite their overrepresentation in the CJS, the sample size of transgender prisoners is still likely to be small and thus so will the staff working with them (Jones and Brookes, 2013). The research used semi-structured interviews "to facilitate person-centred accounts" (Winder and Gough, 2010, p.126) in order to develop a better understanding of how staff work with this group and what further support may be required in order for them to provide optimal care and management for transgendered offenders.

Method

Participants and recruitment

The sample comprised six members of staff currently working at a UK category C sex offender prison for adult males. Participants were recruited through a global email to all staff at the prison; this detailed the aims of the research and encouraged anyone who had any experience of working with transgendered offenders to come forward. Seven staff responded to this email and were sent an information sheet with further information about the study and details regarding ethical issues such as confidentiality and anonymity. One of these participants was relocated to another prison before an interview could be conducted and so the final sample consisted of six members of staff. Participants were all British white females who had some experience of working with transgendered sex offenders during their employment at the prison. Ethical approval to conduct the research was gained from HMPS and a UK University.

Interviews

Participants were interviewed individually in a private room at the prison. Each interview was audio recorded using a password-protected dictaphone and subsequently transcribed by the lead author. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 30 minutes and 60 minutes, with a mean interview time of 40 minutes. Questions were open-ended to allow a range of responses and avoid participants feeling “uncomfortable being asked questions they didn’t know the answers to” (Lurie, 2005, p.96). The interview schedule was developed by the researchers and included questions to explore:

- Experiences of working with transgendered sex offenders.
- Challenges that arise when caring for and managing transgendered sex offenders.
- Awareness of guidelines and legislation for the care and management of transgendered offenders.
- Support and advice available for staff regarding the care and management of transgendered sex offenders.
- Personal feelings surrounding working with transgendered sex offenders.

The schedule was used only as a guide as “semi-structured interviews unfold in a conversational manner offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important” (Longhurst, 2003, p.103). Following interviews, participants were debriefed.

Analysis

Following transcription of the audio files by the lead author, thematic analysis (TA) was conducted on the data, a method for “identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006 p.79). TA was conducted at a semantic level, meaning themes were “identified within the explicit or surface meanings of the data, and the analyst is not looking for

anything beyond what a participant has said” (p.84). This level of analysis was chosen because the aim of the research was to gain an understanding of the experiences of staff for the benefit of the participants themselves and so there was no reason to believe that searching for alternative interpretations of what was being said was necessary. Furthermore, the fact that participants had come forward of their own accord and volunteered their time with no reward was also demonstrative of their genuine interest and concern for the care of this minority group. TA was conducted using the guide provided by Braun and Clarke (2006). Throughout the data analysis “A concerted effort was made to remain cognizant of personal biases, based on previous research experience, which could impact present descriptions” (Sullivan, 2003, p.88). Data saturation was reached (the point in data collection where “no new themes, findings, concepts or problems were evident in the data”; Francis *et al.*, 2010, p.4).

Results

Several dominant themes were identified from the data. Here we discuss three superordinate themes as shown in **Table 1**; informal education, overstepping the mark and management of change.

Where verbatim extracts have been used to illustrate analysis, participants are identified as P1, P2, etc; the primary researcher/interviewer is identified by the letter I and ellipses have been used to denote where parts of a quote have been omitted (due to irrelevance) for the purposes of this paper.

[INSERT TABLE 1]

Informal Education

Two subordinate themes were associated with the theme of informal education; the first related to how staff learnt about transgender issues and the second to the content of this information. Throughout interviews staff were keen to discuss how they interacted with the offenders and learnt from them as sources of information. Communications between members of staff and prisoners have long been of interest and this theme links to research exploring what makes a good relationship, such as Bennett and Shuker (2010) who discussed prisoner-staff relationships in a therapeutic community. We are currently limited in what we know about how staff interact with transgendered sex offenders and how this may differ to a typical prisoner. Furthermore, the interviews highlighted that through working with transgendered offenders, staff became aware of the impact on psychological well-being and consequently were enthusiastic about raising awareness of this in the hope of encouraging others to offer support.

Learning from the horse's mouth

As illustrated by the title of this paper, if staff were unsure of the appropriate course of action concerning a particular issue, they would seek advice from transgendered individuals as a form of informal education:

P5: We learn from talking to prisoners, we learn from the horse's mouth (205).

Participant 5 was of the opinion that the transgendered offender was the expert and also a dependable and authoritative source when it came to educating staff on issues they were unsure about. These interactions also led to staff making professional development as they spent time with these offenders, increasing their insight and understanding into the subjective experience of someone who is transgendered:

P2: I've only learnt that from him and what he's told me and okay it might not be the same for everybody, but it's given me a better understanding of things that might be difficult for people or the kind of process they might have gone through to get to that stage where they, they just even are aware that they might be in the wrong gender body, erm, so it's something that is, that I've become quite interested in as a result of erm doing that work (431-435).

The above extract from participant 2 demonstrates the ways in which staff can become educated through their experiences of working with transgendered offenders and also how this can stimulate further interest in the issues.

The psychological struggle

In addition to learning about the more practical side of caring for transgendered offenders, staff often spoke of the personal struggles they had become aware of whilst working with this minority:

P4: I think they're quite emotional, they just want to outpour, I found that with both of them... and I think kind of suicidal thoughts, real self-loathing, kind of self-punishment in a way (33-36).

Participant 4 has an understanding of the psychological struggle a transgender individual can suffer. It is unclear here whether this self-loathing is connected to the transgendered identity or not. An information booklet is currently being put together at the prison in order to educate others on the topic of transgender and the psychological impact it can have. The booklet is being constructed using the material produced by a transgendered offender:

P5: In the process of discovering himself he's done a lot of research to find out why he, he's had the feeling he's had so it's, it's not just a I felt like that and I feel like that, it's a backed up with science and backed up with evidence erm it's, he's done a lot of research into where he is and why he's where he is (144-148).

Participant 5 shows respect for the journey that one individual has gone through in discovering their transgendered identity. Staff are hopeful that raising awareness and educating others about transgender issues may lead to other members of staff ensuring that transgendered offenders are being appropriately supported whilst in custody:

P4: I think yeah if more staff were perhaps aware of how difficult she's finding it, perhaps she might get a bit more support (321-322).

This text demonstrates the belief that if others were more educated on the topic, it may help to ensure individuals are supported. The subtheme has highlighted that through working with transgendered offenders, staff have increased awareness of the psychological impact that can accompany it. The importance of support has been shown for a variety of different minority groups such as Sheets and Mohr (2009) who found social support to be predictive of both depression and life satisfaction among a sample of bisexuals.

Overstepping the mark

There were two subordinate themes associated with the theme overstepping the mark. This theme takes two directions; it relates firstly to the ways in which transgendered offenders may overstep boundaries in relation to their interactions with staff and secondly to how other people in the prison may behave unacceptably towards transgendered offenders, such as inappropriate comments made by staff or other prisoners. The latter is of particular interest, referring back to Whittle *et al.* (2007) and the 73% of transgendered individuals in the community who experienced some form of harassment.

Pushing Boundaries

Staff sometimes showed concerns that they were unsure of what the content of the conversations should involve with transgendered offenders. As the research was conducted in a male prison, staff may have only ever come into contact with male offenders and sometimes they found it difficult to know what conversation topics were appropriate with male-to-female transgendered offenders. Throughout the interviews, it became evident that staff were willing to talk to transgender offenders about feminine things, however were unsure as to what the boundaries were and how to approach the topics professionally:

P6: I'm quite happy to talk to somebody about you know, what make-up are you using or what have you but it's, it's I think we still can't ignore that there are boundaries there that, you know, another prisoner wouldn't cross them so it's how you kind of I suppose make sure that there is a consistency you know throughout how prisoners are kind of managed really (78-84).

Participant 6 is willing to discuss feminine things with transgendered individuals but is ruminating on the fact that this is a very different conversation to what is usually had between staff and other

offenders in the same establishment. This concern was also evident in physical proximity terms with staff being unsure of the physical limits of interaction:

P4: She may be looking at my mascara, she's coming in a little bit close [laughs] and you are actually a man and you are actually a sex offender, so it's a little bit uncomfortable but on the other hand it's, it's almost, you can see that they need some kind of I suppose female conversation in a way so it's a little bit of a tight rope to walk sometimes (117-121).

It is evident that participant 4 feels 'uncomfortable' at times with the novel situation described but the participant also shows understanding and sympathy towards the fact that the transgendered individual desires female conversation in an otherwise male environment. Nevertheless, concerns are expressed over risk in this situation, describing it like 'a tight rope', indicating concerns over what is appropriate when coming into such close contact with a sex offender to meet their needs. The above extracts demonstrate that staff have little experience in communicating with transgendered sex offenders and they require guidance to establish appropriate boundaries for professional interactions.

Harassment

Throughout the interviews staff shared their experiences of witnessing inappropriate behaviour towards transgendered offenders from other prisoners:

P4: I think there's a fair bit of ridiculing goes on erm I've heard it myself as they're walking down the corridor, you'll hear other prisoners perhaps give out a comment, or give a squeal or do a double take or stop and stare or something (141-143).

The extract provides an example of the harassment that can take place within the prison setting and what an unpleasant experience it can be for transgendered offenders. However, participant 5 explained that they have equality representatives present on the wings; these are offenders who have received training from the equalities team and are there to challenge anything that violates equality policies. This not only means vigilance is maintained when officers are not present but the approach is supported by research which suggests that a message may have a stronger impact if it is delivered by an in-group member (i.e. a prisoner rather than an officer [out-group]) (e.g. Gulker *et al.*, 2013). If inappropriate comments are heard by the equality representatives, it is believed that they have acquired the skills to challenge them appropriately and perhaps more effectively than a member of staff, by identifying with the person being challenged. It is also important to take

into account that there have been instances where staff have encountered positive comments in relation to transgendered offenders:

P3: one of the prisoners in a letter he was writing out, was talking about going to the LGBT group and how one prisoner, I don't know if it was this prisoner or a different one erm stood up and talked about coming out as transgender and starting the process and that it was quite motivational and quite inspiring to hear this story and quite pleased for them (93-97).

This extract demonstrates that there is also support among other prisoners towards transgendered individuals and suggests any inappropriate comments made are from a minority. The extract given by participant 3 also adds to the positive feedback that was received throughout the interviews in relation to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) equivalent support group in place at the prison.

Management of change

This theme was evident throughout the transcripts and two subordinate themes were associated with the theme management of change. It emerged within the first few interviews that staff were enthusiastic about adopting new ways of working with transgendered offenders and tailoring treatment according to the specific and perhaps novel criminogenic needs that the group may bring. Staff were also mindful when it came to being sensitive towards transgendered offenders and considering what adaptations may be needed for the individual.

Adapting treatment

Staff demonstrated throughout the interviews that they would take a flexible and open-minded approach when it came to working with transgendered offenders and making adaptations to accommodate them. Staff also believed that criminogenic needs were of central importance and reducing reoffending was their main focus and this was standard practice across all offenders. Treatment would be given on an individual basis and tailored to the specific needs of the offender:

P1: You'll look at the case, look at the individual and look at what are their needs and if his needs mean erm you know because of his presentation and be that his gender or triggers to aggression or whatever you'd be very mindful of that and then tailor your approach to them depending on what he brings (162-166).

Participant 1 describes how when working with transgendered sex offenders, the transgender identity was treated like any other variable in a case. If it linked to their offending then it would be

treated as a risk factor and appropriate adaptations to treatment would be made. It was evident that the case would be treated very individually, but all cases were and so in that respect it was not so different to delivering treatment to any other offender. However, some staff showed concerns that they were unsure when it came to how criminogenic needs and transgendered identity overlapped and it wasn't possible to solely focus on one without considering the implications of the other:

P6: the thing that worries me most is there's obviously issues with risk and there's issues with the transgender and a lot of the issues with risk are linked implicitly with the issues to transgender and it's, it's not over embellishing the transgender issues and ignoring the risk issues equally it's not, you know it's, it's getting it a balance (178-181).

Participant 6 is concerned that they are ill-informed when it comes to the ways in which a transgendered identity may impact on the offender's criminogenic needs and vice versa and how this is approached in terms of treatment for the individual. Although it is evident that staff believe treatment for transgendered offenders will be tailored to their needs just as with any other offender, there is some concern that the lack of experience with this minority group means they do not have the specific skills and expertise to know how to adapt treatment appropriately.

Mindfulness

Staff were considerate of transgendered offenders and adopted new ways of thinking about how they carried out their work to ensure they did not intentionally cause any offence. They were also attentive when it came to being mindful of how their actions may be perceived by transgendered offenders:

P1: I think you need to be really mindful of what your face is going to say... I think if my face had leaked, if I had gave something away, disapproval or something like that, that would have really damaged that relationship (180-182).

Participant 1 is thoughtful of how her actions may be perceived by the transgendered offender and how this may impact on the therapeutic relationship. This attitude is not only evident in how staff monitored their gestures and body language, but also in the way staff were mindful of other instances which might unintentionally cause offence to transgendered offenders and what adaptations could be made to prevent this:

P2: You know, just small things like if I've got questions written down that are on a hand-out that, it might say he, that I'm going to have to be really mindful that they say she potentially and that sort of thing because I guess that can be quite offensive otherwise (131-134).

Participant 2 is considerate of what future adaptations may need to be made in order to accommodate transgendered offenders, she was also aware that things that would be seen as relatively minor to someone else could be perceived as offensive to someone who is transgendered. In relation to this, staff also spoke of needing to be sensitive towards the topic and ensuring that the transgendered individual was not put under any spotlight:

P6: It may be quite insensitive to kind of put on a, you know a transgendered awareness day when it's kind of like, oh well talk about, you know, kind of, you know setting me apart from everyone else (285-287).

Although good intentions would suggest that increasing transgender awareness would be useful, participant 6 has recognised that this may actually cause more disruption than benefit to the transgendered offender. There was also evidence to suggest that the mindfulness demonstrated by the participants in this study was generally representative of the rest of the staff working at the prison:

P1: Officers here for example are much more sensitive, they're much more aware, they're much more open, they're much more understanding and I think they're more flexible about working in different ways with different people (121-123).

The comments made by participant 1 are promising in that they suggest that the prison staff are generally mindful when it comes to different minority groups and considering what adaptations may be needed to accommodate specific individuals. This also suggests that staff are working in line with the *Equality Act* (Great Britain, 2010) and *Human Rights Act* (Great Britain, 1998), as mentioned in the opening paragraph of this report.

Summary and conclusion

Thematic analysis of the interview data identified three themes that have enabled us to gain an insight into the experiences of staff working with transgendered sex offenders. At present, little is known about this topic; the theme informal education allows us to understand how staff become educated on transgender issues and the content of this information. It emerged that staff often turn to the offenders themselves when they are unsure about transgender issues as dependable and authoritative sources of information. Furthermore, through their experiences with these offenders, staff became aware not only of the practical aspects of caring for transgendered offenders but also the psychological struggle that can often accompany a transgendered identity. Consequently, staff are keen to raise awareness of the psychological impact in the hope of increasing support offered to these individuals. The theme informal education illustrates a positive relationship between staff and transgendered offenders at this prison.

The second theme identified in the data was overstepping the mark, which takes two directions. Firstly, the theme relates to the way in which transgendered offenders may overstep boundaries in relation to their interactions with staff. Some participants expressed concerns that although they are willing to discuss feminine subjects with offenders, a lack of experience with this group means they are unsure of the appropriate boundaries in terms of both conversational topics and physical proximity. This suggests an area where staff may need some additional guidance. Secondly, harassment experienced by transgendered offenders was also associated with this theme. Some staff shared experiences of witnessing inappropriate behaviour from other prisoners, however equality representatives are present on the wings to challenge this. On a more encouraging note, staff had also experienced positive feedback from prisoners who had found transgendered offenders both motivating and inspirational. The third dominant theme identified in the data was management of change. This theme illustrates the professionalism of staff, being open to adopting new ways of working with transgendered offenders and tailoring treatment according to the specific individual, focusing on criminogenic needs. However, there was some uncertainty in determining how these needs overlapped with transgender issues and this may highlight an area that needs more exploration in the future. Management of change was also achieved through staff being mindful when considering transgendered offenders and what adaptations may be required to accommodate this minority group. This included staff being sensitive towards how their actions could be perceived by transgendered offenders and considering what adaptations might be needed to ensure they do not cause any offence.

We believe that the research aim of gaining an insight into the experiences of staff working with transgendered sex offenders was achieved. The present research also corresponds to previous findings, for example to the work by Poole *et al.* (2002) who identified that staff were concerned about coping with prejudice and discrimination that may be experienced by

transgendered offenders. The subtheme in the present research regarding harassment is in line with US research for example Jenness and Fenstermaker (2014) examined interview data of 315 transgender inmates in California. One of the overarching themes was transgender prisoners' "pursuit of gender authenticity" and a longing for respect, recognition and belonging in their identified gender in what is "an unequal, often violent and always hegemonically male, community" (p.28). However, although this appears somewhat present in this study, the hegemonic community appears less dominant within this establishment due to the nature of offenders and, the prison service has identified the vulnerability of this minority group, allocating appropriate resources for them, such as the existence of equality representatives on the wings to tackle inappropriate behaviour. Nevertheless, a transgender representative may be a useful addition to this, as equality representatives may not always be attentive to the mundane or hard to discuss issues that an equality officer may miss. This is evident from participant 4's quote where the appropriate gender reference is used (she), but then the slip 'you are actually a man and you are a sex offender' occurs.

It was also encouraging to see that the staff at this prison are working under the same principles as the probation officers in the study by Poole *et al.* (2002). Both the current sample and the probation sample regarded criminogenic needs as the sole focus of any treatment, regardless of transgender identity and this has remained consistent over time. The present research also relates to previous research with staff working in a health-care setting and in some cases extends on earlier recommendations. The staff who participated in the research conducted by Lurie (2005) found that insight from transgendered individuals themselves would be invaluable to improving services and this was also recommended by Hanssmann *et al.* (2008) in their evaluation of staff training. The present study found that staff were not only happy to gain insight from the transgendered offenders themselves, but would also turn to them to seek advice in times of uncertainty. The fact that an information booklet is currently being produced containing a prisoner's perspective on transgender issues speaks for itself in demonstrating the attitude of this prison when it comes to learning about such matters. It would be interesting to see how well this booklet is received by both prisoners and staff in the near future. Freidenberg (2002) also recommended that staff maintain an open-minded approach, which was clearly adopted by staff at this particular prison. In terms of recommending that female staff are allocated to male-to-female transgendered offenders in a health-care environment, given there is currently uncertainty in determining appropriate boundaries within a prison environment, it is unclear how applicable this recommendation is to the present research.

Limitations

Although there are few studies to date exploring the experiences of prison staff working with transgendered offenders (and particularly in a male sex offender prison), this study is not without its limitations. Perhaps one of the major flaws of this research is the inability to recruit any male staff into the study. This is despite the proportion of female to male staff in the establishment being approximately equal. Typically, female staff are more likely to volunteer to help with research (see Shelton *et al.*, 2013). It would be useful to explore further why no male staff volunteered to take part in this research and whether this was related to the subject matter and, for example, increased feelings of discomfort regarding working with transgendered individuals. A quantitative study is currently being undertaken about staff attitudes towards transgendered offenders, which may provide some insights into this matter. The limitation in terms of this study is that it is possible that the views and experiences expressed here are representative only of female staff, and the experiences of male staff could be very different. Furthermore, it is possible that the themes identified in this research would not reflect similar research at non-sex offender establishments and those prisons holding higher category offenders. For example, Liebling *et al.* (2011) reported on staff-prisoner relationships at a UK prison accommodating Category A and B male prisoners and concluded “whilst staff on the landings did some outstanding work with difficult individuals, staff-prisoner relationships were generally distant” (p.155). It is possible that similar research in higher security prisons may produce different results with regards to communications between staff and transgendered offenders. A further limitation of the present research relates to the possible selection bias as participants self-selected to participate, meaning that conclusions drawn here may not be representative of the prison staff population as a whole.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the present research has offered some insight into the experiences of staff working with transgendered sex offenders in a prison setting. The research was of particular interest considering that gender reassignment is a protected characteristic, covered and supported by the *Equality Act* (Great Britain, 2010) and *Human Rights Act* (Great Britain, 1998). The study aimed to build on a body of research regarding equality and diversity among this minority group and we believe the above findings go some way in contributing towards this. There is still a dearth of comprehensive research and information on transgender offenders, but through raising awareness it is hoped that we can begin to address the needs of this neglected group. The current study also provides a foundation for future investigation; the limitations and conclusions outlined above point to several areas that are still in need of further exploration.

Implications for practice

- Collaboration with transgendered sex offenders can enable staff to become educated on transgendered issues and can also improve staff-prisoner relationships, as shown by Bennett and Shuker (2010). This also allows a minority group to have a voice; when discussing sexual offenders Waldram (2007) argues that “everybody, indeed, has a story, and these stories do speak to our understanding of the human condition” (p.969). If we are to understand how to care and manage transgendered sex offenders then we must give them the opportunity to speak.
- Staff may need additional guidance when determining appropriate boundaries for interactions with male-to-female transgendered offenders.
- We must be careful not to put individuals under the spotlight when increasing transgender awareness and additional support may be needed during these periods.
- More research is required to identify how transgender issues overlap with criminogenic needs.
- Prisons should continue to offer support groups and equality representatives to maintain a support network for minority groups; the LGBT group and equalities department received consistent praise throughout the research.
- Similar research should be conducted in other establishments to determine if the views expressed here are coherent with other samples; specifically among male staff and staff working in higher security prisons.
- Staff training in managing transgender prisoners (and including information on legal issues and human rights) would be a useful addition to the general training programmes available to staff.

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