

‘A shoulder to lean on in hard times’: Understanding the role of friendships in the lives of individuals convicted of sexual offences

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The notion of instrumental peer support has been promulgated as a productive component in creating narratives of change amongst individuals who have engaged in sexual-offending behaviour. It has also been proposed that sustained emotional support from a stable network is a protective factor against sexual recidivism. This paper presents a qualitative analysis of the reflections and experiences of individuals ($N = 7$) who have served custodial sentences for sexual offences regarding the role of friendship in their lives, both before and after conviction, and what impact friendships have had in helping or hindering their transition into the community. Data were collected through one-to-one semi-structured interviews and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Two superordinate themes were identified from the data. The first theme, *true vs fair-weather friends*, highlighted that many friendships were lost, a few were made stronger, but all friendships changed. The friendships that remained became an important place of safety for participants. The second theme, *the cycle of help*, emphasised the importance of having friends at a time of need, but also of the importance of being able to offer help to others, either in a formal scheme such as a Listener, or informally. Implications of the findings are unpacked and the authors make a plea for assisted reintegration through, for example, the provision of peer-support schemes and community-based reintegration services.

Keywords: qualitative; friendship; sexual conviction; IPA; reintegration

Practice Impact Statement

This research highlights the challenges and difficulties in relation to establishing and maintaining friendships whilst dealing with the negative consequences of a sexual conviction. It demonstrates how the role of companionship and mutual commitment within friendships was an important factor supporting their reintegration into the community. The research highlights considerations towards community-based initiatives that support individuals with the emotional strain of friendship loss and

provide them with resources to assist with maintaining existing friendships.

Introduction

The concept of friendship has been emphasised as a principal element of psychological, social, and physical wellbeing (Halpern, 2005; Nguyen et al., 2017; Hojjat & Moyer, 2017). The emergence of collaborative associations as evolutionarily adaptive was suggested by Tomasello et al. (2012, 2014). From an evolutionary perspective, friendships have been posited as being beneficial in novel problem-solving, providing resource benefits, and yielding psychological and social profits (Lewis et al., 2015). But what happens in environments in which there may be restricted – or socially complicated – opportunities for collaborative associations? That is, how is friendship experienced in places that Goffman (1963) has termed ‘total institutions’, which he defines as ‘place[s] of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life’ (p. 11)? When collaborative associations occur in the total institution of prison, are similar mutual benefits seen? From a social perspective, prisons disconnect the people in them from external social relationships and friendships. Though there are opportunities for visitation and communication with the outside world, these are not frequent. People in prison in the United Kingdom are typically allowed up to three or four visits per month, of up to two hours per visit (Prisoners’ Families Helpline, 2023). There are several reasons why people may not receive visits, including practical barriers and the emotional damage of visiting (see Burns et al., 2023). People with convictions for sexual offences typically receive far fewer visits than other incarcerated individuals, often losing contact with family (and friends) given the nature of their offences (Farmer, 2017). This limits an individual in prison’s source of social interactions predominantly to peers (Boone et al., 2016; Bronson, 2008). However, it can also be difficult to develop peer relationships inside prison.

One of the salient factors in successful friendships is building trust (Laursen & Hartup, 2002), or as Bronson (2008) asserts ‘the key factor in converting an acquaintanceship into a friendship was trust’ (p. 63). Fulfilling one’s need for social connectedness within prison can be treacherous; the prison environment makes it imperative to maintain personal security, restricting the establishment of trust amongst others (Liebling & Arnold, 2012). People in prison may be concerned about trusting a peer; they may perhaps share private information about themselves, but this can sometimes lead to being bullied, victimised, assaulted, and/or seriously injured (De Viggiani, 2006). Interpersonal relationships amongst imprisoned individuals may also be distrusted by the authorities and pictured through the lens of gang memberships (Gaes et al., 2002; Winterdyk & Ruddell, 2010). Thus, friendships may be seen as promoting negative – even dangerous – social interactions and encouraging criminal activity such as drug-taking or radicalisation and the development of extremist views (Marotta, 2017; Winterdyk & Ruddell, 2010). While there have been a number of studies examining the development of social networks and the friendships and associations that arise within prison (for example, see Schaefer et al., 2017, on male friendships in US prisons; see Edison & Haynie, 2023, on female friendships in US

prisons; see Wenger et al., 2023, on racial and ethnic identity and friendships in prison) these studies have invariably neglected to focus on people with a sexual conviction as a discrete and (in the UK) segregated population in custody.

A plethora of studies have challenged the notion that becoming involved with peers with criminal records will more likely lead to further criminal behaviour due to potential association and social influence (Gifford-Smith & Rabiner, 2004; McCoy et al., 2019). According to Hojjat and Moyer (2017), friendships tend to become more homogenised with time, increasing the risk of developing pro-criminal attitudes when forming relationships with peers who may share anti-social interests and characteristics.

Accessing friendships within prison has been reported to provide imprisoned individuals with emotional support (Wulf-Ludden, 2013), affirming an individual's basic human need for belonging and satisfaction of their sense of self. Weaver and McNeill (2015) draw upon the idea that social relations are key to impacting individuals' behaviour and influencing processes of change. Their findings indicate that good interpersonal relationships could lead to prosocial behaviour and a lower likelihood of reconviction.

Presenting opportunities to establish social relationships can play an integral role during the transition back into the community (Göbbels et al., 2012). The establishment of reciprocal social support has been found to be motivated by individuals' desires to maintain social connectedness, allowing them to reap health benefits (Jetten et al., 2012). This also suggests that friendships may be developmentally significant throughout an individual's life course (Hojjat & Moyer, 2017), and that disruptions in normal social behaviour could have significant involvement in the development of social anxiety (Siever, 2008). Consequently, it is important to consider how this isolation may impact the increased likelihood of recidivism and damage desistance if it is not addressed (Jennings & Fox, 2016; Perrin et al., 2018).

People with convictions for sexual offences typically have more problematic social relations (Frenzel et al., 2014) and poorer understandings of interpersonal dynamics and how to establish successful friendships (Mann et al., 2010), even before entering prison; after prison, they may struggle even more given the isolating impact of having a conviction for a sexual offence. Amongst men with sexual convictions, there is evidence underpinning a lack of support networks and poor interpersonal relationships as a child (McCormack et al., 2002). It has been noted that individuals who have been convicted of sexual offences may have difficulty maintaining close interpersonal relationships and tend to be isolated from their peers (Garlick, 1991; Seidman, Marshall, Hudson and Robertson, 1994). According to Tomasello (2014), isolation can result in individuals being unable to collaborate and share knowledge and skills that will support the development of their prosocial identity.

To prevent the assumed risk of establishing inappropriate social relations amongst individuals with sexual convictions upon release, licence conditions are often imposed to restrict association between those who have such convictions (Petersilia & Turner, 1993). However, research into desistance amongst those previously convicted of child abuse discovered that those who had successfully desisted had found a place within a social group or network to which they felt they belonged, whilst those who considered themselves to still be at risk described themselves as being socially alienated (Farmer et al., 2012). A key protective factor from sexual reoffending is an ability to form a constructive social and professional support network; this refers to an individual's capability to form positive adult relationships, both in social and professional environments (de Vries Robbé et al., 2015). Thus, exploration regarding

the establishment of friendships amongst individuals convicted of sexual offences is particularly important, as it may contribute to protective and dynamic risk factors that can reduce the risk of recidivism.

Individuals convicted of sexual offences establishing their identity within a social group can have profound implications for their pathways towards successful reintegration. Enhanced social identification within a group has been established as a mechanism to counteract some of the negative consequences of rejection (Haslam et al., 2005) by satisfying psychological needs through a widened pool of alternative sources of social support and therefore protecting wellbeing (Greenaway et al., 2016).

Haun and Tomasello (2011) argue that through interaction and support groups, the ability of individuals with sexual convictions to desist may be supported by assisted functioning through human interaction/cultural groups, as humans not only learn from others, but they also actively conform. An examination of prisoner-to-prisoner peer-support roles amongst individuals convicted of sexual offences has suggested that people who take on such roles can experience a sense of purpose that supports their own transition within prison whilst forming supportive social bonds (Perrin & Blagden, 2016).

Despite the breadth of research advocating the importance of social support as a protective factor in reducing sexual reoffending, less is understood about the effects of friendship, typically a key component of social support, amongst individuals with sexual convictions. Thus, the aim of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of friends and friendship amongst individuals who have been convicted of sexual offences. Gaining a better understanding of the impact of social relations on an individual's transition into society upon release has the potential to improve interventions already in place to support community reintegration.

Method

A favourable ethical opinion of this qualitative study was granted by a UK university's ethics committee (Ref: 2020/305).

Participants

A purposive sample of seven ($N = 7$) adult males convicted of one or more sexual offences and who had each served a custodial sentence were recruited for this study. This sample size was identified as adequate for qualitative analysis to ensure individuality and a rich, in-depth analysis of each case is highlighted (Smith and Osborn, 2015). Recruitment was undertaken with the assistance of the Sexual Offences Crime and Misconduct Research Unit (SOCAMRU) at Nottingham Trent University and the Safer Living Foundation, a charity that focuses on assisting successful reintegration amongst individuals with sexual convictions. Services Users known to the Safer Living Foundation and had expressed interest in participating in research were invited to take part in the study. Table 1 presents key demographics pertaining to the participants.

Table 1. Participant Information

Participant pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Sentence	Time served	Time since release	Offence type
Aiden	53	White British	8 years	4 years	1 year, 9 months	Contact (child) Internet
Nolan	40	White British	10 years	5 years	2 years, 3 months	Contact (child) Non-contact (not internet)
Derek	57	White British	7 months IPP	9 years	5 years	Internet
Brendon	42	White British	3 years	1 year, 6 months	8 years	Internet
Lester	37	White British	1 year 2 months	7 months	3 years, 6 months	Contact (child) Non-contact (not internet)
Harvey	59	White British	12 years	6 years	1 year	Contact (child)
Slade	67	White British	9 years	6 years	5 years, 9 months	Contact (child)

Interviews

The interview schedule was developed through examination of the literature, together with a focus group discussion with a number of individuals with lived experience. The focus group discussion was part of a monthly service user research panel conducted within a prison. The interviews were structured into four broad sections focusing on:

1. questions about their thoughts on friendship and the values they associate with friendship;
2. friendships before conviction and within prison;
3. friendships after release and the impact of the conviction;
4. the role of licence conditions when establishing and maintaining friendship upon release.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by a single researcher (author 1). They were each carried out in a private room at the university and recorded using a passcode-encrypted device. The interviews lasted 45–90 min ($M = 68.56$ min, $SD = 11.68$ min). Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and personal identifiers within the data were anonymised.

Data analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected to analyse the data. In this context, IPA was used to seek understanding of how the role of friendships attribute meaning in the lives of individuals with sexual convictions. In general, IPA invites participants to provide rich and detailed accounts of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Consistent with its phenomenological origins, IPA's objective is to understand the meanings that participants associate with their personal world by going beyond descriptive concerns of language and encouraging people to explore their experiences in their own terms (Smith, 2011). IPA is concerned with making sense of each participant's lived experiences by allowing them to voice and articulate their own unique contexts; this captures a flexible and insightful idiographic

description of their psychological world and the feelings underpinning these phenomena. To gather an insider perspective, a double hermeneutic method is employed whereby ‘the participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world’ (Smith, 2004, p. 40). Qualitative interviews with participants who are comfortable with their interviewer (in our instance, there had been previous positive interactions between the researchers and participants as both authors worked collaboratively with participants as part of patient and public involvement groups) to allow the capturing of rich narratives whilst enabling participants to steer the conversations how they choose, enabling them to articulate their own psychological and social worlds (Smith & Shinebourne, 2012).

IPA encompasses a flexible set of guidelines to allow the researcher to adapt the principles to their research objective (see Smith & Osborn, 2015). The analysis commenced with detailed readings and re-readings of each transcript, followed by the identification of personal experiential themes within them. Following this, cross-case analysis was conducted, and group experiential themes were extracted (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The group experiential themes, and their subthemes, were discussed in reflexive group sessions with three participants from the study to ensure best-practice IPA (Smith, 2011). In the reflexive group, each group theme and its sub-themes were considered, and the discussions reflected how they played out for each participant. This contributed to the final analysis and write-up, ensuring that the analysis of the data was grounded in an accurate interpretation of participants’ meanings (Smith et al., 2009).

Analysis

Participants’ experiences and reflections emerged during the analysis process in the form of superordinate and subordinate themes. Table 2 details the two group experiential themes that emerged from this study.

Superordinate theme	Subordinate theme
1.True vs. fair-weather friends	1.1 Facing the polarisation
	1.2 Fostering a safe space
	2.1 Absent in a time of need
2.The cycle of help	2.2 Collaborative support

Table 2. Superordinate and subordinate themes

Group experiential theme 1: True vs fair-weather friends

This theme is derived from participants’ reflections on how their convictions impacted their friendships following their release. The narratives recount how after conviction, participants’ friendship circles reduced. Subsequently, the removal of the social support that they had relied upon heavily in prison prompted the use of coping strategies. Participants spoke about how their convictions (and consequent isolation from others) had encouraged them to revisit their own values as a means of maintaining the essential structures of friendships in their lives.

Theme 1.1: Facing the polarisation

This subordinate theme conveys the polarising effect of participants' convictions on their friendships. The relationships within their support network appeared to come under a microscope, and no friendships seemed to carry on as they were prior to conviction. Participants reflected upon the diverse reasons their friends articulated when making the decision to either maintain or sever their relationship. The latter provoked participants to develop coping strategies to rationalise the loss of these friendships.

Extract 1

Yeah, we had a lot of good years, unfortunately the things that led me to the conviction ultimately – not immediately but led her to not being able to be in contact with me and I miss her, I really do miss her... it's about 6/7 years now since I've spoken to her and I understand her reasons, but it is very sad. (Nolan)

Extract 1 highlights that Nolan had gained a lot from this friendship; however, he presents the end of this relationship in a rather circuitous way. It is interesting to note that he mentions that his conviction may not have explicitly led to the friendship ending. Despite *understand[ing] her reasons*, Nolan attempts to present reasoning when reflecting on how a change in the social circumstances provoked the loss of his friendship. Self-protective behaviours provide a framework to rebuild self-esteem and resilience when an individual's vulnerabilities are exposed (Crocker & Major, 1989). For Nolan, the opportunity to rationalise his friend's decision to end the friendship provides a coping strategy and a way of protecting his feelings. There is a sense of difficulty to say that it was entirely the conviction that ended the relationship, and therefore, Nolan attempts to justify the loss.

The degree of an individual's attachment security in a dyadic relationship is often reflected in their emotional response when the bond is broken (Welch & Houser, 2010). In longer-term friendships, stronger bonds are likely to be established through trust and feelings of mutuality, and adjusting to their loss can produce psychological and emotional strains (Bowlby, 1979). Further, the beneficial exchanges that characterise friendships had been removed from Nolan's social support network, reducing the potential contribution that his friendships could have towards protective factors that may be pertinent in achieving desistance (de Vries Robbé et al., 2015).

Extract 2

He basically said that morally that he couldn't, he said on his moral compass or something, but I found that hard, not because I know everyone can make their own minds up but obviously I relied on him for a lot of support through all that period... deep down, you know they were wanting to help me and stand by me, but he changed once the conviction happened because when everyone knows about it, it's harder for them to defend why they are standing by me. (Lester)

In Extract 2, the *moral compass* of his friend no longer points in the direction of providing emotional and tangible aid as a result of the conviction. Lester says he

believes that his friend wants to help him, but the pressure of society after his conviction forced this to end. This narrative is consistent with Codd's (2011) findings, which reveal that association with a stigmatised individual is coupled with heightened anxiety. This is attributable to individuals regarding the perceived condemnatory or critical societal attitudes to their own social identity. Attempting to safeguard their own social reputation often leads to the friends of individuals convicted of sexual offences either removing themselves from the dyadic relationship (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006), or hiding their criminal conviction from others, which may lead to stress for the individual (Edwards & Mottarella, 2015).

In this extract, Lester emphasises the difficulties faced by his friend when his conviction is made public, despite not feeling particularly convinced by his friend's justification '*or something*'. He reflected on how, as a result of his conviction, his friend's moral sense of associating with someone convicted of a sexual offence has brought about difficulties for his friend to *defend* the social support they are providing. The social response which tends to portray shame and stigma faced by individuals with sexual convictions can be magnified onto their support network in terms of being 'guilty by association' (Codd, 1998, p. 152; Pryor et al., 2012).

Extract 3

People that's standing by me tend to say it's not a moral attack on their character you know, they haven't done anything wrong, they are just making a considered decision about everything I've done, and they see more good stuff to weigh against what I did for them to stay in it for the long haul... People will stand by you not because they agree but they can just about understand. (Brendon)

In contrast, Brendon reflects here on the relationship dynamics of the friends that are standing by him. He presents the idea of *making a considered decision* by weighing up the characteristics of the individual and the conviction separately. In the narrative, Brendon acknowledges that how individuals perceive others is down to their understanding of their peer's character and their ability to separate the structural issue from the individual (Tomasello et al., 2012). According to Brendon, his friends felt the need to defend their stance of supporting him.

Despite the disintegration of many friendships, those who succeed in establishing a deep bond with a friend may be much more likely to receive critical aid during times of need (Ainsworth, 1989), as they are more likely to understand and perceive the individual's personality traits beyond the conviction. Personality traits encompass the temporally stable cognitions and behaviours that reflect an individual's characteristics (Ilmarinen, 2018), and therefore, if *more good stuff* is offered by an individual that is beneficial to the friendship, then it is within the best interests of both partners to commit to the coalition (Tomasello, 2014). According to Ilmarinen (2018), friendships conform to this pattern of behaviour if beneficial personality traits (i.e. trustworthiness and mutual commitment) are present. Using this form of partner selection, friendships tend to establish stronger dyadic ties and feelings of mutual irreplaceability.

As well as reflecting on how their friendships underwent change as a result of their convictions, participants also spoke about how they changed themselves in an attempt to maintain their remaining relationships.

Extract 4

I could be quite argumentative in my previous life but now I find that hard now and I wouldn't challenge people because I feel I need to be very grateful of the friends I've got and therefore, I don't want to cause any rupture. (Lester)

The extract above encompasses how Lester has altered his interactions with friendships as a result of his sexual conviction. There is a sense of fear linked to losing his friendships as a consequence of conflict arising. He feels that there is a risk of falling out with his friends because he now has so few to rely on. Suggesting that he could *rupture* these attachments portrays that Lester's relationships could be damaged beyond repair, indicating the importance of protecting his remaining support network. According to Adams et al. (2011), a lack of positive social relationships with friends has been linked to lower self-worth. This indicates that dyadic relationships in the lives of individuals convicted of sexual offences could act as a buffer for the negative experiences they can face in the community. However, studies have highlighted how friendships can be compromised by significant life events often due to how individuals are viewed following a change in circumstances, stigmatisation and misunderstanding (Douglas 2020; Archer et al., 2024). Lester reflects on his desire to improve the relationship dynamics by reducing conflict as a way of maintaining friendship security. However, this could be considered as leading to unhealthy relationships due to his inability to present his authentic self through fear of being met with little empathetic concern (Ashforth & Sluss, 2006).

Improving personal behaviours to emulate the prosocial characteristics of an 'ideal' friend was a common action taken by participants to secure the emotional and social support pertaining to friendship.

Theme 1.2: Fostering a safe space

Participants expressed that their current friendships provided them with a safe space to exchange social support and engage in self-disclosure. Establishing reciprocated trust was motivated by each participant's desire to establish a safe space for both individuals in the relationship. There was a sense in their narratives that nourishing the essential structure of dyadic friendships would allow them to benefit from their returns. However, participants also articulated that exposing their true self to create a supportive environment brought forth the increased risk of social stigma.

Extract 5

A shoulder to lean on in hard times, I think that's the – it's support, a little bit of security, you know if somebody loves you, they know what you've done but they haven't abandoned you after all this time, it reduces total feelings of abandonment and fear. (Harvey)

This extract portrays how Harvey characterises friendship as an important resource in obtaining *security* and a sense of belonging. He describes a positive friendship as having a *shoulder to lean on*, suggesting a desire to find someone who can devote their time towards the growth of the relationship. The provision of security within a

friendship allows individuals to explore their sense of self and form their identity (Buhrmester, 1990). For Harvey, the ability to establish an emotional bond with others regulated the negative emotions (*fear and abandonment*) that have followed as a result of the stigmatised views of society. This is likely attributable to the idea that secure attachment contributes to a sense of self-validation and acceptance by others (Rawlins, 1992). This indicates that secure friendship dyads provide greater validation and enhance perceived intimacy to bring about self-disclosure (Grabill & Kerns, 2000).

Extract 6

Erm, I think in my case, them being reasonably reliable and being able to trust them, being able to confide in them and things without knowing it's going to go everywhere and that sort of thing. (Aiden)

The extract above illustrates the qualities that Aiden looks for when establishing friendships. Being able to *confide* in a friend has been established as a meaningful process for aiding recovery from life's problems (Pennebaker, 1993). Aiden reflects upon the importance of being able to build trust in others and disclose secrets without the concern of disclosure to others. The relief of sharing burdens allows for individuals with sexual convictions to build trust and experience intimacy amongst their relationships, which is consistent with Bauminger et al.'s (2008) findings. Intimacy development within friendship is interpersonally linked to an increase in self-worth and a sense of belonging (Erikson, 1963), both of which are protective factors for reducing sexual recidivism (Thornton, 2013).

Research surrounding the development of intimacy within friendships (Bauminger et al., 2008; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) has found that an individual's ability and opportunity to self-disclose are important features in building mutual trust and commitment within a relationship. A lack of intimate friendships may contribute to difficulty in finding sources of emotional support (Bauminger et al., 2008). As a consequence of this lack of support, individuals with sexual convictions will have reduced social connectedness, impairing efforts to reduce recidivism (Maruna et al., 2004).

Extract 7

I think the worst thing is making new friends, you either have to tell them what you've done which is not pleasant and you have to be very careful because it can be dangerous, or you don't tell them what you've done in which case you always feel you're not 100% yourself and I think that's the worst thing. (Aiden)

Aiden articulates the difficulty and anxiety of establishing new social relationships upon release into the community. He feels that he must be *careful* when establishing new friendships given the societal fear and stigmatised identity that having convictions for sexual offences engenders.

Furthermore, Aiden reflects upon not being able to be *100% yourself* or being faced with the negative consequences arising from the social stigma (i.e. discrimination and social ostracism; Tewksbury, 2012). In an attempt to present themselves to others as they hope to be perceived, individuals engage in a process of impression management (Goffman, 1978). For individuals with sexual convictions, social validation is

particularly difficult to obtain, and they therefore often behave in ways that conform to social norms (Goffman, 1978); this has been noted to be a contributing factor in desistance (Mischkowitz, 1994). However, when this behaviour is linked to avoiding stigma and restrictions from social groups, it can provoke emotional distress and difficulties within relationships (Culligan, 2009). This may threaten the success of desisting from offending, as individuals are likely to internalise their virtual social identity, often feeling devalued and deviant (Goffman, 1963).

Research has suggested that friends can become important attachment figures who provide individuals with self-regulation and identification (Keiley & Seery, 2001; Nickerson, & Nagle, 2005), and this contributes to healthy emotional and social development. The stigmatised identity that society assigns to individuals with sexual convictions (Evans & Cubellis, 2015) often introduces a deficit in pursuing intimate relationships and establishing inclusion within a social group (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Consequently, this puts individuals at risk of psychological complications such as increased anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Ge et al., 2017). It has been suggested that prolonged exposure to negative emotions can produce dysfunctional coping, and there is strong evidence that this is a risk factor for sexual reoffending (de Vries Robbé et al., 2015).

Group experiential theme 2: The cycle of help

This theme encapsulates the critical role of friendships in the lives of individuals convicted of sexual offences when transitioning into the community. Within the narratives, participants expressed understanding of the importance of mutual commitment within friendships. They also spoke about how the challenges they faced with their friendships upon release had encouraged them to reciprocate support to nourish the essential structure of friendship in their lives.

Theme 2.1: Absent in a time of need

This theme draws upon narratives describing participants' experiences of friendships in times of hardship. Individuals convicted of sexual offences are often perceived by society as undesirable social-group members (Levenson & Hern, 2007). However, in times of uncertainty, even prior to their conviction, participants noted that their friends were not always there as reliable sources of support. All participants shared a common script that friendships affirmed individuals' basic human need for belongingness, and they described how the impact of social isolation, if friendships are not established, provoked negative emotional consequences.

Extract 8

I did intimate once that these were... I'll call them loosely friends, but they were pretty toxic friends, I did have some sort of problem and I was more or less hounded out of the town even though I hadn't spoken the words and it was a cry for help as well and the people that I knew best that supposedly were my friends immediately showed me that they were a very poor choice of friends. (Harvey)

The establishment of friendship is generally founded on need-based support (Hruschka, 2010), which entails mutual commitment to supporting one another amidst predicaments that warrant assistance. Contrastingly, in Extract 4, Harvey's narrative presents a sense of desperation (*a cry for help*) when attempting to seek consolation amongst his friends in a time of need. The *problem* Harvey refers to in his narrative is related to the disclosure of atypical sexual thoughts to his friendship group. Harvey's portrayal of the reaction he received implies a forceful expulsion from his social group (*hounded out of the town*). This extract links the social scrutiny of individuals with atypical sexual thoughts and their rejection from existing friendship groups, as it led to a reduction of social support for Harvey.

Research pertaining to sexual atypical thoughts has postulated that social support constitutes a coping strategy for reducing the possibility of sexual offending (Houtepen et al., 2016). However, it has also been suggested that the opportunity to receive social support has little impact on reducing sexual offending (Mitchell, 2014). As suggested in this extract, this may be due to fear of disclosure or feeling like the friendships would not be supportive.

Extract 9

Without friends you're on your own, and if you're on your own you start turning in on yourself and you're not leading a very good, happy, and healthy lifestyle. I don't think I'd get through the day without seeing a friendly face or speaking to somebody that I know 'cause if you're not speaking to somebody and meeting people you become a hermit and you're not looking after yourself properly, that's the way I look at it. (Slade)

Slade shares his personal experience of how, without social interactions in his life, he is unable to benefit from the psychological and emotional support that friendship provides (*turning in on yourself*). This extract illustrates the importance to Slade of having friendships, in that the absence of this social interaction would cause harm to his physical and mental health. The function of friendship is to establish a dyadic relationship that serves as means of social interaction and psychological support, increasing levels of self-satisfaction and subjective wellbeing (Lewis et al., 2015). However, having a sexual conviction fosters negative perceptions of an individual's social identity (Kellezi & Reicher, 2012). Slade refers to a social identity without friends as being comparable to that of a hermit – a term that is often used to describe an individual living in solitude, cut off from society. Social isolation is a risk factor in sexual (re)offending (Ward, 2014; Mann et al., 2010). Consequently, alienating individuals with sexual convictions from social contexts not only has a deleterious effect on their mental wellbeing but also heightens their risk of recidivism (Farmer et al., 2012).

Extract 10

I mean there's this old metaphor about empathy and sympathy, and to express empathy there's a ladder when you have to climb down the ladder and see 'oh it looks a bit dark down here' – I think the ideal friend would be someone who

knows me well enough to know if I've got something bad going on and they care enough that they want to jump in and go okay let's talk about that. (Nolan)

This extract encompasses how Nolan, without the support from his friendships, feels that he is in an inescapable situation, particularly when faced with the uncertainty and complications of his transition into the community. Furthermore, he expresses his desire to establish friendships with those who are able to *express empathy* to address his emotional and social needs. When faced with the question of what an ideal friend represents, Nolan places emphasis on his desire to form friendships that have empathetic and supportive tendencies. The focus on empathy conveys the salience of interpersonal competence for individuals with sexual convictions. Here, Nolan suggests that support from friendships can assist in coping with the negatives associated with reintegration into the community. Nolan's desire for supportive friendships is reflected in wider qualitative literature, which suggest that supportive tendencies are associated with improving psychological adjustment and greater wellbeing (Bagwell et al., 2005; Sherman et al., 2006). In addition, research investigating protective factors has found that receiving meaningful social support is important for desistance from sexual offending (Göbbels et al., 2012).

Theme 2.2: Collaborative support

All participants expressed how their own experiences with friendships, as a result of their convictions, had altered their own interpersonal mechanisms. This theme revealed how participants' convictions and some of their experiences of being in prison (in particular, being a Listener, which is a voluntary peer-support role that people can undertake within prison) led them to construe themselves in a positive way and provided them with opportunities to establish successful collaboration within dyadic relationships.

Extract 11

I normally try and help where I can and I've got a reasonably level head most of the time, so I can sort of step back and see a problem and either work out if they just need someone to unload to or they just need a bit of advice or something, I think that's something I learnt in prison that I hadn't had before and I think I'm probably a better friend now than I would have been prior. (Aiden)

Extract 11 reveals Aiden's sense that, as a result of being in prison, he has acquired new insights regarding how he contributes to his friendships. He articulates that becoming a *better friend* was influenced by what he *learnt* from supporting others whilst in prison. Aiden assumed a Listener role whilst in prison, which enabled him to develop constructive skills to establish new friendships. The Listener scheme has been found to facilitate volunteers developing psychological resources to support their transition towards their desirable self (Perrin & Blagden, 2014). A sense of personal growth is expressed by Aiden, which has been acknowledged in literature as a desirable psychological resource to facilitate constructive change in the self (Foster & Magee,

2011). The peer-support role helped Aiden to establish prosocial strategies to support others in his life.

Research that has examined the Listener scheme in prison has found it to be beneficial in self-narrative changes (Perrin & Blagden, 2014); these changes to the self-narrative can allow for a sense of purpose to be obtained whilst building meaningful relationships (Göbbels et al., 2012). As such, it appears that being able to establish a positive reciprocal relationship improves psychological wellbeing amongst individuals with sexual convictions, an important variable in desistance (Perrin & Blagden, 2014).

Extract 12

Well now, I can do a favour for somebody, but I am not expecting return and without asking anything back from them because there's an old saying if you're trying to catch bees, you'll catch more with honey than you will with vinegar you know what I mean. So, if you treat somebody nice and polite, they'll do more for you than if you treat them nasty. (Slade)

Extract 12 reflects how Slade's experience of prison influenced a change in the way he interacted with his friends. He acknowledges that by showing beneficence in his friendships *they'll do more for you*, indicating a positive change in attitude towards the relationships. Further, Slade recognises how he no longer expects any return when he offers help to his friends. Tomasello (2014) reported that if individuals form an interdependent relationship, they are more likely to behave in a way that benefits all parties. In so doing, people with sexual convictions are more likely to establish a 'good self' narrative (Maruna & Ramsden, 2004) and begin to emulate prosocial behaviours as a means to maintaining their social connections (Presser & Kurth, 2009).

Extract 13

I mean we're social animals and you know I think we all need somebody to – to talk to, to share things with, you know, I think it's human nature for most of us, so it helps you offload, and it's a two-way thing you know, you do that for them as well and they can speak to you and it's just helping each other and that's why we have friends. (Derek)

Extract 13 highlights how Derek perceives his friendships to be an essential part of assisting functioning within society. For Derek, as for all the participants, the provision of friendship allowed him to yield important psychological and social resources as a result of successful collaboration (Tomasello et al., 2012). Friendship, from an evolutionary perspective, involves social capital being increased as result of reciprocal altruism (Cosmides & Tooby, 1992). In his narrative, Derek portrays his desire to contribute to the friendship in a prosocial manner as a way of giving back. Altruistic tendencies within friendship transpire as a result of the assurance that these benefits will be reciprocated in the future (Axelrod, 1986).

Research surrounding exchange relationships has postulated that such 'social exchange relationships', involving the use of adaptive problem-solving and collaboration by humans, have evolved as a result of modern society (Kemp et al.,

1997). Participants recognised their dependence on friends to enhance their own social interaction and psychological wellbeing, which are both protective factors against recidivism.

Discussion

A major challenge faced by individuals with sexual convictions upon their release from prison is the ability to maintain social and peer relationships whilst reintegrating into the community (Russell et al., 2013). This can be particularly difficult for individuals with a sexual conviction in the UK, as most are released with a 'no association' licence condition that forbids contact with someone with the same type of conviction. Thus, individuals who have developed positive friendships with peers within prison are unable to maintain these within the community. The 'no association' condition proves further constraints such that individuals cannot develop friendships with peers they meet through community-based rehabilitation and support services.

The present study set out with the purpose of understanding the role of friendships in the lives of individuals with convictions for sexual offences and the value of these relationships on their transition into the community. The results demonstrate that the participants' friendships often required damage repair upon release as a result of the perceived social identity their conviction had established within society. Here, participants attempted to change their behaviour around friends as a means of self-protection and to maintain or justify the loss of their friendships. This is supported by Crocker and Major (1989), who found that participants in their research established coping strategies as a way of justifying the loss of their friendships. The loss of support from their friendships is attributable to the 'courtesy stigma' ascribed to individuals perceived to be affiliated with those convicted of sexual offences (Goffman, 1963, pp. 29–31). Unsurprisingly, participants within the study mentioned that the loss of friendships led to the removal of the basic human needs for belonging and positive affirmation. This may also reduce the contribution of friendships to protective factors pertinent to achieving desistance (Amati et al., 2018).

The present study highlights how participants negotiated friendships with others by conforming to characteristics that their friends acknowledge as being socially acceptable. The participants became aware that the ways in which their friends perceived them determined the level of support they provided upon release. Stronger friendships were associated with deeper feelings of mutuality and commitment from both individuals. This appears to support Tomasello's (2014) findings, which found that social identities can be influenced by the interactions between group members, thus deciding the opportunities for positive support during re-entry into society. Further, for some participants, their current friendships served as safe spaces away from the negative experiences that they faced during their reintegration. Nevertheless, establishing secure relationships was accompanied by the difficulty of obtaining social validation. Goffman (1978) postulated that individuals engage in impression management and emulate a social identity that conforms to social norms. Whilst this may be seen as a positive step towards desistance (Weaver & McNeill, 2015), participants revealed the impractical nature of not presenting their 'true self'. In fact, the inability to present their true self led to increased emotional strain on their mental wellbeing and reduced their social connectedness with others. Further, the meta-analysis by Emmers-Sommer et al. (2009), suggests that social ineptitude may also be a contributing factor towards difficulties in forming and maintaining friendships, rather

than these solely lost due to the offence itself. This aligns with the present study's findings that some participants found themselves 'negotiating' friendships by adapting to socially acceptable behaviours to receive support, often at the detriment of their own interaction style.

When discussing the provision of friendship in their life, participants regarded it as a way of establishing mutual reciprocity (LeBel et al., 2015). The findings of the present study suggest that the negative consequences faced by individuals with sexual convictions during their reintegration fostered a change in attitude towards their friendships. The participants considered that mutual commitment within friendships was an important factor supporting their reintegration into the community. Positive social relationships may serve as a buffer from the stigma individuals with sexual convictions face, which can have a deleterious effect upon their re-entry into society (Göbbels et al., 2014). In contrast, research by Taylor and Becker (2015) suggests that the presence of peer-support systems was not a significant predictor for reducing recidivism, which raises the question of what productive role friendships may have during reintegration. However, the application of friendships as a means of emotional support was not addressed by Taylor and Becker (2015), and they did not account for the use of friendship dyads to provide a sense of belonging and self-validation through intimacy development (Erikson, 1963).

In the case of participants in this study who assumed a peer-support/Listener role in prison, it was important for them to continue to use the psychological resources this had provided to facilitate a productive transition into society. Participants' perspectives regarding why they wished to continue to use the adaptive role they had developed in prison seemed to underpin a positive change in attitude towards supporting their friendships upon release. These findings parallel those of Perrin and Blagden's (2014) research, which found that adopting a Listener role in prison can provide individuals with a purpose and help them to develop a meaningful self. Instilling a sense of purpose into individuals upon their release can facilitate a personal transition of the self, an outcome that is associated with protective factors that are important to achieving desistance (Göbbels et al., 2012).

Implications for practice and future research

The findings of this study offer some initial explanations regarding how individuals convicted of sexual offences establish and maintain friendships. However, further research should endeavour to investigate access to friendships in the community. It would be interesting to consider how the nature of licence conditions frames the communications of individuals with sexual convictions, particularly for those who are subject to the 'no association' condition. Currently, licence condition 3(h) in the UK is 'Not to contact or associate with a known sex offender, other than when compelled by attendance at a Treatment Programme or when residing at Approved Premises, without the prior approval of your supervising officer.' (Ministry of Justice, 2022, p. 25), and the instructions state that 'This condition should only be applied where a specific issue has been identified where association with known sex offenders would increase the individual on licence's risks, and not as standard due to the offence profile or the individual's residency in an Approved Premises.' (Ministry of Justice, 2022, p. 25). The wording used in this condition does not make it clear who does the 'knowing' in these circumstances; it is also unhelpful (unless there is specific cause to include this condition), since it excludes from friendship and/or social support others who have empathy for and understanding of people's experiences. One recommendation for future

research would be to consider the impact of licence conditions on maintaining friendships and the perceptions of social support through formal social control agencies, such as probation, MOSOVO police officers. This has the potential to lead to greater understanding by practitioners and to lead to them facilitating peer-support programmes within the community.

The findings of this study also have a number of potential implications for future policy and practice. Research surrounding public perceptions of ‘sex offenders’ has acknowledged that their stigmatisation, regardless of their actual risk of recidivism, has resulted in society ascribing a negative label to all individuals convicted of sexual offences (Zgoba, 2017). Further, the findings of this study highlight the anxiety people experience in relation to establishing and maintaining friendships whilst dealing with the negative consequences of a sexual conviction, set against the value people place in having friendships. Friendships and social connections are important - to individuals, to their families (who will also benefit from the social capital exchanged in friendships), and to society; there is a substantive body of evidence highlighting the protective impact of social capital (see Tolson & Klein, 2015).

Public awareness campaigns provide information on how risk-level reductions are supported through community reintegration and treatment programmes. It is also important to consider that public attitudinal changes can be influenced when people are exposed to research-based information. However, correcting public perceptions of sexual offending to develop policies promoting public safety and community reintegration presents its difficulties due to public lack of awareness and knowledge (Levenson & Hern, 2007). Consequently, for new awareness campaigns, it is important that policy development considers not only a research-based approach but also the expectations of society.

In practice, there are currently limitations regarding the resources available to individuals with sexual convictions following their release. In addition, participants in this study expressed their concerns about establishing new friendships, as well as coping with the loss of existing relationships. One such example of a community-based initiative is the Corbett Centre (Winder et al., 2021), the focus of which is to aid the transition of individuals convicted of sexual offences into the community. Having such initiatives to assist individuals with establishing or rebuilding their relationships can ameliorate their access to social support (Baker et al., 2021). Additionally, it is important to consider how community-based initiatives have the potential to support individuals with the emotional strain of friendship loss and provide them with resources to assist with maintaining existing friendships. It has been established throughout this study that there is a need for effective formal peer-support schemes to assist individuals with sexual convictions to receive the social support that may buffer the negatives associated with community reintegration.

Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. First, whilst the participants expressed that friendships assist their functioning and transition from an emotional and social perspective, it is important to consider how individual needs and circumstances can also impact re-entry concerns. Different aspects of community reintegration may be more significant to some people than others; therefore, there is a limitation reflected in this study regarding circumstances that may not reflect true difficulties or additional barriers that could be problematic for individuals with sexual convictions. In terms of re-entry concerns, this study regarded individuals convicted of sexual offences as a

homogeneous group, when in actuality, there is a great deal of heterogeneity in individual needs. The type of offence – as well as a person’s support networks prior to conviction – is likely to impact their needs differently; this should therefore be addressed in future research to better understand how the role of friendship combined with instrumental support impacts the risk of recidivism.

Despite these limitations, this study offers a foundation to build upon regarding how friendships can provide psychological and emotional benefits to individuals with sexual convictions. Additionally, the findings confirm that further research is required to address current sanctions that can impact people’s ability to establish and maintain social relationships following conviction although more context is required as to how these findings can be applied to interventions. It would also be useful to obtain a better understanding of how community social-support initiatives for individuals convicted of sexual offences may help to promote positive re-entry and desistance.

Conclusions

Establishing dyadic relationships can be a challenge for individuals convicted of sexual offences. This is attributable to the negative identities that society ascribes to those with sexual convictions when compared to those released having been convicted of other types of offence. Nevertheless, secure friendships play a key role in providing individuals with sexual convictions with social-exchange relationships, and are valued by individuals. These enhance the presence of protective factors that promote a reduction in sexual reoffending and help to achieve desistance.

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