Incarcerated Child Sexual Offenders and the Reinvention of Self through Religious and Spiritual Affiliation

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Abstract

Of particular focus in this study was the exploration of the meaning participants made of their religious and spiritual experiences during periods of incarceration. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was adopted, allowing an in-depth examination of participants' experiences during these particular contexts. Nine in-depth interviews of men incarcerated for sexual crimes were undertaken and analysed. A number of themes emerged; this paper focusses on three of these themes. They include: (1) managing the conflict between religion and spirituality and sexual offending; (2) the use of religious analogies; and (3) experiencing religious or spiritual affiliation in prison and the community aids a sense of community, support, and improved status. The findings presented in this chapter provide some preliminary explanation as to how those convicted of sexual offending who have engaged with religion or spirituality might use this affiliation to help develop new non-offending narratives and identities, improve social status and reduce the effects of stigma.

Keywords: sexual offending, desistance, religious and spiritual communities, identity, stigma

Introduction

The stigmatization of those imprisoned for sexual offending is great. For their own safety, prisons tend to segregate those with sexual convictions into dedicated wings or facilities. Contact with other prisoners is kept to a minimum by separating them away from the main prison population. Likened to that of the 'food chain' (Schwaebe, 2005), only the strongest and most powerful reap social, physical and emotional rewards in prison. Such social organisation and hierarchy (Sykes, 1958) is shaped in part by the *prisoner* or *convict code*, and dictates the attitudes and behaviours of incarcerated communities (Ricciardelli, 2014; Trammell, 2012). In particular, the convict code, casts a moral judgment on people convicted of certain types of offences (Ricciardelli & Moir, 2013) and those with sexual convictions are treated as the most reviled subgroup within the prison community (West, 1985).

Notwithstanding, these unwritten codes and hierarchies, western prisoners are further subjected to poor and harsh living conditions. A range of factors contribute to these challenging conditions. One explanation is the dramatic increase in prison populations. This increase has been experienced by institutions in both the US and UK over recent decades and has resulted in the inevitable overcrowding of many institutions (Cavadino, Digan & Mair, 2013). In addition to the current economic climate which has seen efficiency savings and cuts to public services, the effects of prison overcrowding are great; prisoner health and safety is compromised, privacy is limited, the prison regime is regularly interrupted and regardless of the best intentions of staff, retaining some sense of dignity and respect is often unachievable (Haney, 2012). These conditions extend beyond prisoners too, as prison officers and staff experience occupational stress (Martin et al., 2012), and when prison visits are cancelled family and friends are refused contact, disrupting important social bonds.

Other significant issues mean prison living conditions are dangerous as both staff and prisoners face threats of physical violence. Across almost all male prisons in England and

Wales during 2015 and 2016 the rate of violent incidents and serious assaults against staff and prisoners increased (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report 2015–16). Likewise, the rates of sexual violence is said to have increased also (Stevens, 2015), with particular groups, such as the young, lower educated prisoners and those with mental health conditions being more vulnerable to targets of sexual assault (Morash et al., 2012). The true prevalence of sexual violence is however, unknown, indeed rates are assumed to be far greater than reports suggest, as sexual violence in prison is often a hidden and greatly under report crime (Fowler et al., 2010).

The consequences of these harsh and hostile conditions include the spreading of sexually transmitted infections, exposure to disease through drug misuse, increased anxiety, depression, sleep deprivation, feelings of hopelessness (Liebling & Maruna, 2013), physical injury (Sung, 2010), a greater risk of suicide (Jenkins et al., 2005) and homicide (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales Annual Report 2015–16). Conditions for those with sexual convictions are perhaps greater still, given the rules of the prison code set by the general offending population (West, 1985). Therefore, prisoners attempt to keep their sexual convictions a secret, trying not to draw attention to themselves in an effort to prevent bullying, violence (Schwaebe, 2005) and sexual assault (Edgar & O'Donnell, 1998). This means they often purposefully exclude themselves from social interaction, engaging with interventions or are excluded by others in the prison. As well as the social rejection inside prison, many find themselves displaced and disconnected from family and friends on the outside (Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007). Accessing any type of support therefore, becomes a significant problem (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008). Indeed, the rate of suicide for those convicted of sex crimes, is notably greater than that of the general offending population (Jeglic, Spada, & Mercado, 2013). Given this harsh and unforgiving environment, it is of

interest to understand if and how people with sexual offences cope or gain relief and solace while existing in these conditions.

Although scarcely researched, religious or spiritual conversion in prison is said to bring several benefits and comforts to those incarcerated (Maruna, Wilson, & Curran, 2006). *Conversion* is the rejuvenation of religious or spiritual belief, or the orientation of new ones; followed by the transformation of relationships, behaviours, thoughts and emotions (Mahoney & Pargament, 2004). Indeed, use of religion and spirituality as a means of coping is not an uncommon idea. The religion and spirituality literature indicates religious involvement as being positively associated with improved mental (Bonelli & Koenig, 2013) and physical (Powell, Shahabi, & Thoresen, 2003) health and well-being. In a prison context, people engaged in religion or spirituality have been found to be able to better define personal crisis, manage feelings of shame, build new identities, develop a sense of purpose and empowerment, feel forgiven, have peace of mind and a sense of hope (Dammer, 2002; Maruna et al., 2006); cope with the psychological adjustment of the prison environment (Clear & Sumter, 2002); and it has even been found contribute to the rehabilitation process on release (Jensen & Gibbons, 2002). Yet, despite these important findings, to date, no study has specifically examined the meaning and role of religion and spirituality for those convicted of sexual offending. This is surprising given that this particular subgroup face additional pressures of segregation, violence, rejection and humiliation by peers and officers while in prison.

The Present Study

This chapter presents the findings of a study aimed to begin to address this gap. Through in-depth interviews of nine men, all incarcerated for sex offenses, the present study explores the meaning made of religion and spiritually while in prison. Because of the subjective nature of

religion and spirituality a phenomenological approach was used, enabling exploration of the idiosyncratic and personal experiences of participants.

Method

To best understand the 'real world' and meaning made by participants, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was deemed an appropriate approach. IPA is theoretically grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It is a method used to understand how, from first-person experience, a person makes sense of a particular phenomenon, while presented from a third-person perspective. In contrast to a more nomothetic approach to studying human phenomenon, IPA enables the exploration of unique and idiosyncratic experiences of smaller populations.

Context

The prison where participants were incarcerated was a relativity small one, holding a maximum of 523 inmates. At the time of interview, its purpose was to accommodate vulnerable prisoners (VP). VPs are essentially prisoners, at risk; they are segregated from the general prison population for their own safety. VPs may be at risk of being bullied by other inmates, or have a mental health condition which makes coping in prison a greater challenge. Most people convicted of sexual offending are identified as a VP. This is because the nature of their offending places them at greater risk of harm from other inmates. In the establishment where my participants were drawn from, the majority of prisoners had committed a sexual offence. Therefore, there was no segregation wing or unit for the purpose of housing prisoners based on their offence alone.

The establishment also specialised in the delivery of accredited sexual offending behaviour programmes, such as the Core Sexual Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP) or

its adapted version, for people with social or learning impairments. Additionally, the prison provided other programmes, which aim to target generalised thinking associated with offending behaviour, such as, Enhanced Thinking Skills (ETS) or A to Z motivation life course, and offered one to one programmes where group work was deemed inappropriate. Men in this establishment had either completed a programme, were mid-way through treatment, waiting to start, or to be assessed by the psychology department, for their suitability to attend a sexual offender behaviour programme. Completion of a programme was central to many prisoners sentence planning.

Although multi-faith provisions, services and events were available to men at this prison, only Christian ministers were resident staff members as part of the prison chaplaincy. Imams, Buddhist teachers and other faith ministers visited when necessary.

Sampling

Participants were recruited from one prison in England and Wales. Purposive sampling was used to select participants. Purposive sampling allows participants to be selected with specific characteristics (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). By doing this, the likelihood of collecting rich data from a homogenous sample was maximised. Participants self-selected to the study by responding to posters and flyers located around the prison detailing the study. Participants were required to register their interest with a nominated staff member and the sample were then selected based on the criteria of having a conviction of at least one sexual offence, and a current or previous experience of practicing or engaging with religion or spirituality. Purposive sampling was critical as it ensured those selected were able to provide information relevant to the research questions; this being a fundamental aspect to IPA.

Data collection procedures

As noted by Smith et al., (2009), the nature of IPA interviews are best described as conversational. They require a flexible and natural approach, which allow the participant to tell their story. Although a semi structured interview schedule was developed, it was used as a prompt and guide during each interview. The schedule consisted of general introductory questions with the aim of putting the participant at ease. These then moved to open and prompting questions about participants religious or spiritual affiliation and what this means or meant to them, how they experience(d) religion or spirituality, what role religion or spiritual communities play(ed) during periods of non-offending, offending, detection and (where appropriate) while in custody and while living in the community. All interviews ended with questions about how participants viewed their future. All one to one interviews were conducted inside of the prison by the first author (SK) no other person was present in the private interview room. Interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and were digitally recorded. Interviews were later transcribed, verbatim and copies sent to participants.

The Sample

Although not prescriptive, between four and ten interviews are advised for an IPA study (Smith et al., 2009). The sample in this study consists of nine adult males, all incarcerated for sexual offending and either at the point of interview or previously practicing a religion. Of the nine interview transcripts, only seven were analysed in full, two participants (Ben and Mark) were only partially analysed. This was because not all of their interviews were directly relevant to the phenomenon in question, instead part of their interview drifted away from the central topic.

At the point of interview, the mean age of participants was 58 years (range 29-80 years, SD 16.8). At the point of offending the mean age was 34 years (range 9-50 years, SD 11.7). Five participants had no previous offending history, two had previous general offending convictions and two had prior convictions for sexual offending. The sample

consisted in the main of people convicted for sexual offences against children. Victims were both male and female children and index and previous offences included those of: Indecent assault; Possession, distribution and making of indecent images; Rape; Detaining a child; Gross indecency; Incest; and Buggery. The various religious denominations with which participants identified included; Buddhism, Christianity, Mormonism and Paganism. A demographic overview of each participant is provided in Table 1. To ensure anonymity, participants' real names are not used. Instead random male names have been assigned to each participant.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Data analysis procedures

The analytical process as detailed by Osborn and Smith (1998) was followed by the first author (SK). To ensure the validity and rigor of the analysis, regular audit checks were undertaken by the second author (ML). Analysis was complete when all data had been included and developed into a relevant cluster and then theme. It is also worth noting in light of the methodological approach chosen that no specific definitions between religion and spirituality were prescribed. Instead, meaning from the subjects own interpretation of their experiences of religion and spirituality was examined.

Findings

Although participants' stories are unique, many similarities and shared experiences were uncovered between the nine participants. Through the application of IPA, a range of important themes emerged. Due to the word limitations of this current chapter only three themes will be discussed. Each of the superordinate and subordinate themes is detailed in Table 2.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The first theme: *Managing the Conflict between Religion or Spirituality and Sexual*

Offending, considers the extent to which participants managed the internal conflict they felt

between their past behaviours of sexual offending and current and past religious engagement.

More than half of the sample are described as being actively religiously engaged at their time

of offending and so how they manged to function and reconcile what are argued to be

conflicting experiences, is of particular interest. Likewise, the second theme: *Use of Religious*

Analogies, details the use participants made of religious stories to help them both explain

sexual offending and also help describe the transition they had made from one of an

'offender' to a more religious or spiritual individual. The final theme: *Experiencing Religious*

or Spiritual Affiliation in Prison and the Community Aids a Sense of Community, Support,

and Improved Status, provides some important insight as to how participants drew on

religious and spiritual communities as a resource of social capital. In particular an interesting

observation is made in relation to how inmates use religious belonging to aid their sense of

status while in prison. Social Identity Theory is used to assist in the interpretation of findings

but is discussed in more detail in the discussion section of this chapter. It is also worth noting

that the ordering of these themes does not suggest an order of importance, as most

participants experienced aspects of each of these themes, to some degree.

Managing the Conflict between Religion or Spirituality and Sexual Offending

This first theme focuses on five of the nine participants (Evan, Andrew, Anthony, Greg and

Robert) who all sexually offended during periods of active participation with their church.

They described holding positions of authority within their church including; youth leaders,

lay preachers, or organisers of church activities. It is therefore, important to explore how

these five participants experienced being active in the church, while sexually offending. Two

subordinate themes emerged: 'Compartmentalised identities and incongruent behaviours' and

'The process of forgiveness and feeling forgiven by God', each will be considered and detailed in turn here.

Compartmentalised identities and incongruent behaviours.

This theme outlines the extent to which participants presented themselves and framed their behaviours in a socially and morally acceptable way. In order for participants to rationalise what appear incongruent behaviours i.e. sexual offending and practicing a faith, they presented two separate and distinct identities; one being their core forgiven non offending-self and the other a temporary and historic offending-self. Identities were separate and participants did not recognise offending behaviour as associated with their core selves. Rather, offending was a fleeting anomaly to their central, core and true-self. They were able to present their non-offending identities with confidence, because central to their transformed self was the belief of being forgiven by God.

Participants made concerted efforts to communicate their core-being and true selves as decent, virtuous and honest. Greg for example stated "I don't swear at all I don't blaspheme", likewise Andrew has "never sworn I don't drink and I don't smoke" and Evan has "never had as much as parking tickets or a speeding fine or anything like that in a whole 46 years on this planet". They did not perceive themselves to be like a typical prisoner, who were inhumane and "animals" (Robert). Indeed, Andrew perceived himself to be far more intellectual "a little bit more dare I say intelligent and have a better background than most of the people in here". Although, participants perceived themselves to be superior to other inmates, they were not sanctimonious, in the sense that, they recognised they too were imperfect: "I do try not that I am sinlessly perfect I don't think that is possible" (Anthony).

On some level, all participants experienced conflict between their offending behaviour and their engagement with religion or spirituality; they had an acute awareness that

their offending behaviour was wrong. Andrew, with hindsight, viewed his behaviour as insincere: "it was totally hypocritical of me…I was a total hypocrite you know I knew what was right and what is wrong". At the time of offending, he developed strategies to support the view that his offending-self and religious-self were distinct and different: "I think I managed to compartmentalise my faith and what I was doing at other times (right okay), which is why I said totally hypocritical".

Andrew held the belief that sexual offending was wrong; the stereotyped schema he held about 'sexual offenders' was one of a violent and callous stranger. Thus, his schema was not conflicted by his own behaviour, as he believed his sexually abusive behaviour was mutual, consenting and loving. By maintaining this belief he preserved his self-schema and identity, confirming he was not a real 'sexual offender': "It weren't someone off the street…it was basically in the family… mutual masturbation with the boy and heavy petting and touching with the girl…. I was madly in love with her". Yet, when Andrew began to accept he had sexually abused his daughter, he was shocked and appalled at his behaviour. The conflict he experienced can be observed in his narrative, as he attempted to wrangle with the idea of his core-self being associated with sexually abusive acts:

> "I just can't even understand why at the moment I made these children [pause]…and you know I just [pause] I'm just appalled by it… it was possible to say I will of ruined their lives… I had created victims".

Andrew was, able to sooth himself of this pain because he believed he would be forgiven: "God knows that I am truly sorry for what I have done".

Several of the participants' crimes went unreported for decades. This helped to some degree manage any conflict they felt in relation to their offending-self and their true-self, by simply ignoring the offending. Anthony, for example, viewed his behaviours as historic, and

contextualised within an isolated period of time. He therefore, did not need to reconcile his religious identity with his offending one, because he believed his offending was the result of exceptional historic circumstances. The passage of time resolved any conflict. In addition, Anthony used justifications to help maintain his self-schema, by minimising the abusive behaviours and taking little responsibility for the sexual assaults. He explained his offending behaviour as having been a result of his lifestyle "it was just one of the many things in my life because I lived a busy life", and being less mature "I was younger…I was in my 50s, I was still pretty young at heart". Not only does he believe that his youthfulness meant he was free spirited, he convinced himself that his behaviours were innocent, harmless and mutually consenting:

> "I never took [her] anywhere except counselled her after church and dropped her home and gave her a cuddle in the car, and that's it basically, and then she started to chase me, she her car was found outside my college where I was lecturing, waiting for me and she would follow me home…there was no assault on her, she was cooperative in everything"

Greg also reported spending many years not thinking about his offending, thereby, keeping his offending-self separate to his core-self. Following his recovery from cancer, Greg put everything, including his offending behind him: "I came through cancer eventually got back and picked up life again". He too, satisfied the conflict of his abusive behaviours with justifications that his offending was harmless, quick and gentle: "I just slipped my hand in…I just stroked her I didn't grope her…took my hand away and nothing was said not thinking what effect it would have upon her…just one incident two minutes". This allowed him to believe he was not a bad person. His actions, he believed, were not carried out as a result of some calculated and predatory intention; rather he was an upstanding and moral Christian, who made one mistake: "because I am a practicing Christian…doesn't mean to say that I am perfect". It is also feasible to interpret these comments as Greg forming a cognitive distortion

to support his offending behaviour. Many child sexual offenders often use such distortions when developing offending narratives.

The ability to ignore, minimise, or contextualise offending or deviant behaviour was not experienced by all participants. Robert found it difficult to manage his two identities. On the one hand his non-offending identity was a public and open entity, but his offending-self was secretive, private and something that preoccupied him for many years: "it was always something that was in private that because it was so shameful…it was almost a Jekyll and Hyde". Indeed, as much as Robert tried to put his offending behaviour to the back of his mind, he was unable to: "it had been on my mind all those years and I suppose I'd had tried to however ashamed of it I was, I tried not to think". Robert attempted to separate his offending-self with his core-self by blaming external and supernatural powers: "daemonic….evil forces at work in me". This was, in the long term however unattainable, and is reflected in his experiences of feeling unfulfilled with his life. He asks himself soul searching questions: "I've got practically everything I could want, er we had recently bought a new car, and I was walking back from church thinking, I am not happy what is wrong, what is missing". It appears that only when the offences officially came to light, that Robert was able to begin to accept and address his offending-self.

Evan was unusual to the group in that, although he maintained two separate identities, his offending identity was, in part, fuelled by his experiences with the church. Evan experienced a number of challenges in his life such as; a marriage break-down, bereavement and financial problems. Unable to cope, Evan sought emotional and sexual comfort from his step-daughter. Parallel to his offending, Evan gained support and comfort from his local church he "became this big person in the church respected and everything was so good" he received positive and warm fellowship from his church peers and "was always being blessed ... and it was the first time I started to feel happier". He believed God was rewarding him, he

"felt like it was God you know in a sense saying it's okay", rather than punishing him for offending: "I should be being punished for what I've done…but instead I'm getting fellowship". Evan was able to reconcile and continue both offending and attending church by believing God endorsed his behaviour, he felt: "it was almost as if God was saying to me this is the right this is the way". Evan's justifications and distorted use of his environment enabled him to offend while retaining a non-offending view of himself.

The process of forgiveness and feeling forgiven by God.

Another important mechanism that allowed participants to move on from their crimes and develop new non-offender identities was through the process of seeking and receiving forgiveness. The importance of feeling forgiven was essential. Participants were acutely aware of both the stigma attached to having committed sexual offences for example, "if you mentioned the word sex offender people run a mile" (Robert) while also having to face rejection from their own family, in Greg's case "my family have chosen at the moment not to forgive me which is their choice". But, it was not until they experienced forgiveness that they could reject the stigma and begin to deal with their social isolation.

Feeling forgiven had significant dramatic effects on participants' self-esteem. It enabled them to process their offending behaviour to such an extent that they believed they were completely restored to a position of non-guilt, and therefore an equal member of society once again. For example, Anthony reconciled his offending behaviour because he was forgiven; he "had to come to terms with it and say God has forgiven me and God has forgiven me and accepted me". Not only was Anthony able to come to terms with his offending behaviour, he believed he had also returned to the position of non-guilt, prior to his offending, because God's forgiveness had completely eradicated the whole incident from his life "God has wiped it out I've wiped it out". Anthony believed that God forgave him and importantly accepted him, enabling him to move forward with his life: "it is…not going to

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exist in a way that it conquers me and controls me", raising his levels of esteem. However, it is also possible that this process might also have enabled him to disassociate from having to take responsibility for his offending behaviour.

Likewise, Greg was also able to move on with his life following God's forgiveness. Greg was not held back or wracked with guilt about his offending behaviour: "I'm not screwed up by it". Indeed, even while those around him disowned him, Greg described having a great sense of peace: "I really do I get a great sense of peace…I have got quiet confidence". A belief in God's acceptance meant that both Anthony and Greg felt they were not alone, were no longer guilty for their crimes, and although were serving out their punishment, they had hope for a positive future.

Perceiving oneself to be forgiven by God did not automatically restore all participants' sense of self-worth; rather it was a process that took time. Robert for example could not comprehend how God could forgive those who sexually offended; he perceived his own crime to be of the worst kind: "I couldn't understand how God could forgive someone…the slime at the bottom of the pond". Initially, he was unable to fully restore his sense of self-worth as he was unable to forgive himself and continued to hold onto the shame of his offending history: "I couldn't forgive myself and it's taken two years I hadn't forgiven the sin I hadn't forgiven what I did". So although Robert accepted God had forgiven him, the shame he felt about his behaviour prevented him from moving on. It took him almost two years to begin to deal with his feelings of shame and forgive himself: "I hadn't forgiven what I did but, I'd been able to forgive myself".

Forgiveness, for some participants was immediate Andrew claimed "you only have to ask once". For Nicolas, "forgiveness is eternal". Yet for others, forgiving oneself was less straightforward, and required time. Forgiveness, on the whole however, allowed participants

to be restored and free to move beyond their past offences, feeling able to release themselves from shame and guilt.

This theme developed from participant's conflicting experiences of engaging in religious or spiritual activities while also offending and moving away from offending. In order for them to achieve this, they appeared to develop separate identities. Their true and core non-offending self was non-deviant, virtuous, honest, kind and hardworking. Their offending identities on the other hand were historic, deviant, temporary, a result of external forces, but importantly now forgiven. It is possible that by presenting change and a return to an upstanding and moral self, while also believing that God had forgiven them, participants created distance between an offending identity and their current non-offending identities. By presenting the flawed and problematic identity, as one which was historic and one in which even God has moved on from, participants did not need to engage in excuses or justifications for their true-selves. Their renewed identities were fully repaired and restored. However, this was only one way in which participants articulated their experiences. Emerging in the second theme, we report how participants relied heavily on the use of religious analogies to help present their changed self.

Use of Religious Analogies

This second theme details the extent to which religious analogies were used by participants during the presentation of their experiences. Analogies are generally used to provide a mechanism to help explain a situation or point. Religious analogies themselves are often stories or lessons used to convey a particular spiritual or moral message to followers of the faith. In the case of the participants in this study, they used religious analogies in two very interesting ways: first, they used them as a mechanism to help articulate a painful and shameful experience, through the lens of their faith. Second, these concepts were used to convey the meaning of transition from one of 'offender' salience to spiritual salience.

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Although five participants used analogies, Nicolas and Tim used them most readily and will therefore be used here to demonstrate this theme.

One such example is the 'journey' analogy. Participants used this to help describe how they moved through a particular process; describing the hurdles, barriers, and challenges they faced along the way. In the case of Nicolas, he used the journey analogy to help describe his choices, to both offend and not offend, while attempting to follow Jehovah Witness and Mormon instruction and law. Nicolas described becoming disengaged with his religion when he became sexually interested in an adult female outside of his church congregation. After the relationship was over (his only sexual encounter with an adult), Nicolas began to access adult pornography through the internet. He soon began to routinely access, download and collect indecent images of children and engage in chat room discussions about child sexual abuse.

The use of the journey analogy enabled Nicolas to communicate his understanding and beliefs around the ideas of autonomy and predestination. Although free to make moral choices he believed his life was pre-destined. He believed it was mapped out by a number of routes each of which was determined by the choices he made. When he made decisions against scriptural instruction, he understood these to be poor choices that could lead to offending. Likewise, this analogy enabled Nicholas, to explain how he came to live a life free from crime; by abiding by scriptural instruction he would be taking the alternative non-offending route: "all I have to do is be good...and if I follow a path that has been laid down".

Nicolas' experience continued with the idea of a journey to help recollect and describe the periods in which he began to offend. He recalled how at first, when he began to detach from the church, he sensed falling or slipping:

"I started missing the meetings (okay) and started slipping away from the church and once you start missing one meeting you sort of, it doesn't really matter, I'll miss the next one and all this sort of thing, so...I started sliding away from the church".

The use of a 'slip' or 'fall' by Nicolas is an interesting one. To some degree it allows him to present his offending role as blameless. To slip, slide or fall is an unwanted and unintentional occurrence, it represents being momentarily out of control. To Nicolas however, the idea of slipping represents more than being out of control for one moment, and means more than a one off incident. It represents the beginning of his offending process; the analogy enabled him to describe how he began to offend for example; "if you are starting to slip…that's what starts the slippery slope again". Nicolas described how his disengagement from the church and God, took the inevitable downwards trajectory: "I started sliding away from the church…I let myself slide away from God".

Nicolas' chose not to intervene or stop himself from sliding away from the church, but presents how he unintentionally began to access images of younger children, he: "somehow slipped into…younger, in inverted commas, models". The use of the term slipping here is used by Nicolas to suggest his passive role. It is possible that analogies used in this way might also be mechanisms to avoid having to take full responsibility for one's actions.

Likewise, Tim also used the journey analogy. Tim became a Buddhist during his time in prison (previously Agnostic). He used the analogy not only to describe his experiences with Buddhism but also his journey through life, the destructive nature of his alcoholism, right through to his recovery. Tim's first period of sobriety was experienced during the first 18 months of his current prison sentence. At the pinnacle of his alcoholism, his life became chaotic and destructive. He regularly sought out women for casual sex and on one such occasion, met a 15 year old girl; he took her home and had sex with her.

Tim recalled the poor choices he made in life or the difficult times he faced and described going down a slope or spiralling downwards, his "life had gone really really downhill". Tim appeared to use this analogy to describe the meaning of life experience in a temporal sense, rather than as a form of justification. He reflected that experiencing Buddhism and moving through life was itself an ongoing journey, that: "it's all about your ..., your journey through life".

The journey analogy comes into the fore for Tim when he described his process of recovery. He recounted how he began to tentatively rebuild his life following years of alcohol abuse. Tim had to prepare himself for the changes he had to make he "got ready for the journey" and Buddhism was a platform that enabled him to find his old self it was a "stepping stone for me finding myself". He was only able to begin to recover when he wanted to stop drinking: "you actually turn that corner where you want to stop being an alcoholic". The use of the analogy to describe recovery and not justify offending is perhaps not unsurprising as Tim only came to Buddhism at the point of sobriety.

The journey analogy appeared to help Tim re-tell his life story and explain how he arrived at each point in time; it allowed him to both communicate and develop a new-identity. Tim talked about turning the corner, moving away from alcoholism, and reconnecting with the person he once was. Tim's true identity was immobilised during his time as an alcoholic; it was only when he desisted from alcohol that he recognised this: "when you've been an alcoholic for a long time and you stop drinking and…it actually you actually turn that corner…you're back to where you were, so for me…it's like I'm a teenager again and I'm discovering things again".

Tim recognised that the alcoholic and offending behaviours of his past were not the behaviours of the person he now identified with. Indeed, when he reflected on the destructive

periods of his life journey, he recalled how his 'true-self' would have rejected such behaviours: "I've really stepped over the mark, you know, this is something that 20 years ago I would have been appalled".

Buddhism enabled Tim to begin to see this 'true-self': "made me open my eyes more ... especially to myself". His journey of self-discovery was motivated by him wanting to address the issues in his life and take the positive and intended route of his life journey: "I wanted to get my life back on track".

In simple terms, the use of analogies, as presented by participants, appears to be a useful linguistic tool, which enabled participants to articulate their experiences to others. Although examples here are from Tim and Nicholas, they were typical of the remaining participants. They too used analogies not only to convey their story in a more palatable manner but it enabled them to distance themselves from their offending selves. The use of these analogies appears to have a secondary purpose; they appear to have enabled participants to engage in a greater reflective and validation process. The use of analogies assisted participants to make sense of their identity transition from a salient 'offender' identity, to one, more religiously or spiritually prominent. This appeared important to participants, as it enabled them to make sense of both painful and shameful experiences, as well as experiences of recovery and restoration. This verbalisation of religious stories helped internally rationalise past behaviour while also conveying change to others. Demonstrating change to others was an important feature for participants and having the opportunity to symbolically demonstrate change was seen by participants attaching themselves to religious groups in prison. The importance of religious affiliation while in prison is discussed now in this final theme.

Experiencing Religious or Spiritual Affiliation in Prison and the Community Aids a Sense of Community, Support, and Improved Status

This final theme begins to document the importance of human connection, belonging and social identity. All participants had experienced rejection as a result of their offending or incarceration. Indeed, feelings of loneliness, isolation and a sense of despair all dissipated when participants made connections with faith groups in prison. However, an unexpected finding emerged from this theme; participants' perceived sense of social status and standing in the prison hierarchy also improved. This perception brought about greater feelings of self-worth and purpose for many participants. This final theme is divided into two subordinate themes: 'Belonging to a faith group brings intimacy as experienced by family' and 'Status is gained by belonging to the in-group', each are considered here in turn.

Belonging to a faith group brings intimacy as experienced by family belonging.

As a consequence of a sexual offending history, participants reported experiencing rejection both by others in prison and by family and friends. Amongst this group, feelings of social and emotional isolation were great. Importance was therefore, placed on being affiliated with their religious community. Participants described others who were religiously associated or affiliated to their church as being like their family. Indeed, for most, the only people who maintained contact during their incarceration were people from a religious community.

This was highlighted most by Andrew's case, who was serving his third prison sentence. He recalled the only people who maintained support throughout each prison sentence were the people from his church: "I feel part part of the Christian family since in fact since the people who have stood by me when I came out of prison in 85' it was a Baptist church". Indeed, his church affiliates remained the only source of care and compassion who he viewed as his only family.

Like Andrew, others experienced the corrosion of emotional support from family and friends but an increase in support from religious peers. This tolerance and acceptance by religious associates came as a surprise to Nicolas. While on police bail he attempted to reject

church friends by telling them of his sexual offending history and pending criminal charges. He was surprised, but also pleased, when they insisted on continued contact: "I told them of my offence…thinking they'd run away…they were still friendly towards me". For Nicolas this acceptance was extremely important it validated his self-worth, he was able to begin to believe he was worthy of being part of a community, in spite of his sexual offending history.

Robert experienced a similar experience while in prison. When welcomed into a church, he was shocked by the acceptance of a fellow worshiper: "he said come to my church… we will accept you for what you are not for what you have done, and I was…gobsmacked". Robert had been rejected by every member of his family; he had been moved away from his friends and was extremely isolated in prison. Being accepted in this way meant he could consider a future and a chance to become part of a community once again.

Religious support networks, although developed in prison, were not limited to periods of incarceration. Relationships extended beyond their prison sentence and were anticipated to play a role in participants' lives, post-prison. This is demonstrated in the recollection of Greg's experience. His religious support network was not only expecting his return but were ready to embrace him: "they know I will be going back there and I know I am welcome back". Assistance from religious affiliates featured strongly in participants' release and rehabilitation plans, helping Robert with practical issues; "the Salvation Army captain… said…I'm going to find you accommodation now" or Andrew with emotional support; "they will do anything to help me on release and they will be mentors and friends with no questions", and for Nicholas risk management network "when I get out I will be able to…ring up one of the bishops…and say look can you come and chat to me pray with me…just to help me get my focus". Participants were reassured therefore, with the notion that their church community would help, support and guide them on release.

Prisons were not always able to accommodate all of participants' religious and spiritual needs, or at least, meet their expectations at all times. However, participants acknowledged that there were likely to be a range of explanations for this including a lack of funding, limited resources, security, prison regime, personal expectations and so on. In saying this, where expectations and needs were met, the benefits experienced by participants were great. They were able to feel part of the wider supportive community, for many this was experienced to the same intimacy levels of a family and relationships extended beyond the prison walls, providing emotional and practical support, beyond release. Unlike family, however, these relationships offered some additional security in terms of safeguarding practices.

Status is gained by belonging to the in-group.

Just belonging to a particular religion was, for several participants, insufficient. Pro-active engagement was also important, it was important because of the social status this brought. In the community, while affiliation aided feelings of belonging, being seen to be an active member in the church also aided a sense of status, purpose and authority. This is evidenced most in Evan's narrative. He had been deeply engaged in a religious group for most of his adult life, and offended while actively practicing as a Christian. Evan believed that being involved in church activities such as organising music, youth plays and fundraising activities was part of this duty as a Christian: "I got involved with music there tried to help with all the plays try to help with everything any fundraising…did everything I could I worked hard". Playing a lead role in the organisation of church activities improved Evan's sense of self-worth, he earned the respect from others within the community, which in turn made him feel important, needed and of value: "I became this big person in the church respected and everything was so good". This was particularly important to Evan's sense of self-worth because within his own family "no matter what I did I wasn't ever allowed to really be a

parent I was never really allowed to have ... any input on any decision-making" thus he felt powerless and redundant.

Equally, status, responsibility, and power, for Anthony were recurring themes throughout his life. For many years, he was a preacher: "I would go out preaching in the X town go to X area all over I was pretty well known there as a preacher". Of importance was his position of power. Being the leader of a council, mixing with famous people he "used to meet with royalty I met with David Cameron with politicians I have had tea and dinner with them living the high life". Anthony also believed he had had a lasting influence on many people's lives "ask them whoever they are, did you meet Anthony, and was he important in your life". His narrative and sense of worth appeared to fuel his sense of importance and entitlement. Both sexual offences were commissioned during his employment as leader of a council and as an elder in his local church.

In custody, however, status was not achieved in the same way, yet, it was as equally important to participants' identities and feelings of worth. While opportunities to take a religious lead role or organise activities were not readily available, status and a perceived sense of superiority was achieved by just being associated with a religious group. Indeed, presenting oneself as devoutly religious, further increased ones status. As already noted, participants were aware of the prisoner hierarchy within the prison, they knew they were for example at "the bottom of the feeding chain" (Robert). Yet, this subgroup differentiated themselves further, by presenting the idea that when compared to non-religious others, belonging to a religious group (according to the prison hierarchy) was superior. This was found to be the case with Andrew, Anthony, Greg and Robert. They categorically opposed the idea that they were like other prisoners. Instead they presented others as immoral, inferior and unintelligent: "all they want to talk about is sex…I'm not like that" (Andrew), "they were just animals" (Robert), "the walls are plastered up with half naked over virtually naked

women" (Greg), and "prison has been an eye-opener really because some of them very simpleminded" (Anthony).

Being affiliated to a religious group in prison appeared to give participants permission to present themselves as superior to others. This seems to have occurred in light of the view that they perceived their religious group to be virtuous, moral and superior when compared to non-believing prisoners. Although this appears from an interpersonal perspective to be a somewhat callous outlook, it is plausible that this is a process by which participants attempt to distinguish themselves from the "slime at the bottom of the pond". By viewing others of a non-religious denomination in this way, participants are able to perceive themselves as more socially accepted and even socially elevated, thus distancing themselves from the social stigma associated with incarceration and indeed, sexual offending.

This final theme provides an interesting perspective in terms of how participants benefit from being affiliated with a faith community while in prison. First they develop a greater sense of belonging, association and togetherness; indeed, the religious community to some extent replace participant's family, thus providing an essential social bond. It also however helps participants social stranding improve within the prison hierarchy. This perceived elevation of status, helped restore participants sense of dignity and self-worth.

Discussion

While there is a great deal of literature highlighting some of the benefits of engaging in religious or spiritual activity, no research to date examines this perspective solely from those convicted and incarcerated for sexual offending. Through the analysis of in-depth interviews, a number of themes help to explain the unique experiences and meanings made from those engaged in religious or spiritual activities during incarceration. Participants were able to draw on religious and spiritual language and concepts helping articulate experiences of offending

and making sense of their transformation of identities from one of 'offender' to 'non-offender'. In addition, participants developed social bonds with others, improving a sense of belonging, and social status. Consequentially participants' viewed their new selves as repaired and restored, bringing a sense of optimism, hope and efficacy for their future, even during incarceration. These were important experiences and might be best understood through the lens of social identity theory.

Social identity theory is concerned with an "individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel, 1981, p. 255). Tajfel and Turner (1981) argue that through the affiliation of particular social groups, people are able to define and make sense of themselves and others through their social status and identity in society. Yet because social groups are value laden the social ranking of a group is determined by society's positive or negative perspective on the groups' attributes or characteristics. Indeed, people within groups compare their own group(s) attributions and characteristics, to those of others. This, in turn, impacts on members of the group, whose sense of self becomes shaped on the social status of the group. Thus, when social identity is unsatisfactory, because the affiliated group is of a lower social status, individuals attempt to either improve their group or join another more prestigious one (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

These experiences were reported by the participants in this study. They found themselves affiliated with two very low social status groups, and to some extent were doubly stigmatised first by the label 'offender' and second by derogatory terms such as 'nonce','paedo', and 'monster' (Hanvey, Wilson Philopot, 2011; Marshall, 1996). Such labels are steeped in stereotypical and typically disproportionate notions (Dabney, Dugan, Topalli, & Hollinger, 2006; Haegerich, Salerno, & Bottoms, 2013; Nee & Witt, 2013). Values associated with these stereotypes include the idea that 'sex offenders' are inevitable

recidivists (Levenson, Brannon, Fortney, & Baker, 2007), are unreformable, depraved and deviant (Pickett, Mancini, & Mears, 2013). In an effort to distance themselves away from such stereotyping it was observed that through affiliation with the positive features of a religious or spiritual group, participants were able to adopt the positive characteristics of the group.

Social identity theory supposes that humans strive to achieve a positive sense of self and are therefore motivated to improve or at least maintain levels of self-esteem. It is perhaps unsurprising then that participants made such effort to affiliate with social groups in which they perceived themselves more akin to. Affiliation to non-offending groups enables people to begin to develop and generate new narratives which support reformed identities (Maruna, 2001). These new identities serve to provide distance between the reformed self, and the old offending self. Participants' eagerness to convey this change was observed throughout the study. As a result of religious or spiritual affiliation, not only did participants develop a new sense of self, but this was corroborated by their disassociation with lower status 'offender' out-groups. This was noted most when participants referred to other non-religious prisoners, in derogatory terms such as 'simpleminded animals'. Identifying with a more socially prestigious religious and spiritual in-group, participants perceived themselves to share the in-groups' positive attributes and characteristics. Such internal change meant participants perceived themselves to be reformed, no longer deviant, and had absorbed the positive and pro-social traits of the new in-group.

These initial findings are encouraging because social identity theory tells us that members of an in-group will ultimately take on the behaviours and attitudes of their preferred group. While the participants in this study presented adoption of in-group behaviours in an undesirable way, this needs to be understood within the complexity of the prison code. Participants accepted the low ranked status of their offence category i.e. non-sexual offending

groups are more superior to groups of people convicted of sexual offending (Ricciardelli & Moir, 2013), yet they re-interpreted this code by classifying those with a lack of morality or etiquette, a limited education or a lower socio-economic status as being inferior to them. While presenting hostile attitudes towards other inmates is perhaps an undesirable characteristic, in the light of social identity theory, it is perhaps understandable. Indeed, participants with very strong religious affiliations appeared to rid themselves of the social stigma and affiliation of a 'sex-offender' out-group, with ease. Through the motivation to improve their sense of self and become affiliated to an in-group, participants in this study were able to classify themselves, not according to their crimes, but according to their religious or spiritual affiliation.

This use of religious and spiritual affiliation to operate as a platform to change social status and identity is potentially important, not only in terms of it supporting a person to cope during periods of incarceration but it might also have the potential to support a process of desistance (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Indeed, an understanding of how the shift in one's identity occurs as a result of affiliating with religious and spiritual groups, has been somewhat overlooked in the literature (Ysseldyk, Matheson, & Anisman, 2010).

Although participants did not use the term 'identity transformation', they frequently expressed the notion of internal change, personal reform or the reconnecting with the true self. Participants appeared to achieve identity transformation in three ways. First, their new found religious or spiritual affiliation provided them a new socially accepted group with which to attach to (Stryker, 1968). Presenting oneself as belonging to a particular group is as much a signal to others about social identity, as is belonging to the group. Second, religious or spiritual affiliation provided participants access to analogies, symbols, and language that enabled them to better communicate their identity transformation to others (Marranci, 2009).

Third, through affiliation with a religious or spiritual group, participants were not only able to develop new non-offending identities or narratives (Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) but could justify their transformed self. They did this by claiming their capacity to change was not only a result of their own doing, but a result of God's intervention and sanction. Their change was because God had redeemed them. This use of external corroboration is echoed in Maruna's (2001) redemption scripts. However participants here had no external outlet to provide a validation of change. Absent of such support, their testimony came from a higher power.

The findings in this study are of importance in that they provide some preliminary insight into the potential role religious and spiritual communities might play for those convicted of sexual offending. This role is likely to be complex, but has the potential to assist people to break away from the stigma attached to their offending histories and therefore elevate their social status.

As with all research, there are limitations to this study. Among them is the small sample size and subjective approach used in IPA which can be perceived to be a fundamental weakness of empirical research. Indeed, such criticism is central to decades of debates regarding nomothetic and idiographic approaches (Hermans, 1988). Essentially, critics argue that small sample sizes fail to generalise findings and cannot establish any general scientific principle therefore rendering it immaterial (Eysenck, 1954). However, the establishment of new laws or generalisation of findings is of course not the purpose of IPA. Instead, as in the case here, small sample sizes assist researchers to examine and explore in detail, the unique and idiosyncratic experiences of participants; thus giving a "voice to the concerns of participants" (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 102). Likewise, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that thematic saturation from qualitative research can appear at as little as six interviews.

Findings of this study also reveal some important opportunities for penal policy makers. First, it demonstrates that by providing prisoners with greater opportunities to engage and affiliate themselves with religious communities; health and wellbeing outcomes are likely to improve. For example by providing inmates with as many opportunities to engage in faith interventions, religious services, faith group discussions, access to prayer meetings, religious text study and so on, the need for medical intervention or prescription drugs for conditions such as depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, might be reduced. Thus, improved mental and physical health will also help prisoner's behaviour in terms of increasing motivation to change, engagement in education, work and accredited programmes, as well as reduce the likelihood of disorder and violence. Finally, by strengthening external social bonds, the opportunities available to develop robust formal risk management plans, when preparing to release prisoners back into the community, are far greater. Instead of relying heavily on statutory services to support the reintegration of socially isolated clients, correctional officers can draw on the support of community members to help with this important process. Thus returning people back to the community in a safe, controlled and dignified manner.

Conclusions

This study has provided some preliminary, yet important insights into the experiences of those incarcerated for sexual offending while engaged in a religious or spiritual community. There are, of course, far more questions that need answering, indeed this research possibly unearths more questions than provides answers. What is clear from this study however, is that the religious and spiritual experiences of those incarcerated helped them to feel forgiven, develop an improved sense of self-efficacy, and feel hope for their future.

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Table 1. Description of Sample

Participant	Age at point of interview	Approximate age at start of offending	Offence	Previous offending history	Religion as identified by participants
Evan	46	42	Sexual activity with a child Making indecent photographs	None	Baptist
Ben	61	31	Indecent assault	None	Buddhist
Mark	29	23	Rape of female 14 years old	Criminal damage, burglary with intent to steal, attempt to obtain property by deception	Pagan
Andrew	69	38	Meeting a child following sexual grooming Possession of indecent images Failing to comply with notification requirements	Rape, buggery, incest, gross indecency and indecent assault	Baptist
Anthony	80	36	Indecent assault, making, distributing and possessing indecent images of children	None	Christian
Nicholas	49	9	Indecent assault Making, distributing and possessing indecent images of children	None	Mormon
Greg	72	35	Gross indecency with a male child Sexual assault of a female child	Sexual Assault	Christian

Tim	42	38	Detaining of a child without lawful authority Having sex with a child	Driving a motor vehicle with excess alcohol	Buddhist
Robert	70	50	Indecent assault possession of indecent images	None	Christian/Salvation Army

Table 2. Super and Subordinate Themes

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
Managing the Conflict between Religion or Spirituality and Sexual Offending	• Compartmentalised identities and incongruent behaviours • The process of forgiveness and feeling forgiven by God
Use of Religious Analogies	• Use to articulate experience • Used for identity transformation
Experiencing Religious or Spiritual Affiliation in Prison and the Community Aids a Sense of Community, Support, and Improved Status	• Belonging to a faith group brings intimacy as experienced by family belonging. • Status is gained by belonging to the in-group.