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Life after release from prison: The experience of ex-offenders with Intellectual Disabilities

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Abstract (150 words)

Background In the UK, little is known about the experience of ex-prisoners with intellectual disabilities (ID).

Method A qualitative study was therefore conducted to investigate what life is like for ten men with ID who left prison at least 9 months previously. Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore the men's views of post-prison life, including opportunities/challenges and support received from services.

Results Through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, four over-arching themes emerged: the nature of support and services, the difficulty of staying out of trouble, the importance of family, and the need to act the 'tough guy'. The participants reported being extremely under-supported. They were often hostile about staff who they felt were too focused on their previous crime.

Conclusions In general, men were very under-supported and the upheavals of post-prison lives appeared to be 'normalised' by them. Better understanding of their lives within their social context would benefit their community re-entry.

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Introduction

People with intellectual disabilities, just like anyone else, can sometimes break the law. For those who enter the criminal justice system (CJS), some may end up in prison, either on remand, or as convicted offenders. These outcomes are not thought to be uncommon, though the precise prevalence figures for the number of people with ID in prison have been much disputed and undoubtedly vary with the jurisdiction in question (Murphy & Mason, 2014).

In many countries, there appears to be no adequate routine screening or assessment of intellectual disabilities in prison (Talbot & Riley, 2007; Loucks, 2007; Talbot, 2008). Frequently, prison staff report that, even if someone was known to have ID, they would not readily know how to support them, or what support services were available inside or outside the establishment (Loucks, 2007; Talbot, 2008). Many prisoners with ID may also require educational or rehabilitative support in prison, but conventional offender programmes are not be suitable for those with additional needs associated with intellectual disabilities (Barron, Hassiotis & Banes, 2002), or even for those with specific learning difficulties (Davis et al, 2015). People with ID can therefore be excluded from programmes that may facilitate successful community re-entry (Langdon, Clare & Murphy, 2010; Murphy & Mason, 2014).

Whilst a number of reports have highlighted the considerable hardship of incarceration for people with intellectual disabilities (Boodle, Ellem & Chenoweth, 2014; Cockram, 2005; Talbot, 2008), the focus on what happens *after* prison has been conspicuously absent. For ex-offenders with ID, it seems far too little is known about their experience of being released, and what life entails when they return to the community, despite the fact that studies have shown that prisoners with ID were more likely to be worried about community re-entry than other prisoners (Talbot, 2008) and prison staff were also concerned about their accommodation status and the risks of homelessness (Holland & Persson, 2011). Talbot (2008) further found that prisoners with ID were the least likely of all prisoners to say they have someone to help them on release. Many had unrealistic expectations in terms of the help they could receive from UK statutory services.

As in many countries, the UK care pathways between prison and local community teams are often unclear or non-existent. From exploring the service pathways for offenders with intellectual disabilities in three UK health regions, Wheeler et al (2009) noted the scarcity of referrals made by CJS services to local intellectual disabilities teams, highlighting the tenuous links between the two public services. Publications from the health sector (e.g. *No Health without Mental Health, 2011*) and probation (*Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2014*) have also observed how services in the UK have

continued to work in silos, often unaware of the benefits of joint working when managing an offender with intellectual disabilities, despite government guidance such as *Positive Practice Positive Outcomes (2011)*.

Only two small published studies, both Australian, have explored the life of ex-prisoners with ID (Ellem, 2012; Ellem, Wilson & Chui, 2012). From talking about life before, during and after incarceration, the near absence of support was evident throughout their entire journey, many having no preparation for community re-entry, being left to flounder on release (Ellem, 2012) with difficulties securing accommodation (with some struggling, and remaining homeless), searching for employment, struggling to reconnect with friends and family, and enduring feelings of having no control and being lonely (Ellem et al, 2012). From the stories of these ex-offenders, it was not surprising that eight out of ten participants were reconvicted soon after release, with the remaining two coming close to receiving a formal reconviction (Ellem, 2012).

It should be noted that the themes identified by Ellem and her team were not dissimilar to the life experiences of non-disabled ex-prisoners, including inadequate support and feelings of lack of control (Gideon 2009; Kenemore et al 2006), employment difficulties, ostracism, (Bahr et al, 2010; Mbuba, 2012; Howerton et al, 2009; Kenemore & Roldan, 2006), and stigma (this being a particular issue for those with sex-related offences according to Shivy et al, 2007 and Tewksbury, 2012). People with intellectual disabilities, however, are a doubly disenfranchised group (Ellem et al, 2008), as they experience both the stigma associated with criminal convictions and the discriminatory attitudes shown towards those having an intellectual disability (Stalker & Lerpiniere, 2009), suggesting that they may find post-prison life even harder than non-disabled ex-offenders.

With the above issues in mind, a qualitative research project was conducted to address the main research question: *What is life like for ex-offenders with intellectual disabilities, who have left prison?* As little is known about this topic, the study explored how men with intellectual disabilities make sense of life after prison; the opportunities and challenges to resettlement; the support available after release and their satisfaction with the support received.

Methods

Design

A qualitative approach, with the use of semi-structured interviews, was employed to explore how this group of individuals made sense of life after release. This kind of approach has been shown to be productive and to result in rich data with people with intellectual disabilities, despite the likely communication difficulties of participants (McVilly et al, 2008). The challenges of interviewing individuals with communication/learning difficulties were considered: meeting each participant before the interview to develop rapport (Nind, 2008), and reassuring them that the study was independent of their support services, so as to avoid the worry of repercussions if they said anything negative about the support they receive (Beail et al, 2014). It should be noted that the current study forms part of the OFFSCA-ID project, a quasi-experimental study examining the cost and benefits of social care support for ex-offenders with intellectual disabilities (quantitative aspects are reported elsewhere, see Murphy et al, 2017).

Participants

A purposive sampling procedure was used to recruit men with ID who had been released from prison for at least nine months. A homogeneous sample was advisable for the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the chosen method of analysis for the present study (Smith et al, 2009). The sample was therefore confined to adult male ex-prisoners with intellectual disabilities, as there appear to be characteristic differences between the genders (Lindsay et al, 2004; Fedock, Fries & Kubiak, 2013), as well as their interpretation of offending and imprisonment (Arditti & Few, 2008; Shamai & Kochal, 2008).

Following ethical approval (see below under *Procedure*), identification of potential participants began at adult male prisons that identified prisoners with intellectual disabilities, either through the use of standardised screening tools e.g. LDSQ (McKenzie & Paxton 2006) or other local intellectual disabilities assessments/ procedures. The prison mental health teams that provided the screening were invited to take part in the recruitment process. Altogether, 22 prisons across south, east, west and northern England took part in the main study (Murphy et al, 2017).

Prisoners screened (or identified) positive for ID, who were about to leave prison, were given the study's easy-read accessible information sheet by the prison health staff. The information was read through by the prison staff and the potential participant was asked if they were in principle, interested in taking part in the study and speaking with the study's researchers. For those who agreed, the prison

health staff notified the researchers who then visited the prisoner to establish rapport, reread the information sheet with the man and take formal consent. Contact information was gathered for when the man left prison. Where suitable men had already just left prison, a similar process took place following contact with their community intellectual disabilities health team.

A total of 88 men were referred to the project, of whom 40 were included in the quantitative study (see Murphy et al, 2017). The first 15 of these men who reached the milestone of 9 months since leaving prison were reminded of this present qualitative study and asked if they would like to take part. All participants agreed to take part, with only one participant later withdrawing their consent. Some lost contact before the interview took place however, and so overall 10 men took part in the semi-structured interview to talk about their experience of post-prison life. Table 1 shows their ages, circumstances, and settings (including support received) at the time of the interview.

Measures

Interview topics were initially developed with the assistance of the *Working for Justice Group*, an advisory group consisting of men with ID who had experience with the CJS. The interview schedule was further reviewed with a clinical psychologist who has many years of supporting offenders with ID and two steering committee members with ID from the OFFSCA-ID project, who had previous experiences with the CJS and related community teams. A pilot interview was completed with each of these two committee members with ID so that they could give feedback on the interview.

The interview schedule consisted of 10 questions, each question covering a topic as suggested by the *Working for Justice group*. Acknowledging that this may be a sensitive area for the participants, each man was reminded of the confidentiality of information, and their rights to not answer the questions, or withdraw, as stated by the original information sheets and consent forms.

Procedure

The OFFSCA-ID project was submitted to and approved by both an NHS Research Ethical Committee, and the National Offender Management Service (NOMS). Once approval had been gained from both bodies, local approvals were also obtained from participating NHS sites (via the local R&D teams) and prison establishments (via prison governors).

When men had reached 9 months since leaving prison they were contacted and reminded about the qualitative study. Provided they still consented, they were interviewed face to face, in safe venues. All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim, with the tapes being destroyed

after transcription was complete. No names or identifiable information were written on the transcript and participants were reminded of their right to have a copy. At the end of the interview, time was given to resolve any queries. A shopping voucher was given to thank the participants and to recognise the value of their time. An additional information sheet with details of support services was also given.

Analysis

As the study was interested in the lived experience of men with intellectual disabilities who have left prison, and to reflect on the meanings it had for the individuals, IPA was chosen for the analysis of the data.

Transcripts were analysed on a case-by-case basis. The transcripts were read several times to help immerse the researcher into the data. At this stage, initial observations and notes, including any powerful recollections from the interview, were written down, or 'bracketed off'. This was helpful to ensure the participant's stories remained at the centre of the analysis (Shaw, 2010). After becoming familiarised with the data, *descriptive summaries* were made to outline what the men had said. The summaries were then used as the building blocks for *initial interpretations* of what post-prison life might have meant to the participants. Throughout this process, the interpretations were repeatedly checked with the descriptive summaries, and the texts, to ensure they were tied to the participant's data. Looking at the relationships, connections and patterns between the initial interpretations, *emergent themes* started to develop and data were re-organised into each topic. A written statement was made for each theme, and the relationships, differences and patterns between emergent themes were mapped, so that a structure emerged covering the overall *themes* that were important to the men's account of life after release. As the themes were identified for one man, the same process was applied to the next case. The themes developed from all participants were then examined together, looking at the themes that were most potent, but also identifying themes that shared similarities between the men. Repeating this method with all cases, the *finishing themes* were drawn up in which represented the higher order concepts that all men shared.

To assure the validity of the data analysis, the data were analysed by two independent researchers. The themes were compared resulting in a good degree of agreement (75%).

Reflexivity

The first author's interest in the topic arose from his past experience of supporting people with intellectual disabilities who have offended when he was employed as a psychology assistant in

an assessment and treatment unit. It was acknowledged that the researcher would have existing views of what support services were available for men with said conditions who have left prison, with possible pre-conceptions of what life might entail for men in this situation. The researcher was also motivated to help improve support services for ex-prisoners with intellectual disabilities, and he was therefore mindful of his (and others') motivations during the interview and analysis process.

Results

A total of 10 out of the 15 men approached agreed to take part in the interview. Of the remaining 5 who did not take part, one man declined to take part without providing a reason, 4 lost touch with the researcher, despite exhaustive attempts to contact them. Table 1 gives the demographic details of the participants who consented and were interviewed (names have been anonymised). In 3 interviews with the participants, their support staff were present due to the mandatory requirement of their services. Interviews lasted from 22 to 88 minutes (mean = 40 mins 41 sec).

(Table 1 about here)

Four master themes emerged from the analysis of the data. These were:

- *“Want to help? You ain’t helping”*: The nature of post-prison support.
- *“Staying out of trouble from my friends, is the hardest bit”*: Trouble is both normal & easy.
- *“Yeah. And be one big happy family”*: The significance of family relationships.
- *“I stood up straight... he was bricking it”*: The need to be ‘hard’ in the context of vulnerability

Each theme was composed of other subthemes, as summarised in Table 2 and Figure 1.

(Table 2 and Figure 1 about here)

Theme 1: “Want to help? You ain’t helping”: The nature of post-prison support

Despite the interviews being focused on the participant’s general life after prison, the topics of staff (and support) consistently appeared throughout. This is reflected in the size of this first main theme. The following subthemes will address participants’ perceptions, expectations and relationships with staff; how their experiences of life after prison have informed such relationships; and what became the important factors that were valued by the men. Throughout the discussion, it should be acknowledged that the terms ‘support’ and ‘staff’ was used interchangeably unless specified, as participants themselves did not differentiate where their support came from, nor did they really ‘care’ about the differences between services.

Sub-theme 1.1 “I don’t know if she is just lying”: Hostile relationships between service users and staff

With the exception of one participant, Bob, all men who took part in the interview voiced their dissatisfaction with the support they have received since leaving prison. Negative remarks and criticisms were directed towards their support staff, with comments such as “*She (probation staff) is just useless*” [Mike, interview 5], and “*But the (inpatient) staff are just, aren’t very good*” [Vincent, interview 2]. These were not just off-the-cuff, throwaway remarks, but they carried strong negative feelings, as seen in Kane’s reflection below:

INT: [...] I just wondered, you changed your probation now haven’t you, sounds like you don’t have the guy before that you said [you did

Kane: [No I had a guy, and a, woman but she left, now I got this (staff’s name) and she don’t do nothing!

INT: OK. Have you ever asked her to help you with anything?

Kane: Oh yeah, loads of times I just give up I just go there.

INT: mmm-hmm

Kane: ‘Alright’, ‘yeah’, ‘staying out of trouble?’, ‘Yeah’. ‘Alright, bye!’

[Kane, interview 9]

The “given up” attitude was further reflected by the way Kane mocked the comments and phrases made between him and the staff. Yet, this hostile feeling was not formed without a reason and

in Kane's case, the lack of success with seeking help was his justification. Such adverse feelings had somewhat become an expectation of support services, as Kane later summarised his experience of inadequate support with "She (social worker) is crap but hey, I can't say nothing about it" [interview 9].

Sub-theme 1.2 Why the "bad blood"?

From the negative remarks and the pessimistic expectation projected by the men, it seems that participants did not form, nor did they expect to form, a mutually respectful relationship with staff in their services. However, this did not arise without thought or consideration, but appeared to be the lived experience of many participants.

For Lee, the frosty relationships developed with staff were informed by his tales of mistreatment and injustice. It was apparent that being bullied/victimised was not uncommon in Lee's life. However, it was his experience of seeking justice that informed his perception of and relationship with professional support:

Lee: And then I was in A (prison), again. I got made to do something in there, by my roommate (cellmate). He made me give him a (sexual act) as it was [...] And then. A year after, I went back (prison A), they put me with the same bloke who done it. What happened? It happened again. Told them, told them, they got the police involved. I done my statement, and all that. They took me clothes and DNA. And then they came back a week later, and went, oh we told you we can't do nothing about it. I went why? And they went, we haven't got any evidence. So he got away with that. And I got to live with that. He's in there (prison A). And some days I get so wind up with it [...]

[...]

Lee: Like I've told the police, but, about what has happened to me (previous assault in the community). In the past, as they do nothing. And I'm thinking now, why I bother, telling them. It's not been made, it's not been heard, cos they can't do nothing. And as soon as I've done something wrong. Bang! I'm in here (prison).

[Lee, interview 6]

It was interesting that Lee recalled his experience of injustice in prison when thinking about life after his release. The recollection illuminated a sense of anger and trauma from the alleged

incident, but not so much with the incident itself, rather, it was more the frustration that no action was obtained from the authorities. This injustice was further exacerbated when Lee compared the incident to his convicted offence, whereby if he was the perpetrator, he would no doubt receive the most drastic consequence: incarceration. Such negative encounters with staff have reinforced a sense of unfairness for Lee, encouraging him to take a “*why (do) I bother*” approach with them. At the time of interview, incidents of being bullied and assaults have continued in Lee’s life.

The relationships experienced by the men were also informed by the ‘patrolling’ and risk adverse actions taken by most staff, with many men seeing these as the only thing that staff had to offer. Such perceptions made a personal impact on the participants, as described by Mike:

INT: So for the support that didn’t go so well... what could have been made better?

Mike: It would have been a lot better if she (probation officer) had been more understanding, and she had helped me instead of trying to get me recalled.

INT: So she could have perhaps done more for you rather than just reporting you?

Mike: (Nods)

INT: Do you think that affected you quite a lot?

Mike: Screwed away my confidence... because I was confident at the time that I was going to stay out of prison. But with her screwing me over every time I asked for help, its messed with my head.

[Mike, interview 9]

For Mike, the perception of “*just reporting you*” was not classed as help. The interchangeable use of term “*help*” and “*understanding*” indicates a suggestion that real help goes beyond the borders of issues and troubles, whereby attention is needed for other parts of their lives. It was concerning that such perceptions of staff were detrimental to the men’s progress outside of prison, as Mike felt confused and insecure with his community re-entry. With the dearth of community support available, Mike felt it was better to re-offend and complete his sentence in prison, rather than being in the community:

Mike: Well the reason for it is that I didn’t think I was getting that much help from my probation officer so that’s why I went and got myself recalled (return prison to complete his sentence).

Sub-theme 1.3: "She listens to what I'm saying": The remembrance of good support

Participants did recall moments of appropriate support, despite their overall negative attitude and expectation of professionals. How participants made sense of such valued services projected two important elements: flexibility, and an individualised approach.

For many men, flexible support was ranked highly as they each had exceptional circumstances that required staff to consider them individually; Kane described this simply as "You've got reasons" [interview 9], referring to his absence for one appointment with his probation due to being hospitalised. For Jason, it was important for his hostel key-workers to show flexibility in order to avoid eviction, because "at the moment I am £159 in (rent) arrears already" [interview 3]. With staff acknowledging the difficulties that he had with handling money, Jason was allowed to stay at his hostel despite being in arrears. This prevented him from becoming homeless during his time after prison and showed Jason that the staff were willing to recognise his needs and be flexible about their rules:

INT: OK, so how much arrears can you get into before they go "you can't stay here anymore"?

Jason: Well, they are supposed to stop it after £100.

INT: OK

Jason: But at the moment,

INT: They're OK?

Jason: They're, getting down to where it's been OK because they, they know that... I do find it hard to, keep up to date with it.

[Jason, interview 3]

Other participants have also revealed a variety of experience and thoughts that echo the subtle theme of gaining an individualised approach. For Bob, his experience in an inpatient unit was somewhat different from others. His disgruntlement with staff did not dominate his recall when

thinking about his post-prison life. Instead, Bob showed appreciation for the help that he had received, as Bob cited “*I can’t do it on my own*” [interview 7]. Bob’s inpatient staff did indeed help him with setting up college and art sessions, both of which were activities Bob had requested. However, what appeared to have made the important difference to Bob’s experience was the structured support systems that ensured his preferences were acted upon; a chance to enjoy his music. To make this happen, staff set up an arrangement with his appointee to ensure Bob received money for his weekly CD shopping. In the researcher’s interpretation, it seemed that staff’s willingness to help Bob achieve this goal and to play his CDs when he liked was paramount to his relationship with his service. Bob confirmed that his current placement was better than his previous placement (L):

INT: Was it hard at L? Did you find that time hard?

Bob: Don’t like it, not allowed CD in my room. All those CDs.

INT: Ohh, OK. So not in your room

[...]

Bob: It, not allow CD in your room

[Bob, interview 7]

Sub-theme 1.4: ‘They (staff) need to stop telling people what to do’: Participant’s control vs. powerlessness

From the accounts and reflections of staff support that dominated much of the interviews, the subtheme of control versus powerlessness kept reappearing. This subtheme persisted throughout the interviews and many men clearly experienced their support as rather dominating, as described by Matt: “*I hate social workers*” because “*they are control freaks*” [interview 1] The idea of not being in control sets a negative tone towards staff and professionals, causing friction in their relationship along the way.

The subtlety of the theme comes when participants describe the methods they have adopted to ensure they have some involvement in the decision of their supposed support:

Lee: You know they tell me ohh we’re going to get you some help out there (when release from prison) and when I go out there there is nothing. No. When I left prison they told me... that I got some help with the mental health team and all that out there. It’s only a month that you go then. You heard. Nothing.

INT: Nothing?

Lee: But this time

INT: mm-hmm?

Lee: We're doing it before I go out all the way right up till when I get out

INT: Oh. OK start from here

Lee: So working yeah going all the way up the health team what I got to do so the help will be out there is (would be) fine. Hopefully.

[Lee, interview 6]

Lee's previous experience with prison release appeared to have been filled with empty promises from staff as help was not set up. With his previous taste of no support, there was a sense that Lee wanted to be in the driving position this time, as he "*got to do so*", thus he asserted his presence all the way through the system. Interestingly, the need to assert one's control may fit well with the idea of ensuring a person-centred support. Yet this subtheme should be seen separately, as at times it was more about staff giving them autonomy: whether that is within the support offered, or leaving their choices or life alone.

Theme 2: "Staying out of trouble from my friends, is the hardest bit": Trouble is both normal & easy

This theme captures how the continued occurrence of crimes (and the associated turbulence) have impacted on the participant's perception of trouble. Despite the impression that participants experience such turmoil as normal, many men were still aware of the troubles that their acquaintances could bring, but yet the benefits that they could also provide. The effort to keep their friends away could sometimes be too hard to handle. Equally, to build a new life, as symbolised by obtaining employment, was also not an easy task.

Sub-theme 2.1: "Apart from the ups and downs... It's been alright": The normalisation of troubles in post-prison life

A key aspect of this subtheme is the unchanged nature of life before and after prison. For many participants, life continued to be chaotic after their release. This was expressed by Matt: “*Up and down. Rollercoaster. Erm. Letting hell loose and everything*” [interview 1]. Such emotional upheavals appeared to have led participants to ‘normalise’ the nature of trouble and crime. For Jason, he had already been arrested twice after his release, together with an awaited court hearing. Yet, Jason’s reflection on life was simply: “*I will say it’s been alright*” [interview 3]. That summary appears to have overlooked the troubles that were behind and ahead of him. Further evidence of such desensitisation comes from Jason’s justification of his above summary: “*I’ve done 7 months of, well, nearly 8 months of good behaviour*” [interview 3]. It was surprising that Jason has used the term “*good behaviour*” despite his numerous arrests. This again suggests a sense of numbness, or an increased threshold, to the troubles that were happening in his life. Further evidence of such normalisation can be seen when Ali explained his brother’s thoughts on his imprisonment:

INT: OK does he (Ali’s brother) have any, like, feelings about, what happened that made you go to N (prison)?

Ali: Erm, not really see. When he was in N (prison) he, I was in N as well at the same time (heheh)

[Ali, interview 10]

The above extract opens up the idea that other people in Ali’s social network were embroiled with crime, something that was familiar to their own experiences. Whilst this does not mean an automatic engagement in future offences, it highlights the familiarity of troubles in their post-prison life, thus it was not surprising that many men seemed un-phased in the presence of such issues.

Sub-theme2.2: “I don’t think hard enough. I... shouldn’t be with them people”: Troubled friends with benefits

Despite the occurrence of crime and trouble surrounding the participants, there was one group that participants deliberately avoided: their previous friends and peers. Friends were arguably represented as a double-edged sword for the participants. On the one hand, participants were quick to recognise their troublesome nature with many choosing to avoid old friends:

INT: And erm, it sounds like there are some friends you say, you’re staying away, because they might lead you into trouble?

Kane: Yeah, I keep them at arm's length.

[Kane, interview 9]

On the other hand, their unique benefits have made it hard for the men to resist, as the men felt tempted to continue with their friendships. Mike offered a reason as to why this was the case:

Mike: Like my friend says "It doesn't bother me what you were in for, at the end of the day"

INT: You're you?

Mike: Yeah

[Mike, interview 5]

The above extract showed a strong sense of acceptance, even though Mike may have felt that others were judging him in accordance with his crime, it was his friends that stated a preference for him as a 'person'.

At this point, the attribution of trouble to friends could be seen as a method for the men to displace their own responsibilities, as if their friends were to blame for their offences. Yet, this interpretation did not suffice as participants acknowledged their own responsibility with the crime they committed: "*But it's my fault I got in trouble. So*" [Kane, interview 9]. Equally, other men also accepted their role in their troubles:

Will: I had supported housing in the past, but because like, I was taking drugs weed heavy drinker, used to drink, quite a lot, that's why I got kicked out [...]

INT: OK

Will: And erm, they, they thought because I'm letting people in, who's taking drugs in the flat and drinking, they can't have me there, because, letting people in with drugs

[Will, interview 8]

It was clear that Will understood how his action has led to his eviction from his former flat. However, the second passage again reflects the involvement of his friends, and for Will, it appears that his friends were always part of his problem.

It was interesting that the acknowledgement of friends as ‘trouble’ did not entirely stop the participants from engaging with them. Perhaps this interpretation should be analysed with the benefits that friends can bring. Considering the persistent turmoil that participants often find themselves in, and the lack of beneficial expectation from staff (as seen in Theme 1), it was not surprising that this left participants with a difficult option. The difficulties were summarised again by Will:

Will: I love my girlfriend but, it's just, staying out of trouble from my friends, is the hardest bit...

[Will, interview 8]

Sub-theme 2.3 “I’m hoping to get my job back”: The challenges to getting a better option

Many of the participants spoke about the opportunities that employment could bring to their life after prison and it was obvious (to staff and participants) that holding a steady job was the ideal option:

INT: [...] And, for this work training happening now, it's the support staff that help you to locate it?

Jason: Yeah.

[...]

INT: OK. Are you happy that this is all going along?

Jason: Yes

INT: Yup. And then

Jason: Cos that would then look good for me for when, they, when they eventually decide to, move me from here (hostel),

[Jason, interview 3]

With work training being arranged and attended by Jason, this outcome represented the effort that Jason and his staff had put in to ensure Jason was ready for work. It also showed the potential benefits that work could bring for Jason. However, as highlighted in the last statement, having a job appears to provide more outcomes than simply the job itself. For Jason, his intention for going through the process was to ensure he can “*look good*”, so he can move on from his hostel, thus using

work to gain immediate outcomes. In a later statement, Jason confirmed how such positive portrayals could help him with gaining a place of “*my own*” again, reflecting the gain of a person-centred preference, via the use of his job to lever such an outcome.

Jason: Then we can say yes, he's been doing that too he's really well, at the hostel, he's now getting into, doing erm, voluntary work. And it would definitely help me, to then move on, to like to my own, flat, at the end of it.

[Jason, interview 3]

The new possibilities attached to employment justified the hard work required, to the extent where Mike also attended training and obtained relevant qualifications before his release: “*But I have done, got myself qualifications and everything to help me get a job when I get out and all that.*” *[interview 5]*. However, there was a level of uncertainty that hampered some of the men's effort. This was seen in Kane's reflection below:

Kane: I have had worked in the past but it just, since I've gone in, there, well, people don't want me now, cause criminal record and that

INT: OK. Has someone told you, that?

Kane: I've been for interviews and they've just said, sorry, criminal record, can't have you... Just seem like, yeah OK, bye then

INT: OK

Kane: So... can't be bothered anymore heheh

[Kane, interview 9]

In the experience reported by Kane, there was a sense of success but also a sense of giving up. The success came from his past, where he did succeed with gaining a job. However, the sense of giving up was presented together with the rejection due to his criminal background. Later on, it appears the ‘given up’ approach has persisted for Kane, as he again had to deal with another rejection:

Kane: That will be good. And then I, I go for like jobs because with, me being on probation, so I went for an interview the other day for (company name), like only volunteering but he said, as you got, probation, we can't have you.

[...]

INT: Does it affect your relationship? Does it affect anything else

Kane: No. Just, I just got to sit at home all day (heheh)

[Kane, interview 9]

Whilst being knocked back must be difficult for everyone, it appears Kane has suffered one too many rejections to continue with pursuing a job, despite what a job would bring to the individual. Together with the two other subthemes in this section, it seemed that remaining in the current situation was an easier option, as there appeared to be a normalisation for the current state, together with the presence of friends that they could stay away from, but who also provide benefits. It seemed the potential change might be too much effort for some of the men.

Theme 3 “Yeah. And be one big happy family”: The significance of family relationships

This theme illustrates the participant’s reflections about the importance of continuing and strengthening their relationships with their family members. As described below, the analysis revealed a relationship between the participants and their family that was beyond the provision of practical support, as it was a source for emotional containment as well as an opportunity to demonstrate reciprocity. The unique relationship could also be seen when many men utilised their family as a ‘moral compass’, whereby they perceived breaking the law as equating to breaking their family bond.

Sub-theme 3.1: “I love my dad”: And it’s not just about his practicality

When thinking about life after prison, many of the men perceived their family as having great importance. For Mike, his brother offered a budgeting approach that was perhaps tailored to Mike’s preferences, as Mike needed the money to be out of his hands in order to keep it safe:

Mike: Um...sometimes I would lend money to my brother, and he would give me it back in a couple of days time so, it was basically me saving it,

INT: Oh a bit like a bank?

Mike: Yeah lending him it and then he’ll give it me back

[Mike, interview 5]

Whilst Mike might have valued such practical support, other accounts have highlighted the importance of family as more than just practical help. As we shall see below, family has also provided a sense of emotional support:

Vincent: My parents yeah they've been good

[...]

INT: Yeah? Can you explain what you most enjoy about, seeing your parents

Vincent: Their, their company

[...]

INT: OK. And anything you want to talk about your family, anything you want to talk about that's related to your family?

Vincent: My family is safe

[...]

Vincent: Just a bit of peace, but I can't give her that (mum) at all

[Vincent, interview 2]

The three words chosen by Vincent to describe his family, “*peace*”; feeling “*safe*”; and “*company*” illustrate the importance of this relationship, and appear to reflect the internal fulfilment that his family has provided. Secondly, in Vincent’s last statement, it seemed that Vincent could not return such internal support to his mother. This statement reflects the notion of reciprocity, an element that participants have noted only during the discussion of family. This could also be seen in Kane’s reflection below:

Kane: My mum found it hard (when Kane was in prison) ... Girlfriend found it hard because she left college, through it. But she stayed with me always all the way through... But now like, she, back on track now I'm out she's more happier.

INT: OK

Kane: I make her happier.

[Kane, interview 9]

For Kane, there appears to be a responsibility on his side to ensure his girlfriend was happy. Kane has also made a reflection of the potential struggle that his imprisonment might have caused for his mum and his girlfriend. Yet, by Kane playing his part, through making people “*happier*”, the issue appeared to be resolved. Together with Vincent’s account above, the relationships offered by their family and partners were not just one-way. Their accounts have highlighted the active role participants would like to play in their close relationships.

Sub-theme 3.2: “As long as I don’t do it again I’ve got all my family”: Seeing family as their moral compass

Throughout the interview, there was also a clear line drawn by the participants between their past offences and family. For Will, this was seen in his conscious effort to avoid talking about his troubles in front of certain family members:

INT: Yup, ok. And you, you find it easy to talk to your family about your offence?

Will: I find it quite difficult with my brother, he’s got a baby and, like, when a baby is around I don’t want the baby hearing, like about my offences. He’s got a little boy, 3 (years old).

[Will, interview 8]

As illustrated by Will above, a distinction was made for whether certain family members should hear about his offence, in this case, Will did not feel his nephew was appropriate. A closer examination of Will’s reported action further indicates a sense of protection of his family, but also the preservation of Will’s image for the more vulnerable members. A statement made by Matt confirms the latter interpretation: “*I don’t want my little girl to see me in prison*” [interview 1], as if to protect the younger ones from such knowledge, but also distancing their troubled past from them.

It appeared that the men to some extent viewed their family as their ‘moral compass’, where no crimes were associated with their family, and where their family would not tolerate any more troubles. As Will said “*She’s (girlfriend) had enough of it. (And) My dad’s had enough.*”. This illustrated that family members could at times set up explicit expectations for the participants to

follow. The spoken expectation again reinforced the perception that their family is on the ‘moral high ground’, whereby breaking the family’s rules could mean breaking their relationships.

Theme 4: “I stood up straight... he was bricking it”: The need to be hard in the context of vulnerability

The final theme takes account of the need for some participants to protect themselves, against attacks of any kind. The constructed ‘masculine’ identity appeared useful in the context of possible vulnerabilities, such as bullying and ridicule.

Sub-theme 4.1: “Any person outside starting on me”: The benefits of a ‘hard guy’ identity

For some participants, there was a sense that a ‘hard man’ persona was needed for their life after prison. This was seen when Kane was explaining why he was interested in cars: “*That’s what I want to do, get a car, get it all suited up, be a boy racer (heheh)*” [interview 9], and the desire for building muscles for Matt: “*build erm... build myself up. Muscles*” [interview 1]. Whilst such interests may just be a personal hobby for both participants, it was hard to avoid further interpretation, as such ‘masculine’ construction appeared to serve a function for the men in question, as recalled by Kane below:

Kane: Oh yeah if there’s anyone who tries to break in... they’ve got us to deal with, they’ve got the baseball bat upstairs to deal with so (heheh) [I tend not to use weapons because,

INT: Erm

Kane: I like to use fist... (laughs)

[Kane, interview 9]

As seen in the above extract, Kane was not shy when explaining how to handle an intruder in his home. However, the preference of fist over his baseball bat again represents a tough masculine identity that somewhat serves a function of self-protection, in this case, preserving his own home from intruders. Again, it was interesting how not all the men have voiced this ‘hard guy’ identity: instead such identity appeared to be associated with participants who had found themselves in vulnerable situations.

Sub-theme 4.2: "I put a knife up against someone for trying to start on me": The need to protect one's vulnerability

For some men, it appeared that life outside of prison could mean exposure to bullying and assault. As seen in Matt's account below, acting like a 'hard guy' helped him to deal with such circumstances:

INT: OK. Did anyone deliberately upset you?

Matt: Erm, someone was trying to take my hat off my head.

INT: Ohh

Matt: And went straight up to me. Trying giving it large

[...]

Matt: Then I stood up straight... He was bricking it.

INT: OK.

Matt: He backed off...

[...]

Matt: I had my hand in the fist way ready

[Matt, interview 1]

For Matt, the threat was clear and physical, as the other person was attempting to take his hat and was "giving it large". On this occasion, the act of aggression appeared to have stopped the incident, thus reinforced the need for an aggressive, 'hard guy' approach, as it was a useful coping strategy for self-protection in the community. Again, this portrayal was hardly seen with participants who had not voiced incidents of victimisation in the community: "Erm... Not really. Its just keeping yourself away from, the old stuff what we used to do, what made me come in here" [Will, interview 8].

Discussion

When the expectation of hapless staff becomes the 'norm'

A negative experience of staff support was echoed through numerous accounts and self-reflections. It was obvious that the men's negative feelings, arguably developed from their experiences, had evolved into an unchangeable negative expectation of staff, as if the men might as well 'give up' with their support. The unfortunate position the men adopted supports the findings from Ellem and colleagues (2012), as their participants perceived their difficulties with parole staff similarly, with one man describing it as them having 'a vendetta' against him. Similarly, the findings mirrored the perspective of family members of offenders with intellectual disabilities, as questionnaires collected by Cockram et al (1998) revealed families' major dissatisfactions with professional services, with many families expressing a grave perception of support staff (e.g. they questioned if police were trained to help people with intellectual disabilities), and doubting whether staff were acting in the best interests of the offenders, again, all implying a negative attitude towards professional support.

Here, with the interpretation gained from the analysis, the notion of a rocky relationship between staff and service users led to participants' displaying a hesitancy towards working with staff, and an assumption that 'a line' existed between the two parties. It was interesting that such a divide was also observed by Ellem and colleagues (2012) during their interviews with staff from the health and correctional services, as the practitioners voiced a hesitancy about approaching offenders with intellectual disabilities, rationalised by their lack of experience supporting this vulnerable group. Despite the limitations for generalisation, the current findings suggest a need to explore staff perceptions of their relationship with clients, as well as to identify how these may be improved.

Relationships are not formed without a reason

It appears that participants' experiences of support have informed their relationship with professional staff. For some men, this was through their experience of injustice. For others, it was due to the focus of staff solely on their troubles. The desire for staff to support them beyond their troubles was also reported in the *No One Knows project* (Talbot, 2008), as imprisoned offenders wanted support from staff that was more constructive (e.g. willing to take account of their interests and aspirations in life). Clearly, most of the support as described by the current participants would run into conflict with their aspirations, as the staff paid little attention to the men's lives outside of their crime (there were a very small number of exceptions to this, where staff went out of their way to support

men, and the men genuinely appreciated this). The approach by most staff leads one to question if support professionals are facilitating a rehabilitative process, alongside their 'policing' duties, as suggested by *Breaking the Cycle (2010)*. Whilst the answer would be mostly 'no' for the current participants, it may be unfair to generalise this result to other services. However, future studies should explore the type of work that staff perform, perhaps together with their workload; job motivation; daily demands and overall objectives, to determine if a rehabilitative process is present during their everyday practice. Probation services and social services in the UK have received endless reorganisations, and a terrible battering with years of financial austerity and cuts in services. Clearly improvements in funding may be part of what is needed.

The benefits of Person-centred support

It is fair to say that the participants did not appreciate the one-dimensional, 'crime-prevention' support received from staff, as there were other parts of their life they wanted some assistance with (e.g. relationship with family; undertaking hobbies). Whilst the qualitative findings from Kenemore et al (2006) were concerned with ex-prisoners without intellectual disabilities, it was important to reflect upon their findings as they also revealed a mistrust develop between participants and staff, whereby there was a perceived barrier for practitioners to understand the social, emotional and psychological issues that accompanied community re-entry. Together with the current findings, it seems the life for ex-offenders after release is surrounded by support that may be too simplistic.

At this point, it is worth noting that a variety of guidance already suggests an alternative person-centred approach when supporting people with intellectual disabilities who have left prison, as this takes account of individual circumstances, with support organised to match their needs, facilitating the person to achieve their goals and aspirations (as recommended in the Department of Health's *Valuing People Now (2009)*, and *Positive Practice, Positive Outcomes (2011)* as well as in the *Good Lives Model* developed for mainstream sex offenders, Ward & Gannon, 2006). From the current findings, it seemed that many men felt powerless and not in control of the direction of their post-prison support. Consideration should therefore be given to incorporating a more personalised positive approach to help those who are restarting lives after incarceration.

The normalisation of trouble

A state of upheaval was common in the post-prison lives of men with intellectual disabilities. However, there were indications that such a state was somewhat normalised, as to an extent, the upheaval was nothing new to the men. The 'ups and downs' described by the participants appeared to

confirm the experience of ex-prisoners without intellectual disabilities, as given the challenges of adjusting to the free world (e.g. adapting to life without the strict prison routines), many reported the feelings of being overwhelmed (Kenemore et al 2006), or just feeling hopeless (Tewksbury, 2012). Similarly, a sample of ex-prisoners with intellectual disabilities have also recalled their post-prison life as something that happened to them, rather than taking control, given the great difficulties of re-adjustments to community living (Ellem, 2012). Whilst it would appear that the difficulties in re-adjustments have also affected the participants in other studies, what was surprising in the current study was that the men described a sense of numbness, as though the difficulties of post-prison life were to be expected. For some participants, this has deterred them to make a positive change.

Efforts for friends Vs. Efforts for work

The interpretation of friends as a double-edged sword has posed a challenging dilemma for the men in their life after prison. Confirming the findings from Bahr et al (2010) and Mbuba (2012), in relation to non-disabled offenders, participants in this study also saw their old friends as troublesome when they were re-entering the community, such that many men actively avoided their associations with previous peers. What appeared different in this study was the benefit, such as acceptance, that friends also provided for the men with intellectual disabilities, making that separation just a bit harder.

With the perspective that friends could lead to benefits and to troubled lives, it would be of interest to explore the possible association between peer influences and re-offending. So far, there has been consistent evidence that such a relationship exists for ex-offenders in the general population (e.g. Rebellon, Straus & Medeiros, 2008; Smith & Ecob, 2013). However, a sweeping generalisation should not be made as the social dynamics for people with intellectual disabilities are different, for example, many have a much smaller social network (Forrester-Jones et al, 2006), with staff being more of a functional and emotional support than acquaintances (Van Asselt-Goverts, Embregts & Hendriks, 2013). What also appears to be important here is the effort that the men have to make to stay away from friends, in comparison to the effort to obtain a new life, symbolised by obtaining employment, so that choosing old friends may be a simpler, less effortful option.

All participants voiced their intention to find a job, a common finding that has been seen before in prisoners with intellectual disabilities (Talbot, 2008), ex-prisoners with intellectual disabilities (Ellem, 2012), and ex-prisoners without intellectual disabilities (Howerton et al, 2009; Bahr et al, 2010). The current findings further revealed that many men were willing to go through a number of requirements (e.g. attending a training course) to ensure they were employable and ready for work. Yet, their efforts could be unrewarded due to their history of offence, as employers made

rejections on such grounds. From qualitative interviews with other men without intellectual disabilities, it appears that these are common preconceived judgements made by employers, with one study describing it as vindication (Mbuba, 2012) that continues to persist within the employment market (e.g. Bahr et al, 2010; Shivy et al, 2007). This could be troubling for the participants in the current study, as holding down a job meant more than building a career (e.g. gaining new friends/a new life). Considering the effort that the participants have to put in to ensure they were employable in the first place, facing more barriers could potentially deter them from trying, as was evident for some men in this study.

Beyond the practical importance of family

For the current participants, family proved to be important not just for the practical support they provided, with many reflecting on the emotional containment and an opportunity to demonstrate reciprocity in the relationship. The idea of reciprocity appears to reflect the findings from Mason et al (2013), as interviews with adults with intellectual disabilities concerning friendship have also indicated the value of give and take in relationships.

Whilst each man appeared to have the opportunity to maintain their relationships with their family, this finding was different from those men with ID who were interviewed by Ellem (2012), as their participants reported a lack of opportunity to rekindle relationships with their parents or child.

It was also striking that the current study identified the vigilant roles that families can play for the men (e.g. they warned the men about the loss of family if they were to re-offend). These vigilant roles supported Hubert et al's (2007) findings, as interviews exploring mothers' perspectives have also described their sense of expectation to manage their sons, ensuring vigilance was always in place. With the family providing both practical support and moral guidance, it is important to explore how to help ex-offenders to maintain such family bonds.

The need to be 'a man'

The construction of a 'hard man' masculine identity was only seen in participants who were dealing with bullying and victimisation in the community, despite the fact that such 'tough guy' presentations could lead them to offend again (e.g. retaliating with fists and knives). A question surrounding the safety of men with intellectual disabilities in the community should therefore be asked, as becoming abused or victimised may not be so uncommon (Beadle-Brown et al, 2014). If men with intellectual disabilities do need to act 'hard' in order to avoid victimisation, professional

support should consider the risks involved with community re-entry, and the appropriate skills that could help with reducing/handling such situations.

Limitations of the study

The relatively small sample of the current study captured the unique journeys of men with intellectual disabilities who have left prison in England. The sample was arguably homogeneous enough to ensure the differences captured were not due to other characteristics of the participants. It should be noted that staying in touch with participants has been difficult, though the specificity of the recruitment criteria should also be acknowledged (men with ID who have left prison for 9 months or more). Reflecting on the participants who lost touch with the study, it appears that their lives were somewhat more chaotic, as they were often homeless, with no professional support that could aid the liaison between the men and the study team. Losing such participants would have made an impact on the sample, as the study might have missed out on the stories of men who are in even a less fortunate position.

The presence of staff at a number of interviews should be noted, as it may have had an effect on the recall of experiences by the participants due to their presence, especially if participants wanted to speak negatively with regards to their support experiences. On all occasions where staff were present, the interviewer did reiterate the primary importance of listening to the participant's views, and emphasised that the interview was only concerned with the participant.

It was also important to recognise the shortness in some participants' narrative and accounts during the interviews. For 3 participants, there was a slight speech impediment that may have affected their communication. However, the researcher continued to adopt the approach of giving the participant time and repeating their sentences so the men could build upon it, so that hopefully the difficulties of these men has not prevented them from telling their stories.

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Table. 1 Participants profile

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Nature of offence	Length in prison	Time left prison before interview	Accommodation status	Types of support received by participants (Y/N)		
							Social services	Probation services	Health services
Matt	31	White UK	Breached of licence (original offence: sexual assault)	Less than 6 months	9-12 months	Own Home	Y	N	N
Vincent	30	Other	GBH	Less than 6 months	9-12 months	Assessment & treatment unit	Y	N	Y
Jason	32	White UK	Breached of restraining order and harassment	6-12 months	12-18 months	Homeless hostel	N	Y	N
Louis	50	White UK	Breached of restraining order	13-18 months	9-12 months	Own Home	Y	Y	N
Mike	28	White UK	Breached of licence (original offence: sexual assault)	6-12 months	9-12 months	Prison (recalled)	N	N	Y
Lee	48	White UK	Breached of licence (original offence: sexual assault)	Undisclosed	13-18 months	Prison (recalled)	Y	N	N
Bob	22	Black African	Possession of weapon	Undisclosed	13-18 months	Assessment & treatment unit	Y	N	Y
Will	22	White UK	Breached of licence (original offence: theft)	6-12 months	13- 18 months	Prison (recalled)	N	N	Y
Kane	25	White UK	Arson	6-12 months	13-18 months	Family Home	N	Y	N
Ali	24	White UK	Harassment	Less than 6 months	9-12 months	Family Home	N	N	N

Table. 2 Themes and Subthemes of the findings (pseudo-names were used to ensure anonymity)

Master themes	Subthemes	Extracts
1. “Want to help? You ain’t helping”: The nature of post-prison support	“I don’t know if she is just lying”: Hostile relationships between service users and staff	Vincent: “Yeah. Take me to a better place, where I can work with, you know, where there is the right staff. With the right staff.” [Interview 2]
	Why the “bad blood”?	Kane: “That’s all she does (probation officer) is just, meant to go there, she says, hi Kane, you keeping out of trouble. Yup, What you doing to keep out of trouble, stay at home. Ok then, nothing else, sign your name, here’s your next appointment. That’s all she does she didn’t, don’t do anything.” [Interview 9]
		Louis: “But the one who is coming this afternoon it might as well turn up as a lampshade.” [Interview 4]
	“She listens to what I’m saying”: The remembrance of good support	Matt: “Erm. He helps me erm when I can’t understand stuff he’ll explain it to me. And. In erm. It when I get letters erm I let him look at them. Erm.” [Interview 1]
	“They need to stop telling people what to do”: Participant’s control vs. powerlessness	Bob: “Do you know the manager, they have to decide” [Interview 7]
2. “Staying out of trouble from my friends, is the hardest bit”: Trouble is both normal & easy	“Apart from the ups and downs... It’s been alright”: The normalisation of troubles in post-prison life	Jason: “Feels good but it all depends on, as I said it all depends on what happens on the, 19 th March (court case)” [Interview 3]
	“I don’t think hard enough. I... shouldn’t be with them people”: Troubled friends with benefits	Kane: “But, yeah it’s been easy. I had people, ringing up saying do you want to, come out, it’s just like, no. You can carry on what you’re doing. Get in trouble, find out what, is like in there (prison)...” [Interview 9]

	<p>“I’m hoping to get my job back”: The challenges to getting a better option</p>	<p>Lee: “it’s when I’m out there I got too much time on my hand to know what to do with it [So... I usually end up in the bad situation like D at work (working in prison laundry) he’s going to talk to my probation what I do for the day and as soon as I go out, they’ve got to find me a job.</p>	<p>[Interview 6]</p>
<p>3. “Yeah. And be one big happy family”: The significance of family relationships</p>	<p>“I love my dad”: And it’s not just about his practicality</p>	<p>Bob: “Probably that, erm, I want to be close with my family that’s all”</p>	<p>[Interview 7]</p>
	<p>“As long as I don’t do it again I’ve got all my family”: Seeing family as their moral compass</p>	<p>Mike: “He’s supportive and everything, standing by me.... He he knows what I’ve done is wrong but... as long as I don’t do it again I’ve got all my family still there and that’s why I’m trying... that’s what my plan is... not to commit any more offences”</p>	<p>[Interview 5]</p>
<p>4. “I stood up straight... he was bricking it”: The need to be hard in the context of vulnerability</p>	<p>“Any person outside starting on me”: The benefits of a ‘hard guy’ identity</p>	<p>Kane: “That’s what I want to do, get a car, get it all suited up, be a boy racer (heheh)”</p>	<p>[Interview 9]</p>
	<p>“I put a knife up against someone for trying to start on me”: The need to protect one’s vulnerability</p>	<p>Lee: “Pick on, loads, told him again and he just said you got to live with it again. I go, no, I’m done with it, so I got my coat, walked out, turn towards the building, he looked into the window, he was laughing. And I just went, alright, why don’t you (‘up yours’ gesture)”.</p>	<p>[Interview, 6]</p>

Table. 2 Themes and Subthemes of the findings (continue)

Figure. 1 Diagram illustrating themes and subthemes (with simplified theme names)

