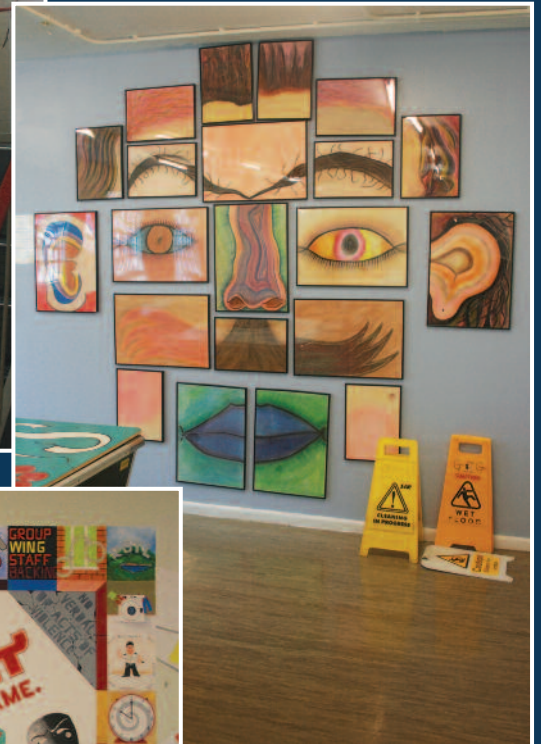
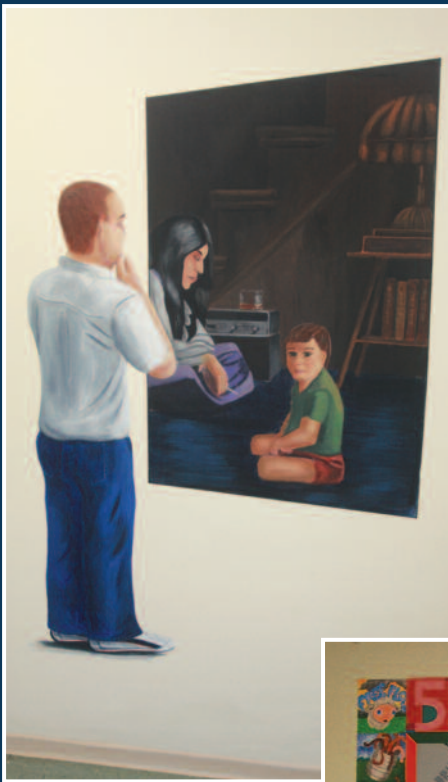


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*Breaking the Cycle*

# Relinquishing control?

## An exploration of the experiences of staff working in a Therapeutic Community prison

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**The majority of the prison service operates on a control orientated organisational model. Such models have received a good deal of attention within the academic literature, in relation to the traditional role of prison officers and the effects of working within a prison setting. However, little evidence exists specific to the unique working environment of a Therapeutic Community (TC) prison, and the experiences of staff in working in these settings in what is traditionally perceived as a role focused on control. This lack of literature prompted our in-depth qualitative study, conducting a thematic analysis of data gained from nine semi-structured interviews carried out with prison officers at HMP Grendon. A number of dominant themes were identified: security versus therapy; benefits of dynamic security; the importance of interaction; 'looking past the uniform'; and finally, adapting to a Therapeutic Community. This paper reports the methods of control utilised within a TC prison, from the perspective of prison officers.**

### Background

This study aimed to review the experiences of prison officers working at HMP Grendon. Of the one hundred and forty prisons in England and Wales, just five currently offer a vision of 'offender management' based upon the principles and aims of a democratic therapeutic community. Grendon — a category B (medium secure) establishment for up to two hundred and thirty five men is the first, largest and only fully dedicated TC prison in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Although the establishment has changed over time, it has kept its unique regime of therapeutic care for offenders. Grendon accepts a range of prisoners, including those serving life sentences and those with complex needs, such as personality disorders and high

levels of psychopathy. Offenders applying to the prison must agree to a commitment of twenty-four months to complete therapy, showing that they have a genuine desire to change. The preferred TC term for inmates is 'residents'.<sup>2</sup> and so this will be used throughout.

Existing literature<sup>3</sup> has identified four complementary and interdependent TC principles: first is the principle of democratization, which ensures that each member of the community can participate equally in therapeutic and administrative decision making; second is communalisation, where facilities and domestic arrangements are shared; third is permissiveness — this simply means that residents tolerate other's behaviours that might normally be perceived as deviant; finally is the principle of reality confrontation, which highlights that although problematic behaviour is tolerated, it does not pass unnoticed or without criticism. This is achieved predominantly through small therapy groups, where the effects of problematic behaviour are discussed and explored. These guiding principles apply equally to staff and residents.<sup>4</sup> The basic principles of a democratic TC allow the residents to influence and change the way they interact within an agreed decision making structure.

When reflecting on the four principles stated above, it is clear that a TC is designed to give a great deal of responsibility to the residents and promotes the idea that residents and staff are equal, with a focus on the encouragement of an open 'culture of enquiry'. A 'culture of enquiry' refers to residents being mindful of each other's needs, problems, and how to negotiate their place in the community and appreciate the interdependence of all members.<sup>5</sup>

### Review of the Literature

This research sought to explore the specific experiences of prison officers at Grendon, in relation to aspects of control. The role of a prison officer is

1. Shuker, R. (2010). Forensic therapeutic communities: A critique of treatment model and evidence base. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 49 (5), 463-477.
2. See N.1.
3. Rapoport, R. (1960). Community as Doctor: New perspectives on a therapeutic community, in: Shuker, R. & Sullivan, E (eds), *Grendon and the Emergence of Forensic Therapeutic Communities: Developments in Research and Practice*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
4. Parker, M. (2007). *Dynamic Security: The democratic therapeutic community in prison*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
5. Haigh, R. (1999). The quintessence of a therapeutic community: Five universal qualities. In: P. Campling & R. Haigh (Eds) *Therapeutic Community: Past Present and Future* (246-257). London. Jessica Kingsley.

traditionally seen as focused on control and security. Recent descriptions in the academic literature highlight that 'prison work is based upon the use of power and authority deployed through human relationships' and 'enforcing rules by the book'.<sup>6</sup> The role of a prison officer is seen as an 'authoritative' role where the staff member has 'control' over the prisoner. However, over time the role of a prison officer has adapted to encompass more of the rehabilitative aspect of the prison environment. TC prisons take these principles further. Indeed, Grendon is unique as some security principles and procedures need not apply as they could damage therapy.<sup>7</sup> For example, a 'segregation unit' does not exist at the prison as unacceptable behaviour is primarily challenged in group work with the whole wing and staff. Through this example we can see how staff members must relinquish some control to the residents in order to collaborate and work within a TC.

There are three main aspects to security within a prison setting: *Physical Security*; *Procedural Security*; and *Dynamic Security*. The latter captures a practical way that prisons might be managed safely as well as decently.<sup>8</sup> Dynamic Security essentially explores a way of working that relies upon the traditional strengths of prison staff, developing relationships with residents, establishing trust and effective communication, therefore 'knowing what is going on'.<sup>9</sup> This aspect of security is based on the understanding that good relationships with prisoners will mean that they will communicate more effectively with staff. Furthermore, residents are thought to be less likely to be disruptive if they regard officers as fair, reasonable and trustworthy.<sup>10</sup> At the same time staff members must maintain their authority and distinctiveness from prisoners. When considering this in relation to the principles of security outlined previously, it is clear that a well-balanced relationship between prison officer and prisoner is vital. The additional benefits of a respectful relationship between resident and prison officer may be that staff can glean information that may indicate what 'has' or is 'about' to happen within the prison,

thereby demonstrating that effective dynamic security is the most valuable and unobtrusive form of control.<sup>11</sup>

While existing literature has looked at how the reliance on dynamic security may impact residents,<sup>12</sup> no research to date has explored any effect on the performance or personal experiences of prison staff. However, some studies have begun to explore the experience of staff working in TC prisons more broadly.<sup>13</sup> These studies have adopted a qualitative approach, allowing us to increase our understanding of the issues affecting staff working in these relatively unique environments.

There is a clear case for furthering our understanding of aspects of control in a TC prison, how staff experience this, and how it may affect them. This current study employed semi-structured interviews with nine prison officers working at Grendon. Five participants had worked within other establishments, while four had only ever worked at Grendon. Participants had worked within the prison service from three years to twenty-four years.

Through this example we can see how staff members must relinquish some control to the residents in order to collaborate and work within a within the TC.

## Discussion of Findings

The findings are presented under the key themes that emerged from thematic analysis of the research interviews: 'You have to wear two hats': Security versus therapy; Benefits of dynamic security; The importance of interaction; Looking past the uniform; and finally, Adapting to a therapeutic community. Sub themes are also discussed. Quotes that represent the majority view are provided throughout the findings presented below.

### **'You have to wear two hats': Security versus therapy**

A number of themes emerged when participants were asked about their role within HMP Grendon. All nine participants spoke about their experiences and struggles of balancing their role as an officer (security) and the role of a group facilitator (therapy). In an attempt to fully explain and represent the experiences of staff, this theme

6. Liebling, A. (2011). Distinctions and distinctiveness in the work of prison officers: Legitimacy and authority revisited. *European Journal of Criminology*, 8 (6), 484-499.
7. Parker, M. (2007). *Dynamic Security: The democratic therapeutic community in prison*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
8. See n.7.
9. See n.7.
10. See n.7.
11. See n.7.
12. Greenall, P.V. (2004). Life in a prison- based therapeutic community: One man's experience. *The British Journal of Forensic Practice*, 6, 33-38.
13. Kumari, N., Caulfield, L.S. & Newberry, M. (2012). The experiences of women working in a therapeutic community prison. *Prison Service Journal*, 201, 7-11.

is presented as two sub themes; *Dual Role* and *Finding a Balance*.

#### *Dual Role:*

All nine participants interviewed within this study acknowledged that they had a dual role as a prison officer in a TC, referring to this as 'wearing two hats'. This was something that participants understood and explained they were comfortable in switching between the two roles.

Participants explained that there were certain tasks they had to carry out as an officer and some they had to carry out as a group facilitator. Although, participants stated that sometimes the roles 'knit together quite nicely and other times the gap is huge, you have got the HMP side and you have got the TC side' (*participant 3*).

When the officer and therapy roles overlapped, participants explained that they sometimes needed to 'change their approach' when moving from security based tasks into therapy, in order to work effectively with the residents. Participant one explained how he had to 'wear two hats, up on the landing and when you get into groups and they are baring their bones you have to take a step back and say I'm not an officer now' (*participant 1*).

#### *'Finding a Balance'*

Participants spoke about the importance of finding a balance between the role of an officer and involvement in therapy, expressing that this balance is important for their own 'sanity' and also 'safety' as being involved in therapy can at times be 'overwhelming'. The general consensus was that their 'primary role is an officer and their secondary is a group facilitator' (*participant 3*). Participants acknowledged that this can be a struggle; however they explained that 'first and foremost we are here as prison officers and we are here for that very reason the traditional security and secondly we are here to do therapy, so it's like wearing two hats' (*participant 7*). Participants explained that in order to find this balance, 'boundaries' need to be set within the community. Participants stated that their relationship with residents really helped them to 'switch' between the roles, as the men on their wing 'understood'. Participant eight supported this in stating; 'they get to understand you have got a uniform job and you have got a therapeutic job'.

#### **Benefits of Dynamic Security**

All nine participants spoke about how residents are 'encouraged to bring a lot of what goes on upstairs, downstairs', meaning that what happens in cells and corridors should be discussed in therapy groups. This is explained as residents being 'open and honest' with staff and relates to dynamic security. Participants made 32 references to how dynamic security facilitates a greater awareness of the prison outside of group sessions. Through this, prison staff get a better understanding of 'what is going on rather than just the surface, you get to see underneath' (*participant 5*).

Participants placed importance on dynamic security: 'the control is that there is less and less mechanical restraints, like locked doors, the residents have more freedom to wander around, you rely more on dynamic security so you know them better and when something doesn't feel right, you think they don't normally do this' (*participant 8*). The benefits of dynamic security were discussed, further explaining that when certain residents are 'challenged', they will often thank the staff and fellow residents as they often felt 'they were going off the rails a little bit and that has brought me back on track' (*participant 3*).

When discussing the effects of dynamic security at Grendon, participants referred to it as a 'helpful part of security'. One participant used a specific example to explain his experience; 'the last act of self-harm was reported by a prisoner, they felt comfortable enough to come to us and say what was going on, it wouldn't happen anywhere else I don't think' (*participant 3*). Participants expressed that through residents telling them 'more about what is going on', helps to 'make the job easier'. Participants spoke about how the principles of a TC allow them to be more aware and that this is not seen as 'grassing' by residents, unlike in a mainstream prison, but is seen as 'challenging'. Participants explained that this is due to the 'culture of enquiry', which focuses on equality and tolerance to progress in therapy.

#### **The Importance of Interaction**

All nine participants acknowledged that being able to listen and communicate was a main skill required to work in a TC, as it 'promoted a better atmosphere' and allowed them to 'get to know the person better'. The shared community and 'living within a democracy' were highlighted as a factor contributing to effective

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communication and that this in turn helps to 'break down barriers and really get to know the individual'. This was a dominant theme within the data set, and three sub-themes emerged; *Challenging behaviour therapeutically*, *'We have control through talking'* and *Positive Staff Relationships*.

### *Challenging Behaviour Therapeutically*

All nine participants spoke about the importance of 'seeing challenging behaviour' as it is essential to 'challenge it therapeutically'. Participants stated that they will always challenge behaviour therapeutically and if this fails they will go down the 'HMP side, such as using nicking'<sup>14</sup> or adjudications<sup>15</sup> if the same thing happens again'. However, participants regarded challenging behaviour as residents 'displaying their offending behaviour'. Interestingly, all nine participants stated that they 'encourage certain behaviour as this allows them really explore and fix it' (*participant 3*). Participants stated that it is valuable to look at behaviour therapeutically and to really work with the residents at Grendon. Residents coming to Grendon must display a desire to change and officers expressed that because of this 'there is a chance of talking them down and understanding what's behind it' (*participant 4*).

It was interesting to note that all participants spoke about how Grendon 'gives residents the space to be angry'. When this occurs prison officers explained that it allows them 'to see something in them that's not just their crime, to see an actual person and understand what motivates them' (*participant 8*). Participants explained how this anger was contained by staff members ability to 'not react themselves'. Through talking and therapy participants were able to challenge behaviour. Participant five summarises this in saying 'if you don't see the anger you can't see the problem, if they don't talk about it, it will still be with them.

### *'We have control through talking'*

Participants did not speak about wanting more control as a prison officer within a TC prison. Participants felt they had 'overall control' as they were 'responsible' for the 'day to day regime'. While participants did speak about times they had felt 'frustrated' in community meetings, they ultimately felt comfortable as they knew the 'final decision' came to staff.

Aspects of control in a mainstream prison were briefly discussed: in a 'system prison we have control over every minute of their day'. However, the majority of participants stated that they felt a different type of control at Grendon, such as 'control through talking' and dynamic security as discussed above. Overall participants felt that 'sitting down and talking is more effective than rolling around on the floor and putting someone in handcuffs' (*participant 1*).

Participants stated that if they needed to they would use physical control. However participants felt that they could 'de-escalate' the situation as they have 'the communication skills here'. The relationship with the residents and the environment of a TC were two main reasons why participants felt they had control through talking, as opposed to more 'traditional methods of constraint'.

Participants spoke about how important it was to have effective communication and listening skills as this was a main contributing factor to the relationship they formed with residents. By seeing and challenging behaviour participants concluded that they were able to 'open up a better dialogue' with residents, which made them understand individuals more. In doing this a great deal of tolerance was needed 'to deal with a lot of behaviours' (*participant 7*). Tolerance was discussed as a vital trait to work in a TC. Tolerance underpinned this whole theme as

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by having tolerance, participants felt they were able to challenge behaviour therapeutically and exercise control through talking.

### ***Positive Staff Relationships***

When talking about the tolerance needed to work in a therapeutic community, all nine participants placed importance on the positive relationships and teamwork of the staff they worked with at Grendon. Participants spoke about how a 'TC wouldn't work without staff teamwork', whether they 'have a rant in the tearoom' or being sensitive towards one another.

Participants expressed how they felt that both sensitivity and supervision helped them a great deal at Grendon. Supervision was highlighted as a way to 'get your point across, an avenue to voice your opinions or frustrations' (*participant 3*). Participants felt this helped them to release concerns and opinions, so they 'didn't build things up' and helped them to 'get their head

14. *Nicking*: A slang term for being accused of breaking prison rules and placed on report.

15. *Adjudication*: The formal term for a 'nicking'.

around it'. Similar to this, feedback between colleagues was noted as an important method for officers in a TC, as it helped them to 'learn on the job'. Overall participants felt the relationship and interaction with other staff helped them in their role as a prison officer and in turn helped them to work effectively within a TC.

### **Looking past the uniform**

All nine participants placed emphasis on the unique relationship between staff and residents at Grendon. Firstly, all participants stated that their role as a prison officer was 'accepted and respected' by residents. The phrase 'looking past the uniform' was used a great deal, meaning participants felt they were more than just a 'black and white shirt'. Participants stated that they felt accepted by residents as the 'nature of a TC' allows them to 'learn a little bit more about you and respect the role you play'. It is interesting to note that all nine participants felt that by using first name terms within a TC a different relationship could be formed with residents, forming 'mutual respect' that 'breaks down barriers'. The use of first name terms was expressed as contributing to a 'different relationship with residents'. In discussing this, participants referred to the 'us and them' culture that exists in mainstream prisons. Participant three stated that 'calling them by their last name and expecting them to call you Mr, that's what creates that them and us'. The majority of participants regarded the unique relationship between staff and residents as a main benefit to working in a TC as it 'allows you to work together'. Breaking down 'barriers' and working together on a 'level basis' were highlighted throughout discussions with all participants. As a result, participants felt this contributed to dynamic security and really emphasised the effectiveness of a TC.

The relationship between staff and residents was regarded as positive, and eight of the participants spoke about how this can sometimes affect their decision making process. Participants spoke about how they 'got to know the individual more' therefore certain behaviours that they displayed could be understood by the member of staff. Participant eight explained that 'this worked both ways as you get to know the person better, so you are better informed with your decisions'. Overall, knowing the individual better made it possible to 'see the bigger picture' and 'view situations differently'.

### **Adapting to a therapeutic community**

When talking about their experiences of working within Grendon, all participants focused on the nature of

a TC, explaining that there are a lot more 'grey' areas. Furthermore, all participants spoke about their '*transition into a therapeutic community*'.

### **Black, White and Grey Areas**

Five participants regarded Grendon as a 'more relaxed environment' than other prisons. In explaining this, participants discussed that the 'different processes' and 'culture' meant a lot of the daily 'responsibility is given to the residents'. Although the relaxed nature of Grendon was seen as a positive for participants, six out of ten participants expressed that 'everything was not black and white,' meaning there were a number of 'grey' areas.

These grey areas were regarded as a main challenge for participants, in relation to aspects of control. Participant three explained that, 'it's about where that line is really, it's not second nature here so you can sometimes go past that line'. There was general consensus amongst participants about this as in 'mainstream prisons there is a firm line that if they don't do what they are told they are restrained'. By not having a 'firm line' and defined 'black and white' boundaries within a TC, participants felt they were 'going against training in some aspects'. The decision making process within Grendon was seen as 'unique' and participants felt that these 'grey areas' made them deal with things on a 'case to case basis'.

The majority of participants regarded the unique relationship between staff and residents as a main benefit to working in a TC as it 'allows you to work together'.

### **Transition into a therapeutic community**

Eight participants stated that they found their transition into a TC 'challenging'. Participants felt that within their training they were just 'taught the regime in a normal prison'. Therefore participants felt there was a real 'struggle' between what they had learnt in training and coming to Grendon. All participants expressed that their training did not include the Grendon 'way' or 'regime'. As a result participants stated they experienced a 'culture shock' when coming to Grendon, as they didn't feel 'prepared'. Participants felt that their prison training was very 'generic' and an emphasis was given on a 'broad overview of the prison system'.

Seven of the participants felt that they were 'not prepared' for the differences of a TC, from either training or previous employment. Participants who were still relatively new to Grendon (2-5 years), stated their training did mention how Grendon would be different but 'no detail was given'. Participants regarded training as a 'guide' but explained that it was 'totally different' when they came to the prison. As a result of this, six participants stated that they 'learnt on the job'. This process was

considered easier at Grendon, as participants felt they were 'eased into the job'. However, participants sometimes felt confused in the beginning when it came to handling situations related to discipline.

When reflecting on their transition to Grendon, all nine participants gave suggestions about what did or would have helped them when adapting to working in a TC prison (see figure 1).

### Conclusions

All participants held the view that aspects of control are different between HMP Grendon and the main prison estate, and explained that they used such methods as dynamic security and control through talking, as opposed to a reliance on physical and/or procedural control. All nine participants expressed they did not need more control at Grendon. When expanding upon this, participants placed importance on their ability to challenge behaviour therapeutically, addressing challenging behaviour on a case-by-case basis, as they had the ability to understand the residents and why they were displaying certain behaviours. Participants reported that they felt comfortable as an officer working in this environment. However, they drew attention to their dual role, switching between security based tasks and involvement in therapy.

When discussing the effectiveness of a TC, participants placed emphasis on the relationship they had with residents at Grendon. This relationship was described as the primary reason for successful and respectful control

and security. Participants explained that due to residents' individual desire to engage in therapy, everybody 'was working to achieve the same goal'. However, officers within this study felt that there were a number of 'grey' areas within a prison TC, which made them question themselves and their role. When exploring this issue further, participants discussed aspects of their training. Participants often felt that they were going against their original officer training, and suggesting a need for more TC focused training to help understand better the boundaries and processes of a TC. Figure one includes suggestions put forward by participants, which would help in the training of officers specifically working in a TC. Participants often felt that they were going against their original officer training, and suggesting a need for more TC focused training to help understand better the boundaries and processes of a TC.

Overall, participants did not focus on the idea of relinquishing control to residents at Grendon, but more on the shared decision making structure of a TC. Participants explained how this allowed everybody to work together and ultimately support the goals of the TC prison.

Through employing a qualitative methodology this research has captured the views and experiences of nine officers at HMP Grendon, providing an insight into this under-researched area. While it is important to note that the sample size is small and so not representative of all staff working in TC prisons, the findings provide a depth of data upon which further research might be based.

**Figure 1**

Participant	Suggestions	Why?
1	Open Day Hand-outs/Information pack DVD	To see how Grendon works and highlight the main aspects of a TC
2	Induction booklet	A programme to teach you the terms/ ethos of Grendon
3	Work in a mainstream prison before coming to Grendon	'Learn your jail graft first. Seeing the ugly side of prisoners in mainstream will help you to be more aware at Grendon'
4	Mentor/ buddy system	To provide a formal structure to help individuals adapt
5	Personality Disorder Training	To gain further awareness and knowledge of the different personality disorders officers are likely to encounter
6	Being trained at Grendon	'This really helped as tutors were from Grendon, they could prepare us'
7	TCAT <sup>16</sup> training	Before coming to Grendon to fully prepare staff for working in this environment
8	Individual coping skills training	To understand how material can affect you (realisation)
9	TCAT before Information booklet Mentor	Having a TCAT before to be more aware. Information booklet to highlight the terms and processes at Grendon

16. TCAT – Therapeutic Community Accredited Training is specific training related to a TC. Students complete 3 modules of study and there must be a gap of approximately six months between completing each module.