

PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

May 2012 No 201



The experiences of women working in a male therapeutic community prison

Neelama Kumari was formerly a student at Birmingham City University, *Laura Caulfield* is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Birmingham City University, and *Michelle Newberry* is Senior Lecturer in Forensic Psychology at the University of Bedfordshire.

Traditionally, prisons are male dominated places. The majority of staff working in prisons are male and prison work has often been viewed as a 'masculine' occupation. However, the number of women working in these institutions continues to grow. As researchers we are interested in the experience of women working in this traditionally male environment, particularly the experiences of those women working in therapeutic community (TC) prisons where there are numerous challenges to face. Little research literature exists concerning the role and experience of women in the Prison Service, let alone concerning the issues specific to a prison TC, and so to investigate these issues we decided to undertake research reviewing the experiences of female staff working at Grendon TC prison. This research is unique in that it is the first attempt to review the experiences of female staff working in a male prison TC and it has produced a number of interesting findings.

The research explored a variety of factors, including the experiences of women working in what is often perceived as an 'authoritative' role in a male-dominated environment, experiences of working with male inmates who may have issues communicating with women, risk and safety concerns, and the personal impact of working in such an environment. In addition, some research¹ has suggested that female therapy staff may have a better attitude towards treatment and expectations than male therapy staff and so we were interested in exploring this further.

The research

This study aimed to review the experiences of female staff working at Grendon TC prison. HMP Grendon opened in 1962 and started out as an 'experimental' psychiatric prison to provide treatment for adult male prisoners with antisocial personality disorders. In recent years, it has adopted an approach more in line with the rest of the prison estate, whilst keeping its unique regime of therapeutic care for

offenders. Grendon is a Category B establishment and accepts prisoners over the age of 21 with complex needs, such as personality disorders and psychopathy. Grendon houses mainly serious offenders serving life sentences and all inmates must give a commitment of 24 months to complete therapy to show that they have a genuine desire to change. Currently, Grendon accommodates up to 235 adult male offenders housed in six autonomous therapeutic communities on separate wings of the prison.

In accordance with the ethical guidelines of the British Psychological Society (BPS), and adopting a qualitative approach, interviews were conducted with ten female members of staff working at Grendon spanning the roles of: Forensic Psychologist; Trainee Psychologist; Assistant Psychologist; Art Therapist; Prison Officer; and Population Management Officer. Participants had worked at Grendon for between two and ten years and so were very familiar with the establishment.

Review of the literature

This research seeks to explore the specific experiences of female therapy staff at Grendon TC prison. Prison-based work has traditionally been male-dominated and so for females to fulfil an authoritative role in such an organisation (e.g. that of a Prison Officer), one could argue that they must adopt masculine traits such as assertiveness and detachment to be taken seriously, as opposed to feminine traits which are stereotypically emotional (e.g. 'soft' and caring). However, female therapists play an important role in a male prison TC, challenging the prisoners to adopt appropriate behaviour towards females in general or because they need to address their negative attitudes towards women during therapy.

Research has suggested that there is an element of gender segregation with regard to performance and recognition at work. For example, female psychologists tend to have a better attitude towards their client and display an appropriate level of empathy during treatment, although they make slower progress in their

1. Bowers, A. & Bieschke, K. (2005). Psychologists' clinical evaluations and attitudes: An examination of the influence of gender and sexual orientation. *Professional Psychology: Research and practice*, 36, 97-103.

career than male psychologists.² There are generally more males in managerial positions than females in most organisations, and it could be argued that 'leadership style' is a major contributor to this. Females typically have a democratic style of leadership and are concerned with trying to understand individual situations, and so have a more diverse approach to their leadership style.³ This was seen as a benefit at Grendon where female therapy staff may help to create a more balanced environment.

Research has suggested that workplaces with both male and female staff are likely to increase confidence and boost productivity,⁴ and gender appears to have a greater influence in the workplace than staff status.⁵ For instance, women tended to dominate the low level management roles, whereas the men dominated the senior management roles.

Given the special nature of HMP Grendon, and the issues that are relevant to women working with male offenders, the overall aim of the present research is to gain insight into the experiences of female therapy staff at Grendon. Specifically, to examine their approach to offering treatment, their experiences of working with prisoners at Grendon, and any differences in career progression between male and female therapy staff.

Discussion of findings

The findings are presented under the key themes that emerged from the research interviews: Gender roles and differences in approach; Feelings of safety and support; Inmate responses to female staff; and Personal experiences.

Gender roles and differences in approach

A number of themes emerged during the discussion of gender roles at HMP Grendon. Staff can find themselves playing the role of 'parents', where they 'need to be firm but fair' and 'every staff member has a role to play, where the older female is the mother,

the younger psychologist is the girlfriend, and the dominant therapist is the father.' Indeed, other research⁶ has found that some prisoners report that they like male therapists to act as a father figure. Projection on to male prison staff can occur in a number of ways and can differ to projection on to females. For example 'male therapists can experience projection from abused prisoners, where the perpetrator was a male', whereas 'women in control can be perceived as undermining and the men get confused because females should be approachable and not be writing reports.' Participants felt that male and female staff tend to respond to an offender's history in different ways. For example, 'male staff seem to cope and shrug their shoulders, whereas females tend to be more empathetic.' However, one participant had observed that 'men cry to stories as well as women, and there is a mixed reaction.'

Some research participants stated that it is important to have a mix of female and male staff in order to understand and treat the prisoner. For instance, one participant felt that females highlight the 'empathic factors, whereas the male staff pick on factual information.' However, it was also noted that these differences are not just gender specific, but sometimes based on

differing personalities. For example, one participant described some 'male staff as controlling overtly, whereas other men are quiet and good listeners,' and so different prisoners are likely to relate to different approaches of staff as much as gender differences.

The majority of the participants believed that they employ an approach which involves the use of feminine and masculine characteristics (e.g. they are empathetic as well as logical at work). Some of the participants reflected on what the prisoners had told them about their approach, with one participant claiming that she adopted a masculine approach to her work as she had been told that she is 'analytical, closed off and shows less emotions.'

To avoid discrimination, participants stated that they ensure they are dressed appropriately around

Research has suggested that workplaces with both male and female staff are likely to increase confidence and boost productivity . . .

2. Bowers, A. & Bieschke, K. (2005). Psychologists' clinical evaluations and attitudes: An examination of the influence of gender and sexual orientation. *Professional Psychology: Research and practice*, 36, 97-103.
 3. Eagly, A. H. & Johnson, B. T. (1990). Gender and Leadership Style: A Meta-Analysis. *CHIP Documents*. Paper 11.
 4. Plas, J. M. & Wallston, B. S. (1983). Women orientated towards male dominated careers: Is the reference group male or female, *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 30, 46-54.
 5. Ostroff, C. & Atwater, L. E. (2003). Does whom you work with matter? Effects of referent group gender and age composition on Manager's compensation, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88, 725-740.
 6. Blazina, C. (2001). Analytic Psychology and gender role conflict: The development of the fragile masculine self, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training*, 38, 50-59.

prisoners; the 'men are denied sex in prisons, therefore it would be inappropriate to dress provocatively before them. It is about mutual respect' and clothes must be worn which 'are not revealing or low necked, and accessories cover bare skin'. The issue of appropriate dress was widely discussed by the participants with one describing how she 'initially would wear dark and loose clothes, but now feels she can wear nice clothes without drawing inappropriate attention'. The latter point illustrates that reactions can be motivated by a number of factors: 'the men notice new clothes on the staff all the time, for example new shoes or the male therapist's new tie.' It is noted that women are likely to adopt a range of measures to manage discriminatory issues at work.⁷

Gender differences were also discussed with respect to seniority within the prison. While research has shown progress in gender equality in the workplace with women often showing outstanding performance in their leadership style⁸ some participants felt that men still hold the majority of managerial positions at work: 'senior officers and governors are predominantly male' and the 'western culture perceives men as dominant'. While some participants felt that men dominate senior roles because the Prison Service recruits more male staff, one participant claimed that success rates for female staff on promotion was lower 'there are many females in psychology, but not so many females as Head of Psychology.' Therefore, the perception here is that predominantly female professions are also dominated by males in managerial positions. Indeed, research still suggests that the gender of individuals affects status at work, with men dominating the senior roles, and women dominating the low level management roles⁹. However, one participant explained that she 'chose to work in a male dominated environment...but is not treated differently to any other staff and is not undermined.' Additionally, participants did feel that management roles could be efficiently undertaken by men or women, as both are able to 'take charge to hold

things together and focus on the bigger picture', and staff in senior roles 'need to be strong and assertive'.

Feelings of safety and support

Overall the participants reported feeling safe at Grendon. One respondent commented that a prisoner's previous offending was not necessarily a predictor of prison based offending: 'the series of events which led to an offence will not repeat itself in the prison environment'. However in any prison environment there are likely to be some occasions when staff may be fearful of their safety, which one participant stated 'is healthy and realistic.' Ground rules are put into place to influence prisoners' actions, and if rules are broken there are particular procedures to be followed. For example, 'an observation book records the prisoners actions, the prisoner is challenged directly, and there is the opportunity to speak to staff team for advice'. The staff were aware of the need to be vigilant and confident in their approach to avoid placing themselves in risky situations, and participants felt that ensuring they are communicating effectively with the 'wholesome of the community and staff' was the best strategy for avoiding such situations.

While there are safety procedures at Grendon (e.g. alarms, security staff, and appropriate staff numbers on the wing), staff reported that in addition to concerns over the potential for physical harm in the work place, there is sometimes concern for its emotional impact. Many prisoners are or have been dangerous individuals and their difficult histories can affect staff in different ways. For example, one member of staff described herself as a 'low reactor,' whereas another described one instance where she read a rape account and was horrified, and since then she 'briefly scans the offences to avoid false impression'. Furthermore, 'the level of contact with the men can exploit painful things', and the intensity of the job can lead to stress. It is therefore important to have support at work. Grendon offers a range of support, including, 'group sensitivity, one to one supervision

While research has shown progress in gender equality in the workplace with women often showing outstanding performance in their leadership style⁸ some participants felt that men still hold the majority of managerial positions at work . . .

7. Lupton, B. (2000). Maintaining masculinity: Men who do 'women's work'. *British Journal of Management*, 11, 33-48.
 8. Eagly, A. H. (2007) Female relationship advantage and disadvantage: resolving the contradictions, *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 31, 1-12.
 9. Ostroff, C. & Atwater, L. E. (2003). Does whom you work with matter? Effects of referent group gender and age composition on Manager's compensation, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88, 725-740.

with clinical staff, informal staff support, and the staff welfare care team who get involved after an incident'. Generally, participants claimed that there was adequate support and that the staff team seem to provide most of it. However, not all staff felt that the support at Grendon is useful. For example one participant claimed that the 'staff can give their opinion but are not heard,' and some reported that there is a lack of recognition at work. However, most of the participants felt supported by their senior managers. For example, '(I) had an issue with being the only female staff on the wing and requested for more female staff,' and her senior manager is in the process of addressing this. Most of the participants felt that the resources at Grendon are sufficient, but that the people at Grendon are the best resources, because 'there are lots of people who come from diverse range of experiences'. Indeed, it has been suggested that a mix of male and female staff can lead to an increase in self-esteem and confidence amongst staff.¹⁰

Inmate responses to female staff

Most of the prisoners at Grendon have had bad life experiences, which in many cases has resulted in distorted thoughts about males and/or females. For example, one participant described how some 'prisoners will perceive females negatively due to the female negative role models in the past.' Indeed, high risk offenders can have a history of problems with a particular gender, which can also be linked to their offence¹¹; because of these preconceived ideas about gender, it is inevitable that some prisoners will struggle with particular staff. Alternatively, 'the men can be protective towards female staff', which is something the male staff do not experience from the prisoners. Staff had also observed how prisoners can alter their behaviour, and will behave well and temper their language around females. For example, if the prisoners swear in the presence of a female, they will apologise immediately. However, the same prisoners do not do this for the male staff. The way the staff present themselves has an influence on the way the prisoners communicate. For example, on e

participant described the 'male therapist on the wing as palpable and the men will respect him.'

There have been instances where prisoners will purposefully say or do things in order to differentiate between male and female staff. Some prisoners can also 'be critical and punishing when they are overtly sexual and flirtatious, and the staff do not reciprocate'. A few of the participants described incidents where a prisoner touched a female prison officer on the bottom, and another described a situation where an inmate came out of his cell with nothing but a towel on in front of a female officer. However, these kinds of situations are rare at Grendon, and staff reported that only a few prisoners will break boundaries. Most of the prisoners become infuriated with those prisoners who create these situations, and are 'over-protective' of the females. Petrillo (2007) claimed that female staff are perceived to be at high risk when working with these types of offenders, although other research has found that female staff are capable of adopting reasonable measures to protect their safety.¹²

The prevalence of psychopathy in HMP Grendon is unsurprisingly high given the nature of the offences committed by the prisoners held there¹³ and so the level of manipulation among and by prisoners is an understandable risk. One participant claimed that the prisoners tend to target 'anyone who has feminine aura about them, men or women,' but 'the degree to which the manipulation has an effect on the individual can vary'. Conversely, other research has found that if prisoners have an issue with females, then female staff can teach the prisoners about female perceptions.¹⁴

Personal experiences

More generally, most of the participants stated that the duration of employment at Grendon can influence staff performance. One participant explained that the 'intense and long relationships with prisoners has a positive impact on the treatment.' Another claimed that the long duration in employment is beneficial, because then the staff have 'seen it all before,' whereas the 'new

Most of the
prisoners at
Grendon have had
bad life experiences,
which in many
cases has resulted in
distorted thoughts
about males
and/or females.

10. Plas, J. M. & Wallston, B. S. (1983). Women orientated towards male dominated careers: Is the reference group male or female. *Journal of Counselling Psychology*, 30, 46-54.
11. Petrillo, M (2007) Power struggle: Gender issues for female probation officers in the supervision of high risk offenders, *The Probation Journal*, Volume 54, 4, p.394-406.
12. Stanko, E. (1990). When precaution is normal: A feminist critique of crime prevention. In L. Gelsthorpe & A. Morris (Eds.), *Feminist perspectives in criminology*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
13. Hobson, J. & Shine, J. (1998). Measurement of psychopathy in a UK prison population referred for long-term psychotherapy. *British Journal of Criminology*, 38, 504-515.
14. Rees, C. & Grinham G. (1986). Letters: Women workers in prison. *Probation Journal*, 33, 118-119.

staff tend get horrified with offender histories.’ Following this, some participants believed that the longer the staff have been working at establishment, the more the prisoners start to understand the staff and form their opinion of them.

Typically, prisoners at Grendon are engaged and motivated to change, which in turn impacts positively on staff: ‘staff have respect for inmates, and the inmates have respect for the staff, which is positive in reducing risk’. Several participants reported having found it a privilege to work at Grendon, because of the ‘engaged rehabilitation process’, and the proven success of the therapeutic community approach. One participant recalled that she was attracted to the prison because ‘everyone wants to do the same thing and the whole prison works in the same way.’ Most of the participants felt they have changed personally since working at Grendon. For example, they have ‘become more vigilant and have realised people are not as innocent as they may look’. Some of the participants were parents, and seeing how some of the prisoners have had a difficult childhood which may have affected their offending behaviour, they ‘are more wary and over-protective of their children’. Participants generally felt that this was something which was more likely to be experienced by female staff. One participant described how she ‘has become more thoughtful, empathetic, compassionate and (her) general outlook on life has changed,’ and another described herself as ‘a good listener now, with more patience and confidence.’ Grendon is all about communicating and empathising with each other, and one participant stated that this ‘has enabled her to soften up and get in touch with her feminine side, allowing her to look at (her) personality issues and family dynamics.’ Similarly, another found that she has ‘started to look at myself more and question how I relate to other people.’

Conclusions

The majority of female staff who were interviewed for this research felt that Grendon is a safe place to work

and that prisoners are generally well mannered and compliant in the presence of female staff. However, many participants reported that at times they can find certain aspects of the work distressing or challenging, such as listening to prisoners’ offence histories or the intensive level of contact with prisoners. It is likely that these issues are not specific to HMP Grendon, and may perhaps be typical of women working throughout the prison estate — particularly of those women working in male establishments. However, as noted previously, Grendon does house high numbers of men with psychopathy and personality disorders, and this combined with the unique regime of Grendon means that there are some factors likely to be unique to the experience of working in this particular prison. For example, most participants felt that they had changed since working at Grendon, including becoming more vigilant and protective of their children, and more thoughtful, compassionate and empathic. Female staff also reported being aware that prisoners do treat them differently from their male colleagues, but over time at Grendon they had learnt how to deal with this, for example by raising any issues in community meetings rather than individually.

Participants reported that they feel supported and are comfortable working in a TC environment. Those interviewed perceive that some gender differences at work still appear to exist — for example there are still predominantly males in senior roles, although this is not specific to Grendon or indeed the Prison Service as a whole — but participants did report feeling that their achievements are recognised at Grendon. The participants did not feel undermined at work, and any negativity from prisoners is not taken personally because staff understand that it has more to do with their past experiences than the gender of staff. Overall, HMP Grendon is perceived as a positive place for female staff to work, and furthermore, the characteristics of female staff are likely to have a positive impact upon the TC regime.