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Original Citation

Reeves, Carla (2013) The role of Probation Approved Premises in supporting the formation of pro-offending social networks amongst sex offenders. In: One Day Symposium on Incarceration, 1st February 2013, Sheffield, UK. (Unpublished)

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The role of Probation Approved Premises in supporting the formation of pro-offending social networks amongst sex offenders

Dr Carla Reeves

University of Huddersfield
With thanks to Bangor University
Today...

• **Aim =**
  – Explore the structure of offender groups in Probation Approved Premises and how these may support pro-offending identities
  – Consider the structures of the PAP and how this may support the formation of pro-offending offender groups

• **Sex offender =**
  – Anyone convicted of a sexual offence under the SOA 1997 or 2003
  – Residing in the hostel in the fieldwork period
The Study

• Ethnographic study of the experiences of sex offenders living in a PAP over 21 months:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of data collected</th>
<th>Number of data collection points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Observation in hostel (including informal interviews)</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with residents</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews with Staff</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Mixed hostel setting for high risk offenders:
  – insular, secretive, isolated
Research on sex offenders & reintegration:

- Pro-offending attitudes, personal & social identity
  - Continued social stigma & exclusion
  - Negative local community projection of identity

- Complex process of internalised change in personal identity construct
  - Some CJ agency staff assumptions of ‘irredeemable’
  - Liberal other Vs Demonised other

- Pro-social attitudes & social identity as a positive, active social agent
  - Peer support of neutralisations & cognitive distortions

Alternative outcome: Resistance to positive change & maintenance of pro-offending identity
Findings: Messy, non-linear process of identity change

Offender

Positive influences e.g.
- Positive role models (pro social modelling)
- Social denunciation
- Supported by external inhibitions to offending

Offence based / life skills work
- Social norms

Social denunciation

Negative influences e.g.
- Social isolation
- Negative peer group identity
- Institutional culture
- Offence neutralisations & cognitive distortions

Institutional structures

Supported by external inhibitions to offending

Institutional culture
Findings: Messy, non-linear process of identity change

- Positive influences e.g.
  - Positive role models (pro-social modelling)
  - Social denunciation
  - Supported by external inhibitions to offending

- Offence based / life skills work
  - Social norms

- Negatively influential e.g.
  - Offence neutralisations & cognitive distortions
  - Institutional culture

- Social isolation
  - Negative peer group identity
  - Institutional structures
Findings: social grouping

• Foundation of social identities
  – Shared cultural values and group identity

• “you still get the same groups forming [as in prison]. Those on drugs and the others. You know what I mean. (Jim, csa)

• “those paedo’s” (Paul, staff)
  – Drug addict / other = non sex offender
  – Other / sex offender = sex offender
  – Younger v older residents

• “I say I’m here for violence and they believe me, it helps that I do have a temper on me. Then they leave me alone [...] (Jack csa)
A solid line denotes additional membership of other groups. A dotted line denotes potential movement between groups. Arrows denote the direction of movement on dotted lines.

Limited movement only, with ‘others’ not moving between the two.
Significance of grouping

• Immersive group identity supported:
  – resistance to offence-based work
  – Neutralisations & cognitive distortions
  – Construction of themselves as a sex offender
  – Construction of sex offenders as not ‘criminal’

• “you listen to these men [...] justifying it to themselves over all this time.[....] they sound more convincing. And they are there all the time. Not just once a week or whatever. (Jim, csa)

• Emotionally & practically supportive network
  – Potentially pro-social
Structural impact on grouping:

- Structural constraints of mandated:
  - Accommodation
  - SOGP
  - Communal living space
  - Admissions policy

- Proximity
- Homophily
- Shared experiences
- Shared values & attitudes
Cultural impact on grouping:

Sex offender social group

- Group judgement label (staff & residents)
- Proximity
- Shared values & attitudes
- Homophily
- Staff: index offence = primary identifier
- Shared experiences
- Social need for support network
- Territorial use of group space
- Demonised other: ‘beasts’, ‘perverts’

Polarised ‘them & us’ culture
Conclusions:

• Probation hostels work to encourage grouping amongst sex offenders

• Sex offender informal group is the most influential factor in determining individual’s response to hostel work & their self-concept
  – Negative effect in this study

• Grouping by sex offenders tends to be seen as a risk-indicative active choice, but...
  – Like anyone else, feel the need to have a socially support network around them
  – Structurally & culturally constrained in their social networks
  – Staff & hostel work also contribute to grouping pressures
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University of Huddersfield
Institute for Research in Citizenship and Applied Human Sciences
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• Scottish Executive (2003), *Criminal Justice Accommodation Services: a review and consultation paper.* Scottish Executive.