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Sex Offender Grouping and the Normalisation of Offending Attitudes

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Yorkshire and Humberside BSC

BANGOR UNIVERSITY

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Why grouping?

- Use formal grouping positively
  - In SOTP/SOGP
  - To challenge each other
  - Evidence that more effective than challenging by non-sex offender
- But, suspicious of informal grouping
  - Dyads or rings of sex offenders
  - Concern in respect to supporting further offending

The Study

- Ethnographic study of the experiences of sex offenders living in a Probation Approved Premises (hostel): (21 months)

Type of data collected	**Number of data collection points**
Observation in hostel (including informal interviews)	57
Interviews with residents (some repeated)	24 (21 sex offenders)
Interviews with staff (some repeated)	17 (9 RSO)

The Study Setting

- Edge of small city
- Semi-rural location
- Set apart from residential & central business zone

- Curfew imposed
- Double –cover staff minimum
- ‘private’ & ‘public’ space

- Insular, secretive, isolated

My place as a researcher

- Access negotiations
  - formal and informal gatekeepers
- Role negotiations
  - Staff/ visitor/ spy/ researcher/ audience/ observer/ participator
- Trust, rapport & informed consent

What Residents & Staff Say About Groupings…

- The Main Groups:

"They talked about how there were two groups of offenders: the 'others' and the 'sex offenders' ." (R7 and R8 in interview, CSA)

However, in public….. 'drug addicts' and 'others'

Categorised by offence type

"R47 (convicted of multiple rapes against adult women) was upset because someone called him a 'paedo'. He was sitting with R39, R26 and R49 (all CSAs) and said he was not interested in kids. Later when R51 (female, 'other') asked him what he was going to do tomorrow he said he was 'going to sniff glue and then go to the park to watch the kiddies.' R51 was shocked and said he shouldn't say such things because of the other three there. R47 said he 'didn't give a fuck about them' although he spends much of his time with them." (field notes)

Categorised by Age

-

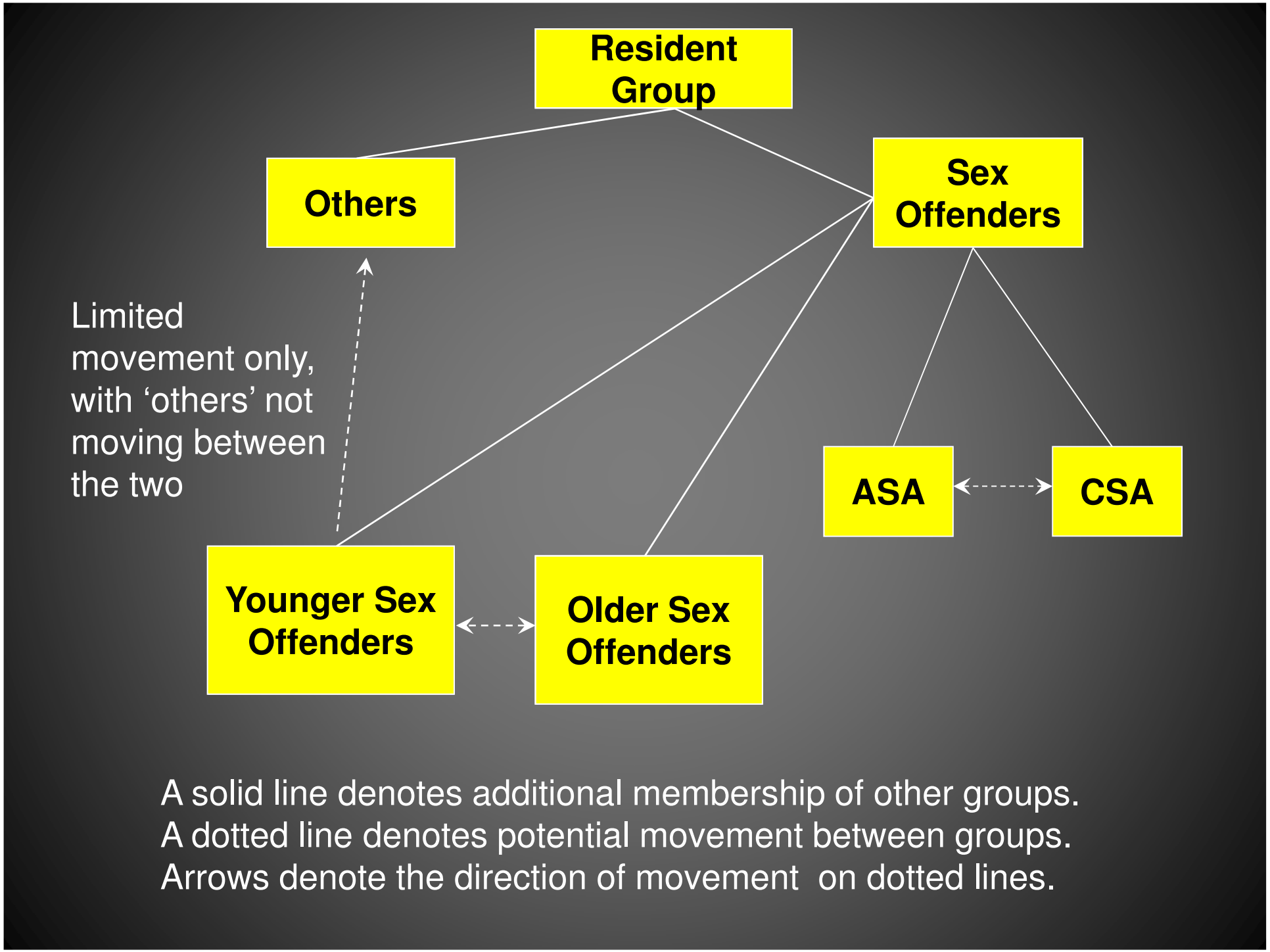
"S9 comments that the younger sex offenders especially see themselves as 'white knights' or 'advocates for everyone else' [residents]. They 'have a certain cockiness over-confidence. This disappears with age, like a chrysalis and they turn into older sex offenders who are not so attention seeking, patient and take much longer [grooming] over their offences."

(S9, PSO, observation notes)

Interaction of age and Offence Type

"That's what makes it so hard for people like R6 (20 year old CSA), he's in between groups. The drug addicts are about his age, they're much younger really [than the sex offender group], but his offences are the other group. He doesn't really fit in anywhere."

(R7 in interview with R8, both CSA)


Resident Group
Others
Sex Offenders
Limited movement only, with 'others' not moving between the two
ASA
CSA
Younger Sex Offenders
Older Sex Offenders
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.

Distancing Techniques: Othering

- 1. Distancing from the group not a member of
  - Name calling: “R33 [violent offender] calls R1 [CSA] ‘nonce’ and ‘kiddie-fiddler’ to his face.”
- 2. Distancing from group a member of
  - Presentation as another offender
- 3.Reinforced by staff & hostel structure
  - “there’s lots of ‘nonce-calling’ going on. Even among staff.”
  - SOTP/SOGP

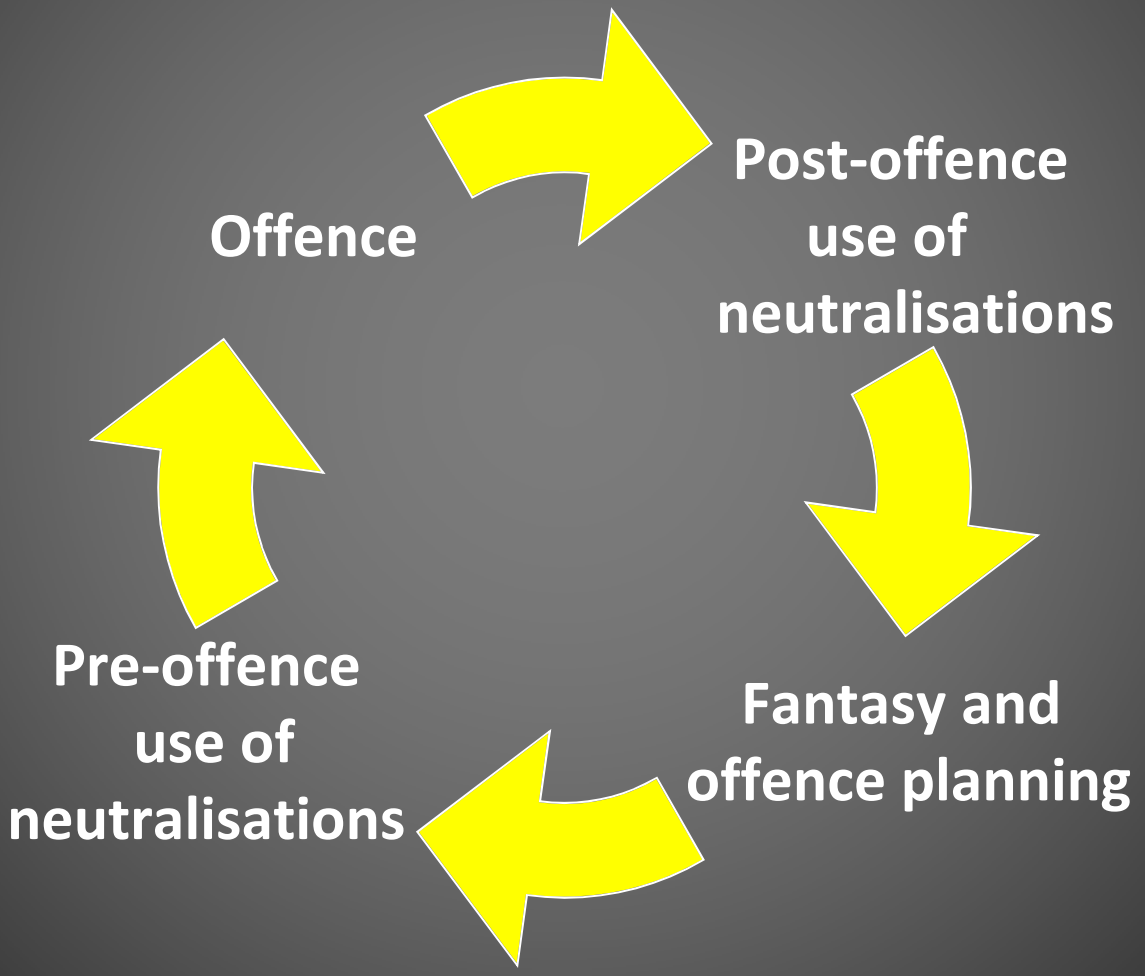
Functions of Grouping

- Support mechanism
  - Coping structures
  - Older offenders
- Supporting members' resistance to offence work
  - Development, internalisation and normalisation of techniques of neutralisation

Sykes and Matza (1957)
Techniques of Neutralisation

1. Denial of responsibility
2. Denial of Injury
3. Denial of a Victim
4. Condemnation of the Condemners
5. Appeal to Higher Loyalties

Why are Neutralisations Important?



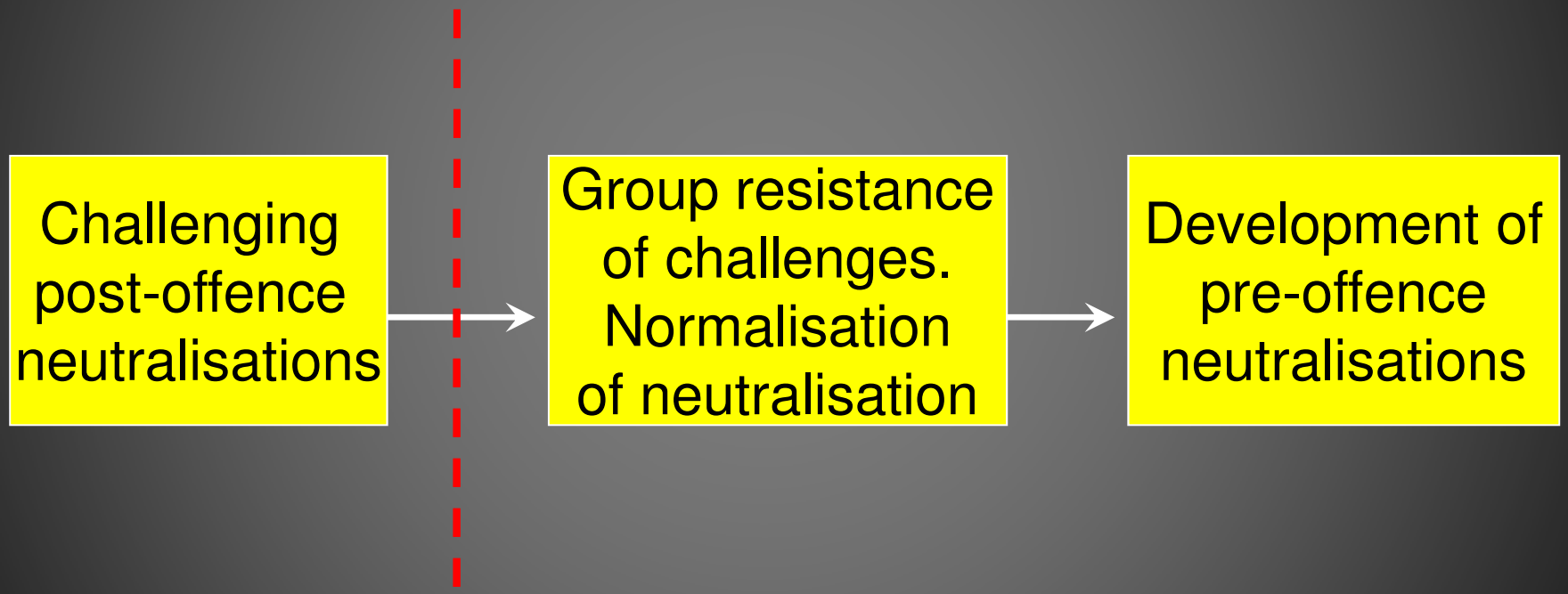
It’s not my fault

- “ She was overly affectionate”
- “My girlfriend miscarried, that’s what prompted me”
- “She was having an affair”
- “She was a bad mother”
- “They were happy with it”
- “I’m being framed”
- “[…] everyone in the hostel is a criminal, and 99% of the population are too.”

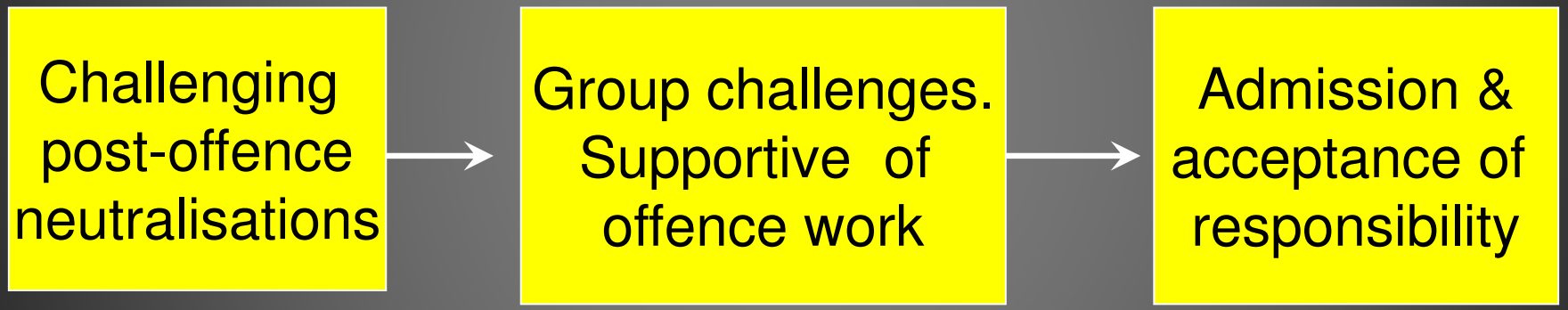
The Power of Peers

"The thing is you listen to these men, they've been offending for years...what do you call it?…justifying it to themselves all this time. And they're much more convincing than the psychologists [….] and they are there all the time." (Child sex offender)

Resisting Rehabilitation



But…. Grouping Can Support Rehabilitation



What can be taken from this?

- The character of groups are influential on members
- Supportive – instrumental to coping in institutions
- If grouping were managed in residential settings it could be a powerful mechanism to support RSO and PO work
- If not, the negative effect of grouping needs to be acknowledged

- Note: structure of hostel life encourages informal sex offender grouping

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