

The Information Behaviours of Maximum Security Prisoners: Insights into Self-protective Behaviours and Unmet Needs

Abstract

Purpose: to advance our understanding of the information behaviours of prisoners, providing insight into their information needs and information seeking preferences, and the factors influencing their behaviours; to inform education and rehabilitation programmes.

Design/methodology: in-depth qualitative study. Theoretical framework was provided via Chatman's (1996) concepts of information poverty. Participants were adult male prisoners in a Scottish maximum-security prison, and prison staff. Data collection method was semi-structured interviews.

Findings: prisoners have a broad range of information needs, many sensitive, and many unmet. Interpersonal information sources are predominantly used due to a combination of natural preference and restricted access to other information sources. Issues of stigma and trust influence information behaviours. Further issues include restrictive social norms, and disinformation to incite violence. A significant degree of risk is therefore inherent within interpersonal information interactions, fostering self-protective acts of secrecy and deception amongst prisoners. Unmet emotional needs appear particularly problematic.

Research limitations/implications: highlights the need for further research exploring issues of unmet emotional needs in prisoners; in particular, assistive methods of need recognition and support in the problematic context.

Practical implications: identifies significant unmet information needs in prisoners that impact upon their ability to cope with incarceration, and prepare for successful release and reintegration.

Originality/value: addresses an understudied group of significant societal concern and advances our understanding of information need in context, providing insight into unmet needs and issues of affect in the incarcerated small world context.

Keywords: information behaviour; information need; information poverty; prisoners; education; rehabilitation

Article classification: research paper

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Introduction

Over 10 million individuals are currently incarcerated worldwide (Walmsley, 2018a), and whilst political and societal views on crime and punishment are varied and often polarised, there is general consensus that imprisonment rates are of significant societal concern (e.g. Coyle *et al.* 2016; Cunneen *et al.* 2013; Jacobson *et al.* 2017). Despite a marginal decline in the Scottish prison population over the period 2011-2016 (Scottish Government, 2017a), Scotland has one of the highest imprisonment rates in Western Europe with 143 prisoners per 100,000 of the general population (Walmsley, 2018b). Several Scottish prisons are operating close to, or over maximum capacity (Scottish Prison Service, 2017a). Such population issues are compounded by the fact that 43% of prisoners in Scotland are reconvicted within one year of release (Scottish Government, 2017b), making offender rehabilitation a key concern of the Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2017c).

Key factors contributing to reoffending include lack of social support, homelessness, and unemployment (Graham, 2016; Healy, 2010; Shapland *et al.* 2016), with educational deficits long considered a significant underpinning factor (e.g. Nuttal *et al.* 1998; Lehmann, 1999; Ministry of Justice, 2010). Rehabilitation programmes, beyond tertiary and/or vocational educational goals, aim to effect meaningful psychological and behavioural change in prisoners to reduce the likelihood of reoffending (Ministry of Justice, 2010); and encourage self-reflection and acquisition of new knowledge via non-confrontational approaches to correcting problematic attitudes or behaviours (Raynor and Robinson, 2009). Effective methods of information access and support are recognised as central to such programmes (Learning & Work Institute, 2018; Ministry of Justice, 2011; Scottish Government, 2015). For example, a stated goal of the Scottish Prison Service to reduce reoffending is to provide, “improved information and education for offenders” (2013, p.58).

Prisoner information access and support (from basic literacy classes to Open University courses) is primarily provided via prison learning centres, which often include prison libraries; however a significant challenge relates to issues of prisoner disengagement with learning centres, with up to 44% of prisoners in Scotland not participating in any educational programme during their custodial stay (Scottish Prison Service 2017b, p.5). Issues of disengagement and/or limited use of prison information services are compounded by limited understanding of the information needs and behaviours of prisoners (see Background below), which might inform interventions. Consequently, this study sought to better understand prisoner information needs and behaviours to inform education and rehabilitation programmes.

Background

Despite a growing emphasis on marginalised groups within information behaviour research (see for example, Ford 2015), there remains limited empirical studies involving prisoners. In a previous review of prisoner studies, Campbell (2005) has observed that, “the information studies field has not ignored the prison population, but very few articles found were user-focused” (p.19). With this in mind, we focus on the most relevant empirical studies involving prisoners to date.

Stevens (1994) examined the information needs of prisoners in three US prisons. Stevens reports that prisoners’ information needs are determined by length of sentence and time left to serve; and that the extent to which information needs are satisfied is dependent on the prison regime and perceived effectiveness of formal information channels. A number of factors impacting upon effective information interactions are identified: limited independent access to information; inconsistencies and arbitrariness of information provision; poor timing of information provision; lack of advice on how to utilise provided information; inadequate staff training and staff shortages; and prisoner hostility towards staff. Stevens also notes that prisoners themselves may be unable or unwilling to articulate their information needs for a variety of reasons, including: distrust towards prison authorities, the

rapid institutionalization process, low motivation, and low expectations. However it should be noted that whilst Stevens' study involved prisoners, no empirical data is provided.

Chatman (1999), examining the information behaviours of female prisoners in the US, notes that for many prisoners, "The routine of prison life gives a certain degree of security and even protection" (p.207). Chatman reports that prison life is held together by restrictive "social control", and that, "Behaviour is judged by appropriate standards determined by other players in this game of life" (p.216). Chatman adds that prisoner information behaviours are shaped by social context, and that collective norms influence the information that is sought, and from where it is sought. Chatman identifies four concepts influencing information behaviours: *small worlds*, *social norms*, *worldviews* and *social types* (p.213-214), and argues that such factors contribute to a state of information impoverishment amongst prisoners, with needs largely unaddressed due to social barriers.

Rafedzi and Abrizah (2014) provide some insight into the information behaviours of male juvenile prisoners in Malaysia as part of a review of prison library services. Whilst primarily investigating prisoner reading interests, Rafedzi and Abrizah also report multiple information needs amongst their participants variously relating to prison operations, family, sex, health, recreation, legal support and their academic studies. The most frequently used sources of information amongst participants were other prisoners, prison teaching staff, family, televisions and books. Rafedzi and Abrizah also identify a general reluctance amongst their participants to approach prison staff.

Whilst information behaviour studies involving prisoners are limited, further insight can be gained from related fields, in particular sociology and library studies. Again, our focus was empirical studies involving prisoners.

Within sociology, Akerstrom (1988), examining concepts of social construction in Swedish prisons and in particular how 'snitches' are identified, also provides some insight into factors influencing interpersonal information interactions, in particular issues of trust. Akerstrom reports that prisoners cooperate amongst themselves in identifying informers, "through a process of accepting and rejecting pieces of information until a final consensus in the group has been reached" (p.155). Akerstrom also notes that prison officers were considered trustworthy sources only when information was not given voluntarily.

Within library studies, a number of recent studies have been undertaken in Nigeria examining prison library services that also provide some insight into the information needs of prisoners, and issues of information access. Eze (2014) identifies information needs relating to legal, health, religious, education, recreational, and vocational needs; variously meeting developmental and coping needs. Tarzaan et al (2015) identifies similar needs, and identifies a number of factors inhibiting prisoner access to information including: cost, illiteracy, and unawareness or lack of services. Emasealu and Popoola (2016), identifying their mixed age participants as both male and female, also identify similar needs, and add financial needs. Similar to Eze (2014), Emasealu and Popoola (2016) also identify needs ranging from developmental to coping. Sambo et al (2017), identifying their participants as male and female from four prisons, concur with previous needs identified and add: human rights, prison rules, and release information. Similar to Tarzaan et al (2015), Sambo et al (2017) also identify a number of factors inhibiting access to information, adding: time restrictions, censorship, lack of professional staff, and poor staff training. Notably, all four studies conclude that many prisoner information needs are currently unmet by prison library services in Nigeria; however, limited empirical data is provided to evidence and support conclusions.

In summary, previous studies suggest that prisoners have multiple information needs, many unmet. Previous work also suggests complex access and internalised behavioural barriers, the former influenced by physical constraints, the latter by social structures and norms. However, it is also apparent from the above review that information behaviour studies involving prisoners are limited. Further, the majority of the above studies provide limited empirical evidence, and in relation, the

majority also lack participant demographic data (considered important as prisoners are not a homogenous group). Consequently, further work is required, raising three key research questions:

1. What are the information needs of prisoners;
2. What information sources do prisoners use, and why;
3. What issues influence prisoners' information behaviours?

Methodology

This in-depth qualitative study sought to better understand the information behaviours of prisoners to inform education and rehabilitation programmes.

Theoretical framework

Chatman's (1996) theoretical framework for describing an impoverished information state was considered appropriate given reports of aversion to risk and unmet needs amongst prisoners (see Background above). Chatman's (1996) theoretical framework for describing an impoverished information state draws on insider/outsider theories from the social sciences to explore how insider/outsider identity influences behaviours. Chatman argues that, "Based on previous research, one can make a prima facie case that people who live in an arduous social landscape view outsiders with self-protective eyes" (1996, p.205). Chatman (1996) proposes four concepts defining the basis of an impoverished information world: deception (distortion of truth), risk-taking (aversion to risk), secrecy (intentional concealment), and situational relevance (immediate utility); and six propositional statements, that describe an impoverished information state as one in which people perceive themselves to be devoid of sources of help, are influenced by outsiders who withhold privileged access to information, adopt self-protective behaviours in response to social norms, are mistrustful of the ability of others to provide useful information, withhold their true problems in the belief that negative consequences outweigh benefits, and selectively receive new information in response to needs. Chatman reports that in impoverished circumstances, a stratification of information access occurs, with information needs and sources localised, and outside sources not usually sought in a "world in which norms and mores define what is important and what is not" (1996, p.205). Insider/outsider theories are further explored in the prison context as part of Chatman's (1999) development of her 'theory of life in the round', incorporating four key concepts: small world (localised like-minded community); social norms (codes of behaviour); worldview (collective beliefs); and social types (social roles).

Research Design

Two key initial design considerations were how best to approach and recruit participants from the prison population, and how to gain access to facilities providing an environment conducive to researcher-prisoner engagement. A pragmatic route was identified via prisoners attending the prison learning centre housing the prison library and facilities for education classes.

Interviews (individual) with prisoners were semi-structured around everyday information needs and associated information behaviours and issues. Interviews (individual and small group) with prison staff were also semi-structured, and explored staff perceptions and experiences of prisoner information needs, behaviours and issues. We recognised Information need as a secondary need or factor (secondary to primary physiological and psychological needs) that can act as trigger and driver of information seeking (Savolainen, 2017); and utilised natural language to explore (e.g. *are there things you want to find/know about, and can you tell us why?*). It was not our intention to develop comprehensive typologies of needs, but to allow prisoners to discuss what they themselves considered important and/or noteworthy. Identification also provided important context and structure to further discussion exploring information behaviours. Open-ended questions encouraged

exploratory and reflective discourse, placing an emphasis on the participant's perspective (Bryman, 2016).

Data analysis incorporated both deductive and inductive elements. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach: data transcription and familiarisation; initial code generation; collating codes into themes; reviewing themes; refining themes; and producing themes. Data were disaggregated into meaningful categories via identification of patterns and regularities through iterative pattern coding. Initial start-list codes were based on but not limited to, Chatman's (1996) concepts of information poverty (e.g. deception, risk-taking, secrecy, situational relevance) reflective of the theoretical framework. Further codes were emergent from data, in particular those relating to issues and affective factors. Periodic code checking (multiple sample coding), was conducted by one team member independent to the first to validate developing code structures. Emergent themes were crosschecked (both team members) for coherence, consistence, and distinctiveness (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained via Institutional Ethics Committee in strict accordance with the University Code of Practice on Investigations of Human Beings, and in further compliance with the ethical guidelines set forth by the Scottish Prison Service Research Access and Ethics Committee. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants, who all participated voluntarily.

Sample

A purposive approach to sampling identified key participant inclusion criteria as being a sentenced adult male prisoner (adult males representing 95% of the sentenced prison population in Scotland (Scottish Prison Service, 2018a)); and for prison staff, as being directly engaged with prisoners on an everyday basis. The study was conducted in a maximum security prison for long term adult male prisoners run by the Scottish Prison Service. At the time of study, the prison held approximately 500 adult male prisoners, all serving sentences of 4+ years (Scottish Prison Service, 2018b).

Findings

12 male prisoners were interviewed aged 18 to 54 (avg. age 34). Ten identified as White, one Black, and one Asian. Three (25%) were serving prison sentences of 4-10 years, and nine (75%) sentences of 10+ years. Three (25%) were in the first third of sentences, six (50%) midway through, and three (25%) in the final third of sentences. Two (17%) had served previous sentences. Three (25%) had no educational qualifications, six (50%) possessed one or more school qualifications, one (8%) a College Diploma, and two (17%) university degrees. Prior to sentence, eight (67%) had been employed, and four (33%) unemployed. All were attending the prison learning centre, and nine (75%) had obtained educational qualifications whilst in prison.

Six members of prison staff were also interviewed: the learning centre manager, three learning centre lecturers, and two prison officers. It was confirmed that our staff participants represented the main members of staff that our prisoner participants interacted with on an everyday basis in the learning centre.

Findings are presented reflecting the order of semi-structured discussions that explored the information needs of prisoners, the information sources utilised, and the issues influencing behaviours. Under each sub-section prisoner discussions precede staff discussions.

Information needs

The information needs identifiable from prisoner' discussions were categorised as: education, health, prison routines, legal, finance, housing, and employment.

Several prisoners discussed education needs. For example, one prisoner commented, "I find myself going to my OU [Open University] coordinator saying I need information on this, information on that, because I want to find out more to build on what I know". And another, "...you can ask to find out how you go about signing up for classes, and you can ask obviously what time education's on... what qualifications... you can get as well". And another,

I've done five NVQs [National Vocational Qualifications], six or something in the last year just trying to keep myself engaged in something other than all the nonsense going on.

Several prisoners discussed health needs ranging from a general interest to specific conditions. For example, one prisoner commented, "It's always good to know about your health", and another, "...one of the things I was interested in was organ donation". Others discussed more specific needs. For example, one prisoner discussed unmet needs relating to mental health commenting,

You could be depressed in here and not know you're depressed... We're all in the same boat. So we're all having a mental breakdown, but nobody's picked up on it.

Several prisoners mentioned information needs relating to everyday prison routines. For example, one prisoner gave the following examples, "What time's work, what's for dinner today, what time am I gonna phone my family, what time you put your washing out?". Such everyday routines varied prison-by-prison and had to be relearned as part of prison transfers. For example, one prisoner commented, "When you first come in to a new jail, obviously you don't know the way things work 'cause the laundry's different, the library's different, the education's different".

Several prisoners discussed legal, financial, housing and employment needs in relation to future release, many interwoven, and many unmet. For example, one prisoner, describing an unsuccessful request for information from the Scottish Prison Service, commented, "I tried to speak about where I would be relocated on my release so I could then investigate what kind of jobs would be out there". Another described information on behavioural courses that prisoners must complete as part of rehabilitation, as "scattered". And another, worried about living expenses, commented, "How are you gonna pay for your driving test again? How are you gonna pay for licenses or home insurances or anything?". And another, aware that he had the legal right to access his prison record, felt that it wasn't worthwhile because, "you'd have to pay like a fee obviously and then they would make you wait the whole time to give you it and a lot of it would be like blacked out".

Prison staff discussed education, health, and employment as the most common information needs. For example, one prison officer explained that prisoners would often ask him questions such as, "Boss, I want to get myself on this course... How do I get on it?". Another prison officer commented, "Most of the time [prisoners] speak to you it's about healthcare or healthcare-related matters". And another that, "The health thing could cover outside information as well because maybe a family member's been diagnosed with something and they need information on that". A teacher discussed how prisoners would also often ask how useful educational qualifications would be when applying for jobs post release, commenting, "I made up a little sheet on how creative writing is a transferable skill because I think a lot of them think, 'Oh, it's just a waste of time'".

Sources of information

The information sources identifiable from prisoner discussions were categorised as: prison staff (teachers, librarians, prison officers, healthcare professionals, chaplains, and social workers), other prisoners, and family. Interpersonal sources dominated discussions; however some prisoners also mentioned television, newspapers and radio, and learning centre resources.

Prison staff are considered important information sources, but their use varies according to staff role and individual relationship. Teachers were considered approachable and helpful, and discussed in relation to educational needs. For example, one prisoner commented:

What you find in the jail is that teachers, they're more helpful; they want to work with people, whereas most other people that work in the jail don't... If they can't help you, they'll find someone that will... They never make you feel stupid

Librarians were also considered approachable and helpful. For example, one prisoner commented, "Well you know the librarian? She's set up that you fill out a wee form if you're after any information and if she can get it, she will through Wikipedia". And another, "I think the librarian has been – [name removed] in particular, when [name removed] were here... I mean it was fantastic... to get some of the things that I needed".

Prison Officers were discussed as approachable on an individual basis. For example, one prisoner commented, "It's almost like Jekyll and Hyde with some of [the prison officers]... Some of them are here to just turn keys and lock you up". And another that there were some prison officers "that you don't dare ask", adding that:

I've been here for like three years or four years now and so, in that time, I think I've picked a couple of guys that most of the time I ask them something, they're willing to help. And some of them are not willing to help, you understand. They give you an excuse or whatever.

Chaplains were discussed as approachable sources of emotional support. For example, one prisoner commented, "There's no prejudice... They want to help everybody 'cause they're good people... That's important to guys", adding that:

I had a lot of demons as well and the chaplaincy helped me to... deal with them and get through it... If it wasn't for the chaplaincy team in here, I wouldn't be here. I would be dead or I would have killed somebody else.

And another, "It is a social support and it's also a moral support for me, you understand. You know, when I say to you that I speak to my chaplain, it is moral, you understand, and it is spiritual".

Interactions with Healthcare Professionals were discussed negatively by several prisoners. For example, one described an unsuccessful request for information on organ donation:

It's like well, they looked at me like 'What are we meant to do?' – "Well you're the NHS [National Health Service], how can you help me?"... I asked my mum and she sent [information]... but you just don't get anywhere with things like that.

Another described a situation where the medication that he had been prescribed had failed to improve his condition, and the assistance he had then received from another prisoner, commenting:

Like it's took another con to say to me, "Go get yourself checked for Helicobacter [stomach infection]" and, right enough, that's exactly what it was and all it took was a week's worth of meds to get rid of it... I'd been suffering for months with that... I was annoyed at the healthcare for that.

Interactions with social workers were also discussed negatively. One prisoner recalled his experience with social workers after trying to unsuccessfully get his personal belongings out of a property after being imprisoned, commenting:

They tried to trick me into signing an end of tenancy agreement, and [the social worker] was trying to rush me through it... That's been three year ago... and it's still crystal clear what happened, in my head... I had to put it to the back of my mind because it's causing me that much upset.

Another voiced frustration about not being able to forward plan his release, commenting, "Social services don't want to know you because you're too far away from the end... I'm far too far away from the door and nothing is accessible for you until then".

Other prisoners are also considered important sources of everyday information. For example, one prisoner commented that at the start of his sentence, "It was always cons who gave me information as to how things went day to day". And another, highlighting the value placed on shared experience, commented:

The best place you get information from is other cons... It's because they're going through it... They're not just applying or handing information out. They're actually going through the same process of trying to get information.

Prisoner information networks were described by one prisoner as "faster than the speed of light", and by another as:

...a far better network than anything you could get from British Telecom, from the Internet, WIFI... and it's all done by word of mouth... We tend to find out a lot more information about anything that's happening in the jail than any other party.

Prisoners discussed family as important sources of outside information and support. For example, one prisoner described his parents as his "outside network", and explained that despite having friends in prison, "I would still ask my mum 'cause there's only so much you can ask in here". Another that, "I face the aspect of, by the time that I get out, the world's gonna be changed again... from the one I left... And it's up to my family, to keep me up to date with whatever happens". And another, "Well, I speak to [family] every day on the phone... that just keeps me confident to know that I can fit back in when I get out". However, whilst important, one prisoner admitted that he found it difficult to speak to family without becoming upset, commenting, "I know if I phone my gran, I'm just opening a can of worms for the tears to come".

Television, newspapers and radio provided information on the broader outside world. For example, one prisoner commented that many prisoners, "Still wanna read papers and look at the news and talk to people about the outside world", because "they don't want to be institutionalised".

Prisoners held mixed views regarding learning centre resources. With regard to books, one prisoner commented, "They've got a good system in place where if you've got a book that you want and you know the author and that then you just do a request, and if they can get it for you they will", whilst another commented, "In here we're stuck with last year's stuff". Encyclopaedia software was described by one prisoner as offering, "a power of information", and by another as, "...no right up to date or anything so... it was hard to get the information".

Prison staff recognised themselves as important sources of information, approached on a regular basis, and on a wide range of topics. For example, a teacher commented, "I'm a teacher, a nurse, social worker, a mum, a granny, a listener... You can't just be a lecturer while in here". Teachers felt that prisoners were comfortable approaching them for information because they had mutual respect, and were at a distance from prison regimes. For example, one teacher commented, "It's partly from mutual respect... I'm not there as part of any kind of punishment regime for them". Another that:

It's not a formal distance because obviously we couldn't do our jobs... because we're trying to help them. So we actually need them to take the lead and we'll help them do that but we're not just telling them what to do. We're guiding them and telling them what they can and what they can't do. So it is a different relationship. It's not so authoritarian.

Staff also recognised that prisoners could be selective in which staff they approached. For example, one prisoner officer commented, "Depending on the prisoner, they would pick and choose which officer they would go to", and one teacher commented, "It depends again on the officers; some are more approachable than others and I think that's a known fact".

Staff also provided insight into prisoner accounts of poor interactions with healthcare professionals. One prison officer commented:

There's not enough consistency for the guys at the health centre and it's causing confusion for them... Without any explanation – "You don't need it. You're not getting it anymore"... I think at times certain professionals don't realise some of these guys have got a bit of catching up to do in the understanding and explanations... Some of these guys need that in their life, they need the explanation in order to understand and move on.

Staff also recognised that other prisoners were important information sources for prisoners. For example, one prison officer commented, "I would say first of all, other prisoners would be... their first port of call". Staff also discussed the speed of prisoner information networks, one prison officer commenting, "It's just the nature of the jail... information travels very fast".

Staff also reiterated the importance of family to prisoners. For example, one teacher commented, "In anybody's life, family support is obviously useful. That tends to be where most people - when they run into problems - where anybody would go to".

Issues

Participants discussed a number of issues that impacted information behaviours, categorised as: self-esteem, stigma, trust, misinformation and disinformation, and access.

Several prisoners discussed issues of self-esteem. For example, one prisoner, discussing a reliance on his family for information to manage his personal affairs, commented, "They're ashamed. I'm ashamed. Why burden them with that?", adding, "I should be there helping them... not them helping me". Another discussed how he felt when approaching prison staff for information:

You feel like a pest... Well at the end of the day they know you're cornered. That's there - they'll do that, that's part of their job and I know that, but I still feel bad for asking anyway because I feel like a nuisance.

Prisoners also worried about how staff perceived them during interactions. For example, one commented, "Even if you are being polite, then you worry am I being too polite? Am I taking advantage? And you don't wanna be that person".

Judgement appeared a contributory factor with several prisoners feeling that prison staff were prejudiced towards them. For example, one commented, "There's a lot of them [prison staff] that think because they've got a suit on, it means they're ten times better than us". And another:

I've no had too many dealings with the social work and that but I don't think they do a lot... they don't get to know the person. They only look at a file and think 'Oaff... he's a bad man' or maybe.... Like somebody could have made a mistake, right? It could have been a rush of blood or whatever, but because of this file they're looking at, they think 'Oh this guy, he's evil. He's gonna do this again'.

Several prisoners discussed feeling treated with scepticism by medical staff. For example, one commented:

The only thing that makes you anxious in here is - if you have an illness, they don't take you seriously in here... you find that sometimes they're a little reluctant to believe what you're saying.

Several believed this scepticism from medical staff was drug-related. For example, one prisoner commented, "They think that everybody in here's scheming to get drugs", and another, "A lot of people thinking you're just chasing medication and that as well, which wasn't the case".

Several prisoners also discussed not interacting with prison staff for fear of being labelled an informant by other prisoners. For example, one prisoner commented, "In here, you don't just open your mouth and say what is happening, you know. People will see you and say 'Grass!', you understand?". And another, "They [prisoner] might be in a position where they've got things to lose, but they know if

they go to the officers then they're a grass". This fear stopped many prisoners asking questions of prison staff. For example, one prisoner commented:

When I first came in... it wasn't really alright to talk to prison staff... It wasn't really the done thing... if you had to ask them like even an innocent question, it would be "What were you questioning? What were you talking to them for?" It's kind of like you'd be under suspicion kind of thing just because you asked a simple question or something... Even now, still sometimes if you see somebody up at the desk, they'll go like that "What's he up there for?".

Several prisoners discussed issues of trust. For example, one commented, "I don't like talking about information about prison with prison officers, because you don't know who to trust here, to be honest". And another, "You've got to watch what you say, you always must keep to that boundary". Several felt that they were unable to fully trust anyone in the prison, including other prisoners, as there was a degree of risk associated with doing so. For example, one commented:

Well that's what a lot of it is to do with the jail is trust man, isn't it? You know what I mean? You don't know if you can really trust anybody... That's what I've always thought. Obviously there's people you can trust but... There's always something in the back of your head...

And another:

You know the people you can trust but even then, you trust them at an arm's length 'cause you never trust anyone with your deepest darkest secrets in here because all that takes is you have an argument with that person and that guy's gonna throw it right back in your face... The next thing you're gonna do, for most boys in here, violence is the next thing. You've got to wear a mask in here...

Several prisoners also discussed issues of misinformation and disinformation. For example, one prisoner commented, "There's a lot of rumours and it spreads like wildfire". Another that information often grew "arms and legs" as it passed from one prisoner to another; and that "Unless you've been in the system for a while, don't believe a word that's said". Another that:

At the end of the day what you've got to understand is that, prisoners will like to feed you information to make friends with you. Do you understand? They will like to tell you what you wanna hear... But is it true?

Access issues discussed related to lack of Internet, telephone restrictions, and lockdown. Several prisoners felt that the lack of Internet was a major issue. For example, one prisoner commented, "not having that [Internet] access is massive", and another, "It's the boys who are doing university degrees; they need it [Internet] more than most". And another:

...if you had the Internet in here it'd be so much easier because if you did have a problem with something like your back is sore and you wanna know the best way of dealing with it... you could go on that.

Some felt that the Internet could also help with outside relationships. For example, one commented, "If it was Skype or something like that ... Well it'd be great if it was just for people that can't make visits", and another:

If I was trained how to use it, it would mean that I could have plenty more things to speak to about with my sons... It would help me fit more into their lives because that's the kind of thing they do, and that's missing.

Some prisoners also recognised the risks associated with Internet access. For example, one commented that it might be "open to abuse", and another that some prisoners might "ruin it for others". Another felt that access would need to be restricted, commenting, "I would... block social media. Block porn sites".

With regard to telephone access, several prisoners, aware that calls are routinely monitored by prison staff and can be overheard by other prisoners in the communal space, discussed actively self-censoring their conversations through fear of negative consequences. For example, one commented that he felt unable to have a “laugh” on the phone with his friends because, “that laugh might be serious to the SPS [Scottish Prison Service]”. Another commented, “Part of your mind is going, I’ve got to be careful what I say here, because even if I say something that’s banter, it could be misconstrued”. Several discussed feeling unable to discuss emotional subjects over the phone. For example, one commented:

I can’t say nothing personal about how I’m feeling because if somebody hears it on the phone, they’re gonna use that as a weapon against me... You can’t have an emotional bond with anybody ‘cause it seems to be that if you say something, it is a likely chance that’s it going down on your Intel [prison record].

Excessive noise in the communal space was also restrictive. For example, one prisoner commented, “As soon as you go on the phone, no matter where you are, somebody will be shouting beside you and they see you’re on the phone but there’s nothing you can do”.

With regard to lockdown-related access issues, several described situations of emotional distress. For example, one commented:

...it’s brutal... It’s that time at night when you’ve got nobody to talk to... You could be on the border of wanting to kill yourself but you can’t do nothing... There’s nothing else you can do if you can’t get to sleep or you can’t cry yourself to sleep.

And another:

That’s when you think... or well that’s when I’m thinking, you know what I mean? ...Just see even, for example, when you’re out and you’re talking to someone... you’re busy and you’re not really thinking, but see when you’re just sitting in your cell, nobody around you, your mind’s racing.

And another:

...they’ve got the Listeners service which is Samaritan’s trained but that’s only up to 9 o’ clock at night when everyone gets locked up and if you want to see someone, if you wanted to speak to someone after that time, there’s no service available...

With regard to prison staff views on issues impacting on prisoner information interactions, staff also discussed issues of self-esteem. Staff felt that prisoners often held questions back for fear of appearing “stupid”, and discussed how prisoners often apologised before asking questions. For example, one teacher commented, “They apologise a lot. They do apologise – ‘I’m really sorry to bother you’, ‘Oh, there I’m bothering you again, I’m really sorry’. I get that all the time”. And another commented, “For me it’s often apologetic... really polite like we’re in Downton Abbey [period country house television drama]”. Another discussed how lack of confidence limited prisoner self-efficacy, commenting:

There’s a culture of some of the guys [prisoners] eh... I think feeling disempowered or unable to use their initiative, even in the smallest way. I see guys that do use their initiative and others that are so dependent on you.

Staff also discussed issues of stigma. For example, one teacher discussed how prisoners would sometimes make requests in a “combative” manner because they were worried about how other prisoners might perceive them if acting too polite. And another:

Sometimes they don’t want to... [appear polite] in front of their peers because sometimes their friends will say, “Oh look at the way you’re talking you wee crawler. You’re this or you’re that”. So they’ve sometimes got to put on a face; “I’m a big man”.

Prison officers also acknowledged that prisoners could be uncomfortable approaching them for similar reasons. For example, one commented:

I've been here five years now and I've never once had a prisoner come and ask me, "Can you check the Internet for something medically-related, judicially-related, know what I mean, law-related" or whatever... I think it's probably frowned upon [by other prisoners].

And another:

I think the biggest barrier is this [tugs shirt]... We're still a uniformed service and I think until this [shirt] goes, even though we're prison officers we're still seen as 'screws' as they call it. And eh... these are obviously guys who don't see any difference between us and the police service... So that's quite sad.

And another:

Some prisoners, no matter how much you try to be nice to them, just don't like you because you're a prison officer... A lot is made about the white shirt thing but I don't think it matters. I don't think it'd matter if we were wearing black shirts, green shirts... It's just the fact that you're an officer and we're all in one uniform that is different from anything else.

Staff also discussed issues of prisoners sharing misinformation and disinformation. For example, one prison officer commented, "It's like that game *Chinese Whispers*; something that starts as one thing, by the time it gets to the end of the queue it's grown arms and legs". And another, "That's why there's so many assaults; half the time it's false information or somebody stirring".

Staff also discussed prisoner Internet access, with polarised opinions. Teaching staff felt that lack of access was a barrier to education. For example, one teacher commented, "It's a real barrier for the OU students", and another:

It's easy to concentrate on the disadvantages [of Internet access] which in here they like to do all the time but the advantages so much outweigh if you actually want to try and do something and education should always be arguing to do things rather than not to.

However, one prison officer commented:

I'm totally dead against [Internet access]. I mean you've got all the sexual stuff right away considering some of the prisoners we've got in. You've got information on bomb-making. You've got weapon-making. You've got means of contacting maybe ex-prisoners that you didn't get on with to threaten them... You could threaten prisoners' families. You get to know what other prisoners' and staffs' families look like. You can find out addresses of them... There's no place for the Internet in jails for prisoners.

Discussion

In discussing our findings, we return to our research questions.

What are the information needs of prisoners?

Our participants identified a broad range of prisoner information needs, categorised as: education, health, prison routines, legal, finance, housing, and employment. Many are of a sensitive nature, particularly those related to coping with imprisonment. Many needs also appear unmet; particularly those related to mental health and rehabilitation aspects. Our findings regarding multiple unmet needs support previous prison studies (Chatman, 1999; Eze, 2014; Rafedzi and Abrizah, 2014; Tarzaan *et al.* 2015; Emasealu and Popoola, 2016; Sambo *et al.* 2017); and importantly, provide empirical evidence and depth of insight previously lacking.

One potential factor contributing to unmet needs was incorrect assumptions amongst staff regarding the importance of release-related needs to prisoners (e.g. finance, housing and employment) if sentences still have significant time left. It would appear that many of these needs are unmet in such circumstances, with prisoners feeling “cut off” from information and unable to plan ahead. Grupe and Nitscheke (2013) have previously reported that uncertainty regarding future possibilities can cause anxiety, potentially compounding situations that are already acknowledged as stressful (Campbell 2005). It is important to note that stress is known to contribute to psychological and behavioural problems (Kristofersson and Kaas, 2013), with stress reduction a core part of internationally recognised rehabilitation programs such as Prison SMART (<http://www.prisonsmart.eu>).

Our findings also provide insight into unrevealed and/or unmet emotional needs, and issues of affect. It is notable that whilst our prisoners do not explicitly identify emotional needs, such needs were evident in general discussions. For example, one prisoner discussed having, “a lot of demons”, and another that, “when you’re just sitting in your cell, nobody around you, your mind’s racing”, and another that, “we’re all having a mental breakdown, but nobody’s picked up on it”. Another discussed being unable to speak to family without becoming upset, and another described himself as “ashamed” of himself in front of family. Another discussed feeling unable to, “have an emotional bond with anybody”. Whilst emotional needs are alluded to in discussions, they are not identified as such by prisoners. One possible explanation is that such needs are not yet fully formed or understood as information needs, suggesting needs in early visceral or conscious stages of development (Taylor, 1968). Another possible explanation is reluctance amongst our prisoners to reveal such needs within a predominantly masculine prison environment that deems certain emotions (e.g. fear) as “feminine” and “inappropriate” (Mosher and Tomkins, 1988, p.67), and suggesting risk averse self-protective information behaviours in response to social norms (Chatman, 1996). There is evidence suggestive of this in prisoner comments such as, “...there’s only so much you can ask in here”, and, “I can’t say nothing personal about how I’m feeling...”. Interplay of factors is also possible (i.e. presence of both undefined needs and a restrictive social environment). This is an important finding for further investigation as repressed and/or unmet emotional needs are linked with aggression during incarceration (e.g. Robertson *et al.* 2014, 2015; Velotti *et al.* 2017), and unsuccessful rehabilitation (e.g. Day, 2009).

What information sources do prisoners use, and why?

Our prisoners use a number of interpersonal sources of information, categorised as: prison staff, other prisoners, and family. Prisoners also discussed prison learning centre resources, and television, newspapers and radio sources, but to a lesser degree. Such findings remind us of enduring human preferences for interpersonal communication (Case and Given, 2016), and support previous findings in the prison context (Chatman, 1999; Rafedzi and Abrizah, 2014). Prior to discussing interpersonal preferences it should also be noted that use of other information sources (e.g. learning centres) is also influenced by access restrictions (see issues discussed later).

With regards to interpersonal preferences, our findings provide insight into the factors influencing choice of interpersonal source. Other prisoners are an important source of everyday prison-life information, identified with and valued for experiential advice. Family are an important, but less accessible, source of outside world information. Prison staff (officers, teachers, librarians, healthcare professionals, social workers, chaplains) are important sources of information across a broad range of topics (e.g. health, education, rehabilitation), and are approached not just according to perceived appropriateness, but also on perceived approachability. Whilst teaching staff, librarians, and chaplains are all considered approachable; prison officers and health and social care staff are considered much less so, and were often discussed negatively. Fear of judgement, much stigma related, appears a significant influencing factor. For example, one prisoner felt that staff considered themselves “ten times better than us”, and another that healthcare professionals viewed all prisoners as “scheming”, and another that social workers viewed all prisoners as “bad men”. For similar reasons, prison officers are approached on an individual basis. Staff acknowledged this issue

themselves and discussed the importance of continuity of relationship for building trust between prisoners and staff, and highlighted continuity as an issue, particularly for healthcare staff. Buchanan *et al.* (2018), in recent work examining the role of human information intermediaries in disadvantaged and dependent circumstances, have also identified continuity of relationship as an important factor in building trust conducive to effective information interactions, and highlights that amongst stigmatised groups, this is a gradual process achieved over time.

Stigma could also originate from other prisoners and influence interpersonal interactions, particularly between prisoner and prison officers. Several of our prisoner participants discussed being reluctant to be seen interacting with prison officers in case other prisoners deemed this inappropriate and/or perceived them as an informant. Prison officers also discussed this issue. This supports previous findings, including Rafedzi and Abrizah's (2014) observation that prisoners are often reluctant to engage with prison officers because this group is considered "different" and not the "correct" source through which to seek information (p.11); and Akerstrom's (1988) report that prisoners run the risk of violating prisoner social codes and being labelled a "snitch" if they approach prison officers too often. A significant degree of risk is therefore inherent within interpersonal information interactions, and once more fostering self-protective information behaviours in response to restrictive social norms (Chatman, 1996). Again, this is an important finding for further investigation, as it appears a significant barrier to effective interpersonal information sharing, compounding issues of unmet needs discussed above.

What issues influence prisoners' information behaviours?

Our participants discussed a number of issues (beyond stigma discussed above) that impact upon prisoner information behaviours, categorised as: self-esteem, trust, misinformation and disinformation, and practical access.

Low self-esteem is evident in our prisoners' expressing a reluctance to "burden" others with their information needs. Prisoners expressed a reluctance to seek assistance from prison staff for fear of being viewed as a "pest", or a "nuisance", or to be "taking advantage", despite often having nowhere else to turn to for this information. In turn, staff described prisoners as often holding back questions for fear of appearing "stupid", and often apologetic when asking questions. Such feelings extended to interactions with family, with one prisoner discussing feelings of shame if troubling family with his needs. Such feelings are not limited to the prisoners who participated in this study, with low self-esteem long recognised as a common characteristic of the general prisoner population (e.g. Goffman, 1961; Liebling, 1994; Gravett, 1999). In further support, a recent prisoner survey found that 48% of prisoners did not "feel loved", and that 38% did not feel "good about themselves" (Scottish Prison Service 2017b, p.11).

Trust issues are also evident, with prisoners reluctant to share information with both prison staff and other prisoners. For example, one prisoner discussing prison staff commented that "you don't know who to trust here", and another, discussing prisoners, commented that other prisoners could only be trusted "at an arm's length". One discussed wearing a "mask" through fear of humiliation and/or violence. One potential reason for prisoners' distrust of staff may be attributed to adverse childhood experiences involving "white shirt" services (e.g. police, social work, etc.) which result in continued distrust of authority figures in adult years (Mitchell and Latchford, 2010; Howerton *et al.* 2007). Again there is evidence of both secrecy and deception as part of self-protective behaviours (Chatman, 1996).

With regard to issues of *misinformation* and *disinformation*, several participants discussed issues with prisoner information networks. Whilst prisoner networks were regarded as extremely effective modes of communication within the prison, they were also recognised as problematic. Beyond issues of misinterpretation inherent in such extended informal networks, they were also discussed as prone to manipulation and abuse, compounding issues of trust discussed above. Both prisoners and staff discussed targeted disinformation to incite violence as an everyday issue. The manipulation of

information for such purposes has been previously reported in the prison context, and as we have found, also associated with acts of aggression (Archer *et al.* 2010).

Issues of practical access related to lack of Internet, telephone restrictions, and lockdown. Such constraints are elements of a secure custodial environment and much debated in society. Whilst we do not wish to enter into this debate, our findings provide insight into the impact of such restrictions.

Whilst a lack of Internet access was considered primarily a problem for prisoners undertaking distance-learning courses, it was also recognised by one prisoner as a way to access health information, and by others as a way to maintain close contact with family. However, both prisoners and staff also considered Internet access as something that could be prone to abuse by the general prison population. It remains a topic of continued debate, particularly with regard to preparation for release and reintegration into an increasingly digital society. For example, Coates (2016) argues, "Internet use is a fact of life in most homes, colleges and workplaces in the modern world. To release prisoners with out-of-date or no digital skills reduces their job and education prospects, restricts contact with family and friends, and thereby increases the likelihood that they will reoffend" (p.48).

Telephone restrictions related primarily to lack of privacy due to monitoring by staff and ability to be overheard by other prisoners in the public space. Prisoners discussed feeling unable to discuss personal topics with family and friends and consequently self-censoring their calls, which can compound issues of unmet emotional needs discussed above, and for this reason, warrants further consideration. Notably, in-cell telephones have recently been introduced in a number of prisons in England and Wales specifically to decrease prisoners' stress and incidents of self-harm (Ford, 2018).

Lockdowns were discussed by some of our prisoner participants as moments of significant emotional distress. Again lockdowns are an element of a secure prison environment, but it is clear from several of our prisoner accounts that they are a time when unmet emotional needs come to the fore. One reason for this could be attributed to self-reflection which may occur in times where there is little opportunity for distraction; as Skogstad *et al.* (2006) explain, "Emotional distress may be an appropriate response when prisoners confront offending issues (e.g. feeling depressed or upset with increased recognition of the impact of offending for victims)" (p.56). We remind the reader that unmet emotional needs are associated with increased aggression during incarceration (e.g. Robertson *et al.* 2014, 2015; Velotti *et al.* 2017) and unsuccessful rehabilitation (e.g. Day, 2009). It is also important to note that suicide rates in Scottish prisons are more than 2.5 times higher than those of the general population (Fazel *et al.* 2017). Therefore, addressing unmet emotional needs in prisoners is not only important to better prepare them for release, but also to help them cope with incarceration.

Limitations and areas for further research

We report within the practical constraints of a single prison and from the perspectives of adult male prisoners engaged with prison learning centres. Further research is recommended to explore our findings amongst the wider disengaged prison population (i.e. those not attending prison learning centres), and including female and juvenile prisoners.

There is a need for further research exploring issues of unmet emotional needs in prisoners, and in particular, assistive methods of need recognition and support in the problematic at-risk context. Such research face significant challenges, not least in addressing issues of self-recrimination and rehabilitation within an environment of restrictive social norms and personal constructs.

Conclusions

Our prisoners have a broad range of information needs, many of a sensitive nature, particularly those related to coping with crime and punishment. Many needs appear unmet, particularly those related to health and rehabilitation. Our prisoners use a number of interpersonal sources of information, from prison staff to other prisoners to family, with choice largely influenced by need and restrictive social norms, and associated issues of stigma and trust. Further issues include low self-esteem, and misinformation and disinformation to incite violence. A significant degree of risk is inherent within interpersonal information interactions, fostering self-protective acts of secrecy and deception amongst prisoners.

Our findings also evidence significant unmet emotional needs, and issues of affect. It is notable that whilst our prisoners do not explicitly identify emotional needs, such needs were evident in general discussions. Our findings suggest that such needs are unmet through issues of recognition and restrictive social environment. Our findings suggest that this is a significant problem for further research, and one that impacts upon prisoners' ability to cope with incarceration, and their successful rehabilitation. In particular, further research is needed into assistive methods of information need recognition and support in the problematic context.

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