Exploring the Experiences and Perceptions of Sex Addiction in Men Incarcerated for Sexual Offences

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There is controversy over whether sexual addiction as a behavioural addiction exists at all and in the literature the terms and definitions used for out of control sexual behaviours vary and are not clearly defined (Marsh et al. 2008, Marshall 2015). Sexual preoccupation, sexual addiction, sexual compulsivity and hyper sexuality are all terms used and measured and given the overlap in definitions there have been attempts to produce a theoretical model (Bancroft and Vukadinovic 2004). The reason this is important beyond semantics is because it can affect treatment choice. Marshall et al. (2008) acknowledge a resistance in forensic settings for therapists to define sexual offenders as addicts because of the element of inability to control behaviour that such a definition implies.

The issue is an important one because sexual addiction has a high prevalence in sexual offenders, Marshall, Marshall, Moulden and Serran (2008) for example finding 43.9% of sexual offenders categorized as sexual addicts according to the Sexual Addiction Screening Test (SAST, Carnes 1989). Given that sexual preoccupation (a central aspect of addiction) is both an acute and stable dynamic risk factor for sexual recidivism (Hanson & Harris, 2000; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004; Hanson, Harris, Scott and Helmus 2007) and a predictor of violent and non sexual, non violent recidivism (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2004) it is an significant issue to address in both research and treatment.

However there is little if any research on the perceptions or experiences of the concept of sexual addiction from the offenders point of view. If practitioners are to choose treatment based on such factors it seems important to understand the offenders perspective. The concept or at least the term sexual addiction is used in the general population and is therefore accessible to those attempting to understand their own behaviours and thoughts, indeed there are questionnaires available via the internet for self diagnosis. Additionally the main source of self help for those troubled by out of controlled sexual behaviours in the community are the peer support groups such as sex addicts anonymous. Therefore it is theorised that those incarcerated for sexual offences may have encountered and considered this label for themselves. It would be useful to know if this is the case and if this has been helpful.

To that end the current research employed semi structured focus groups of men incarcerated for sexual offences to explore their understanding and experiences of sexual
addiction. There were 13 participants over 3 focus groups lasting between 1 and 2 hours each. All were incarcerated in a sex offender category C prison in the UK for an index offence of sexual crime.

Data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) and produced 3 superordinate themes, namely (i) addiction: self labelling as part of the journey, (ii) addiction in relation to support services and (iii) connotations of addiction.

Within the self labelling theme, some participants had usefully appropriated the label of addiction prior to or in prison as part of the journey of understanding their problem. This was in part because of its accessibility as a concept or its association with experiences of substance addiction characteristics. In terms of the support theme, sex addiction support was experienced as the only accessible support prior to prison, and for some was anticipated as support on release. The mutuality and non-judgmental nature of peer support was experienced by some participants and within focus group discussions explored by others as an attractive method of support. Contrary to expectations adopting a label of addiction was not interpreted as negating accountability but was seen as step to taking responsibility to change.

The findings suggest that for some the addiction approach is useful and may be a starting point for treatment even if not indicating specific addiction treatment. Findings also indicate that not withstanding concerns around ex sexual offenders meeting up after release, the peer support of sex addiction groups may be useful to rehabilitation. Future research could usefully explore the prevalence of sex addiction within UK sex offender prisons and also the perceptions and experiences of peer support group such as sex addicts anonymous around ex-prisoners becoming members.

References
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Belinda is a co-founder, trustee, Vice Chair and Head of Research and Evaluation for the Safer Living Foundation, a charity set up in 2014 to conduct (and evaluate) initiatives that help to prevent further victims of sexual crime.

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