

BETTER TOGETHER

2018 ATSA Conference | Thursday October 18 | POSTER

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

Christine Norman, PhD
Jessica Faulkner, MSc
Rebecca Lievesley, MSc
Belinda Winder, PhD
Nottingham Trent University

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 (Marshall *et al.* 2008, Marshall 2015). Sexual pre occupation, 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 pre occupation (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 a 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

BETTER TOGETHER

2018 ATSA Conference | Thursday October 18 | POSTER

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 notwithstanding 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

- Bancroft, J., & Vukadinovic, Z. (2004) Sexual addiction, sexual compulsivity, sexual impulsivity, or what? Toward a theoretical model, *The Journal of Sex Research*, 41:3, 225-234,
- Carnes, P. (1989). *Contrary to love: Helping the sexual addict*. Minneapolis, MN: CompCare
- Hanson, R.K., & Harris, A.J.R. (2000). Where should we intervene? Dynamic predictors of sexual offense recidivism. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 27, 6-35.
- Hanson, R.K., Harris, A.J.R., Scott, T.-L., & Helmus, L. (2007). Assessing the risk of sexual offenders on community supervision: *The Dynamic Supervision Project* (Corrections Research User Report No. 2007-05). Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Public Safety Canada.
- Hanson, R.K., Morton-Bourgon, K.E. (2004). The characteristics of persistent sexual offenders: A meta-analysis of recidivism studies. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 73(6), 1154-1163.
- Marshall, L. E., & Marshall, W. L. (2006). Sexual addiction in incarcerated sexual offenders. *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*, 13, 377-390.
- Marshall, L. E., Marshall, W. L., Moulden, H. M., & Serran, G. (2008). The prevalence of

BETTER TOGETHER

2018 ATSA Conference | Thursday October 18 | POSTER

sexual addiction in incarcerated sexual offenders and matched community nonoffenders. *Sexual Addiction and Compulsivity*, 15, 271-283.

Marshall, L.E. (2015) Treatment Approaches with Sexual Offenders Presenting with Non Paraphilic Hyper sexuality. *ATSA conference proceedings*, Montreal.

Dr Christine Norman is a Senior Lecturer in psychology at Nottingham Trent University and a member of the Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit (SOCAMRU) at Nottingham Trent University. Christine's research and teaching interests are in the area of biological and cognitive psychology with application to psychiatric disorders, forensic psychology and behavioural addictions. She is part of the research team working closely with HMP Whatton one of Europe's largest sex offender prisons and is also involved in prevention research with non offending paedophiles.

Belinda Winder is a Professor in Forensic Psychology and Heads the Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit (SOCAMRU) in the Department of Psychology at Nottingham Trent University. She set SOCAMRU up in 2007 to build upon the collaborative relationship between ongoing research within the Department of Psychology at NTU and HMP Whatton (one of the largest prisons in Europe, holding approximately 830 convicted adult men who have been convicted of a sexual offence). The unit's primary aim is to conduct and facilitate applied research in the area of sexual offending and sexual crime. The unit works with the HMPPS, Ministry of Justice and the NHS and conducts research at a number of prisons (including HMP Whatton and HMP Stafford) and other secure forensic establishments. She has disseminated her work in a range of ways (presentations, professional reports, peer reviewed papers, articles for prisoners' newspapers, medical journals and so on) both internationally and nationally. Belinda specialises in mixed-method research with a strong service-user voice and an applied focus.

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.

Rebecca Lievesley is a Lecturer in Forensic Psychology and member of the Sexual Offences, Crime and Misconduct Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University. She has worked and researched within the Criminal Justice System for around 10 years, currently engaged in various research projects including an investigation of reoffending and desistance in those serving short sentences, an evaluation of anti-libidinal medication for individuals convicted of a sexual offence and help seeking prior to committing a sexual offence. Rebecca is also a co-founder and trustee of the Safer Living Foundation, a charity established to reduce sexual (re)offending through rehabilitative initiatives and prevent further victims of sexual crime.