Evaluation of PhotoVoice ‘Shutter Release Project’

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Executive Summary

Evaluation Findings

1. A comparison of quantitative and qualitative findings in the first stage of the evaluation indicated that resettlement wing prisoners may deny or downplay any anxieties which they have about impending release into the community. The finding is consistent with research literature concerning prison culture and offender psychology. This was evidenced when prisoners were required to report on their internal state and focus directly on their thoughts and feelings about release. The findings of the evaluation in conjunction with relevant research on prison context and culture and offending populations may suggest that prison populations facing release do have anxieties, which they are not always willing or able to access or explore and that certain prisoners may benefit from creative interventions to facilitate this – which is the aim and objective of the ‘Shutter release’ project.

2. The qualitative analysis on the resettlement wing prisoners anxieties indicated that when focus on those anxieties is removed from the individual themselves in favour of a focus on external factors or barriers, prisoners responded that they have anxiety concerning employment, training, housing, their criminal records, education and lack of mental health and substance misuse related support. Each of which are evidenced in literature as risk factors for re-offending and recidivism rates. This could suggest that prisoners find concentration on sources of anxiety which are external to them easier to access. It may also infer that prisoners are partially aware of their own risk factors for re-offending which may be better understood and pre-empted for through exploration of these issues or barriers to successful rehabilitation – the ‘Shutter release’ project methodology has the potential to help better facilitate this process.

3. All 3 (100%) of the photography workshop participants reported reduced anxiety concerning their release and showed increased abilities to understand the process and any potential barriers they may face. This exceeded the 50% outcome rate set by PhotoVoice.
4. All workshop participants reported four shared benefits of the process, these were the increased ability to reflect on their anxieties, to be more flexible in their thoughts, to think more about the different thoughts of others and the ability to think or speak in more depth about their issues concerning release from prison. Each of these abilities have been evidenced as deficit in some studies in offender psychology. This finding inferred some potential benefits of the process for some offending populations with reference to certain forensic psychological research over and above the aims and objectives set by PhotoVoice.

5. Photovoice had intended that 25% of prisoners viewing the workshop participants exhibited photography would report reduced anxiety about their release, and increased understanding of the process and potential barriers they may face. One of the 3 (33.3%) of the focus group reported that they found this process beneficial for them and thought it would be beneficial for other resettlement wing prisoners.

6. The focus group results were mixed and did have some significant findings which should be considered in terms of outcome measures. Some reactions were very negative from the other 2 (66.6%) of the participants who struggled to understand what viewing the photographs were meant to do for them. These participants reported that they found looking at other people’s photographs meaningless to them personally, they said they could not understand what the photographs were showing ‘without a proper story’ and they complained that they failed to see how photographs documenting another person’s life, perspectives and anxieties would be of help to them. Those participants also commented that looking at the photographs frustrated them and heightened considerably, rather than reduced their pre-release anxieties. Again, these findings can be evaluated in terms of the offender psychology and prison culture literature mentioned above. Some offenders have been evidenced in research literature as finding abstract thought and understanding the perspectives of others difficult, moreover, due to the tendency to deny anxieties in the prison culture to avoid showing weaknesses, it could be very understandable that viewing prisoners might well experience heightened rather than reduced anxieties as a result of a new
found or more conscious awareness of those anxieties. Indeed this very finding has been evidenced before in talking pictures therapy (a form of phototherapy) with children where anxieties are raised considerably through the growing awareness of one’s own presenting issues and the ability to better access those anxieties. Similar findings have also been documented in psychotherapy outcome research.

Recommendations

1. It was noted that workshop participants reported that they found the process powerful psychologically and containing certain issues that arose during the process was difficult for some participants. One participant, who disclosed a history of mental health issues reported he would have liked counselling or psychotherapy as part of the process. He reported feeling unable to suitably deal with some of the anxieties raised for him. It is therefore recommended that some participants, particularly those with mental health or substance misuse histories might be better safeguarded and facilitated in their personal process by some concurrent work with a trained psychologist or psychotherapist. It is suggested that this could better meet the more complex needs of some offenders, encouraging inclusion and equality for those with greater psychological or health needs.

2. It was recommended that PhotoVoice reconsider their outcome expectations concerning reduced anxieties for those viewing the photographs of workshop participants in light of a combination of research evidence. This evaluation and other literature suggests that anxieties are often heightened rather than reduced by new or growing awareness. In light of research and findings in offender psychology, prison culture literature and in case studies concerning phototherapy that new awareness of anxieties or presenting problems most often brings a heightened anxiety before it can be lowered. This was clearly demonstrated in the evaluation findings. Again, this area could benefit from the input of a trained psychologist or psychotherapist who may be better equipped to facilitate participant’s exploration and subsequent containment of these heightened anxieties to potentially achieve more productive results.
PhotoVoice ‘Shutter release’
Prisoners explore issues around release and rehabilitation through photography

Aims:

- To reduce re-offending rates for prisoners at Leeds prison by increasing their level of mental and practical preparedness for successful rehabilitation through photography.
- To raise awareness of the barriers and anxieties faced by prisoners upon release from prison, in order to campaign for better support structures and to allow prisoners to feed into the design and implementation of those structures.
- To create a model of good practice and an evidence base to support the wider use of photography as a tool to tackle issues around release and rehabilitation.

Objectives:

- To provide 3-5 prisoners with a new skill and a creative outlet through which they can explore and communicate their expectations, fears and aspirations around release from prison and rehabilitation into society.
- To build up the learning and evidence required for the creation of a methodology guide to help future projects in this area.
- To lay the foundations and build up the learning and evidence required for a follow-up project in Leeds prison working with a larger number of prisoners inside the prison walls for more widespread benefits in the prison community.
- To support prisoners to create photos and captions around the experience of release and rehabilitation for public exhibitions and a sensitisation campaign to raise awareness of the common reasons for reoffending and to strengthen and inform campaigns aimed at lobbying the government for better post-release support.
- To generate constructive and positive discussion within the prison community about release and successful rehabilitation through exhibitions and presentations showcasing the work by the project participants.
Outcomes:

- One day of preparatory training in PhotoVoice methodology and ethical issues around participatory photography and image use for 3-5 members of key prison staff, to ensure support structures during and after the workshop process are sufficient and appropriate.
- 3-5 prisoners on ROTL complete a course of 10 PhotoVoice workshops held in the Visitor Centre of Leeds Prison.
- 3-5 prisoners complete a personal photo essay consisting of at least 10 captioned photographs exploring their expectations and ambitions for release and rehabilitation.
- At least 50% of participants report reduced anxiety about their release, and increased understanding of the process and potential barriers they may face.
- 25% of the prison community polled after the exhibition report reduced anxiety about their release, and increased understanding of the process and potential barriers they may face.
- Learning and equipment left with prison staff to allow on-going use of photography as a creative tool and to enhance communication and understanding between prisoners and staff.
Evaluation

Introduction

The evaluation for the PhotoVoice ‘Shutter release Project’ was conducted in three stages between November 2012 to March 2013. Stage one was an investigation into the wider prison community, the cohort from which the three workshop participants were selected by PhotoVoice. This stage of the evaluation was intended to explore the existing anxieties and needs of prisoners on the resettlement wing at HMP Leeds. A 10 question Likert Scale questionnaire was administered to all prisoners on the wing. This numerical data collection was also supported by a thematic analysis (a qualitative analysis of coded themes) conducted on the answers inmates gave to two additional questions. The purpose of this data collection was to measure how the project aims may or may not address the existing needs, difficulties and anxieties of the more general prison population pre-release. These findings were then evaluated in terms of existing psychological research and prison-specific research in the field.

The second stage of the evaluation was carried out using semi-structured interviews with the workshop project participants themselves. This stage employed a thematic analysis of the interviews with the participants, which were coded into dominant themes to explore the shared benefits of the project for the three participants. Again the findings were then evaluated and discussed with reference to any existing research. The three participants also gave their feedback on the project and made recommendations and suggestions for improvements in terms of future projects with prison populations.

The third and final stage of the evaluative process was a focus group to explore how the photographic work of the workshop participants might affect other prisoners viewing them. The focus group was intended to explore how, if at all, viewing the photographs might encourage other prisoners to better explore any pre-release anxieties and to feedback on their thoughts about the process. Again this feedback was thematically analysed and is discussed with reference to existing literature and research in the field.
The evaluation documents each of the three stages, providing sample data results and it concludes with a full discussion of all findings in respect of any relevant psychological literature or research. The discussion section explores some of the possible explanations for the findings and makes some suggestions and recommendations based on those findings and existing research in the field for future ‘Shutter release’ projects with prison populations.

**Methodology**

The project evaluation employs both quantitative and qualitative methods. These methods were used to collate numerical and interview discourse data. A Likert scale questionnaire with 10 questions and two separate commentary questions was administered to prisoners on the resettlement wing (see table I). Statistical data was analysed using computer software and all semi-structured interviews were coded (Saldana, 2013) and thematically analysed (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Thematic analysis is the grouping and subsequent coding of themes in semi-structured interviews with participants in which the interviews are grouped and coded separately and then again across the full data set for dominant, and in the case of this evaluation, shared themes raised in the responses of participants. Thematic analysis is a method often employed as part of a wider qualitative methodology – such as Discourse Analysis, but can be used as a method on its own (Braun & Clark, 2006:234).

**Ethical Considerations**

All research conducted as part of the ‘Shutter release’ evaluation was conducted according to the British Psychological Society guidelines on human research. Ethical approval for the evaluation was given by University of Roehampton Ethics Board. All participants were briefed and debriefed in writing on the project aims. The participants signed standard consent forms and all who took part were aware of their right to withdraw from the research process at any time. All data collection and storage complies with BPS codes of ethics and confidentiality.
Prisoners Anxieties about Resettlement

Resettlement Wing Data

For the first stage of the evaluation a ten question Likert Scale questionnaire was administered to the prisoners on the resettlement wing at HMP Leeds. The questions can be viewed in table I below. The questionnaire was provided with an ethical declaration, a briefing/debriefing letter and a standard participant consent form. 27 prisoners responded and completed the questionnaire. Prisoners who did not have any literacy needs completed the questionnaires alone in their cell, those with literacy needs were aided in doing so.

Table I

Quantitative data Analysis: Likert Scale Questionnaire Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Nor Disagree</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I do not feel anxious about leaving prison</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel personally prepared for leaving prison</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel I can discuss any anxieties about leaving prison with prison staff</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel I can discuss any anxieties about leaving prison with other prisoners</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel I can discuss any anxieties about leaving prison with significant others (family, friends, etc.)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have had appropriate support to discuss any issues</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I may have regarding leaving prison</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel positive about my opportunities when leave prison</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think it is unlikely that I will re-offend</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel confident I could discuss any difficulties I have on release with significant others (family, friends, etc.)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think people will understand any anxieties I have</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8
Results

As table I would indicate 75% of prisoners on the resettlement wing stated they agreed or strongly agreed they were not anxious about leaving prison and 86% felt they were personally prepared to do so. A further 61%, 67% and 82% agreed or strongly agreed they could discuss any anxieties they might have about resettlement with prison staff, other prisoners and with significant others respectively. 58% of the sample agreed or agreed strongly that they had received appropriate support to discuss issues they may have regarding leaving prison, with a further 68% feeling positive about their opportunities when they leave. 82% of the respondents who completed the questionnaire agreed or strongly agreed that they thought it was unlikely that they would re-offend. 76% agreed or strongly agreed they could discuss any difficulties they might have when they were released with significant others and 57% agreed or strongly agreed that they thought people on the outside would understand any anxieties they might have.

The results of the quantitative data analysis, taken from the Likert scale section of the questionnaire appeared to show little anxiety around release, or concerns regarding lack of support in preparing for release or lack of future opportunities, post-release support and understanding. However, the numerical data taken from the sample on the resettlement wing was contradicted starkly by the results of a qualitative thematic analysis on the comments made by the same 27 inmates in response to the following questions:

- What, if any do you see as the main obstacles to successful rehabilitation post-release from prison?

- In what ways, if any, do you think the prison/criminal justice system could help you further in preparing for successful rehabilitation post-release from prison?

Qualitative Data Analysis:

Thematic Analysis of Inmates Comments on Pre-Release Anxieties taken from the question section of questionnaire

20 inmates completed the question section on the questionnaire and these responses were
coded and grouped into common themes across the data set. The common themes are reproduced below in sample extracts.

**Participant A:** ‘I want to get off Methadone and also go into education so I can get a good trade and make some decent money to turn my life around – they could help me get decent accommodation upon release or get me into rehab’

**Participant B:** ‘Most of us fail because of confidence issues. Education. I would suggest prison’s run personal development courses that encourage opportunity and a desire to take action. Most prisoner’s go out with the same attitude they came in with. This needs to be rectified.’

**Participant C:** ‘Just help me find a full time job and some housing’

**Participant D:** ‘I want to go back to my old job. I worked there eight years, but I can’t I have a criminal record. People think we are all the same’

**Participant E:** ‘They should educate employers about hiring ex-offenders and they should offer some incentive to hire us because most employers don’t understand and they are not willing to give us a chance’

**Participant F:** ‘I need to get myself a full-time job, I have a family to support and I am not going to be able to cope. I don’t have a chance’

**Participant G:** ‘They need to give us more than just a level 1 education. I need a proper education. Higher level.’
Within the themes coded for the above questions the prisoners revealed significant anxieties around their opportunities for employment on leaving prison. The most dominant theme was that of lack of employment opportunities and anxieties concerning prospective employer’s lack of understanding where employing ex-offenders was concerned. Some respondents suggested employers should be educated about employing ex-offenders and some suggested incentives should be offered to employers who were willing to trial ex-offenders. A related and common theme which was also prominent in the prisoner’s comments concerned the general public and inflexible thoughts about ex-offenders being ‘all bad’ or being unable to change. Within this, many felt they would not be trusted and that they would fail to be given a chance anywhere. Some inmates reported that they were significantly anxious that they would fail to ever have a ‘worthwhile’ job which they enjoyed, or a career that would be sufficient to support their families again. Other anxieties reported by inmates on the resettlement wing included an awareness of their own lack of education, or higher level education opportunities, and the fears they may not be able to return to their prior employment with criminal records.

Another theme which dominated prisoner’s own comments around resettlement anxieties was that of suitable housing on release from prison, many felt they had nowhere to go and were anxious about the possibility of homelessness. Other themes which dominated prisoner’s response to these two questions were lack of support with mental health or substance misuse issues and other health issues post-release.

**Comparison of Qualitative and Quantitative Results:**

The comparison of the quantitative and qualitative methods to measure the inmates current anxieties concerning their release may appear to contradict each other – however there is considerable prior research which shows that socialisation into the prison system has several psychological effects, one of which may be the tendency to down-play worries, anxieties and need for support in an attempt at hiding weakness from other inmates and staff (Crighton & Towl, 2008). This tendency may also have been impacted by the demand characteristics of questionnaire methodology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Thus, the evaluation was also supported by a thematic analysis methodology in an attempt to counter
this by offering inmates the opportunity to express any anxieties in their own words in response to the two questions above.

Prior research on recidivism rates consistently show that lack of education, lack of employment and training opportunities, mental health and substance misuse issues contribute significantly to re-offending (Harvey & Smedley, 2010). It would appear that the prisoners on the resettlement wing also had fears and anxieties about these issues on resettlement.

**Outcomes for Project Participants**

Each of the three participants who took part in the ‘Shutter release’ workshop were encouraged during a semi-structured interview with the external evaluators, to consider the ways in which they thought the ‘Shutter release’ project had affected them in terms of their own issues and anxieties about leaving prison.

The interviews were then coded into over-arching themes for a thematic analysis. Four themes were particularly dominant across the interviews in terms of the participant’s beliefs about how the project had enabled them to access the thoughts and feelings to describe, articulate and explore their pre-release anxieties or issues. These themes were the ability to reflect on their anxieties, the ability to be more flexible in their thoughts, the ability to think more about the thoughts of others and the ability to think or speak in more depth about their issues concerning release from prison.

**Theme One: The ability to reflect**

**Extract 1:**

*Participant 1*: ‘I wouldn’t say it’s helped, but it’s opened my mind to a lot of problems that I wouldn’t have thought about and there’s things in life, where I probably wouldn’t have, you know, looked at something and you know, related to it in a personal aspect, like for instance I had a photograph with a car behind a, it weren’t a security screen it were like a builders barrier, wire barrier, caged barrier. A barrier thing and it just reminded me so much of why I’m here and (. ) err, so I related to it a bit more, I looked at that, I looked at it a lot, and it helps me reflect.’
Theme Two: The ability to be more flexible in thought

Extract 1:

Participant 1: ‘Oh, yeah, I look at a lot of things and I think to myself, just, here’s one, I took a photo of a mince pie and at the time I didn’t realise, I broke that mince pie in half and I got a close-up of it, and you could see the crumble, you could see the texture and everything in the mince pie and that were like me, that were like looking inside me, it’s all broken down and (.) Whereas before I’d have just looked and thought ‘Oh, I’ll just have one of them’ but you know, just silly little things like that, it’s strange’

Interviewer: To be able to reflect on yourself by seeing the mince pie?

Participant 1: Yeah, yeah and that’s just one example, I mean there’s loads of things you do through day, I mean I used to be black and white, but my life’s very much grey now, it is very much clouded, it’s in a way, that I’m not too sure now of the answers’

Theme Three: The ability to consider the different thoughts of others

Extract 1:

Interviewer: If you could talk to another prisoner about them doing the course, what would you say to them about what it might do for them?

Participant 3: Well, I think I’d say if you go on to the PhotoVoice course and learn to do the course it would build up your confidence. I would also say it is good to see the different sides of a photograph (.) the different meanings from different sides. I like to see it as a story, as part of a story in a sequence. I like seeing it as a story and doing them as a story. I think when you see them the story and the meanings will be different to different people.

Theme Four: The ability to think or speak in more depth about anxieties

Extract 1:

Participant 2: ‘Yeah, because before you are not thinking about it much, you are just thinking, when I get out, but the project made you think more deeper about the situation, to
look at it properly to think about when then actually open those gates, what are you going to
do? How are you going to live your life? Who are you going to be knocking about with? You
and your girlfriend have had time apart, people change, they do, thing’s don’t stay the same.
How are you going to deal with that? Cause it can be explosive. It’s not gonna be the same,
you have changed, they have changed.’

Extract 2:

Participant 3: ‘It has helped me a lot with my confidence and I want to carry on with
photography when I leave. It has really helped me talk about things better, I mean I have
always been a talker but now I can talk about other things, things in more depth. I think I can
also relate to things much better. I can now think more about what some images mean (. ) I
can relate to pictures differently I can relate better to things now. I relate to the meanings of
things.’

Each participant in the workshop stage reported personal benefits from attending and
completing the workshop. One participant spoke about feeling more able to look at his pre-
release anxieties in ways which were more ‘in depth’ another reported he was able to
confront more complex mental-health related anxieties and the other participant was able to
articulate thoughts and feeling around the changes that he had experienced in prison and the
ways these might affect his family on his release. Each participant reported being able to
better articulate their anxieties through their photography. All participants felt they were
better able to discuss and engage with any potential barriers they may face in terms of their
successful release into the community. All felt positive about their future opportunities.

Workshop Participant Recommendations for Future
Projects

During the semi-structured interviews the workshop participants also made several
recommendations for future workshops and potential participants. These were briefly
explored by the evaluators. These are stated below.

- One participant with mental health issues suggested he would have liked counselling
  offered to him alongside the workshop as he felt it was sometimes hard to contain the
  emotions raised by the process in his case. This he reported was a significant issue for
  him.
• All participants said they wanted longer to work on the thoughts and feelings which arose for them during the process and would have liked someone to facilitate this for them alongside their learning.

• All three participants thought the process should have been of a longer duration with more discussion around the issues raised.

• All three participants thought more prisoners should have had the chance to have taken part in the workshops.

• One participant said he would have liked to have had more time to analyse his pictures and would have liked someone to work with to discuss the personal issues raised for him.

• Two Participants said they would have preferred to have done the workshop earlier in their sentences.

Final Focus Group

The final stage of the evaluation took the form of a focus group. The photographs taken by the workshop participants were subsequently shown to 3 female inmates on the resettlement wing at another prison to evaluate the effects the prisoner’s photography might have on others viewing it who are facing release. Firstly, the female inmates were asked about their own pre-release anxieties in a semi-structured interview format and then they were asked how they thought the photographs may have an effect on them in terms of those anxieties.

Focus Group: Personal Pre-Release Anxieties

The three participants in the focus group were asked about any issues or anxieties they may be having regarding their impending release from prison. These responses are documented below.
Extract 1:

Participant 1: ‘Leaving in 9 weeks and not knowing where I’m living. Wondering will it all be the same? If I have to a hostel, I might as well stay in here. Not wanting to see people I knew. Scared’

Extract 2:

Participant 2: ‘Putting into practice the work I’ve done. Using motivation. Remaining clean. Starting afresh. Continuing to work on myself. No external worries as I will be away old people might include needing to move to a new area, get away from peer pressure. People with debts might struggle. Family and friends support is important.’

Extract 3:


The focus group participants presented similar personal issues about their impending release to those prisoners who completed the questionnaires on the resettlement wing in HMP Leeds. Only one focus group participant came into the focus group with any positive thoughts about her release into the community. Two participants reported that they felt particularly anxious about their release. However, the focus group participants reported back less feedback on their anxieties than other participants in stages one and two of the evaluation.

Focus Group: Issues raised concerning release from prison on viewing the photographs

The three participants in the focus group were then asked about any issues or anxieties which may have been raised, or affected by seeing the photographs which were taken by the workshop participants. These responses are also documented below.
Extract 1:

**Participant 1:** ‘Makes everything look dark and scary. No happy photos. All about sadness. Makes it seem not nice to go out. Raises lots of questions about children and how you can’t see your children in prison. Missed out of 18 months of my daughter’s life – that’s a long time. No people in the photographs – life isn’t like that unfortunately.’

Extract 2:

**Participant 2:** ‘Raises real life questions – made me think. I forgot about needing to do things like my driving license, council tax. These things stop being important when you are in here. The space and freedom in the photographs was important. Might give people insight into what they need help with/ making a list for things they need to do outside prison. There’s lots of people in here but when you go out, you are all alone. Photos reminded me that there are many people in it together.’

Extract 3:

**Participant 3:** ‘No issues raised – I know what outside looks like. What showing me pictures will remind me its shit?’

Only one of the focus group participants found looking at the photographs a positive experience. Two of the participants found that doing so raised their anxieties and made them think very negatively about their own release and the possible issues they might be facing. One of these participants appeared to be suggesting that the photographs made her better appreciate being in prison where she felt ‘safe’ from anxieties about being on the outside post-release. One participant was unhappy being shown the ‘outside’ and this appeared to frustrate her.
Focus Group: On the Benefits of Viewing the Photographs

The focus group participants were then shown the workshop project participants photographs and they were asked how, if at all the photographs might benefit them in discussing or thinking about their own release from prison or any anxieties they might have about that.

Extract 1:

Participant 1: ‘I don’t understand what the photographs are meant to do. Do you just look at them? And is that supposed to do something? I would like to take the photographs, but looking at someone else’s, I don’t know what that would do as their life isn’t the same as mine.’

Extract 2:

Participant 2: ‘Makes people think – opens their eyes to matters to think about. Lots of the girls in here don’t think until they have left and then it’s too late. Would be useful in the resettlement wing where I live. Some girls in here may be too immature or may not want to work on this stuff, but my girls would find it helpful.’

Extract 3:

Participant 3: ‘Why would looking at these pictures help someone? Why would they help me? What – to show me outside? I’m not an idiot so I know what outside looks like. I’m sure it is interesting if you go into the pictures and their storied but as just pictures, for me they mean nothing.’
Again, two of the focus group participants were negative about the potential for the photographs to benefit them in any way. There appeared to be some confusion for two participants surrounding how these photographs were supposed to stimulate discussion or benefit anyone other than the person taking them.

**Effects of Participant Photographs on Other Inmates**

The focus group had very mixed results, in that the participants of the focus group either found the photographs very helpful or not helpful at all. Two participants found the experience of looking at the pictures of no consequence to them or their situation, one thought that the experience was beneficial. All of the participants expressed a desire to take their own photographs and tell their own story, which they all thought would be more beneficial than viewing someone else’s.

Two participants in the focus group reported that they were unsure as to why they were supposed to be looking at the photographs, they were also unsure as to how a photograph taken by someone else might be of benefit to them. Two participants appeared to struggle with the abstract nature of the photography itself and one thought that ‘without a story’ the photographs mean nothing. One participant was angry with having been shown the pictures stating ‘Why would I want to see outside – I know it is shit’ and reported that she found the process a waste of time. One participant thought the process of viewing the pictures would be very valuable for other women on the resettlement wing. One participant also found that the photographs reminded her of her crime and heightened her fears about how she would be received by the general public on release. She reported that the pictures were ‘scary’ to her and they heightened her anxieties about her treatment by others on release.
Discussion

Stage one findings suggested that 75% of the 27 prisoners researched on the resettlement wing stated they agreed or strongly agreed they were not anxious about leaving prison and 86% felt they were personally prepared to do so. A further 61%, 67% and 82% agreed or strongly agreed they could discuss any anxieties they might have about resettlement with prison staff, other prisoners and with significant others respectively. 58% of the sample agreed or agreed strongly that they had received appropriate support to discuss issues they may have regarding leaving prison, with a further 68% feeling positive about their opportunities when they leave. 82% of the respondents who completed the questionnaire agreed or strongly agreed that they thought it was unlikely that they would re-offend. 76% agreed or strongly agreed they could discuss any difficulties they might have when they were released with significant others and 57% agreed or strongly agreed that they thought people on the outside would understand any anxieties they might have.

The results appeared to show little anxiety around release, no worries about support in preparing for release and no issues around future opportunities and understanding from others. However, the inmates responses to the question regarding what they saw as the main obstacles to their rehabilitation post-release and the question regarding what they thought the prison/criminal justice system could aid them with in terms of better preparing them for release, revealed significant anxieties concerning the inmates opportunities for employment on leaving prison. The most dominant theme was that of lack of employment opportunities and anxieties concerning prospective employer’s lack of understanding where employing ex-offenders was concerned. Some respondents suggested employers should be educated about employing ex-offenders and some suggested incentives should be offered to employers who were willing to trial ex-offenders. A related and common theme which was also prominent in the prisoner’s comments concerned the general public and inflexible thoughts about ex-offenders being ‘all bad’ or being unable to change. Within this, many felt they would not be trusted and that they would fail to be given a chance anywhere. Some inmates reported that they were significantly anxious that they would fail to ever have a ‘worthwhile’ job which they enjoyed, or a career that would be sufficient to support their families again.

Other anxieties reported by inmates on the resettlement wing included an awareness of
their own lack of education, or higher level education opportunities, and the fears they may not be able to return to their prior employment with criminal records. Another theme which dominated prisoner’s own comments around resettlement anxieties was that of suitable housing on release from prison, many felt they had nowhere to go and were anxious about the possibility of homelessness. Other themes which dominated prisoner’s response to these two questions were lack of support with mental health or substance misuse issues and other health issues post-release.

The comparison of the quantitative and qualitative methods to measure the inmates current anxieties concerning their release may appear to contradict each other – however there is considerable prior research which shows that socialisation into the prison system has several psychological effects, one of which may be the tendency to down-play worries, anxieties and need for support in an attempt at hiding weakness from other inmates and staff (Crighton & Towl, 2008, Towl, 2006, Harvey & Smedley, 2010). This tendency may also have been impacted by the demand characteristics of questionnaire methodology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Prior research on recidivism rates, lack of education, lack of employment and training opportunities, mental health and substance misuse issues contribute significantly to re-offending (Harvey & Smedley, 2010). It would appear that the prisoners on the resettlement wing also had fears and anxieties about these issues on resettlement.

The results of the first stage of the evaluation appeared to show how prisoners may down-play their anxieties around release from prison when they are asked directly about this which is consistent with literature on prison culture (Toch, 1992, Crewe, 2009) and offender psychology (Farringdon & West, 1993, Andrews & Bonta 2006) despite actually experiencing some considerable anxieties concerning this (Andrews & Bonta, 2006; Harvey & Smedley, 2010). Again this lack of reporting issues to direct questions about any anxieties or feared weaknesses is consistent with literature concerning prison populations and data gathering (Towl, 2006). The contradiction in the two data sets taken from the resettlement wing, may also suggest that prison populations down-play these anxieties when asked directly about their own anxieties in respect of their personal thoughts, feelings, but find it easier to express them when the question is focused on their needs and issues which they view as somewhat external to them. Again this is consistent with existing literature in the field (Weldon and Velson, 1988).
The inconsistent quantitative and qualitative results from the resettlement wing, taken in conjunction with existing literature in the field appear to indicate that prisoners may benefit from deeper exploration of their pre-release anxieties, which is an aim of the ‘Shutter release’ project and that prisoners may find this a less daunting experience when they do so in a way which facilitates this exploration through concentration on that which is external to them in order to access deeper internal anxieties. Again, this seems to be consistent with the intention of the ‘Shutter release’ project workshop which is intended to facilitate expression of internal anxieties through a medium removed from the individual (photography). Stage one of the evaluation indicated that prison populations facing release do have considerable anxieties about their impending release, however, they may not be confident or able to access or express these anxieties which may be confounded by a variety of factors noted in prior research including psychological and prison context factors.

The second stage of the evaluation which was carried out using a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with the three workshop participants revealed four dominant and significant themes concerning the potential benefits of the ‘Shutter release’ project for those participants. These findings may also indicate potential benefits beyond the objectives of the project in terms of factors specific to certain offender profiles and psychology in other literature and research on prison populations. These themes were the ability to reflect on their anxieties, the ability to be more flexible in their thoughts, the ability to think more about the thoughts of others and the ability to think or speak in more depth about their issues.

As noted above, psychological research in prisons suggests that inmates find discussing anxieties or perceived weaknesses difficult to express, this was something that all the ‘Shutter release’ workshop participants reported as being better facilitated by their involvement in the project process. Furthermore, the participant’s felt that the process of taking photographs to express those anxieties helped them to think about release and any issues which they may face in a far deeper way than they had perhaps thought about before taking part. Prior forensic psychological research has demonstrated that a considerable number of people who have been incarcerated show a difficulty in reflecting on their internal states, or their behaviour or the behaviour and internal states of others (Farringdon & West, 1996). Similarly this was something that all participants in the ‘Shutter release’ workshop reported being facilitated by their experience. A final and significant benefit reported to the evaluators by
the workshop participants was a considerable change in the flexibility of their thoughts concerning release and their own experiences in and out of the prison context. A significant amount of psychological literature indicates that some offending populations (in particular young offenders) show an inflexibility in their thought patterns which is a risk factor for criminal behaviours (for an overview see Boswell, 1996, DeZulueta, 2006, Muncie, 2009, Harvey & Smedley, 2010). The ‘Shutter release’ workshop participant’s interviews all showed not only an increasing flexibility of thought but also indicated a growing awareness of this and the benefits this may have for the participant’s in the future on the outside.

The benefits reported by the participants all concern psychological factors which have been well documented as common deficits in offending samples which suggest a ‘therapeutic’ function of the project which could be very helpful to workshop participants. Indeed the potential benefits of phototherapy (the use of photographs in therapeutic psychological interventions) have been well documented (Loewenthal, 2013). However, such therapies are carried out by trained psychotherapists and psychologists and each of the participants made recommendations that future projects could better facilitate participant’s exploration of the sometimes overwhelming thoughts and feelings which arose for them during the process. Each participant thought that in these terms the process should have been of a longer duration. One participant with mental health issues reported that he thought he should have had counselling throughout the process and he reported feeling uncontained as the feelings arisen were very difficult for him to deal with in either the workshops or when he returned to the prison. That participant said the thing that was noticeably missing for him was a counsellor.

It has been suggested in literature on phototherapy that the use of photographic images in therapy can help to access the unconscious and it could be further suggested the exploration of the photography stage should be carried out by a trained psychotherapist or psychologist to better contain and safeguard those participants who may be more significantly affected by the process psychologically or for those with mental health needs (Loewenthal, 2013). This may also heighten the benefits already evidenced and discussed above with regard to factors relating to offender psychology and emotional literacy in research literature.

The final focus group stage of the evaluation linked into the above results in that these results also appeared to be confounded by some of the factors in offender psychology
mentioned above. Firstly, the female inmates were asked about their own pre-release anxieties in a semi-structured interview format and then, after viewing the workshop participant photographs they were asked how they thought the photographs may have an effect on them in terms of those anxieties.

The focus group had very mixed results, in that the participants of the focus group either found the photographs very helpful or not helpful at all. Two participants found the experience of looking at the pictures of no consequence to them or their situation, one thought that the experience was beneficial. All of the participants expressed a desire to take their own photographs and tell their own story, which they all thought would be more beneficial than viewing someone else’s. The mixed focus group findings can also be seen in terms of the offender psychology mentioned with reference to stages one and two above.

Overall two thirds of the focus group did not find viewing the photographs taken by other participants helpful, nor could they see how the photographs were supposed to be helpful to them. This should be considered in conjunction with the fact that those participants also came to the focus group with very negative views about their own release. This is again consistent with the aforementioned rigid thought patterns in some offending populations (Harvey, 2011). Furthermore, the finding that the focus group found it very difficult to see how photographs taken from another person’s perspective might be of help to them is also consistent with the research findings detailed briefly above with regard to possible offender deficits in understanding the minds and perspectives of others (DeZulueta, 2006). The fact that the participant’s reported that they couldn’t really understand pictures without a proper story may also be connected to deficits in capacity for abstract thought in some offending populations (Boswell, 1996).

All but one of the focus group participants also demonstrated heightened, rather than reduced anxiety about their release on viewing the pictures which was the opposite result to that which PhotoVoice were aiming for. However, some literature suggests that when people are in the prison environment they may try to forget about the outside world as a way of coping (Toch, 1992). Thus, on viewing the photographs it would be understandable that anxieties could be heightened, rather than reduced. This finding has also been seen in a case study in phototherapy research whereby the participant had entered the talking pictures therapy scoring low on an anxiety scale and by the end of therapy scored much higher due to
heightened awareness of their presenting issues (Lowenthal, 2013:92). This can be a common outcome in the beginning of various forms of psychotherapy (Jarrett, 2008). In this respect the external evaluators would suggest that the PhotoVoice aim and intended outcome of reducing the anxieties of those viewing the photographs may be an erroneous one, as it is likely with any new awareness or focus on potential anxieties, that general anxieties will be heightened before they can be lowered. This may be particularly so of prison populations who have been evidenced here and elsewhere as trying to forget or downplay any anxieties they may have, not least due to expectations within the prison culture (Harvey, 2011). Again, it might be suggested that this process could also benefit from the input of a psychologist or psychotherapist to explore this growing awareness further with viewing participants in a more productive way as part of the ‘Shutter release’ process. However, the focus group were able to engage with some barriers they thought they may be facing through the discussion.

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References


