**Performing well: male prisoner experiences of drama, dance, singing and puppetry in England**

**Abstract**:

This paper outlines art form impacts used within *Staging Time* at an adult male sex offender prison in England by drawing on the voices of prisoners (aged 21 to 75 years), including those with undiagnosed autistic traits. We qualitatively investigate prisoner experiences from drama (n = 11), dance (n = 12), puppetry (n = 7) and singing (n = 15) projects using a Theory of Change approach. Based on themed analysis of self-report data from 4 world cafés and 44 follow-up questionnaires, we conclude arts projects positively contribute to health and well-being, forming healthy relationships and prison culture. By applying a Desistance Theory lens, we argue arts projects provide building blocks towards crime abstinence. Whilst all arts projects improved prisoner well-being, dance had greater propensity for increasing physical fitness. With a focus on dance impacts, our research widened to stakeholder and practitioner interviews (n = 4), alongside analysis of secondary data from dance performance audience feedback sheets (n = 48) collected by *Staging Time*. Audience members included prison staff, prisoners, prisoner family members and close friends and a small group of invited stakeholders. Arts projects have wider impacts upon staff, other prisoners, and family members.

**Keywords**: prison arts, mental health, sex-offenders, autism, prison culture, desistance

**Introduction**:

There is international wide-scale evidence for arts being used therapeutically in the community for social activism, rehabilitation, mental health enhancement and behavioural-health purposes including reducing ‘*maladaptive behaviors’* (Potash *et al*, 2016;120), which can be transferable to incarcerated populations. UK evidence suggests art-based prison projects help forge therapeutic rehabilitative community (Jewkes, 2018). This is important because UK prison conditions can mutually diminish prisoner and staff mental health (Kinman *et al*, 2017), highlighting need for prison condition and culture improvement. The arts programme *Staging Time* (consisted of drama, dance, puppetry and singing) with adult male sex offenders incarcerated in HMP Stafford are evaluated in this paper. Prisoners with diagnosed autism, or displaying prevalent autistic traits were a priority group for inclusion in *Staging Time*. Arts interventions can positively impact autistic child cohorts regarding improvements to sense of self, emotion regulation, reductions to rigid behaviour patterns and improved social behaviour, inclusive of better communication (Schweizer *et al*, 2020). We anticipated positive outcomes for our incarcerated cohort and used a Theory of Change model to evaluate impacts.

UK prisoners are not always officially diagnosed with autism (Underwood *et al*, 2016) or learning disability (Cohen & Henley, 2018) due to insufficient resources leading to support deficit (Critoph & Rope, 2018). Whilst autistic sex offenders can be more sociable in prison, isolation can still occur, along with mental health decline (Vinter *et al*, 2020), possibly due to feeling stigmatised (Berg *et al*, 2018), particularly for child sex offenders (Mann, 2012). Prison officers experiencing conflicting personal feelings and professional obligation can fail to build meaningful relationships with sex offenders (Berg *et al*, 2018). Although, most sex offenders do not have autism, there is greater prevalence within sex offending cohorts compared to other offending groups (Vinter *et al*, 2020;2). It is noted that a high proportion of sex abusers have been victims of child abuse (Glasser *et al*, 2001). Having an intellectual disability (Willott *et al*, 2020), or autism, can increase vulnerability to abuse (Brown-Lavoie *et al*, 2014). Steven and Watson (2018;17) advocate that 'healing' from past abuse is possible through prison theatre involvement and Doxat-Pratt (2018;28) found music an outlet for emotions enhancing prison security. Despite apparent healing needs among some sex offenders, public preferences are for severe punishment (Payne *et al*, 2010) to acknowledge impact severity to victims (Yates, 2009).

Sex crime perpetrators are media depicted as ‘*incurable predators’* (Malinen *et al*, 2014), despite comparatively low recidivism rates (Heroux, 2011), possibly due to under-reporting to the police (Felson & Pare, 2005; 597; Willott *et al*, 2020;82). However, they also undergo high surveillance which increases crime detection (Farmer *et al*, 2015). Mews *et al’s* (2017;2) Ministry of Justice research questions core sex offender treatment programme effectiveness in England and Wales, irrespective of low recidivism rates, a pattern also found in Germany (Lösel *et al*, 2020;467). Both studies indicate treatment is less effective at reducing recidivism in sex and violent offending. Some child sex offenders reported to Mann (2012;352) playing a *‘façade’* in UK sex offending treatment programmes. Other researchers have found prisoners perceived attending projects and therapeutic interventions positively, demonstrating a level of ‘*willingness to change’* (Farmer *et al*, 2015*;* McAlinden *et al*, 2017). Desistance tends to increase with age (Farmer *et al*, 2015), but desistance is not always a linear journey (Farrall & Calverley, 2006). There are subtle differences between *‘hooks for change’* regarding male and female desistance (Giordano *et al*, 2002). Key ingredients for crime abstinence generally include re-evaluation of crime(s) committed, re-shaping the future and re-connecting with society (Galnander, 2020). Such cognitive and social connection trends are apparent in sex offender cohorts, although engaging with employment and new relationships have mixed outcomes (Farmer *et al*, 2015; McAlinden *et al*, 2017). Conversely, non-desisting child sex offenders perceived their arousal as innate and representative of *‘true self’* (Farmer *et al*, 2015; 327), as such, identity cognition change is not apparent. Whereas, desisting sex offenders infer a rational choice not to offend (ibid).

Arts can contribute to helping incarcerated people make positive progress towards behaviour and attitudinal reform and are cost effective interventions (Merrill & Frigon, 2015). Arts enrich prison rehabilitation (Liebling *et al*, 2019) and can aid those convicted to have a greater *“understanding of the impact of their offending on victims and their own families*” (Scotland SPS, 2015;7) facilitating reflexivity and empathy. This is of particular value for autistic individuals based on findings with children (Jones *et al*, 2010; Schweizer *et al*, 2020). Furthermore, Yardley and Rusu (2018) convey that arts projects leverage engagement with wider prison activities with propensity to reduce re-offending.

International and UK evidence conclude drama and theatre having positive impacts to male and female prisoners (Barton & Russel, 2018; Stephenson & Watson, 2018; Prendergast, 2016; Davey *et al*, 2015; Hewish, 2015; Keehan, 2015; Merrill & Frigon, 2015), including with sex offenders (Bottoms, 2010). Davey *et al’s* (2015) prison theatre secondary research asserts prisoners gain capability skills to desist crime and Keeham (2015) concurs that applied theatre can enable individual and organisational change. There is less academic evaluation on dance in prisons. Perillo (2011;609) indicates Philippino prison courtyard troupe dancing achieved a more disciplined prison population, reduced violence and facilitated teamwork. Seibel (2008) reflectively acknowledges emotional and physical demeanour changes occurring from USA prison dance therapy work with woman, concurring with Frigon and Shantz (2015) empirical data collection with incarcerated women in France and Canada. Even less is academically conveyed regarding puppetry in prisons; Henley (2015) alludes to puppetry within a music making project in youth custody in England. Conversely, singing has a long-documented history in UK and USA prisons for making a positive reform contribution (Cohen, 2009; Henley, 2015; Cohen & Henley, 2018). Higgins (2015) discusses emotional well-being from singing projects and notes prisoners in Massachusetts routinely sang in the shower, demonstrating propensity for sustainability beyond a project. Cohen and Henley (2018;5) advocate music learning in prisons connects with desistance regarding ‘*identity and diversity, motivation and hope, relationships with professionals and personal supporters, development of personal as well as social strengths, respect and self-determination’ and the ‘development of social capital’*.

***Staging Time*: the arts projects:**

*Staging Time was* facilitated by Rideout (Creative Arts for Rehabilitation) alongside a team of freelance arts specialists[[1]](#footnote-1). Prisoners were pre-selected, which helps minimise risk (Stephenson & Watson, 2018;17) and some self-volunteered for the projects. Whilst *Staging Time* was not dedicated to autistic prisoners, those with autism and autistic traits were a priority group. Rideout’s ‘*applied theatre’* approach is rooted in participatory practice that draws on concepts from cognitive-behavioural practice, attachment theory, trauma theory, desistance theory, theories of fundamental human needs, and emerging theories from autism studies. *Staging Time* was underpinned by historical research and comprised of the following projects:

* Drama - *Past Time* (focused on historical food in prison)
* Dance - *Biomechanics of the Treadwheel* (focused on historical labour in prison)
* Puppetry - *More Fool than Knave* (focused on the historic practice of incarcerating those with learning disability and mental health needs, particularly autism in the storyline)
* Singing - *Ghost Songs of the Conscientious Objectors* (focused on the conscientious objector’s experience of prison and included music making and poetry)

*Staging Time* commenced in HMP Stafford in November 2018 and ended 18 months later. Each project lasted for two weeks (excluding weekends) and then several months went by before the next project commenced. There was a new recruitment drive for every project. Each project involved approximately 12 inmates and the singing project recruited 19 people. Prisoners were able to participate in more than one project. The ‘*cathartic’* practice of literature engagement contributed to script development in the context of teamwork (Colvin, 2015; 214) for each project. Each project performance was delivered twice to audience (once for the singing project due to facility availability) at the end of the two weeks. Audience members included performer family and friends, combined with stakeholders, other prisoners, and prison staff. Each *Staging Time* project closed with a performer debrief mentioning our evaluation. A CD was produced for Singing performers who opted for a family member or friend to be the recipient, reflecting similar practice elsewhere (Roma, 2010; Henley, 2015; Cohen & Henley, 2018;14).

Methodology:

Demonstrating qualitative academic rigour is imperative to credibly evaluate prison arts due to perceptions that self-report is not scientific (Hewish, 2015). Connell and Kubisch (1998) commend a Theory of Change evaluation approach using several sources of evidence to measure achievement of project outcomes. Envisaged outcomes for *Staging Time* based on previous literature, included prisoners experiencing:

a) increased health and well-being

b) increased confidence and self-esteem and

c) increased ability to make healthy relationships with others

Theory of Change evaluation includes whether the project is ‘*doable’* and ‘*testable’* (ibid). *Staging Time* used approaches akin with ‘*what works’* within criminal justice (Davey *et al*, 2015;4-5) and arts-based best practice. The prison governor dedicated staff to the financed project. These factors met the ‘*doable’* criteria. Our research team identified data collection methods to test for change and applied a crime desistance lens to analysis. Cohen and Henley (2018;10) raise issue with proving sole impacts attributed to arts, which we resolved through performers being full-time on the arts project and collecting data the week after each performance for standardisation consistency. Ethical approval was granted through Staffordshire University with prison governor permission. Ethical practice relating to confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, right to withdraw and debrief were applied, in line with Criminology guidance (British Society of Criminology, 2015).

Our first research phase was underpinned by principles of participatory evaluation (Gratton & Beddows, 2018) by utilising an adapted World Café combined with follow up questionnaires (Author *et al*, XXXX), following the format described in Table 1. World Café is endorsed by Clinks (2011) and Revolving Doors (2016) and complemented Rideout’s democratic approach to working with performers. A café layout with refreshments was set up with group discussions at tables to allow delegates to form a ‘world’ view’ through rotations to other groups and summary (Author *et a*l, XXXX). This practice addresses the concern Hewish (2015) raises about ensuring academic rigour with ongoing cross checks regarding data validity and reliability through group dialogue (Brown & Issacs, 2005). As discussed by Page (2020), World Café allows for accuracy challenges by peers present. Where participants agree on points raised this contributes to the themed analysis process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). An adjustment to World Café design included utilising trained undergraduate research assistants as table-hosts to scribe, thus avoiding reading and writing participation barriers (Stephenson & Watson, 2018) because literacy levels in prison populations are low (Colvin, 2015;213; Revolving Doors, 2016).

Table 1: World Café Sequence

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Step | Activity | Methodological Consideration |
| 1 | Welcome and introductions to the research | Participants were given detail about the research project to make an informed choice to voluntarily participate. Prison officers were available to engage any prisoners not wanting to participate in alternative prison activity. |
| 2 | Consent form completion | Consent forms were verbally talked through, and written copies made available for completion. Participants had opportunity to ask question and have writing support. |
| 3 | Presentation on performance | Research team members attended performances and audience insight formed a short flip-chart presentation to stimulate subsequent discussions. Flip chart was used to accommodate security requirements. |
| 4 | Question 1 | We asked:  1a) What is one thing that you most appreciated about taking part in the project?  1b) What is one thing that the project could have improved upon? |
| 5 | Rotation(s) | We allowed for some self-selection of up to two people per group moving to another group. Table Hosts welcomed newcomers and supported the group sharing their discussion and facilitated a cross check on data and expansion of knowledge. |
| 6 | Summary on key findings | Table Hosts shared main points from question 1 back to the wider group and facilitator. |
| 7 | Question 2 | We asked:  2a) What impact has taking part in the project had upon your confidence and self-esteem?  2b) What impact has taking part in the project had upon your health and well-being? |
| 8 | Rotation(s) | Facilitators pre-selected group members to move based on group dynamics combined with some self-selection. |
| 9 | Summary on key findings | Table Hosts shared main points from question 2 back to the wider group and facilitator. |
| 10 | Question 3 | We asked:  3) What impact has taking part in the project had on your ability to make healthy relationships with others? |
| 11 | Rotation(s) | Facilitators pre-selected group members to move based on group dynamics and self-selection also occurred. |
| 12 | Summary of key findings | Table Hosts shared main points from question 3 back to the wider group and facilitator. |
| 13 | Plenary | Facilitators summarise main points from the session. |
| 14 | World Café Adaption: follow up questionnaire | Facilitators explain voluntary questionnaire completion and remind participants of what will happen to the data. Table Hosts provide scribing support and collect completed questionnaires. |
| 15 | Debrief | Facilitators thank participants and cover debrief information verbally and in writing. |

A total of four World Cafés were conducted (drama performers = 11, dancers = 12, puppeteers = 7 and singers = 15) and sessions lasted approximately 2 hours. There was 60% to 100% of participants from each project represented and we had viable group sizes according to Page and Temple-Malt (2018). We typically had four inmates working with one Table Host and two academics available for in situ coaching and additional scribing support. We used fewer rotations per question to a typical World Café because moving people to different groups was sometimes counterproductive (Author *et al*, XXXX) to achieving world view (Brown & Issacs, 2005). Minimal core questions are advised at a World Café (ibid), as such we had three core questions for each world café to assist with data consistency. Table-Hosts summarised main points to the wider group after each question.

A follow up questionnaire aimed to capture data less sharable in a group and 44 research participants responded. Questionnaires have solely evaluated other arts projects (Stephenson & Watson, 2018). Incomplete demographics were captured and informed us that the men’s ages were between 21 and 75 years and people self-identified as ‘*White British*’, ‘*White/Welsh’*, ‘*English Gypsy’*, ‘*Irish’*, ‘*British Asian – Indian’*, ‘*Black British’*, ‘*South African*’, ‘*Black African’* and ‘*Italian*’. We directly enquired about desistance in terms of changes to thoughts and feelings regarding offence(s). Feedback on the World Café was also sought, which prisoners enjoyed (Author *et al*, XXXX). World Café’s ended with written, and verbal debrief reiterating anonymity, what happens with the data, participant access to report(s) and publication(s), how to withdraw from the study, or to make a complaint. Prison officers present returned prisoners to scheduled activities and team members debriefed either before, or after being escorted out of the prison.

The second research phase facilitated a cross reference for prisoner responses. The dance project was the focus because first phase data analysis indicated greater impacts to prisoners. Semi structured interviews were conducted with professionals involved (n = 4) including arts practitioners and prison staff using purposive sampling (Savin-Baden, 2012:314). A research assistant undertook interviewing and analysed dance performance audience feedback (48 survey responses out of 96 attendees collected by Rideout) which also informed their undergraduate final year thesis. Prior rapport with professionals was apparent due to this student also undertaking a work placement with the dance project and this was perceived as a positive for data collection, although Bell and Waters (2014:178) suggest bias potential. Due to security and time constraints participants chose between telephone or face-to-face interview. A similar note-taking approach to World Café was used for data capture where audio recording was not possible reducing accuracy and compromising achieving rich data (Denscombe, 2014).

Findings and Discussion:

Braun and Clark’s (2006) theoretical thematic analysis supported qualitative data processing from all data sets, allowing for examination of experiences, behaviour and social realities (Robson & McCartan, 2016;467). Theoretical themes underpinning our coding pertained to:

* Benefits to health and well-being (including self-esteem and confidence)
* Relationship building and reduced isolation
* Improved prison culture

We subsequently used a crime desistance lens to review data with consideration to Galnander’s (2020) observation that re-evaluation of crime(s) committed, re-shaping the future and re-connecting with society are keys to behaviour change. Desistance is a journey with many influencing factors to whether someone desists in prison and then continues desisting beyond prison and into the community. As such, our analysis focuses on whether arts can stimulate moves towards desistance.

**Benefits to Health and Well-being:**

Sykes (1958) referred to prison courtyard exercise as a ‘*madman’s dance’* involving step counting. In today’s prisons, exercise is typically limited, but there is evidence of a prison body building culture, through to physically inactive prisoners (Hannan-Jones & Capra, 2016). Child sex offenders may engage less in exercise due to associated stigma and hostility from other prisoners (Marti, 2021). Moffa *et al* (2021;4315) view prisoners adopting physical activity as a public health agenda with life expectancy and health care expenditure implications. In the *Staging Time* drama project participants engaged in physical movement; *“got us moving and thinking creatively”*, but the dance project exceeded all projects regarding physical fitness improvements:

*“Within the dance session you can integrate a physicality… you can actually have the same result that they do in the gym…* *they are still accessing the same endorphins that they would find in the gym… ”* (Dance Practitioner)

*“used muscles that never used before’*” (Dancer)

*“lost 1 kilo of weight over the 2 weeks, I weigh myself all the time”* (Dancer)

*“fitter – lost weight.”* (Dancer)

Seibel (2008;108) noted women were more physically relaxed from prison dance therapy, corroborating with empirical findings from Frigon and Shantz (2015). Our research extends this by male prisoners clarifying weight loss and increased fitness. Engagement with exercise suggests a re-connection with societal activities, which is a possible building block to desistance (Galnander, 2020) and lifestyle changes (Mannocci *et al*, 2018). Prisoners and practitioners commented on the “*gym guys”* initially mocking dancers, but opinions altered with noticeable physical impacts from dance:

*“people walking on route would joke about whether we would be wearing tutu’s and dancing was sissy but when the gym people saw us they were really impressed and wanted to do it”* (Dancer)

*“…dance is perceived as being feminine and as being graceful… but the dance that I try and encourage within my work is a very physical, dynamic, gymnastic approach and allows them to be graceful but in a very masculine way”* (Dance Practitioner)

Rather than dispel gendered ideology, the selected dance form seemingly created appreciation of a dance genre in keeping with the masculinity reflected in prison gym culture. However, thinking changes were noticeable, and demonstrates aptitude for desistance related thinking changes. Furthermore, dance bridged a connection gap between groups of people and reduced shaming, which are both are contributors to desistance (Galnander, 2020).

Physical activity for incarcerated groups can positively impact mental health (Mannocci *et al*, 2018), including reducing depression, anxiety and hostility (Battaglia *et al*, 2015). *“Over 70 per cent*” of men in prison have *“two or more mental disorders*”, which is *“fourteen times more than among the general population*” (Marmot, 2015;91), demonstrating need for mental health support in prisons. We found dance improved interpersonal connectivity and reduced anger, which supports hostility reduction as mentioned by Battagalia *et al* (2015). Whilst performers talked less about having depression, they indicated low mood from feeling knocked down by the system, concurring with experiences reported by Sykes (1958) that can lead to hostility to both the system and to desistance. Theatre performing can effectively reduce depression (Stephenson & Watson, 2018), and put simply by a Drama performer in our study, taking part: *“helped me feel alive”.* A prison manager commented that “*one* [dance performer] *was in a dark place and has been better since…*”. Both Singing and Dance projects evidenced how mental health concerns typically requiring mental health service interventions were positively impacted:

*“support from group stopped me from self-harming and got me through”* (Singer)

*“PTSD sufferer taken out of normal stressful environment and gave other focus.”* (Dancer)

Mental and physical well-being can be exacerbated by insufficient sleep (Touitou *et al*, 2017; 94) and this issue was partially addressed through engagement with Dance and Drama:

*“slept like a baby, better than usual inside, like when I’m outside and I go to work and sleep well, the only time I didn’t sleep well was the night before I practiced the dance moves.”*. (Dancer)

“*better sleep. Broke day down”* (Drama performer)

Another public health concern impacting mental well-being is isolation (Delerue Matos *et al*, 2021). Like Yardly and Rusu’s (2018) findings, engaging with *Staging Time* assisted with encouraging prisoners and incarcerated audience members to join other activities. This reduced isolation and built social capital, which Galnander (2020) advocates supports desistance. Making positive rational choices also supports desistance (Farmer *et al*, 2015) and it is a rational choice to engage in projects which are producing positive outcomes:

*“Project helped with mental health - decided to do the singing project”* (Puppeteer)

*“…a guy that did the puppetry project with us, he was an autistic guy, who amazingly signed up to do another project… And then he subsequently did that final project with us and took on a major role… confidence to do this kind of project..* [and to] *take that into other things…”* (Arts Practitioner)

Foundational well-being factors of self-esteem and confidence were improved, aligning with Frigon and Shantz’s (2015) dance findings and Merrill and Frigon’s (2015) drama findings. However, puppetry received mixed feedback on self-esteem improvements, but a reduction in stress associated to prison life was more readily acknowledged; “*took your mind off things*”. The art projects offered an emotional safety valve for periods of heightened emotion and distress, which corroborates with Haugland Balsnes (2012) findings from a Norwegian choral community group. A prison manager commented that four residents were going ‘*to open or release’* and their *“engagement”* had increased, a point validated by one prisoner commenting that Puppetry helped him navigate emotions whilst going to ‘*appeal’*. Farmer *et al’s* (2015) findings indicate life challenges can contribute to sex offending and keeping busy, increased self-worth and self-esteem contribute to crime desistance. Two weeks on an arts project kept minds occupied on the performance, rather than on other life situations.

Whilst projects elicited positive emotions, there was a post-performance dip when the usual prison regime resumed: *“felt sad and emotional after it finished. Felt like ‘one big happy family’ and then it was all over”* (Puppeteer). Transition between arts project engagement and prison routine needs more consideration for short term projects (Author *et al*, XXXX). Ongoing arts projects could help with longer term impacts to well-being and physicality, as well as continuation of the journey towards desistance. Despite emotional dips, prisoners said, “t*he come down is not bad enough that I wouldn’t do it again”* and some positively considered how to transfer the experience to handle other life issues; *“…this slump and how to cope gives good life experience then have to pick yourself back up…”,* which could aid desistance.

**Relationship Building and Reduced Isolation:**

Healthy relationship building occurred on all projects and teamwork helped prison feel “*more like a community”*.Prisoners described how they *“carried each other”* (Singer) and *“became a team”* (Singer) and were *“comrades”* (Dancer).Haugland Balsnes (2012;257) uses Durkheim’s concept of *‘organic solidarity’,* explaining unity forged through group singing to create a blended sound. Solidarity through co-creation of performances was evident in all *Staging Time* projects and this assisted with positive behaviour change such as, calming a peer to encourage pro-social behaviour. This corroborates with Van de Wall’s (1936) view that prison music projects promote ‘*feelings of belonging, loyalty, and shifts destructive habits into constructive ones’* (In Cohen, 2009; 54). Groupwork offered support and peer challenge, but continuation of this support is less viable when prisoners are on different wings or activities, due to fear of reprimand, so some felt relationship investment was pointless. There was evidence of passive acceptance of such rules, with contentment to simply see a familiar person in passing. This ‘*accepting of the rules’* attitude, reflects Crewe and Ievins (2020) findings of sex offenders complying in acknowledgement of the right to punish. Conversely, some prisoners in our study felt angry about relationship controls, both inside prison and upon release, due to government restrictions to prevent paedophile networks. This practice particularly upset two men using the Drama project to further their romantic relationship. However, practitioners did not view this romantic relationship as healthy:

*“…a couple of guys that we worked with on a previous project* [Drama project] *who we had already agreed would not be good for them to be involved* [in further projects together]...[and] *there was an individual* [in the Singing project]… *he presents a lot of problems, acting out, been on every wing, bullies people for sexual favours and I was very conscious of watching him with a very vulnerable guy in the group… ”* (Arts Practitioner)

Artists challenged negative perceptions of sex offenders and provided *‘unconditional positive regard’,* whilst being mindful of predatory behaviour and proactively safeguarding others. Some prisoners were also guarded with such performers. Physical proximity issues were noted, for example one man felt *“Anxious… if people come near you plus at puppets when stand close due to past child abuse”* (Puppeteer).Caution is justified with regards to the predatory behaviour mentioned by the arts practitioners. Furthermore, Mann (2010) raises issue with acting skills being used by some inmates to manipulate staff to gain assets. We noted that prisoners building relationships with prison officers on the project offered opportunity to negotiate accommodation wing changes, such conversations seemed to be opportunity based, rather than manipulative. Prisoners were able to choose to attend the projects, communicate choices about performance content and discuss wing change choices with staff. Rational choice is a feature in sex offender desistance (Farmer *et al*, 2015). Allowing prisoners to make choices with staff support helps to build competence in choice making. Whereas the practitioner’s’ observations showcase manipulation occurring at peer-level, which further validates consideration needed regarding selection of arts project participants. We found group composition enabled prejudices to be challenged and social inclusion. For example, the projects allowed for intergenerational engagement and wider connections:

*“Opened me up to speaking to other people that are not my own age – so gave confidence.”* (Dancer)

*“Taught me not to be so judgemental and not to judge a book by its cover’* (Drama performer via Questionnaire)

Art project engagement challenged prejudices and developed empathy. Furthermore, the story line in the Puppetry project gave performers insights into challenges faced by autistic prisoners:

*“About a guy moved around prisons after bullying and assaulting an officer. Diagnosed as weak minded and about that story- this story is good for people with autism because it’s not widely known about- good for people with autism in prison”* (Puppeteer)

Despite learning about autism and having preconceptions challenged, some found it uncomfortable working alongside autistic prisoners and those with behavioural issues on the Puppetry project:

*“Difficult acting with autistic peers”* (Puppeteer)

*“Some people hard to work with: deliberately missing lines – attention seeking- brought out a nasty side to people”* (Puppeteer)

Some questioned their pre-selection to participate in this piece, feeling it was more suited to prisoners with diagnosed autism due to the storyline. However, they acknowledged the project *“would help officers to understand the needs of the residents more”* (Puppeteer). Our findings concur with those of Underwood *et al* (2016), Critoph and Rope (2018) and Cohen and Henley (2018) regarding need for improvements in diagnosis and support for those with autism and learning disabilities more broadly. We advocate need for staff and prisoner training in this area to further reduce prejudice.

Seibel (2008;108) noted female incarcerated dancers were *“more communicative… and their interpersonal skills improved. Hostility and sarcasm had melted, replaced with calm expressions of gratitude*”. Our findings further this by evidencing enhanced communication with both fellow prisoners and prison staff on all projects. One Drama performer commented; *“Can apply communication/listening skills learned into other areas”* and a Singer said they *“felt more able to deal with negative comments on wing now”.* This suggests improved emotional well-being is linked to better communication, interpersonal skills and coping mechanisms*.* We advocate that communication skills are transferrable from project sessions to wider prison interactions.

Existingfamily relationships were also strengthened and provided incentive for arts engagement to give family members “…*peace of mind”* that they were *“okay and happy”* (Drama performer).Dance audience feedback included a family member and a professional stakeholder commenting:

*“I came to see my brother! It was great to see him do things like this as I worry sometimes but I can see he loved performing! It honestly makes us family feel so proud of him and the prison for conducting activities like this…”* (Audience family member)

*‘… I was delighted to see in the audience family members who were proud, relieved and felt welcomed into the prison… very moving and emotional to see how the guys worked together and supported each other…’* (Audience professional stakeholder)

Our findings corroborate with evidence that performances enhance family connections (Fair & Jacobson, 2016; Thorpe, 2014; Barton & Russel, 2018). Farmer *et al* (2015) highlights existing family relationships can be preventive to future child sex offending because the person does not want to cause further shame. The forging of new relationships can also encourage crime desistance, whereas relationship breakdown can precipitate sexual offending (ibid). However, some prisoners felt uncomfortable inviting loved ones because of offence types committed by other performers: *‘I’ve got kids so didn’t want to invite them because of some of the reasons people are here’.* This highlights thatin a sex offenders’ prison, the othering of child sex offenders is still apparent.Other issues raised pertained to insufficient time for visitors to make attendance arrangements, or costs for family to travel. There was a range of social demographics in the performer cohorts, including those with cultural capital as noted by Mann (2012). Concerns raised by Bottoms (2010) and Prendergast (2016) over families having little theatre going experience reacting in challenging ways to performers was less apparent in our study, possibly because such family members could not afford travel costs to attend. An arts practitioner commented on a prisoner’s extended USA family attending, despite having never met the performer before. This could be a genuine example of a reunited family, thus supporting future desistance. Alternatively, it could be intrigue regarding English prisons and the offender population and as such future connections between the family and incarcerated person may not occur. Such rejection could negatively impact desistance (Farmer *et al*, 2015). Irrespective of attendance motives, when family members were present the men were elated. Those without a guest felt sad, but other audience members non-judgementally engaging with them provided compensation which performers felt positively about and this fuelled hope for release regarding community reintegration:

*“Got emotional because I had no one there. Having strangers talk to us helped.”* (Dancer)

*“Were treated like people by visitors which is unusual.”* (Singer)

Here we see tentative evidence that interactions humanising the person, rather than stigmatising them, assists with reducing shame and helping to forge a new identity, two features significant for sex offending desistance according to Farmer *et al* (2015). However, audience reactions to performers may also be associated with professional conduct, as opposed to more typical community responses which might convey stigmatisation.

**Improved Prison Culture:**

Ievins (2020;15) describes UK sex offender prison culture as restrictive, with ‘*tight’* surveillance. Peer surveillance is encouraged and self-policing leads to prisoners being fearful and distrusting of one another (ibid). Whilst we saw some distrust between prisoners, this tended to relate to paedophile offending. We observed a ‘*them and us’* culture, where prisoners became comrades and were negatively vocal about prison officers who they perceived as harsh; *“the officers who get assaulted have no people skills”* (Dancer). However, officers involved in the arts projects were regarded positively; *“broke down “us and them” between prison officers”* (Dancer) and this extended to officers in the audience who praised their efforts. Maruna (2012;81) indicates that engaged prisoners who are respectful of staff and show commitment can be signalling change, and this was apparent in all arts projects. Prisoners were elated by governor support to arts projects, which validates Scottish female prison and YOI findings by Nugent and Loucks (2011) that staff engagement maximised arts project benefits, inclusive of building social capital. Hewish (2015;214) also advocates how staff supportive to the arts impact upon the “*day-to-day*” interactions that enhance well-being. A prison manager in our study commented on changes noted as prisoners and staff went back to wings:

*“Prisoner and staff relationships improved… Staff that came to watch were incredibly moved and impressed. More positive and willing to engage…* [Name of staff working on the project omitted] *definitely took her to the next level… opened her eyes to a new lease of life”* (Prison Management)

Keehan (2015;391) discusses individual and institutional level change regarding theatre and we noted aspects of this in our study. A prison manager alluded to how wholescale prison culture change requires more than arts projects, but arts projects contribute to rehabilitative culture, supporting the view of Jewkes (2018) of the arts building a therapeutic community. From our finding’s arts projects contributed towards positive prison culture changes but was not a panacea. UK and Western nations have a prison culture that considers child sex offenders as lower ranking (Mann, 2012; Ievins, 2020; Marti, 2021). Whilst judgments towards child sex offenders were lessoned through the arts projects, caution towards this group was still apparent. Working on the performance and staff watching the performance was a vehicle for training and reducing prejudice for some, but not all:

*“… we had another member of staff that we worked with on the puppetry project that… had a high degree of scepticism about what we were doing… he was the one that was saying that ‘I can’t believe that this person is doing this’. He sort of got converted, so then he then did the music project with us… ”* (Arts Practitioner)

A significant finding across all projects was prisoners feeling “*human*” through interactions with the artists because they were treated as “*equals*”, rather than “*convicts*”. A group of prisoners said: *“being in prison takes away confidence and being part of this made it possible to feel normal/human again”.* Participants told us how in general “*prison takes a shot gun to self-esteem*” (Drama performer), which is acknowledged by Sykes (1958). The artists were described as creating a *“non-judgemental and respectful environment”* and a *“protected, safe space that helped me to open up*”, which corroborates with Higgins (2015) notions of hospitality and how participatory approaches using a person-centred ethos is imperative for success. Having prison officers involved in and forging positive connections helps to build on the sense of prison hospitality beyond the arts project, that spills into rapport on the wings.

Performers indicated prison culture improves when people are treated fairly. In the Singing project, performers felt it unfair that other projects had two performances and a longer period (by 1 day) on the project. Performers also talked about social injustices experienced throughout the criminal justice system in sentencing people who were “*innocent*” and in the harsh treatment from some prison staff and wider societal judgements. Singing project participants said they *“appreciated learning more about conscientious objectors and what they did”* which portrayed a social justice storyline*.* To create the script and deliver the performance, performers needed some literacy skills. Education level is a significant factor in health and social inequalities (Marmot, 2015), which includes literacy levels. Being involved in the singing project “*helped with literacy skills”* and participants said they got *“…inspiration from seeing others achieve e.g.: seeing someone with dyslexia do really well was inspirational for others with it to”*. Performers in our study drew on inspiration from others overcoming personal challenges such as dyslexia and developing literacy skills. This allows for social learning to be facilitated, a theory pertinent to ‘*what works’* in offender reform (Davey *et al*, 2015). We noted that social learning occurred at peer-to-peer level, in addition to role modelling by practitioners.

It was evident that prisoners learnt new knowledge and new skills:

“*Chance to learn about history that didn’t previously know. Looked at an area that previously would not have looked at.”* (Drama performer)

*“Learnt a new skill”* (Puppeteer)

Here we see parallels between incarcerated performers experiencing what Haugland Balsnes (2012) suggests that community singers experience in terms of learning new skills beyond the art form itself, which improves well-being.

**Developing Building Blocks to Desistance:**

Throughout this paper we note building blocks to desistance in terms of increased confidence and self-esteem, reduced shame, better engagement with others, reduced isolation, peer support, better emotional management and the arts projects facilitating people making choices. Galnander (2020) discusses how re-evaluating crime(s) committed, re-shaping for the future and re-connecting with society supports with desistance. Our follow up questionnaire directly asked whether performers felt or thought differently about their offending behaviour. This question was met with resistance by those purporting that the majority of those incarcerated for sex crimes are not guilty. In the questionnaire, 14% provided a denial-based responses to the crime(s) committed, for example:

* *“60% of offenders haven’t done the crime, so this isn’t rehabilitative, it is just something to do”*
* *“NO AS I AM NO WRONG IN ANYWAY”*
* *“offences are historic and being an alcoholic at the time with little memory of events…”*

Denial includes minimising responsibility (Mann, 2012), as noted in the participant response mentioning alcohol addiction. The small subsection of participants engaged in denial sought solitude in one another, forming what Mann (2012;354) refers to as an ‘*unhealthy’* subculture where the collective ‘*consciousness can become harmful when it serves to justify and validate the actions and feelings of these men’*. Such participants were vocal about wanting to continue relationships in the community, which concurs with Mann’s (2012) concerns regarding jeopardy of community integration and increasing likelihood of re-offending. Dietz (2020), in review of existing empirical studies, found it quite common for sex offenders to minimise, or deny sex offences throughout the criminal justice process, including when incarcerated. Yates (2009) argues that denial of sex crime(s) has implications for treatment delivery, however, it doesn’t corroborate with re-offending. This could be due to Maruna’s (2012;80) observations that people can start believing what they ‘*hype’* about themselves and it becomes a self-fulfilling prophesy. It is possible that those claiming not to be sex offenders may continue this non-offending persona upon release and desist from crime. In our study 52% of responders acknowledged committing an offence based on their questionnaire response, corresponding with typical confession rates in the UK from this cohort (Yates, 2009;573) and 44% clarified experiencing a change to how they felt and/or thought about their offending. Performers reported learning how to better manage their responses to situations, which is likely to help with desistance:

*“taking part has helped me to realise that I actually can control my temper”* (Dancer)

*“it made me think before I speak”* (Drama performer)

*“it made me understand that sharing can really help when you are having issues”* (Drama performer)

*“it has helped me to recognise I can be part of different social circles and still get a high from not having a drink”* (Dancer)

In ‘*primary desistance’* (Galnander, 2020;1303) there is abstinence from crime. Our participants noted behavioural changes and coping skills gained to avoid situations that might put them at risk of offending. Performers also talked about having a sense of purpose and hope for the future which contributed to ‘re-shaping’ identity, a feature in ‘secondary desistance’ (ibid;1303). Participants commented:

*“it helped me think that life on the outside may not be as hard as I think”* (Dancer)

*“it gave me a sense of purpose and if I had done this before, I probly [SIC] wouldn’t of come to jail”* (Puppeteer)

*“It has given me the opportunity to show myself and others especially family) that I am not my offence. I am what I can achieve and what I want to become.”* (Drama performer)

Here we see the beginnings of ‘*tertiary desistance’* where there is a reconnection with society, others notice changes and there is a sense of belonging (Galnander, 2020;1303). Nugent and Schinkel (2016) talk about the sense of ‘*giving something back’* to society to make amends. From our observations and performer comments, we advocate performing for others is a way of ‘*giving back’* to audience members and through ‘*peer support’* in the group work preceding the performance. Comments evidence that performers were beginning to transform their narrative and identity, which Cohen and Henley (2018;5) found to be a step towards desistance.

***Limitations of the Study:***

Generalisations to the wider secure estate are limited due to our research being in one UK adult male prison specialising in sex offender rehabilitation. More research is needed with female offenders, young offenders, and different category prisons regarding art impacts. Participant numbers were not extensive, particularly the interviews with professionals due to access issues within project time parameters. More research is needed regarding impacts upon prison staff and prison culture. Additionally, 5 participants were on more than one of the arts projects, which may have resulted in a cumulative effect impacting data analysis. Longer term impacts, particularly on recidivism, would be useful to explore in the future.

Participant concerns over confidentiality (Author et al, XXXX) could have created barriers to fully articulating opinions and experiences. At one World Café, two prison officers working on the arts project joined group discussions, which may have created a communication barrier. However, we found similar comments made by participants when prison officers did not join groups and questionnaire feedback allowed for anonymous comments. The level of denial to crime noted in the questionnaire responses may suggest honesty levels more broadly were compromised, although literature suggests crime acknowledgement issues with this cohort (Dietz, 2020; Mann, 2012) relates more to fear of reprisal, or to gain privileges and power (Mann, 2012).

Reflecting on audience data, comments articulately endorsed the dance project and performers using technical terms, suggesting that mostly stakeholders completed the feedback. Gaining a deeper insight to how family members and friends felt about the performance and what changes this triggered within their relationship thereafter would be beneficial.

**Conclusions:**

This study demonstrates prison-based arts projects positively impact upon a) the health and well-being of the prisoners, b) prisoner self-esteem and confidence c) the ability to develop healthy relationships with both inmates and prison staff and d) provide building blocks for desistance. Prison arts positively impact upon prison staff and prison culture, enhancing rehabilitation efforts, but they are not a panacea and other aspects of prison life need to align with the therapeutic community for sustained change. More research on staff impacts and sustained changes are needed. A contribution to knowledge is that both prisoners and prison staff can experience attitudinal change and reduced prejudice, as well as experiencing motivation to engage in prison life through engagement with arts projects. As well as prison staff supporting the project experiencing enhanced job satisfaction.

We found drama, dance, puppetry and singing all had positive outcomes regarding wellbeing and healthy relationship building, with dance eliciting a greater level of physical health improvements, including fitness levels, weight loss and improved muscle usage and sleep. A unique contribution to knowledge were impacts discovered relating to dance and puppetry in prison. Whilst the puppetry project had positive mental well-being impacts pertaining to reducing stress and building confidence, some performers were less certain of self-esteem change. Reduced stress from the tensions of being incarcerated were acknowledged on all projects because they provided a positive distraction and peer-support. This was particularly apparent for those facing appeal, and transition to open prison or release. Ongoing arts projects would help ensure on-going peer-support when life situations arise and this could also help to reduce the post-performance emotional dip that prisoners described (Author et al, XXXX). Our findings demonstrated that arts projects provided relief from low mood, PTSD and self-harming.

Arts projects had positive impact upon family connections, and we noted prisoners experienced enhanced self-esteem from audience commendations. Effort is needed to facilitate family and friends in attending performances, particularly where socio-economic barriers to attendance are apparent. Whilst peer relationships were positively formed on the projects, a further new insight is that some prisoners felt it challenging working with people with behavioural issues and autism. We advocate more training for both staff and prisoners on how to support people with learning disability and mental health needs. The arts can be a powerful form of communicating on such social justice issues and a useful training tool. We noted prisoners and staff relaxed their guard to build connections on projects, but both remained mindful of safeguarding. In the context of sex offenders, there is caution about whether relationships can be exploitative and contribute to unhealthy comradeship regarding denial of crime and personal responsibility for offending, as well as gaining power and privileges (see Mann, 2010; Dietz, 2020). A prisoner learning to perform with manipulative intentions is counterproductive to reducing recidivism.

Our findings demonstrate that arts projects facilitate building blocks to desistance through helping prisoners to think and feel differently about their offences and become more empathic to others. Increased self-esteem, confidence and communication skills also help with desistance, along with improved relationships with family members (see Cohen and Henley, 2018; Galnander, 2020). Longitudinal research is needed into this aspect of the benefits to arts projects. Arts projects are unlikely to have a desistance impact for all, however, the diversity of arts genres available and the positive impacts across the range of arts forms evaluated demonstrates there is something creative to suit most people and develop positive well-being impacts, irrespective of desistance outcomes. Our research was centred on male participants with ethnic, sexuality and age diversity and all reported positive experiences of the arts, including those with onset of dementia and undiagnosed Autism and Asperger’s. More research across wider secure estate provision would help to build on our findings.

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1. • The Staging Time artists were overseen by Rideout and included: Emily Andrews, Emma Doherty, Nick Hayes, Saul Hewish, Aidan Jolly, Dave McKenna, Dylan Tate and Rob Willson. Musicians included those from the Irene Taylor Trust. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)