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The legitimacy of offender management programmes in a post-TR landscape

Michael Rowe, Adele Irving and Sarah Soppitt

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the under-considered perspectives of service users engaged in various community sentences based on a “strengths-based” approach to desistance. Further to recent changes in the sector, the paper considers service user views for programmes delivered by combinations of agencies from private, public and third sectors.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper is based on analysis of 64 semi-structured interviews with users of four programmes, accompanied with informal fieldwork observations by the researchers as they carried out the research at the premises of service providers.

Findings – The research finds that service user perceptions of the legitimacy of programmes are closely related to their understanding of three key dimensions: first, the “authenticity” of those delivering the service; second, the instrumental (in broad terms) gains they expect from engagement; and third, their understanding of the identity and ethos of the programme.

Originality/value – The paper adds important understanding based on service user perceptions in a period when service provision is being diversified. Further directions for other research are identified and it is recognised that a limitation of the current study is that it incorporates a sample drawn from one area.

Keywords Legitimacy, Offender perspectives, Probation, Transforming Rehabilitation, Community sentences, Offender narratives

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Unprecedented in respect of the scale and pace at which the reforms have been implemented (Annison et al., 2014), the full impact of the Transforming Rehabilitation (TR) “revolution”, introduced into the probation service in England and Wales, is yet to become clear. Proponents argue TR widens the range of service providers, and so promotes innovation and efficiency, drives down costs and reduces recidivism (Ministry of Justice, 2013). Opponents, including many from the National Probation Service (NPS) and related staff associations, stress that the reforms would provide lucrative opportunities for private sector corporations to profit, via the Payment-by-Results (PBR) model, from working with low-risk clients but leave a much reduced public sector to deal only with high-risk offenders (Annison et al., 2014). Irrespective of viewpoint, however, commentators agree that TR is the most significant reform of the probation system since the introduction of the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) in (2003).

Distinguishing between continuity and change, however, is challenging. To some extent, TR can be considered to significantly extend, rather than introduce the privatisation of the criminal justice sector (Annison et al., 2014). Twenty years ago, a study quoted a senior officer’s observation that
the Probation Service has absorbed the politics of punishment, entered the market place, mirrored the private sector [and] taken its managers through a grand renaming ceremony” (Wallis, 1997, cited in Garland, 2003, p. 177). While the earlier epoch of reform did not extend to wholesale privatisation, principles of private sector discipline in the form of New Public Management have been present for a considerable time (Paterson, 2007). In addition, many of the reforms instigated under TR offer the prospect of a greater role for third-sector agencies, and so reinvent historical arrangements whereby volunteers were engaged in offender rehabilitation (Mair and Burke, 2011, pp. 117-8). Other barriers to assessing the impact of TR can be identified from the public policy literature on implementation failure. Key among these is the “law of unintended consequences”, where the outcomes of policy reform either fail to materialise as intended or transpire only partially or belatedly (Dunleavy and Hood, 1994). In public administration in general, and criminal justice policy-making specifically, there is a significant body of literature which suggests that caution should be exercised in predicting the impact of TR on the basis of a literal reading of the policy itself (Howlett, 2012; Boylan and Mocan, 2014; Ruggiero, 2010). The agency of organisations and personnel is likely to result in elements of the programme being resisted or ameliorated. Indeed, several studies examining the micro-contexts of probation practice doubt that the enforcement policy introduced through A New Choreography (National Probation Service for England and Wales and the Home Office, 2001) produced a culture of enforcement. Ugwudike (2016) found substantial deviation from official policies and guidance governing enforcement, which Robinson and Ugwudike (2012) suggested that “tough” enforcement policies suffered a legitimacy deficit at the frontline. Although TR might be detrimental to the status of officers (Robinson, 2013) and the capacity of staff to implement policy on their own terms might be reduced, professional discretion is likely to continue. This has been the experience in the practice of crime prevention and community safety more widely (Hughes, 2007). For these reasons, it is difficult to identify future directions in the organisation and philosophy of offender management and probation with a high degree of certainty.

To date, much of the debate and analysis surrounding TR has focussed on organisational restructuring, the professional culture of probation, the introduction of PBR and associated challenges such as the attribution of outcomes, the dynamic nature of risk and potential recidivism, and moral and ethical debates about private profit from punishment. However, the impact of TR on desistance – particularly from the perspectives of service users – has been largely neglected; this is despite Vaughan’s (2007) argument that service users need to be understood as “active agents” within desistance programmes. Furthermore, as the concepts of effectiveness and compliance are “inextricably linked” (Bottoms, 2001, p. 89, cited in Robinson and McNeill, 2008), it is surprising that discussions of TR have neglected the impact of new models of supervision on this topic. To rectify this, this paper considers the impacts of service user-practitioner relationships and service user perceptions of the authenticity and legitimacy of offender management programmes, delivered both pre- and post-TR, to narratives of desistance. In doing so, it considers potential implications for wider debates about the current re-shaping of the criminal justice system. The paper will begin with a review of literature regarding the role of service user-practitioner relationships to perceptions of legitimacy, the nature of compliance and re-offending behaviour. Following this, a brief outline of the methodology of the study will be provided. Research findings are then used to analyse the potential implications of TR for compliance and desistance. This is done in terms of, first, the authenticity, instrumentality and legitimacy of relationships with practitioners and second, perceptions of various offender management programmes. Drawing upon McNeill and Robinson’s (2013, p. 116) concept of “liquid legitimacy” – reflecting the ways in which legitimacy “changes its forms and shapes as a community sanction is negotiated, constructed, contested and reconstructed by the various actors and audiences involved” – it is argued that relationships between service users and supervisory officers seem not to be based upon perceptions of the sectoral status of programmes, but instead upon their philosophy, delivery style and perceived characteristic of staff. In that sense, the creation of a more diverse landscape under TR in terms of organisations involved in the delivery of desistance programmes – particularly third-sector organisations – might be beneficial for offender engagement and desistance. On the other hand, however, proposals to deliver offender management via remote technology such as satellites (Travis, 2016), kiosks or call centres, may preclude the development of positive relationships between service users and providers and so be detrimental to trust, authenticity and legitimacy, thus undermining desistance.
Service user-practitioner relationships, compliance and desistance

The relationship between service users and staff remains the central mechanism for the delivery of community-based sanctions (Burnett and McNeill, 2005). Notwithstanding change and various paradigms of reform (McCulloch and McNeill, 2007), frontline staff have long maintained that legitimacy, authenticity, mutual understanding and collaboration are integral to effective relations and practice (Burnett and McNeill, 2005; McNeill, 2006; 2009). In a review of probation practice by Boswell et al. (1993, p. 148, cited in Burnett and McNeill, 2005, p. 223), officers identified “relationship making” as a key skill, and the authors concluded that casework had “come to be seen as a simple relationship-making process, which incorporated respect for the individual, rather than the somewhat obscure and esoteric practice of bygone years”. Similar conclusions were made by Knott (2004, cited in Burnett and McNeill, 2005, p. 225), who, shortly before her appointment as the first NOMS Manager, emphasised the role of supervisor, not only as referrer and enforcer, but also motivator. Other senior practitioners have discussed the importance of case management in terms “relating to the offender” so that they feel “that somebody cares about them” (Mann, 2004, p. 44, cited in Burnett and McNeill, 2005, p. 225).

Desistance research into the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce offending suggests that it is not so much the content of programmes or appropriateness of service users chosen to engage, but the service user-practitioner relationships surrounding these that are essential to reductions in re-offending. Evidence suggests that service users’ commitment to desistance can be generated by the personal and professional commitment shown by their probation officers, with reasonableness, fairness and encouragement engendering a sense of personal loyalty and accountability. Advice about behaviours and underlying problems, interpreted by service users as evidence of concern for their wellbeing, can also acts a key source of motivation to change (Rex, 1999). However, it is only when relationships model virtues such as optimism, hopefulness, persistence, trustworthiness and loyalty that the formal authority of the probation officer is likely to be rendered legitimate in the mind of the offender (McNeill, 2006). The importance of perceptions of legitimacy can be explained by Bottoms’ (2001) framework of compliance. He argued that authentic relationships are more likely to elicit normative compliance, based on a sense of moral obligation, a wish to maintain the alliance, and the perceived “legitimacy” of the conditions imposed.

The validity of this research is strengthened when looking at the impacts of enforcement-based relationships on levels of compliance and desistance. Enforcement-based policy and practice is founded on a model of offenders as rational actors, whose behaviour can be manipulated by incentives and disincentives. It is assumed that by informing offenders that non-compliant behaviour will be met with enforcement action, they will be more likely to desist (Robinson and Ugwudike, 2012). However, research indicates that offenders are relatively immune to the deterrent effects of formal sanctions (see e.g. Hearnden and Millie, 2004; Hedderman and Hough, 2004), with service users much less likely to comply for purely instrumental reasons and deterrent strategies most effective with those who have a stake in conformity (Bottoms, 2001). Robinson and Ugwudike (2012) found that studies exploring the links between “tough” enforcement and desistance have produced mixed findings. Although Home Office research tentatively indicates that taking appropriate enforcement action can increase desistance (May and Wadwell, 2001, cited in Robinson and Ugwudike, 2012, p. 305), other evidence suggests that “tough” enforcement can produce higher rates of reconviction (Hearnden and Millie, 2003, cited in Robinson and Ugwudike, 2012, p. 305). Indeed, research indicates that perceptions of rigidity and “regulatory unreasonableness” can alienate service users and increase (rather than reduce) the likelihood of future non-compliance (e.g. Sherman, 2003; Sherman et al., 2003; Digard, 2010; all cited in Robinson and Ugwudike, 2012, p. 305). When non-compliance is met with a response which is perceived as unjust or unfair, secondary non-compliance may follow (Lemert, 1967, cited in Robinson and Ugwudike, 2012, p. 305). For this reason, some scholars have warned that authorities seeking compliance should aim to protect their reputations as “legitimate” through fair and reasonable treatment (Murphy, 2005, cited in Robinson and Ugwudike, 2012, p. 305).

In exercising a note of caution, however, the extent to which service user-practitioner relationships are the most important factor in promoting desistance is subject to debate. Various studies into the offending patterns of young people suggest that their own resources and
social networks, for example, are often better at resolving their difficulties than professional staff (Hill, 1999). The potential of wider social networks is highlighted by “resilience” or “strength-based” perspectives, which, in contrast to approaches that focus on risk and needs, consider the “protective factors and processes” involved in positive adaptation in spite of adversity. Such perspectives emphasise recognition, exploitation and development of offenders’ competences, resources, skills and assets (Schoon and Bynner, 2003).

Building upon this body of literature, this paper considers the nature of legitimacy and service user perspectives on their relationships with staff. This is analysed in the context of a diverse range of programmes that (at least to some extent) reflect the more complex sector developing in the wake of the TR project. Prior to presenting findings and analysis, the next section of the paper outlines the methodology used in the data collection process.

Methodology

The data presented in this paper are derived from a series of semi-structured interviews with service users engaged in four different desistance programmes, delivered in one probation – now CRC – area in England. The interviews were carried out between 2012 and 2014 for evaluative studies commissioned by local community safety partnerships, a local charitable foundation and the probation service. One of the programmes was a voluntary scheme, delivered by a multi-agency team drawn from a range of criminal justice agencies. The second was a court-mandated scheme, whereby community penalties were delivered by a third-sector organisation contracted to the probation service. The third was also a community sentence delivered by the public sector, but by an individual employed (along with other skills and experience) on the basis that he/she had a personal history of crime and substance abuse. The fourth was a community sentence delivered by a private CRC, in conjunction with a network of local support agencies, which placed considerable emphasis on service users engaging in group work with their peers. It is recognised that the nature of the programme could impact upon a person’s view of legitimacy: the analysis did not suggest significant or coherent differences between those from different schemes. Methodologically any differences would be difficult to attribute to the nature of that scheme since all had experiences of multiple interventions, and often couched their perceptions in broad terms drawing upon different episodes and engagement with a range of statutory and non-statutory agencies All of the programmes were multi-agency in nature and three of the four were delivered by a combination of public, private and third-sector groups, the other conducted by a combination of probation and police staff. The programmes were not selected for this analysis because they represented a range of types of provision but because each sought to deliver a form of integrated offender management, were delivered within the same region and were evaluated using a common methodology, which allows for a comparative discussion.

In total, interviews with 64 service users were carried out: 11 undertaking the first programme, 7 enroled in the second, 23 in the third and 23 in the fourth. Several service users were interviewed multiple times. The interviews were conducted in various locations and at different stages of service user engagement in the respective programmes. Spending time in the premises used by the programmes gave opportunities for informal fieldwork observations and unstructured discussion with staff and, occasionally, other service users present in reception areas or coffee rooms and some of this informs the discussion below. Naturally, the offending history of participants was varied, but the programmes were all targeted at those with relatively long-standing careers, comprised of low-gravity offending. All had multiple experiences of other sentences, both community-based and custodial, and with probation and other offender management programmes (delivered by youth justice agencies, for example). The majority of those interviewed were male: only 15 (23 per cent) were female; as such, the analysis offered below cannot address gendered differences. The interviews addressed a broad range of issues, including respondents’ offending histories, previous engagements with the criminal justice system, perspectives on desistance and “lifestyle normalisation” and attitudes towards staff delivering their current programme. Interviews took place in private spaces in the various premises where the services were provided and typically lasted between 20 and 40 minutes. They were fully transcribed and thematically analysed. The study was approved by the research team’s university ethics committee.
Research findings

An important finding from the studies is that service user perceptions of their motivation to desist from crime were often expressed in terms of their relationship with support workers. In circumstances where service users reported positive relationships, these tended to be cited as a reason for a strong commitment to desistance. It is shown below that there were three important components to a positive relationship: authenticity, instrumentality and programme ethos. Each of these is analysed below and the implications that each might have in terms of key elements of the TR agenda are considered.

Authenticity

Service users frequently expressed that their strong commitment to desistance was derived from the perceived authenticity of the staff with whom they were working. Each of the programmes was designed such that service users would develop a close working relationship with an individual practitioner – whether this be a qualified practitioner or a peer mentor. Positive assessment of those was predicated either on the basis that the staff members were “authentic” in terms of their personal biography or that they had a genuine and demonstrable commitment to supporting the service user. As noted above, the third of the four programmes was largely facilitated by an individual employed to work as a peer mentor with service users. The individual had an extended history of offending and substance abuse. Not only was this individual respected by many of those interviewed on the basis of successfully managing their personal desistance, credibility was also given since that person was continuing in their “recovery journey” through further support from other peer mentors. Three extracts from service user interviews reflect these perceptions:

He’s singing the right notes […] He’s been there and done it. He’s in a good place now […] I’ve seen where he was, he was in a bad place and now he’s in a good place […] and that’s where I want to be (Project 3, Respondent 1).

He’s been through it. You’ve got to have been through it. It’s hard to explain it. That’s why it’s good that they have people like him working in these sorts of places. You feel better talking to them (Project 3, Respondent 2).

It takes an addict to understand another addict […] most everyday people will never, ever get it […] only an addict understands (Project 3, Respondent 3).

The “understanding” mentioned by Respondent 3 did not mean, necessarily, that service users found this engagement more palatable or in some way easier to negotiate. Indeed, the relationship could be challenging, as noted in fieldwork observations when service users were questioned in terms of their presentation of the inevitability of their drug use or their inability to sustain abstinence. Even so, service users valued that the peer mentor had personal experience that made for a more honest – or more authentic – relationship. One interviewee noted that:

It doesn’t matter how much you relapse or what mistakes you have made, that support will always be there, they won’t judge you, you won’t get in trouble from being honest with them. There’s no pressure […] I can just focus on myself (Project 3, Respondent 4).

As is noted in more detail further below, this authenticity was often positively contrasted with respondent’s previous experiences of offender management programmes. While the extract below is from a service user engaged in the third project, similar points were made by interviewees involved in the fourth project, which also involved an element of group work with peers. The interview extracts below indicate the value placed on engagement with peers with credible personal experience, and that this was assessed as more significant than working with those more formally qualified:

It’s quite good to be involved with people in similar situations, I can sit and talk about my problems to professionals and they just sit there and nod and they don’t understand at all. Where you can sit and talk to a complete stranger who’s been through similar experiences and even though they might not have these qualifications, these people who are lower down the qualification level, understand a lot more. It’s like a breath of fresh air (Project 3, Respondent 1).
I liked it really, I spoke to everybody, people listened to you and everybody had been through the same type of stuff. I knew the man (the mentor), I’d know him from years before, I felt comfortable with him. They were all spot on (Project 4, Respondent 1).

In terms of engaging a broader range of voluntary third-sector organisations in a post-TR landscape, this is significant. The broader literature around peer mentoring has noted the value that authenticity offers, but that this can be in tension with the professional expertise of trained and qualified staff. Vennard and Hedderman (2009) argued that the perceived value of voluntary sector input into desistance programmes stemmed from the distinct tradition of working outside the framework of offender management, but that this risked being undermined as third-sector organisations become further enmeshed into contractual relations with criminal justice agencies. TR has significantly accelerated this development since third-sector, social enterprise and community interest companies are contractual partners in all of the 21 probation areas (Annison et al., 2014).

Another component of the authenticity of staff valued by interviewees was the perceived strength of their commitment to assisting service users. Furthermore, in terms of transforming ex-offenders’ social identity, the positive experience of demonstrable commitment from staff was understood as evidence that the service user had some value not previously recognised. Content wise, these desistance programmes were underpinned by “strengths-based” approaches, which encouraged service users to develop social capital and imagine themselves in terms not solely defined by anti-social, problematic and criminal behaviour (McNeill, 2006). The authenticity underpinning this perception was based on the congruence between content, communication and demonstrated staff behaviour. This perspective was encapsulated in the comments of Respondent 1 in Project 2. She reflected on an experience whereby staff from the project had attended a ceremony to mark completion of the scheme:

[...] they are more hands on, on the other end of the phone [...], picking you up and things like that, if I was short of bus fare, it’s a close bond that you have with them [...]. They are all lovely [...], all really nice. The [project name] hadn’t had like a passing-out thing, I didn’t know that you could have people there, all the other lads have carers and family there, I was the last to get up and talk and when I sat down someone told me that [names staff] were there at the back. I thought “e, my God!”, I was buzzing and that, they’d come to see us! I was chuffed to bits, that was really nice (Project 2, Respondent 1).

In sum, the perceived authenticity of staff was typically associated either with their professional commitment to service users and/or their personal experience of offending and desistance. The latter element related to the notion of offender biography and the concept of narration of a pro-social identity, whereby desistance emerges from socio-psychological recalibration of the offenders perceived relationship with their external environment, social relationships and future potential (Farrell, 2002). A key feature of the TR agenda is to establish a more diverse set of service providers, with the greater engagement of the voluntary sector in the delivery of desistance appearing particularly likely. Our data suggest that a more mixed economy of provision – including the greater involvement of peer mentors and volunteers – might be beneficial if those engaged are regarded as authentic in their commitment to their work.

**Instrumentality**

The discussion above demonstrates that the legitimacy of desistance programmes was partially constructed in terms of the social identity of the service users and their perceptions of relationships with staff. Accompanying this was the perception that service users benefitted from engagement in the programme in instrumental ways. The nature of the instrumental returns ranged from mundane day-to-day support, to more substantive benefits relating to lifestyle normalisation, for example. Participants in Project 3 spoke positively in interviews about the ease and effectiveness of engaging with staff, with responses including: “everything has been spot on since I’ve met him”, “if you ever ask him to do anything, he’s straight there. The support you get from him is second to none”, “He’s done more than he’s paid to do”, “He’s always there, he’s committed”. Across all the programmes, respondents valued assistance aimed at helping them to organise “chaotic lifestyles”. Sometimes this was expressed in respect of routine activities, such as calling to remind of forthcoming appointments and to provide transport to attend, or simply to check on their wellbeing. Similarly valued was advice to service users in relation to...
accessing a wider range of support services to provide help in terms of recovery, health and fitness, housing and benefits (including avoiding potential benefit sanctions), meaningful activities and education, training and employment. One respondent expressed the instrumental benefits, and the importance of that to maintaining desistance, in the following terms:

[Staff name] would come and see [me to] ask how I was doing; if I needed any help. He took me to [agencies] […] I got registered with Crisis. I did the Health and Hygiene course. Just introduced me to some people that would help me with, like, my CV; getting into jobs and all that […] if [staff name] never came to see me in prison or I never became involved here at the [programme], I’d probably be either in prison or due to go into prison or sitting with a drug habit and reoffending (Project 1, Respondent 1).

Similarly, a respondent in the fourth programme noted practical benefits in terms of facilitating wider support networks and that this was combined with developing their personal capacity within these environments:

I get support from [staff name] if I need it: like [agency name], [agency name], [agency name]. She’s got me to understand that I don’t have to accept what’s offered, I can change what’s on offer. I find it hard to open up in a group, or to open up in a group. But in the future I could come back and have a word with [staff name], I know she’d be there for that (Project 4, Respondent 3).

These extracts suggest that positive evaluations of programmes were partially predicated on resulting instrumental benefits, but that these were often couched in relatively minor terms and only indirectly associated with desistance. This is significant in terms of the wider intention of TR to introduce PBR mechanisms, since service users assessed some relatively minor outcomes as being especially significant as potential pre-requisites or indeed, integral to sustained desistance. The value attributed to these minor outcomes indicates that the legitimacy of the programme was based, in part, on service users engaging more firmly within networks of local support agencies. This in turn means that there might not be an overall reduction in referrals to local multi-agency networks, and so evaluations using methodologies such as Social Return on Investment models (SROI Network UK, 2011) need to become sufficiently sophisticated to identify costs that enhance long-term desistance. Another challenge is that for such work to prove beneficial in the long term, there is an inherent need for local networks to exist in the first instance. Current pressures on public sector provisions will make this more challenging and perhaps the fluidity and instability of these local networks will mean that supporting service users to negotiate a shifting landscape of providers is increasingly important. If the metaphor of desistance as a journey is extended, then the route map requires frequent updates from an expert navigator.

Service users often valued the capacity of staff to help them to identify a positive conception of their future self and to begin to narrate a new social identity. Frequently this was articulated in terms of improving relations with friends and family. The quote below from a service user illustrates the instrumental impact that engagement with the programme was held to offer in these terms. It further demonstrates that benefits which might accrue from the desistance programme can be understood in narrow terms of crime reduction, but actually are considered more broadly by service users. Attributing and measuring such outcomes for the purposes of PBR would be extraordinarily challenging:

[…] society has changed now, people don’t buy stolen goods now, they know it is a crime. A lot of people who used to steal don’t now, they’ve got jobs, the people I used to hang around with have got themselves into college courses, they have got jobs and settled down with families. They’ve managed to stick in their jobs, and that has changed people’s perceptions about crime. My sons know now not to commit crime, and that if they do they’ll get into trouble for it. When I was younger, when I was committing crime, I was applauded for it. It’s different for my sons, they won’t be appreciated for it. They know not to go to the shops if they’ve got no money (Project 2, Respondent 2).

This section has shown that the (real or perceived) instrumental benefits that staff could provide in terms of negotiating with other service providers, benefits agencies, housing providers and the like were often central to positive evaluations of engaging with desistance programmes. Our research found that these benefits related secondarily to desistance and were couched in broader terms of assisting with “lifestyle normalisation”. Support to access and engage with a range of agencies is widely recognised as a vital precursor to desistance (LeBel et al., 2008; McNeill, 2006, 2009), and our findings support this. However, identifying the impact of such “soft outcomes” and then attributing payment for that result is challenging (Vennard and Hedderman, 2009).
Sectoral status and programme ethos

A central element of the TR reforms has been the development of a more diverse range of providers of offender management. All 21 of the contracts that established the new CRCs were awarded to consortia comprising public, private and third-sector organisations. These included multinational corporations, public agencies including NHS trusts, charities (both national and local), not-for-profit social enterprise companies and community interest companies (some of which were constituted by former probation officers). While the development of multi-agency and cross-sectoral delivery is not new within criminal justice, this aspect of TR has been a major step in a wider process of privatisation (Annison et al., 2014). As noted above, this has been subject to extensive critical analysis, for which there is no room to rehearse here (Burke and Collett, 2016; Dominey, 2016; Harper, 2013; McNeil, 2013). But notably, little of this has drawn upon the insights of service users and so the analysis offered below adds further perspectives on these wider debates.

In various combinations, the four programmes from which research respondents were drawn were delivered in a multi-agency environment. Project 1 was delivered under contract by a charity that had little prior history in criminal justice. Service users reported that the charitable status of the project, and its independence from the CJS, enhanced the trust and confidence that were significant factors in their motivation to desist. The legitimacy of the programme was often expressed in terms of how it positively differed from service users’ previous engagement with probation services. The interview extracts below illustrate the widely expressed perception that the programme was valued partly because of the contrast with prior engagements:

When I had probation in the past, I just walked into a room, they asked a couple of questions and that was it. That was basically it: you’ve showed your face, you can go now. Not “How you doing? Are you keeping out of trouble?” nothing like that. [This programme] is different [...]. It’s much better. They seem to care for you, they ask how you’re doing, whereas I have never had none of that [...] (Project 1, Service User 2).

Probation is more like a school isn’t it, if you are late, they just breach you then, there is no leeway, where here it’s more easy going, everyone’s ok really, it’s alright [...] They treat you like an adult, not like a kid (Project 1, Service User 3).

Service users were clearly aware that the project was being delivered by a charity (not least since it was run from their premises) and often articulated that there was an ethos distinct from previous engagements, and this enhanced perceived legitimacy of the programme. While this suggests that the sectoral status of the delivering organisation underpins service users’ perceptions of legitimacy and motivation towards desistance, the picture becomes more complex when considering the interviews with service users engaged in projects delivered by other configurations of agencies. Those engaged in Project 2 also expressed their positive perceptions by contrasting their experience with mainstream probation:

It’s not, like, “how have you been doing [...] Blah-di-blah”, like five minutes and you’re out of here. But they, like, have the time to talk to you and stuff like that, do you know what I mean? Like, ask how you’ve been doing and things like that. It’s just better, rather than coming in and just, do you know what I mean, doing nothing? (Project 2, Service User 3).

The peer-mentoring component of the third project and the strengths-based approach to delivering the fourth project were similarly recognised by service users as distinguishing characteristics that contrasted positively with previous offender management. From whatever sector, or combination of sectors, the project was being delivered, service users perceived legitimacy in terms of relations with staff and that this was contrasted with the perceived normal pattern of probation work. In sectoral terms, legitimacy was “liquid” in the sense that it seeped around boundaries between public, private and third sectors. While legitimacy might be articulated in terms of the ethos of a charitable organisation, the service user interviews suggested that this perception could be morphed and expressed in similar terms to programmes delivered by public and private sector agencies. In terms of the ambition of TR to diversify service
provisions by including private and not-for-profit organisations, this suggests that such developments might enhance legitimacy among service users, but only in circumstances where an ethos is embedded that prioritises authentic relationships of the type outlined in the earlier section of this paper. Conversely, it follows, legitimacy will be harder to sustain where such relationships are absent; discussion of the possibility of introducing electronic monitoring of low-risk offenders or of delivering supervision remotely via kiosks at which service users check-in effectively excludes the possibility of authentic relationships and so seem likely to have deleterious effects in terms of legitimacy and desistance.

In sum, the identity and ethos of programmes and their relation to offender perspectives on desistance appeared significant. Indeed, it is timely to consider how service users perceive the status of organisations with which they engage in light of the diversified landscape of delivery organisations under TR. Our research findings suggest that service users were relatively unconcerned with the formal sectoral status of the delivery organisation(s). What emerged from the interview data, however, was a strong value placed on the programme being distinctive from the usual experience of offender management services. From where this distinctiveness was delivered was less important than that the programmes were understood by those engaged in them as being out with the usual parameters and ethos (real or perceived) of mainstream provision. This has two potential ramifications in a post-TR environment characterised by multi-sectoral and multi-agency provisions. Positively, that greater perceived legitimacy may result in increased engagement under TR. More concerning, however, is that proposed electronic or remote monitoring without sustained relations with staff post-TR may be detrimental to engagement and desistance.

Conclusion

The primary intention of this paper has been to consider the importance of relationship-based practice in current probation interventions aimed at reducing re-offending and to use these findings to provide insight into the impacts that various elements of TR might have on service user perspectives of the legitimacy of programmes delivered in a more diverse sectoral environment. The data add perspectives from service users that have tended to be marginalised in wider debates about changes to probation and offender management in England and Wales. Three key themes emerge. First, positive perceptions of the legitimacy of staff and programmes had no relation to their formal status in sectoral terms. Instead, service users valued the authenticity of staff in terms of their personal commitment to assist them; sometimes this was related to their personal biographical experience of crime and substance abuse. If TR succeeds in establishing an environment for offender management in which a wide range of third, private and public sector agencies contribute to desistance programmes, it might be that this proves an effective way of enhancing legitimacy in the eyes of service users. However, the value that personal credentials offer in terms of staff and programme authenticity maybe in tension with a counter-veiling tendency towards the development of evidence-based practice within probation. The interviews reported above suggest that service users value authenticity and sometimes express this via a negative comparison with remote “professional” experts with whom they lack rapport. While it might be possible to reconcile professional expertise and personal authenticity, this paper suggests that this will be a continuing challenge. Related to this is the risk that as third-sector organisations become further enmeshed in contractual relations with private and public criminal justice providers, the distinctive tradition of voluntarism is eroded. TR risks undermining the values that service users identify as central to the legitimacy of those working outside of public sector mainstream offender management.

A second theme emerging from the discussion above relates to the difficulty of ensuring effective mechanisms for PBR. These challenges have been noted elsewhere (Fox and Albertson, 2011), but service user interview data reported here suggest that the instrumental outcomes that service users valued were often only indirectly related to desistance and often appeared to be relatively minor in themselves. They were the “soft outcomes” identified previously by Vennard and Hedderman (2009). These benefits might have contributed in various ways to “lifestyle normalisation”, but only at a distance were they linked to reduced offending and so might be removed from the formal outcomes that trigger payments. Equally problematic for PBR is that the outcomes that do relate to desistance are subject to a delay since they are secondary to more immediate steps such as referral to welfare or health services. The temporal lag means that
the secondary outcome (desistance) is not understood by PBR mechanisms as a result that stemmed from the primary outcome (agency referral, or similar).

A third theme arising from the data is that the sectoral status of desistance programmes did not seem to determine the legitimacy perceived by service users. What was highly significant was that the ethos, values and culture of programmes were outside of the normal experience of probation and offender management. Staff and programmes that prioritised the building of meaningful relationships with service users were valued highly, and this was often expressed as a positive contrast with other experiences with shallow or cursory interaction with staff. In terms of the TR agenda, this might suggest that innovative programmes delivered by different combinations of service providers have the potential to achieve greater levels of legitimacy. Counter to this are components of TR that prioritise greater efficiencies in terms of community supervision of low-risk offenders. If providers, whether public, private or voluntary, develop – as has been widely mooted – systems that remotely monitor service users using electronic tagging or through check-in kiosks, then the personal relationships valued highly by service users will be disappear and the legitimacy arising from those relations will be greatly eroded. The perspectives of service users on those forms of monitoring would form a useful avenue for future research. Moreover, further studies addressing themes outlined in this paper in other CRC/probation eras would be a valuable way of testing the findings outlined. What is more, to do this over an extended time period during which service user recollections of “pre-TR” provisions might fade would test the importance of comparing diverse post-TR services with what went before.

References


Further reading


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Gendered assisted desistance: a decade from Corston

Una Mairead Barr

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of assisted desistance from the perspective of women involved in the criminal justice system. It focusses on two community projects set up in the aftermath of the 2007 Corston Report, Northshire Women’s Centres (WCs) and the Housing for Northshire project.
Design/methodology/approach – Through analysis of a year of observation in these settings and 23 narrative interviews with staff and service users, the paper notes the differences between risk-focussed and desistance-focussed justice for women.
Findings – Neither projects are a panacea; however, they offer an insight into desistance-focussed practice. The findings would suggest that the projects provide social justice as opposed to criminal justice, particularly because of their flexible approach and awareness of the relational elements involved in female desistance.
Originality/value – The in-depth, qualitative data provided challenges the “payment by results” rhetoric which demands positivist research that promotes an understanding of desistance as a binary outcome. Implications for policy are considered.
Keywords Assisted desistance, Corston report, Desistance, Gender, Payment by results, Transforming rehabilitation
Paper type Case study

Introduction
It is now a decade since the publication of the 2007 Corston Report, which, following the death of six women in 2006 at Styal prison, considered the vulnerabilities faced by women in the criminal justice system (CJS). The report made 43 recommendations for improving the services for women in the CJS or those at risk of offending. Although women-specific services preceded the report publication, the attention the report garnered was significant. Yet, 2016 saw the highest rates of death of women in prison since records began (INQUEST, 2017). Prison is still being used as a punitive response to low-level female offending and the ambitious recommendations made in Corston have been abandoned (Hogarth, 2017). Additionally the role of the CJS in supporting female desistance is salient at the time of writing because of the changes under the “Payment by Results (PbR)” and the “Transforming Rehabilitation (TR)” agenda which many authors have argued will have significant detrimental impacts on women attempting to desist.

Annison and Brayford (2015) argue that much of PbR and TR will reverse recommendations made by the 2007 Corston Report. Women are a minority within any part of the CJS (Prison Reform Trust, 2014). Under the TR agenda, Community Rehabilitation Companies (CRCs) are likely to concentrate their funds on the majority male clients as this is where they can concentrate on reducing re-offending. This is a particular concern against the backdrop of austerity. Broad and Spencer (2015) argue that policy “silences” around women’s rehabilitation will be likely to persist, amplified again by cuts to services. However, Annison and Brayford (2015) note that this also opens the possibilities for women’s centres (WCs) becoming CRCs, specifically focussed on the needs of their female clients. Nonetheless, a recent (2016) report by the Howard League found that PbR has, in reality, meant watered-down services and a real danger that WCs will close.
Commissioning decisions under TR have been happening from November 2014 under a binary measure of re-offending rates. This measure has been criticised by academics studying the link between gender and desistance (Radcliffe and Hunter, 2013) as lacking recognition of the complex pathways of desistance that women travel and devaluing the incremental moves they may make towards desistance. Desistance for women can be a multifaceted process involving setbacks and disappointments; much like it is for men (Carlsson, 2011, 2012; Healey, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Maruna and Farrall, 2004). For women, desistance is also situated within the context of gendered inequalities (Prison Reform Trust, 2014), not least of these cuts to women’s services. Desistance can occur in the absence of formal interventions, and formal interventions can be destructive to the desistance process (Halsey, 2006; Halsey et al., 2017). Yet poor services with binary outcome measures can be iatrogenic to women’s desistance.

This paper examines two community projects, Northshire WCs and the Housing for Northshire (HfN) Project, both of which were established following the 2007 Corston Report, and both of which include supporting and enabling female desistance as a central aim. It is argued that both projects provide social justice through a desistance-focused approach to change by focusing on the individual as well as the social/structural factors which promote or stand as barriers to change. These projects provide a tonic to the risk-based, offence-focused, interventions experienced by the majority of the participants in prison and probation settings. The reasons for this are examined below.

Methodology
The research presented is based on observations conducted from Spring 2014 to 2015 at five WCs located across Northshire, as well as 23 narrative interviews with women with recent convictions (n = 16) and staff members (n = 6)[1]. These women with recent convictions were either part of the HfN Project or were completing/had recently completed Specified Activity Orders at Northshire WCs. Narratives were collected, content-coded and narratively analysed for patterns in tone, theme, plot, roles, value structure, coherence, and complexity (Maruna, 2001), using N-Vivo software. A research diary was kept during the observation period and this research was analysed alongside the qualitative findings from the interviews. The research on which this paper is based was approved by the UCLan Research Ethics Committee. Interviews were recorded using a dictaphone to ensure accuracy. Informed consent was sought and provided at each stage. All women and place names in this paper have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

The aims of the observation sessions included scene setting, observing relationships, activities and discussions. The observations also provided a platform to introduce the research and recruit interview participants. Jones (1996) has noted that a feminist methodology must involve a levelling of any potential (not only gendered) power imbalance between the researched and researcher. Narrative methods sit well within the feminist tradition as they offer individuals the opportunity to tell their stories, in their own words, and from their own subjective perspective. Narrative methods give voice to those who are often voiceless, particularly within the patriarchal, increasingly neoliberal, justice system. Many of the women interviewed described the research process as cathartic.

Whilst the current study is small and qualitative in nature, the rich insights it provides into experiences of women-centred projects enables a deeper investigation into the “lived experiences” of the women within them than a quantitative measure would allow. Additionally, qualitative research into this area can be seen as resisting results-focused policy research which promotes a binary understanding of desistance. Denzin notes that in narrative research, “the storyteller should be considered both the expert and authority on his or her own life” (1998, p. 59, quoted in Yar, 2014, p. 13). This research followed this approach. An overview of the two community projects and an analysis of the difference between criminal and social justice in terms of assisted desistance follows.

Northshire WCs
Observations at the WCs took place between March 2014 and May 2015. The WCs provided a “one stop shop” for women entering the CJS as part of the Northshire Women’s Specified Activity Requirement (NWSAR). WCs provided these services after securing a contract through
Northshire CRC. Mary, a staff member at the WC provided an overview of the purpose of the WCs:

We don’t say we’re specialists in everything, we’re not specialists in domestic abuse, drug services etc. but we do provide counselling and one to one support and assist with them accessing that. So under that umbrella, where you say “one stop shop” kind of thing, you might get a woman who has an alcohol problem but doesn’t quite feel ready [...] it’s like, what do you address first? And it might be that you address some of the issues and then if they’re ready to go into alcohol treatment afterwards (Mary, Criminal Justice Project Manager at the Women’s Centre).

Women were referred from the police, courts, probation and other parts of the CJS. The women spent ten weeks attending weekly two hour sessions at the various centres. The first week involved a one-on-one induction. This was followed by eight weeks of group work sessions and a final, one-on-one, conclusion session on the last week. At the time of the research observations, the topics offered in the group sessions were: substance misuse awareness, health and wellbeing, housing and money management, community and citizenship, employment training and education, thinking and behaviour, victim awareness and family and relationships. These themes follow many of the similar themes found within the desistance literature. For example, the themes covered by McIvor et al. (2004) in their study of youth offending and desistance in Scotland were: education, employment, use of leisure and lifestyle, drug and alcohol use, offending, relationships with family, friends, and partners, neighbourhood, community, and society, values and beliefs, victimisation, identity, and aspirations for the future.

It must be noted that in 2015, the NWSAR was undergoing change. This included condensing the eight sessions into six and allowing the sessions to be used as introductions to the “add on support” that women may need. In the introductory one-on-one sessions, women were given information about the “one stop shop” project and asked to sign a contract relating to their behaviour at group sessions. The contract included an agreement to discuss their offences, take part in sessions and respect others. In reality, the women were not forced to reveal their offences at any time during the groups I attended. Group size varied from ten people (including the group leader) to a one-on-one session.

The HfN project

Rebecca Brown’s HfN Project was opened in September 2014. Rebecca described the project as a “supportive, abstinence-based, housing project”. The project was divided into services for women and services for men. Rebecca started the project as a service for women only but with help from her partner Paul, has developed a parallel service for men:

So we offer a shared accommodation within community housing so that could be 2, 3, 4-bedroomed units. And for people of no fixed abode. So it’s primarily people from prison […] We’re coming from a community standpoint and we’re about community regeneration, rather than it being a project for people from prison, which is why the CJS is not mentioned in any of the project vitals. So whilst primarily it is women from CJS, and with men from the CJS, it’s not something that is effectively designed towards that (Rebecca, Project Manager, Housing for Northshire).

Rebecca described the project as having a “peer-led, co-operative structure”. Women and men from the CJS were referred to the project from police, prison and various probation services whilst non-criminal justice referrals were often self-referrals. Whilst the focus was on housing, Rebecca and Paul also referred women and men into counselling, domestic violence services, health services, as well as employment and training. Rebecca’s office had an open door policy and she herself could be contacted at any time. According to Rebecca, the houses were not set up as permanent accommodation for the women and men but as a stop gap with a view to enabling people to become “responsible, functioning members of society with a view to getting back to work”.

Desistance

Desistance theorists have long suggested that programmes for sentenced individuals should have as their basis a desistance paradigm (Burnett and McNeill, 2005). Advice from the Ministry of Justice (2012) on working with criminalised women also recommends
desistance-focused practice. Furthermore, there has been a recent call from The Howard League (2016) and Hogarth (2017) to document and support women-centred community projects which enable desistance. This section aims to expound the meaning of desistance and theory surrounding supporting female desistance. Subsequently, the paper considers whether the community projects studied herein are better placed to support female desistance than traditional interventions (prison and probation).

Weaver and McNeill (2010) note, “most criminologists have associated desistance with both ceasing and refraining from offending” (p. 37). It is not assumed that desistance is a simple process which follows a straight and definite line. A consistent, but not unchallenged (for example see Sampson and Laub, 1993 or Giordano et al., 2002), finding in the desistance literature is that there is no specific “turning point” in time where former law breakers become “desisters” (Maruna, 2001; Bottoms and Shapland, 2011). On the contrary, desistance has been likened to a zigzag path (Glaser, 1964). Healey (2012) describes desistance as the area “betwixt and between” crime. Most desistance researchers now recognise desistance as a process or a path rather than a specific event. These definitions suggest that a person may go through many periods of desistance throughout the life course, making it difficult to categorise individuals in terms of “desisters” and “persisters”.

Within the desistance literature, there has been a relatively limited investigation into the desistance experiences of women (Rumgay, 2004; Matthews et al., 2014). A recent meta-analysis (Rodermond et al., 2016) of the female desistance literature found that having children and pro-social, supportive relationships, economic independence, agency and an absence of drugs were important for females attempting to travel desistance journeys. These factors are similar to those suggested in the research literature based on male desistance. However, the authors found gender differences in the influence of children (children were more important to women) and supportive relationships (relationship dynamics were arguably more complicated for women). Rumgay (2004) suggests that coping strategies are of particular importance to female “offenders”, who are likely to experience material deprivation, social exclusion, and psychological vulnerability. Rumgay (2004) notes that relapse can actually signal desistance each time the severity of the offence decreases, or the gap between offences increases. She argues that social reaction is essential and wider societal recognition that “scripts for change” may take time to have an effect may form an essential element for desistance. Rumgay (2004) argues that these scripts can promote self-efficacy and control through increasing participation in conventional roles and relationships. The de-labelling process is considered central and positive reinforcement of the script can reinforce resilience and survival. This is also a common finding in the male literature (e.g. Maruna, 2001).

Desistance theorists have investigated “assisted desistance” in the male context for decades (Farrall, 2002; Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Farrall et al., 2014; McNeill, 2016). The relational and flexible features of female desistance as described by Rumgay (2004) and Rodermond et al. (2016) have been found to be helpful in this “assisted desistance” context (Ministry of Justice, 2012). Yet, critical desistance theorists (Hart, 2017) argue that desistance happens in spite of CJS interventions and not because of them. The current research proposes that traditional risk-focused and offence-focused criminal justice can be damaging to desistance by neglecting the relational elements and flexible approach needed to support and reinforce desistance. However, the women-centred interventions studied as part of this research contain many positive desistance promoting features. These are discussed further below.

Risk-based and offence-focused approaches to “justice”

The vast majority of criminological research now widely acknowledges that time spent in prison does not reduce recidivism but in many cases actually has a criminogenic effect (Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Farrall et al., 2014; Cullen et al., 2011). The state too has conceded that there are too many women in prison. Prison has been recognised as an “expensive and ineffective way of dealing with many women offenders” (Justice Select Committee, 2013, p. 4), something which was made clear in the 2007 Corston Report.

Although the current research focussed mainly on community sentences, many of the women’s narratives were replete with references to imprisonment. 7 out of the 16 women interviewed
about their offences had spent time in prison. An additional three women had male family members with prison experience. The majority of the sentences served by the women were short sentences. For example, Paula, served 6 days before her appeal was granted, Michaela served a total of 22 sentences throughout her life; her longest sentence was five and a half months, and Shelly claimed to have lost count of the number of prison sentences she served, particularly in her early life and during the heroin addiction which provided context to her criminalisation 20 years previously.

The futility of women’s imprisonment, and particularly women’s short-term imprisonment, is well known in criminological research (Hogarth, 2017; Prison Reform Trust, 2014; Player, 2014). Quantitative analysis of women’s incarceration does not make for positive reading. Although there has been recent decline, women are still being sent to prison, mainly for non-violent offences and to serve short sentences. In 2016, there was a record high of 22 deaths of women in prison (INQUEST, 2017). In all, 48 per cent of women are reconvicted within one year of leaving prison. This rises to 61 per cent for sentences of less than 12 months and to 78 per cent for women who have served more than 11 previous custodial sentences (Women in Prison, 2017). Certainly, when considered in the light of desistance, women’s imprisonment, and particularly short sentences for non-violent offences, can be wholeheartedly critiqued. The negative effects on mental health, relationships, and employment opportunities were expounded by all women involved in this study who had experienced prison. Hart (2017) persuasively makes the case for interventions concerned with desistance promotion to have at their heart an abolitionist perspective. The narratives of the women in the current study reinforce this argument.

Another omnipresent feature of the women’s narratives was the probation system. Some studies have positively linked formal probation with encouraging desistance. Rex’s (1999) study of 60 probationers found that 68 per cent of those interviewed stated they were less likely to offend as a result of the supervisory experience. Rex’s findings were from a prospective, narrative, study. The author (similar to the current study) therefore could not know anything about the outcome of probation intervention. Nonetheless, many of the women involved in this research had positive probationary experiences which they elaborated on in the course of our meetings. On the whole, the positive probation experiences were related to good relationships with offender managers and flexibility in their approach. These relational and flexible approaches are considered key to desistance (Rumgay, 2004).

It has been the concern of researchers that the relationship element has been eroded over time (Burnett and McNell, 2005). This concern has also been present more recently, related to the current TR rhetoric of binary outcomes (Annison and Brayford, 2015). Nonetheless, there is no “one size fits all” probation officer-service user relationship model; for Shelly flexibility was important, whilst for Karen, strictness was key. Holly also valued strictness and discipline in her relationship with probation but felt this was not forthcoming. Holly’s narrative contained much criminal justice rhetoric about just deserts and punishment. However, she noted what she perceived as a lack of interest in her progression and desistance journey from criminal justice bodies:

And like when I go to probation it’s like no help at all at really. All they do is ask you how you’ve been doing, what have you been doing? But obviously I could lie to them and say, “oh I haven’t been doing crime,” which I used to do and they didn’t bother checking or anything. So I just found it all not good, they need more power or stuff like that. And if you get really sentenced for it you’d probably stop doing it, but because they give us so little, we’re redoing it again. They just send you in there for five minutes, ask you how you’ve been doing, ask if you’ve been keeping out of trouble and you say, “yeah” whether you have or whether you haven’t and you just, you’re on your way again. So you could be doing all sorts and they don’t know. It’s not helped one bit (Holly, Age 23).

Mutual respect in officer-service user relationships was important in narratives surrounding probation. Both Marie and Anna described times when they felt this mutual respect was lacking, particularly surrounding attendance and time keeping and lack of flexibility on the offender manager’s side:

I’m not so keen on my probation worker really, she talks down to me. She does talk down to me a lot. The one I had before this were alright, she were sound, she understood if you were going to be late and stuff. But this one, I think she’s an ex-copper or summat […] But at the minute, it’s a bit like […] she was fifteen minutes late. And I’m sat there. And she kept me an hour sat there, and she didn’t even
apologise. And it’s like, we’re supposed to apologise if we’re late, and I agree with that, I think that’s courteous, it’s natural to say “I’m sorry I’m late.” […] But she just walked in like, “come on Marie!” And I thought, “No I’m not having that.” But I didn’t say anything […] I bit my tongue and just went “mmmm”. And then she kept me an hour, with my daughter sat outside. It were when I were doing dog walking. My mum’s got a dog walking business and we were covering it for me mum. Anyway, and I just thought, “you bitch”. You know it’s one of them, it’s normal, nice and courteous to say, “I’m sorry I’m late.” And we would be expected to do it. But she just talked down, right down to you (Marie, Age 40).

Marie felt that the respect she was expected to show was not reciprocated and resulted in an unequal relationship. This, in turn, added to feelings of resentment towards the CJS which created feelings of defiance and barriers to desistance. This was not an unusual finding about women’s experiences of the CJS (Smart, 1977; Kennedy, 1993; Jordan, 2004; Davies, 2011). There appeared in these narratives to be a lack of flexibility in probation’s approach to women as single mothers with caring responsibilities. This clearly highlighted a lack of gender-sensitive working. It is somewhat ironic that probation created difficulties in furthering employment opportunities as in Marie’s case, as social bonds theorists (see, e.g. Sampson and Laub, 2003) have long advocated the transformative power of employment. These narratives reflect Farrall’s (2002) finding, of a lack of recognition, on the part of probation, about the social circumstances in which desistance occurs (or indeed, does not occur).

Flexibility and encouraging adoption of “alternative identities” (Maruna, 2001) have been found to be central in any probationary approach aimed at promoting desistance. Anna in particular felt that probation was a negative experience which was unhelpful at encouraging desistance. For Anna, not only did the unequal relationship discourage any chance of “assisted desistance” (Rex, 1999), additionally her probation meetings meant she was regularly meeting with people (usually men) from her “past life” who could jeopardise moves towards desistance by association. This stalled Anna’s chances of gaining new “scripts for survival” (Rumgay, 2004). Additionally, the mixed gendered setting resulted in intimidation and harassment:

Probation? Pointless, really pointless. They stick me in a place where all them nutters go that I’ve grown up with all my life. So I’m avoiding people and I’ve got to see them. I’m like, “do I have to come here, really?” ‘Cause I don’t like it, it’s all people from me past. And I don’t do ‘owt now. Do you know it’s a really hard situation? You know, “Oooh there’s not many women in here. Are you all right, do you want my phone number?” (Anna, Age 38).

In many ways there appeared to be a lack of connection to the “lived experiences” of the women amongst criminal justice practitioners. Both the WCs and the HFN Project have links with the changes in community provision; both projects are sponsored by the council whilst the WCs are sponsored by the county CRC amongst others. Reflecting the work of Annison and Brayford (2015), there was a feeling amongst both project’s staff that this lack of recognition of women’s social circumstances was only set to get worse under the PbR agenda as they too are dragged into CJS rhetoric around results and austerity:

I find it an utter travesty what’s happening in the probation service […] and payment by results. I think there’s an industry created on the backs of offenders, addicts and alcoholics. We are dealing with an industry here, it’s a massive, massive industry. And now in times of austerity where they’re putting the pound signs in front of the offenders and the addicts, it’s just pure accountancy. So obviously there’s going to be massive failures within that industry […] If you stigmatise and label people, you’re never going to get anywhere, you’ve got to personalise it. This “payment by results”, I don’t know which joker came up with that and it has to be a joker (Rebecca, Housing for Northshire project manager).

Staff noted that PbR will have negative implications for women attempting to desist as it will encourage labelling and a lack of the available alternative identities which are central to desistance. This sentiment is present in the work of Matthews et al. (2014) and The Howard League (2016) who note that this constant criminalisation through negative labelling of women can effectively act as a barrier to desistance.

Overall, the women’s narratives were not sources of evidence of the desistance inducing potential of the traditional, punitive CJS. Interventions which were risk-based and focussed on public protection were not desistance-focussed. Indeed in many cases the interventions were reported to be detrimental to desistance progression. Whilst examples of good practice, particularly within the probation system, were to be found, these were few and far between.
It is also worth noting Farrall et al.’s (2014) finding about the long term desistance potential effects of probation supervision. The authors found that, contrary to their earlier findings, for their male sample, the positive influence of probation on desistance could only become apparent in the long term. Nonetheless, the Corston Report (2007) noted that traditional justice, particularly in prisons but also in the police, courts and probation service, were failing females with convictions. This research found that little has changed, supporting the “five year on” findings of Hardwick (2012), and No Offence (2012), as well as more recent studies (Hogarth, 2017). The TR agenda creates net-widening and a binary measure of success or failure of desistance. These problems are compounded under PbR by the continuing punitive rhetoric and pressure on probation service staff, often discussed in WC conversations between staff, creating further problems for criminalised women attempting to desist. If there is light in the CJS tunnel it comes from the caring nature of its overworked staff (expounded upon for example in Marie’s narrative about a past probation officer) and its ability to provide support through alternative means, two of which will now be considered. The risk-need-responsivity approach (alongside concerns of deterrence and incapacitation) currently advanced by the traditional criminal justice state apparatus has had, on the whole, a negative impact on women’s desistance journeys.

Desistance-focussed approaches to “justice"

One of the central findings of Baroness Corston’s 2007 report was that more often than not, women with convictions’ issues were best addressed outside prison. These findings have been given qualified support above. However, this research has already found that there are issues with probation provision, which are compounded by the pressure of TR and PbR approaches. Nonetheless, a positive impact that probation found to have was the referral of probationers to women-only services. Radcliffe and Hunter (2013) found that women’s community services have filled a gap in provision for low-risk females, effectively providing a range of gendered social capital required for effective desistance. This section now moves on to consider these types of alternative community provision, and particularly that experienced by the women in this study, Northshire WCs and the HfN Project, both of which address issues of social justice, as opposed to purely criminal justice through desistance-focussed approaches. The ability to make this distinction emerged from conversations with both staff and service users, particularly during a conversation with a group leader based in Weston, Maria. Maria noted that she would remind the women, “I don’t work for probation; I work for the Women’s Centre which is more about concern for wellbeing”. This contrast was evident in the narratives of the women who attended the WC group meetings[2]; Holly’s quote was typical:

Holly: Yeah it’s helped, the Women’s Centre, cause like they’re giving me a course in January so it’s helping, that. They should do that, they should get you voluntary work or something, probation, just to make sure you’re not going out during the day and doing crime and stuff like that.

UB: So if you could change anything about your sentence what would you change?

Holly: Just my probation, like come to the Women’s Centre instead of all the times I were meant to go there, like twice a week (Holly, Age 24).

Additionally, the provision of both the WCs and the HfN Programmes were seen to be more flexible than traditional justice programmes. Bridget was a 27 year old mother of two. She was one of only two women involved in the research who were arrested for violent offences. She had spent two short sentences in prison. Bridget had severe learning difficulties. She was mentored by Fran, a WC volunteer. At the time of the interviews, Bridget had finished her specified activity requirement at the WC but was continuing to attend weekly group meetings. She met with Fran on most days. The other women in her group clearly looked out for Bridget. For example, during one of the WC sessions when Bridget was running late, there was a fear amongst the group that she was not going to turn up. When she eventually did turn up there was laughing and joking amongst the women. Bridget talked about her desire to move away from her friends who were “a bad influence” on her. It was evident, both in the actions of the women, and in Bridget’s narrative, that in Fran, the other WC staff, and her fellow group members she had found an alternative, pro-social relational bond.
Bridget attended money management programmes and was in the process of finding a new house to rent with Fran’s help. Although Bridget had recently breached her licence and broken the conditions of her electronic tag, the WC was in contact with the police and magistrates to prevent a return to prison, as there was a general feeling that this was not helpful to Bridget’s desistance journey. This close relationship was only possible through an effective women-only provision which was flexible enough not to end when the programme ended. Healey (2012) has noted the importance of beyond-programme help. Carlsson’s (2012) and Rумgay’s (2004) ideas around intermittency are pertinent here; it was clear the WCs are aware that desistance involves more than the end of offending. Particularly for Bridget, the recognition of her peers within the WC that she had changed and the sense of belonging this produced was clear, despite the recognition that this was occurring at the same time as breaches to her licence. Additionally, Shelly, Michaela and Kelly-Marie, whose narratives contained examples of intermittent desistance, all experienced an “identity change” (Maruna, 2001) consistent with secondary desistance, largely as a result of the support they received within the HfN Project and particularly from Rebecca.

Farrall (2002) noted that there was a fissure between the social bonds rhetoric of desistance and the actions (or inactions) of the CJS. It is this fissure, that the research found the WC and HfN Projects, to be particularly positive in bridging. As a very brief overview, women involved in this research accessed counselling services, abuse support services, debt management programmes, art and exercise workshops, volunteering experience, college courses, housing, full time jobs and mental health services through both the WC and HfN programmes. The HfN programme was particularly prudent in involving the women’s families in their desistance journeys. Kelly-Marie forged a new and improved relationship with her mother following encouragement from Rebecca. She noted:

‘Anyhow I got introduced to the Housing for Northshire Project and Rebecca Brown and my life’s finally turned round. I’ve gone full circle, there’s nothing else can come at me now […] I mean, me and me mum have sat down, we’ve talked. But what we’ve also done is interact; they’ve got somebody to interact with me mum, to explain to her, from a drug addict’s point of view. And they’ve involved her in my recovery and I feel like I’ve got a totally different mum now; I feel like I’ve got the mum I should have had years ago (Kelly-Marie, Age 48).’

Community links were a key focus of the HfN provision. Shelly discussed informal soup kitchens and provisions for community members who were struggling, set up by Rebecca and helped by the other women. Michaela was preparing to begin volunteering at a local café. These community links provided sources of “scripts for survival” (Rumgay, 2004).

Both services provided support for cognitive moves towards desistance. Neither service labelled women as “offenders” as their approaches were strengths based. The WC group sessions provided the women with a sense of hope for change, seeing their fellow group members and staff as positive role models. Stigma and shame were overcome by talking methods in both projects, particularly by the discussion of shared narratives in group settings and peer encouragement. This could particularly be seen in shared narratives of abuse, of motherhood and drug and alcohol experiences.

Nonetheless, the provisions of both community projects had limitations. It must also be noted that the WC’s in particular followed a largely individualistic, responsibility-focused approach to desistance (see Hart, 2017 for possible, alternative “critical” approaches). Whilst many of the sessions promoted women addressing issues such as cognitive processes and personal relationships, these require agency. There was a lack of recognition in places of the structural forces (such as patriarchy or neoliberalism) which may impede female desistance. For example, in one session on victims, Sarah noted that she had trouble seeing the victim of her shoplifting offences from large stores which, she noted, did not pay taxes. Jenny, the group leader, commiserated with Sarah’s sentiment but was unable to clarify (understandably) why Sarah’s desistance may have been in her best interests. Additionally, the linkages between many of the women’s narratives of abuse and coercion with their offending trajectories were addressed only on an agentic level. The structural forces of patriarchy were not considered or discussed.

Although the HfN Project was able to work with the family and community, the same was not the case for the WCs. Weaver and McNeill (2014) have highlighted the relational aspects of desistance. The volume of women in the WCs as compared to the HfN service meant that this
could not be catered for on the whole. WC staff would, for the most part, deal with women in a group setting and could not for example, provide homeless women with housing directly. Mary, Criminal Justice Project Manager at the WCs, reported housing to be one of the project’s central issues as her experience highlighted housing as a crucial element in desistance (see, e.g Ellison et al., 2013). These findings echo The Howard League’s (2016) findings about watered-down women-focussed support in the light of austerity.

The group provision of the WC was criticised even amongst staff members for not being suitable for every woman. Maria recalled a woman with dementia, referred from probation to the group provision, and the difficulties this posed for the group setting. Many of the women, Maria noted, required more one-on-one mentoring than the WC was often able to provide in the two week induction and conclusion. Certainly, group sessions were witnessed in the course of the observation research where one or two women in the group did not contribute at any stage. As noted previously, the size of the groups varied from week to week. This had an effect on the way the groups were run as when only one woman turned up, a role play, for example, could not be completed, whereas in one session with ten participants, the staff did not have enough time to go through all the activities.

Jenny, another group leader, noted that the structure of the provision was often very rigid; women had to “go through the motions of all the different courses”. Many of the women were enrolled on a comprehensive education and employment course provided by the WCs yet also had to cover this topic as part of their specified activity requirement. Sometimes the women confided in me that they found some of the sessions irrelevant to their lives, or covered topics which they found to be “common knowledge”. To this end, the WCs were responding to this criticism, and Mary outlined developments which were forthcoming:

The plan is, obviously you still need your induction session, but to make, rather than eight sessions, some that are a bit fluffy […] put it into six sessions, condense it a little bit and make it more meaningful and make the add on support, like the housing and debt, the access to benefits; […] [making it] more of an engagement tool, helping them recognise what the issues are ‘cause they may well not know what their own issues are because everything just becomes a big bubble of loads of issues and how do we address that? So just making it more condensed, more meaningful, to give an added value to the add on support as well, that’s kind of what we’re looking at (Mary, Criminal Justice Project Manager at the Women’s Centre).

This flexible approach from the WCs meant that it was somewhat adaptable to change and able to recognise and amend its faults in a meaningful way.

There were only three women interviewed who were clients of the HfN Project as well as two members of staff. The project is very small and to take a sceptical position would be to suggest that it is because of this small sample number that there were no critiques or complaints about the service from either staff or service users. On the other hand, the focussed, one-on-one mentoring, and the housing model as provided by the service was difficult to critique. As Shelly noted, Rebecca was available for her clients 24/7. Certainly, the service would not be suitable for all women with convictions. Many of the WC group had minor offences or were one-off offenders with stable housing and good community and/or family support. Nonetheless, for the more prolific offenders and for homeless women, the support offered was crucial to the secondary/tertiary desistance narratives of Shelly, Michaela and Kelly-Marie, which are testament to its successes.

Again, noting the structural factors involved in offending/desistance trajectories, the main challenges faced and anticipated by staff in both projects were surrounding TR and PbR. The changes as a result of TR and PbR were underway at the time of the research. Although funding for the WCs came partly from the local CRC, Christine sensed that this would create a worrying potential for them to be swept into the system of putting a price on the head of each potential “desister”. In this way, it appears that drawing Maria’s line (discussed above) between the “wellbeing-focussed” elements of alternative community provision and the traditional, risk-based punitive justice system is becoming increasingly difficult to map out:

I think as far as barriers [to desistance] go, there is danger that we increasingly become part of the system. And I think the contract environment pushed us towards that, we’re much more target-focused,
data-focused, measurement-focused. I would say as a manager there’s benefits to that; it helps us get control of the process, really look at what’s working and what isn’t working, you know grow the skill set of the practitioners. But it can feel that there’s more assessments and those can be barriers, and questions asked of women can be barriers (Christine, CEO of the Women’s Centre).

The staff in the WCs also noted that the introduction of PbR would allow less time for staff members to work on the important relational aspects of desistance with the women. Again, TR was seen as contributing to the stresses of working in such a setting, ultimately putting a strain on the desistance potential of the sentenced women.

Overall both programmes provided women-only “desistance structure” or “space” by engaging with both cognitive level themes and social/structural elements which have been shown to be conducive to desistance journeys (Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 2003; Rumgay, 2004; Rodermond et al., 2016). The importance of engaging with the social/structural as well as the cognitive was summarised by Jenny, a group leader in the WC:

“It’s very rare that you would find a woman that goes out and thinks, “You know what I’m going to go out and I’m going to punch someone in the throat.” No they don’t do that, they don’t go out and think, “I’m going to go out and rob summat”. No, there’s always an underlying issue and whether that is housing, accommodation, substance misuse problems, mental health problems, you know a bad relationship and things like that, there’s usually something underlying that needs dealing with” (Jenny, Group Leader, Women’s Centre).

Through providing a holistic women-only service, these two projects are largely dealing with exactly the issues outlined by Jenny above. Whilst neither project was a panacea for all women, there was recognition present amongst staff of these issues and attempts to overcome them. The ability to be flexible was evident in both projects and meant that “assisted desistance” (Rex, 1999) was possible to some extent. To echo Baroness Corston’s (2007) findings, community-based approaches tailored towards the gendered needs of women, enable women to feel supported at turning their lives around. Both projects studied in this research provide a tonic to the male-focussed, risk-based, punitive traditional system. This research echoes that of Hogarth (2017) and The Howard League (2016) in that women-centred services must be free to continue this holistic, social justice, desistance-focussed provision in spite of wider changes within the CJS. However, the changes under TR and PbR in particular were worrying staff members at both projects. There was a real concern amongst staff that the community projects would become “an extension in the network of control and regulation” (Gelthorpe and Wright, 2015, p. 51) of the wider CJS.

It is worth noting again that the current research is small scale and qualitative in nature. The study was prospective and, although some useful follow up interviews were conducted, these were not put in place to measure desistance outcomes, but to trace the desistance journey. The reason for this was the recognition that desistance was not generally a linear process but, as was established in most of the women’s narratives, can involve setbacks and relapses. Whilst quantitative analysis of women’s assisted desistance experiences is welcomed in the future, this research must be cognisant of the nature of desistance which may involve non-linear pathways. Future research is also recommended to follow up on the impact of TR and PbR.

Conclusion

Young (1991), in his explanation of left realist approaches to crime control, noted that “crime cannot be simply explained in terms of crime control agencies, and [...] the agencies involved in crime control are much wider than in the CJS” (p. 152). Nonetheless, this paper has noted that “control agencies” can play a central role in the encouragement of desistance journeys, particularly through engaging with the social/structural as well as the individual. Traditional, risk and offence-focussed justice systems, this research has found, have often done more harm than good in enabling desistance. There is a lack of understanding, on the part of the CJS, about the contexts of female offending. Just deserts and punitive rhetoric will not support female desistance journeys (Radcliffe and Hunter, 2013). Certainly prison has a limited, if not detrimental, impact on desistance. Particularly, short sentences for non-violent offences are more likely to have a detrimental effect on desistance attempts (Corston, 2007). Probation relationships, where they are flexible and encouraging, with an understanding of the social/structural barriers to
desistance, can be a source of hope nonetheless. Whilst there is no one-size-fits-all relationship model, there is a continual worry amongst practitioners and academics alike (Annison and Brayford, 2015) that the changes under the TR agenda may make flexible and supportive relationships less likely where the focus is on a binary measure of results, and does not recognise incremental moves towards desistance.

In terms of policy implications, this research has highlighted that women-centred and desistance-focused programmes with through-the-gate and post-programme support (Healey, 2012) can help produce assisted desistance. Programmes should be aware of the social/structural circumstances in which desistance does or does not take place (Farrall, 2002), and should support pro-social roles whilst recognising and applauding incremental moves towards desistance (Carlsson, 2012; Rumgay, 2004). In particular, WCs which are ideally placed to recognise the fullness of a women’s life should be supported as desistance mentors. Desistance, as measured in the PbR paradigm, as a binary outcome, must be strongly contested. Many of these features reflect what has already been considered as part of a male desistance paradigm and it is clear the male system can learn much from female successes. Many of these features are present in both the work of the WCs and HfN Projects studied as part of this research. Whilst neither programme is a panacea and neither provide a “one size fits all” model, the acknowledgement of what is “known” both about desistance and female involvement in the CJS, provide them with a template to work from.

Parliament UK (2014) requires the justice secretary to make arrangements to meet the needs of females with convictions. Many of these needs could be garnered from the aforementioned projects. Yet in times of austerity where women’s services and mental health services are first on the line to go (Ryan, 2017), alongside “crackdowns” on benefit fraud and reductions of the welfare system, women are likely to continue being criminalised due to poverty, abuse and mental health issues. These issues are not only confined to women with convictions but are gender-wide issues of inequality and discrimination. A justice system which replicates these inequalities is damaging to women’s desistance prospects and, importantly, to their lives more generally. Women-centred services which encourage desistance and decriminalisation in a supportive, holistic and flexible environment must be championed and supported.

Notes
1. One woman, Rebecca, fell into both categories.
2. The Women’s Centre provides a number of services to women caught up in the formal CJS, from avert schemes at the point of arrest to through-the-gate services for women coming back to the community after imprisonment. This research focuses on women provided with specified activity requirements but it is clear additional research surrounding the effectiveness of all these services is required.

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Further reading


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The patchwork of alcohol-free zones and alcohol-prohibited areas in New South Wales (Australia)

Daren G. Fisher, Phillip Wadds and Garner Clancey

Abstract

Purpose – Developing policies to curb public alcohol consumption is a priority for governments. In the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW), local governments have introduced alcohol-free zones (AFZs) and alcohol-prohibited areas (APAs) to prohibit the public consumption of alcohol and reduce crime stemming from intoxication. Previous studies, however, argue that these policies are driven by stakeholder desire rather than alcohol-related crime and may result in increased criminal justice contact for vulnerable populations. The purpose of this paper is to estimate the number of AFZs and APAs in NSW and examine the extent to which these policies are connected to the frequency of alcohol-related crime.

Design/methodology/approach – Examining the 152 local government areas (LGAs) of NSW, the authors analysed whether the implementation of AFZs and APAs were linked to the frequency of liquor offences and assaults using group-based trajectory models.

Findings – The authors found that AFZs and APAs were often not advertised nor inconsistently implemented both across and within jurisdictions. Group-based trajectory models indicated that AFZs were more common in low liquor offence LGAs than high liquor offences LGAs, but were more frequently implemented in high assault LGAs compared to low assault LGAs. APAs were more common in the lowest crime LGAs compared to those LGAs that experienced higher levels of recorded crime.

Originality/value – These analyses demonstrate how widespread AFZs and APAs have become and provides evidence that the implementation of is only tenuously linked to the frequency of crime.

Keywords Australia, Public policy, Alcohol, Local government, Policy implementation, Crime prevention

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Alcohol-related crime is a major cause of social harm in Australia (Collins and Lapsley, 2008). The estimated annual cost from the effects of alcohol in Australia is $15.3 billion (AUD), stemming primarily from treatment costs, premature deaths, and crime (Collins and Lapsley, 2008). Alcohol consumption has been connected to increased personal injury (Hobday et al., 2015), lost economic productivity (Collins and Lapsley, 2008), and more than a third of violent crime (Laslett et al., 2010). Public alcohol consumption also leads to substantial community concern, and constitutes a significant drain on community, health, and police resources (Donnelly et al., 2007; Manning et al., 2013). Alcohol is a major factor in many prominent crime types, including assault, malicious damage to property, public disorder, and dangerous driving (Graham and Homel, 2008; Poynton et al., 2005). Indeed, research suggests that a substantial proportion of assaults involve alcohol, with alcohol consumption being a contributing factor in up to 73 per cent of all assaults (Briscoe and Donnelly, 2001), half of assault hospitalisations, and a third of road fatalities in Australia (Chikritzhs et al., 1999).

Commensurate with these significant costs, the consequences of alcohol consumption and intoxication are frequently featured in media reports and influence public perceptions of safety in New South Wales (NSW). This attention has mobilised local political action to confront the
issue (Wadds, 2015). In response to populist calls for action, a number of high-profile legislative and regulatory interventions have been instituted across NSW, including highly controversial licensed trading restrictions popularly known as the "lock-out laws[1]." Aiming to address public concern with crime and safety related to alcohol, many of these strategies have drawn public criticism on the grounds that there is little empirical evidence to support their implementation (Patty, 2014). This criticism has been compounded by reported declines in pedestrian flows, business viability, and the erosion of urban nightlife culture in Sydney (Barrie, 2016a, b). Despite these critiques, the introduction of policies aimed at reducing public alcohol consumption in NSW in 2014 have been found to be related to significant decreases in recorded violent crime in Sydney’s major urban nightlife precincts, with smaller decreases being detected across the rest of the state (Menéndez et al., 2015).

In the most recent release of recorded crime data within the designated lock-out zone, alcohol-related assaults were down by 49 per cent since the introduction of the lock-out interventions, although the report did also show significant displacement of assaults in both distal and proximal nightlife precincts in Sydney (up 17 and 12 per cent, respectively) (Donnelly et al., 2017).

However, these highly publicised state-wide policies are only part of the suite of interventions that seek to reduce alcohol consumption and related crime in NSW. NSW local governments have long had the legislative power to manage the consumption of alcohol in public spaces through the establishment of alcohol-free zones (AFZs) and alcohol-prohibited areas (APAs). AFZs prohibit public alcohol consumption on and around public roads, footpaths, and car parks, whereas APAs cover all other public spaces, and both designated areas allow Police and authorised council enforcement officers to confiscate and tip out alcohol, and to impose fines (Woodward, 2010). Occurring amidst a legislative context that has increasingly regulated public drinking through licensed premise and footpath trading restrictions, these localised laws have created a patchwork of drinking controls that require intensive coordination between local councils and police to enforce (Pennay and Room, 2012; Pennay et al., 2013). These zones allow police officers to confiscate and dispose of any open alcohol containers and impose fines of up to $2,200 to those found consuming alcohol in the designated areas (Woodward, 2010). These fines represent a relatively large cost, amounting to approximately 2.7 per cent of the median gross annual income for NSW in 2014 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

Particular concern has been expressed regarding the possible impact of this type of legislation on Indigenous communities (Burns, 1992). The history of regulation concerning public intoxication and drinking in NSW (and elsewhere in Australia) has been, and continues to be, intimately connected with the criminalisation and policing of Indigenous persons and communities (McNamara and Quilter, 2015). As such, the aforementioned fines and other controls relating to public alcohol consumption have had a disproportionate impact on Indigenous Australians (Palmer and Warren, 2014). Compounding these pernicious effects, there is little research indicating the success of these regulatory strategies in reducing rates of victimisation and/or crime within AFZs or APAs, leading to calls that they may, in fact, increase social marginalisation and criminal justice contact for already disadvantaged populations (Burns, 1992; Pennay et al., 2013). Thus, while these policies may lead to reductions in the incidence of public drinking, such outcomes come at great social cost with “no indication of any change in the recorded rates of assault, malicious damage to property or offensive behaviour” (Burns, 1992, pp. 19-20).

These policies have been implemented through powers derived from the introduction of the Local Government (Street Drinking) Amendment Act 1990 (NSW). This Act supplemented local councils’ pre-existing power to ban public drinking in parks and reserves and declare public spaces, including roads, footpaths, and car parks, as AFZs (NSW Department of Local Government, 2009). Powers associated with establishing AFZs and APAs were subsequently incorporated in the Local Government Act 1993 (NSW). According to the Ministerial Guidelines on Alcohol-Free Zones, produced by the NSW Department of Local Government in 2009:

The object of alcohol-free zones is an early intervention measure to prevent the escalation of irresponsible street drinking to incidents involving serious crime. The drinking of alcohol is prohibited in an alcohol-free zone that has been established by a council. Public places that are public roads, footpaths or public carparks may be included in a zone (NSW Department of Local Government, 2009, p. 5).

The establishment of these zones is accompanied by a number of requirements by local governments, including consultation by the relevant council with local police, notification of
relevant parties (including police and licensees) of an intention to establish an AFZ, and erection of signage to indicate the boundaries of and period for which an area is designated an AFZ. The Ministerial Guidelines state that:

Councils with authorized council enforcement officers need to establish a system to record the number of occasions that these officers enforce the Alcohol-Free Zone legislation in the area. This should include monitoring the number of authorized council enforcement officers and how often alcohol is tipped out or otherwise disposed of (NSW Department of Local Government, 2009, p. 14).

Despite the public attention paid to other alcohol-related policies and their potential impact on crime and criminality, there has been relatively little scrutiny or debate about the implementation or impact of AFZs and APAs. This study provides the first systematic analysis of the implementation of AFZs and APAs within NSW. This study empirically examines whether the implementation patterns of AFZs and APAs adhere to the level of assault and alcohol-related crimes in the 152 local government areas (LGAs) of NSW. This study concludes with a discussion of the policy implications stemming from these analyses.

Methods

To examine the implementation of AFZs and APAs in NSW, this study first sought to identify which LGAs had instituted these provisions. After compiling a sampling frame of all 152 LGAs in NSW, the official website of each LGA was examined to identify the existence and quantity of AFZs or APAs within each LGA. As many councils did not publicise the presence, number, or location of these areas, this research employed additional methods to identify whether or not LGAs had AFZs and APAs. After exhausting official local government resources, alternative records were obtained using the global news database Factiva to search local newspapers for reference regarding implementation of AFZs or APAs. For LGAs where there was no online or newspaper record of AFZs or APAs, emails were then sent to the LGA’s public liaison requesting this information. When no reply was heard within a month following this initial e-mail, a follow-up e-mail was then sent, and telephone calls were used if no reply was received in the following month. After an additional period of two months had elapsed these LGAs were recorded as not having either an AFZ or an APA (n = 9, 5.92 per cent). As such, this measure for the absence of AFZs and APAs indicates the inability to identify the presence of these areas using publicly available data and not necessarily the physical absence.

When multiple sources were located for a single LGA, it was common to find varying counts for the number of AFZs or APAs. In the majority of these cases, the number of these designated areas increased over time, with council meeting minutes documenting the incorporation of additional areas, while for some jurisdictions the number decreased as the prohibitions were allowed to expire or were not renewed. However, in two LGAs the number of AFZs decreased due to the expansion of these areas leading to previously separate zones becoming one larger area. For the purposes of this study, AFZs or APAs were counted separately only if they had some geographic separation, and the most recent record of these areas was used for the subsequent analysis.

In order to examine potential links between crime and the introduction of these areas, crime data were also gathered from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research. These publicly available data provide the official counts for recorded crime in each of the 152 LGAs in NSW for each month between January 1995 and December 2015, and cover 62 separate crime types. Given the focus on the link between public alcohol consumption and assault, this study specifically examined data on non-domestic assault[2], and liquor offences[3].

Group-based trajectory models were used to explore whether there was any meaningful variation between LGAs, and to discern whether distinctive patterns of crime emerged for both offence types. These models were designed to identify clusters of individuals or larger units that follow similar progressions of a particular behaviour over a period of time (Jones and Nagin, 2007). Weisburd et al. (2004) note that group-based trajectory are particularly valuable for studying patterns of crime changes within heterogeneous geographic areas, and are able to detect qualitatively distinct behaviour patterns over time. In the present study, this method was used to examine whether there were meaningful differences in the trajectories of NSW LGAs with regard to population rates of liquor offences and assault. In order to allow for the skewed distribution and
non-linear trends in the incidence of crime in NSW (see Haviland et al., 2011), censored normal models with quadratic functions were initially used to estimate LGA-level trajectories.

The optimal number of latent groups that fit the data and the model specification were determined by iteratively comparing the Bayesian Information Criterion statistics. These latent groups do not represent real groups, but instead represent LGAs that were observed to follow similar crime trajectories in this period (see Nagin and Tremblay, 2005). Consequently it is important to note that within each presented group, individual LGAs did not follow this pattern in “lock-step” (Nagin and Tremblay, 2005, p. 874). As will be further discussed below, this method produced small group sizes (< 5 per cent) for some models. As these groups represented LGAs that had substantively different crime trends in the offences being examined, and due in part to the small sample size, the present analysis elected to retain these smaller groups due to their policy relevance (Hynes and Clarkberg, 2005). The posterior probability of group measurement for each LGA that falls into each specific trajectory was also examined to determine how well both of the models fit with the existing data. In all cases, this probability was above 0.80 for all groups.

Results

Using publicly available information, it was clear that AFZs had been widely implemented across NSW. As can be seen in Figure 1, this study identified that 119 out of the 152 LGAs had implemented AFZs (78.3 per cent). AFZs were also more prevalent compared to APAs, as only 44 LGAs had at least one APA (29.0 per cent). APAs were also rarely implemented independently, and were exclusively used in only three LGAs. In contrast, nearly half of all LGAs had exclusively introduced AFZs (n = 75, 49.3 per cent). AFZs and APAs were not mutually exclusive policy strategies, as 41 LGAs employed both AFZs and APAs (27 per cent). Combining both types together, 80.3 per cent of councils (n = 122) operated AFZs and/or APAs while 19.7 per cent of LGAs (n = 30) had no public indications that either AFZs or APAs had been used. The use of language denoting AFZs and APAs varied both across and within LGAs. Indeed, some LGAs had created their own terms synonymous with the legislative terminology following leadership changes, indicating a lack of consistency that could potentially confuse stakeholders. Some LGAs also imposed AFZs and APAs temporarily for major public events such as New Year’s Eve and public holidays.

The number of AFZs varied between 0 and 351 distinct geographic areas within an LGA, with a mean of 11.59 AFZs (SD = 34.16) and a median of two. APAs were less numerous within LGAs with a maximum of 48 being present within a single LGA and a median of 0 (x = 2.21,
These figures should be treated with caution, as direct comparisons obscure the variation in geographic area contained within these zones. Some LGAs designated areas as small as car parks as individual AFZs or APAs, while others selected large beachside reserves that were hundreds of metres in length. Although attempts were made to estimate the total geographic area encompassed by these zones in each LGA, many official LGA documents list only the location of AFZs and APAs without indicating their official boundaries. While some LGAs provided maps that clearly delineated AFZs and APAs, this study highlights that there was a great deal of geographic ambiguity that rendered systematic estimations impossible.

**The convergence of AFZs, APAs, and crime**

The state-wide trends in the population rates for liquor offences assaults in NSW between 1995 and 2014 can be seen in Figure 2. For both offences, a marked increase was evident between 1998 and 2002, particularly for liquor offences. After 2001 however, the incidence of liquor offences relative to population decreased (from 4.84 per 1,000 residents to 2.94 per 1,000 residents in 2014). The trend in assaults was also similar, peaking in 2002 with an average of 7.30 assaults per 1,000 people, then declining thereafter.

To examine how representative these state-wide averages were, group-based trajectory models were run for both offences. Turning first to liquor offences, Figure 3 suggests the presence of three groups of LGAs in NSW – a high group comprising 5.2 per cent of LGAs (\(n = 8\)) that on average experienced more rapid increases then declines in liquor offences compared to the rest of NSW; a moderate group of 16.6 per cent of LGAs that experienced less pronounced but consistent increases in liquor offences; and low and stable group of 78.2 per cent of LGAs that experienced relatively few liquor offences relative to their population. Contrary to the predictions of this study, both AFZs and APAs were most commonly implemented in LGAs that were identified as being part of the low and stable group for liquor offences. In the lowest group, 79.0 per cent of LGAs had AFZs compared to 62.5 per cent of LGAs in the highest group of LGAs. Similarly, 32.8 per cent of low-offence LGAs had APAs while the highest group had 0 councils with detectable APAs. Similar substantive findings were also observed when examining the raw rates of liquor offences. The outputs from these analyses are available from the authors upon request.

The group-based trajectory models also suggested three groups for non-domestic violence assaults in NSW. Again, the modal group for LGAs in NSW was a low and stable group, comprising
57.8 per cent of LGAs (see Figure 4). A second relatively stable group was also observed with a slightly higher rate of non-domestic violence assaults in NSW that encompassed 38.9 per cent of LGAs. Unlike liquor offences however, the highest group of LGAs did not begin the observed period at a similar level and instead produced an overall high but declining trajectory. Although this group fell below the traditional cut point of 5 per cent for minimum group size at 3.3 per cent, the five LGAs in this group had a qualitatively different start point and overall trajectory compared to all other LGAs in NSW. Unlike liquor offences, AFZs (low = 0.713, medium = 0.833, high = 0.800) and APAs (low = 0.264, medium = 0.333, high = 0.200) were more consistently implemented across all three observed groups. Indeed, the higher of the two low and stable groups had the highest proportion out of any of the groups, however, these differences were not statistically significant for either AFZs or APAs.

Pennay et al. (2013) suggest that the introduction of AFZs and APAs is a function of stakeholder desire rather than a result of specific evidence proving the effectiveness of these policies in reducing alcohol-related harm – a finding supported here. This may have broad negative impacts on marginalised social groups, regardless of whether these policies are effective in regulating public drinking and associated crime (Coleman et al., 2005).
Discussion and conclusions

The results from the above analyses confirm that AFZs and APAs have been widely implemented across NSW. Our conservative estimate suggests that at least 80 per cent of LGAs have implemented some form of geographic designation that renders public alcohol consumption illegal. Our data further suggest that AFZs are the most common policy that has been adopted, being evidenced in more than three-quarters of all LGAs. While this prevalence was widespread, LGAs often created and changed their own nomenclature for these zones over time. In many cases, these zones were also allowed to expire, or were implemented only temporarily, with little public discussion or advertisement. Thus, while our estimates are likely underestimations of the prevalence of AFZs and APAs, these observations reflect the information that is available to the public. This study highlights that the lack of clear and transparent advertisement of these areas may prove potentially confusing for local communities, particularly given the ongoing fears that these policies may have disproportionate and negative impacts on marginalised and disadvantaged groups that might not have access to, or knowledge about where to find, this information.

Extending the locally-based observations of Pennay et al. (2013), our findings also indicated that the introduction of AFZs and APAs share only a tenuous link to the incidence of crime. The descriptive analysis enabled by the group-based trajectory models suggests that, for the majority of LGAs, both liquor offences and non-domestic assaults were low and stable between January 1995 and December 2015. In addition, LGAs that were categorised as being in the highest groups for these offence types were not more likely to have implemented either AFZs or APAs. Consequently, these findings suggest that the rate of alcohol-related crime within an LGA is not a primary determinant for the introduction of AFZs or APAs.

The data compiled for this study have a number of important limitations that should be noted. In addition to the likely underestimation of the AFZs and APAs that was noted above, the present study also did not attempt to differentiate when AFZs and APAs were introduced. As periods of introduction were often vague or contradictory in the data that were gathered, the ability to provide reliable estimations of when these zones were implemented was undermined. Consequently, this study was unable to assess with confidence the direct impacts that the introduction of AFZs and APAs had upon crime trends in NSW. It is, however, evident that these ambiguities may only serve to further reinforce the difficulties that the public may experience in identifying which areas of an LGA allow the legal public consumption of alcohol.

Based on the analyses presented here, this study provides the first systematic evidence regarding the breadth of the introduction of AFZs and APAs within an Australian state (NSW). In light of the evidence suggesting that these zones were implemented inconsistently both across and within LGAs, and that their implementation may share only a tenuous link with the incidence of crimes connected to public alcohol consumption, these findings support earlier research conducted into the design of AFZ and APA policy that suggested that their implementation acts to serve stakeholder desires rather than as a response to any evidence that they are required to address high crime rates. Given the potentially negative impacts on particular populations, especially those already suffering marginalisation, stigmatisation, and disadvantage, there is a need to review the widespread use of AFZs and APAs in NSW, and improve the overall management and implementation of these powers.

Notes

1. The “lock-out laws” are a major component of the much broader Sydney CBD Entertainment Precinct Plan of Management that was rolled out across 2014 and includes a 1:30 a.m. venue lock-out (no entry or re-entry to a licensed venue) and 3:00 a.m. cessation of service requirement for all licensed premises within the designated area. Other interventions include the establishment of a liquor licence freeze to the newly established CBD precinct, the introduction of temporary banning orders that police can issue to remove troublemakers from the CBD precinct, a new state-wide closing time of 10:00 p.m. for all takeaway alcohol sales, a new Periodic Licence Fee Scheme, a mandatory minimum eight-year jail sentence for “one-punch” assaults, increasing the maximum sentence to 25 years for the illegal supply and possession of steroids, the removal of voluntary intoxication as a mitigating factor in sentencing, increases to criminal infringement notice penalties, including for offensive language, offensive behaviour, and continued drunk and disorderly behaviour, greater police powers allowing the NSW Police Force to conduct drug and alcohol testing where they suspect an offender has committed a drug or
alcohol-related violent assault, and a number of other trading restrictions and safety measures to operate inside and around licensed venues (NSW Treasury, 2016).

2. Assault is defined as the "direct (and immediate/confrontational) infliction of force, injury or violence upon a person or persons or the direct (and immediate/confrontational) threat of force, injury or violence where there is an apprehension that the threat could be enacted" (Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR), 2016).

3. Liquor offences are defined as: "production, sale, purchase and/or consumption of alcohol in breach of licensing conditions/ regulations/laws (BOCSAR, 2016). Includes the police incident categories of consume alcohol in public by minor, consume alcohol in an alcohol-free zone, Licensing Legislation Offences (e.g. offence by licensee/employee/secretary/minor/customer (not minor), supply liquor to juvenile, offence against registered clubs" (BOCSAR, 2016, p. 8).

References


Further reading


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Gangs, music and the mediatisation of crime: expressions, violations and validations

Craig Pinkney and Shona Robinson-Edwards

Abstract

Purpose – The way in which criminologists understand, contextualise and theorise around the mediatised world has raised some critical new questions. The purpose of this paper is to report on qualitative research which looks at the ways in which some forms of social media are utilised by gang members. Gang research in the main is predicated on the notion that gangs are deviant products of social disorganisation; however, there is little written on the “specific” forms of expression used by those associated with gangs.

Design/methodology/approach – The lyrical content of three music videos has been analysed using narrative analysis.

Findings – Music videos have been used as a form of expression for decades. More recently in some cases they have been used as a tool to send threats, promote gang culture and flaunt illegal substances, which is fairly a new concept, in the UK at least. Social media and music videos are not the sole reason why there has been a rise in violence amongst young people; however, this paper aims to further explore some of these notions.

Originality/value – The authors suggest that this form of expression presents challenges in the understanding of gang activity in a mediatised world. The intention is not to further criminalise young people, but to seek understanding and explore the phenomenon of music videos and its position their gang research.

Keywords Violence, Narrative, Crime, Youth, Social media, Mediatization, Gangs, Expression

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Social media has become an integral part in the lives of young people within the UK, and those that are involved or subscribe to street gangs are increasingly using social media as a platform to communicate. Music videos have been used for decades by artists to express, communicate and tell stories of their lived experiences. Drill music in particular is a hip-hop subgenre originating from youth located in the Southside of Chicago, USA (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017). Due to the current climate of gang-related music videos, and the consequential incarceration of individuals involved in such videos, we felt it appropriate to explore this element further. The use of music videos as evidence within a court setting has been utilised more frequently. An example is Reial Phillips from Birmingham, who was sentenced to 27 years in prison for conspiracy to possess a firearm with intent to endanger life, possessing ammunition without a firearms certificate and further charges of possessing a firearm with intent to cause fear of violence (McCarthy, 2016). The second example is Winston White, Akyrie Palmer and Mark Oduro who were sentenced to a total of 51 years for 2 counts of possession of a firearm with intent to endanger life and three charges of ammunition possession (Bullen, 2016).

In both cases, music videos, specifically, played a role in the evidence and subsequent convictions. Crime and the expression of crime through means such as social media is arguably utilised more frequently by new millennials. Yardley et al. (2017) argued that criminology has learnt far too heavily on media concepts that are binary in orientation and in the main operate as independent variables, without acknowledging that crime has now firmly moved into a digital,
virtual and online mediated space. Arguably gang members have also seized this very opportunity of utilising mediatised spaces.

This paper explores gang research in relation to the “mediatisation of crime” with specific reference to gangs and social media. Hjarvard (2002) argued that mediatisation is a technological “modus operandi”, in which media distribution operates within, and impacts on, society as a whole. Lilleker (2008) further argued that mediatisation shapes and frames the processes of social, cultural and political communication in the society in which that mediatised communication takes place. In essence both Hjarvard (2002) and Lilleker (2008) saw that we are all inextricably located within a mediatised culture, where we are not passive observers, nor onlookers from a distance. The need therefore to use an interdisciplinary approach to better understand the complex and challenging world of gangs and social media is required.

Mediatised communication is clear, with the proliferation of online blogging, high-performance phone cameras with easy access to digital platforms, and examples include the extensive blog written by Norwegian mass murderer Anders Brevik and recent graphic depictions of beheadings posted online by ISIS. It is important to note here that websleuthing has made the headlines on several occasions. Yardley et al.’s (2016) paper titled “What the deal with websleuthing” explored the above. Arguably as the wider public now see themselves as amateur sleuths, virtual police and internet vigilantes, criminology is moving into an era of “digital public criminology”. Public criminology could be loosely defined as the intersection of academic criminology and public discourse. It is by no means a singular entity and means different things to different people, as there are multiple publics and many public discourses. Given the significant role of social media, specifically related to the presence of music videos in the narrative of gang members, the way in which individuals make sense of their world, a number of reasons why gangs choose to utilise this platform is clear due to easy accessibility of social media and the attention those utilising it receives. This paper therefore outlines the findings of a study that examined the expressions of three individuals, all of whom took centre stage in music videos. The lyrical content was documented and analysed using narrative analysis. It is important to note that a number of narrative identities emerged from this study. Having said this only the Rival, Life for a Life and Hyper Masculine narratives are discussed in detail.

Cultural criminology

Cultural criminology is key to the understanding of culture, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours. However, the question of who defines mainstream culture is constantly debated. Essentially those in gangs deviate from informal and formal social expectations. Deviation, however, from mainstream culture can relate to a number of factors such as hobbies, clothing, music and so forth. Counter culture is also applicable here, which looks at how individuals, in this case how gang members embrace their position in society. In essence those in gangs are living “counter” to what mainstream society expect. The question of “media” is central for cultural criminologist, according to Deuze (2012) we “live” in media. The sole concern, however, is not the way in which the media dictate to us about deviant acts, but how those labelled deviant and even criminal use the media. Individuals use the media in constructing, maintaining and shaping their identities.

Ferrell et al. (2008, 2015) used the concept of “loops” to explain this process. Loops essentially describe the process by which “everyday life recreates itself in its own image” (Ferrell et al., 2008, p. 130). As gang members utilise media platforms and their lives are made visible through the media, this then feeds back into those lives themselves. Arguably mainstream media representation of gangs, alongside the media produced by gangs (e.g. YouTube videos), add to, and give meaning to the experience of gang members. Ferrell et al. (2008, 2015) argued that whilst these loops remain self-contained, they more commonly connect up to other loops in larger “spirals” of culture and crime. This ties into Surette’s (2015) concept of performance crime:

Contemporary performance crime encompasses the spectacle of recording, sharing and uploading crime in order to distribute the performance to new media audiences [...] purposely created and distributed by offenders (p. 190).
However, it is important to note that performance crime is not a new concept; individuals engaging in criminal activities have often sought to perform for others. This can take various forms, Vester Lee Flanagan killed two people in Virginia, later posting a video of the incident to social media, people also upload attack on strangers, a phenomenon better known as “happy slapping”. Although performance crime is not a new concept, the newer media technologies that have emerged mean that there are more opportunities for crime to be performed for an audience.

Hayward and Presdee (2010) highlighted the link between criminality and symbolic display, suggesting that the images that we see from people engaged in deviance and crime, is as real as the crime and deviance itself. So as gang members display Hyper Masculine tendencies such as brandishing weapons and talking about violence, the narratives in which they communicate is real to them and their audiences (Hayward and Presdee, 2010). It is a connection to the social realities of young people in gang impacted environments. Bennett et al. (2014) argued that these social realities are by default a consequence of poor socio-economic backgrounds, which create a series of marginalised subgroups and subcultures. Arguing that the voices of such groups, are often captured within different forms of sound, and have always found an audience regardless of location, race, age or gender.

Social media and gang research

Attitudes, behaviours and perceptions have been shaped, and in some instances reshaped by the use of social media in people’s lives (Greenfield, 2014; Annisette and Lafreniere, 2016). Communication undoubtedly can be enhanced by online activity; however, it is acknowledged that it also raises a host of challenges. This paper focusses on one of these challenges, exploring the links between gang-related activity in the virtual and real world. Gang-related violence has existed long before the establishment of social media platforms, and is well documented within research on gangs (Horowitz and Schwartz, 1974; Decker, 1996; Hagedorn, 1998). Having said this, research has found a correlation between online activity on social media platforms and offline gang-related violence (Johnson and Schell-Busey, 2016). The internet appears to provide a platform for new conflicts, alongside intensifying old ones (Moule et al., 2016).

Social media networks such as Myspace (created in 2003); Facebook, a text, video and image sharing network (2004); YouTube, a video sharing network (2005); Twitter, a text-based platform (2006); Instagram, an image sharing platform (2010); and Snapchat, a video sharing platform (2011) have been utilised, enabling communication on a multitude of levels. In 2010 social media users worldwide were estimated at just under one billion; by 2016, this has grown to almost two and a half billion – a figure that is projected to reach three billion by 2020 (Statista, 2016d). Data clearly show the increased number of people using social media; however, it is important to note that the duration, frequency and use of online platforms are steadily increasing. According to Statista (2016b), one in four teenagers admitted in a US-based survey that they are checking the internet “almost constantly” during their waking hours.

The emergence of smartphone in 1992 technology plays a significant role, with smartphones accounting for over two-thirds of time spent on social media (comScore, 2016). Snapchat, an application developed specifically for smartphone use, for example, generates an average of 10 billion daily videos from 150 million daily active users worldwide (Statista, 2016c). Having said this, there is a clear generational divide in relation to the popularity of some social media platforms, whilst younger generations embracing platforms developed “specifically” for smartphones, whilst older generations not so much. In April 2016, almost 70 per cent of US smartphone owners aged between 18-24 reported using Snapchat, compared to only 14 per cent of adults aged 35 and over (Statista, 2016a).

Gang activity on social media

Research including interviews and data from surveys contends that gangs are online and using social media (see King et al., 2007; Decary-Hetu and Morselli, 2011; Knox, 2011; Decker and Pyrooz, 2011, 2012; Van Hellemont, 2012; Pyrooz et al., 2015). Gang members like anybody else use the internet for a number of reasons, which include making remarks or threats to rival...
gangs, promoting gang culture, recruitment, flaunting illegal substances or weapons (see Womer and Bunker, 2010; Decary-Hetu and Morselli, 2011; Decker and Pyrooz, 2011; Hanser, 2011; Sela-Shayovitz, 2012; Patton et al., 2013, 2016). To provide a comprehensive review of the literature to date this paper will focus on the role of music videos in gang activity and research.

Gangs have used social media platform such as YouTube to promote gang music videos for decades (see Haut, 2014; Johnson and Schell-Busey, 2016). Currently, in the UK and the US, these videos typically sit within the music genres of "drill" or "trap-rap" (Densley, 2012; Storrod and Densley, 2017; Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017). The majority of videos are filmed at night, either in areas associated with the gang or in a rival’s territory, identifiable through the inclusion of street signs or local landmarks in the video shots.

Such videos often attract both local and national attention, not only from gang rivals, but also from impressionable young people that find such videos entertaining (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017). Moreover as gangs utilise social media as a means to maintain virtual presences, to communicate about their activities, and to establish an identity, criminal justice agencies in recent times have used gang material on social media to help incarcerate gang members (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017). Within the major cities across the UK, gang taskforces have been set up to disrupt gang activity, reduce the threat of violence that gangs pose and work alongside police, local authorities, criminal justice agencies, to better manage individuals involved in gang activity (Home Office, 2015). This multiagency approach, according to the “Ending Gangs and Youth Violence Report” (Home Office, 2015), asserts that in order for there to be a reduction of violence within gangs and gang impacted environments, better communication and appropriate dissemination of gang intelligence gathered by gang taskforces needs to be more transparent between agencies.

Gangs, Hagedom (2007a, b, c) argued are products of social exclusion, like other social movements and groups of armed young men. Wood and Alleyne (2010) suggested that future directions into gang research should adopt a more multidisciplinary approach. Wood and Alleyne also called for theory knitting, which refers to integrating the best ideas into a new framework to undertake new gangs research. It involves identifying the common and unique ideas from existing ideas and theories that provide explanatory power and testable hypotheses. Such a model they argued would facilitate the examination and further development of theory.

The role of music and gangs

In 1873, Pike reported the first active gangs in Western Civilisation; Pike “documented the existences of gangs of highway robbers in England during the 17th century” (Howell et al., 2002, p. 1). The term gang has evolved, still raising a host of complexities. Debated for decades, arguably no worldwide or even national consensus has been reached on its definition. The question which frequently arises is what is a gang? And how do gangs differ from groups of friends? Is criminality an element relating to gangs? If a group is not involved in criminality it this a gang? The diversity and complexity of the nature of the term gang is clear.

Wood and Alleyne (2010) expressed the view that although criminological explanations on gangs span almost a century much of that literature was written at a time before the intensification of mediatisation within society. Joseph and Gunter (2011) posted that academic research, government policy, youth work/youth crime prevention practice and policing have largely failed to get a handle on contemporary urban road youth culture, which functions with a mediatised world. Short (2007) and Glynn (2014) also expressed the view that too often criminologists focus on the social control of crime, not emerging trends and patterns such as mediatisation of crime. Decary-Hetu and Morselli (2011) pointed out that we need to understand the emergence of gangs in this new social world as a way of identifying trends in the virtual world in relation to new gang activities and trajectories. Harding’s (2014) book “Street Casino” provides a recent perspective surrounding gangs within urban communities; Harding highlighted this notion of constant competition amongst gang members. Rival gangs whom engage in violence do not solely compete for territory, but for wealth, status and recognition. Moreover, this quest to receive the ultimate goal of success within gang membership is frequently challenged in the day-to-day
lived experiences of gang members. This notion of gang rivalry has now transited onto media platforms, in which not only engages their rivals but also impacts wider communities (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017).

Lyrical expression is vital for some gang members, many of whom have limited access to elements of the social structures within society, such as employment, education and training. Music is a way to express their narratives, since many gang members have the access to local recording studios. Arguably music videos, lyrical content and the physical portrayal of a “gangsta lifestyle” are becoming more mainstream, specifically within the UK. For many involved in gangs, motivations are not solely economic, and to do with identity, power and recognition are also significant factors. Arguably popular media and global entertainment industries have “sensationalised” crimes and specifically gang crimes and Lyddane (2006) suggested that this has contributed to the “migration and growth of a popular gangsta subculture” (p. 2). The media has therefore perpetuated the spread of subcultures from beyond borders. An example of this is Chicago’s drill rap movement as Drew (2013) accurately put it, if you want an “accurate” portrait of Chicago modern gang culture the “drill music scene” needs to be explored.

Drill music

The globalisation of Drill music and its link between gangs and social media has been a significant point of interest by many researchers and practitioners (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017). Drill music is a style of hip-hop music that originated in the Southside of Chicago. Drill broke into the mainstream in mid-2012 with the success of rappers like Music Video 1, Lil Durk, Fredo Santana and Lil Reese, all of whom were established on their strong local followings and internet presence. Although in spite of having much economic success and signing to many of the major labels in America, drill rappers were being criticised as the style of music was getting a lot of media attention for the graphic imagery and lyrical content. Drill music was linked to a spate of gangland shootings and murders as it was said to be perpetuating the youth in Chicago to be violent. The lyrics of drill rap tend to mainly focus on the harsh and dangerous experiences of life for residents of Southside Chicago. It is widely argued that hip-hop as a genre historically has always featured artists highlighting the social reality of people in a range of socio-economic environments. However, in drill rap, although a more contemporary facet of hip-hop, the overt explicit nature of content/imagery, i.e. imagery of young men holding automatic weaponry, live drive-by shootings, discussions of violence and unsolved murders either by the artist or by a member of the gang is different (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017).

This persists in spite of the police and authorities observing footage on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Periscope (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017). Drill rap has been coined the most explicit response to the city’s off and on title as the murder capital of America (Goldstein, 2013). Gangs and artists alike such as Music Video 1, Lil Durk, Fredo Santana and others have embraced this title as Chicago being the murder capital of America, by often referring to Chicago as “Chiraq”, due to the homicide rate in the state mirroring the number of fatalities in modern day Iraq.

The drill phenomenon is clearly intertwined with violence, although drill music has not affected the UK to the extent it has in Chicago, yet, there are, however, some very clear similarities. Major cities such as London, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham, which in recent years, have seen a rise in knife and gun crime (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017). And a rise in music videos used by gangs similar to those identified as drill music. However, it should be noted that all gangs do not express themselves in a lyrical or even musical form, although according to Lyddane (2006) “a significant number of gang members do” (p. 6). Within the UK therefore there is an increasing popularity of gangs using music to enforce their points.

Grime music, which has a similar lyrical content and expression as hip-hop, has its own unique sound and is the style that many artists in the UK have used. Grime music has witnessed the success of artists such as “Lethal B”, “Dizzie Rascal” and “Stormzy”, many of whom rose to success through music platforms like SBTV, which is owned by millionaire and entrepreneur Jamal Edwards, who started recording artists with talent across the country giving them exposure (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017). Other music platforms have mirrored this idea such
as Grime Daily, Link Up TV and P110 to give exposure to new talent. Many street gangs have members that are musically talented and have used these platforms to showcase their lyrical talent; however, some use these platforms as an opportunity to publicise their gang identity and agendas (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017). Drill music has been the choice of style, as we have seen artists such as Music Video 2 in London, “Tremz” from Liverpool and Music Video 3 from Birmingham rise in popularity with drill rap. The West Midlands in recent times has been labelled “the nation’s gun crime capital” (Halliday, 2015). During this period, a young man named Reial Phillips was sentenced to 27 years in prison, after he featured in a number of “drill” style music videos. These videos were ultimately used in court to support his conviction (McCarthy, 2016), as it was said his involvement in the video, and being part of a gang were responsible for the spate of shootings in 2016.

More attention should be given to “gang narratives”, which are amplified through social media; however, this also raises a host of complexities for academics and the Criminal Justice System at large. Performance crime is a concern; therefore we cannot take every element of lyrical content expressed in music videos literally. Surette (2015) explored what “criminals” and “deviants” do with media – constructing, maintaining and shaping realities – an example being “performance crime”. The concept of blurred lines comes into play here, as arguably the line between fact and fiction are blurred. The mediascape is a hall of mirrors in which the street scripts the screen and the screen scripts the street (Hayward and Young, 2004). The lines between fact and fiction are not clear cut, gang members often talk about incident which may have taken place, however, can be exaggerated or even include fictional elements. Whether a real crime or incident has occurred or not, essentially gang videos are developed and performed by the artist who develops a significant fan followings. In a nutshell gang narratives should be pursued, however, with critique and caution.

Narcissism and the amplification of violence

A recent report titled “Social Media as a Catalyst and Trigger for Youth Violence”, by Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney (2017) discusses studies surrounding social media and violence, highlighting concerns amongst young people and professionals relating to music videos. In particular those that contained taunts and threats to individuals from rival groups, comScore (2016) discussed the dramatic rise in the use of social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Periscope and YouTube. Over recent years, social networking sites account for nearly a quarter of the total time teenagers spend online. comScore (2016) further discussed that such sites have become one of the primary venues in which young people interact with one another, establish identities and friendships and influence peers.

Research suggests that young people’s constant use of social media has a strong connection with narcissism. Narcissism according to Panek et al. (2013) is an affinity to believe oneself to be superior over others, to increasingly pursue adoration from others, and to participate in egotistical thinking and behaviour. Carpenter (2012) expressed the notion that young people have become obsessed with taking and posting “selfies” on social media platforms, similarly gangs utilise these platforms for the very same reasons. The lust for adoration sees young people thriving on the idea that they are important based on the volume of “likes” and comments received on personal profiles (Carpenter, 2012). Alloway et al. (2014) asserted that narcissism in relation to the aforementioned use of social media, damages people’s abilities to shape healthy, mutually beneficial relationships.

As drill music has become a popular genre of choice for many young people, gang members alike have taken advantage and utilised social media platforms, thereby attracting attention from people within the music industry, their fans, rival groups and criminal justice agencies by default. With the constant increase of video views, alongside comments and “likes” for the drill/trap rapper, this becomes the motivation to want/or need to make more content to appease their audiences (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017). This by default has created a paradigm shift in the way artists make music, as well as the way in which the viewers decide whether the content they view is good enough. Therefore, where viewers would traditionally listen to music and analyse the content of forms of expression, the difference with “drill music” or “trap” rap now means that viewers are making judgements based on whether the artist is projecting true content, and whether this can be verified. If an artist professes that he/she is a gang member, who has
committed a series of stabbings and shootings, the audience in a sense demands some type of proof. Although the artist may be lyrically talented, the talent of such an individual will be tainted if the claim cannot be supported.

An example of this comes from a well-known “trap” rapper known as “Nines” from London who released a video on Instagram with fellow members of his gang, posing with the jewellery of an opposing “trap” rapper from London named “C Biz”. In the video “Nines” and his friends are seen boasting and taunting “C Biz” about the robbery and challenging “C Biz’s” rap ideas about the money he spends on his jewellery, suggesting that the watch and chains that his gang took was not worth as much as he claimed in his music videos. This video went viral across the UK on all media platforms which young people use. Along with the thousands of views on YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and Snapchat, there were comments from his fans and rivals suggesting what “C Biz” should do a retaliation, which would in turn have gained his popularity back. Within 24 hours of the robbery, a drive-by shooting on “Church Road”, where the rapper “Nines” resides, took place resulting in an innocent man, aged 27, being murdered (IBTimes, 2016). Following the incident, seven men including “C Biz” were arrested in connection with the murder and are currently on remand awaiting a trial at the Old Bailey.

Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney (2017) suggested that violence within inner cities is increased when “beef” is uploaded on the internet. The volume of viewers and comments from both supporters and opposing groups amplify the violence because the constant narrative of “will you do, what you say in your raps” puts the victim in a position where their credibility and livelihood is at stake. Although this may be seen as entertainment for those viewing robberies, assaults and other forms of violence, the victims themselves feel they have a duty to respond due to the narcissistic thinking social media has created (Carpenter, 2012). In many cases where certain areas within the major cities across the UK have witnessed spats of violence, it is important to note the significance of the adverse impact that comments from viewers on social media platforms have on individuals that are victims to some sort of violence (Irwin-Rogers and Pinkney, 2017). This discourse highlights new elements within gang research that explore not only what triggers gang members to be violent but rather the discourse about narcissism, social media and its relation to gang violence.

Narrative identities

Yardley et al.’s (2013) study “Narrative beyond Prison Gates: Contradiction, Complexity, and Reconciliation” highlights both the importance and complexities of narratives. Undoubtedly social scientists have become interested in how stories and personal experiences are told, through oral, written and/or visual means (Atkinson, 1997; Atkinson and Delamont, 2006; Riessman, 2008). Consequently a significant area within literature has emerged around the “concept of narrative”. Narration has a key purpose, Yardley et al. (2013) suggested it is to “share a story with an audience – and indeed, the audience or audiences, actual or perceived, are shapers of narrative” (Yardley et al., 2013, p. 160). Looking at narrative identities through oral expression and visual means is significant, as language is explored to begin to understand elements such as how the story teller presents stories about their lives, and the lives of others:

The interpretation of language will be mediated by the cultural context within which there are frameworks guiding what constitutes “normal” or mainstream and what is “deviant” or runs counter to social acceptability Yardley et al. (2013, p. 160).

Narrative is not a new concept as criminologists have explored narratives in various areas, including the Chicago School Studies (Shaw, 1930) and desistance literature (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001). Narrative, however, is key to understanding why people do certain things, and enables one to make sense of their journey. Having said this, criminologists are not “detached” observers, and as Yardley et al. (2013) eloquently put it:

We are inextricably intertwined with the social world around us. Our inquiries are conducted through lenses coloured by our lived realities, and our findings are given meaning by culturally mediated concepts, names, and labels (Yardley et al., 2013, p. 165).

Narrative accounts of offenders or ex-offenders are crucial in the criminological research process. Brookman (2015) illustrated how narratives can shift between different discourses, individuals can therefore commit to a particular narrative. Sandberg (2009) reported on individuals who
committed to the “gangster narrative”, however, interestingly shifted from gangster to a victimhood narrative (Brookman, 2015). Therefore, interviewing or analyses content cannot be looked at, at face value, as there are a range of “multi lingual and seemingly contradictory accounts” (Brookman, 2015, p. 208).

The shift of narrative highlights a number of implications for narrative criminology (Brookman, 2015), “If the narratives of violent offenders are constantly shifting, how can we make sense of past and (potentially) future offending” (Brookman, 2015, p. 208). It is documented that offenders present themselves in a multitude of ways (Brookman, 2015). Literature to some extent has focussed upon this, for example, how some offenders excuse or justify offending behaviour and in turn present positive self-image (see Sykes and Matza, 1957; Scott and Lyman, 1968; Maruna and Copes, 2005). Acknowledgement of behaviour and self-presentation has been explored in some depth within criminological and sociological literature (Brookman, 2015, p. 208), clearly highlighting that offenders tend to choose the position they wish to identify.

Methodology

Due to the exploratory nature of this study narrative analysis was adopted to explore the lyrical content of three music videos. The aforementioned form of analysis was chosen not only because it allows for the exploration of content and material, but it also explores the narrative and lived experiences. Arguably voices and the experiences of those affiliated to gangs are rarely heard, qualitative research involves a continuous process of reflection which gives a greater understanding of the social context which is being studied. It is therefore incumbent for all criminologists to transcend straightforward explanations and neat theoretical understandings of crime, and occupy space outside of the comfort zone of the “ivory tower”.

Instead this is a historical moment that requires a move towards a more “mediatised criminological imagination”. This new world is not science fiction, nor is it neat and tidy. It is messy, chaotic and in need of understanding. More importantly, criminologists have been too slow to respond to the growing menace of how crime operates within this mediatised world based on the paucity of studies that have been conducted. Clark (1965) revealed the importance and contemporary relevance of conducting research in inner city communities and called for the researcher operating as an “involved observer”, who is well versed in the historical, social, cultural, political and economic realities of inner city communities and can enhance researching and criminological theorising when investigating a complex and under researched area such as gangs and social media.

Context

We decided to focus on three music videos from individuals residing in Birmingham, UK; London, UK; and Chicago, USA, all of whom had some affiliation with gangs. The videos were in the public domain, having said this some aspects of analysis were generalised to protect the identity of individuals. The analysis of video content took place over three weeks by a qualified gang and urban youth specialist (C-P), whose experience of working on the front line in Birmingham (UK) was crucial in understanding the context of media pieces. The approach to this study is anti-positivist in its nature, with the view that understanding is only possible from the subjective perspective of the story teller.

Data collection

Three videos were analysed individually and collectively, by C-P. The analysis of each music video was recorded in a chart, which was structured around a number of headings. The authors also created a general comments column for further commentary. Each video was analysed using this framework, and a process of watching and re watching the videos took place. The first phases allowed a general sense of familiarisation which then led to the second phase, analysis of the videos individually and then a comparative analysis of all of the videos. Notes included commentary on linguistic style, lyrical content, tone, reference to other gangs and visualisation of weapon. A summary of analysis and documented notes was further developed with SR-E.
The third phase involved the interpretation of data and the development of themes and narrative identities. Analysis involved referring back to observations, comments and interpretation, alongside regular discussion between authors to ensure the validity of the analysis.

Data analysis

Language describes the human world and conveys meaning about past events and action. Therefore, data analysis was in the form of narrative analysis. Narratives are unique and somewhat special whether this be oral or written communication, individuals express events which have and in some cases have not (yet) taken place. Narrative research therefore enables the researcher to analyse stories to further develop understanding. The model of narrative analysis focussed on thematic and performative analysis. Thematic analysis therefore focusses on the content, for example, “What is said” more than how it is said” (Lewis-Beck, 2003, p. 2). Performative analysis was also utilised as, “interest goes beyond the spoken word, and, as the stage metaphor implies, storytelling is seen as performance by a ‘self’ with a past-who involves, persuade and (perhaps) moves an audience through language and gesture, ‘doing’ rather than telling alone” (Lewis-Beck, 2003, p. 5).

Results

Table I clearly shows the similarities between all three music videos, which all used antagonistic language and made clear reference to rival gangs. The promotion, use and in all cases sale of drugs are promoted throughout. Essentially some drugs such as marijuana were normalised, therefore discussing this in lyrical content and in some cases visibly smoking such a drug is not viewed as deviant or even criminal. Also the sale of drugs is also documented, and there seems to be a hierarchical structure in relation to the usage of particular drugs. As aforementioned, some of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I</th>
<th>Drill music videos</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Title of song</strong></td>
<td>Antagonistic language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Music Video 1</strong> (MV, 1) (Chicago)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Music Video 2</strong> (MV, 2) (London)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Music Video 3</strong> (MV, 3) (Birmingham)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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the videos show individuals smoking what appears to be marijuana; however, none show
the use of crack cocaine or heroin; however, the sale of these drugs is expressed to some extent.
The promotion of drugs is particularly interesting, as some see the sale of drugs as a “business”,
for example, discussing prices, the amount of drugs sold and motorway route ways.

There is clear reference to specific postcodes/area codes, the lyrical content does not use
subliminal messages, and is straight to the point and direct. Arguably gang culture is glamorised
in these videos, and can be viewed from those involved or associated as a personal “anthem”. Table I illustrates that the only significant difference is that Music Video 1 clearly brandishes an
array of firearms, which is not seen in Music Videos 2 and 3. Evidently the location, laws and
regulations are major factors. Having said this, the overall message and content is mirrored
throughout all three videos.

Narrative identities of music artists affiliated with gangs

Although a number of themes were highlighted such as materialism, competition and
conspicuous consumerism, this paper, however, focusses on three narratives expressed by
those who appeared in (Music Videos 1, 2 and 3) these included Rival; Life for a Life; and Hyper
Masculine narratives.

Rival narrative

The Rival narrative is used to describe those who specifically make reference to rivalry between
gangs; this is portrayed through the lyrical content and in some cases illustrated through
symbolisation. The specific nature and focus on rivals is quite clear in this narrative. Music
videos are therefore used as a tool for individuals to portray their message. Interestingly rivalry,
however, is not solely between gangs; reference is also made to the strained relationship with
the police. The recognition and validation received from peers were quite surreal; as many were
encouraged, supported and in most instances joined by others who essentially portrayed
tendencies related to the Rival narrative. It can be suggested that elements of power,
masculinity and most certainly antagonistic language are key in this narrative. Individuals within
this narrative needed and in some cases relied on the platform of music videos to express their
points to a wider audience, as many have limited access due to location, postcodes and gang
affiliation. Arguably without external influences such as music videos, some may not have
pursued their interest and roles in music videos to the extent in which they did. Below are
quotes taken from all three music videos that reflect the Rival narrative:

MV1 – “im high, im smoking gun smoke (im smoking ganja), fuck ah tooka gang bitch, im 3 Hunna”.
MV2 – “Free Mental (Free K), an opp got, got so they threw him in jail”.
MV2 – “Stepped out on violence, beef with meeks and trident”.
MV2 – “The whole squad on obbo (all of us), feds make squad feel famous, where ever they see us they
follow”.
MV3 – “We got bells and polls in the ride, if he’s from 1.9 he has to die”.

Life for a Life

The Life for a Life narrative is very much concerned with expressing past encounters and
highlighting future actions. Individuals constantly referred to strengths as musicians; affiliation
with gangs and the use of guns and weapons. This was specifically expressed in relation to
reflecting on the near death experiences of rival gang members. Consequently threats are
directed to rival gangs, the main areas of focus in this narrative are revenge, violence, threats and
homicide. The sole interest for individuals in this narrative is revenge, and music videos are used
as a platform to express the “Life for a Life” narrative. This narrative was used within music to
engage others in some way, shape or form. This included music being viewed by various
audiences such as friends, gang rivals and others. The socialisation with other like-minded
individuals had a number of benefits for those who expressed the Life for a Life narrative. It should
be noted that the “Life for a Life” narrative is somewhat similar to the “Rival Narrative” as rivalry and revenge in most cases are tightly linked:

MV1 – “GBE Im a big dawg, kill yall and forget yall”.
MV2 – “Stepped out on violence, got beef with meeks and trident. See man run to the sound of that drum, bet he thought he was sliding”.
MV2 – “An opp got, got so they threw him in jail (free mental)”.
MV3 – “Me and LJay running niggaz down, dat nigga dere got cheffed. He got grabbed, got kicked, got punched, that nigga dere nearly dead!”
MV3 – “Tried to run from the bells and ting, my jigga hit a nigga in his back!”
MV3 – “Big corn in dis ting, click-clack everybody dead”.

Hyper Masculine

Individuals used the Hyper Masculine narrative to brag about material possessions. This was heard via lyrical content; however, Hyper Masculine characteristics were also shown through body language. Individuals frequently sought to engage with others to show what they have, what they have achieved, and in essence what they can do. For the Hyper Masculine music videos are quite personal, the portrayal of exaggerated aggression, strength and violence is clear in this narrative. Socialisation and connections with other like-minded individuals were key.

Although some may not possess the wealth or power to the extent in which they portrayed, the video and rhetoric clearly enabled individuals to portray a “desired” lifestyle and share this with others. The Hyper Masculine narrative is tightly linked to the Rival and Life for a Life narratives. Individuals would therefore draw upon multiple narratives:

MV1 – “Keep diss shit 1 Hunna, I keep this shit 3 Hunna, I pull up in dat Audi, you pull up in dat Honda”.
MV2 – “Still got to pray for my sins, I did a lot of dirt but im innocent, chilling wid streetz on da wing”.
MV2 – “Pull up in a stolen truck, hear thunder see lightning, yeah that shits exciting”.
MV3 – “I got bud and grub, point 2 and I hit that strip. On the M42 got a parcel for hoods and bits”.

Discussion

To our knowledge, no recent study examines three videos, from different locations in relation to gang culture and the mediatisation of crime. The findings of this study are therefore important to develop further knowledge about how best to understand gangs, gang’s rivalry and the use of social media. It is also important to understand the current context of the use of music videos by gang members, emphasising that these are not only consumed by audiences in the USA, but have transcended and become utilised more frequently by gangs in the UK.

As discussed earlier narrative analysis is important for social scientist, and specifically criminologist in “understanding how people make sense of their lives” (Yardley et al., 2013, p. 174). Various scholars have highlighted the flexibility or elasticity in stories (Maruna, 2001; Sandberg, 2013), “through the coexistence of conflicting or contradictory narrative identities” (Yardley et al., 2013, p. 174). The purpose of this paper was to explore the nature of gangs, music and forms of the mediatisation of crime, this was done by focussing on three music videos, with the aim of highlighting the following; what were the videos portraying? Were there any conflicting narratives? Were there any similarities? Having presented the narrative identities that emerged from the research encountered we therefore present the following points.

Although the Rival, Life for a Life and Hyper Masculine narratives shared a number of similarities characterised by power, masculinity and gangs, these narratives were still unique in the sense that key themes, and expressions were focussed on in each. The narratives highlighted are potentially problematic for those who identified with them, and raise a host of complexities. Most notably the “Life for a Life” narrative was categorised by direct threats to kill. For example, Music Video 3 (MV3), “We got bells and polls in the ride, if he’s from 1.9 he has to die”. This quote makes
Having said this, it is clear that there is often a switch between narratives, and we do not suggest that individuals rigidly express one particular narrative; essentially there are a series of different characters. An example being those expressing the “Life for a Life” narrative were able at times to draw on the “Hyper Masculine” narrative, which was demonstrated more so in body language, whereas the “Life for a Life” narrative was more focussed on lyrical content. These narratives therefore in most cases complemented each other. Those expressing the “Rival Narrative” seemed to refer to issues of the past, which have led to rivalry in the present whereas; the “Life for a Life” narrative was very much future focussed, emphasising what was going to happen in the future, alongside direct threats; and the “Hyper Masculine” narrative was generally portrayed through content and body language, facial expressions and aggression were a recurring theme.

Elements which emerged from narrative analysis are the complexities of dealing with and understanding forms of expression. The platform of music videos facilitated the opportunity for people to express their views albeit negative ones in some instances, which consequently motivated others to imitate and retaliate. We suggest that for those involved in such exchange, their role is not simple, it, however, is to make a statement and send threats. Having said this, it is also linked to thrill, power and masculinity. The impact and in some cases inspiration for music videos is clear, and this shift has been highlighted more recently within the UK. These similarities are not only picked up within this paper, comments left in the public domain also make reference to the influence of other artists on style, lyrical content and the visual nature of music videos in the UK.

Arguably gang members within these videos have achieved some goals, such as financial gain, status and recognition, many of them have become known beyond their postcodes, and in some instances beyond the country in which they reside. Ultimately music videos are a platform which can provide the gang and/or gang members with a sense of power and authority. Individuals can essentially say and do what they want, which in the short term does not necessarily carry any immediate consequences. The videos in some cases portray a desirable life, full or thrill, living life on the edge and excitement. What the videos fail to do is give the audience a “reality update”. For example, the grieving process of families who have lost loved ones is not shown, and the consequences being involved in criminality is not documented. Significantly music videos have been used as vital evidence in courts; The Criminal Justice System within the UK has a history of using such material which has led to the conviction of many. Evidently many did not foresee the impact of music videos on pending and future criminal cases.

Given the nature of gangs and the lyrical content of music videos one might have expected the central narrative to be associated with violence. And, indeed while this is true to an extent the role of masculinity, revenge, past experiences and the treatment received from those in authority heavily shaped narratives. While it is clear that gang rivalry does exist, many gang members expressed a somewhat negative relationship with the police and the Criminal Justice System at large. Therefore, this platform used by gang’s member should not be viewed as being solely targeted at rival gangs. The content should be listened to by a wider academic audience, as criminological research and the process of research are forever changing. Individuals in these videos were able to subconsciously or consciously draw upon different narratives, emphasis within songs is upon gangs and violence; however, on the other hand reference is made to harassment of the police, innocence and essentially false imprisonment. Narratives of the past and present are somewhat entwined.

This paper has explored the narrative identities highlighted in three music video, we therefore acknowledge that this study is vulnerable to the criticism that one cannot generalise (Yardley et al., 2013, p. 176); however, this study is not based on testing factors and variables, the approach used in the natural sciences. We have engaged in an exploratory study in the contexts of discovery (McAdams, 2012; Yardley et al., 2013), understanding and comparative analysis. We acknowledge that our interpretation of the narrative identities may differ from others; however, this is our subjective view as academics and practitioners. We intend for this study to contribute to the criminological knowledge base surrounding gangs in the UK, whilst contributing to a pathway of research exploring the current issues impacting gangs.
In conclusion, we suggest that the narrative identities highlighted should be understood as an element of the deep rooted issues experienced by gang members. Understanding gang members and their lived experiences and choices is a “journey”. We suggest that the gang members in this particular study affiliated themselves with the narrative highlighted; however, it is important to note that narratives are amendable to change and adaption (Maruna, 2001; Ward and Marshall, 2007). Therefore, those in gangs who openly express gang rivalry may require support, intervention and education needed within communities and behind the prison walls.

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Further reading


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Social network use and youth well-being: a study in India

Jehangir Bharucha

Abstract
Purpose – The youth in present day India is the first generation to grow up within a world of pervasive technology. While several writers applaud these social network sites (SNSs) for transforming the social landscape of India, recent research is beginning to examine the destructive role of these SNSs. The purpose of this paper is to explore whether and to what extent social media contributes to decline in well-being, addictive behavior and other harmful social effects.

Design/methodology/approach – In the first phase, a structured questionnaire was sent via e-mail to 114 students. The second stage embraced an exploratory qualitative approach with in-depth interviews and reflections. As part of the third stage, the author devoted a lot of time reading the blogs and posts of the youth.

Findings – The analysis of qualitative data is presented in three major themes: patterns of usage, nature of online friendships and threat to well-being. Some of the respondents did experience “addiction-like” symptoms. It can be deduced that the respondents are not addicted to the medium per se; they are cultivating an addiction to certain activities they carry out online.

Practical implications – Indian newspapers have recently reported several cases how social media can mislead and corrupt the youth and some of these cases have ended in tragedy. This kind of obsessive behavior is extremely dangerous to the minds which are otherwise actually intelligent and ought to be stopped.

Originality/value – There is no doubt that the Indian youth is developing a dependence on this technological advance that fuses people all over the world. We are still in the infant stages of understanding these issues in the Indian context. This study adds value to the negligible empirical evidence in India till date.

Keywords Safety, Social media, Well-being, Addiction, Social network sites, Habit

Introduction
The increase in new technologies and virtual communication involving personal computers, tablets and mobile phones is causing changes in individuals’ daily habits and behavior (King et al., 2016). Social network sites (SNSs) are seen as a “global consumer phenomenon” and have been experiencing an exponential rise in usage in the last decade. Even in India, social media is emerging as the latest platform for information and communication among the Indian communities. Effective social networking has even transformed how the country elects its prime minister. The youth have grown up within a world of pervasive technology including mobile phones, digital cameras and the omnipresent internet. A significant aspect of this generation is its widespread usage of the internet from a young age. It is the first to become adult amid and with access to digital technology. This generation has been characterized as the “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001) surrounded by and using “computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age” (Prensky, 2001). Given the recent worldwide proliferation of internet sites and the ever expanding numbers of adolescents joining up, these sites presumably play an integral role in adolescent life.

For this study, we use the definition advanced by Bryer and Zavatano (2011): “Social media are technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stakeholders. These technologies include blogs, wikis, media (audio, photo, video, text).
sharing tools, networking platforms (including Facebook), and virtual worlds. Social media has radically changed the way people interact in India and has been playing a vital role in transforming Indian lifestyles. These sites have become a day-to-day routine for most Indians who now have access to thousands of networking sites that cater to different groups and buttress diverse interests and hobbies. These virtual forums for communication are increasingly present in peoples’ daily lives, and although their use is expanding throughout the entire population, they are especially popular among teens and young adults (Oberst et al., 2017). In a short span of time, this has turned into some kind of frenzy, with people constantly trying to portray a perfect image of their lives and moving toward getting more followers or likes.

While several writers applaud these SNSs for transforming the social landscape of India, recent research is beginning to examine the destructive role of these SNSs. On the internet, people engage in a variety of activities some of which may be potentially addictive (Kuss and Griffiths, 2012). The much appreciated technology-driven interconnectivity is paralleled by an increase in research indicating that excessive internet use can lead to symptoms that are associated with problems and/or addiction (Ko et al., 2009; Leung and Lee, 2012). According to the biopsychosocial model for the etiology of addictions (Griffiths, 2005) and the syndrome model of addiction (Shaffer et al., 2004) people addicted to using SNSs go through the same indications as those suffering from substance abuse.

Internet and smartphone addictions are different from addictions such as alcohol or drugs; the former are behavioral and not substance dependent (van Deursen et al., 2015). Behavioral addiction can be defined as a disorder characterized by behavior that functions to produce pleasure and to relieve feelings of pain and stress, and failure to control or limit the behavior despite significant harmful consequences (Shaffer et al., 2004). In this case, the act of using social media itself becomes a sort of reward. This is some kind of an addiction where no intoxicant is involved; therefore, it is akin to “pathological gambling” (Lee et al., 2012). Researchers have discovered certain behavioral connections between continuous social media use and substance abuse, including compulsive use, tolerance, withdrawal (Aboujouade, 2010) unsuccessful attempts to cut back, and impairment in functioning. Young (1999) argues that there are five different types of internet addiction, namely, computer addiction (i.e. computer game addiction), information overload (i.e. web surfing addiction), net compulsions (i.e. online gambling or online shopping addiction), cyber sexual addiction (i.e. online pornography or online sex addiction) and cyber-relationship addiction (i.e. an addiction to online relationships). Addiction to SNSs falls in the last category since SNSs are used to maintain online and offline relationships.

The popular press in India was perhaps the first to point out the addictive features of SNSs. As social networks continue to burgeon, several recent articles in Indian newspapers have been highlighting these concerns. Using social media on a continuous basis gets one severely addicted to it, and unable to do without using it for a long period of time. We are still in the infant stages of understanding these issues in the Indian context. There is no doubt that the Indian youth is developing a dependence on this technological advance that fuses people all over the world, but does this necessarily mean that the Indian youth is addicted to it? The simple correlation between social network use and depression is not supported by a large amount of research (Jelenchick et al., 2012), at least in India so probably the media scare is largely overblown. In particular, there is negligible empirical evidence in India till date whether SNSs are addictive. In any case research on the addictive qualities of social networks all over the world is scarce. The study will focus on some of these issues by drawing on the perspectives of youth in two metropolitan cities in India. This paper explores whether and to what extent social media comes in the way of well-being, contributes to addictive behavior and other harmful social effects.

Research design

The addictive features of social media are becoming a concern in India. To further understand the negative repercussions of excessive usage of these platforms, students belonging to the humanities and business disciplines in Mumbai and Bengaluru were surveyed. The data collection entailed three separate stages. In the first phase, which went on from June 2016 to September 2016, the researcher managed to secure permission from five colleges in Mumbai
and two in Bengaluru to put up flyers on notice boards inviting young students who spend a minimum five hours a week on SSNs to participate in a study meant purely for academic purposes. In total, 114 students responded to this call. A structured questionnaire was then sent via e-mail to these 114 students. Usable responses were received from as many as 87 students with maximum responses (63.22 percent) from undergraduate students compared to post graduate students (36.78 percent). Out of the actual 87 respondents, 51 (58.62 percent) were male and 36 (41.38 percent) were female. The second stage embraced an exploratory qualitative approach with in-depth interviews and reflections. This qualitative method was chosen as it allows an account of the experience individuals have to be told in a sequential manner, which allows the opportunity to explore the events, which may be related to each other and which may provide an indication of areas of importance for researchers (Saunders et al., 2007).

Out of the 87 respondents, 30 were randomly selected for face-to-face interviews with some replacements from the list. The interview process was based on an interview guide divided into three sections which addressed the research questions and provided the structure. Respondents were asked relatively subjective questions about their habits and experiences on SNSs with proper elaboration on the questions if needed. Although the broad questions were common to all interviews, certain related interesting points were also considered, personalizing some of the questions. Strict confidentiality was assured to all the respondents. All interviews have been recorded which made the writing process easier. The average time spent per interview was 70 minutes. There was a broad coding of data and the data was analyzed for the main themes. The mean age of the students was 18.4 years and all respondents were urban youth in the city and suburbs of Mumbai and Bengaluru. In the third stage, the author devoted a lot of time reading the blogs and posts of youth with whom the author was virtually connected along with a few more available in the public domain.

The theoretical framework used by this study is the uses and gratifications theory along with rational addiction theory. The uses and gratifications theory is suitable for this study as SNSs have something suitable for everyone be it information-seeking, inter-personal communication, entertainment, or escapism (Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1996). It explains how the social factor might ultimately lead to internet addiction. Full focus is on the gratification one gets from the SSN which is equivalent to total escapism from the problem one currently faces and one would refuse to give it up, ultimately leading to SNS addiction. This paper also builds upon the theory of rational addiction that the dependence is formed out of habit. So, the dependence on the SNS starts with normal usage that might initially appear harmless. This repetitive behavior would appear to maximize utility out of the SNS (Wright, 2006). This “overdeveloped” habit might gradually moves toward irrational behavior (Xu and Tan, 2012). The present study cautions how excessive and inappropriate usage of SNSs is becoming addictive for Indian adolescents and highlights the need for the Indian youth to moderate this habit. It suggests that parents, educational institutions and employers should provide methodical education on this important issue.

Observations and inferences
The analysis of qualitative data is presented in three major themes: patterns of usage, nature of online friendships and threat to well-being.

Patterns of usage
Widespread use. SNSs are gaining in popularity among the Indian youth. As is seen in Figure 1, the most popular social media platform is Facebook (97.70 percent), followed by LinkedIn (87.35 percent), Instagram (77.01 percent) and Twitter (67.81 percent). Snapchat (32.18 percent) and Pinterest (25.28 percent) do arouse moderate interest among the Indian youth. Friendster (11.49 percent) and Hi5 (9.19 percent) seem to be the least popular sites. The average time spent by the respondents on these sites is depicted in Figure 2. In all, 2 percent spend up to five hours a week on social media, 8 percent spend between five and ten hours a week on social network websites, 21 percent spend between 10 and 15 hours a week, 15 percent spend between 15 and 20 hours a week, another 24 percent spend between 20 and 25 hours a week,
17 percent spend between 25 and 50 hours a week and 21 percent spend more than 50 hours a week on social media networks. This is indicative of the fact that in order to keep an attractive profile, frequent visits are necessary and this is a factor that facilitates potential excessive use (Lenhart et al., 2010). Several respondents visit SNSs several times a day and many claim it is hard to go through an hour without checking up on their online contacts. It is also to be kept in mind that college students were introduced to these websites very early in their lives and these has become a part of their daily routine. Almost all the respondents admitted that social media sites are a “very important part” (62 percent) or “important part” (34 percent) of their lives. Comments like the one given below are not uncommon, though this could be categorized as a slightly extreme case:

I log in after I come home from college around 2 pm and log out only after 2 am. In college I use my mobile internet and check updates every few minutes usually on the sly (14).

The most common activities on SNSs as can be seen from Figure 3 are posting on the Facebook wall (94 percent), reading and responding to comments (88 percent), sending and responding to invites (83 percent) and browsing the profiles and pages of others (69 percent).
Privacy settings. It is heartening that 59 percent have extremely strong privacy settings so only their friends and followers can view their profile. In all, 23 percent allow those known to their friends to have access to their profile. In total, 17 percent have weak privacy settings and allow all users to view their profile.

Connections. The main reasons reported for the widespread usage are that it becomes easy to stay in touch with friends (94 percent), and these are also used to make new friends (36 percent). The latter seems more common among boys than girls. The female respondents mostly use social networks to stay in touch with existing relationships whereas some of the males majorly use these networks also to forge new relationships. In all, 6 percent (two of them female) claimed to have mainly interacted with strangers through social media networks. Upon further probing, they confided that the anonymity that social media websites offer excites them.

Some of the respondents (9 percent) stated that they mainly interacted with parents and relatives on social media. Mumbai and Bengaluru are study hubs and attract students from all over the country. Social media platforms offer a cost effective, convenient and speedy mode of communication to such students to stay in touch with parents and relatives. Several respondents (47 percent) claimed to mainly interact with other people they knew, apart from classmates and relatives. They do not regularly meet these people and thus use these platforms to maintain their relationships.

On trying to understand whether belonging to social networks makes the youth feel they belong to a community, mixed reactions were noted. Almost half replied in the negative explaining that social media is merely a projection of a lifestyle, which is different from the stark reality and they find the platforms “flaky” and “superficial.” Also, reasons like anonymity, constant judgment and criticism resulting from the veil provided by the internet and the existence of cyber bullying made them even more convinced that they were not part of a community. In all, 49 percent believed that they would feel left out if they were not a part of these social platforms, as is evident from comments such as these:

I start feeling restless if I don’t check what my friends are up to (05).

On the other hand the other half believed that social media platforms did make them feel like a part of a community. Social media platforms enabled them interact with people sharing similar interests, and helped build a close-knit community in terms of immediate social circles. This then is extended to a global network of people having similar interests. In total, 49 percent believed that they would feel left out if they were not a part of these social platforms, as the following statement shows:

I always want to be in tune with my group and what is going on (24).

Nature of online friendships

Only 10 percent of the respondents consider all social network contacts cultivated online as their friends. In total, 27 percent deem a majority of their social network connections as their friends.
whereas 46 percent regard very few among their social network as friends. SNSs may appear constructive for those whose real-life social circle is limited. It gives them quick and easy access to friends in the virtual world. All this is relatively less risky and easier than face-to-face communication because of its greater anonymity. It is very interesting to note that a chunk of the respondents (71 percent) had not yet met their online friends, though they would speak to them online on a regular basis. In all, 22 percent had spoken on the phone and 41 percent regularly text messaged these connections but never met them, even after keeping online connections with them since a long time. A mere 14 percent admitted to meeting their online friends on a regular basis and hanging out with them. In total, 60 percent of the respondents were not even comfortable asking their social media connections for a “small favor.” Ultimately, social media has made the respondents aware of the fact that the real world and the virtual world are completely different. They realized that these friendships do not have any actual emotional connect. Three respondents also stated that when they forged friendship with strangers on these platforms, they almost became victims of fraudulent activities. This upsets their mental sanity and may lead to serious consequences. Experiences such as these have helped them reflect on the real friendships that exist outside the virtual space. Others believe that these platforms had helped them strengthen their existing relationships and also forge new ones. Social media platforms had given them a broader perspective of relationships, helped build bonds and made them reduce the tendency to pass false judgments.

**Threat to well-being**

**Cyber bullying.** In total, 32 percent claimed to have suffered from cyber bullying on at least one of the SNSs at some point of time especially on Facebook whereas 67 percent had never been victims of cyber bullying on these platforms. During the interviews two girls who had been victims of cyber bullying stated they had greatly reduced their social media usage after these incidents and deleted their accounts on certain platforms. Others admitted they are still active on social media even after such incidents. On certain victims it had a long-lasting impact and they had not yet recovered from it. Further probing revealed that it had “negatively impacted self-esteem and shattered self-confidence.”

**Comparison of lifestyles.** Social media networks allow us a glimpse into the supposedly perfect life led by others and thus, directly affect how we view ourselves. In total, 52 percent of the respondents claimed not to be affected at all by the posts and profiles of others. However, in the face-to-face interviews some of them admitted that although they had ticked this option in the questionnaire at a subconscious level this did matter to them and they had made some changes in their lifestyle. In all, 33 percent claimed to being marginally affected and 11 percent admitted that they are greatly affected by others profiles, and what other people post has a huge impact on them. Thus, some of the youth in our study do get affected by what other people post on social media, which is an unhealthy sign. Some respondents confided that they were having “less rewarding experiences and less fun” compared to their friends. They admitted to feeling left out from the “good life” and tried hard to fit into the lifestyle followed by others. Remarks such as these were all too common:

- I feel inferior at times and crave for a better lifestyle (53).
- I get depressed when I see what a good time my friends always have. I feel left out and unwanted (06).

According to this research, one in two teenagers felt that they were “missing out” on the picture-perfect lives others portrayed through social media. This upsets their mental sanity and may lead to serious consequences. This is despite the fact that a majority (59 percent) of the youth do acknowledge that people behave differently and are not their usual selves on social media. In our study, 67 percent of the respondents admitted to projecting an exaggerated and perfect picture of their lives to get more followers or likes and this may take them to the point of addiction. At the other extreme 14 percent of the respondents admitted they reveal the truth and pour out their woes on social media to get advice from others. This is particularly seen among the female respondents.

**Impact on self-esteem.** Social media use produces an array of emotions, some of them positive, such as the self-affirmation and self-esteem boost that comes from creating and viewing one's
own profile (Kim and Lee, 2011). The size of people’s online social networks correlates positively with life satisfaction and well-being (Lee et al., 2011). Feedback from friends is instantly and publicly available and this most likely has a great impact on adolescents’ self-esteem. Some people have a habit of incessant and continuous posting on social media in order to remain “popular” and “relevant.” In all, 44 percent feel they cannot trust everything they see on social media and that it is not trustworthy enough. On the issue whether the Indian youth link popularity on social media to their self-esteem, 64 percent of the respondents “strongly link” the likes, comments etc. on SNSs to their own self-esteem and another 22 percent feel the posts and comments may be affecting their self-esteem. Only 12 percent acknowledge that social media popularity is not linked to self-esteem at all, and what happens on social media “strictly remains there.”

This study has unearthed some personality traits from the kind of posts on SNSs. Students seen as introverts tend to disclose a lot more personal information. A boy who describes himself as “highly obese, ugly and suffering from halitosis” admitted to never actually meeting friends he makes on the internet. On the other hand a girl confided: “I am flat-out ugly no matter what I wear or what I do to my hair so I first make friends on the SNSs, confide in them and then ultimately meet them” (39). Introverts disclose more personal information on their pages (Amichai-Hamburger and Vinitzky, 2010). From the face-to-face interviews it is observed that the majority appear to use SNSs for social enhancement, and a few did admit to using the sites for social compensation. These results seem to be fairly consistent with those of Mehdizadeh’s (2010) study on Facebook users.

The constant habit to check their online accounts and see the likes or dislikes leads to fluctuations in the level of self-esteem. Once all this starts many teenagers acknowledged they find it extremely difficult to reverse it. They also tend to go overboard in buying expensive clothes and start spending a lot of money on their appearance. This in the long run keeps them marooned in the virtual world and they lose contact with real life.

Addictive behavior? Users who prefer communication via SNSs (as compared to face-to-face communication) are more likely to develop an addiction to using SNSs (Kuss and Griffiths, 2012). Comments such as these testify to the addictive power of social media among the Indian youth:

- I have to miss college often because I just cannot get up in the mornings after logging off at 4 am (78).
- I consider my Apple my best friend, spending hours with it every day (71).
- I’m an addict. I just get lost in Facebook (16).
- I now do not feel the need to go out (23).
- Facing problems with my girlfriend over this addiction! (30).
- I do not deny I have a problem. I now feel fine only in the non face to face interaction. I call it socializing whereas my brother calls it escapism (62).
- My grades in college have dipped. Mom often says I tend to procrastinate and get easily distracted from my studies (55).

In fact, 52 percent of the respondents admitted to being addicted to social media platforms and affirmed that social media platforms did contribute to addictive behavior. Some of the students did complain of very erratic sleeping patterns and constant yawning during the day. They confessed they “could not live without it.” In fact, one boy explained in detail how his mother made all attempts to make him abandon this habit, but in vain.

Some common patterns were deduced among these cases of suspected addiction. Most of them were male with a fair sprinkling of females; they had very few actual friends, hardly socialized and were not too attractive in their appearance. Accordingly, the supposed expectations and benefits of SNS use may go awry particularly for people with low self-esteem (Kuss and Griffiths, 2012). These perceived advantages make them spend more and more time on these sites which may potentially lead to addiction. Some of the respondents did experience “addiction-like” symptoms. It could be deduced that the respondents are not addicted to
the medium per se; they may cultivate an addiction to certain activities they carry out online but beyond doubt majority of the youth surveyed spend their lives completely immersed in technology and perhaps do not even consider social media as “technology.”

Discussion

Habits are formed through repeated acts in certain circumstances (Oulasvirta et al., 2011). Maladaptive habits can cause unintended behavior activated by internal or external cues interfering with other acts, for example, when people experience excessive urges such as unintended smartphone checking and this could interfere with daily life if it is not limited by regulations or social norms (Rush, 2011). The new generation in India is the first to have constant access to internet technology right from the very beginning. As teenagers go through an important transitional period in their lives, attention and popularity become very important to them. So, they tend to use these sites for socializing and making new friends and are usually vulnerable to the next “new” thing. The Indian youth make extensive utilization of SNSs in order to stay in touch with family and friends, but also with acquaintances; therefore sustaining weak ties with potentially advantageous environments (Kuss and Griffiths, 2012). This may lead to excessive usage of these sites ultimately leading to addictive behavior. These platforms have adversely affected social relationships and community life of the respondents who now spend less time with friends and family. Majority also feel lonely and depressed when they see pictures and videos of others having a good time, thereby leading to an inferiority complex. While the desire to disclose personal information may not be a product of social media per se, one cannot deny that social media does provides the platform to do this and receive immediate feedback. It is the individual rather than the community that is the focus of attention (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). The youth present themselves and their lives in a very rosy way on these SNSs and this gives them immense pleasure. Adolescents often engage in what has been referred to as “imaginative audience behavior” (Elkind and Bowen, 1979). They constantly feel they are being watched and evaluated and tend to become obsessed with their appearance. The heightened feeling of increasing recognition on social media guides self-worth and self-esteem. Everybody is always trying to project themselves in the best light. Many of the youth are using these SSNs to show the rest of the world what a huge circle of friends they have and what a fancy life they lead. People feel inferior when they make “upward comparisons” and feel better when making “downward comparisons” (Michinov, 2001). The upward comparisons in the long run lead to conditions like anxiety and other psychiatric disorders. Social media is also linked to comparison of lifestyles and a feeling of depression as the youth tend to spend a lot of time thinking about what they saw online.

This analysis clearly indicates that connections on social media do not blossom into friendship in actual life. Contacts remain random names on the friends list. Also, even when the online friendships do go deep, an actual meeting may never materialize and this is exactly how some of the youth want to maintain the equations. The findings correlate to the model developed by Caplan (2005) which explains that individuals who have deficient self-presentational skills might prefer online communication to face-to-face communication. As they devote more time and attention to their online social interaction, some of them have a hard time regulating their internet use, which is termed compulsive use (Caplan, 2005). This in turn leads to all kind of negative life outcomes such as missing out on a social life, dip in grades and sleepless nights. The use of SNSs also seems to be related to poor social adaptation, such as social anxiety (Bodroza and Jovanovic, 2016). Internet and other digital addictions are often the result of habitual behavior used to relieve pain or escape from reality (Huisman et al., 2000). This research has shown that excessive usage of these is becoming a problem for the Indian youth as well. Addictive behavior has six core components of addiction, which are: salience, mood modification, tolerance, withdrawal symptoms, conflict, and relapse (Griffiths, 2005). Social networking fulfills all these six criteria of addiction. The egocentric construction of SNSs facilitates the engagement in addictive behaviors and may thus serve as a factor that attracts people to using it in a potentially excessive way (Kuss and Griffiths, 2012). The fifth annual National Stress and Wellbeing in Australia Survey has discovered that the fear of missing out due to high levels of social media use leads to depression and anxiety and stress (Damjanovic and Dayman, 2015). More specifically, Dutch adolescents aged
10 to 19 years who received predominantly negative feedback had low self-esteem which in turn led to low well-being (Valkenburg et al., 2006). Studies indicate that people tend to self-disclose much more on internet sites than in the real, physical world (Raymer, 2015). A study by Wölfing et al. (2008) indicates that people use the internet excessively in order to cope with everyday stressors.

Some other studies show results contrary to what is reported by this study. Huang (2010) has shown that social communication via internet is a positive predictor of psychological well-being. Wang et al. (2014) reported that social communication use is positively correlated with well-being and people who use SNSs frequently have higher levels of well-being. However the findings of this study seem to be in conformity with several other studies in the field. On et al. (2009) inferred that particularly shy people spend large amounts of time on Facebook and have large amounts of friends on SNSs. Individuals with internet use problems may be unable to remain abstinent or to moderate their addictive behavior (Murali and George, 2007). A study by LaRose and Peng (2009) showed that individuals who experienced loneliness and had deficient social skills could develop strong compulsive internet use behavior leading to leading to negative life outcomes rather than tackling the original problems. That excessive usage of Facebook leads to depressive symptoms was proved in another study as well. Individuals with low self-esteem may end up feeling worse due to the effects of social comparison on SNSs such as Facebook (Steers et al., 2014). Facebook and online social networking is associated with several psychiatric disorders, including depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Pantic, 2014). Kross et al. (2013) concluded “The more people used Facebook “the worse they felt” and “the more their life satisfaction levels declined over time.” Facebook use is linked to declines in subjective well-being and rather than enhancing well-being, Facebook may undermine it (Kross et al., 2013).

Indian newspapers have recently reported several cases how social media can mislead and corrupt the youth and some of these cases have ended in tragedy. In China, some youth drawn into gambling and gaming on the internet indulged in it continuously beyond a day and then died. This kind of obsessive behavior is obviously extremely dangerous to minds which are otherwise actually intelligent. Excessive use of anything is harmful and dangerous for a person and everything ought to be done in moderation.

This study finds support for the displacement hypothesis but not for the stimulation hypothesis. Based on displacement hypothesis, spending more time on SNSs reduces adolescents’ well-being because it displaces time spent with existing while the stimulation hypothesis maintains that usage of SNSs increases the quality of their real-life relations (Valkenburg and Peter, 2007).

Conclusion

This generation in India has put social media at the top of their priority list. All the respondents selected for this research spent a minimum of five hours on SNSs a week and were heavy users, spending up to even 50 hours a week on SNSs. These sites have become an in-built part of the Indian youth today who are deemed to be “digital natives” (Prensky, 2005) as against those of us in India who learnt digitalization as adults and are technology immigrants. The youth in this study do acknowledge that they need to reduce the usage but are seem unable to do so in the majority of cases. What we see in India today is the persistence of a trend of people spending more time in the midst of technology than amid humans. Social network platforms are considered a boon, allowing people to connect seamlessly and viably with anyone in the world. These sites are especially attractive for the youth in this study as they can adjust their profiles to show the world an ideal picture of themselves; and via those virtual selves they can interact with friends and peers in a forum that is often shielded from supervising adults.

This study dealt on the negative repercussions these platforms have as a result of their excessive usage. Internet addiction has been described as a twenty-first century epidemic (Christakis, 2010). There is growing evidence that because of their hyperlinked architecture social media can prove more distracting than focusing (Aagaard, 2014; Anderson et al., 2014; Rambe and Nel, 2014). Along with this, other research has provided clear evidence that overuse or maladaptive use of ICT can have negative effects on the well-being and psychological functioning of children, adolescents, and young adults (Brooks, 2015; Fox and Moreland, 2015;
However, social media is simply providing a quicker peeling of the onion as in majority of the cases the issues were anyway there and most people anyway love to talk about themselves.

Undoubtedly the Indian youth are spending a lot of time browsing and chatting on various SNSs and these clearly have mass appeal. These levels are becoming more and more extreme and are leading to potentially addictive qualities. The youth are acquiring an addiction to the particular activities they do online rather than the internet per se. This is a kind of cyber-relationship addiction partly to escape reality and partly to uplift one’s mood. They label their computer as their “best friend.” For many youth in this study, interacting online is the best way of living in a society where people are getting more and more isolated from each other. The youth are particularly impressionable at this age and when social media gets added to the prevailing peer pressure, some cannot handle it. The line between habit and addiction is drawn when it interferes with living a normal life. The rational use of social media thus moves from habit toward irrational behavior (Xu et al., 2012).

Excessive use of anything is harmful and dangerous for a person. Just as the remedy to alcoholism cannot be to go back to the era of prohibition, the right remedies need to be offered to the youth who get into these addictive habits. Moderating their access to social media is one excellent method. The best plan is to redirect the focus by providing enough time for face-to-face social interaction, increasing family leisure time and inviting friends and family over for get-togethers.

Parents and teachers would do well to worry more about all the negative effects of their children’s incessant and probably maladaptive use of these SNSs. Schools and parents should educate children on these matters from the very beginning. Enhancing their self-esteem and promoting social skills could be an important measure of prevention of negative outcomes of social networking and mobile device use (Oberst et al., 2017). Parents should ensure that from the beginning they keep controls on their children, try to monitor the sites their children frequently access, make sure the time spent on SNSs is not excessive and prevent excessive late-night log-ins. Educational institutions also have a pivotal role to play and need to reiterate to their students that they should filter the information they see on social media. Administrators can play a primary role in promoting awareness of internet abuse or addiction on campus by being in a position to both assess the needs of students, and implement preventive programs to decrease the potential dangers of excessive internet use (Scherer, 1997). While the internet has certainly changed the way we live, all the changes it has brought about in the Indian lifestyle may not always be for the better. Further research is needed on the Indian scene and also on the effective treatment of internet addiction.

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