

# Experiences of autism in UK prison-based offending behaviour programmes to address sexual offending

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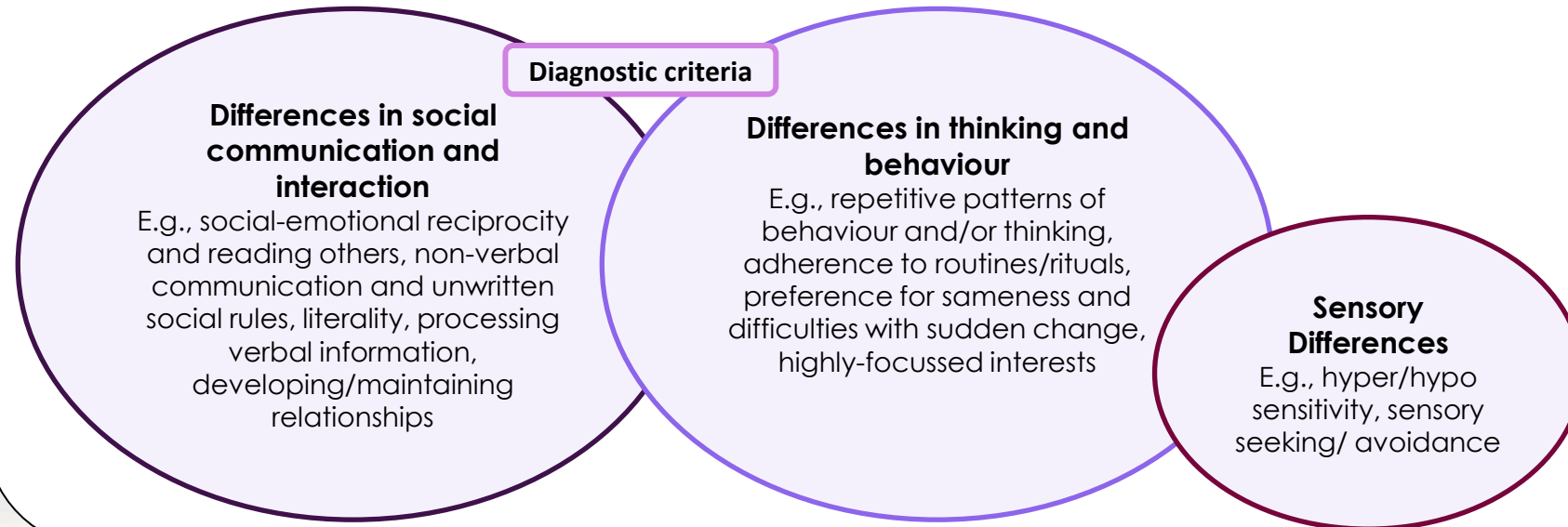
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# Background

In clinical literature, autism is characterised as a heterogenous (i.e., diverse), lifelong, neurodevelopmental condition, approx. 1-2% prevalence in the general population (APA, 2022).



- Autism is an example of 'neurodivergence'
- Many in the autistic community challenge the diagnostic criteria, as they feel it does not *truly* encapsulate what it means to be autistic

Autistic individuals are no more likely to offend than the rest of the general population (Mouridsen et al., 2008; King & Murphy, 2014)

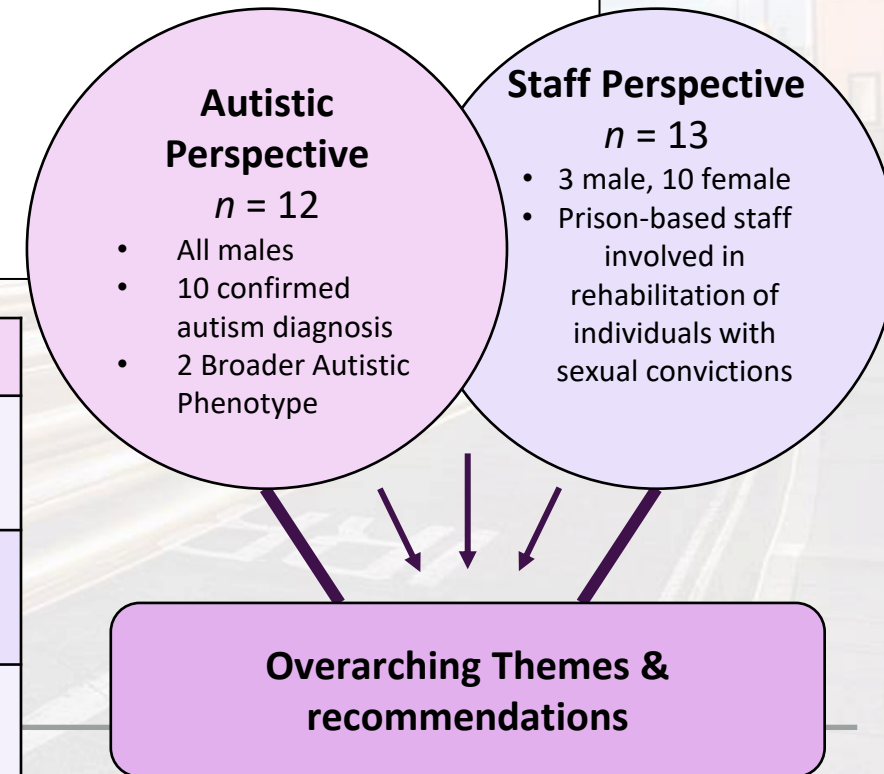
- **HOWEVER;** when they *do* offend, autism can provide some context for offending + **sexual offending** is one of the more common types of offending committed by autistic individuals (Allely & Creaby-Attwood, 2016; Browning & Caulfield, 2011)

Limited applied empirical research in relation to the rehabilitation of autistic individuals with sexual offence convictions, particularly in prisons → small body of existing work suggested that specific responsivity may be especially pertinent (Higgs & Carter, 2015; Hollomotz et al., 2018; Robertson & McGillivray, 2015).

# Basis for today's talk

- **Content for today's talk comes from a multi-perspective qualitative study, which aimed to:**
  - Explore how prison-based interventions to address sexual offending are experienced by autistic individuals with sexual offense convictions and the staff who work with them
  - Identify the features of prison-based sexual offending interventions that may be challenging or beneficial for autistic individuals with sexual convictions.
- **Method**
  - Semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with 25 participants
  - Multi-perspective phenomenologically-informed thematic analysis (MPTA)
    - i.e., exploring 'what?' + 'how?'

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes
<b>1. Feeling overwhelmed</b>	1.1. A lot to process 1.2. Reaching boiling point
2. Out of the comfort zone	<b>2.1. Thinking about feelings</b> 2.2. Knowing what to expect
3. (Dis)connected to others	<b>3.1. Between integrated and alienated</b> 3.2. Networks of support



# 1. Feeling overwhelmed

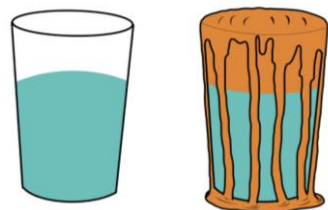
## Participants described how autistic individuals had a tendency to feel overwhelmed in group-based interventions

### Why?

- Too much information:  
E.g., Managing and monitoring multiple interactions at once, opening up, difficulties reading the room, sensory environment, processing auditory content and following pace
- Feeling a lack of familiarity or predictability
- Ripple effects from experiences beyond the intervention:  
E.g., interactions with staff, troubling sensory experiences, disrupted routines

### Results and impacts on engagement:

- Initial apprehension and/or hesitancy
- Reaching boiling point



“Understanding how people want to be interacted with is different for each person, and if there’s lots of people that I’m interacting with simultaneously then, I can end up, just, getting it wrong for everybody... an awful lot of stress in trying to process all that stuff, in addition to stressful talking about offending, and history, and talking about myself, and opening myself, laying myself bare doing that to lots of people... it’s, just, too stressful, trying to monitor how everybody’s reacting, and trying to react to their reactions, and it’s just too many equations” (P1, Autistic individual)

“I didn’t like it, there was too many people. I don’t like big groups... they’re trying to tell me stuff, I don’t understand it, they’re going too fast for me, I got frustrated... I walked out a couple of times... I went back to them [facilitators], I got a negative comment, and I said “fuck this shit!” and I walked out... it was getting too much for me.” (P7, Autistic individual)

# 2.1. Thinking about feelings

## Talking about emotions and feelings, hypothetical thinking, and perspective-taking during interventions can be particularly challenging for autistic individuals

- Remembering emotional aspects of past experiences
- Identifying and differentiating emotions felt
- Intuiting what someone else felt/thought, or may feel/think in future
- “What would I do in X situation that I’ve never experienced before?”

## Examples of challenging interactions between autistic individuals and staff when discussing topics relating to feelings and emotions

- Sense of tension, frustration and pressure between autistic individuals and the staff working with them

“Trying to develop that emotional awareness was quite difficult, because then he didn’t know how to deal with frustration or upset, because he didn’t really understand that it was different to feeling angry or depressed” (P20, Staff)

“It can be quite frustrating if you’re thinking “oh, look, he’s just said he has no idea what the victim went through, I mean everybody’s got an idea”... you’re thinking “oh, y’know, I’m wasting my time here”” (P24, Staff)

“I was struggling, but they kept on persisting, I became all distressed... asking questions, if I didn’t understand it, they would ask in a different way... they just kept on persisting, and then I would lose my rag, and get angry, not meaning to, I don’t mean to... it was like being interrogated again” (P11, Autistic individual)

# 3.1. Between integrated and alienated

**Participants described how autistic individuals *could* struggle to develop relationships and integrate with others in group-based intervention programmes**

**Participants often framed this as an interaction between autism-related social interaction difficulties and how others in programmes responded to those difficulties**

- E.g., saying something inappropriate, not 'reading the room'

**Examples of consequences:**

- Trepidation about 'getting involved'
- Exclusion and alienation from others on a programme (other group members and staff)
- Challenges for staff in managing challenging interactions between autistic individual and group

"He was still quite isolated... he found it really difficult to understand sarcasm and a lot of the lads would use sarcasm, so they would alienate him then... you know, "he's not having a laugh, he's not one of us"" (P20, Staff)

"You'll say "ok, hasn't John done really well with that piece of work? Can we give him some feedback?"... the group will, sort of, get the unwritten social thing there about, you know, "we need to tell John he's done well". Someone with Asperger's won't get that, and they'll be like "John, when you said such and such there, that was terrible"... the group might, sort of, turn against them, because they're, sort of, seen as, like, rude or selfish... they get a lot of social rejection then" (P25, Staff)

# Concluding points

## In brief, this research identified the following key issues in relation to working with autistic individuals in prison-based interventions to address sexual offending:

- Some features of intervention programme content and delivery may not be suitable for some autistic individuals, and may require adjustment or adaptation
- The prison social and sensory environment within and beyond the programme can be particularly impactful on autistic individuals' engagement with prison-based interventions
- There is no one-size-fits all approach to working with autistic individuals. Therefore, working effectively with autistic individuals and tailoring interventions to them pivots on access to individualised information about that individual (i.e., "do they have a diagnosis, and what does that mean for them in this context?")

**These have since been used to inform broader recommendations for working with autistic individuals in prison-based interventions**



## Avenues for future work:

- Larger scale quantitative work on treatment engagement and outcomes for autistic individuals with sexual convictions
- Exploring community-based interventions, through-care and resettlement for autistic individuals
- Exploring how autistic women experience prison and interventions

## Broad examples of practical recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** Enhance general prison autism awareness through training and education

**Recommendation 2:** Learning about and tailor to the individual

**Recommendation 3:** Improved autism screening tools and procedures in prisons

**Recommendation 4:** Supporting engagement through adjustments to communication and delivery in interventions.

**Recommendation 5:** Adjustments and accommodations in the sensory environment

**Recommendation 6:** Preparing the individual for interventions and supporting readiness

Thank you for listening!  
Any questions?

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Original Research Article

**A Multi-Perspective Qualitative Study About Working With Autistic Individuals in Prison-Based Interventions to Address Sexual Offending**

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**Abstract**  
Research suggests that sexual offending is one of the more common forms of offending behaviour committed by autistic individuals. Despite this, very little research has investigated the effectiveness of rehabilitation for autistic individuals who have sexually offended. Existing literature that does exist suggests that interventions to address sexual offending may not be sufficiently adapted for this group. In this paper we present an exploratory qualitative study that (i) explores how prison-based interventions to address sexual offending are experienced by autistic individuals with sexual offense convictions and the staff who work with them, and (ii) identifies and explores the features of prison-based sexual offending interventions that may be challenging or beneficial for autistic individuals, from the perspective of those involved in treatment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 autistic men serving prison sentences for sexual convictions, and 13 members of prison staff. A multi-perspective phenomenologically-informed thematic (MPT) analysis identified three themes of 'Feeling overwhelmed', 'Out of the comfort zone', and '(Dis)connected to others'.

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