

Working in challenging  
environments:

Effective working relationships in operational  
prison staff

EXAMINING RESILIENCE, WORKING RELATIONSHIPS, ATTITUDES  
TO SUICIDE AND EMOTIONAL LABOUR



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# BACKGROUND



- Prison staff witness a high level of suicide, deliberate self-harm and violence when compared to staff in most work environments, (Bennett, Crewe & Wahidin, 2008)
- Incidents are rising again with prisons in England and Wales having 70 self-inflicted deaths, over 23,000 incidents of self-harm and 3,148 incidents of violence against staff (including 356 serious assaults), across the prison estate in 2013 (Ministry of Justice, 2014).
- Working as a prison officer, has effects in terms of their attitudes, emotions and behaviour (Arnold, 2005; Liebling, 1992).
  - includes impact upon the home life of prison officers and detrimental effect on staff wellbeing (Boudoukha et al., 2011; Crawley, 2004).
  - But also evidence of positive impact of trauma and difficulties (& may outweigh negatives; see Clarke, 2013)

# STUDY AIMS



There were three main aims to the study:

- i. To outline the **potential impact on staff** of the experience of different challenging experiences in relation to personal resilience, emotional labour and working relationships.
- ii. Explore the factors present in the prison environment, types and level of experience plus personal factors which **predict good working relationships** with prisoners at risk of suicide.
- iii. Explore the factors in the prison environment, types and level of experience and personal factors which **promote resilience in prison staff**.

# RESILIENCE

- Suggested that a factor in an individual's response to challenging events is their level of resilience (Vaugh et al., 2008).
- A resilient individual is someone who 'bounces back' from life stressors and can restore equilibrium within their life (Wagnild and Collins, 2009).
- The impact of training on resilience and effective working practice may also be of relevance.
  - E.g. Trainee practitioners working with suicidal clients greater optimism in their influence on clients but greater distress and impairment and negative effect on resilience in the event of suicide, than more experienced practitioners (Ruskin et al., 2004; Takahashi, et al., 2011).
  - Inexperienced / untrained staff are more likely to view clients' suicidal behaviour as a personal failure which reduces resilience and increases vulnerability (Maltzberger, 1992).

**Measure: RESILIENCE SCALE-25 (Wagnild & Young, 1993)**

# EMOTIONAL LABOUR

Emotional Labour = 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (Hochschild, 1983).


- It is a necessary aspect of most public service roles, including within correctional services (Newman, Guy & Mastracci, 2008).
- + Emotional labour improves the ability to engage with clients and gain job satisfaction.
- A lack of balance has been linked with Burnout (emotional exhaustion, cynicism and an inability to disengage from work) and the hardening and deadening of emotional experience.

A balance is therefore required between client engagement, empathy and over-engagement to maintain wellbeing.

**Measure: EMOTIONAL LABOUR (REVISED) SCALE (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003) Considers: Surface (Hiding/Faking) vs Deep Acting**

# WORKING RELATIONSHIPS

Collaborative, encouraging and empathic staff-prisoner relationships in a variety of prison staff have been identified as key factors in encouraging engagement and positive rehabilitative outcomes (Bennett & Shuker, 2010; Marshall et al., 2003).

- For suicide  an improved therapeutic relationship (including collaborative relationship) linked to better depression treatment outcomes (Klein et al., 2003) and significant decrease in suicidal ideation (Ilgen, 2010).
- The staff-client relationship is therefore thought to be an important factor in mitigating suicide risk (Burgess et al., 2000).

**Measure: AGNEW RELATIONSHIP MEASURE (ARM-12) (Cahill et al., 2012)**

# MEASURES

**RESILIENCE SCALE-25** (Wagnild & Young, 1993)

**EMOTIONAL LABOUR (REVISED) SCALE** (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003) Considers: Surface (Hiding/Faking) vs Deep Acting

**AGNEW RELATIONSHIP MEASURE (ARM-12)** (Cahill et al., 2012) Considers: Bond, Partnership, Client Confidence and Client Openness)

**Attitudes towards Suicide Scale** (ATTS:Salander-Renberg & Jacobsson 2003). Considers: 1. Acceptability of suicide (including those with a serious illness), 2. Preventability of suicide, 3. Condemnation/ Incomprehensibility of suicide

**Demographic:** Age, length of service and gender.

**Prison environment factors:** Type of prison (Adult/Young Offender and Male/Female prisons); Monthly average of self-harm and suicide rate for the year 2012 (Ministry of Justice, 2013).

**Experiences:** Number of times experienced for each of a range of suicide, self-harm, assault, intimidation and humiliation incidents.

# PARTICIPANTS

281 operational prison staff completed the survey.

These were across six prisons in England (2 x Male Category B Local prisons, 1 x Male Category C prison, 1 x Female Closed prison, and 2 x Young Offender Closed establishments) (65% male; Age Mean = 41).

There was a community control sample of 169 participants (26% Male; Age Mean = 29)

Online and anonymous study.



# RESULTS AIM 1:

## IMPACT ON STAFF OF THE EXPERIENCE OF DIFFERENT CHALLENGING EXPERIENCES

- Few overall differences between prison staff and community sample. Prison staff had:
  - lesser perception of Bond with prisoners than control group had with their clients
  - believed that suicide was more preventable but less acceptable.
- Witnessing serious self-harm decreased a sense of bond between staff and prisoner.
- Having felt humiliated or intimidated initially increases the sense of bond, although effect was not maintained as experience increased.
- Witnessing suicide initially increased the acceptance of suicide although effect disappeared with greater experience.
- Exceptionally high levels of threats to personal safety (10+ of many types) linked to greater Faking of emotions

# RESULTS AIM 2: FACTORS WHICH PREDICT GOOD WORKING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PRISONERS AT RISK OF SUICIDE

## Stronger Bond

**Prison factors**  
None

### Experience

- Greater experience of feeling intimidated

### Personal factors

- **Greater Surface Acting: Hiding**
- More accepting attitude towards suicide
- Basic training only

## Stronger Partnership

### Prison factors

- **Female prison**
- **Prison with higher suicide rate**
- **Prisons with lower self-harm rate**

### Experience

- **Fewer direct threats of serious harm made against me**
- **Fewer contacts with expressed suicidal thoughts, plans or threats**
- **Greater number of threats to professional integrity**

### Personal factors

- **Greater Surface Acting: Hiding.**
- **Greater resilience**

## Stronger Client Confidence

### Prison factors

- **Female prison**
- **Prisons with higher suicide rate**
- **Prisons with lower self-harm rate**

### Experience

- **Fewer direct threats of serious harm made against me**
- **Greater number of times of feeling humiliated by a client's behaviour**

### Personal factors

- **Greater Surface Acting: Hiding**

## Stronger Client Openness

**Prison factors**  
None

### Experience

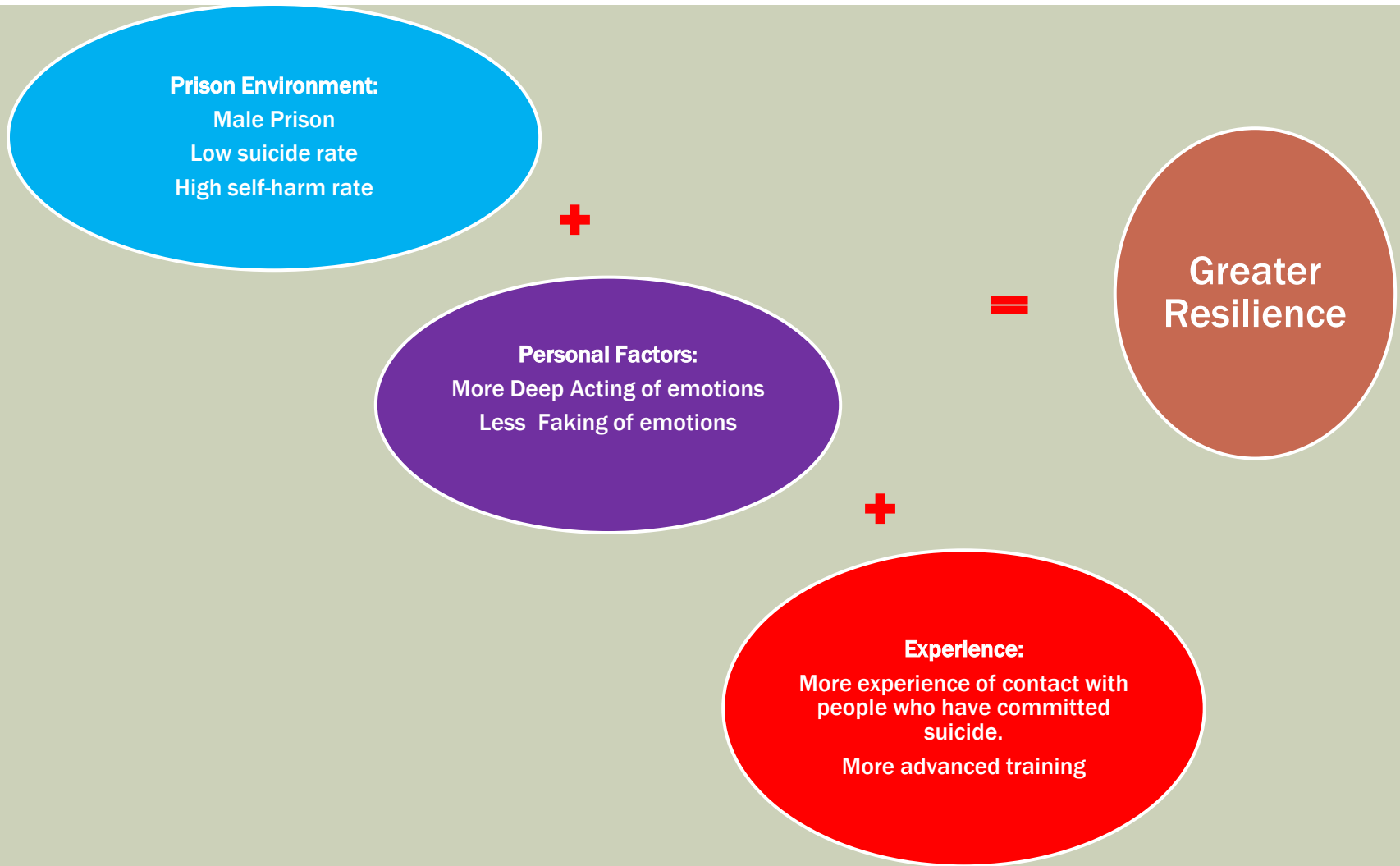
- **Greater experience of feeling physically threatened by a client's behaviour**
- **Greater experience of witnessing self-harm serious enough for medical attention**

### Personal factors

- **Greater Surface Acting: Hiding.**
- **Being female**
- **Greater sense of Suicide as Preventable**
- **Less Condemnation/Incomprehensible of Suicide**
- **Greater Deep Acting**

# RESULTS AIM 3:

## FACTORS WHICH PROMOTE RESILIENCE IN PRISON STAFF



# CONCLUSIONS

- Supports positive and negative impact of challenging incidents: Most serious events (witnessing suicide, victim of violence) have less long-term effect on resilience and working relationships than other experiences: In fact knowing people who committed suicide improves resilience!
- Experience generally leads to better (or at least similar) working relationship with prisoners (except threats of harm).
- Hiding feelings or trying to really feel like you think you should (deep acting) supports effective working relationships and promotes personal resilience; but faking emotions may be detrimental and this is prevalent in those with exceptionally high exposure.
- Within the prison environment, a greater sense of bond may not be reflective of a positive relationship but reflect vulnerable staff.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

- Developing national and local training and on-going supervision or chance for reflection, e.g. utilising resilience models such as Clarke (2013) or Paton et al.'s (2008), focusing on...
  - Additional suicide and violence prevention and training focussing on working relationship style and effective/non-effective emotional labour styles
  - Resilience training for staff with additional training for Staff Care Team and managers to include awareness of the emotional impact on staff over time, self-care and reflection.
  - Boundary violation training to identify own and other staff boundaries and strategies.
  
- Expanded provision of structured and on-going support for a broader range of experiences e.g. Care Team, Staff support services, Structured Group support.
  
- Consideration of the development and implementation of new operational models including:
  - Promoting a culture shift to acceptance of vulnerabilities and need for self-care.
  - Mentoring or supervision schemes, with suitably trained staff in order to:
    - Monitor staff for the on-going effects of experiences on working relationship style, emotional labour and resilience.
    - Promote effective working relationship styles through partnership, client confidence and client openness and monitor the strength of any unhelpful bond.

# ANY QUESTIONS?

Full report available at:

[http://www.academia.edu/4555409/Research\\_Report\\_Promoting\\_Resilience\\_in\\_Prison\\_Staff](http://www.academia.edu/4555409/Research_Report_Promoting_Resilience_in_Prison_Staff)

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