

## Sexual Abuse

### **'This time it's different' preparing for release through a prison-model of CoSA: A phenomenological and repertory grid analysis**

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Abstract:	<p>Circles of support and accountability (CoSA) in the prison-model begin prior to the core members' release from prison and continue with them on release in to the community. The purpose of this study was to explore the expectations of release of those convicted of a sexual offence and how this develops during their participation in the prison sessions of CoSA. The research question was to consider how the prison-model of CoSA relates to the desistance of crime, in particular the phases of desistance developed by Gobbels, Ward and Willis' (2012).</p> <p>Data was collected using both phenomenological interviews and repertory grids at two different time points; prior to starting the circle in prison (n=9) and just before release (n=5). The findings suggest the prison sessions provide a sense of support and 'no longer being alone' often absent in those who sexually offend. The additional prison sessions enabled the participants to experience this during their approaching release date; a stressful period that was characterised by anxiety. Further research is now required to explore whether circles in the prison-model are able to encourage and reinforce the cognitive change required for desistance, enabling the core members to successfully manage their underlying anxieties surrounding societal stigmatisation.</p>

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It is unequivocal that those who commit sexual offenses create negative consequences for the victims directly, in terms of mental health difficulties or social and sexual functioning issues (Elliott & Beech, 2012). For society, feelings of fear, anger, and hatred are also generated by these offenses, which in turn creates strong negative feelings towards those who commit them, particularly with regard to their release from prison back into the community (Bates, Williams, Wilson, & Wilson, 2014).

This transition from prison to the community for those convicted of sexual offenses can therefore involve feelings of stress, loneliness, fear of being recognized, and alienation from society, especially if they have also been rejected by family and friends because of the nature of their crime (Tewksbury, 2012; Tewksbury & Copes, 2013). Although uncomfortable for many members of the public, research suggests that accepting these individuals into the community and helping them overcome the barriers to successful reintegration, encourages pro-social behavior and prevention of further offending (Tewksbury & O'Connor, 2012).

**Circles of Support and Accountability**

One way of supporting and encouraging this reintegration is through Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA). CoSA is an intervention used with medium to very-high risk individuals, convicted of a sexual offense, with little to no social support on release from prison. Their level of risk is determined using the Risk Matrix 2000; the most widely used actuarial risk assessment tool in the English and Wales prison and probation services (Thornton et al, 2003) and the CoSA is used to support and enable their reintegration back into society, whilst still holding them accountable for their behavior (Cesaroni, 2001).

CoSA involves a group of between three and six screened, selected and trained volunteers who meet at least once a week in the community with the Core Member (ex-prisoner). The CoSA volunteers are supervised by a professionally qualified coordinator who

also works and communicates with other agencies responsible for the Core Member's risk management (i.e. police, probation, psychologists). As Clarke, Brown, and Völlm (2015) argue, what sets CoSA aside from many other interventions available for those who have committed sexual offenses is that the support is given by people from the local community, who volunteer to help the individual reintegrate and desist from sexual offending. The CoSA model recognizes the humanity of the ex-offender and seeks to balance community protection from victimisation, with the reintegration into society of those individuals who are socially isolated and highly marginalised (Hannem & Petrunik, 2007).

Although existing within the UK since 2002, CoSA originated in Canada. The first evaluations by Wilson, Picheca, and Prinzo (2005; 2007) demonstrated how being a Core Member of a CoSA was associated with a 70% reduction in sexual recidivism compared to those who were not in a CoSA (5% vs. 16.7%). Similar findings were replicated in a study by Wilson, Cortoni, and McWhinnie (2009) who reported re-offending rates of Core Members in a CoSA as significantly lower than those in the comparison group (2.3% vs. 13.7%). In the UK Bates, Williams, Wilson, and Wilson (2014) reported a significantly lower number of combined sexual or violent re-offenses in the CoSA group than the comparison group, which involved individuals matched on risk who were referred to, but did not receive a CoSA.

Duwe (2012) also reported, from the only Randomised Controlled Trial used with CoSA to date, a significant reduction ( $p < 0.05$  using cox regression analyses) in re-arrest for any offense (38.7 % Core Members vs 64.5% controls) and a (non-significant) reduction in sexual recidivism over a two year follow up (0% Core Members vs 3.2% control). Although a longer follow up period would be recommended, Seto et al. (2008) argue that randomised control trials are necessary to gain the knowledge required to advance clinical practice. Indeed, further randomised control designs involving CoSA would contribute to a more

thorough and comprehensive research base, something which Elliott and Zajac (2015) believe is still in need of further development.

However, as Clarke, Brown, and Völlm (2015) state, good quality evaluations of recidivism, though important, do not capture the full experience of participating in a CoSA. Although RCTs and reconviction studies are useful in determining effectiveness, psychosocial outcomes should still be captured in any evaluation. For example, in the Netherlands, qualitative research has been conducted with both the Core Members and professionals involved in CoSA (Höing, Vogelvang, & Bogaerts, 2015). The ‘from within’ perspective of the Core Members meant improvements in protective factors, for example self-confidence, self-esteem, and active problem solving, could be identified. Exploring the experience of Core Members, through the use of qualitative research, can also be of benefit when considering new initiatives, such as a UK prison-model of CoSA. This involves CoSAs being established in forensic settings whilst the Core Members are still in prison as will now be discussed.

**CoSA: The prison-model**

In 2014, the first prison-model of CoSA in the UK was established at a treatment prison for those who commit sexual offenses. Although a similar model is used in the US, by the Minnesota Department of Corrections, this was the first time the model had been operationalised in the UK. The prison-model initiative was set up by the Safer Living Foundation (SLF); a charitable organisation and member of Circles UK. There was a concern felt by the trustees of the SLF that some individuals serving sentences for sexual offenses, particularly those who were elderly (55+) or who had intellectual disabilities (ID), were leaving prison without any family or community support. In addition to the already difficult process of trying to reintegrate into a hostile community, those who are elderly and who have intellectual disabilities face further social isolation. For example, for elderly offenders the

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3 fear of isolation on release can be even greater, with many nursing homes and elderly care  
4 facilities reluctant to accept them due to the type of offenses they have committed (Hart,  
5 2008). Individuals with ID are reported to have a lack of social networks and resultant lack of  
6 feelings of connectedness, both of which are believed to be required for successful  
7 community integration (Cummins & Lau, 2003).  
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14 When considering the well-being of offenders recently released from prison, Fox  
15 (2015) acknowledges how individuals can quickly become overwhelmed, particularly if they  
16 have served a long sentence in prison. In addition, Aresti, Eatough, and Brooks-Gordon (2010)  
17 identify the early stages of release as a particularly sensitive period in terms of desistance of  
18 crime. Acknowledging therefore, the need for 'through the gate' support prior to release, a  
19 new prison-model of CoSA was developed. Similar to community models, Core Members are  
20 selected based on their risk of recidivism and a lack of pro-social support outside of the  
21 prison environment. In addition however, they were also required to either be elderly (55+) or  
22 be assessed as intellectually disabled, in order for the prison-model's resources to be focused  
23 upon those with the most need.  
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36 In the prison-model, the volunteers visit the Core Member whilst still in prison. CoSA  
37 sessions are held on a weekly or fortnightly basis, approximately 3 months before they are  
38 due to be released. The CoSA then continues in to the community once they are released  
39 from prison. The aim of the prison sessions is the same as when in the community; to offer  
40 support to the Core Member, whilst at the same time holding them accountable for their  
41 thoughts, feelings and behavior. It is hoped in doing this the volunteers can support the Core  
42 Member through the entire transition from prison into the community.  
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### 51 **Desistance from crime**

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53 It is argued that the most appealing definition of desistance is viewing it not as an event but a  
54 dynamic ongoing process, complete with relapses and recoveries (Willis, Levenson, & Ward,  
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2010). Expanding on this, Göbbels, Ward, and Willis (2012) have developed the Integrated Theory of Desistance from Sex Offending (ITDSO). The model consists of four phases and aims to outline a comprehensive psychological and social account of the desistance process. The first phase of this model involves the presence of a turning point, whereby the ex-offender begins to move away from their criminal lifestyle. During this phase, a critical evaluation of the offender identity takes place whereby the individual must possess the cognitive and emotional capacities to take advantage of positive opportunities as turning points; defined as ‘decisive momentum’ (Göbbels et al., 2012).

The second phase of the ITDSO involves a successful reconstruction of the self with the roles of cognitive transformation and hope being of particular importance. Individuals during this phase are beginning to make changes towards the new pro-social self and have hopes for an offense free future. The third phase focuses upon the process of re-entry and a maintained commitment to change. This requires the practical identity as non-offender, constructed in the previous phase, to be not only adopted by the individual but also acknowledged and accepted by others. The final phase of the model is normalcy, which occurs once ex-offenders define themselves completely as a non-offending member of society, who are fully reintegrated within the community. It is hoped that the benefits of being involved in a prison-model CoSA supports and enables the Core Member to reach this final stage of desistance.

The purpose of this study therefore, was to explore the expectations of release of those convicted of a sexual offense and how this develops during their participation in the prison sessions of CoSA. Exploring the expectations of release in this way may help to identify early desistance narratives and as well as illuminate whether factors required for desistance to take place are present. Leading from this therefore, the role of the prison-model

of CoSA in assisting the desistance of crime was considered in relation to the phases of Göbbel et al's (2012) ITDSO. **Method**

### Participants and Recruitment

The participants were recruited from the treatment prison in the UK where the prison-model of CoSA had been established. Individuals who had been offered and accepted a place as a Core Member on a prison-model CoSA were approached and invited to participate in the research.

To be considered as a Core Member, individuals needed to meet a number of criteria. Firstly, the individual must have had previously committed a sexual offense and currently be residing in the prison where the CoSA were due to start, which only houses those convicted, or previously convicted of a sexual offense. Secondly, they must have been assessed as medium to very-high risk using the Risk Matrix 2000. Thirdly, the individuals must be facing release from prison with little to no pro-social support in the community. This is operationalized through self-report from the individual, along with supporting evidence from their offender manager and offender supervisor. The final criteria was that the individuals must either be elderly or be defined as having intellectual disabilities. Using the IQ tests already carried out by the prison to determine treatment suitability, individuals were considered as a potential Core Member if they had an IQ of less than 80 or were over the age of 55 years. Using an IQ of below 80 ensured those with borderline ID were also considered for a CoSA place. However, for individuals who fell in the borderline range, an Adaptive Functioning Checklist (AFC) was also administered to assess adaptive and social functioning. With regard to the elderly individuals, Age UK, the largest UK charity to work with older individuals, including prisoners, have 55 as the starting age of their 'elderly' category, therefore the same was adopted for this project.

From the start of the project until the end of data collection, twelve prison-model CoSA were rolled out. Of these, nine male Core Members consented to participate in the research. As highlighted in table 1, 7 of the participants were considered elderly (55+) and 4 were assessed as having ID. In one case, the clinical lead of the psychology department at the prison and trustee of the SLF overrode these criteria. The individual was not elderly or intellectually disabled, but was still considered for a place due to evidence of a severe lack of pro-social support and very-high risk of reoffense.

For the participants in this study, the average length of time between starting the prison-model CoSA (T1) and being released from prison (T2) was 6 weeks. However, since data collection has ended, the length of the prison part of the CoSA has been extended to 3 months where possible.

[Insert table 1 here]

Procedure

The participants were interviewed just before they started the prison sessions of the CoSA (T1) and after they had completed the prison part of the CoSA and were about to be released (T2). The difference in the final sample sizes at T1 (n=9) and T2 (n=5) was due to the participants being released quickly from prison with no time for the research to take place, rather than participants dropping out or withdrawing from the research. As Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) state, qualitative research focuses upon depth rather than breadth, often relying upon small sample sizes. Therefore, rather than making claims about generalizability to larger samples, an in-depth exploration of the topic was conducted.

The Core Members had consented, through the prison staff involved in the project, to be contacted by the authors. They were therefore invited to take part in a consent interview, whereby the purpose of the research was explained and any questions answered. The interviews and repertory grids were carried out in purpose-built interview rooms at the prison.



University and prison service ethical clearance was obtained prior to any data collection taking place. Participation in all aspects of the research was voluntary, with no incentive offered for taking part.

### *Semi-structured interviews*

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were carried out with participants, one to one, to facilitate in-depth discussion and explore their personal experience. In line with Smith and Osborn's (2003) view, the participants were considered the experts on the experiences being discussed deeming it essential that they were given maximum opportunity to share their story and elaborate on any areas of personal meaning. The interviews lasted an average of 1 hour at each time point, and explored areas such as their experience or expectations of the prison sessions, their expectations and aspirations for the future, and their social network (or lack thereof). For example, 'What do you think it will be like when you leave prison?', 'Who will be there to support/ help you when you leave prison?' The flexibility of the data collection instrument enabled areas that were deemed to be important by the researcher to be probed and explored further than if a structured interview were taking place. Due to the participants potentially having intellectual disabilities (ID), the interview schedule was written in suitable language, with a Flesch readability score of 2.8. This meant the questions posed could be understood by an individual with the reading ability of a 7-year-old and therefore suitable to be used with those who had borderline to mild ID.

The interview data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The aim of this approach is to gain an in-depth understanding of the way in which people make sense of their personal and social worlds (Aresti et al., 2010) and involves a detailed examination of the participants' lives (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The researcher began the analysis process from a phenomenological perspective, empathically hearing the participants' story, before moving to a more interpretative position, using hermeneutics to

make sense of the participants' experiences and concerns (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Although there are no rigid rules for conducting IPA, Smith and Osborn (2003) offer a flexible set of guidelines which were adopted for this study.

*Repertory grids*

Repertory grids, a popular methodology used in Personal Construct Theory (PCT), enable statistical rigour to be blended with idiographic richness (Horley, 2008), making them an ideal partner to IPA. According to PCT, to interpret the current situation, test hypotheses and predict future experiences, individuals develop a unique personal construct system (Kelly, 1955). The repertory grid, is essentially a complex sorting task, which helps the researcher to develop an understanding of these constructs, the way a participant makes sense of their world and how they interpret their experience (Neimeyer, Bowman, & Saferstein, 2005). This method was chosen to help explore further how the participants construe their world, in particular regarding their past, current, and future selves. This enabled the perceived distance between their self now and self in the future to be explored as they approached their release from prison. In addition, the underlying experiences of the participants could be considered to complement the data collected from the interviews.

Each repertory grid is conducted in relation to a particular topic and involves elements and constructs. Elements of the grid are examples of this topic and usually take the form of people. For this study, the elements the participants were asked to consider were; 'self in the past', 'self now'; 'self in the future'; 'mum'; 'dad'; 'partner'; 'ex-partner'; 'friend'; 'non-offending person'; 'sex offender'; 'prison officer', and 'someone you don't like'. In cases where the elements were not applicable, i.e. they had no partner or no relationship with their mother, participants were asked to think of another meaningful person they had experienced a strong relationship with throughout their life, for example Auntie.

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3 A dyadic method was used in this study to elicit constructs from the participants. This  
4 involved two elements being presented to the participant, who were asked to describe a way  
5 in which they were similar (e.g., 'how are you now similar to your Father?'). Participants  
6 were asked to then think of the opposite of the construct forming the second pole. For  
7 example, the elements self now and father may be similar in terms being 'caring' (the  
8 emergent pole) and participants may state that someone who was the opposite of 'caring'  
9 would be 'selfish' (the implicit pole). The dyadic method has been criticised due to it  
10 producing less complex personal construct systems (Neimeyer et al., 2005). However, when  
11 considering that some of the participants had intellectual disabilities, and the difficulties they  
12 would face with more complicated methods of elicitation, the limitations of the dyadic  
13 method were arguably likely to be less damaging to the research. This process was continued  
14 using a variety of element combinations until 7-9 constructs had been elicited or saturation  
15 had been reached.

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18 As recommended by Easterby-Smith (1980), the supplied constructs were given after  
19 the rest of the constructs had been elicited so as not to influence the participants' choice of  
20 constructs. The supplied constructs were 'socially supported'/'socially isolated'; 'trusts others  
21 easily'/'untrusting'; 'intimate and meaningful relationship'/'opposite was elicited from  
22 participant'. This ensured the topic of participants' social networks was included.

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25 Finally, a seven-point Likert scale was used for the participant to rate the elements  
26 and constructs, providing meaningful rating scale for statistical analysis (Tan & Hunter, 2002).  
27 For example, Figure 1 is a completed grid, the constructs on the left of the grid correspond to  
28 the emergent pole and on the right the implicit pole (which the participant had previously  
29 chosen during the elicitation process). Low scores on the grid suggest that the individual  
30 construes themselves as more toward the emergent pole of construct. In this figure,  
31 participant 9 viewed his 'self in the past' as having a 'sense of humour' (as he rated himself 1  
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on that construct) but also viewed himself as untrusting and as having had no intimate or meaningful relationships in his life (as he rated himself as 7 on those constructs).

[Insert figure 1 here]

The analysis of the repertory grids was on the content and the structure of the participants' grids and focused on making sense of the participants' constructs. Alongside this, how the participants construed themselves in relation to their different selves (i.e. past, future), and the meaningful others in their grid, was examined. Idiogrid (see Grice 2002), a statistical program designed for this purpose, was used in conjunction with IPA as is explained below.

The repertory grid data was triangulated with the interview data during the analysis process. This mixed method approach is growing in popularity as a method of rigorous exploration of participants' meaning making (Blagden, Mann, Webster, Lee, & Williams, 2017; Yorke & Dallas, 2015), the findings of which will now be considered.

**Findings**

An analysis of the data from both time points; T1 involved 9 Core Members and T2 involved 5 of these Core Members. This analysis identified two superordinate themes; 'This time it's different' and 'The reality of the future'. Each of these encompasses two to three subordinate themes. For the purpose of this paper, however, only the those interpreted as the most important to the research question will be unpacked, including how they have developed from T1 to T2.

Superordinate Theme 1: 'This time it's different'

All but one of the participants involved in the study had a previous criminal history, with many acknowledging that they had been in and out of prison all their adult life. Despite this, all the participants appeared to believe that this time on release from prison it would be different. The reasons for this was a recognition of the social support the CoSA would

provide, along with a cognitive shift in how they viewed their situation, and in many cases their offending behavior. These will now be considered in further detail.

*'I'm not going out alone again'*

Prior to starting the prison CoSA sessions, participants stated that they would have little to no support on release from friends and family. They recognized, however that the CoSA may provide this instead, giving them someone to talk to. For the participants, this was significant as it meant that this time, unlike previous times they had been released from prison, they would not be alone.

'The support, knowing there was that amount of support out there for me, you know, just a sad, lonely old git, you know with nowhere to go, suddenly I don't need to bury my head in the sand, I know there's people there to support me, so from that point of view I feel a lot more confident.' **Extract 1, T1**

The extract here highlights how the participants construe themselves currently as lonely and sad but realise this may change. They are beginning to realise that they will have people to support them on release from prison, in the form of the volunteers, and this is improving their sense of well-being even before the CoSA has started.

By T2, the participants' well-being has continued to improve. This increase is attributed, by the participants, to the knowledge that they will be going 'through the gate' with the support of the CoSA and not alone.

I: For you so far what have been the main benefits of the circle sessions?

P: That knowing I'm not going out on my own again, I've got someone at the end of the phone that I can talk to if I need to. If I'm not getting on as well as I hope I've always got someone that I can talk to or we can meet

and have a coffee or whatever and sit and looking at problems from a different light.

I: yeah definitely, you say you're not going out on your own, how do you feel about going out?

P: Mostly happy, a lot happier than I've ever been in the past **Extract 2, T2**

As extract 2 highlights the participants are aware they will have the support from the CoSA on release and this appears to increase their happiness. This resonates with research carried out on the first 60 community CoSA in the UK, whereby 70% of the Core Member's case files documented an improvement in well-being through being part of a CoSA (Bates, Macrae, Williams, & Webb, 2012).

In relation to this, the prison sessions allow for the dynamics of the CoSA to settle and relationships to be built, before the transitional period of release commences.

I: How do you feel about the (CoSA) meetings as they've been going on then?

P: it's making me feel, how can I explain it, a bit more relaxed and slowly I'm starting to build up that relationship and also that trust and that's how it's gotta be. **Extract 3, T2**

This extract highlights how the relationships between Core Members and volunteers can be built at a slower pace, which was particularly important for those with trust and paranoia issues. The prison sessions of the CoSA enabled these issues to be worked through and overcome, giving the participants time to establish relationships with the volunteers, and vice versa. This was particularly useful for the individuals in this study, due to the existing difficulties they experienced in forming and maintaining healthy relationships with family

and friends. The additional time spent in the prison sessions however, enabled the CoSA, by the point of release, to be ready to deal with and work on any problems the participants encountered as they entered the community (see Tewksbury, 2012; Tewksbury & Copes, 2013 for a detailed outline on the issues those convicted of sexual offenses experience on release from prison).

Adding to this increased sense of support and well-being is the knowledge that the support on release will be provided by 'normal' people, that is non-professionals who are not paid to spend time with them.

P: 'Well as I said if I get problems and I've got somebody to go out with, you know I can go to a pub or I can go for long walks and they're gonna come with me and we can talk about anything.'

I: How's that make you feel, you know knowing you've got people to do normal things with on release?

P: Wonderful, I've never had it before, never ever had it, I've been out with people and there's been a reason I've been out with them for this, that or the other, or I've wanted to get close to them, nothing was genuine but they make me feel genuine, they are good people.' **Extract 4, T2**

This extract highlights how many of the participants have never experienced genuine relationships with pro-social, law-abiding people before. This disconnectedness from social supports and a sense of alienation from society has been identified within those who were still actively offending (Farmer, Beech, & Ward, 2012). The participants' knowledge however, that they will have the support from 'normal' individuals on release appears to provide them with a sense of belonging, which has been highlighted as a necessary factor in achieving desistance. For example, positive pro-social relationships are believed to orient ex-

offenders towards an optimistic and hopeful perspective, thus motivating them to live pro-social, crime free lives on release from prison (Visher & O’Connell; 2012). Weaver and McNeill (2015) similarly explain how positive social relationships can encourage a shift in identity towards desistance through a sense of ‘we-ness’; a sense of belonging that enables an individual to realise their aspirations without becoming dependent. They argue strongly that personal change alone is not enough to achieve desistance, instead it should also be recognized and supported by the community, which in the case of the participants may be achieved through a CoSA.

*Cognitive change*

From the data collected from both time points it appeared evident that, for the participants, this time the lead up to release was different. Not only would they have support but many appeared to have developed a cognitive shift in how they viewed their situation, and in many cases their offending behavior, which was attributed to the treatment programs they had participated in previously whilst in prison.

‘I’ve learnt quite a lot since the past. I mean looking at my situation now before, in prison I couldn’t give a hoot, I’d just get on, I’d just get on and do it but now I’m planning now for when I get out.’ **Extract 5, T1**

This extract highlights how, even during T1, the participants believe their release from prison would be different to how it had been in the past, due to what they had learnt this time in prison.

‘Now I understand a bit more about the victim and how they felt, it’s like not sort of something you can deal with, it’s something that is ongoing for life.’ **Extract 6, T1**



Similarly, this extract explains how the participants now understood the consequences of their previous offending behavior. King (2013b) has stated that a clarity surrounding past offenses and offending behavior, combined with an increased sense of agency over one's future, can provide a turning point whereby a new narrative could emerge. These pro-social narratives, as can be seen in the extracts from the participants, can encourage the move away from crime by conditioning future behavior and social interaction (Presser, 2009). However, it is crucial that these early narratives receive positive reactions and testimonies from others to facilitate longer-term desistance (King, 2013b).

Indeed, this cognitive transformation is encouraged within all CoSA. During the prison sessions, pro social plans for release were reinforced along with the discussion of any potential barriers to achieving them. The participants were beginning to think pro-actively about what they would need to do differently to establish an offense-free, pro-social life on release.

'I've got to stop running away from problems and solve the problems. In the past I would run away from problems and a small problem would soon become a massive problem, this time it's about dealing with any small problems that crop up and getting on so that small problems are easily fixed. Massive problems are a lot harder to fix and they're the ones that are likely to lead to me getting in to trouble. Small problems if they're dealt with, they're not really problems'. **Extract 7, T2**

By T2, the participants had begun to develop a sense of agency over their future. Rather than letting the small problems build, they were planning to take control of their life outside of prison from the beginning, enabling them to overcome any challenges as they arise.

P: Right I've spoken to \*\*\*\*\* (co-ordinator) about it and the group, when I get out I'm going to go to various places cause I've got to start thinking about disclosing my crime to people, we're gonna go through that next time apparently, we're going to talk as though we don't know each other.

I: Like role plays?

P: Yeah role plays, 'who are you? Where do you come from?' **Extract 8, T2**

This extract highlights how the prison sessions of the CoSA encouraged this sense of agency, helping the participants to feel prepared to face the outside world on release from prison. For the participants with ID, roleplays were particularly helpful in preparing them for release. Individuals with ID experience a range of cognitive deficits, which can affect the way they process information, for example, concentration on and comprehension of what is being said to individuals with ID is likely to be limited (Craig & Hutchinson, 2005). The volunteer training for the prison-model of CoSA involves specific guidance for how to work most effectively with these individuals. For example, breaking information down in to small chunks, reducing the speed of what is being said and the use of pictures and drawings to help explain complex concepts (Craig & Hutchinson, 2005). The extract indicates that the guidance appears to have been taken on board by the volunteers and being used effectively in the prison sessions to help increase the participants' sense of agency.

This is particularly important when considering the pathway to successful desistance from crime. From their analysis of multiple interviews with repeat offenders LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, and Bushway (2008) argue that belief in one's ability to 'go straight', along with an adequate sense of hope, was a necessary condition for an individual to be able to desist from

crime. For the participants in this study, an increased sense of agency over their future could lead to a future free from crime.

The development of these cognitive changes was illuminated further in the self-identity plots derived from the participants' repertory grid data. These plots, along with a brief commentary, can be viewed in the online supplement of this journal.

#### Superordinate Theme 2: The reality of the future

The above data highlights the positive benefits of the prison sessions in relation to enabling the participants to feel supported whilst having their new prosocial-self reinforced, thus encouraging cognitive change. Despite having the extra support of the prison sessions, however, the underlying concern of society's opinion of those who commit sexual offenses remains.

#### *'I'll never be truly free'*

Although the participants have the support of the CoSA volunteers, their concern that this may not be representational of all members of the community is evident from data collected at both time points. The participants express a concern that they will never be truly free from the 'sex offender' label. It is argued that the term 'sex offender' is the most highly stigmatised label in modern societies, with 'sex offender' status becoming the master status above all other identities the person may have, such as a father or even a human being (Mingus & Burchfield, 2012). Despite the participants' positivity when discussing their release from prison, they are also aware of this stigma, suggesting that they may be doubting whether the reality of their future will be in line with how they construe it ideally.

'although I was here 26 years ago for a similar offense, there wasn't so much stigma about it back then but this time I'm getting out and a bit weary 'sex offender' you know and now I'll have to disclose about my offense and things like that. It's a bit worrying on that side of it you know

and to get in to a relationship I'm going to have to tell them before hand  
and will they still want to be friends' **Extract 9, T1**

'I'm concerned about going to a hostel where people might find out you're  
a vulnerable prisoner...that's a worry erm because you don't know what  
people know or can find out and you know erm so yeah I'm just generally  
scared to be honest' **Extract 10, T1**

What resonates here from these two T1 extracts is the fear the participants associate with  
release. This fear is unsurprising given the representation in the media of those who commit  
sexual offenses as terrifying and loathsome (Nellis, 2009). Similar to this study, participants  
from Tewksbury and Lees' (2006) research believed that they would never be able to escape  
the 'sex offender' label imposed on them by society and be accepted back in to the  
community, no matter how pro-socially they tried to live their lives. Instead of controlling  
future sex crimes, public shaming and stigmatisation socially isolates and excludes the ex-  
offenders, making it difficult for them to reintegrate successfully back into communities  
(Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). At T2, this fear is still evident, with participants starting to think  
about how members of the community may react to them once they are released.

I: How do you feel about having to disclose everything to new people you  
meet?

P: It would depend on the situation and depending on how well I know  
them and how well I trusted them because not everybody you could turn  
round after you've met them once or twice and say 'oh by the way I'm a  
convicted sex offender' because some people's reaction would be wallop.  
They wouldn't actually listen because there's two sides to every story, all  
they see is the offense **Extract 11, T2**

This extract highlights how the participants are aware that many of the people they will come in to contact with may not be able to see past their previous sexual offense. This requires the participants to negotiate the 'sex offender' label, only disclosing their previous offending behavior to those they can trust. Indeed, fear of being judged, or worse, rejected, has been reported as an important underlying factor to influence the disclosure and admittance of previous offenses (Blagden, Winder, Thorne, & Gregson, 2011). This feeling of being judged by people within society was apparent within all participants of this study, as the following extracts indicate.

I: So what are your hopes going forward?

P: Get back to normal, whatever that was, is

I: I was just about to say what's normal?

P: There is no normal once you've been inside really, you're forever under conditions, even after probation finishes you're still under conditions, you're not free really **Extract 12, T2**

I: Ok and how are you feeling just in yourself coming up to release then?

P: Makes no difference, cause I know I'm going out there's no SOPO, no licence no nothing but at the end of the day it's like you've got to keep proving yourself.

I: What do you mean?

P: Like now there's something telling me I've got to keep proving myself to everybody else and I don't wanna be like that, I just wanna be myself.

**Extract 13, T2**

These two extracts highlight the participants’ fear that they will never be truly free of their past, suggesting that they are aware of how difficult it may be to distance themselves from the ‘sex offender’ label. A principal component analysis (PCA) of the repertory grids offers further insight in to the underlying participants’ experience during their time on the prison part of the circle (Leach, Freshwater, Aldridge, & Sunderland, 2001; Mason, 2003). A PCA provides a graphical output of an individual’s construal system, which shows the internal relationship between the people important in the participant’s world (elements represented as points) and the way they understand and construe them (constructs represented as lines from the origin) (Jankowicz, 2004).

[Insert figure 2 here]

[Insert figure 3 here]

Figures 2 and 3 represent almost all the participants’ data, whereby the element ‘self in the past’ is diametrically opposed to the other ‘self’ elements and construed on the negative poles of their constructs. This demonstrates how much they construe themselves now to have changed from how they were in the past, in line with the previous theme. Self now and self in the future are also close together on the graph showing that they construe themselves to be moving towards where they would like to be in the future, again something which the participants have discussed in their narratives. However, the eigenvalues for the Varimax rotated components of the two graphs suggest there is more going on under the surface, which they may not be so openly talking about.

A percentage in variance for the two components on the PCA of 80% or above can indicate tight construing within the participant (Winter, 1992). With the support of the CoSA and the positive themes derived from the narratives it may be presumed that the participants’ levels of anxiety would decrease. For most of the participants however, it actually stays the same or increases slightly. For example, for the participant in figures 2 and 3, by T2 in their

prison-model CoSA journey the Eigenvalues for Varimax rotated components show that PC 1 and 2 account for 97.74% of the variability in the repertory grid; a slight increase from before they met the volunteers in T1 (93.7%). The PCA output in figure 2 and 3 also identifies two tight groupings of constructs which fall within only two of the quadrants, which again suggests tight construing. This, according to Kelly (1955), is a result of anxiety, involving the awareness that the events an individual is confronted with lie mostly outside the range of their construct system. For all the participants, the reality of their future as a pro-social member of the community is unknown. In addition, this narrowing of the perceptual field enables individuals to not attend to any uncomfortable information (Kelly, 1955). Although the participants are positive about release and construe it as a fresh start, they appear to still have underlying feelings of anxiety as it approaches, which enables an almost defensive position to be taken. Release from prison may not be everything they hope it can be and this narrowing of the perceptual field is preparing them for this.

The themes in this study highlight the steps most of the participants have made whilst in prison towards a new, offense free life. This is however, for all of the participants', the first time they have been released in this frame of mind, thus they are entering the unknown. There are some significant hurdles for the participants to overcome still, such as settling in to a new area and establishing pro social networks outside of the CoSA, indicating that there is some distance for them to travel before they are established as pro-social members of the community.

## Discussion

This study used a unique mixed-methodology combining qualitative interviews and repertory grids, enabling the analysis to go beyond the verbalisations of the participants. One of the main findings of this evaluation is that participants realised they would no longer be alone on release from prison, resulting in what appeared to be an increase in well-being. This

is particularly important as those who have a positive support system in their lives demonstrate significantly lower sexual recidivism rates than those with negative or no support (Levenson & Hern, 2007). In addition, this period of transition can be a considerably more vulnerable time for those with intellectual disabilities or who are elderly due to additional difficulties in establishing a social network (Cummins & Lau, 2003; Crawley & Sparks, 2006). Offering support to the Core Members whilst they are still in prison may help them enter the community with a positive support system in place.

In addition to the presence of support, there appeared to be a sense of change within the participants. This can be linked to the first phase of the Integrated Theory of Desistance from Sex Offending (ITDSO) developed by Göbbels et al. (2012). The first phase of this model involves the presence of a turning point. Capitalising on this decisive momentum, as the authors term it, can only occur if a person is open to change, which is also highlighted in the findings of this study. Farmer, Beech, and Ward (2012) reported, in relation to sex offender treatment programs, that only those who had gone on to successfully desist from committing sexual offenses had been able to use the experience as a ‘hook for change’. Similarly, LeBel et al., (2008) argue that self-identification as a pro social person, rather than as an offender, can enable an individual to take advantage of positive social opportunities, which may reduce the chances of future re-offending.

The outcome of the second (rehabilitation) phase of the ITDSO (Göbbels et al., 2012) is a reconstruction of the self, which involves reinforcing plausible pro-social narratives of desistance. King (2013a) argues it is relationships like those between the volunteers and the Core Member of a CoSA that provide support whilst at the same time nurturing pro-social narratives, which encourage desistance. Fox (2015) argued, from her research on CoSA, that volunteers could encourage a more enduring pro-social identity for the Core Member and help maintain optimism for this positive sense of self. Not only can a CoSA provide support



for someone convicted of a sexual offense, it can also encourage hope and motivation to change, keeping it alive when, as the data in the second superordinate theme suggests, belief in themselves may waver (McNeill, 2009).

Deeper anxieties were identified as the participants approached their release from prison. Despite the support of the CoSA and the progress being made towards change, underlying anxieties remained, or even increased slightly, the closer they came to leaving prison. These findings at first appear surprising considering the positive narratives in the previous superordinate theme. However, an underlying cause of this anxiety appeared to be a fear of the stigmatisation that awaits them on release, with many feeling that they would never be truly free of the 'sex offender' label. Due to the prison-model CoSA involving members of the general community, it is possible that the confrontation with the community's opinion is also starting early; prior to release. Indeed, the internalisation of the social prejudice towards ex-offenders has been reported as predicting both reconviction and re-imprisonment (LeBel et al., 2008), meaning the underlying anxieties of the Core Members could prove detrimental if not addressed. Recent research however, has demonstrated CoSA volunteers have more positive attitudes towards those who commit sexual offenses than the general public (Kerr, Tully, & Völlm, 2017). Further research is required therefore, to explore the causes of this increase in anxiety in more detail.

The third phase of Göbbels et al.'s (2012) model of desistance, re-entry, can be seen as a process beginning well before release and continuing after the individuals have re-joined society. In this phase, the recognition and acceptance of this new non-offender identity, by people in their social environment, serves to reinforce the commitment to change and weakens further the deviant, offender identity. The lack of support ex-offenders receive during this transitional period from prison to community can make the process difficult and uncertain (Elliott & Zajac, 2015). One limitation of the community CoSA in the UK is that

they are unable to offer support during this phase, due to the CoSAs not starting until the potential Core Member has been back in the community, often for up to twelve weeks. Starting a CoSA whilst the Core Member is still in prison enables the CoSA to be well established so that support is firmly in place once this third phase of desistance is reached. Further research is now required however, to determine whether the reinforcement of the new pro-social self, by the volunteers during release and into the community, is enough for the participants to progress through this third stage of the ITDSO and reach the final phase of desistance.

Limitations

One potential limitation of this study is that the Core Members may have felt obliged to speak positively about their experience so far on the CoSA. The confidentiality of the data given by the participants was explained on several occasions, thus reducing the concerns of a self-report bias. Future research, however could consider collecting observations, from CoSA volunteers and coordinators, of any Core Member progress or changes, thus reducing the possibility of such a bias even further.

The limited sample size restricts the conclusions that can be drawn from the data. The smaller sample size at T2 specifically means we are unable to generalize the findings to all of the prison CoSAs. Prospective studies using larger sample sizes are recommended to enable further exploration of the findings.

Conclusion

CoSA in the prison-model provides a sense of support and a feeling of ‘no longer being alone’, which is often absent in people who have offended sexually but present in those who successful desist from such crime. The additional prison sessions enabled the participants to experience these feelings during their approaching release date, a stressful period that was characterised by anxiety. Further research is now required to explore whether prison-model

CoSAs are able to encourage and reinforce the emerging cognitive change required for desistance, thus enabling the Core Members to successfully manage their underlying anxieties surrounding societal stigmatisation. This would allow further exploration in to the whether the prison-model of CoSA is best placed, with regard to the ITDSO (Göbbels et al., 2012), to provide assisted desistance to those convicted and imprisoned for sexual offenses.

For Peer Review

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**Table 1.** Participant information

Participant Number	Participant Age	Intellectual Disability	Health issues	Risk level (RM2000)	Lack of pro-social support	Length of prison sessions
1	60	Yes - mild	Yes - physical	Medium	Yes	2 months, 1 week
2	60	No	Yes - physical	Medium	Yes	2 weeks
3	60	Yes - mild	Yes - physical	Very high	Yes	3 months, 2 weeks
4	45	Borderline	No	Medium	Yes	1 month, 1 week
5	58	No	Yes - mental	Medium	Yes	1 month
6	78	No	Yes – physical and mental	Medium	Yes	1 month
7	73	No	No	Very high	Yes	IPP sentence (parole date not confirmed)
8	64	Yes – mild	No	High	Yes	3 weeks
9	52	No	No	Very high	Yes	1 month, 2 weeks

Original Grid (Participant 9 - Pre-circle grid)

		Self in the past		Self now											
				Self in the future											
				Mum		Dad									
							Friend								
								Brother							
									Sex offender						
										Non-offending person					
											Prison officer				
												OMU			
													Someone you don't like		
	Hardworking	3.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	3.00	1.00	2.00	2.00	3.00	Work shy/ Lazy	
Approachable/ go to them with problems		5.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	3.00	3.00	5.00	Don't care	
	A sense of humour	1.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	3.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	3.00	3.00	5.00	Moping/ complaining a lot	
	Appreciative of life	3.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	1.00	4.00	1.00	3.00	3.00	5.00	Expects everything on a plate	
	Has humanity	3.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	1.00	3.00	1.00	2.00	2.00	4.00	Judgemental	
	Helps others/ caring	3.00	2.00	1.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	2.00	3.00	1.00	2.00	2.00	6.00	Stand offish	
	Puts other people first	3.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	2.00	1.00	2.00	1.00	2.00	2.00	5.00	Selfish	
	Trusts others easily	7.00	3.00	1.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	2.00	5.00	2.00	4.00	4.00	7.00	Untrusting	
	Socially supported	6.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	5.00	1.00	2.00	2.00	1.00	Socially isolated	
	Intimate/ meaningful relationships	7.00	4.00	2.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	3.00	1.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	A loner	

Figure 2. Principal components analysis (Varimax rotated): Participant 7, T1

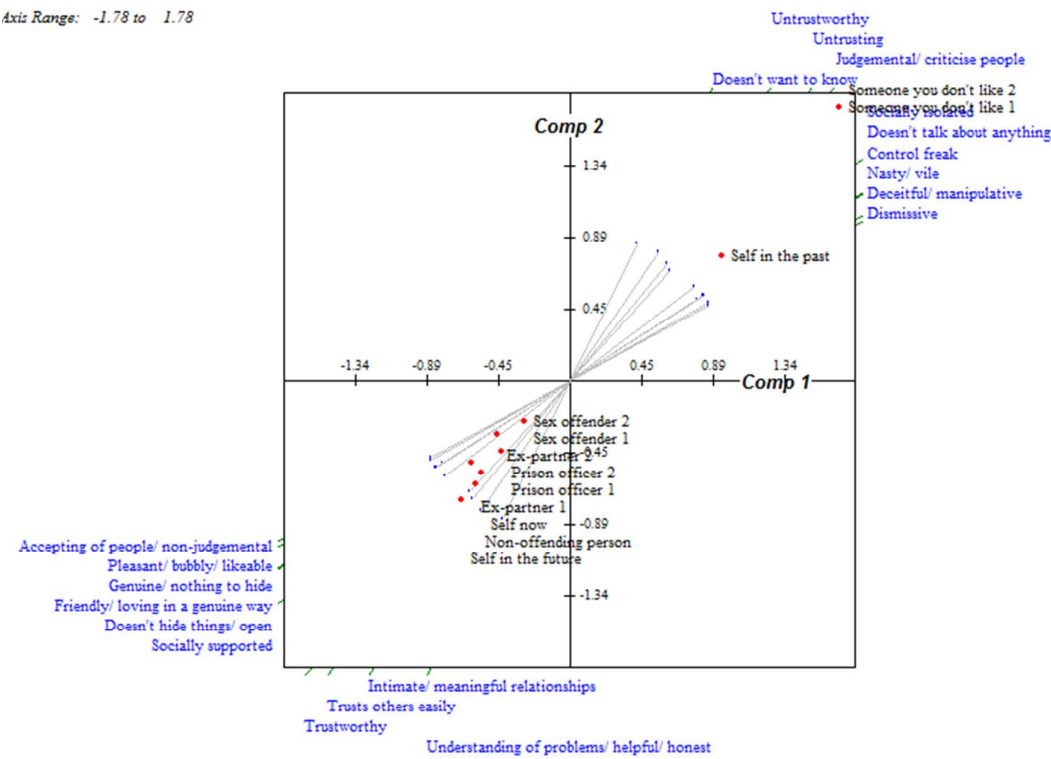
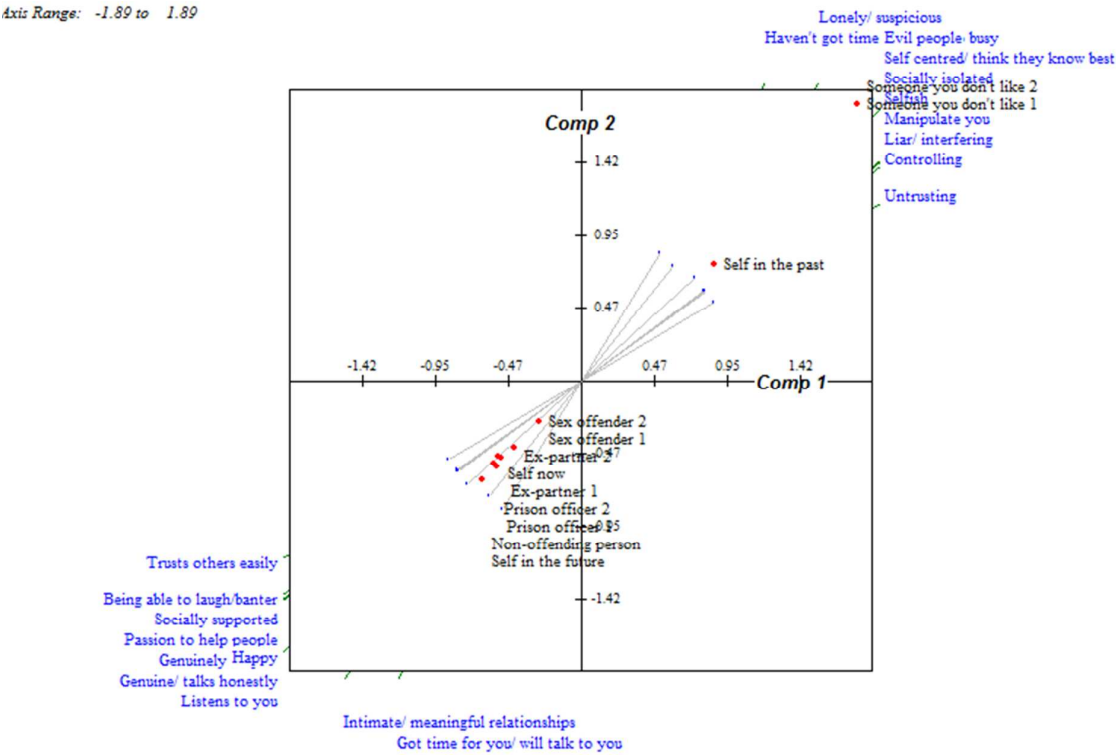


Figure 3. Principal components analysis (Varimax rotated): Participant 7, T2



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For Peer Review

The importance of self-identity in the process of change and sexual offending desistance has been reported within the literature (e.g. Blagden, Winder, Gregson, & Thorne, 2012; Mason, 2003). The development of the cognitive changes within the participants between T1 and T2 was illuminated further in the repertory grid data, specifically the self-identity plots. These are a graphical method, which use two elements to form a two-dimensional space (Norris & Makhoul-Norris, 1976). Any combination of elements can be used to achieve this, however in the case of this study, the ‘Self now’ and ‘Self in the future’ were used. The standardised Euclidean distances between the elements in the grid are then plotted in this two-dimensional space providing a summary of the relationships among the elements (Grice, 2002). In doing this, a self-identity plot shows the relationship between those elements a person views as important and meaningful in their world and highlights the way they construe the self and others. In addition, a self-identity plot can document an individuals’ self-identity in the process of change and desistance from crime by considering the spatial position of the element ‘self-now’ compared to the elements ‘self in the past’ and ‘self in the future’.

[Insert figure S1 here]

[Insert figure S2 here]

For participant 1, the self-identity plots highlight how by the second time point the ‘self now’ is construed as much closer to the pro-social elements in his repertory grid. For example, his friend, ex-partner, prison officer, non-offending person and Mother are all within a closer distance than in T1. This indicate that during the prison sessions of the CoSA the way he construes himself has begun to change; he now views himself as more pro-social than before. As will be discussed later in this section, however, there is still some distance for this participant to travel for him to reach his ideal ‘future self’.

[Insert figure s3 here]



[Insert figure s4 here]

Two points to note from participant 3's self-identity plots are the change in position of the three 'selves' between T1 and T2. By the second timepoint the 'self in the past' has moved to a more central position, whilst there appears to be a greater distance between the 'self now' and the 'self in the future'. As highlighted earlier, as well as in the main paper, self-identity change towards a more pro-social self is key in the desistance process. These changes will therefore be returned to and discussed later in this section.

[Insert figure S5 here]

[Insert figure S6 here]

Interestingly figures S1 to S6 illustrate how although in the same quadrant there is still some distance to be travelled between the 'self now' and 'self in the future' for these 3 participants. The 'self in the future' appears in some cases further away from 'self now' by timepoint 2. This incongruence, between how the participants construe themselves now and how they construe themselves to be ideally in the future, is initially surprising as it appears to conflict with the positive themes derived from the interview data. It is possible that this increase in distance between the two elements, as release approaches, represents the participants developing a more realistic conception of becoming the pro-social, non-offending person they wish to be; a concept which is captured further in the second superordinate theme discussed within the main paper.

[Insert figure S7 here]

[Insert figure S8 here]

Participant 8’s self-identity plots do not appear to demonstrate the changes in the same way as the other participants’ within the study, with the plots from the two timepoints looking almost identical. The only slight change is the positioning of the ‘self in the past’ element, which will be discussed later in the section. The absence of change between the two plots could be due to the extensive sex offender treatment work the participant had undergone prior to beginning the CoSA. For example, he may have addressed his thoughts and behaviour to such an extent prior to meeting the volunteers that in terms of cognitive change, the role of the CoSA was to support and encourage this rather than help develop it first. This is purely surmising at this point however, with more research needed to explore further these considerations further.

[Insert figure S9 here]

[Insert figure S10 here]

The final point to highlight from the participants’ self-identity plots is that figures S7 to S10, along with S3 and S5 also, appear to demonstrate a shift in the participants’ construing of their past offending self. At T1, the element ‘self in the past’ is diametrically opposite to the ‘self now’, by T2 the same element is almost at the origin of the plot. If an element falls within the centre in what is referred to as the ‘zone of indifference’, as is the case here, then it suggests that the element has not been given much consideration. This indicates that, by the

end of the prison sessions, the participants are no longer associating themselves with the person they were in the past suggesting a cognitive transformation may be taking place. The rest of the research, outlined in the main paper, now considers the superordinate theme derived from the participants' data; 'the reality of the future'.

## References

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Figure S1. Self-identity plot: Participant 1, T1

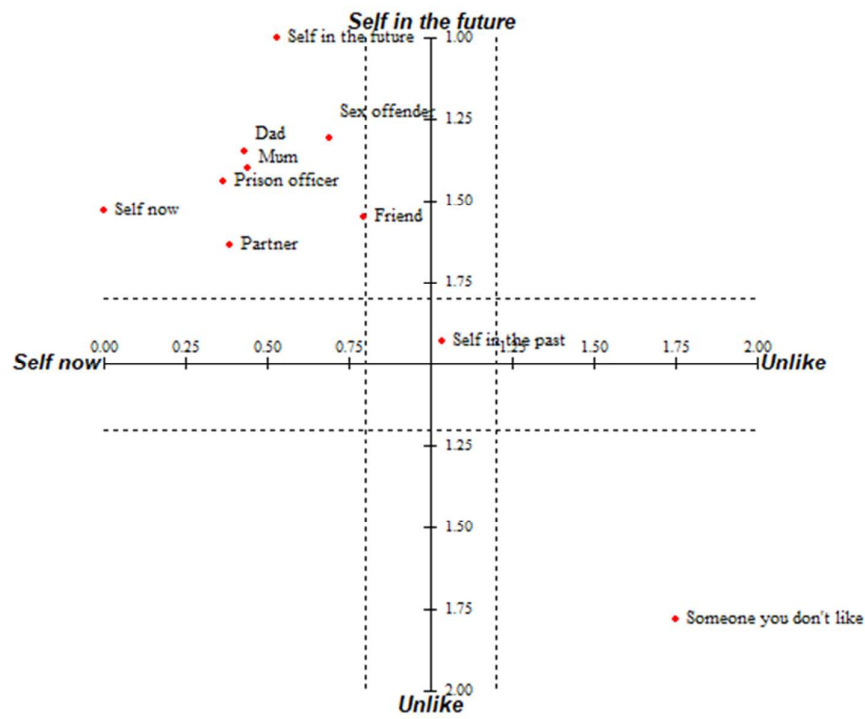


Figure S2. Self-identity plot: Participant 1, T2

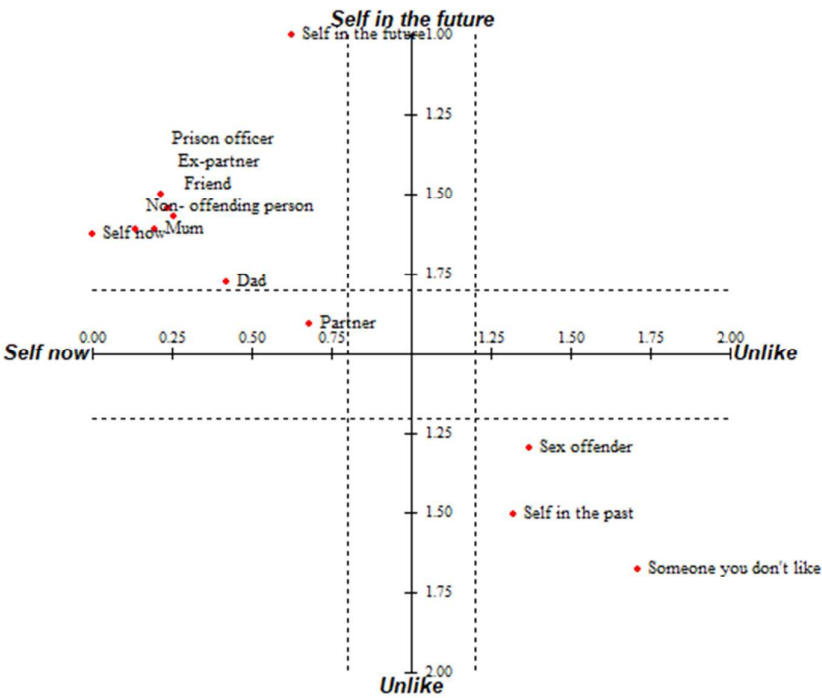


Figure S3. Self-identity plot: Participant 3, T1

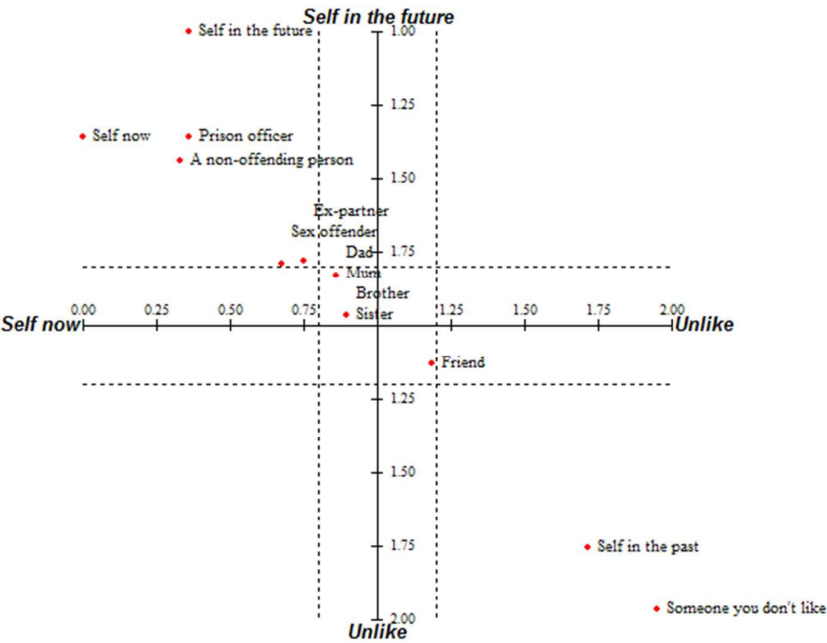


Figure S4. Self-identity plot: Participant 3, T2

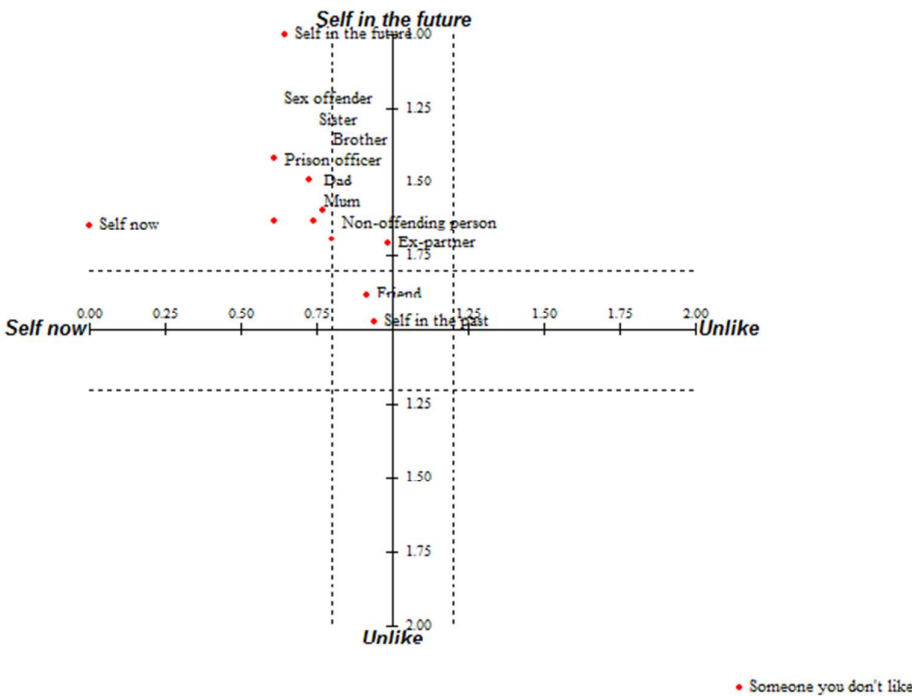


Figure S5. Self-identity plot: Participant 4, T1

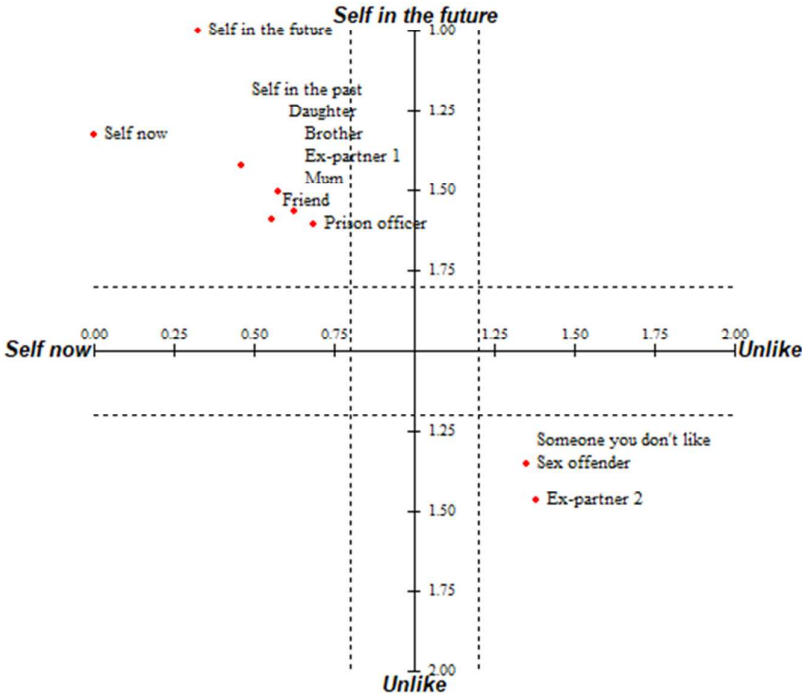




Figure S6. Self-identity plot: Participant 4, T2

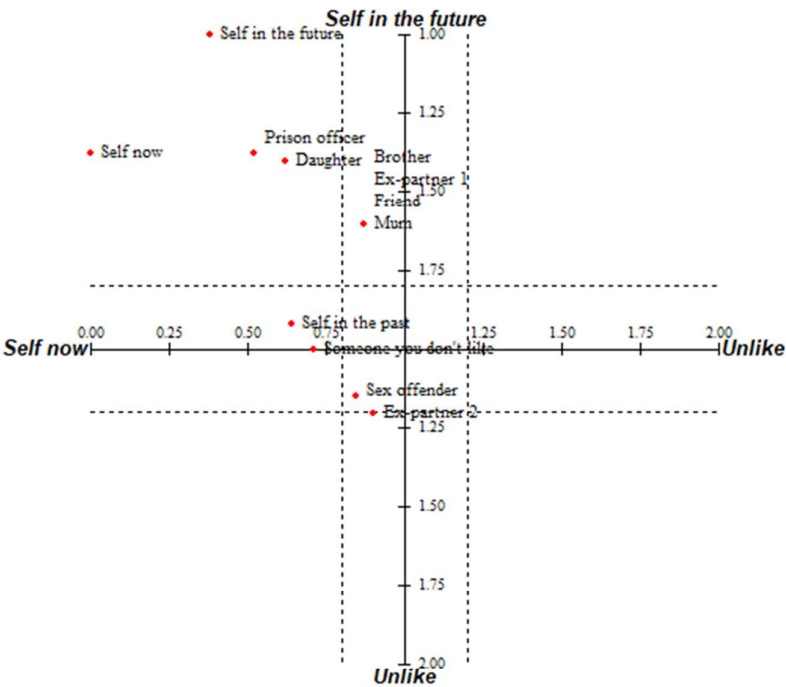


Figure S7. Self-identity plot: Participant 7, T1

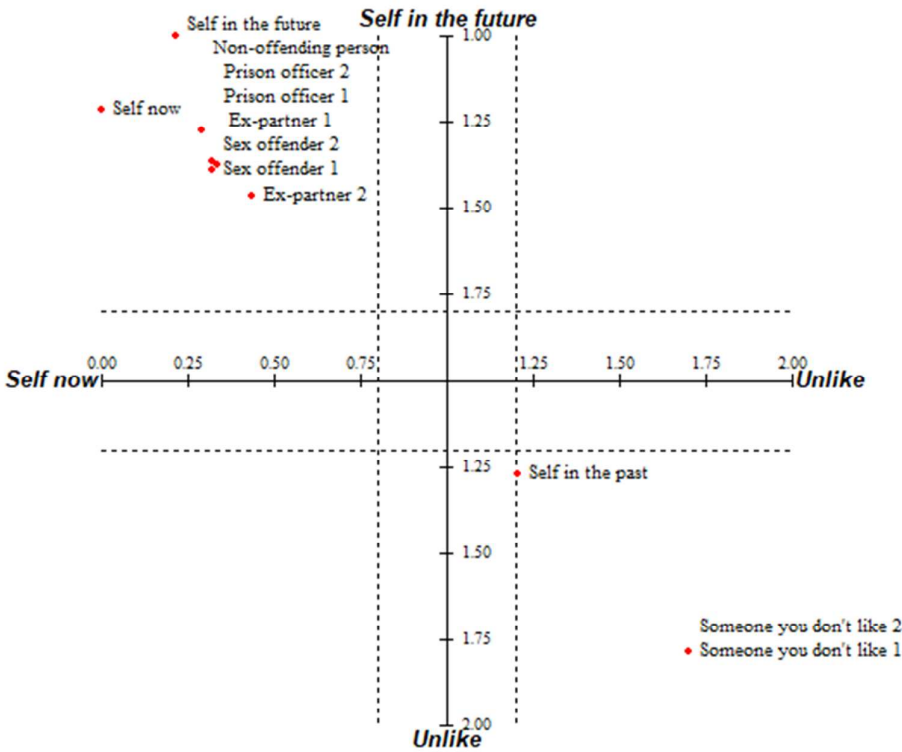


Figure S8. Self-identity plot: Participant 7, T2

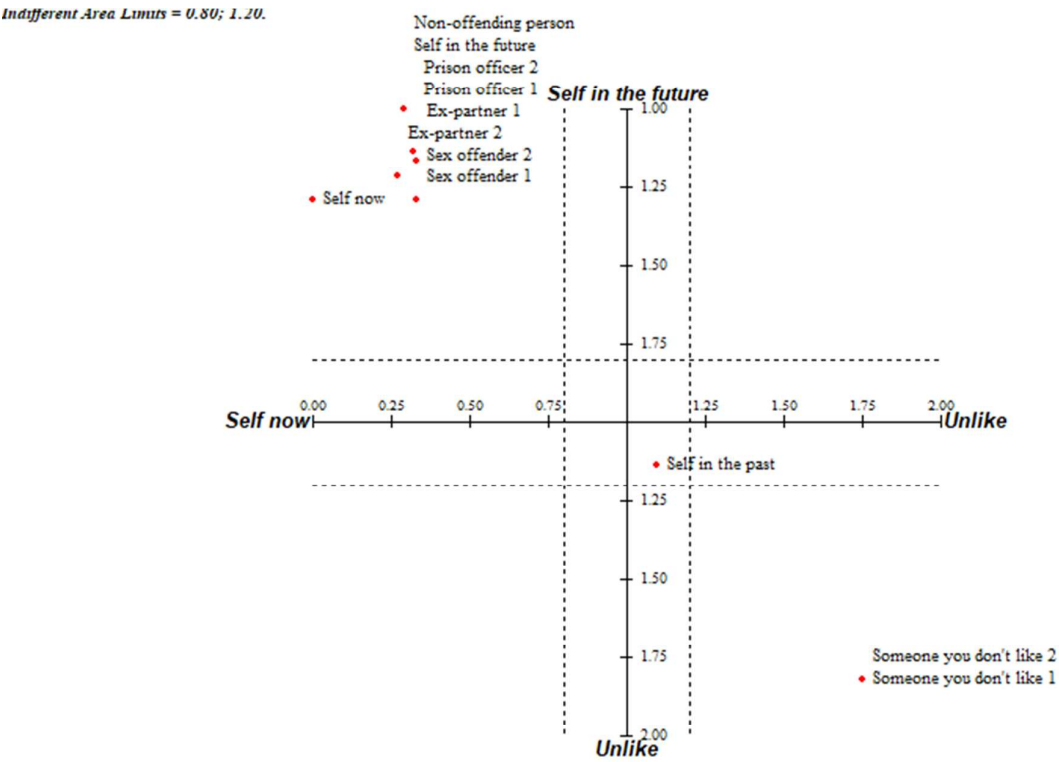


Figure S9. Self-identity plot: Participant 9, T1

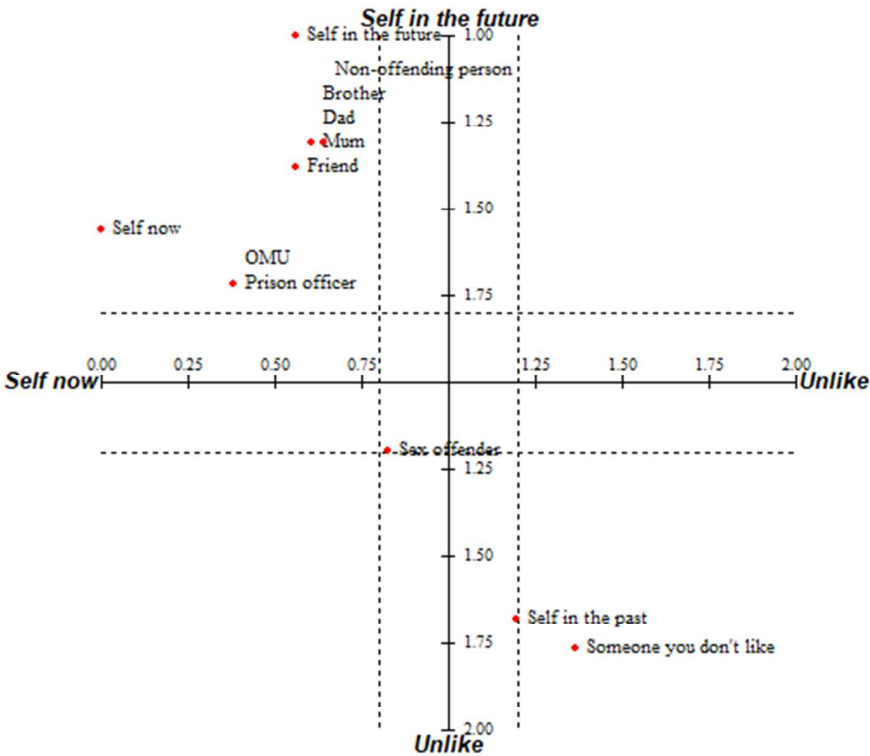


Figure S10. Self-identity plot: Participant 9, T2

