‘People don’t like you when you’re different’: Exploring the prison experiences of autistic individuals.

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Abstract

There is little research regarding the prison experiences of individuals diagnosed with autism. Extant literature suggests that prison presents numerous challenges for autistic prisoners. This research explored the experiences of seven autistic men in a UK prison that houses individuals who are serving sentences for sexual convictions. Participants were interviewed using semi-structured interview schedules. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed with an applied inductive thematic analysis. The latter explicitly focuses on generating commonalities that emerge from the data that have practical (applied) utility. The analysis generated three superordinate themes: '*Interacting with others*', '*Being in prison*', and '*My autism*'. Participants described both helpful and challenging aspects of the prison experience, and the findings give rise to important implications and considerations regarding the prison experience of autistic individuals. This paper concludes by outlining practical recommendations for prisons to improve the management and support of autistic residents.

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Introduction

The 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) introduced Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a single spectrum condition, to replace what were previously presented as several distinct Pervasive Developmental Disorders in the DSM-IV (APA, 1994). The DSM-V defines ASD as a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition prevalent in approximately 1% of the general population, which is characterised by difficulties in social communication and interaction, accompanied by restrictive and repetitive behaviours, thoughts and interests (RRB) (APA, 2013). Additionally, sensory processing differences such as hyper-reactivity (increased sensitivity) and hypo-reactivity (reduced sensitivity) to particular sensory stimuli are common among autistic individuals (Crane, Goddard & Pring, 2009). While sensory issues are not required for an autism diagnosis under the DSM-V (APA, 2013), appearing instead as a subdomain of the RRB feature, there is an increasing recognition of sensory processing differences in autism and the challenges that these can pose (Hazen, Stornelli, O’Rourke, Koesterer & McDougle, 2014).

While ASD is the most recent diagnostic label, for the purposes of this paper; the alternative term ‘autism’ will be used hereafter. This represents a move away from the medical model view of autism as a disorder or deficit to a more neurodivergent conceptualisation of autism (Woods, 2017). Additionally, to reflect the preferences of the autistic community, reported by Kenny et al. (2016), this paper will refer to individuals diagnosed with ASD as ‘autistic individuals’, as opposed to ‘individuals with autism’.

Autism and Offending

Autistic individuals are no more likely to offend than those without autism and are in fact more likely to become victims of crime (National Autistic Society, 2017). However, it has been suggested that, when autistic individuals do offend, their offending behaviour can often be partly attributed to their autism (Allely & Creaby-Attwood, 2016; Browning & Caulfield, 2011). It has been reported that sexual offences and arson offences are two of the most common types of crimes committed by autistic people (Mouridsen, 2012). Indeed, there has been an increased interest in contemporary research around autism and sexual offending, however this body of research is still limited. The research that *does* exist suggests that while autism does not predispose an individual to commit sexual offences, autistic traits may contribute toward the lead up to committing sexual offences (Murrie, Warren, Kristiansson, & Dietz, 2002). For example, a strong fixed interest, stemming from RRB traits, may manifest as a sexual preoccupation, or may be focused upon a particular individual. Such a strong preoccupied interest could potentially become a dangerous antecedent to sexual offending, particularly when partnered with social interaction and communication difficulties (Chan & Saluja, 2011; Ray, Marks, & Bray-Garretson, 2004). Similarly, social interaction difficulties could contribute toward the lead up to a sexual offence; for example through a misinterpretation of social cues that indicate sexual interest from a potential victim, difficulty

recognising indicators of fear in others, or misunderstanding appropriate socio-sexual conventions (Allely & Creaby-Attwood, 2016; Murrie et al., 2002).

Autism and the Criminal Justice System

If an autistic individual does commit an offence(s) and comes into contact with the criminal justice system (CJS), they may face further challenges relating to features of their autism. For example, when confronted about their crimes, it has been observed that some autistic individuals can appear remorseless or non-empathetic regarding their actions and victim(s) (Haskins & Silva, 2006). Research has clarified that this is not a psychopathic deficiency in empathy, but a difficulty intuiting what others may think or feel (Jones, Happé, Gilbert, Burnett, & Viding, 2010). Nevertheless, difficulties in expressing remorse and appreciating how others think or feel can have problematic consequences during the criminal justice process for autistic defendants, particularly if the individual's autism is undiagnosed. What appears to others as a lack of remorse and acceptance of accountability for their crimes could result in harsher treatment and sentencing in police and court contexts (Murrie et al, 2002).

Receiving and serving a prison sentence can be an extremely stressful experience. For autistic individuals, this stress may be amplified as they are confronted by a number of unique challenges related to their autism (Lewis, Pritchett, Hughes & Turner, 2015). The prevalence of autistic individuals serving sentences in UK prisons has not been reliably established (Archer & Hurley, 2013; Robinson et al., 2012); however, extant literature suggests that there may be a hidden population of undiagnosed autistic prisoners (de la Cuesta, 2010; Myers, 2004). There is currently a lack of universally-administered appropriate autism screening tools, empirically validated for use in prison settings (Archer & Hurley, 2013). While there have been reported attempts to design effective autism screening techniques in prison settings (see Robinson et al., 2012), there is yet to be an established validated and reliable screening method (McCarthy et al., 2015). The problem of autism identification in prison populations is complicated by difficulties clinicians face in obtaining prisoners' developmental histories (Underwood, Forrester, Chaplin, & McCarthy, 2013), as well as the potential misattribution of autistic traits to other mental health conditions that present similarly (Allen et al., 2008). There is also limited awareness and understanding of autism across CJS staff, including in prison staff, which may contribute to a reduced availability in support for autistic individuals in the CJS (McCarthy et al., 2015). It has been suggested that, as a result of the difficulties prisons face in identifying autism in prisoners, and the limited awareness and understanding of autism in the CJS, it is plausible that there may be autistic prisoners who are currently not being appropriately managed, and require additional support (Mouridsen, 2012).

Moreover, the limited body of research that has discussed the implications of autism in prisoner populations has highlighted some of the unique challenges that autistic prisoners may be facing. For example, it is common for autistic individuals to adhere rigidly to a specific daily routine. Such routines help provide an element of predictability in a largely unpredictable world, and disruptions of these routines can be anxiety-inducing and difficult to cope with (Bathgate, 2017). Thus, one challenge that autistic prisoners face during their sentence is a dramatic change in their daily routine (Allely, 2015). Generally, prisons enforce

a strict, prescribed routine that dictates specific times for daily activities, such as eating, sleeping, work and recreation. It has been proposed that such a strict routine may be helpful and comforting for autistic prisoners, introducing predictability to the prison environment (McAdam, 2012). However, those who do find comfort in the prison routine may encounter difficulties if the routine changes without warning, which is common in many prison establishments (Cashin & Newman, 2009).

Autistic prisoners may face specific challenges relating to social communication and interaction difficulties. For example, autistic prisoners may find it difficult to establish and maintain relationships with other prisoners, which may render them prone to isolation in the prison (Paterson, 2008). This may involve actively avoiding socialising with other prisoners, due to anxiety surrounding social interactions (de la Cuesta, 2010). Alternatively, some may attempt to socialise with others, but may struggle and be socially excluded by other prisoners because they seem different (Allely, 2015; National Autistic Society [NAS], 2011). Relatedly, it has been reported that autistic prisoners are at a greater risk of being victimised and bullied, which some have postulated may be linked to social interaction difficulties; for example, autistic prisoners may present with a social demeanour that is viewed an 'odd' by other prisoners (NAS, 2011; Talbot, 2008).

Some autistic prisoners may experience sensory processing issues, such as hyper-reactivity or hypo-reactivity to light, noise and touch. These sensory issues present further challenges when adjusting to life in the prison environment, particularly given the lack of control prisoners have over their physical environment compared to their life in the community. For example, if an autistic prisoner experiences hyper-reactivity to light, harsh fluorescent prison lighting could distress that individual, particularly if they cannot control the lighting (Freckelton, 2011; Higgs & Carter, 2015). In extreme cases this may result in aggressive behavioural outbursts to express feelings of sensory overload (Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee, 2012).

Cumulatively, the challenges that an autistic individual could face living in a prison may act as dangerous antecedents to mental wellbeing decline. Autistic individuals are reported to have higher levels of psychiatric comorbidity than the general population (Abdallah et al, 2011), most notably anxiety and depression (Bleil Walters et al., 2013; Talbot, 2008). In a prison, with the aggravating challenges described above, depressive symptoms could worsen, particularly if the individual is socially isolated (Paterson, 2008).

The Present Study

Despite the suggestion in existing literature that autistic prisoners are experiencing unique challenges during their prison sentences, research that has explored the prison experiences of autistic individuals is largely absent (Allely, 2015). The present study aimed to (a) qualitatively explore the prison experiences of male autistic prisoners, serving sentences for sexual convictions, and (b) generate recommendations to inform appropriate support and management strategies and enhance the quality of life for autistic prisoners.

Method

Participants

Ten prisoners with confirmed autism diagnoses were approached and given information about the research by an Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (IDD) nurse, who was part of the IDD specialist team in the prison Mental Healthcare department. It was made clear to potential participants that participation was voluntary and conferred no additional external benefits. Seven individuals (70% of those approached) expressed an interest in taking part. Autism diagnoses of potential participants (*specifically, Asperger's syndrome*) were confirmed by the IDD nurse, which had been corroborated with patient records kept by the prison Mental Healthcare department. Participants were seven autistic adult male prisoners, aged 23-47 (M= 34.43), serving sentences for sexual convictions at HMP Whatton.

Ethics

Ethical approval was obtained from Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service National Research Committee and Nottingham Trent University (NTU) College Research Ethics Committee prior to commencement.

Data Collection

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants in a private counselling room in the prison. This room was chosen, as the quieter, naturally lit environment was more sensitive to potential sensory needs of participants. Participants were given the opportunity to re-read the information sheet they had received during the recruitment process and sign an informed consent form. During the initial rapport-building and consent process, participants were reminded of their rights to ask questions about the research. In the interests of clarity and to ensure participants were fully informed about the research, the interviewer read information aloud and checked for participant understanding of said information. Interview schedules were designed in light of existing research literature, with additional input from prison psychologists and the IDD team. Broadly, interviews explored: general background about the individual's autism (e.g. "*How long have you known that you have autism?*", "*Is there anything you thing you find more challenging because of your autism?*"), aspects of living in prison that they found challenging or helpful (e.g. "*Were there any aspects of prison life you found challenging when you first came to the prison?*", "*Can you explain some of the things that are helpful to you in prison, in relation to having autism?*"), and what they would seek to change in the prison (e.g. "*Thinking about the ways you are currently supported in the prison, what could be done differently or better?*"). These broader questions would enable participants to lead more in-depth, individualised interview discussions. Prompts were included in the interview schedule to help scaffold and filter discussions, particularly for participants who found broader questions more difficult to answer. For example, when participants were asked *"Is there anything you thing you find more challenging because of your autism?*", this could be followed up with prompts that gradually became more specific such as; "*this could be in your life inside prison or outside of prison*", "*is there a specific situation you can think of that was made more challenging because of your autism?*", "*How about social situations, such as making friends or relationships? Why?"*. The interview was designed so that discussions were largely

participant led, but flexibly guided by the interviewer, avoiding imposition of interviewer views or assumptions where possible.

Interviews lasted 44-98 minutes (M= 63 minutes) and were recorded on password-protected dictaphones. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Names and places were anonymised, and pseudonyms were used in place of the actual names in reported extracts.

Analysis

An applied inductive thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006), was chosen as the method of analysis for the interview data, with an additional phenomenological focus inspired by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Larkin & Flowers, 2009). This analytic approach was chosen as it was a flexible yet systematic method of qualitative analysis that enabled researchers to generate themes inductively from the research data, and also placed firm emphasis on capturing participants' lived experience. Notwithstanding the sometimes unique experiences participants recounted, the researchers noted that data saturation was evident by the final two interviews. The final two interviews were nonetheless completed since the participants were keen to be interviewed, and their data was included in the analysis.

The applied element of this analytic approach was integrated to fulfil the secondary aim of this study to generate practical recommendations to improve the quality of life of autistic prisoners. This approach was previously used in a research project to address the needs of prisoners with dementia (Dillon, Vinter, Winder, & Finch, 2018) and is useful when research is conducted in response to a need for evidence-driven practical advice (in this case, a prison governor requesting advice to improve conditions for autistic residents in their prison and the staff who work with them). This form of TA was inductive in that the themes were allowed to naturally develop from the data, rather than being driven by apriori theoretical or predictions.

During the initial coding process, the research team worked independently to familiarise themselves with interview transcripts, extract codes and develop preliminary themes, maintaining a dual focus on extracting phenomenological and applied themes from within and between transcripts. The research team discussed their interpretations of the data to establish commonalities. A number of iterative stages of analysis took place, with the ongoing re-checking and re-grounding of themes to the transcripts, the creation of thematic sub-documents to ensure that each subtheme was articulated frequently both across and within participants' accounts, before the final thematic structure was agreed. This iterative process of cross-checking (between researchers) and re-checking (between developing themes, transcripts and thematic sub-documents) helps to underpin reliability in qualitative methods, echoing the inter-rater reliability and test-retest reliability techniques of quantitative methods.

Results

Three superordinate themes emerged from the rich data set; these are detailed in Table 1 with respective subordinate themes.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Theme 1: Interacting with Others

Participants described difficulties that they had faced when interacting with others throughout their life because of their autism, and the relevance of these difficulties during their life in prison.

1.1. Misunderstandings

Participants recalled challenging experiences during their time in prison where particular social interactions with staff and other prisoners escalated into altercations. These often stemmed from misunderstandings relating to their autism, for example difficulties reading the emotions of others and that a social interaction is escalating toward an altercation.

> 'I have to second guess myself all the time, because, erm, I can say things, that other people might find offensive, and I haven't got a clue it's offensive (Yeah) So, I have to be careful and think about what I'm going to say, all of the time… Erm, I don't understand body language. I don't understand verbal clues, if you want something, you gotta ask me, because I won't get it if you try to make a suggestion'
> (*P1, Lines 598-604*)

This resonates with previous literature, which has highlighted that the typically volatile social climates of prisons could be challenging for autistic prisoners (Cashin & Newman, 2009), and how individuals must be extremely careful about how they act and what they say to avoid confrontations. Often, participants described frustration that they felt arising from confrontations with both staff and prisoners. P5 described a challenging incident they experienced with prison wing officers:

> 'I tried to get away from the situation, I said "I can't do this now, I just need to go for a few minutes" and walked out, and three or four all went running at me (Yeah) and that really didn't help. Again, they've got to manage the risk, but it's how they do it.'
> (*P5, Lines 1006-1013*)

Participants emphasised how helpful it was to have a supportive network of prison staff and fellow prisoners who understood them, as individuals, and who appreciated how autism affected them. Having people around them who understand the challenges they faced because of their autism helped to avoid misunderstandings and altercations, particularly in social interactions.

> 'I've got a select group of friends and they all understand the difficulties I have. They all understand I might say something inappropriate, they all understand that if I do say something inappropriate, or do something inappropriate, all they have to do is say "look [Participant Name] that was wrong"'
> (*P3, Lines 580-583*)

1.2. I'm more social in prison

Most participants believed they were more sociable in prison, compared to how they were on the outside; participants stated they appreciated the opportunity to socialise with others. Many participants felt that outside of prison they avoided associating with others, keeping themselves to themselves, and in some cases being quite isolated, with few friends.

> 'Erm, I think I did things differently, prob... but erm, I had to sit in me own corner (Ah, ok) not making friends, because it's hard for me to make friends (Yeah, sure) and that's how I was, that's how I was all through me school years'
> (*P2, Lines 95-103*)

By contrast to their lives on the outside, most participants described being much more socially active in prison, associating with other prisoners and becoming active members of social groups. Participants, reflecting on their social lives in prison, were surprised at themselves when they came to the realisation of how many people they knew and associated with in the prison.

> 'I was very antisocial outside, didn't like being around people at all. Inside, I know about 250 people now. By name, so I am quite popular with people.'
> (*P1, Lines 136-137*)

> 'There's been people that I've associated with, if you want, that you wouldn't necessarily associate with on the out (Yeah) so that's been quite interesting.'
> (*P6, Lines 633-638*)

Participants attributed their newfound increased sociality to several factors. Some felt that socialising and interacting with others is a necessity in prison, compared to the outside. Others felt that during their time in prison, they had become more confident, which they also attributed to how supportive others in the prison were.

> 'My confidence in doing different things like…I used to, because when I was in school I was constantly bullied and the teachers thought because I wasn't one of the brightest students they didn't want to teach me so when I was at school everyone used to use to think I was a bit thick that I knew nothing... but here I think because people are often saying I'm putting myself down which I shouldn't do and they're trying to be the people who encourage me to do other things like, like ask more questions or volunteer to do more stuff like reading the bible on a Sunday service, that helps with my confidence.'
> (*P4, Lines 706-713*)

1.3. Ignorance about autism

Participants also described challenges that they had faced in relation to feeling misunderstood by others. All seven participants noted that whilst there are pockets of excellence in relation to autism awareness, such as in the healthcare team, personal officers

and specific prisoners, that this is not ubiquitous across the prison as a whole. P1 noted how autism awareness and understanding across the prison was extremely mixed:

> ‘I’ve had a conversation with a senior SO [Security Officer] here who’s actually said that they believe that Autism and ADHD don’t exist (Really?) So there’s actually that kind of thing as well (Right and so, since the length of time you’ve been here, has that improved at all? Or is it still the same?) still the same, a couple of officers are very, very good, like [Wing Officer] off [Wing], he’s especially good. He was good when I first arrived, so he obviously knows what he’s doing. A lot of the others don’t, they haven’t got a clue.’
> (*P1, Lines 283-295*)

Participants highlight how ignorance about autism in the prison has led to some difficult interactions and tension with others in the prison:

> ‘I said with my autism when somebody comes and confronts me about something I sometimes go into, where I freeze I don’t know how to react or what to do and he just said “oh you’re using your autism as an excuse, go away” (Right) Erm, so I, in my own head, I just thought I really hate him, I’m not going to speak to that certain officer again and this was June, middle of June this year and I haven’t spoken to that officer since.’
> (*P4, Lines 373-381*)

Participants hoped that in future the prison will contribute toward increasing autism awareness in prisoners and staff through training and education events. The benefit of such training was put forward as a way of mitigating some misunderstandings about autism. Participants described positive experiences with events like this, such as Autism Awareness Week, especially where those participants were given the opportunity to be involved in the design and delivery of such events. One participant also described how they had experienced positive changes in the prison, as a result of autism training for prison staff.

> ‘Some things have started to change I’ve seen a difference in here over the last 4 years of how officers deal with certain situations, if they know then person they that are dealing with has any form of autism, whether it be high functioning or low functioning. They are starting to deal with certain situations slightly differently (Yeah) It’s no longer reach for the rod, it’s reach for the dictionary and find out what it means’
> (*P3, Lines 693-700*)

Limited research has explored prison staff understanding of autism (Allely, 2015). However, this theme illustrates the benefit of increased autism awareness among prison staff. In particular, it emphasises the value of autism awareness training, which has been highlighted as an important need in previous literature (McCarthy et al., 2015).

1.4. Interpreting emotions

All participants recognised that they had some difficulty identifying, interpreting and expressing emotions during their lives inside and outside of prison, which they attributed to having autism. Participants explained that one of the biggest challenges they faced was judging how others were feeling. P7 noted how, in their lives outside of prison, they had experienced negative consequences of misreading how others were feeling. In this extract, they described an incident that had occurred in a pub when they struggled to recognise that someone was angry:

> 'So, I misread a situation, and he was, kind of, angry and, kind of, frustrated and he did say, if I have a think back, he did say something about wanting to hit somebody, erm, in not so many words, and I was, like, I don't know, rather than, like, read the situation, I, sort of, stayed and I put myself in the firing line really and he elbowed me in the eye, and cut all my eye open, erm, and I think that was error with reading the situation'
> (*P7, Lines 98-109*)

P3 explained that recognising the emotions of others through tone of voice was particularly difficult for them, and could lead to misinterpretations of how other people feel:

> 'I think, I struggle with the tone of voice sometimes, most of the time I get it right. Occasionally I get it wrong, and it's when I get it wrong and I don't realise the person I'm talking to is in a bad mood or is in pain or whatever'
> (*P3, Lines 659-665*)

Some participants explained how they could read the emotions of others if the expressions of said emotions were extreme, such as crying. However, they struggled with more subtle expressions of and distinctions between emotions. In the prison context, this difficulty reading how others feel had led to altercations with others in the prison, including prison staff:

> 'Erm, understanding that other people's emotions I still struggle with. Maybe two extremes I can understand is sadness and anger. Anything in-between that I struggle with, anything more, because like I get into, like, not an argument per se, but an altercation with the staff and it'll just escalate, because I can't see. Like how they're feeling, because of autism, I can't see their side of it.'
> (*P5, Lines 96-108*)

Difficulty reading how other feel can be a common challenge for autistic generally (Uljarevic & Hamilton, 2013). However, it became clear in participant interviews that this challenge can have more significant consequences and implications in a prison context.

Theme 2: Being in Prison

There were a number of specific features of prison life that participants had found particularly helpful or difficult to adjust to.

2.1. Routines and structures: a double-edge sword

The prison routine was mentioned as a salient feature of prison life for all participants, and is frequently referenced in the small body of literature relating to challenges faced by autistic prisoners (Allely, 2015; McAdam, 2012). While most participants found having a fixed daily prison routine useful, they also noted how it was prone to changes and disruptions. The contradiction between the advertised rigidity of the routine and its propensity to change was something that was extremely frustrating and stressful for participants, and has been highlighted as an issue in previous literature (Cashin & Newman, 2009). P5 expressed how they felt frustrated when the advertised prison routine was not adhered to:

> 'I tend to set my routine to the prison routine, so it kind of annoys me when they don't unlock on time… it's never that I want to be unlocked to do something that *I* want to do, or that I want to do something that isn't happening at that time, it's they're not doing things that they are supposed to be doing'
> (*P5, Lines 392-395*)

Participants frequently referred to feeling frustration, stress and worry stemming from wanting to know *why* the routine had changed. If the change or disruption did not make obvious sense or they were not told *why* it had happened immediately, participants described how could become extremely agitated:

> 'Sometimes in the past when they've had to change the routine slightly and said "we're sorry but we have to lock you away for an hour" that was the only thing, routine has changed, "why has it changed? Nobody has told me why it's changed" and I go off into my cell and I'm like swearing at myself and saying "stupid routine, shouldn't be locked up, we should be doing this by now, we should be doing that by now"'
> (P4, Lines 426-433)

During their time in prison, some participants had adapted, somewhat, to the routines propensity to change and disruption. P3 described how they had developed contingency plans, in anticipation of unexpected disruptions to the routine. These contingency plans consisted of a set of alternative plans they could pursue, thereby reintroducing a level of predictability in their daily routine.

> 'There are certain situations that you can't do anything about, erm, situations within the prison that the prison officers can't tell you about, fire alarms, stuff like that. There are obviously gonna be some things that you cannot deal with because you do not know, you cannot foretell them. Erm, but there is contingency stuff that I've already set up, so that if something does go wrong, I can turn round to myself and say "right ok, it's a lockup this afternoon, instead of association, oh that's fine, I can get an extra hours sleep" but I've still got that contingency… it's always a back-up, it's

always running in the background and always constantly updating itself, so that I always know that if something goes wrong, that's out of my control, then I've got one of two ways to go'
(*P3, Lines 416-429*)

Similarly, other participants noted how they found it difficult to adapt to the new routine when they arrived at prison. To cope with the complexity of this new routine, they utilised helpful tools such as visual wall calendars. However, despite finding some ways to cope with the routine, participants still found the lack of consistency annoying, and expressed a wish for a more fixed schedule.

'I have, multiple calendars, and all sorts which I write all different notes on, otherwise I forget. But it's just one of those things which just annoy me. I don't like the change, I'd have it the same every single day'
(*P1, Lines 354-363*)

2.2. Too much noise

Several participants described how noise was a prevalent, yet inescapable, challenge for them since they have lived in a prison environment. More specifically, participants highlighted feelings of frustration stemming from noisy areas of the prison. Noises included both the general loud noise of the busy prison environment, and specific noises, such as the sound of flip-flop shoe footsteps on a wing landing.

'It [a quiet place] is hard to find [in prison]… Some things really do get on my nerves, some people are like *bang, bang, bang* on the landing and you think "c'mon, pick your feet up, it's not that hard", oh flip flops that's another one, when they're banging on the floor and *bang!'*
(*P5, 1052-1058*)

P4 described a particularly strong aversion to the sound of other prisoners whistling on the corridors, and how the rest of their day can be effectively ruined by hearing someone whistling.

'Well sometimes it's the slightest thing, because certain, like, sounds annoy me, like, especially people whistling and that. I can be happy one minute and then someone unknown to me and they're just walking down the corridor whistling… it just sends me into a bad mood, and I'm probably in a bad mood for the rest of the night.'
(*P4, Lines 89-96*)

In their lives outside of prison, participants tended to avoid excessively noisy environments. However, they emphasised that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find a quiet place to retreat to in prison. Ultimately, participants expressed a strong desire for access to a quiet retreat area in prison. P3 highlighted how there can be a lot to process in

prison: having a quiet area to retreat to would help them to re-centre themselves and settle an overloaded mind.

> ‘I mean it would be nice on the wing particularly, and I know it’s not easy. But it would be nice to have a room, where you could go, which is quiet, and you can just sit there and read or sew. I do tapestry work, and sitting there, or just some either some fairly light music in the background, or sitting there in silence, doing some tapestry work so you could concentrate on one thing, rather than having everything around you… it’s that being able to centre yourself. It’s being able to pull yourself back into yourself, being able to get back to where you were. Be able to get back to, I wouldn’t say a safe place, but it’s a safe position you are in your own mind, so you can pull everything back, you can relax, you can calm down, you don’t have to think about “oh where do I have to be in half an hour” or that someone wants something off me, and all this lot. It’s just a quiet space, beautiful’
> (*P3, Lines 1132-1158*)

The experiences described above suggest that participants may have been experiencing sensory hyper-reactivity to noise in the prison, commonly experienced by autistic people generally (Landon, Shepherd & Lodhia, 2016), and the absence of a quiet retreat area exacerbated to this challenge.

2.3. Coping with stress and frustration

Stress and frustration were commonly cited feelings from participants, stemming from some of the more challenges experiences they had faced in prison. For example, P7 described being “flooded with emotions” when they were required to move cells suddenly.

> ‘They came to me and said “you need to move” and because I don’t really cope well, and it was, just, the sudden spring of shock, I was flooded with emotions and I just, basically, said “I’m not moving, erm, this is not happening, you can’t do this”, and I, sort of, stormed off and went and locked myself in my cell, and didn’t come out and didn’t sleep’
> (*P7, Lines 252-258*)

Most participants had developed methods of coping with this stress and frustration. Some had discovered these methods during their life outside of prison, others developed them out of necessity during their time in prison. For example, P5 described how they would attempt to distract themselves from their frustration:

> ‘The frustration, I’ve learned to cope with it, I’ll go and do something else even if it’s just, just go and step outside for a bit of fresh air for a few minutes, if that’s possible, obviously if I’m locked up that’s not possible. I just try and take my mind off it, it can be anything, pick up a book, put the tv on, distract myself so I can push it away.’
> (*P5, Lines 613-620*)

Some participants described how their hobbies and interests would be a helpful outlet to mitigate their stress and frustration. P4 described how listening to specific music helped them to calm down after a frustrating or stressful experience. However, they also explained that some of their calming hobbies were not facilitated or readily accessible in the prison, due to lack of provisions or security restrictions:

> 'You know some autistic people they're like, sort of their hobbies and that and they have, some of their hobbies borderline obsessions and for me I can say I've got two, like, Queen the rock band I've got three thousand bits of memorabilia at home and model vehicles I've got, between me and my brother, we've got five thousand. But there's nothing here in prison to help to relax me, stop me getting more frustrated, like even books in the library and that about model vehicles, at home I've got a book that's on, like, you know, model vehicles like Corgi, Dinky and that, they're just picture books with all the vehicles and it would be handy to have something like that in the library'
> (*P4, Lines 956-968*)

P4's description is resonant a point raised by Allely (2015), regarding how autistic individuals may feel reduced anxiety in prison if permitted to engage in their specific interests.

2.4. Finding the right job in prison

The allocation of a prison job was an important and often beneficial provision for participants, providing structure and routine to their prison life. Participants emphasised the importance of finding the right kind of job for them as an individual. P3 explained how they were specifically chosen for their job because they possessed the ideal characteristics for the role:

> 'The officers knew I was struggling in the job that I was in at the time. They wanted someone who was sensible, reliable, and would get on with the job, and didn't backchat them (Yeah) and they went "who's that?" and they went "[Participant Name]" [laughter] so I kind of got volunteered to do the job'
> (*P3, Lines 621-628*)

Participants found work to be a positive experience if it played to their interests and existing strengths, had a positive social environment and an appropriate physical environment. This is consistent with existing literature, which has advocated the benefits of careful matching of autistic individuals to workplace environments that are aligned to their strengths and well-suited to them as an individual (Hendricks, 2010).

P1 described how their natural inclination to ensure everybody received the same food portions made them well-suited to their role on the servery:

> ‘I worked on the servery, feeding people food and what have you. But everyone said they preferred me serving, because everyone got the same portions. Because I noticed with some of the other people, who tend to give their friends more. Whereas I’m more everyone should get the same… I just think that everyone should get the same, end of. Whether you’re a friend or not is irrelevant, they should still get the same as everyone else.’
> (*P1, Lines 764-775*)

By contrast, participants also gave examples of jobs that they had held in the prison that they did not feel were suitably matched to them. P4 contrasted their positive experience of their current job in the prison laundry with their previous negative experience of working in the kitchens:

> ‘When I look back on the way the kitchen worked, to me it was a bit too noisy and I didn’t really get on with all the inmates in the kitchen and I think now that I’m in the CES that I’m better off because I get on with everyone in CES, I don’t have a problem with anyone. In myself, I feel more happier in CES than when I was in the kitchen.’
> (P4, Lines 795-798)

Theme 3: My Autism

Participants discussed their diagnosis of autism, how and when they received it, what it has meant for them during their life and in prison specifically, and the role it has played in their life generally.

3.1. What my diagnosis means to me

Participants spoke about what led them to being assessed for autism, when and where they were diagnosed, and how they felt about receiving the diagnosis. Five of the participants received their diagnosis outside of prison, whereas two did not receive a diagnosis until they were in custody. Regardless of when participants received their diagnosis, all were prompted to seek assessment or diagnosis by another person: a family member, partner, or a professional who they were in regular contact with. While none of the participants who had been diagnosed with autism as an adult had suspected they were autistic before their diagnosis, they did report that they always felt different to other people.

> ‘I’ve known that in a sense I have been different from other people, or I’ve a different outlook on life than other people’
> (*P6, Lines 7-8*)

In the extract above, P6 illustrates a sense of how it might feel to feel different from other people, which may, in itself, feel isolating. Moreover, possessing autistic traits also felt isolating to other participants because they, and others around them, did not understand the additional challenges that they faced when interacting with other people:

> ‘There was always something else, because I was always doing things or asking things that I shouldn’t be or saying things that were inappropriate, where I’ve not known they’re inappropriate. The biggest one, I still have problems with now, is maintaining eye contact. I can’t read, or I have a very difficult time, reading body language (Yeah) and facial expressions, forget it.’
> (*P3, Lines 62-69*)

It is perhaps not surprising that many participants expressed a sense of relief upon receiving their diagnosis, as they finally had an explanation for why they had felt so different to others, and why they had sometimes struggled:

> ‘I think, when I was diagnosed it was like a relief to me, thinking I knew I was different, but I didn’t know why, and quite often I wish I was diagnosed when my brother was in 2001.’
> (*P4, Lines 44-46*)

Participants’ views of their autism were largely positive, and while having autism did lead them to struggle in some areas of their life, they did not see it as wholly negative and did not wish it away.

> ‘It’s just, a lot of people say, “you suffer from this”, I don’t suffer from this (No) in many ways, I benefit from this.’
> (*P1, Lines 1032-1037*)

3.2. This is me

A number of participants spoke about how having autism has given them a unique perspective on the world and provides them with distinctive strengths compared to ‘neurotypical’ people, or ‘normies’ as P1 calls them. Examples of these strengths included problem-solving, organisation, recognising patterns and a talent for research.

> ‘Yeah, yeah, I can solve problems a lot easier. Like, I call normal people ‘Normies’, and normies seem unable to make a decision without getting emotions in the way (Yeah) Whereas I can just... (Just use logic? And that’s it) Yeah! Like m’children used to run rings round my wife. And it got to the stage where she would, she told them to ask me, and they’d just say ‘oh forget it then I don’t want it’. Because they knew they couldn’t use emotional blackmail with me, it doesn’t work. Half the time I don’t even know people are doing it (Yeah) Yeah, because it’s just irrelevant to me.’
> (*P1, Lines 161-177*)

Participants recognised some real advantages to being autistic; in the extract above, P1 highlights how his family have benefitted from his ability not to let emotion cloud his decision-making. In the extract below, P3 can identify that he has strengths (problem solving) that offset potential weaknesses (socialising).

> ‘I became very good, and still am, a very good problem-solver (Yeah) So, problem-solving is one of my strong suits, as it is built into me, but dealing with social situations kind of doesn’t work quite properly.’
> (*P3, Lines 99-104*)

Other participants spoke with pride about their ability to be organised, and to be able to help people who were not as systematic or tidy as they were.

> ‘Erm, organising all my paperwork in my cell because somebody came up to me and said “have you got such and such a paperwork?” and I went “Yep”, thirty seconds later I’m like “there you are” and he said “How do you know where things are?” well if you a systematic order to put everything in and keep it all in its place, then you know where everything is, because I went into his cell and just, it was a complete mess in there and you can’t find anything.’
> (*P4, Lines 167-172*)

These extracts reflect the sense of pride that all participants expressed at some point in their interviews; while they realised they were ‘different’ to others who were not autistic, they had abilities that ‘normies’ lacked. Even the terminology ‘normie’ is used as to denote a kind of out-group (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979). Its use here to ‘out-group’ so-called ‘normal’ people is a neat reversal of the standard use of this term, emphasising the participant’s feelings of comfort with his autism.

3.3. Wanting to learn more about autism

Understanding of what autism was and how it affected them was mixed among participants. The majority of participants had a clear understanding of autism as a condition, and how it affected them. A minority knew they had an autism diagnosis, and knew some of the ways it impacted on them, but did not have as full of an understanding as they would have liked, expressing a strong desire to learn more about it:

> ‘Just trying to learn more about it [autism], so, when I leave here, and get into a relationship I can sit down and go (Yeah, ok) so me partner can understand it and understand me’
> (*P2, Lines 652-661*)

Some participants had sought to research autism in more depth since receiving their diagnosis, however many had faced difficulties in this pursuit in the prison setting, due to a lack of accessibility to information and learning resources. This was a particular issue for those who did not receive their diagnosis until later in their life, or until they began their prison sentence. Participants described the various avenues they had taken to try and learn more about autism, including searching for books and information in the library, and speaking to specialists in the prison mental healthcare team. However, they still felt very limited as to both the quantity and quality of information they could access. Participants highlighted that the majority of the information available in the library was outdated.

> ‘Erm... took me nearly a year to find someone in healthcare who actually understood what autism was (So you were seeking it then?) I was. I was trying to find... I had limited information [about autism] and the information I had was only from the bits and pieces I was able to gather at my previous prison (Yeah) and a little bit from my family, but... the general consensus is that there was no information in the prison. So when you’re going up to someone and saying “do you know what this is?” and they’re going “no, try the library”. I’ve already been and done that, the library don’t know what it is... go to healthcare, ok try healthcare, it’s only once I started getting to speak to people in healthcare that I found [IDD Nurse] and therefore I found that she is actually autistically trained’
> (*P3, Lines 746-762*)

Participants felt that access to more information and education on autism would be helpful for them to learn more about themselves, and how to manage their autism:

> ‘Erm… I’ve been reading all these books on autism and learning about because some of the books tell you how you can manage autism better in the environment that you’re in, I’ve learnt that being here, instead of trying to fight the system and that, I can learn to adapt and live with it.’
> (*P4, Lines 491-494*)

Discussion

The present study highlighted a number of challenges faced by autistic prisoners. While it is important to acknowledge these challenges and work is needed to improve the prison experience for those with autism, it should also be recognised that some prisons are already working towards this (Social Care, Local Government & Care Partnership Directorate, 2016). However, due to limited resources, prisons in England and Wales are currently restricted in their capacity to improve conditions for autistic prisoners. This is not a situation that is unique to the prison service. Resourcing implications across sectors such as education and social care mean that supporting autistic individuals adequately is a continual challenge (Bond & Hebron, 201). Finding ways to do this effectively relies in part on making suggestions that have low resource demands, many of which are transferrable between sectors and contexts. The findings from this study provide further justification for the allocation of resources to the Forensic Autistic Community (FAC), for both autistic prisoners and the staff that manage and support them.

Autism Awareness

The findings in this study have provided further evidence of the need for increased awareness of autism and how to accommodate the needs of autistic people, both in prison and the CJS more generally. For example, some of the challenges described by participants with reference to misunderstandings could have potentially been avoidable, if operational prison staff were offered training opportunities to better understand autism and management of people with ASC, such as ‘low arousal’ de-escalation techniques (Elvén, 2010). Maras,

Mulcahy, Crane, Hawken, and Memon (2018), for example, report the impact that an understanding of autism, or lack of, by police officers during police interviews with autistic individuals can impact significantly on the outcomes of the interviews. This echoes previous literature that has expressed a need for, and highlighted the benefits of, autism education and awareness training for criminal justice staff in how to recognise autistic traits, and respond appropriately to the support and management needs of autistic people (Higgs & Carter, 2015; Lewis et al, 2015; Myers, 2004; Talbot, 2008; Underwood et al, 2013).

It may be useful to engage and include members of the FAC in the design and delivery of such training, to ensure their priorities are being sufficiently considered. This would reflect contemporary moves in the community towards more involvement of the autistic community in shaping autism research and practice (Pellicano, Dinsmore, & Charman, 2014).

Support services and provisions for Autistic Prisoners

The findings from this study emphasised the importance of access to specific support services and provisions for autistic prisoners. Participants highlighted the value of access to fixed points of supportive contact in the prison who were sensitive to their needs, such as the prison IDD team. Therefore, it is suggested that the implementation of such services and provisions be encouraged in other prison establishments. For example, autism-specific support services to help individuals cope with the challenging aspects of life in the prison environment, such as; strategies for what to do if the routine suddenly changes. This suggestion is congruent with guidelines presented in Prison Service Instruction (PSI) 03/16 (published in response to the Care Act 2014). These guidelines stipulated that HMPPS (previously NOMS) have a specific responsibility, in partnership with Local Authorities, to ensure social care services for adults in prisons mirror those available in the community, consistent with the principle of equivalency (Till, Forrester, & Exworthy, 2014).

It is suggested that prisons consider reasonable adjustments to the prison physical environment to improve life for autistic residents. The sensory environment was highlighted as a difficult element of prison life for participants in this study, specifically in relation to noise. Resources permitting, advancements could be made towards accommodating the sensory needs of autistic prisoners, such as providing low-stimulating retreat areas in the prison. Specially allocated quiet areas in the prison could be useful for autistic prisoners, benefitting their overall wellbeing. These quiet retreat areas would be beneficial not only for coping with sensory challenges, but also for coping with other stressors and frustrations that autistic prisoners experience. Sensory issues should also be considered when allocating autistic prisoners to particular wing and work environments. For example, an individual who is particularly sensitive to noise may flourish more in a job that has a quieter environment.

Limitations and future research

As participants were recruited from one prison that exclusively houses men with sexual convictions, the representativeness of the findings in the current study may be questioned. On the other hand, autism is a notoriously heterogenous condition, and therefore it was important that each individual's experiences were explored to a sufficient depth in

order to identify both important commonalities and differences in experience. It was decided that an in-depth qualitative investigation was most appropriate to achieve this.

Further qualitative investigations should be conducted, which explore the experiences of autistic prisoners in other prison types, such as mixed population prisons, and potentially other criminal justice-related institutions, such as secure hospitals. Future research should explore whether these different prison experiences have implications for the prison-based rehabilitation of autistic individuals.

Conclusions

To conclude, the findings presented in this paper have highlighted some challenges, faced by autistic individuals, that are unique to prison settings. However, many were challenges that are experienced by autistic people in non-forensic environments. Therefore, it is the contention of this paper that, if provided with adequate resources, prisons could improve conditions for the FAC by modelling person-centred approaches taken in the community (Beadle-Brown, Roberts, & Mills, 2009), and involving members of the FAC to ensure that improvements align with their needs and priorities.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data is not available.

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Table 1. Superordinate and subordinate themes

THEME	**SUBORDINATE THEMES**
1. Interacting with Others	*1.1. Misunderstandings*
	1.2. I'm more sociable in prison
	1.3. Ignorance about autism
	1.4. Interpreting emotions
2. Being in Prison	*2.1. Routines and structures: a double-edged sword*
	2.2. Too much noise
	2.3. Coping with stress and frustration
	2.4. Finding the right job in prison
3. My Autism	*3.1. What my diagnosis means to me*
	3.2. This is me
	3.3. *Wanting to learn more about autism*