Exploring the Listener Scheme in a women’s prison: the importance of a gendered approach to peer support for women who self-harm in custody

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Exploring the Listener Scheme in a women’s prison: the importance of a gendered approach to peer support for women who self-harm in custody

Abstract

Purpose

Without exception, research on the contribution of the Prison Listener Scheme as a form of peer support for those who self-harm in custody has focused on men’s prisons. Women’s experience of custody is shaped by their experiences of hegemonic masculinity that also mediate through women’s roles as mothers and caregivers. Women’s self-harm is similarly influenced by these gendered experiences. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the Listener Scheme as a form of peer-to-peer support for women contributes to women managing their self-harm in a female prison.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper employed a case study design with mixed methods approach using a quantitative questionnaire with prison staff (n=65) and women in custody who had self-harmed (n= 30). Qualitative methods included a focus group with Prison Listeners (n10) and semi-structured interviews with women who self-harm (n10) and prison staff (n10). Four days were also spent observing the prison environment.

Findings

Findings suggest that women seek support from other women as peer Listeners for three main reasons; their previous difficult experiences with men, a displacement of the mother role and their attachment needs in custody. This paper suggests that peer support schemes internationally should be tailored to providing support for these types of gendered experience to support women who self-harm in custody. This has implications for the training and support of Listeners in women’s prisons.

Research limitations/implications

This exploratory research was conducted in one female prison and while can be considered to test proof of concept is limited in its generalisability.

Originality/value

This paper suggests that Listeners providing peer-to-peer support for women in custody who self-harm will encounter triggers for this behaviour based on women’s experiences including; how women relate to men; women’s experience of the way custody displaces their role as mothers and women’s need for safe attachments in custody. These gendered experiences have implications for the training and development of peer support schemes in women’s prisons, such as the Listener scheme. Further research is needed to compare the gendered types of support Prison Listeners provide depending on whether they are located in male or female prisons.
Key words – Prison Listener, women prisoners, self-harm, prison peer support, gender

Article Classification – Research paper

Research question

Exploring the Listener Scheme in a women’s prison: the importance of a gendered approach to peer support for women who self-harm in custody

Introduction

Self-harm defined as any “act of self-poisoning or self-injury carried out by an individual irrespective of motivation” (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), 2011, p. 4) is a gendered issue. Research testifies that the reasons why women self-harm are different to their male counterparts. The literature reveals that women in custody engage in self-harm for numerous reasons, which include current and previous traumatic events, negative experiences of the prison environment, and isolation in a single cell (Marzano, Hawton, Rivli & Fazel, 2011). Additionally, other contributing causations include the early days of imprisonment (NOMS, 2012) and mental health concerns ( Ministry of Justice, 2013).

Research suggests that women often have significant addictions and mental health problems, and are more likely to engage in self-harm (Prison Reform Trust, 2015). Therefore, although women are far fewer in the UK prison population (3,797 compared to their 78,675 male counterparts (Official Statistics, 2019) they account for almost 5 times more incidents of self-harm than men.

Historically, the prison estate has been designed for the incarceration of men (Lemgiuber, 2000) manifest through the architecture design and security practices. Indeed, current research acknowledges the use of Trauma Informed Care and Practice for women is problematic because of this ‘hostile environment’ (Jewkes, Jordan, Wright & Bendelow, 2019). These features of a custodial environment are evident in female prisons despite research that testifies to the needs of women in custody as more complex (Ministry of Justice, 2013). For example, restricted access to children (Corston, 2007; Baldwin and O’Malley, 2015), prior experience of abuse (Wright et al., 2016; Prison Reform Trust, 2015), mental health issues (Light et al., 2013), and the removal of coping methods such as drugs and alcohol (Prison Reform Trust, 2015).

Being imprisoned intensifies women’s prior experiences of abuse and exacerbates existing mental health issues and/or renders women vulnerable to new episodes of mental ill health such concerns: the prison environment makes women significantly vulnerable, given that they were already at risk when they entered custody (Caulfield, 2016). Women are over-represented in prison populations, a trend that would be reversed if, as Corston (2007) advocates, women were given fewer custodial sentences.
To date, the prison estate has not been adequately adapted to meet women’s needs in terms of access to treatment for mental health issues, education, employment and debt management (Prison Reform Trust, 2015). Furthermore, research shows that it is extremely important to ensure that the gendered needs of women in custody are being met by the prison estate (Walker and Towl, 2016) as a gendered aspect of prison is that it represents a time of limited control for women, which can lead to self-harm (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2005; Crewe et al, 2017).

One way that the prison system can respond to women’s needs is through peer-to-peer support schemes that see women supporting each other based on their common experience. There are many benefits of peer support (Farrant and Levenson, 2002), in terms of affecting better health outcomes of prisoners (Woodall et al., 2015), and the improvement of organisational skills and behaviour (Collica, 2014). The Listener Scheme is one such source of peer support that adopts the same structure and arrangements in both male and female prison establishments.

The Listener Scheme is supported by Samaritans as a registered UK charity, which trains volunteers to offer confidential advice 24 hours a day (Samaritans, 2017). Samaritans provide the Listeners Initial Training (LIT), which consists of eight sessions held over a period of 3–6 weeks that are organised within the prison establishment. The seventh training session focuses on identifying and understanding self-harm, including why individuals engage in the behaviour, the difference between self-harm and an attempt to end a life, and to equip Listeners with the skills to respond to this behaviour. The purpose of this seventh session is to identify what self-harm is and to help Listeners understand some of the reasons why prisoners engage in this behaviour.

Ongoing training provides a refresher for Listeners to help them to continue to support those who continue to self-harm in custody. Currently the content of the LIT and the refresher training is the same in male and female prisons. This means that there is limited understanding about whether the Listener Scheme should provide more gender specific support (Stewart, 2008). The purpose of this paper is to explore how the Listener Scheme as a form of peer-to-peer support for women contributes to women managing their self-harm.

Methods
The study adopted a case study design (Stake, 1995) in one women’s prison. A mixed methods approach was employed to collect quantitative data using a questionnaire with prison staff (n=65) and women in custody who had self-harmed (n=30), this enabled the use of purposive sampling to include participants in the qualitative part of the study. Qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus groups were captured from Prison Listeners (n=10), women in custody who self-harm (n=10) and prison staff (n=10). Observations over a four day period were conducted on A, B, C, D, E, F wings and the Therapeutic Community that operated in the prison, which was located on J wing. The interview schedules were developed from exploring the literature to reflect women’s
gendered experiences of custody, which may lead to their engagement in self-harm (Crewe et al, 2017). The questions explored how women used the Listener Scheme in relation to their self-harm behaviour.

The methods used in the study together with details of the sample of women, Listeners and staff is described in more detail in a related paper (see Griffiths, Bailey & Slade, 2019).

Results

The findings revealed that women’s experiences are inextricably linked with their gender and this contributes to triggers for their self-harming behaviour in custody in three interrelated ways:

The difficult experiences of women (in prison) with men

Displacement of the mother role

Attachment needs in custody

In turn, these experiences influence the reasons why women seek support from their peers as Listeners.

The difficult experiences of women (in prison) with men

Women in this study disclosed feelings of ‘hate’ towards men that they attributed to the relationships they had experienced before coming into prison. "A man could do what they want you know, especially when it’s your husband, rape wasn’t rape. I was never taught it was” (Joy, prisoner). For Joy, this subsequently resulted in the use of Self-harm as a means of coping within the prison environment “It has led to me, you know hurting myself, cutting! I just get so angry that they get to do what they want!” (Joy, prisoner).

The majority of women described themselves as relatively powerless compared with men “Men have always been the important ones, in my family, the only ones with power (Nicola, Prisoner).

Yet women used their positions with men to manipulate "I would know what to do to get what I wanted, I wasn’t worried about what I had to do, I did it! (Fran, Prisoner).

Listeners reported a level of understanding of hatred and manipulation of men and the use of sex as a weapon as a common thread that underpinned women’s crimes “We hear about it a lot, the women who we listen to haven’t had the best experiences with men, I get that, it leads to things, I guess influences” (Katie, Prison Listener). This ‘Hatred’ once in custody manifested in self-harm as a method to cope with their previous experiences with men.
“It’s only once I have been in here (custody) that it has hit me! That wasn’t right, what he did to me isn’t normal but even though I know this it leds to hurting me, that’s all I can do, harm myself” (Kerry, Prisoner).

Women’s narratives suggested that their negative relationships with men existed on a continuum from men undermining them “I’ve not had a good male role model, I don’t know what that is, my relationships have been bad!” (Pippa, Prisoner) through to actual disclosures of physical abuse. “Some men do hurt women, we have that a lot, I understand if you are getting beat up by a man you would hate them” (Olivia, Prison Listener). For women in the research, they held negative feeling towards men with hate as the extreme.

This category (The difficult experiences of women (in prison) with men) was discussed by the majority of women and the Listeners within this study, which justifies the inclusion of this as a key gendered focus in the development and running of peer support schemes to support women who self-harm in custody. This pre-existing perspective and absence of good male role models may result in the women engaging in self-harm.

Displacement of the mother role

A reoccurring category within this research identified the displacement of the mother role. For women in custody this represented a number of different forms. For some women the displacement reflected their own childhood and how this had resulted in self-harm prior, and during custody. In addition, other women discussed the displacement to signify the complexities of trying to continue being a mother from within the prison environment. Furthermore, the women discussed the distress following visitations and how this resulted in self-harm.

The displacement of the mother role by virtue of being in custody could be traced back to women’s childhoods and is outplayed in their behaviours in custody for example, Laura, (Prisoner) acknowledges that her mother had not played an active role in her childhood, and she experienced traumatic abuse as a consequence which led to learned self-harm behaviours. Whilst initially Laura’s self-harm acted as a coping mechanism outside of the prison environment, the behaviour acted as reassurance and to an extent a comfort within the prison environment. As Laura acknowledged,

“Yes I self-harmed before prison, ten overdoses. The first was when I was 9 years old, this was something I did as a child, it is something I have brought to prison. I know I can self-harm and I will feel me. Somewhere that is strange (Laura, Prisoner).

This form of displacement is further explored by Bella linking the mothering of her own children to the past experience of her own childhood. "Trying to be a good mum, finding it difficult as I don’t know how to be a mum” (Bella, prisoner). Bella acknowledges worthy intentions to develop her own bond with her daughter, whilst disclosing the difficulties of her own childhood, which has positioned her with doubts concerning wholesome parental models.
A secondary form of the displacement category is how the women’s relationships with their children remain as an extremely important feature of their day-to-day life in prison even when they are separated physically by virtue of being in custody. Women talked about the distress associated with these separations:

“I don’t know my son as an adult. He is 19 years old now. I have been in prison 11 years and I was only with him 8 years. Even then I was there with him but not there, I had issues going on” (Adele, Prisoner).

For the majority of the women, self-harm reported serves as a method of coping with separation experiences;

“When being away from them (children) gets too much, I will harm myself, you see I blame myself for this” (Cindy, Prisoner). Prison Listeners recognise this experience and can share other ways of dealing with the pain of separation “We all feel it, we don’t want to be away, none of us, I’m a mother you know. I just don’t self-harm, I listen and show I’m listening, I understand the mothering and the pain. I just deal with it in other ways” (Barbara, Prison Listener).

For some women even though separated from their children, the mothering role continues, in terms of the emotional commitment and still being regarded a mother was the most important thing in their lives. The women described their days as still very much occupied by thoughts and worries regarding their children and this could lead to self-harm “Visitations can lead to me feeling sad, when they leave I have to have a way to get over the loss, hurting myself helps in the physical sense, I am always hurting on the inside” (Ann, Prisoner). This women signifies the difficulties of seeing her children and how self-harm is used as a way of coping but also Ann uses self-harm in the physical sense to see the cuts as a visual representation of the pain she feels inside from being away from her children.

The continued importance of the family in reference to the mothering role is portrayed by Amber, (Prisoner) “All I ever wanted was a family you know” this is a shared characteristic in which the majority of the women acknowledge and relate too. Those women who have a family make this reference; however, prison means they can no longer function as a family which leads to the women engaging in self-harm. Similarly, those women who have no children but hold a desire for them also discuss the longing for a family which when they see other women ‘throwing this away (Jo, Prisoner)’ also can result in self-harm as a method of coping with the family they have desired. The findings of this study illustrate that women’s self-harm is attributed to difficulties with the displacement of the mother role a key distress for women in custody.

The importance of a gender specific approach to self-harm is evident within the support preferences of the prisoners, as the women acknowledge that they use the provision, as it is women to women support, “I wouldn’t disclose to a male listener, it wouldn’t happen. I only disclose as the listener is a woman too, you know” (Merry, prisoner). The woman provides further details relating to damaging experiences with men, which have left her unable to discuss any of her problems with a male, including a male Listener.
To provide further support to the gendering of the Listener Scheme for women who self-harm in custody, another prisoner identified that women are better Listeners and understand each other's emotions much better than their male counterparts, by references to the heightened emotions associated to the menstruation cycle. As one prisoner illustrated, "(Listeners) expect things may come in cycles for a woman to do with hormones, menstrual cycles, I think they are more (pause) ..Well the ladies understand that women can get highly excited or highly stressed, especially about not seeing family and children and being shut off contact. What used to be their job in the family, suddenly they are cut off from that role, listeners understand all of that" (Bella, prisoner).

The common characteristics in which all women share is identified within the reference to hormones and the menstrual cycle. This is then related to the prison environment, which is documented as particularly challenging for women. The women here is signifying the displacement of her role as a mother, which is an innate role, which comes with inbuilt responsibilities to her family and the feelings, which constitute her sense of self that is determined by the mothering role. Listeners also share the dual disadvantage, as the majority are also mothers and prisoners, which provides further support for a gendering prison approach for women in custody to support their self-harm, which accounts for the pains of the displacement of mothering role as a causation for this behaviour.

Whether it develops from the maternal instant or the difference in hormones it has been documented that women are more empathetic and are able to share their prison journey with other women to an extent that men are not “Most proactive provision (Listeners) for peer support, there are differences between male and female, females are more willing” (Pete, staff member).

**Attachment in custody**

A notable causative reason for self-harm was highlighted by the women, staff and Listeners was related to their peer to peer relationships with fellow prisoners; women with whom they who share the same experiences in custody. The triggers were acknowledged as difficulties and the loss of attachments when the relationship ended within these close peer relationships led to the women engaging in self-harm as a method of coping. Staff members documented alternative reasoning, which considered external factors such as family issues, which affected the women’s ability to cope with custody.

The majority of the staff and women acknowledged that Listener support is not exclusively used to assist women to manage their self-harm but rather accessing Listeners is more about having some company and someone who will stay, listen, and not judge if self-harm is the behaviour being talked about or engaged in. It seemed for the majority of women that being “locked up” in their cell at night induces reflection, which then stimulated a desire to offload. “It is at night, when I am on my own I think about what I’ve done! I need someone to talk to, to listen, I will use a Listener then” (Ann, Prisoner). This was supported by the
majority of staff and women who reported that night-time is when Listener support is usually requested.

Further to this, the prospect of sharing a cell with a fellow prisoner was deemed as a positive, as opposed to the current housing at the study prison for every woman to be housed alone in their own cell. As Jan acknowledged, “Cell mates would be a good thing, even if you don’t talk, just for company” (Jan, prisoner).

Whilst acknowledgement was made that co-sharing women do not have to talk, there is a sense of security provided by having someone who is physically sharing the same environment during the night. This sense of company is attributed to close friendships or family members with whom sitting in silence is comfortable. It is in the shared situations and familiarity of close friendships and families that “just for company” can be obtained. In essence, friendships with fellow women take the place off albeit while in custody important relationships with family and friends that are lost to the outside world.

The success of the Listener Scheme is documented to the continuity of the Listeners this is central for both the women and the Listeners. As Poppy acknowledged, “Here in HMP… it’s very good. I like the fact that the ladies don’t change often, you see the same familiar face and that’s more approachable” (Poppy, prisoner). In the absence of the ability to maintain close relationships outside, the importance of relationships in custody become critical as protective and in maintaining resilience. The women feel that isolation and being on their own is difficult, especially at night time, so they seek a familiar face in the Listeners to find comfort.

It is apparent the development of ‘relationships’ is of central importance within the research establishment, which is extended to both staff and by the women. Furthermore, for the women to feel secure in obtaining support the development of a prior relationship is required. The Listener Scheme could include the importance of attachment for women as a measure to prevent the engagement in self-harm within the core training but also to ensure the Listeners are mindful of this desire and the possible impact on self-harm in their support for women in custody.

Discussion

This section relates the findings of the current study to the wider literature on women in prison who self-harm and the use of the Listener Scheme as a form of prison peer support. The implementation of gender sensitive provisions for women in custody is not a recent suggestion; it is documented within much earlier feminist research (Covington and Bloom, 2007). Indeed, the prison environment is distinct for the genders, which signifies the requirement of specific provisions for women in custody (Covington and Bloom, 2007).

The findings of this study address the aims of this paper by supporting a gendered approach for women who self-harm in custody and use peers as a source of support. The findings of this study identified that women in custody self-harm as a result of specific gendered issues,
these being the difficulties they experience with men, the displacement of their mother role and the requirements of attachment in custody. The findings of this study support the application of a gendered approach for women who self-harm in custody in relation to the use of peers as a source of support.

The difficult experiences of women (in prison) with men

The findings of the current research identifies negative experiences of women with men which can result in the women engaging in self-harm as a coping mechanism in prison. Indeed, while previous research documents the history of abuse that women in custody experience, which is distinct to male prisoners (Crewe et al, 2017; Macdonald, 2013; Light et al 2013) the literature does not explore the manipulation by women in custody who experience this abuse, which identifies an original finding of the current research.

Research suggests that 53% of women in custody had experienced abuse that was emotional, physical or sexual, whereas only 27% of men had endured such abuse (Prison Reform Trust, 2015). Indeed, research alludes to the relationship between historical abuse experienced by women prior to being in custody (Wright et al., 2016), and women’s engagement in self-harm as a coping method to deal with the ongoing emotional toll of this experience (Macdonald, 2013 ). Therefore, incorporating the difficult experiences the women experience with men that leads to them engaging in self-harm within peer support schemes such as the Listener Scheme enables these supporters to be aware of the central issues for women which leads to their engagement in self-harm.

Displacement of the mothering role

A reoccurring category which has been identified is the displacement of the mother role. For women in this study this category represented a number of different definitions. For some women the displacement reflected their own childhood and how this had resulted in self-harm prior and during custody. In addition, other women discussed the displacement to signify the complexities of trying to continue being a mother from within the prison environment. Furthermore, the women discussed the distress following visitations and how this resulted in self-harm. Whilst these differences exist within the overarching category of the displacement of the mother role they all are interlinked through the discussion of the importance of the mother role either for themselves as mothers or retrospectively as children.

The findings of the current research support the body of literature, which suggests it is the removal of the mother role by virtue of being physical incarcerated that women in prison find extremely traumatic (Corston, 2007; Baldwin and O, Malley, 2015; Hairston, 1991; Crewe et al, 2017).

The detrimental impact of the absence of the mothering role constructs a role strain, which if the women are able to continue engaging in mothering activities such constraints are reduced (Berry and Eigenberg, 2003). The current research documents the displacement of
the mothering role, in which the women’s mothering role is thereby prevented following incarceration. This study identifies that the information reported by the women results in a role strain as they try to continue being a mother whilst in custody. Evidently, before imprisonment the women within the research held an ideology of their roles as mother, however being placed in prison is not included as part of the mothering role. In essence, the women within the research know how to mother but face complexities at mothering within prison.

This study supports the existing literature, which documents that losing contact with family members, especially children is a significant concern for women in prison (Crewe et al, 2017). It is clear that the mothering from the prison estate constitutes a restricted role; in which engagement in self-harm for women in the current research represents a release. It is thereby crucial for peer support provisions in custody to explore this concern to contribute to the support of women who self-harm in custody.

In addition, as the Listeners are also women prevented from their mothering role so they hold a shared understanding that enables an empathetic approach, with the core characteristics constituting being a woman, mother and being in custody. Worrall (1981) acknowledges the gendered approach, which documents the solidarity of women prisoners as a gendered issue.

The women in this study also discussed the displacement of the mother role from a different perspective, relating to the women during their childhood and their own mother. These reflections were discussed by the women and linked to their engagement in self-harm, within this perspective the displacement of the mother role during childhood had led to the engagement in self-harm in childhood, which was continued in custody as a method of coping. Whilst the association between childhood trauma and self-harm for women in custody is supported by the literature (Howard, Karatzias, Power and Mahoney, 2017), how this relates to the absence of the mother role is not explored and therefore provides a unique insight from this study.

**Attachment in custody**

The Listener Scheme enabled the building of connections between women in custody and their peers so that women know there is someone they can turn to in times of distress. Whilst the Listener Scheme might not always be the source of support women seek in prison it offers an empathetic approach (Foster and Magee, 2011), which in turn contributes to helping women manage their self-harm in custody. Indeed this supports the findings of this study to include gender specific training within the Listener Scheme for women who self-harm in custody.

The loosing of attachment to family members is signified as a noteworthy causation for the engagement in self-harm for the women within this study, as they disclosed details of the breakdown of personal relationships, the restricted contact with children and the rejection from family members following incarceration. A category throughout the data was the desire for attachment to other prisoners in the form of relationships and to staff members
who cared for their self-harm. The need to belong whilst in prison to a family is supported by previous research and identified as producing a search for a collective identity within the prison (Liebling, Arnold & Straub, 2011). The importance of attachment is central to women who self-harm in custody and therefore should be focused upon during the delivery of prison support schemes, such as the Listener Scheme.

The case study design incorporating mixed qualitative methods used within this research provides an in-depth understanding of women’s concerns in prison which in turn trigger and reinforce self-harming behaviours. The Listener Scheme is one source of support so that women can begin to manage their self-harm behaviours in prison. While the research is conducted in one women’s prison, the understanding of women Listeners’ experiences of providing support in a women’s prison is relevant to all prisons in the female estate.

Indeed, the use of qualitative data means the findings of the currently study are unable to be replicated. This study does however, provide a richness of in-depth data which can be used as a guide to incorporate gender specific approaches to peer support provisions for women who self-harm in custody.

**Conclusion**

Whilst the implementation of gender specific prisons for women in custody is not a new concern, ensuring gendered specific concerns are included within prison peer support schemes is currently under researched. Despite the significant benefits including gendered related concerns could have for the engagement of self-harm for women in custody.

Peer support provisions internationally should include a gender specific approach for women in custody who self-harm, taking in to account the key findings from this paper, relating to the previous difficulties of women with men prior and during custody which can lead to their engagement in self-harm. Additionally, that the ‘mother role’ is central for women in custody, which has already been acknowledged in the literature, however that the displacement of the mother role is complex, for some women focusing on the present, for others on their childhood and for some a combination of the two. What is clear from this study is that the displacement of the mother role is traumatic for women and acts as a causation for self-harm whilst in custody. Peer support schemes in custody should acknowledge the importance of the displacement of this role but also the positive impact women Prison Listeners supporting fellow women in custody can have.

Currently the same training is provided for Listeners in male and female prisons although individual differences occur between settings in the operation of the scheme. The findings of this study suggest that the scheme may benefit from incorporating the gender differences identified in this study regarding the reasons for self-harm and accessing the service. By providing a to nuanced service for women, Listeners may be able to better respond to the experiences they are likely to encounter when supporting fellow women in custody.
As a starting point Listener training could better reflect an understanding of the triggers for women’s self-harm that relates to their difficult experiences with men, the displacement of their mother role and their needs for attachments in custody. One way to address the above is for the content of the training for prison Listeners to be tailored to gender awareness raising, particularly in relation to women who self-harm in custody.

Further research

1. To further research the employment of a gendered approach to other prison peer support provisions, such as the insiders scheme, the buddy scheme (Part of the Therapeutic Community), The Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust (RAPT), Shannon Trust’s Turning Pages scheme and Health trainers.

References


Dr David Crepaz-Keay,

Many thanks for your constructive feedback on our paper: ‘Exploring the Listener Scheme in a women’s prison: The importance of a gendered approach to peer support for women who self-harm in custody’
Please see below for detailed comments and amendments.

Many thanks.

Best wishes

Dr Louise Griffiths

Response to Reviewer Comments

Comments:
The topic is interesting and relevant, it is important that where the motivation for problematic behaviour differs for men and women that those who support individuals displaying such behaviour are trained appropriately and receive support.

Comment: I was curious about the lack of content that related to the listeners experiences of training, and whether they found the training to equip them to deal with the specific needs of female offenders, or if this was something they developed themselves or innately because of the shared experience of being a woman (with probable similar difficulties).

Amendment: The Listeners in the current study perceived the training provided for their role positively
“As Listeners we do receive training on self-harm, it is part of that. We are, do feel ready to help others. Sometimes no matter how much training you have it comes down to being a woman and well a prisoner” (Mary, Listener). Which signifies that the Listeners within this study use their relation nature which they acknowledge a gendered attribute to offer support, which supports the formalisation of this when implementing peer support schemes for women in custody.

My main feedback centres around ensuring that you have captured sufficient information on the methodology. At present there are a number of questions / gaps that reduce the quality of the overall paper. I think a number of the questions I have posed would be addressed by adding a thematic map and giving further consideration to the links between the different concepts you have identified.

Response: Full thematic map would include information relating to subsequent papers/ or already published papers so unable to include.

Additional Questions:
1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?: The area explored has minimal research currently and offers relevant points of evaluation on the use of the listeners scheme within female prisons.

2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any significant work ignored?: Paper introduces the topic of peer support via the listeners scheme for offenders that self harm as exclusively focused on research within male establishments. The paper by Michelle Jaffe (2012)The Listener Scheme in Prisons: Final report on the Research Findings, Presented to Samaritans (available online) contains some relevant information to the content of the paper that has not been included.

Amendment: With few exceptions, research has been conducted within the male prison estate, the few existing studies have explored the use of the Listener Scheme for the general support of women in custody (Jaffe, 2012), rather than in relation to the behaviour of self-harm.

The benefits of the Listener Scheme to the prisoners’ obtaining support has been explored in great depth, as have the benefits to the Listeners themselves (Farrant and Levenson, 2002; Jaffe, 2012; Foster and Magee, 2011), alongside the negative aspects of the scheme (Foster and Magee, 2011; Syed and Blanchette, 2000). Nonetheless, to date there has been an absence of a significant focus on the Listener Scheme and its contribution to supporting women who self-harm in custody. This paper
explores how peer support schemes such as the Listener Scheme can incorporate gender specific elements into the scheme to support women who self-harm in custody.

**Comment Page 1 Line 23:** what specific research details differences in male and female self-harm? The paper argues for the need for a gendered approach and therefore further explanation of the differences between the motivations for self harm would assist this argument

**Amendment:** Research suggests that women often have significant addictions and mental health concerns and are more likely than their male counterparts to engage in self-harm (Prison Reform Trust, 2017). In addition, women’s self-harm acts as a coping method for ‘intrapersonal issues’ which documents self-harm as a result of frustration and lack of control in custody as opposed to ‘interpersonal issues’ which documents self-harm as a result of relationship difficulties with partners (Walker et al, 2017).

**Comment: Page 1: Line 30 - is this a causal link? if so, this should be specified**

**Amendment:** “will” changed to “May”

**Comment: Page 1: line 44 - cites the needs of women in prison as more complex than those of men, I recommend changing the language, the source document refers to the needs of women being different to those of men, not necessarily more complex**

**Amendment:** that women have distinct needs in prison

3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts, or other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?

**Comment:** Further description of the case study design and methods selected would be beneficial.

**Amendment:** Previous research into the Listener Scheme predominately focuses on male prisoners, with a limited number of studies (Jaffe, 2012) focusing on the Listener Scheme within the female prison estate. Furthermore, to date, previous research has yet to examine the ways in which the Listener Scheme can support women to manage their self-harm behaviour in custody. Yin (2013) supports the use of a case study design in response to the research which endeavours to answer “how” and “why” questions, considered to align with a case study approach, as a response to the explanatory nature of the questions. Indeed, by employing a case study design approach detailed insights were obtained from the women themselves to aid in enhancing the support provided by Listeners to women who engage in self-harm in prison.

**Comment:** What was the questionnaire used within the study to collect quantitative data? Further information about this would be helpful, e.g. reliability / validity or reference if appropriate.

**Amendment:**

The research was collected in two stages, the first stage involved a researcher-developed questionnaire and subsequent interviews with women prisoners and also staff, as well as a focus group with prison Listeners. Stage two included observations of the prison site to confirm the findings from stage one.

The questionnaire acted as a screening tool to ensure that the participants who were invited to take part in an interview had prior experience of self-harm and the Listener Scheme. For this reason, a questionnaire was employed which provided a source of quantitative data which was then analysed to enable the screening of potential participants.

The questionnaire obtained general information about the women’s background, which included the length of the current prison sentence, if it was their first time in prison, if they had children, their relationship status and who they had contact with outside of prison. The questionnaire for the staff also included some background information, such as their role within the prison, if they had additional responsibilities such as an ACCT case manager and whether they had worked in other prisons.

**Comment:** there needs to be a description of the methods used to analyse the qualitative data - is this
thematic analysis? It is stipulated that these areas are interrelated, a thematic map would be helpful here.

Amendment:

The qualitative data was analysed using Constructivist Grounded Theory as this enabled analysing the data as the research process evolved, in order to consider whether or not changes to the subsequent direction of the research were necessary (Charmaz, 2014). This influenced the later interviews as the schedule was amended to ask additional question to explore the emerging categories in more detail.

Constructivist Grounded Theory expands on qualitative research to answer the ‘why’ questions within the data by considering the impact of the values of the researcher and participants on the study through careful exploration of the language and meanings used by these specific groups (Charmaz, 2017). The use of constructive grounded theory was also aligned with the case study design framework and gendered approach, which considers the influence of the researcher being female as a vital component of the theoretical positioning (Charmaz, 2017).

The analysis involved looking at the participants’ transcripts and using line-by-line coding to identify what the participant was trying to articulate (Glaser, 1998). By using line-by-line coding, categories emerged from within the data (Charmaz, 2014). Focus coding was then used to consider the context of the line-by-line codes. In addition, memos were made during the research to assist in providing the context of the participants’ line-by-line coding.

The categories, which emerged during this coding of stage 1 data identified areas which required further details to provide an extensive exploration into the Listener Scheme and what contributions of support the scheme has made for self-harm. The revisiting of codes and categories is essential when using grounded theory as a method of analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). During the second stage of the data collection, the categories which were identified within the first data collection stage were either confirmed or discounted. The same grounded theory approach was also applied to stage 2 of the data collection (prison observations).

Response: Full thematic map would include information relating to subsequent papers/or already published papers so unable to include.

4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: How was the potential for bias explored / controlled for?

Comment: The SSI was based on research highlighting the gendered experience of offenders within custody and how this related to self-harm, it is therefore unclear whether there are experiences less related to gender that contribute to self-harm that are not captured due to the structure of the interview. This limitation should be acknowledged / explored, as it relates to the training.

Amendment:

The results of this study identify that women have distinct needs in custody which influence the use of self-harm as a method of coping. This paper focuses specifically on the findings from the research which support the implementation of a gendered approach within peer support schemes such as the Listener Scheme. This paper therefore doesn’t include alternative causations for self-harm which may be experienced by both women and men in custody.

Comment: Page 4, Line 48/49: this sentence is out of context with the remaining results, is this another experience on the continuum of women’s experiences with men? is it a difficult experience that has led the participant to need to manipulate or is this not a difficult experience? integrating this into the understanding of the other data would be helpful.

Amendment: Yet women used their positions with men to manipulate “I would know what to do to get what I wanted, I wasn’t worried about what I had to do, I did it! (Fran, Prisoner) – quotation removed.

Comment: Page 5, line 9/10: the extract does not appear to reflect a woman being undermined by a man

Amendment: Extra information from the quote included “I wasn’t trusted with anything and he would take what I had”
Comment: Page 6: line 57/58: this sentence fits also with the previous theme regarding the difficult experiences with men and links the theme to the case study for gendered approach to peer support i.e. that a woman with difficult experiences with men would not want a male listener, obviously this would not happen in a female prison but it shows the support for female to female support more effectively - I would consider moving this.

Amendment: Move this quotation to ‘difficult experiences with men’ section of the results.

The importance of a gender specific approach to self-harm is evident within the support preferences of the prisoners, as the women acknowledge that they use the provision, as it is women to women support, “I wouldn’t disclose to a male listener, it wouldn’t happen. I only disclose as the listener is a woman too, you know” (Merry, prisoner). The woman provides further details relating to damaging experiences with men, which have left her unable to discuss any of her problems with a male, including a male Listener.

Comment: page 7: this is an important area that would seem to be better represented with a separate theme, or the title of the theme could be revised

Amendment: Title of theme has been amended to “Attachment needs of women in custody: The importance of peer relationships”

Comment: page 7 line 48: the staff seem to be highlighting other attachment issues e.g. family issues, perhaps it is reflecting attachment needs whilst in custody rather than the attachments being exclusively within custody

Amendment: Addressed by the change of the title for this theme “Attachment needs of women in custody: The importance of peer relationships”

Comment: page 8 line 3 - Are you saying that the listeners scheme is meeting the attachment needs of the women? this would be an interesting point to elaborate on

Amendment: Indeed, for the women within this study the use of the Listener Scheme was central to the management of their self-harm as a source of attachment in custody. Whilst the Listeners may not have been used during the engagement in self-harm, the support provided prior and after this behaviour was paramount for the women and provided an essential source of attachment in custody.

Comment: Page 10: line 26/27: The reference needs to be more clearly linked to the findings from the research. Currently it does not read as though it is connected.

Amendment: Page 10: line 29: The paragraph may flow better if it is moved to before the previous paragraph (line 22). The conclusions drawn within paragraph (line 22) can be applied to the latter paragraph - i.e. female listeners may also have experiences of absent mothers, thus this point can be applied to both, and greater emphasis can be added here to the peer support training approach requiring a sensitivity to such issues.

Amendment: The following paragraph has been moved as suggested:

In addition, as the Listeners are also women prevented from their mothering role so they hold a shared understanding that enables an empathetic approach, with the core characteristics constituting being a woman, mother and being in custody. Worrall (1981) acknowledges the gendered approach, which documents the solidarity of women prisoners as a gendered issue.

It is thereby crucial for peer support provisions in custody to be sensitive to this concern in order to fully support women who self-harm in custody.

Comment: Page 10: line 58: this would be expected because the SSI was based on literature that focused on gendered experiences in custody - modifying the wording e.g. “the specific issues related to gender that were identified from the data were”

Amendment: The specific issues related to gender that were identified from the data were

Comment: Page 10, line 43: the paragraph needs to make clearer how the empathetic approach taken
by the listeners that helps women manage self harm supports the need for a gendered approach within
the training - are you saying that an empathetic approach is more beneficial with females and this is the
reason for specific focus on gender during the training? or is it related to the earlier point regarding
connections between women?

Amendment: Indeed, an empathetic approach is beneficial for women in custody, which supports the
findings of this study to include gender specific training within the peer support schemes for women who
self-harm in custody.

5. Practicality and/or Research implications: Does the paper identify clearly any implications for practice
and/or further research? Are these implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the
paper?:

Comment: Greater attention could be paid to exploring the strengths and limitations of the study as
well as extrapolating other areas for research and more detailed implications for training of listeners

Amendment:

Furthermore, the use of a case study design limits the generalisation of the findings to the research site.
For example, the Listener Scheme as a source of peer support could include the triggers identified by
this paper within their training, such as the difficulties women may have experienced with men, the
displacement of the mother role and the importance of peer support as a source of attachment in
custody.

The results of this study identify that women have distinct needs in custody which influence the use of
self-harm as a method of coping. This paper focuses specifically on the findings from the research which
support the implementation of a gendered approach within peer support schemes such as the Listener
Scheme. This paper therefore doesn't include alternative causations for self-harm which may be
experienced by both women and men in custody.

This research supports the development of gender specific peer support for women who self-harm in
custody which can be used by the prison estate to incorporate/ design schemes to be not only be
mindful of these triggers but to tailor the support provided within these schemes to ensure distinctions
are made within the male and female prison estate in relation to how self-harm is supported.

2. To develop a gendered training course for prison peer support schemes to support women who self-
harm in custody.

Comment: page 11 line 50 / page 12 line 1: these paragraphs appear to be saying the same point.

While the research is conducted in one women’s prison, the understanding of women Listeners’
experiences of providing support in a women’s prison is relevant to all prisons in the female estate. –
Deleted

6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the technical
language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has attention been paid
to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon use, acronyms, etc.:

Comment: Page 2: Line 54 - sentence is unclear

-Amended

Comment: The introduction section could be improved by restructuring so the topics flow in a more
logical fashion. For example, explaining the context (prisons), the needs of women as different to men,
response to these needs (self harm), available support (listeners scheme), pulling this together with the
discussion of the importance of the gendered approach to such support.

Amendment: Restructured as suggested by reviewer

Comment: Page 7:line 42/43: remove "who"

Amendment: Removed
Comment: Page 11: line 56/57: remove "to"
Amendment: Removed
The entire document requires proof reading for grammar.

Reviewer: 2

Recommendation: Minor Revision

Comment:
In the results you talk about the loss of opportunity to become a mother while in prison. But although you refer to the displacement of the mother role focusing on the present and on childhood in the results then return to them in the discussion and conclusion you do not refer to the loss of opportunity to become a mother again.

Amendment: Whilst for some women this represented a missed opportunity of becoming a mother, which is now unlikely because they are in custody

a loss opportunity to become a mother, for others on their childhood and for some a combination.

Additional Questions:
1. Originality: Does the paper contain new and significant information adequate to justify publication?: Yes it is an interesting addition to the literature

2. Relationship to Literature: Does the paper demonstrate an adequate understanding of the relevant literature in the field and cite an appropriate range of literature sources? Is any significant work ignored?: Yes it gives a good account of the current literature

3. Methodology: Is the paper's argument built on an appropriate base of theory, concepts, or other ideas? Has the research or equivalent intellectual work on which the paper is based been well designed? Are the methods employed appropriate?: Yes the argument builds logically and creates the case for the research.

Research methods are comprehensive and appropriate

4. Results: Are results presented clearly and analysed appropriately? Do the conclusions adequately tie together the other elements of the paper?: The authors refer to a previous paper in which they described their methodology in more detail. In this article the description is adequate for providing context to the study results.

5. Practicality and/or Research implications: Does the paper identify clearly any implications for practice and/or further research? Are these implications consistent with the findings and conclusions of the paper?: The research provides specific recommendations for practice which are consistent with the finding of the paper.

There is one area mentioned in the results which is not referred to again and which is another important finding. I have discussed this in more detail in the authors notes.

6. Quality of Communication: Does the paper clearly express its case, measured against the technical language of the field and the expected knowledge of the journal's readership? Has attention been paid to the clarity of expression and readability, such as sentence structure, jargon use, acronyms, etc.: It is very readable and engaging.

There are a number of small typos and punctuation errors. I have listed the ones I noticed in the attached word document but there may well be more so I suggest a detailed re read.

Amendments made.
Exploring the Listener Scheme in a women’s prison: The importance of a gendered approach to peer support for women who self-harm in custody

Abstract – (250 words)

Purpose

Without exception, research on the contribution of the Prison Listener Scheme as a form of peer support for those who self-harm in custody has focused on men in prison. Women’s experience of custody is shaped by their experiences of hegemonic masculinity that also mediate through women’s roles as mothers and caregivers. Women’s self-harm is similarly influenced by these gendered experiences. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the Listener Scheme as a form of peer-to-peer support for women contributes to women managing their self-harm in a female prison.

Design/methodology/approach

The paper employed a case study design with a mixed methods approach using a quantitative questionnaire with prison staff (n=65) and women in custody who had self-harmed (n=30). Qualitative methods included a focus group with Prison Listeners (n10) and semi-structured interviews with women who self-harm (n10) and prison staff (n10). Four days were also spent observing the prison environment.

Findings

Findings suggest that women seek support from other women as peer Listeners for three main reasons; their previous difficult experiences with men, a displacement of the mother role and their attachment needs in custody. Research suggests that women often have significant addictions and mental health concerns and are more likely than their male counterparts to engage in self-harm (Prison Reform Trust, 2017). In addition, women’s self-harm acts as a coping method for ‘intrapersonal issues’ which documents self-harm as a result of frustration and lack of control in custody as opposed to ‘interpersonal issues’ which documents self-harm as a result of relationship difficulties with partners (Walker et al, 2017). This paper suggests that peer support schemes internationally should be tailored to providing support for these types of gendered experience to support women who self-harm in custody. This has implications for the training and support of Listeners in women’s prisons.

Research limitations/implications

This exploratory research was conducted in one female prison and while can be considered to test proof of concept is limited in its generalisability.

Originality/value

This paper suggests that Listeners providing peer-to-peer support for women in custody who self-harm may encounter triggers for this behaviour based on women’s experiences including; how women relate to men; women’s experience of the way custody displaces their role as mothers and women’s need for safe attachments in custody. These gendered
experiences have implications for the training and development of peer support schemes in women’s prisons, such as the Listener scheme. Further research is needed to compare the gendered types of support Prison Listeners provide depending on whether they are in male or female prisons.

Key words – Prison Listener, women prisoners, self-harm, prison peer support, gender

Article Classification – Research paper

Research question

Exploring the Listener Scheme in a women’s prison: the importance of a gendered approach to peer support for women who self-harm in custody

Introduction

Historically, the prison estate has been designed for the incarceration of men (Lemgiuber, 2000) manifest through the architecture design and security practices. Indeed, current research acknowledges the use of Trauma Informed Care and Practice for women is problematic because of this ‘hostile environment’ (Jewkes, Jordan, Wright & Bendelow, 2019). These features of a custodial environment are evident in female prisons despite research that women have distinct needs in prison (Ministry of Justice, 2013). For example, restricted access to children (Corston, 2007; Baldwin and O’Malley, 2015), prior experience of abuse (Wright et al., 2016; Prison Reform Trust, 2015), mental health issues (Light et al., 2013), and the removal of coping methods such as drugs and alcohol (Prison Reform Trust, 2015).

Research suggests that women often have significant addictions and mental health problems and are more likely to engage in self-harm (Prison Reform Trust, 2015). Therefore, although women are far fewer in the UK prison population (3,797 compared to their 78,675 male counterparts (Official Statistics, 2019) they account for almost 5 times more incidents of self-harm than men.

Being imprisoned intensifies women’s prior experiences of abuse and exacerbates existing mental health issues and/or renders women vulnerable to new episodes of mental ill health, with such concerns: the prison environment makes women significantly vulnerable, given that they were already at risk when they entered custody (Caulfield, 2016). Women are over-represented in prison populations, a trend that would be reversed if, as Corston (2007) advocates, women were given fewer custodial sentences.

To date, the prison estate has not been adequately adapted to meet women’s needs in terms of access to treatment for mental health issues, education, employment and debt management (Prison Reform Trust, 2015). Furthermore, research shows that it is extremely
important to ensure that the gendered needs of women in custody are being met by the prison estate (Walker and Towl, 2016) as a gendered aspect of prison is that it represents a time of limited control for women, which can lead to self-harm (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2005; Crewe et al, 2017).

Self-harm defined as any “act of self-poisoning or self-injury carried out by an individual irrespective of motivation” (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), 2011, p. 4) is a gendered issue. Research testifies that the reasons why women self-harm are different to their male counterparts. The literature reveals that women in custody engage in self-harm for numerous reasons, which include current and previous traumatic events, negative experiences of the prison environment, and isolation in a single cell (Marzano, Hawton, Rivli & Fazel, 2011). Additionally, other contributing causations include the early days of imprisonment (NOMS, 2012) and mental health concerns (Ministry of Justice, 2013).

One way that the prison system can respond to women’s needs is through peer-to-peer support schemes that see women supporting each other based on their common experience. There are many benefits of peer support (Farrant and Levenson, 2002), in terms of affecting better health outcomes of prisoners (Woodall et al., 2015), and the improvement of organisational skills and behaviour (Collica, 2014). The Listener Scheme is one such source of peer support that adopts the same structure and arrangements in both male and female prison establishments. **With few exceptions, research has been conducted within the male prison estate, the few existing studies have explored the use of the Listener Scheme for the general support of women in custody (Jaffe, 2012), rather than in relation to the behaviour of self-harm.**

The Listener Scheme is supported by Samaritans as a registered UK charity, which trains volunteers to offer confidential advice 24 hours a day (Samaritans, 2017). Samaritans provide the Listeners Initial Training (LIT), which consists of eight sessions held over a period of 3–6 weeks that are organised within the prison establishment. The seventh training session focuses on identifying and understanding self-harm, including why individuals engage in the behaviour, the difference between self-harm and an attempt to end a life, and to equip Listeners with the skills to respond to this behaviour. The purpose of this seventh session is to identify what self-harm is and to help Listeners understand some of the reasons why prisoners engage in this behaviour,

Ongoing training provides a refresher for Listeners to help them to continue to support those who continue to self-harm in custody. Currently the content of the LIT and the refresher training is the same in male and female prisons. This means that there is limited understanding about whether the Listener Scheme should provide more gender specific support (Stewart, 2008).

**The benefits of the Listener Scheme to the prisoners’ obtaining support has been explored in great depth, as have the benefits to the Listeners themselves (Farrant and Levenson, 2002; Jaffe, 2012; Foster and Magee, 2011), alongside the negative aspects of the scheme (Foster and Magee, 2011; Syed and Blanchette, 2000b). Nonetheless, to date there has been**
an absence of a significant focus on the Listener Scheme and its contribution to supporting women who self-harm in custody. This paper explores how peer support schemes such as the Listener Scheme can incorporate gender specific elements into the scheme to support women who self-harm in custody.

Methods

The research approach and data collection methods used in the study, together with details of the sample of women, Listeners and staff is described in more detail in a related paper (see Griffiths, Bailey & Slade, 2019). In summary, the study adopted a case study design (Stake, 1995) in one women’s prison. Previous research into the Listener Scheme predominately focuses on male prisoners, with a limited number of studies (Jaffe, 2012) focusing on the Listener Scheme within the female prison estate. Furthermore, to date, previous research has yet to examine the ways in which the Listener Scheme can support women to manage their self-harm behaviour in custody. Yin (2013) supports the use of a case study design in response to the research which endeavours to answer “how” and “why” questions, which is considered to align with a case study approach, as a response to the explanatory nature of the questions. Indeed, by employing a case study design approach detailed insights were obtained from the women themselves to aid in enhancing the support provided by Listeners for women who engage in self-harm in custody.

The research was collected in two stages, the first stage involved a research-developed questionnaire and subsequent interviews with women prisoners and staff, as well as a focus group with prison Listeners. Stage two included observations of the prison site to validate the findings from stage one. A mixed methods approach was employed to collect quantitative data using a questionnaire with prison staff (n=65) and women in custody who had self-harmed (n=30), this enabled the use of purposive sampling to include participants in the qualitative part of the study. The questionnaire acted as a screening tool to ensure that the participants who were invited to take part in an interview had prior experience of self-harm and the Listener Scheme. For this reason, a questionnaire was employed which provided a source of quantitative data which was then analysed to enable the screening of potential participants.

The questionnaire obtained general information about the women’s background, which included the length of the current prison sentence, if it was their first time in prison, if they had children, their relationship status and who they had contact with outside of prison. The questionnaire for the staff also included some background information, such as their role within the prison, if they had additional responsibilities such as an ACCT case manager and whether they had worked in other prisons.

Qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus groups were captured from Prison Listeners (n=10), women in custody who self-harm (n=10) and prison staff (n=10). Observations over a four-day period were conducted on A, B, C, D, E, F wings and the Therapeutic Community that operated in the prison, which was located on J wing. The
interview schedules were developed from exploring the literature to reflect women’s gendered experiences of custody, which may lead to their engagement in self-harm (Crewe et al, 2017). The questions explored how women used the Listener Scheme in relation to their self-harm behaviour.

The qualitative data was analysed using Constructivist Grounded Theory as this enabled analysing the data as the research process evolved, in order to consider whether changes to the subsequent direction of the research were necessary (Charmaz, 2014). This influenced the later interviews as the schedule was amended to ask additional question to explore the emerging categories in more detail.

Constructivist Grounded Theory expands on qualitative research to answer the ‘why’ questions within the data by considering the impact of the values of the researcher and participants on the study through careful exploration of the language and meanings used by these specific groups (Charmaz, 2017). The use of constructive grounded theory was also aligned with the case study design framework and gendered approach, which considers the influence of the researcher being female as a vital component of the theoretical positioning (Charmaz, 2017).

The analysis involved looking at the participants’ transcripts and using line-by-line coding to identify what the participant was trying to articulate (Glaser, 1998). By using line- by- line coding, categories emerged from within the data (Charmaz, 2014). Focus coding was then used to considers the context of the line- by- line codes. In addition, memos were made during the research to assist in providing the context of the participants’ line- by- line coding.

The categories, which emerged during the coding of the stage 1 data identified areas which required further details to provide an extensive exploration into the Listener Scheme and what contributions of support the scheme for self-harm. The revisiting of codes and categories is essential when using grounded theory as a method of analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). During the second stage of the data collection, the categories which were identified within the first data collection stage were either confirmed or discounted. The same grounded theory approach was also applied to stage 2 of the data collection (prison observations).

Results

The findings revealed that women’s experiences are inextricably linked with their gender and this contributes to triggers for their self-harming behaviour in custody in three interrelated ways:

*The difficult experiences of women (in prison) with men*

*Displacement of the mother role*
Attachment needs of women in custody: The importance of peer relationships

In turn, these experiences influence the reasons why women seek support from their peers as Listeners.

The difficult experiences of women (in prison) with men

Women in this study disclosed feelings of ‘hate’ towards men that they attributed to the relationships they had experienced before coming into prison. “A man could do what they want you know, especially when it’s your husband, rape wasn’t rape. I was never taught it was” (Joy, prisoner). For Joy, this subsequently resulted in the use of self-harm as a means of coping within the prison environment “It has lead to me, you know hurting myself, cutting. I just get so angry that they get to do what they want” (Joy, prisoner).

Most women described themselves as relatively powerless compared with men “Men have always been the important ones, in my family, the only ones with power (Nicola, Prisoner).

Listeners reported a level of understanding of hatred and manipulation of men and the use of sex as a weapon as a common thread that underpinned women’s crimes “We hear about it a lot, the women who we listen to haven’t had the best experiences with men, I get that, it leads to things, I guess influences” (Katie, Prison Listener). This ‘Hatred’ once in custody manifested in self-harm as a method to cope with their previous experiences with men. “It’s only once I have been in here (custody) that it has hit me! That wasn’t right, what he did to me isn’t normal but even though I know this it leads to hurting me, that’s all I can do, harm myself” (Kerry, Prisoner).

The importance of a gender specific approach to self-harm is evident within the support preferences of the prisoners, as the women acknowledged that they use the provision, as it is women to women support, “I wouldn’t disclose to a male listener, it wouldn’t happen. I only disclose as the Listener is a woman too, you know” (Merry, prisoner). The woman provides further details relating to damaging experiences with men, which have left her unable to discuss any of her problems with a male, including a male Listener.

Women’s narratives suggested that their negative relationships with men existed on a continuum from men undermining them “I’ve not had a good male role model, I don’t know what that is, my relationships have been bad! I wasn’t trusted with anything and he would take what I had” (Pippa, Prisoner) through to actual disclosures of physical abuse. “Some men do hurt women, we have that a lot, I understand if you are getting beat up by a man you would hate them” (Olivia, Prison Listener). For women in the research, they held negative feelings towards men with hate as the extreme.

This category (The difficult experiences of women (in prison) with men) was discussed by the majority of women and the Listeners within this study, which justifies the inclusion of this as a key gendered focus in the development and running of peer support schemes to support...
women who self-harm in custody. This pre-existing perspective and absence of good male role models may result in the women engaging in self-harm.

Displacement of the mother role

A recurring category within this research identified the displacement of the mother role. For women in custody this represented several different forms. For some women the displacement reflected their own childhood and how this had resulted in self-harm prior, and during custody. In addition, other women discussed the displacement to signify the complexities of trying to continue being a mother from within the prison environment. Furthermore, the women discussed the distress following visitations and how this resulted in self-harm.

The displacement of the mother role by virtue of being in custody could be traced back to women’s childhoods and is outplayed in their behaviours in custody for example, Laura, (Prisoner) acknowledges that her mother had not played an active role in her childhood, and she experienced traumatic abuse as a consequence which leads to learned self-harm behaviours. Whilst initially Laura’s self-harm acted as a coping mechanism outside of the prison environment, the behaviour acted as reassurance and to an extent a comfort within the prison environment. As Laura acknowledged,

“Yes, I self-harmed before prison, ten overdoses. The first was when I was 9 years old, this was something I did as a child, it is something I have brought to prison. I know I can self-harm and I will feel me. Somewhere that is strange (Laura, Prisoner).

This form of displacement is further explored by Bella linking the mothering of her own children to the experience of her own childhood. “Trying to be a good mum, finding it difficult as I don't know how to be a mum” (Bella, prisoner). Bella acknowledges worthy intentions to develop her own bond with her daughter, whilst disclosing the difficulties of her own childhood, which has positioned her with doubts concerning wholesome parental models.

A secondary form of the displacement category is how the women’s relationships with their children remain as an extremely important feature of their day-to-day life in prison even when they are separated physically by virtue of being in custody. Women talked about the distress associated with these separations:

“I don’t know my son as an adult. He is 19 years old now. I have been in prison 11 years and I was only with him 8 years. Even then I was there with him but not there, I had issues going on” (Adele, Prisoner).

For most of the women, self-harm reported serves as a method of coping with separation experiences;

“When being away from them (children) gets too much, I will harm myself, you see I blame myself for this” (Cindy, Prisoner). Prison Listeners recognise this experience and can share
other ways of dealing with the pain of separation “We all feel it, we don’t want to be away, none of us, I’m a mother you know. I just don’t self-harm, I listen and show I’m listening, I understand the mothering and the pain. I just deal with it in other ways” (Barbara, Prison Listener).

For some women even though separated from their children, the mothering role continues, in terms of the emotional commitment and still being regarded a mother was the most important thing in their lives. The women described their days as still very much occupied by thoughts and worries regarding their children and this could lead to self-harm “Visitations can lead to me feeling sad, when they leave I have to have a way to get over the loss, hurting myself helps in the physical sense, I am always hurting on the inside” (Ann, Prisoner). This woman signifies the difficulties of seeing her children and how self-harm is used as a way of coping but also Ann uses self-harm in the physical sense to see the cuts as a visual representation of the pain, she feels inside from being away from her children.

The continued importance of the family in reference to the mothering role is portrayed by Amber, (Prisoner) “All I ever wanted was a family you know”. This is a shared characteristic in which most of the women acknowledge and relate too. Those women have a family make this reference; however, prison means they can no longer function as a family which leads to the women engaging in self-harm. Similarly, those women who have no children but hold a desire for them also discuss the longing for a family which when they see other women ‘throwing this away’ (Jo, Prisoner) also can result in self-harm as a method of coping with the family they have desired. The findings of this study illustrate that women’s self-harm is attributed to difficulties with the displacement of the mother role a key distress for women in custody.

To provide further support to the gendering of the Listener Scheme for women who self-harm in custody, another prisoner identified that women are better Listeners and understand each other's emotions much better than their male counterparts, by references to the heightened emotions associated to the menstruation cycle. As one prisoner illustrated, “(Listeners) expect things may come in cycles for a woman to do with hormones, menstrual cycles, I think they are more (pause) ..Well the ladies understand that women can get highly excited or highly stressed, especially about not seeing family and children and being shut off contact. What used to be their job in the family, suddenly they are cut off from that role, Listeners understand all of that” (Bella, prisoner).

The common characteristics in which all women share is identified within the reference to hormones and the menstrual cycle. This is then related to the prison environment, which is documented as particularly challenging for women. The woman here is signifying the displacement of her role as a mother, which is an innate role, which comes with inbuilt responsibilities to her family and the feelings, which constitute her sense of self that is determined by the mothering role. Listeners also share the dual disadvantage, as the majority are also mothers and prisoners, which provides further support for a gendering prison approach for women in custody to support their self-harm, which accounts for the pains of the displacement of mothering role as a causation for this behaviour.
Whether it develops from the maternal instinct or the difference in hormones it has been documented that women are more empathetic and are able to share their prison journey with other women to an extent that men are not “Most proactive provision (Listeners) for peer support, there are differences between male and female, females are more willing” (Pete, Staff member).

**Attachment needs of women in custody: The importance of peer relationships**

A notable causative reason for self-harm as highlighted by the women, staff and Listeners was related to their peer to peer relationships with fellow prisoners; women with whom they share the same experiences in custody. The triggers were acknowledged with the loss of attachments when the relationships ended which resulted in the women engaging in self-harm as a method of coping. Staff members documented alternative reasoning, which considered external factors such as family issues, which affected the women’s ability to cope with custody.

The majority of the staff and women acknowledged that Listener support is not exclusively used to assist women to manage their self-harm but rather accessing Listeners is more about having some company and someone who will stay, listen, and not judge if self-harm is the behaviour being talked about or engaged in. It seemed for most women that being “locked up” in their cell at night induces reflection, which then stimulated a desire to offload. “It is at night, when I am on my own, I think about what I’ve done! I need someone to talk to, to listen, I will use a Listener then” (Ann, Prisoner). This was supported by most staff and women who reported that night-time is when Listener support is usually requested.

Indeed, for the women within this study the use of the Listener Scheme was central to the management of their self-harm as a source of attachment in custody. Whilst the Listeners may not have been used during the engagement in self-harm, the support provided prior and after this behaviour was paramount for the women and provided an essential source of attachment in custody.

Further to this, the prospect of sharing a cell with a fellow prisoner was deemed as a positive, as opposed to the current housing for every woman to be housed alone in their own cell. As Jan acknowledged, “Cell mates would be a good thing, even if you don’t talk, just for company” (Jan, prisoner).

Whilst acknowledgement was made that co-sharing women do not have to talk, there is a sense of security provided by having someone who is physically sharing the same environment during the night. This sense of company is attributed to close friendships or family members with whom sitting in silence is comfortable. It is in the shared situations and familiarity of close friendships and families that “just for company” can be obtained. In essence, friendships with fellow women take the place off albeit whilst in custody important relationships with family and friends that are lost to the outside world.
The success of the Listener Scheme is documented to the continuity of the Listeners, this is central for both the women and the Listeners. As Poppy acknowledged, “Here in HMP... it’s very good. I like the fact that the ladies don’t change often, you see the same familiar face and that’s more approachable” (Poppy, prisoner). In the absence of the ability to maintain close relationships outside, the importance of relationships in custody become critical as they are protective and maintain resilience. The women feel that isolation and being on their own is difficult, especially at night-time, so they seek a familiar face in the Listeners to find comfort.

It is apparent the development of ‘relationships’ is of central importance within the research establishment, which is extended to both the women and staff. Furthermore, for the women to feel secure in obtaining support the development of a prior relationship is required. The Listener Scheme could include the importance of attachment for women as a measure to prevent the engagement in self-harm within the core training but also to ensure the Listeners are mindful of this desire and the possible impact on self-harm in their support for women in custody.

The Listeners in the current study perceived the training provided for their role positively “As Listeners we do receive training on self-harm, it is part of that. We are, do feel ready to help others. Sometimes no matter how much training you have it comes down to being a woman and well a prisoner” (Mary, Listener). Which signifies that the Listeners within this study use their relation nature which they acknowledge a gendered attribute to offer support, which supports the formalisation of this when implementing peer support schemes for women in custody.

Discussion

This section relates the findings of the current study to the wider literature on women in prison who self-harm and the use of the Listener Scheme as a form of prison peer support. The implementation of gender sensitive provisions for women in custody is not a recent suggestion; it is documented within much earlier feminist research (Covington and Bloom, 2007). Indeed, the prison environment is distinct for the genders, which signifies the requirement of specific provisions for women in custody (Covington and Bloom, 2007).

The findings of this study address the aims of this paper by supporting a gendered approach for women who self-harm in custody and use peers as a source of support. The findings of this study identified that women in custody self-harm as a result of specific gendered issues, these being the difficulties they experience with men, the displacement of their mother role and the requirements of attachment in custody. The findings of this study support the application of a gendered approach for women who self-harm in custody in relation to the use of peers as a source of support.
The difficult experiences of women (in prison) with men

The findings of the current research identify negative experiences of women with men which can result in the women engaging in self-harm as a coping mechanism in prison. Indeed, while previous research documents the history of abuse that women in custody experience, which is distinct to male prisoners (Crewe et al, 2017; Macdonald, 2013; Light et al 2013) the literature does not explore the manipulation by women in custody who experience this abuse, which identifies an original finding of the current research.

Research suggests that 53% of women in custody had experienced abuse that was emotional, physical or sexual, whereas only 27% of men had endured such abuse (Prison Reform Trust, 2015). Indeed, research alludes the relationship between historical abuse experienced by women prior to being in custody (Wright et al., 2016), and women’s engagement in self-harm as a coping method to deal with the ongoing emotional toll of this experience (Macdonald, 2013). Therefore, incorporating the difficult experiences the women experience with men that leads to them engaging in self-harm within peer support schemes such as the Listener Scheme enables these supporters to be aware of the central issues for women which, leads to their engagement in self-harm.

Displacement of the mothering role

A reoccurring category which has been identified is the displacement of the mother role. For women in the study this category represented several different definitions. For some women the displacement reflected their own childhood and how this had resulted in self-harm prior and during custody. **Whilst for some women this represented a missed opportunity of becoming a mother, which is now unlikely as a result of being in custody.**

In addition, other women discussed the displacement to signify the complexities of trying to continue being a mother within the prison environment. Furthermore, the women discussed the distress following visitations and how this resulted in self-harm. Whilst these differences exist within the overarching category of the displacement of the mother role, they all are interlinked through the discussion of the importance of the mother role either for themselves as mothers or retrospectively as children.

The findings of the current research support the body of literature, which suggests it is the removal of the mother role by virtue of being physically incarcerated that women in prison find extremely traumatic (Corston, 2007; Baldwin and O, Malley, 2015; Hairston, 1991; Crewe et al, 2017).

The detrimental impact of the absence of the mothering role constructs a role strain, which if the women are able to continue engaging in mothering activities such constraints are reduced (Berry and Eigenberg, 2003). The current research documents the displacement of the mothering role, in which the women’s’ mothering role is thereby prevented following incarceration. This study identifies that the information reported by the women results in a role strain as they try to continue being a mother whilst in custody. Evidently, before imprisonment the women within the research held an ideology of their roles as mother,
however being placed in prison is not included as part of the mothering role. In essence, the women within the research know how to mother but face complexities at mothering within prison.

In addition, as the Listeners are also women prevented from their mothering role, they hold a shared understanding that enables an empathetic approach, with the core characteristics constituting being a woman, mother and being in custody. Worrall (1981) acknowledges the gendered approach, which documents the solidarity of women prisoners as a gendered issue.

This study supports the existing literature, which documents that losing contact with family members, especially children is a significant concern for women in prison (Crewe et al, 2017). The mothering from the prison estate constitutes a restricted role; in which engagement in self-harm for women in the current research represents a release. It is thereby crucial for peer support provisions in custody to be sensitive to this concern in order to fully support women who self-harm in custody.

The women in this study also discussed the displacement of the mother role from a different perspective, relating to the women during their childhood and their own mother. These reflections were discussed by the women and linked to their engagement in self-harm, within this perspective the displacement of the mother role during childhood leads to the engagement in self-harm in childhood, which was continued in custody as a method of coping. Whilst the association between childhood trauma and self-harm for women in custody is supported by the literature (Howard, Karatzias, Power and Mahoney, 2017), how this relates to the absence of the mother role is not explored and therefore provides a unique insight from this study.

Attachment needs of women in custody: The importance of peer relationships

The Listener Scheme enabled the building of connections between women in custody and their peers so that women know there is someone they can turn to in times of distress. Whilst the Listener Scheme might not always be the source of support women seek in prison it offers an empathetic approach (Foster and Magee, 2011), which in turn contributes to helping women manage their self-harm in custody. Indeed, an empathetic approach is beneficial for women in custody, which supports the findings of this study to include gender specific training within the peer support schemes for women who self-harm in custody.

The loosening of attachment to family members is signified as a noteworthy causation for the engagement in self-harm for the women within this study, as they disclosed details of the breakdown of personal relationships, the restricted contact with children and the rejection from family members following incarceration. The specific issues related to gender that were identified from the data were the desire for attachment to other prisoners in the form of relationships and to staff members who cared for their self-harm. The need to belong whilst in prison to a family is supported by previous research and identified as producing a search for a collective identity within the prison (Liebling, Arnold & Straub, 2011). The importance of attachment is central to women who self-harm in custody and
therefore should be focused upon during the delivery of prison support schemes, such as the Listener Scheme.

**Strengths and limitations of the research study**

The results of this study identify that women have distinct needs in custody which influence the use of self-harm as a method of coping. This paper focuses specifically on the findings from the research which support the implementation of a gendered approach within peer support schemes. This paper therefore doesn’t include alternative causations for self-harm which may be experienced by both women and men in custody.

The case study design incorporating mixed qualitative methods used within this research provides an in-depth understanding of women’s concerns in prison which in turn trigger and reinforce self-harming behaviours. The Listener Scheme is one source of support so that women can begin to manage their self-harm behaviours in prison.

Indeed, the use of qualitative data means the findings of the current study are unable to be replicated. Furthermore, the use of a case study design limits the generalisation of the findings to the research site. This study does, however, provide a richness of in-depth data which can be used as a guide to incorporate gender specific approaches to peer support provisions for women who self-harm in custody not only in the UK but also internationally.

The Listener Scheme as a source of peer support could include the triggers identified by this paper within their training, such as the difficulties women may have experienced with men, the displacement of the mother role and the importance of peer support as a source of attachment in custody.

This research supports the development of gender specific peer support for women who self-harm in custody which can be used by the prison estate to incorporate/ design schemes to be not only be mindful of these triggers but to tailor the support provided within these schemes to ensure distinctions are made within the male and female prison estate in relation to how self-harm is supported.

**Conclusion**

Whilst the implementation of gender specific prisons for women in custody is not a new concern, ensuring gendered specific concerns are included within prison peer support schemes is currently under researched, despite the significant benefits including gendered related concerns could have for the engagement of self-harm for women in custody.

Peer support provisions internationally should include a gender specific approach for women in custody who self-harm, taking in to account the key findings from this paper, relating to the previous difficulties of women with men prior and during custody which can lead to their engagement in self-harm. Additionally, that the ‘mother role’ is central for
women in custody, which has already been acknowledged in the literature, however that
the displacement of the mother role is complex, for some women focusing on the present, a
loss opportunity to become a mother, for others on their childhood and for some a
combination. What is clear from this study is that the displacement of the mother role is
traumatic for women and acts as a causation for self-harm whilst in custody. Peer support
schemes in custody should acknowledge the importance of the displacement of this role but
also the positive impact women Prison Listeners supporting fellow women in custody can
have.

Currently the same training is provided for Listeners in male and female prisons although
individual differences occur between settings in the operation of the scheme. The findings
of this study suggest that the scheme may benefit from incorporating the gender
differences identified in this study regarding the reasons for self-harm and accessing the
service. By providing a nuanced service for women, Listeners may be able to better respond
to the experiences they are likely to encounter when supporting fellow women in custody.

As a starting point Listener training could better reflect an understanding of the triggers for
women’s self-harm that relates to their difficult experiences with men, the displacement of
their mother role and their needs for attachments in custody. One way to address the above
is for the content of the training for prison Listeners to be tailored to gender awareness
raising, particularly in relation to women who self-harm in custody.

Further research

1. To further research the employment of a gendered approach to other prison peer
support provisions, such as the insider’s scheme, the buddy scheme (Part of the
Therapeutic Community), The Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners Trust (RAPT),
Shannon Trust’s Turning Pages scheme and Health trainers.

2. To develop a gendered training course for prison peer support schemes to support
women who self-harm in custody.

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