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## Positive collateral damage or purposeful design: How sport-based interventions impact the psychological well-being of people in prison

David Woods\*, David Hassan, Gavin Breslin

Sport and Exercise Sciences Research Institute (SESRI), Ulster University, Jordanstown Campus, Shore Road, Newtownabbey, Co. Antrim, BT37 0QB UK

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The primary aim of this study was to identify how sport based interventions impact psychological well-being within the prison population, considering both the hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives, namely the experience of positive affect and healthy psychological functioning and self-realisation. The study focuses on the perspective of those involved in either the design, delivery or oversight of sport based interventions within prison, collectively referred to as stakeholders throughout. Results were presented within a thematic framework to aid the future design and delivery of sport based interventions within the prison environment. A second aim was to link the themed framework to psychological theories of health behaviour change, a quality assurance recommendation by the Medial Research Council, but not achieved to date in the literature.

**Methods:** A total of 16 stakeholders were interviewed to ascertain their views on constituent components of the interventions contributing to psychological well-being. Inductive thematic content analysis was adopted and the emergent themes are discussed within the context of extant psychological theory and recent relevant research to understand how they positively impact psychological well-being.

**Results:** Six themes emerged, reflecting the spoken words of participants: 1) "Relating and Relationships"; 2) "Sense of Achievement"; 3) "Sporting Occasions"; 4) "In Their Hands"; 5) "Facing Forward"; and 6) "Creating a Life Rhythm". The psychological theories identified as underpinning these themes were Basic Psychological Needs Theory, Self-Identity Theory, and Self-Categorisation Theory.

**Conclusions:** Collectively, the themes and psychological theories identified, offer a new framework for the effective design and delivery of sport based interventions within prison that will potentially maximise benefit to prisoner psychological well-being. The new conceptual framework includes constructs from three psychological theories, suggesting that one theory alone cannot account for the complexities of designing interventions to enhance psychological well-being for prisoners. We invite researchers to go beyond designing ad-hoc programmes and to adopt and evaluate the proposed framework in future trial based research.

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## 1. Introduction

Psychological well-being relates to a person's psychological functioning, life-satisfaction and ability to develop and maintain mutually benefiting relationships (Stewart-Brown & Janmohamed, 2008). It comprises both the hedonic perspective, that is, the subjective experience of happiness and life satisfaction, alongside the eudaimonic perspective, focusing on psychological functioning, good relationships and self-realisation. The psychological well-

being of people in prison has been repeatedly identified across multiple judicial jurisdictions as a serious issue which should be given priority status, and afforded the appropriate resources to enable a multi-agency approach if success in tackling poor psychological well-being is to be realised (United Kingdom - Mental Health and Criminal Justice Report, Durcan, 2016; United States - Travis, Western, & Redburn, 2014; Australia - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2015). Although intervention programmes vary in content, it has been shown that regular involvement in sport can have a beneficial effect on social, physical and psychological well-being (Biddle, Mutrie, & Gorely, 2015; Lancet, 2016; Woods, Breslin, & Hassan, 2017; World Health Organisation, 2016). In line with the European Sports Charter (Council of

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [woods-d3@ulster.ac.uk](mailto:woods-d3@ulster.ac.uk) (D. Woods).

Europe, 2001), sport is defined as all forms of physical activity, both casual and organised, competitive or non-competitive. Studies within non-prison based populations have demonstrated involvement in sport leads to decreases in depression and anxiety, and increases in self-perceptions (Fox, 1999; Mason, Curl, & Kearns, 2016). Furthermore, systematic reviews of the impact of sport and physical activity from childhood through to old age (Arent, Landers, & Etnier, 2000; Biddle & Asare, 2011) and specifically within prisons (Woods et al., 2017) have reported positive effects on psychological well-being.

Within the prison population, multiple studies have reported a myriad of positive effects sport can have on psychological well-being (Amtmann & Kukay, 2016; Battaglia et al., 2015; Buckaloo, Krug, & Nelson, 2009; Cashin, Potter, & Butler, 2008; Gallant, Sherry, & Nicholson, 2014; Martin et al., 2013; Martos-Garcia, Devis-Devis & Sparkes, 2009). Positive effects are reported in life-skills, self-esteem, self-efficacy, confidence, hopelessness, depression, mood and resiliency. These findings primarily focus on the views of the prisoners, and relate to studies of people in prison engaging with sport through regular physical activity in the gym, or for example, participating in recreational football several times a week. Previous studies have also examined the impact of facilitated sport-based interventions (SBI) within prison, also focused primarily on the prisoners' perspective. A typical SBI would be the delivery of 8–12 week "sporting academies", which have sport participation as the main focus/activity, but include specific aims related to, for example, personal development or employability (Dubberley, Parry, & Baker, 2011; Leberman, 2007; Meek & Lewis, 2014a; Parker, Meek, & Lewis, 2014; Williams, Collingwood, Coles, & Schmeer, 2015). However, the lack of detailed studies focusing on the perspectives of stakeholders responsible for the design and delivery of SBIs within prison represents a significant gap in the literature, that if not filled will have implications for programme effectiveness in enhancing well-being.

Parker et al. (2014) reported on the outcomes from a 12-week sporting academy, which facilitated the development of sports coaching skills, qualifications (e.g. Sports Leaders awards), life-skills mentoring and pre-release resettlement support. The authors highlighted positive physical, social and psychological benefits, including: feeling physically fitter, increased self-esteem and positive outlook on life in preparation for reintegration into society. In a separate study, Meek and Lewis (2014a) provided a detailed ideographic account from prisoners and prison staff, focusing on the impact of football and rugby based sporting academies, provided within an English prison. The academies were positioned as an alternative way of engaging young men in identifying and meeting their community re-entry needs associated with the transition from prison. In this study, a cohort of 79 young men, (aged 18–21 years) reported benefits on prison life, preparation for release, improved attitudes toward offending, positive thinking and behaviour within prison, and on release. The authors also reported increased desistance from crime and enhanced prisoner self-esteem. Mindful of these positive outcomes, and similar positive impacts on prisoner psychological well-being detailed within a systematic review of 14 prison-based SBIs, Woods et al. (2017), highlighted that new research was required to further our understanding of the complexities of how such interventions are effective, in turn enabling practitioners to maximise intervention impact. A consistent exclusion of any psychological theory in the design of prison based SBIs, in contrast to Medical Research Council (MRC) guidance encouraging sound theoretical inclusion in health behaviour change interventions (Moore et al., 2015) was also highlighted by Woods et al. (2017) and represents a gap/opportunity for future research to address. This call for a greater

understanding of the complexities which underpin effective SBIs within prison resonates with the wider use of SBIs with at-risk individuals within communities, not only across the UK, but worldwide (Jones, Edwards, Bocarro, Bunds, & Smith, 2017).

Studies have examined the use of sport within at-risk communities to simultaneously promote psychological well-being at an individual level, whilst also delivering improved social cohesion and/or crime reduction in the communities within which that individual resides (Cameron & MacDougall, 2000; Coalter, 2009; Nichols & Taylor, 1996; Nichols, 2007; Taylor, Crow, Irvine, & Nichols, 1999; West & Crompton, 2001). The use of sport is often credited with playing a distinctive role in achieving non-sporting development goals, offering both at-risk individuals and prisoners alike, an alternative activities-based delivery method with which they typically engage better (Nichols, 2007). However, caution is sounded that the crucial psychological benefits are largely by-products of broader sports development objectives (Nichols, 2004), and the empirical evidence consistently warns of disconnect between the positive views of practitioners regarding the transformational power of sport, and those conducting the research (Coalter, 2013; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Kay, 2009; Lubans, Plotnikoff, & Lubans, 2012; Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006).

Criticisms often centre on difficulties in deconstructing and attributing causality (Collins, Henry, Houlihan, & Buller, 1999), and the centrality of sport to the resultant benefits (Coalter, 2013; Holt, 2016). Holt, mindful of the view expressed by Parkinson (1998), that sport, like most activities, is not a priori good or bad, but has the potential of producing both positive or negative outcomes, suggests the more constructive question centres around enquires on what conditions are necessary for sport to have a beneficial impact. This suggestion is further echoed in the more recent call by Woods et al. (2017) for a greater understanding of the complexities involved in SBIs delivered within prisons and a need to identify appropriate psychological theory to guide SBI design. The importance of a number of psycho-social mechanisms within the prison population were identified by Parker et al. (2014) and Meek and Lewis (2014a), such as improved self-perceptions, social connectedness and mood and emotions. However, there is a lack of detailed exploration from a stakeholder perspective, those responsible for intervention design and/or delivery, of how such SBIs positively impact on the psychological well-being of people in prison. Given the centrality of these stakeholders to the realisation of potential positive SBI impacts, a detailed exploration of their views is deemed worthy of investigation. The current study is therefore a response to the paucity of research exploring how stakeholders believe SBIs effectively contribute to prisoner psychological well-being and the lack of psychological theory explaining the link between what stakeholders perceive to be the constituent intervention components and improved prisoner psychological well-being.

Therefore, the study aims are twofold: 1) to understand the complexity of how SBIs can positively impact the psychological well-being of people in prison from the stakeholder perspective and present the results within a thematic framework; and 2) to link the framework to existing psychological theories of health behaviour change. Through interviews with a broad cross-section of those invested in the provision of SBIs in a prison setting, their views will inform a framework of key components, both sporting and non-sporting, required for the effective design and delivery of prison-based SBIs. Furthermore, the research will reflect on, and discuss, the emerging framework in the context of appropriate psychological theories which, it is suggested, should collectively underpin the development and delivery of SBIs.

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