

Enabling environment for sexual offenders in Swedish prisons?

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Abstract

It is not only the sexual offender treatment program itself which has an effect upon the rate of recidivism of sexual offenders. The quality of the relationship between prison staff and the prisoners, as well as the relationships between the prisoners themselves, has an impact on recidivism. The environment on the prison wing can be controlled by dominating prisoners who refuse treatment programming, deny their offence and often have an antisocial attitude. Alternatively, it could be dominated by prisoners who work with themselves in treatment. Prison staffs have an important role in intervening and be a part of creating an enabling environment by being present and relationship orientated, since absent staff tend to give room for destructive attitudes on the prison wing. An investigation of the effect of an enabling environment for sex offenders has been carried out in Sweden. The goal with an enabling environment is to help the offender to live a good life after release and not to reoffend. Every prison holding these prisoners was investigated and factors which promote or counteract an enabling environment were observed. The investigation concludes with six proposals for how to develop a better enabling environment in Swedish prisons.

Key words: Psychotherapy, sexual offenders, responsivity, environment

Background

A project group in the Swedish Correctional Service in 2001 suggested how the conditions for the "new" sexual offender treatment program should be implemented in the prisons (Kriminalvårdsstyrelsen, 2001).

Following guidelines were suggested and also implemented:

- All men sentenced for sexual offences shall be placed at special prisons for this category
- Staff competence and treatment facilities shall be concentrated to seven units both open and closed to meet the different risk levels within the offender group
- There should be a continuity for the treatment and rehabilitation from the prison service to probation service
- All men sentenced for sexual offences shall be assessed for a risk and need profile and offered to participate in the sexual offender treatment
- All staff members shall have a special basic training in sexual offender treatment, attitudes, offender psychology, victim psychology and knowledge of the program
- Every probation office should have at least two probation officers specially trained in the sexual treatment program

At the same time a research project was looking at the supporting environment at Skogome prison (Månsson, et al. 2001). The research project was concluded in following statement:

"The prison culture and the culture of sex offender treatment can be seen as two parallel subcultures, with partly counteractive components. They contain elements and attitudes which are clearly contradictory. This thereby puts both the officers and the inmates in situations which cause them to hover between different coping strategies. Many elements in the prison culture promote withdrawal from interactions, deficient communication, the hiding of important information, manipulation and passive coping strategies. This effectively counteracts the changes desired in the therapeutic work. To optimize the changes among the sexual offenders and have good results in treatment requires a more uniformly therapeutic environment. The everyday life in prison, including work, studies, programs and leisure time must be altered to support the therapeutic treatment goals. Thereby making it possible to reach the level of change required with sexual offenders."

A new approach in Sweden for the treatment of sexual offenders started in 2002. The Canadian program was generously offered and was translated and adjusted to Swedish conditions. The program was accredited in Sweden of an external accreditation panel in 2006 (Kwarnmark & Hasselrot, 2006). The program is now running in all prisons which have places for sex offenders and the Correctional Service offers a great majority of the inmates the program. However, the treatment is often run in isolation from the rest of the prison environment. As mentioned above it is apparent that the prison environment inhibits the inmate's progress in treatment (Månsson et al. 2001). Of special interest is the psychological environment between inmates both on the prison wing and in the working department. Furthermore, it is important how the prison staff interact with the inmates.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to look for factors which promote success as well as obstacles to success, as described by those involved in the treatment programs. The goal being to achieve a prison environment which supports inmates to work therapeutically on them, increase their ability to live good lives after release and to not relapse. The study should result in proposals and guidelines to optimize the enabling environment in Swedish prisons for sex offenders.

Material and methods

An investigation of the enabling environment for sex offenders in Swedish prisons were performed during fall 2009 and early spring 2010. All five prisons for sex offenders in Sweden were visited: Skogome, Kristianstad, Salberga, Tillberga and Norrtälje. An international comparison outlook in England and Canada was also performed.

To investigate those environments and processes we chose to interview inmates, prison officers and the prison management. An interview guide for these groups was constructed and was performed in a semi structured way. The interviews were performed in a way that each question was explored as long as new aspects of the subject were exposed.

To minimize projections and to optimize true reflections, we chose to interview inmates who had taken part in the sexual offender treatment program, and who were regarded as reflecting persons by the officers. A total number of 18 inmates, 25 prison officers and five prison management persons were interviewed. The material were analysed and put into different clusters and typical

answers for those clusters were chosen. These answers should mirror the most important alignments in the material.

Definitions of "supporting environment" and "enabling environment"

The definition of a "supporting environment" we have used in this study is:

- The client should be in the centre of attention
- Everything that can support the client to improve in a positive way and decrease the risk for reoffending
- A uniform positive spirit of treatment characterises the prison
- The prison staffs show the ability and ambition to give relevant positive feedback to the inmates
- A motivating environment with possibilities to express and show feelings
- Empathic environment which creates trust

The definition of an "enabling environment" we have used in this study is:

An enabling environment for the inmates means that they have a greater freedom and greater opportunities to take responsibility for their lives at the prison such as their treatment, work and interactions with staff and other inmates. They also have more opportunity to take initiative and take responsibility for security and to a certain degree democracy inside prison. Training to take responsibility in prison is a step towards taking responsibility after release.

Supporting environment is the first step at the prison and enabling environment is the second to reach an environment which prepares the inmates for freedom and an offence free lifestyle.

Supporting environment in Swedish prisons for sexual offenders

Results

Analysis of present situation

At a prison a great number of inmates project their complex problems to others in his environment. Perhaps this phenomenon is extra legible in prisons for sexual offenders, where the inmates with the offence have shown this need to project their anxiety to other people. Therefore we are interested in how this area can be described both by the inmates and by the prison officers.

Inmate's personal attitudes to the sex offender program

Typical answers:

To be honest, the prison sentence in general and sexual offender treatment specifically was the best thing that could happen to me in the situation in life I was in

Personally I have very good experience of ROS (Sexual offender treatment program). I can now see clearly my own responsibility for what I have done. Now it's up to myself! Freedom and responsibility. The most painful was to "dig" in empathy and victim awareness. My own victim and my own close relationships

I have felt so well just to talk about it!

These answers are about the same as the unpublished answers of the normally delivered questionnaire the inmates have to fill in after they have been treated by ROS, which are very positive towards the program.

Inmate's attitude to the sex offenders program in the wing environment

Typical answers:

You almost get bullied if you think that the sex offenders program is something good

Those who say that treatment is something good don't speak so much. Those who think its bad and refuse treatment they talk a lot

There are a lot of blockheads here. Everything concerning treatment is awful. They exaggerate. There is a hidden revolt against treatment

From the interviews it's clear that the inmates who are positive to treatment do not seem to have as strong voice as those who refuse treatment and often deny the offence. Regardless of how many are really positive towards treatment, the wing environment is often dominated by those who refuse treatment. Those who engage in treatment are more introverted and are filled with shame and feelings of guilt towards the victims. They are also more occupied with thoughts on how to change their lives and patterns within their relationships. Those who refuse to take part in treatment however often have a contrary need to flee from their "points of pain" and blame the judicial system, the women's liberation, police and correctional service. An inmate who doesn't fit in that context is seen as a threat to their perspective of innocence and victimization and often gets repressed.

I just sat together with a gang of ten inmates and discussed. In the middle an "Alfa male" inmate saying that he is innocent. Afterwards everybody said that they also were innocent. From that follows opinions that the court of law is corrupt and women have got too much power in the society. Pathetic! I have heard people in treatment groups who first have denied their offence and admitted it after a while. It hurts like hell, to admit a sexual offence! Shame is in the way! Now I am restrictive towards a person who denies his offence

The inmates who want to change themselves normally become frightened in this environment. They recede into themselves and only try to survive during the sentence. On the wing they live in a "culture of silence". When genuine feelings break through in the program it is progress in treatment, but a threat on the wing. In that way the environment on the wing counteracts the progress in treatment and possibly increases the risk of reoffending. Many of the inmates have the following attitudes on the wing:

I am taking part in the program only because it's easier to get to an open prison when you have finished the program

In that way they can manage to be in both environments. There are also examples of inmates who have admitted their offences in the treatment group but denied them on the wing.

Inmates about officers who work close to the inmates

The predominant opinion among inmates we have interviewed is that they want the officers to spend more time on the wing. Here we observe a difference compared to other prisons with more criminally inclined prisoners, where the prisoners normally don't want to fraternize with the staff members. The following statement describes the situation:

The language at the wing is often raw and aggressive towards women. They think that the feminist movement has got too much power in the Swedish society. The language is much gentler and there is much less threats between inmates, when the officers are out spending time on the wing. It's a big difference! But this has to be a respectful officer. When you meet respect you feel like a human being. An unsure officer creates only more irritation and aggression

The sexual offenders are normally afraid of each other and they are also often "sick and tired" of the normal antisocial conversation in the population of inmates. These inmates who normally take the treatment seriously want the officers to be on the wing.

Of course there are other opinions about the professional relationships between officers and inmates. Strong leaders among the inmates, who often don't work in treatment and are more criminally inclined, see the officers as a threat.

They are officers; it's not our business to hang around with them. When the guards come and sit with us in the dayroom, it's tiresome. Inmates and officers shall not create friendships - they lock our door for Christ sakes. You don't play cards with officers - at other prisons you get problems if you do!

If the leader among the inmates creates a hostile atmosphere between staff and prisoners it can possibly increase the mental distance between the two groups.

You feel that the officers think it is inconvenient to get too close to the inmates. At the reception they are in their "arena" and I am on mine on the wing

Inmates about officers' individual work as "contact persons" with the inmates

The contact person is really important! They don't know how important they are!

Many of the interviewed prisoners confirm the importance of the "contact person". The contact person is important for many practical things but an underestimated role is their importance in treatment.

When I came to prison I really felt like a dammed rapist! I almost didn't dare to look at a woman! Looked away! Nevertheless I received respect from the officers. The respect from the female officers was most important. I was treated like a human being and slowly I start to feel like an individual again. To be treated like a human being is very important, even from a therapeutically point of view. It felt that they were rather secure with themselves

The cooperation with many staff categories in treatment is very valuable!

In the beginning of the sentence I "threw up" on everything connected to the correctional service. I was fed up, shouting and yelling. I wanted the door open when talking with the officers, afraid that other inmates should classify me as an informer. I had a stone wall around me. I denied my offence

powerfully. Shame and guilt were in the way. Perhaps it started with the psychologist. Then I was in a retreat in the monastery in Kumla prison. It was the first time I could look inside myself. I had no television, only talks with a priest. Afterwards things started to happen. Both the officers and the psychologist recognized it. Started to talk seriously. In the beginning I was scared to death what other inmates would say, what the officers would say and what the family at home would say. I was scared that everybody would turn away from me. The relationship with my contact person became very important. We got to know each other and we had a good relationship. It was during a talk with the contact person that I said it. That I was guilty!

In other situations the influence from the officers can be doubtful.

When I came to the prison the officer said to me, "Don't tell anybody what your sentence is, you will only get in trouble". I questioned that! To lie does something with me! My relationships in prison would be based on a lie. I am now open with my offence and I feel good about telling people, most inmates are not!

Many officers suggest that the inmates do not tell other inmates about their offence. Of course this can be regarded as a good advice to minimize the risk of reprisal towards this single inmate. It can also be said in order to minimize aggression in the prison and the officers will have an easier time. For an ambitious inmate who wants to take responsibility for his offence and would like to work on himself, this advice can be questioned. He could be thrown into a "culture of silence" were he is forced to continue to lie and is left with painful loneliness inside. The feelings of loneliness can also occur in other situations:

When I have been in the treatment group and come to the wing and feel extremely unhappy, there is no place to get consolation. The contact person is not there and other inmates are hostile

Officers about the climate between inmates on the wing

The inmates influence each other extremely. The negative individuals take over the whole time from those who are positive to treatment. There is so little which are needed. Most people don't have the energy to resist

The officers confirm, in other words, the perspective many inmates have talked about, the destructive and treatment hostile mental environment on the wing. The negative leaders have a powerful advantage compared to the inmates who go into and are positive about treatment. Many of the officers want to intervene but they experience that they do not have enough time.

Today you don't have the calm environment to work for a good contact with the inmates. Working tasks which are new i.e. to open and close gates, count cutlery, look for lighteners, and look when they go through the metal detector, lead to that we don't have time for building good relationship with the prisoners

One last factor is expressed by an officer in the following way:

There is a "threshold effect" that we have to pass before it becomes a natural thing for us to be out on the wing and spend time with the inmates. You can feel that you interrupt the inmate - as if you force yourself towards them. Perhaps it's also the resistance from the inmates for us to spend time with them, which we internalize and becomes our own resistance to be out on the wing

Obstacles in the wing environment

- Inmates who are not willing to go into any treatment and deny their offence. Are repressive to inmates who want to be open and work on themselves in sex offender treatment
- A culture of silence
- Insufficient presence of staff in close proximity to the inmates
- Lack of response and understanding from prison officers
- Traditional prison rules and relationships between inmates and officers
- Not giving priority to the relationship building process between officers and inmates

Factors of success in the wing environment

A management who:

- Works for the idea of treatment and an enabling environment for the inmates
- Are present, participate and are well informed with treatment issues
- Support, notices and confirms staff when they make good interventions from staff to inmates

And

- To have confident staff members in close association with inmates, as much as is possible, given the situation
- That all staff categories works together with each single inmate and his criminogenic needs. Also to offer a humane and treatment friendly prison environment
- For as many of the staff members as possible to have good knowledge about every single inmate
- To have good cooperation between psychologists, program staff, work managers and prison officers

Discussion

Promisingly, Correctional services in Sweden and around the world are increasing their efforts with sex offender treatment programs, often with the Canadian concept as a model. Much research is being done to follow up the different programs and their effects when it comes to risk of reoffending. In this report our aim is to focus upon other factors during the sexual offender's time in prison, which also possibly affect the rate of reoffending. The program activities, in Sweden, normally occupy about seven hours per week for the inmates. The rest of their time is spent on the prison wing and in the work department together with other inmates. Our assumption has been that the psychological environment has a great impact of the progress of the inmate's treatment. It can either confirm and promote an inmate's work with his risk factors and increase his ability to live a good life after release, or it can inhibit this progress.

There is limited research on how this external environment affects the rate of relapses into offending behaviour. However the existing research does show that the environment is of great importance in reducing risk factors and reaching the goal of a good life. (Incardi et al. 2001, Taylor, 2002, Birtchnell et al. 2008, McGuire per.com 2009). Our findings suggest that by not addressing this issue, there is a great risk that the psychological environment in sexual offender prisons will become hostile towards treatment, women, equality and good social norms. Not because this is what the majority of sexual offenders think, but because destructive individuals are often dominant and set the attitudes and the informal rules (Shackelford et al. 1996). This hostile environment counteracts

the treatment efforts.

The inmates who are in treatment are often more introspective, deal with them selves and isolate from others. Findings suggest that staff can, if they are in close client positions, have the possibility to intervene against the destructive and hostile norms. Other important findings are that the normal prisoner wants to have more and well structured contact with their contact person. This finding confirms that of Bottoms and Rose (1995).

The Canadian models (Marshall, L., pers. com. 2009) with a high security shelter wall and a high degree of freedom inside the prison send the message, that correctional service trusts the inmates and their ability to take responsibility. If they mismanage this trust and opportunity they will be sent to a high security normal prison. The goal is to train the sexual offender to take responsibility for his treatment, his relationships (with other inmates and staff) and to show a good attitude regarding important social norms. The ability to take responsibility is essential after release, and therefore it is a significant advantage to be able to practice this within the prison setting prior to release. Our hypothesis is that this is of great importance in reducing the risk of reoffending.

Our opinion is not only "what works?" in terms of the quality of treatment programs, but also "what works in what context?" in terms of the quality of the environment in which the program is facilitated.

Proposals to Swedish correctional service how to change into a more enabling environment for sexual offenders in prison

1. That our prison system should separate inmates who refuse treatment from those who want treatment and would like to work on themselves. The "refusers" ought to be sent to motivational prisons with specially trained staff to motivate unmotivated prisoners. Only motivated offenders should be sent to treatment prisons
2. To introduce a reward system for those inmates who seriously work on themselves in the treatment. For example the option of receiving more freedom as a reward at the treatment prisons compared with normal prisons. This would enable and encourage inmates to take responsibility for their treatment, relationships and rules in prison and in their future life
3. That the management continuously remind staff members of the importance of professional yet close relationships with inmates and give priority to working in the wing environment together with the inmates
4. To continuously monitor the quality of supporting and enabling environments in the whole prison
5. To create a security level at the sex offender treatment prisons which is adapted to this client category
6. To recruit staff members to the sexual offender prisons who have the ability to:
 - talk about the crime, violence in close relationships and deviant sexuality, in a challenging but respectful way
 - show empathy to the offenders without minimizing the seriousness of the sexual offence
 - stand up for good social norms and equality between women and men, even in the sometimes hostile environment among the offenders
 - stand up for rules and limits in a way that doesn't create unnecessary conflicts

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