

Abstract

Prison therapists must navigate a complex socio-political landscape within a harsh and unforgiving environment (Harvey 2011.) There are those who do not believe psychotherapy should be practiced in prisons (Huffman 2006,) whilst there are others that believe that the very fabric of the prison provides the concrete containment required to provide the frame to treat the most marginalised group in society (Morris 2001.)

This study conducts a small-scale qualitative study using a heuristic approach that explores therapists rich experience of working relationally with trauma in a prison setting. A specific focus considers how therapists work with clients who have been both harmed and harmed others. Five relational developmental therapists, the researcher included, explore their experience of this secret world and provide an alternative view to restriction and punishment.

A heuristic research method, (Moustakas 1994,) provided a safe space allowing for exploration and the opportunity to create a shared understanding of the subjective experience of delivering therapy in a prison setting. The approach searched for meaning within the experience of individuals, exploring how sense and meaning are made within the work and thus how this is received by clients within a prison setting.

Recurrent themes of personal connection to the work, safety and holding, working with parts of self, defences, countertransference and supervision that are integral parts of the therapists experience emerged within the interviews. Findings from the study were reviewed within the context of the current and historical research. The scarcity of research in this specific area suggests that this study will bring more knowledge to the field of Integrative Psychotherapy and therapy in prisons. The intention of this research is that it might interest future therapists and current therapists by eliciting curiosity in

those who have considered practicing in a prison setting by challenging preconceptions about offenders.