

Risk Assessment Interviews: Exploring the Perspectives of Psychologists and Indeterminate Sentenced Prisoners in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This study explores the forensic risk assessment interview from the perspectives of qualified prison-based psychologists and indeterminate sentenced prisoners in the United Kingdom. It focuses on the psychologist–prisoner relationship in the interview context. Twenty-one in-depth individual interviews were conducted with psychologists and prisoners and analysed using Grounded Theory methods. The analysis identified the following categories reflecting participants’ descriptions of risk assessment interviews: “Emphasising Clarity and Transparency,” “Collaborative Engagement,” “Making a Respectful, Boundaried yet Human Connection,” “Respecting Individuality,” and “Having a Purposeful Conversation.” Analysis demonstrated that these categories of meaning reflected the broader notion of risk assessment interviewing as “A Difficult Balancing Act.” The views of prisoners and psychologists about the risk assessment interview were remarkably similar and provide some direction and guidance for practitioners navigating this challenging but essential aspect of forensic psychological work.

Keywords

risk assessment, indeterminate sentenced prisoners, forensic psychologists, interviews, Grounded Theory

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Risk assessment is central to the work of forensic psychologists (Kebbell, 2016). It requires them to make judgements about the risk of recidivism and risk of harm to make recommendations about further treatment or monitoring, suitability for parole, or suitability for transfer to less secure prison conditions. Risk assessment is also central to the lives of indeterminate sentenced prisoners (ISPs)¹ who are dependent on favourable risk assessments for their progression through the prison system and ultimately for their release back into the community. In England and Wales, psychologists play a significant role in providing risk assessment evidence to panels of the Parole Board (Crewe, 2012) that make decisions about release and progression for ISPs. The technology of risk assessment has progressed substantially over the last 20 years, and psychologists now have a significant body of literature to draw from when considering what information to gather for risk assessment (e.g., Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2009; Mann, Hanson, & Thornton, 2010; Webster, Douglas, Eaves, & Hart, 1997). There is also a range of empirically validated structured risk assessment tools on which psychologists can base their decision making (e.g., Historical, Clinical, Risk-Management 20 (HCR-20), Webster et al., 1997; Structured Assessment of Risk and Need-Sexual Offenders (SARN-SO), National Offender Management Service, 2009). The predictive value of these structured procedures over those reliant purely on clinical judgement is apparent (e.g. Dawes, Faust & Meehl, 1989). In the majority of cases, psychological risk assessment involves an interview between psychologist and prisoner, thus inevitably adding an element of judgement into a structured, empirically driven process (which is why they are known as ‘Structured Professional Judgement’ or SPJ assessments). Risk assessment interviews serve a number of functions. The psychologist needs to gather information to help them understand and assess risk, including the information needed to complete the SPJ assessment. If the prisoner is not forthcoming with this information, the psychologist needs to overcome any resistance or reluctance prisoners may have to discussing aspects of their lives or offending behaviour, and motivate the prisoner to engage in the assessment (Logan, 2013). Risk assessment interviews also provide an opportunity to promote prisoners’ engagement in current and future intervention and risk management services as well as their co-operation with risk management (Proulx, Tardif, Lamoreux & Lussier, 2000). Although an effective interview should perhaps serve all of these functions, so far there has been little empirical exploration of the risk assessment interview itself to examine the extent to which this is the case. However, there is some evidence to suggest that a range of factors may influence the degree to which these functions are fulfilled.

First, there is evidence to suggest that forensic clients’ perceptions of the nature of their interaction with criminal justice professionals have an impact on risk management outcomes. For example, when perpetrators of domestic abuse believed that they had been treated fairly by police officers attending a callout, this resulted in less frequent repeat offending (Paternoster, Brame, Bachman, & Sherman, 1997). Similarly, suspects were more likely to admit their offending during police interviews when they perceived their interviewer as humane, empathic, and respectful (Holmberg & Christianson, 2002; Kebbell, Hurren, & Mazerolle, 2006). Conversely, “dominant” interviewing styles, where police officers were experienced as aggressive, brusque,

impatient, and condemning, were associated with suspects maintaining their innocence. The relationship between empathic interviewing style and admission has not been consistently demonstrated (Oxburgh, Ost, Morris, & Cherryman, 2014)—which could be due to methodological issues. Oxburgh et al. (2014) identified empathic interviewer behaviour from written transcripts, rather than the reports of the interviewees (Holmberg & Christianson, 2002; Kebbell et al., 2006), which may have shaped their findings. Oxburgh et al. noted that there are likely to be nonverbal elements of empathy that are not accessible from interview transcripts alone. This evidence supports the importance of the client's *perception* of their interviewer in determining outcome.

Second, there is a growing body of literature which suggests that relationships between prison-based psychologists and prisoners are increasingly characterised by hostility and mistrust (Crewe, 2012; Gannon & Ward, 2014; Maruna, 2011; Warr, 2008). The reasons for this are unclear, but it could be argued that the strained relationships are an unintended consequence of relatively recent changes in the role and work practices of prison-based psychologists (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Needs, 2016; Towl & Crighton, 2008). These changes include withdrawal of qualified psychologists from direct intervention work with prisoners and into supervisory roles (Gannon & Ward, 2014). The increasing dominance of the risk, needs, and responsivity (RNR) model of correctional practice (Gannon & Ward, 2014) is also potentially relevant. The RNR model emphasises the allocation of prisoners to (largely actuarially defined) risk categories to ensure appropriate targeting of resources (Barnett & Mann, 2011; Crewe, 2011; Feeley & Simon, 1992; Gannon & Ward, 2014; Maruna, 2011; Ogloff & Davis, 2004). Concern has consequently been expressed in the literature that RNR has encouraged practitioners to see risk solely as a property of the individual which can be assessed by the application of nomothetically derived tools, resulting in neglect of context and individuality and a focus on “procedure over process” (Marshall & Serran, 2004, p. 310; see also Ward, 2002; Ward, Mann, & Gannon, 2007; Ward & Stewart, 2003). These changes could result in resentment towards psychologists, who are seen as distant and removed from prisoners, neglectful of prisoners' strengths and motivated to keep them in prison (Crewe, 2011; Ward et al., 2007; Ward & Stewart, 2003). It may also mean that psychological risk assessment currently lacks legitimacy in the eyes of prisoners (Liebling, 2004) in that it feels “unfair”: In other words, psychologists' lack of direct contact with prisoners and tendency to focus on the negative aspects of prisoners' behaviour might undermine their perceived authority to make assessments. Given the evidence indicating that clients' perception of their interactions with criminal justice professionals impacts on risk management outcomes, the literature highlighting broader problems in prisoner–psychologist relationships becomes pertinent.

Finally, Attrill and Liell (2007) provided some insight into prisoners' experiences of risk assessment, which offer some clues about what could assist practitioners in meeting the range of functions of the interview, as delineated above. Attrill and Liell held a series of discussions with 60 male and female prisoners focusing on their general views about risk assessment. Prisoners reported experiencing risk assessment as

stressful (see also Crewe, 2011). They wanted risk assessment to take greater account of their strengths and progress rather than focusing solely on their weaknesses and problems (see also Marshall, Anderson, & Fernandez, 1999; Ward & Fisher, 2006). They described feeling trapped by their past mistakes (see also Crewe, 2012). These prisoner-driven criticisms are consistent with recent criticisms of RNR-based approaches to correctional assessment and intervention (e.g., Ward & Fortune, 2013), as well as with the more recent focus on the importance of protective factors, not just risk factors, in risk assessment (de Vries Robbé, Mann, Maruna, & Thornton, 2015). Attrill and Liell also reported that prisoners valued feeling understood by assessors; they wanted clarity about the processes of risk assessment and wanted to feel involved in those processes (see also Shingler & Mann, 2006). Although Attrill and Liell's work is rare in its focus on prisoners' perspectives, it is limited (as noted by the authors themselves) by the lack of in-depth, systematic analysis of the data. In addition, the study did not explore prisoners' experiences of the risk assessment interview or explicitly address what would be most useful in helping prisoners engage with the assessment and risk management elements of risk assessment interviewing.

In sum, although little is known about the actual risk assessment interview (Elbogen, 2002; Murray & Thomson, 2009), the evidence summarised above suggests that the nature of the interaction between prisoner and psychologist could influence the extent to which the aims and purpose of the interview are fulfilled. Several authors have provided guidance and commentary on how best to conduct risk assessment interviews (e.g., Logan, 2013; Shingler & Mann, 2006; Westwood, Wood, & Kemshall, 2011), but these suggestions have been based largely on clinical opinion and literature on treatment style rather than on empirical exploration of the risk assessment interview. Therefore, gaining a greater understanding of the experience of the risk assessment interview could provide valuable information about how it could be used to maximal effect in meeting the range of functions it is required to serve. A greater understanding of the interview may also contribute towards reducing what might be called the "pains of risk assessment"² in which prisoners can feel labelled and judged both by the broader process and by the psychologist involved which, in turn, risks them disengaging from assessment and ongoing risk management. Prisoners' perspectives are central to developing this understanding (Attrill & Liell, 2007; Lewis, 2016; Wakeling, Webster, & Mann, 2005), and it is apparent that the perspectives of clients can, at times, prove more informative than those of professionals (Horvath, 2000, and see above). The perspectives of psychologist risk assessors are equally important. Psychologists face considerable challenges in conducting risk assessment. Their opinion is widely seen as having significant influence on decision-making bodies; according to Crewe (2012), psychologists hold "the key to captivity or release" (p. 121). In addition, psychologists face the fear of making potentially fatal errors (Adshead, 2014) and consequently the "harsh scrutiny of hindsight bias" (Kemshall, 2009, p. 332) that comes with investigation of serious further offences (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, 2006). There is a need for greater understanding of the challenges psychologists face in risk assessment and how these are dealt with in the interview situation.

The findings reported below form part of a larger, ongoing project that aims to provide an in-depth, multifaceted exploration of the risk assessment process. The objective of the specific analysis outlined here was to examine the perspectives of participants in relation to the *risk assessment interview*. The broader influences on the risk assessment process (i.e., the wider context in which interviews take place) will be analysed and reported in due course. Here, we focus on addressing the following specific questions:

Research Question 1: What are psychological risk assessment interviews *like* for prisoners and psychologists?

Research Question 2: What do prisoners and psychologists describe as helpful and unhelpful approaches to psychological risk assessment interviewing?

Method

Research Design and Analysis

Data were gathered using semistructured interviews with psychologists and ISPs in the United Kingdom and analysed using Grounded Theory (GT) methods (see below for more detail).

Participant Recruitment

Approval for the study was obtained from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) National Research Committee (NRC) which enabled the researchers to request access to prisoners and prison staff. Access to participants was negotiated separately with individual prison establishments and Regional Psychologists (i.e., qualified psychologists responsible for psychological services in a specific geographical area of England and Wales). There was no connection between the prisoner and psychologist participants who were interviewed; that is, we did not seek to identify prisoners who had been assessed by specific psychologists and interview both parties.

*Psychologists.*³ Qualified⁴ psychologists were eligible for participation in the study if they currently worked within a prison and conducted, supervised, or managed risk assessments with ISPs. Eleven psychologists employed by NOMS and working within Her Majesty's Prison Service (HMPS) in England and Wales were interviewed between May 2015 and July 2015. Six interviews were conducted face-to-face and five by telephone (due to geographical distance).

Ten of the eleven psychologists interviewed were women.⁵ Participants' ages ranged from 33 to 48 years,⁶ and all participants described their ethnicity as White British. Participants had worked in the field of forensic psychology between 8 and 29 years, and had been Chartered for between 1 and 17 years. Nine psychologists had only worked in a prison setting. Six psychologists were actively and regularly conducting risk assessments; four were actively involved in supervising risk assessments

conducted by others. One psychologist had previous experience of conducting and supervising risk assessment and was currently managing risk assessment provision.

*Prisoners.*⁷ Prisoner participants were currently residing in two prisons geographically convenient to the interviewer. Prison 1 was a Category B establishment and Prison 2 was a Category C establishment.⁸ Ten adult male prisoners, three from Prison 1 and seven from Prison 2, were interviewed between April 2015 and February 2016. All interviews were conducted by the first author in private interview rooms within the prisons.

Prisoners were eligible for inclusion in the study if they were men, over the age of 18, currently serving an indeterminate sentence in a Category B, C, or D⁹ establishment, and had undergone a psychological risk assessment during their current sentence. There were no restrictions regarding the types of offences participants had committed. To maintain safety for both the interviewer and the prisoners and to ensure that prisoners could contribute meaningfully to the project, prisoners were excluded if they were identified in prison records as posing an immediate risk to staff safety or of self-harm, were currently receiving treatment for psychosis, were not able to speak English, or were subject to deportation arrangements.

Prisoners' ages ranged from 26 to 57 years. Seven prisoners described their ethnicity as "White," "British," or "White British"; one as "Black British," one as "Black Caribbean," and one as "Mixed Race." Prisoners had served between 4 and 34 years in prison on their current sentence. Some were serving their first custodial sentence; the greatest number of previous custodial sentences was 10. Six prisoners were serving mandatory or discretionary¹⁰ life sentences, three were serving Indeterminate Sentences for Public Protection (IPP),¹¹ and one was serving an Automatic Life Sentence.¹² Four prisoners had yet to reach their tariff, and six were past tariff.¹³ The most recent psychological assessments for these prisoners were conducted between 2009 and 2015.

Materials

An interview guide was developed prior to data collection with the aim of exploring the following topic domains with both prisoners and psychologists: (a) participants' experiences of and thoughts and feelings about risk assessment interviews, (b) their views on the professional relationship between prisoners and psychologists during risk assessment interviews, (c) their views on the high-stakes nature of risk assessment for ISPs, and (4) their overall views on what constitutes effective and ineffective practice in psychological risk assessment interviews. Although these domains were explored across all interviews (i.e., with prisoners and psychologists), there was a degree of flexibility within each interview, in that the order of questions and the time spent exploring each domain were determined by participants' individual contributions. This was to allow the researcher to respond to and explore issues raised by participants. Within each domain, initial questions were deliberately broad and open-ended (i.e., phrased so as not to constrain participants' responses—e.g., the first question to prisoners was "What I am most interested in is your experiences of having risk

assessments completed on you by psychologists. Can you tell me a bit about what that has been like for you?”). These were followed by more focused (less open-ended) questions if and when further prompts were required.

Procedure

Individual interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min. The prisoners and the majority of the psychologists were previously unknown to the interviewer. Some psychologist participants were previously known to the interviewer in a professional capacity. In all cases, steps were taken to build rapport with participants and to make participants feel comfortable and confident about the purpose of the interview and the boundaries of confidentiality. The interviewer was clear about her role as a researcher but also as an experienced practising forensic psychologist who regularly conducted risk assessments. Prisoners were reassured that the information they provided was for research purposes only and would not inform any future psychological risk assessments. The interviewer’s professional background meant that she was able to explore issues arising in interviews flexibly and responsively. The interviewer, at times, used her own experiences of risk assessment to explore issues with participants. She remained mindful of the need to understand the perspectives of participants while also remaining aware of the impossibility of separating herself entirely from the interview process (Charmaz, 2006). She was frank about wanting to hear about examples of both good and poor practice and that she was interested in participants’ own perspectives. In line with GT principles, interviews allowed participants’ individual contributions to inform each other and for issues raised by one group of participants to be explored with the other. Interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed by the interviewer (i.e., the first author) using a transcription convention derived from Edwards and Potter (1992).¹⁴ All identifying information was removed, and each participant was allocated a pseudonym.

Analytic Approach

Data collection and analysis followed GT principles. The specific GT approach adopted here is described in detail by Urquhart (2013) and drew on principles outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Charmaz (2006). The analytic process consisted of three levels of coding, namely, *open coding*, *selective coding*, and *theoretical coding*. However, as GT analysis is generally conceptualised as an iterative process, coding, categorising, and data collection occurred simultaneously and informed each other.

The initial stage of open coding involved line-by-line analysis of each transcript and the identification of discrete units of meaning (Charmaz, 2006; Urquhart, 2013). This was conducted by the first author. Selective coding (Urquhart, 2013) involved looking for different examples of the same open codes both within and across interviews while remaining attentive to the presence of new ideas. In addition, open codes that seemed to describe different dimensions of the same concept were grouped together. Theoretical coding involved identifying broader categories which could help

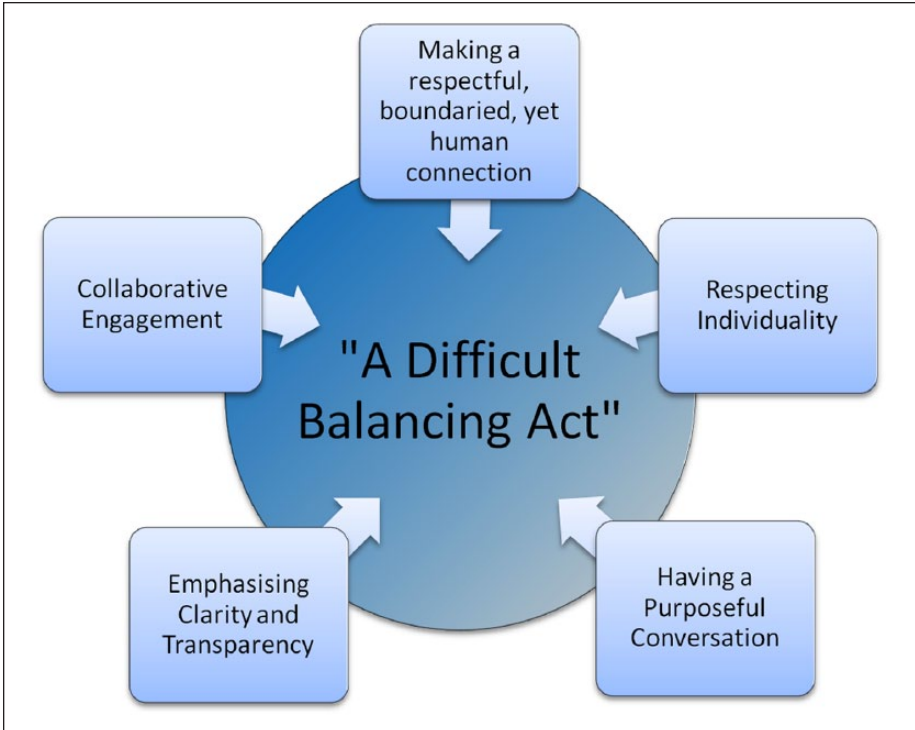


Figure 1. The “Difficult Balancing Act” of risk assessment interviewing.

to explain the relationships between selective codes and under which selective codes could be grouped.¹⁵

We engaged in a number of exercises during analysis to check the validity of the emerging codes and categories. Emerging open codes were discussed and refined with the second author, and the overall scheme was checked with the research team (“peer debriefing”, see Creswell & Miller, 2000; see also Urquhart, 2013). We also engaged in “member checking” exercises (Creswell & Miller, 2000) in which the preliminary results relating to the risk assessment interview were discussed with qualified psychologists in two group sessions. In total, 15 qualified, prison-based psychologists, selected for convenience, participated in these discussions which helped to further define and refine the emerging theoretical code (i.e., A Difficult Balancing Act) and other category definitions (i.e., selective codes).

Findings and Discussion

Overall, five selective categories were identified (see Figure 1). These categories of meaning (Emphasising Clarity and Transparency; Collaborative Engagement; Making a Respectful, Boundaried yet Human Connection; Respecting Individuality; and Having a Purposeful Conversation) specifically related to the risk assessment

interview and to the interpersonal relationships within it. The categories were derived from analysis of both prisoners' and psychologists' contributions. The category *labels* reflect what both groups believe to be the "gold standard" approach to risk assessment interviewing.

As can be seen from Figure 1, the common thread that links the categories together is the notion of risk assessment as a "Difficult Balancing Act" (Karen, psychologist). The difficult balancing act reflects the challenges involved in striving for the "gold standard" inherently expressed in the category labels when working in a dynamic and complex setting—that is, the categories themselves reflect both the gold standard and also the ways in which interview practice can fall short of this. As such, the core category of a difficult balancing act seems to provide a common analytical thread connecting all the selective categories. In other words, the necessity of balancing often contradictory demands, requirements, and aims of risk interviewing was the common thread underlying the selective categories of meaning.

Below, we outline the categories of meaning identified in the analysis, with illustrative quotes which highlight the elements of balance inherent within each category. The selective categories are not presented in any particular order of importance or prominence (i.e., all categories appeared to be of equal relevance), and there is some overlap between these categories (i.e., some elements of meaning are relevant to more than one category). Although the theoretical category—"A Difficult Balancing Act"—will be examined in detail at the end, issues pertaining to the notion of "balance" will be considered throughout.

Emphasising Clarity and Transparency

Building good rapport is seen as crucial in risk assessment interviewing—for prisoners and psychologists alike—for which clarity and transparency, in turn, are seen as central. Psychologists describe the need to be clear about the process of risk assessment with prisoners from the outset, for example:

. . . This is what I'd like to do, this is why I'd like to do it, these are the things I'd like to cover in the interview, and this is how I would propose then pulling all that together, this is where I'd like to kind of share the report with you and give you right to reply . . . (Alex, psychologist)

Psychologists' accounts emphasise the value of directly communicating a transparent approach via their behaviour during the assessment. This might involve sharing interview notes, being open about developing opinions and formulations throughout the assessment process, being frank about their level of experience, and acknowledging and addressing factual errors. Similarly, prisoners report valuing open, honest, transparent communication, and see this as helping them to feel sufficiently comfortable to reveal personal information and to accept unfavourable decisions:

. . . If there are negative things that they [prisoners] perceive have been written about them they can question why, they can maybe get answers to that and have it pointed out

to them, “this is why we think this,” and if they go away and reflect on that, they may well realise actually, I don’t *like*¹⁶ it, because I’ll not get my Cat D this year but they’re *right* and they’ve explained why . . . (Shawn, prisoner)

This is consistent with Tyler and Huo’s (2002) finding that clarity about decision making is central to the perception of fairness: if people can see how decisions are made and can understand the process, they are more likely to trust the motives of the decision maker, see the process as fair, and accept the outcome (regardless of favourability). Clarity on the part of psychologists in risk assessment could increase this “motive-based trust” in prisoners, in that it enables prisoners to have more understanding of the motives and intentions of the psychologists or, at the very least, reduces the chances of prisoners inferring harmful or detrimental motives.

The quality of transparency on the psychologist’s part seems key to the process of rapport building. John (a prisoner) describes a positive assessment experience with a psychologist in which he felt listened to and which he felt challenged rumours that psychologists were there to “catch you out.” John describes how the psychologist “. . . explained the process and she also sort of explained *why* she was doing it.” Here, the willingness of the psychologist to provide clear explanations helped John to trust her and have confidence in the process (potentially increasing John’s motive-based trust; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Crighton (2010) also noted the importance of trust in promoting disclosure of sensitive information during risk assessment. Conversely, Shawn (a prisoner) describes feeling anxious and mistrustful when the interview lacked openness and transparency:

. . . For many lifers obviously who want to progress and get out and somebody’s sat there hiding behind a pad, making notes looking at you asking questions, quite deep but there’s no feedback coming from them, what the hell are they thinking? Is this all negative, is it gonna be negative and you think . . . feelings of oh I’m gonna be slaughtered here.

When prisoners feel anxious and uncertain about what is happening in an interview and what the psychologist thinks about them, they are unlikely to disclose information that can assist in the assessment of current risk (Crighton, 2010; Tyler & Huo, 2002). The results presented here suggest that clarity and transparency help to build trust, which can potentially increase not only the view of risk assessment as procedurally just but also increase prisoners’ acceptance risk assessment decisions.

The difficult balancing act expressed within this category of meaning is that of having to balance the advantages of openness with potentially deceptive elements present in risk assessment interviewing, including strategic efforts to build rapport. Ezra (a prisoner) describes how psychologists use their skills to create rapport and encourage disclosure which may result in negative outcomes for prisoners:

. . . [the psychologists’ approach is] always smiley, welcoming, but that’s your professional mannerism. If you rallied them or unsettled them, that mask is up, you won’t tell, but then you say certain things that’s out of turn, that get used against you, no matter how you may try to answer the question *correctly*, in your mind it may be, but in

their mind, they're nodding to you and saying "yes," or what not, everything is just, "yeah that's OK," and then they come back to you, "ah well, he ain't really got much insight" . . .

This is an example of the psychologist's power in an interview to elicit disclosure (see Kvale, 2006), which may not end up benefitting the prisoner (Appelbaum, 1997; Odiah & Wright, 2000). Kvale also described the power of the psychologist to determine how information is interpreted, as illustrated by Sam (psychologist), "he [the prisoner] explains what he thinks about that, there *might* be some discussion about it but ultimately it goes down, as *I* have said it's gonna go down."

Similarly, prisoners describe feeling that psychologists interpret disclosures in a way which implies increased risk. They describe this as the "twisting of information" (Ron) and being asked "a trick question" (Malcolm). This is likely to counteract the view of risk assessment as procedurally just and increase suspicion about the psychologist's motives and intentions (Tyler & Huo, 2002), as described above. It is also noteworthy that the attributes required for rapport building, such as warmth and sociability, tend only to be viewed positively if they are accompanied by honesty and compassion (Landy, Piazza, & Goodwin, 2016). It may well be that efforts to build rapport are counterproductive (i.e., regarded as purely strategic) if prisoners do not trust psychologists' motives.

Collaborative Engagement

Psychologists talk consistently about making risk assessment "as collaborative as possible" (Karen, psychologist) and "helping [prisoners] to feel empowered that they have a part, an important part in that process" (Alex, psychologist). Likewise, prisoners describe wanting a "two-way dialogue" (Shawn) and a "chance to have input" (Jude). Collaborative engagement reflects the importance of properly involving prisoners in the risk assessment process, facilitating their contributions to decisions and recommendations, and giving them a stake in their own futures.

Prison life undoubtedly limits choice for prisoners. Risk assessments have to adhere to the formats and standards required by prisons and parole boards. ISPs are dependent on favourable risk assessments for progression through the system (see Miles, 2016, for discussion of coercion in forensic psychological services). The resultant lack of choice is recognised explicitly by both psychologists and prisoners: Karen (psychologist) states that "I still think the whole context is you know, there is a reality that this is going to go ahead without, without you," and Martin (prisoner) explains, "I don't know how it sits with me because, I haven't got a choice in the matter." Again, "Collaborative Engagement" involves an act of balancing, namely, striving to involve prisoners while recognising the inherently coercive environment (Crewe, 2012; Meloy, 2005) and the fact that risk assessments will be completed regardless of the extent to which prisoners collaborate. This reflects the importance of taking steps to overcome the inevitable issues of coercion and lack of choice and making proper,

meaningful efforts to include prisoners in the risk assessment process (Ward & Connolly, 2008). Psychologists describe taking time to ensure the risk assessment process and its implications are fully understood by prisoners: In this way, “maximising clarity and transparency” is essential in working collaboratively. Collaborative engagement also involves answering questions, giving prisoners an opportunity to express their views, and listening to their views and incorporating them into reports, thus maximising choice wherever possible.

Despite psychologists’ commitment to a collaborative approach, several prisoners describe experiences of psychological risk assessment that were inconsistent with this, for example, “My experience, how it felt for me was that it made no difference, what I felt, believed, what my emotions were, they were going to do it their way” (Jude, prisoner). The experience of risk assessment “being done *to* someone” (Karen, psychologist) rather than *with* them is described as unhelpful and undermining by both prisoners and psychologists (see also Crewe, 2011). Examples of this include risk assessments that do not involve an interview at all. More subtle noncollaborative approaches include psychologists not taking time to fully explain and discuss a report, such as “just kind of going in at the end and just saying this is my decisions and . . . that’s it, being a bit expert-y about it I think, rather than discussing it and explaining it” (Maria, psychologist). Similarly, Jude (prisoner) describes psychologists having fixed ideas about a prisoner’s life or risk factors and not listening to prisoners’ views, with the result that “your risk assessment is done with their answers, not your answers.” Lorna (psychologist) describes noncollaborative interview practice being like a “job interview,” involving “firing questions,” which is the antithesis of the “two-way dialogue” described by Shawn above. Thus, noncollaborative approaches seem to result in disengagement and mistrust, as well as creating stress, for example, “you feel, as if your head’s gonna explode, yeah but it’s something you have to do innit cos there’s no way out. If, if you don’t co-operate with them, you’re punished” (Peter, prisoner).

These results are in line with previous clinical observations by Shingler and Mann (2006) who recommended a collaborative approach to risk assessment with sexual offenders. In addition, research supports involvement in decision making (Leventhal, 1976; Tyler, 1990), and having a voice has a powerful effect on the perception of fairness which, in turn, significantly impacts the likelihood of accepting decisions (see Paternoster et al., 1997, for a summary). Thibaut and Walker (1975) emphasised participation in decision-making processes and how participation increases feelings of satisfaction with the process.

The tangible outcome of a risk assessment is a written report with recommendations for progress and risk management. Prisoners need to be engaged in the construction of such reports if they are to understand their offending and take steps to address problem areas (Proulx et al., 2000). Proulx et al. (2000) suggested that a failure to develop a collaborative relationship with clients was one reason for failures in risk management; this view is supported by the accounts of participants in this study. There are some promising creative efforts aimed at collaborative risk assessment in forensic psychological practice (e.g., Braha, 2016), indicating the broader appeal of a collaborative approach.

Making a Respectful, Boundaried Yet Human Connection

Both psychologists and prisoners describe the ideal risk assessment as an encounter characterised by a “human being in a situation with a human being” (Maria, psychologist). Making a human connection involves psychologists balancing their professional duties and responsibilities by connecting with prisoners as human beings. This echoes the idea of ethical interviewing (Shepherd, 1991). Similarly, Tyler and Huo (2002) identified a sense of commonality and shared values and concerns as a key element in service users’ views of authority figures as trustworthy.

Psychologists’ descriptions of establishing a “human connection” in risk assessment interviewing indicate that, as far as possible, they aim to treat the prisoner as they would treat an acquaintance or fellow professional: using first names, being generally respectful (including being reliable, listening, being fair, and sensitive), avoiding jargon (i.e., communicating clearly), making appropriate personal disclosures, using humour, and being “a normal, really really friendly person” (Maria, psychologist). Prisoners describe how they value human engagement with psychologists, including psychologists being available for occasional informal conversations, laughing at jokes, answering questions about their lives, and even something as seemingly basic as shaking hands (see Crewe, 2012, for a similar discussion about education staff in prisons).

Despite the value placed on this human-to-human relationship, participants’ descriptions highlight the difficult balancing act of engaging with prisoners as human beings while maintaining appropriate professional distance. There are things that psychologists cannot and should not disclose (“home addresses and telephone numbers and registration plates”; Martin, prisoner) and some behaviours that would inevitably breach boundaries (for example, “I can’t start crying in an interview, that would, you know, I’d just, that’s not gonna happen”; Alex, psychologist). There is consequently a balance to be struck between an unboundaried personal style which risks compromising judgement, personal safety, and professional integrity and one which is overly distant and remote. Overly distant and formal practice is more frequently noted as problematic and is seen as limiting understanding of the prisoner by psychologists, resulting in prisoners withdrawing and feeling suspicious, thereby undermining the aims of risk assessment:

I think that people who are kind of really boundaried or really distant . . . I don’t think that’s good, erm, cos I think it—people can’t express themselves or you’re not understanding people if you’re like that, I just don’t think it leads to understanding people properly. (Maria, psychologist)

And similarly,

They’d ask you a question and you’d have a conversation about the the question or whatever and then you’d ask *them* something like just as a normal conversation would go and they’d be like oh erm and they’d be very guarded against what they said and sometimes they might just say, “oh we’re not here to talk about me der der der,” but *I* think if you wanna get more out of people, treat them like normal human beings and like you’re having a conversation. When I *hear* or see people act like that towards me

it makes me clam up and I think well, that's suspicious to me I don't know why. (Martin, prisoner)

The balancing of boundaries was summed up most vividly by Ezra (prisoner):

As I said, there's a wall, I understand, that needs to be brought down; obviously that wall has to remain there, professionalism and whatnot, but at the same time, it needs to be lowered a bit, so you *can* go over the wall and you *can* see who you *are* talking to.

In this way, psychologists are called upon to maintain their professionalism but also to achieve a more natural and human connection with prisoners. Rex (1999) similarly described the importance of community probation officers balancing professionalism and formality with an engaging interpersonal style. The importance of a human connection has been discussed elsewhere in the literature in relation to cultivating constructive working relationships (Blagden, Winder, & Hames, 2016) and navigating challenging power differences (Lewis, 2016), both of which are crucial in a risk assessment interview.

Respecting Individuality

"Respecting Individuality" reflects a balance between respecting the integrity of the individual while applying the necessary generic procedures in line with the tight deadlines required in prison-based risk assessments. In risk assessment interviews, prisoners "want to be heard and to be almost validated as an individual" (Maria, psychologist). Malcolm (prisoner) describes the importance of not making assumptions about prisoners in assessment and recognising that "everybody's individual, n'they got [a] story, n'you don't know what his, what his could be." These contributions reflect the previously highlighted importance of acknowledging individuality in a risk assessment field which is increasingly dominated by nomothetically derived tools (Dematteo, Batastini, Foster, & Hunt, 2010; Feeley & Simon, 2002; Polaschek, 2012; Ward & Stewart, 2003; Ward, Yates, & Willis, 2012). The shift in focus of criminal justice services from individually driven processes of punishment and rehabilitation to the allocation of risk management resources according to a process of risk categorisation is the crux of the "new penology" framework (Feeley & Simon, 1992; Simon, 1998), and it is apparent that this is experienced as lacking in legitimacy (Crewe, 2012; Sparks & Bottoms, 1995) by the participants in this study.

In addition, participants describe how resource constraints and task demands can result in psychologists becoming overly focused on "the output and the concrete product" (Karen, psychologist). This can result in risk assessment becoming mechanical, like a "production line" (Sam, psychologist) or "sausage factory" (Alex, psychologist), resulting in a potential loss of individuality. Again, Feeley, and Simon (1992) discussed "new penology" as both a cause and a consequence of dealing with too many clients with too few resources, as is reflected here. Less experienced practitioners seem most at risk of slipping into a formulaic "tick box" approach (Karen and

Steph, psychologists; Martin and Ezra, prisoners) rather than thinking about the individual and responding to his specific interpersonal style and context. This is consistent with the criticism that RNR-driven risk assessment can result in offenders being treated as “disembodied bearers of risk” (Ward & Stewart, 2003, p. 354), rather than people with individual strengths and preferences (Ward & Gannon, 2006; Ward & Stewart, 2003). Moves towards strengths-based assessment and the incorporation of protective factors (de Vries Robbé et al., 2015) are useful ways in which this problem can be ameliorated, as there is a danger that an exclusive focus on risk results in overly pejorative interpretations of prisoner behaviour, which prisoners experience as frustrating and deindividualising. In the following extract, Peter relates how descriptions of his childhood experiences resulted in unfair attributions of risk factors:

Peter: When you try to explain your childhood, they look at you as if, that’s not right is it, but that was the childhood of every single person when I was a kid, that’s the way we lived, and like if I say . . . the role of my mother was, she was tied to the kitchen sink, that was her job, which in the sixties, was what women did, I mean I accept now that women go to work and do a lot more my wife went to work, y’know, so it’s not that you have a concept of women being tied to the sink, that is how we was fetched up.

Interviewer: So when you tried to explain that, what would happen?

Peter: We are classed as treating women as submissive

This example illustrates how prisoners might come to feel that individual experiences are ignored or used against them to support continued incarceration. The task for psychologists is to keep the individual at the forefront of the risk assessment process. Given the views of the prisoners in this study, this approach is likely to lead to a greater perceived legitimacy of psychological risk assessment and potentially greater cooperation and acceptance of the process and outcomes (Proulx et al., 2000; Shingler & Mann, 2006; Tyler & Huo, 2002).

Having a Purposeful Conversation

As already mentioned, one function of risk assessment interviewing is that of information gathering. This is recognised by both prisoners and psychologists here. Both groups also agree that this information gathering function is best achieved when the interaction is “more conversational” (Shawn, prisoner) and less like a “job interview” (Claire, psychologist). “Having a Purposeful Conversation” therefore reflects the balancing act of conducting a purposeful, aims-driven interview in a natural, conversational manner that puts prisoners at ease. Alex (psychologist) describes the ideal approach to risk assessment as

For someone to have an interview with a, with a prisoner that feels like they’ve *listened* and has been really productive and they’ve, you know, just kind of allowed, either

allowed themselves to be kind of led down the different avenues and they bring it back to where they want it to go.

Prisoners also recognise the need for focus and similarly seem to value a more informal, conversational style:

It's difficult because, if you've got seventeen questions you've got to get across, but I would say interview technique, needs to be more, maybe friendly's the wrong word, but certainly open and engaging. (Shawn, prisoner)

Effective risk assessment interviewing is seen by the psychologists as being focused on the task (i.e., having a clear *purpose*) at the same time as flexibly dealing with a changing situation. Purposeful focus means that practitioners are not *so* responsive that they forget their overall aim, for example, they are “. . . not being *drawn* into like, don't worry I'll solve the issue in education for you” (Lorna, psychologist). Psychologists describe wanting to achieve the aims of the assessment, yet doing so in a way that is friendly, natural, and responsive to the prisoner and the situation as opposed to using a rigid, scripted approach. Logan (2013) similarly described both the need to remain imperceptibly in control of the interview (i.e., having a clear purpose and direction) yet not allowing interview schedules to dominate. Having a purposeful conversation sums up this balance: although risk assessment interviewing has aims and some structure, if it is conducted in a natural and conversational manner, it is perceived as more engaging and reassuring. Prisoners feel more able to participate in interviews that are conducted on more of an equal footing (Shepherd, 1991); participation increases the experience of the interview as collaborative, which in turn increases the likelihood that the process is seen as legitimate and procedurally just (Agnew, 1992; Tyler, 1990).

The Risk Assessment Interview as “A Difficult Balancing Act”

As already indicated, the common thread that links the findings discussed thus far is the notion of risk assessment as a “Difficult Balancing Act” (Karen, psychologist). The importance of balance has already been alluded to in the selective categories described above—and the challenges of maintaining balance form the centre of the developing GT presented here. Risk assessment interviewing is a dynamic process and the point of balance shifts continuously as questions are asked, information is exchanged, emotions are triggered, and implications of the assessment are reflected on. This point of balance, and how to achieve it, is a challenge of professional practice and psychological skill (Hough, 2010) and not something that can be easily reduced to a set of guidelines or checklists (see Gannon & Ward, 2014; Schön, 1983). Linehan (1993) made a similar observation about therapeutic style, and Schön (1983) commented that “skilful action often reveals a, ‘knowing more than we can say’” (p. 51). The point of balance depends on a range of circumstances—the nature of the assessment, the nature of the prisoner, the prisoner's previous experiences, the nature of the prison environment, and the experience and confidence of the psychologist (issues

which are being explored further in ongoing data collection and analysis). The notion of forensic work involving the balancing of competing demands, needs, and responsibilities is discussed elsewhere in the forensic literature (Appelbaum, 1997; Ward, 2013),

The challenge of navigating the difficult balancing act was identified by participants as especially relevant to less experienced psychologists. Training as a psychologist involves learning about theories, techniques, and procedures, but when it comes to deciding precisely what to do or say in a specific situation to maximise cooperation and engagement, this is a matter of judgement:

When I was less experienced . . . yeah, you've got to empathise, and you've got to kind of you know, reflect back, and it's all you know, the techniques of doing it erm, but . . . I think once all that, all that stuff, kind of fades into the background you can just get on with being a human being in another, in a situation with a human being, and, yeah, you can use those techniques if you're stuck, but I think erm, yeah, I think it's about confidence in your own ability to kind of make a judgment as well. (Maria, psychologist)

It could also be argued that the post-RNR manualisation of risk assessment (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Marshall, 2009) has made a sense of balance more challenging to achieve. The extensive guidance accompanying most structured risk assessment tools, alongside the requirement in some cases for practitioners to attend and pass interrater reliability training, arguably leaves less room for clinical expertise in risk assessment—as was recommended by Andrews and Bonta (2010), but seems sidelined in many applications of RNR (Gannon & Ward, 2014). The notion of working with offenders being a craft (Hough, 2010) that requires skill, experience, and responsiveness to the uniqueness of the situation (Schön, 1983) could potentially be undermined by the structured, manualised approaches currently favoured (Marshall, 2009). The de-emphasis of professional expertise is also noted as a consequence of the “new penology” (Feeley & Simon, 1992). This is not to say that structured risk assessment tools should be abandoned in favour of a return to clinical judgement: This would be to ignore available evidence (see Dawes et al., 1989). Rather, structured tools may not be enough to form a comprehensive understanding and formulation of an individual prisoner's risks, strengths, and treatment needs (Boer & Hart, 2009) and may even “. . . stop psychologists from thinking” (Steph, psychologist). The current findings suggest that a more flexible, nuanced, and balanced approach to risk assessment interviewing is more valuable and more likely to achieve the information gathering, motivational, and engagement-in-risk-management-services functions of the interview.

In terms of implications for practice, this is an ongoing project, and while there are some preliminary ideas that might be derived from the results to inform practice, engagement with other key stakeholders such as the Parole Board will further enhance the capacity to make more detailed and confident recommendations. However, at this early stage, the results suggest that practitioners could usefully draw on the benefits of structured tools while being clear, transparent, and honest about their role, the nature, and purpose of their assessment and how they plan to go about it. Practitioners could work to engage prisoners collaboratively in their assessment, giving them as much

choice and involvement as circumstances allow. They could maintain a keen awareness of prisoners as human beings with needs for autonomy, integrity, and clarity at the same time as maintaining their professional boundaries. Similarly, the need to keep individual prisoners with individual strengths and needs at the centre of the task is indicated. Finally, adopting a naturally conversational style during assessment while remaining focused and transparent about aims and purpose is indicated as a useful interpersonal style. These suggestions potentially maximise the utility of the risk assessment interview as well as increasing the extent to which psychological risk assessment is perceived as procedurally just.

Limitations

The current findings are a starting point in understanding an underresearched area, and ongoing research will need to explore the extent to which the results can be applied to a wider population of prison-based psychologists and male, adult, ISPs. Wider applicability of these findings (e.g., to women prisoners, young offenders, psychologists working within but not employed by HMPS) also needs to be considered in future research. Similarly, while prisoner participants in this study were at different stages in their sentences, it was not possible to make any meaningful comparisons between those who had reached and those who were yet to reach their minimum term (“tariff”), and consideration of this issue would be useful going forward.

All participants in this study were volunteers. Psychologists may have been more likely to volunteer if they had particularly positive or negative experiences. It was apparent that the psychologists generally had a collaborative and respectful attitude towards risk assessment, and it is not possible to comment on how representative this is of the wider group of prison-based psychologists. Many prisoner participants described uncollaborative and disrespectful practice which was not evident in psychologists’ descriptions of their own practice. It is possible that psychologists whose practice is consistent with these descriptions chose not to participate. Similarly, prisoner participants may have clustered to extreme ends of the spectrum: those with excessively positive or negative attitudes to psychological risk assessment may have been more likely to volunteer. Steps were taken to overcome extreme views by asking all participants about both good and bad experiences of psychological risk assessment.

Conclusion

The notion of risk assessment as a difficult balancing act is the key theoretical finding arising from this study. The GT methodology enabled thorough and detailed exploration of the perspectives of 11 psychologists and 10 prisoners, and the difficult balancing act reflects the perspectives of both groups of participants. Throughout risk assessment interviewing, interpersonal as well as wider contextual factors exert pressure on the interview, continually threatening its balance. The task of the psychologist is to steer a course through sometimes challenging and unpredictable conditions,

keeping the safety and integrity of all involved as a priority, to achieve the overriding goal. The goal is easier to identify and to achieve if the psychologists and prisoners are working together—if aims, objectives, and methods have been agreed collaboratively. The outcome of the assessment is more likely to be accepted if prisoners understand the process, feel like they have been treated respectfully, and that they have actively participated in the interview.

Here, we have described the perceived nature of the risk assessment interview, touching on some of the wider influences (e.g., the coercive nature of prison). As this project progresses, we will pay more attention to these broader issues, with the aim of gaining a greater understanding of the wider context and its role in shaping risk assessment practices.

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Notes

1. In the United States, the equivalent sentence is “life sentence with the possibility of parole.”
2. The phrase “pains of risk assessment” is derived from Sykes’ (1958) descriptions of the “pains of imprisonment,” and Crewe’s (2011) comment about assessment being a form of purgatory.
3. Psychologists were recruited via Regional Psychologists, who chose to gatekeep the involvement of their staff in different ways. Some sent the researchers their staff contact lists. Others chose to contact their staff themselves and pass on details of those who agreed to participate to the researchers. The researchers had no control over this, as National Offender Management Service (NOMS) National Research Committee (NRC) approval only provides permission to request assistance with recruiting participants. Technically, all qualified psychologists employed by NOMS and working in prisons had the opportunity to participate, as all Regional Psychologists were contacted and asked for their assistance in recruiting participants.
4. Participants were eligible if they were *either* Chartered Psychologists *or* Registered Forensic Psychologists *or both*. All participants were *both* Chartered and Registered.
5. Statistics about the gender composition of different functions of the NOMS workforce are not in the public domain, but the first author’s personal experience of working in and around the prison service for over 20 years suggests that the vast majority of prison-based psychologists are women.

6. One participant declined to give their age.
7. Prisoner recruitment was dependent on local procedures and permissions. In Prison 1, local staff provided a list of men who met the inclusion criteria, from which we randomly selected five men to contact in writing to invite to participate. Three men agreed to participate; the remaining two did not reply. In Prison 2, a local manager asked staff to provide names of potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. The first author met the seven men identified and all agreed to participate.
8. Prisoners are given a security category depending on their likelihood of escape and the risk they are considered to present to prison staff and other prisoners. Category B prisons are for prisoners who do not need the highest level of security but “. . . for whom escape must be made very difficult” (Ministry of Justice, 2011, p. 6). Category C prisons are for “. . . prisoners who cannot be trusted in open conditions but who do not have the resources and will to make a determined escape attempt” (Ministry of Justice, 2011).
9. Category D prisons are for prisoners who present a low risk and “. . . whom can be reasonably trusted not to abscond” (Ministry of Justice, 2011). There were no Category D prisoners in the research sample.
10. A *Mandatory Life Sentence* is a life sentence given for murder, in which the sentencing judge has no choice but to impose a life sentence—that is, it is *mandatory*. A *Discretionary Life Sentence* is one given at the *discretion* of the sentencing judge for serious offences such as rape, manslaughter, and arson.
11. *IPP sentences* were available to the courts between 2005 and 2012 and could be given for serious sexual and violent offences, which would attract a determinate sentence of 10 years or more, when the person had a relevant previous conviction, and where, in the court’s opinion, the person posed a significant risk to the public of serious harm by the commission of further specified offences.
12. *Automatic Life Sentences* were available to the courts between 1997 and 2005 and were *mandatory* when a person was convicted for a second time for a serious offence, again including serious violent and sexual offence and firearms offences. Automatic Life Sentences were replaced with *Indeterminate Sentences for Public Protection* (IPPs) and are no longer available to the courts. However, prisoners serving Automatic Life Sentences remain in prison and are subject to the same rules and restrictions as other indeterminate sentenced prisoners. Please see www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk for more details about indeterminate prison sentences
13. The “tariff” is set by the trial judge and is the minimum term prisoners must serve before they can be considered for release.
14. The precise transcription convention used is available from the first author on request.
15. Further details of our approach to coding are available from the first author on request.
16. *Italics* are used to denote emphasis in speech.

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