

The working relationship and desistance: What constitutes a ‘good quality’ working relationship?

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a small-scale exploratory piece of research that examined perceptions of what constitutes a ‘good quality’ working relationship between the practitioner and the child, within the criminal justice system. Using a qualitative approach, focus groups and interviews were conducted with practitioners and children, based in two Youth Offending Teams in Wales, United Kingdom. The study sought to explore the characteristics of a ‘good quality’ working relationship, from two different perspectives: (1) the practitioners and (2) the children. Using thematic analysis, findings revealed that whilst both practitioners and children perceived trust to be an important characteristic of a ‘good quality’ working relationship, differences between their perceptions did exist, with practitioners focussing more on the characteristics of reliability and time; and children highlighting the characteristics of genuineness and comfort. It was concluded that such disparity between the way practitioners and children perceive a ‘good quality’ working relationship has important implications for youth justice practice and desistance for children.

Keywords: desistance, practitioner, children, relationship, youth justice.

INTRODUCTION

To begin, this paper positions the research within the broader context of desistance literature, and this will be followed by an overview of the research approach and methodology used by the study.

Context

Whilst the number of First Time Entrants (FTEs) to the criminal justice system (CJS) has fallen by 86% since 2008, the number of children reoffending has increased in the same period, rising from 38% to 41% (Ministry of Justice, 2019). Reoffending by children was estimated to cost

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England and Wales £1.5 billion during 2016-2017 (Newton et al., 2019). Policy makers would benefit from understanding more about what works to increase desistance, as fewer offences would not only reduce economic costs and make communities safer, but would afford children their rights to achieve their full potential and to reintegrate into society (Unicef, 2020).

In England and Wales, children who commit criminal offences are dealt with by Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), which were established by the *Crime and Disorder Act 1998* (GOV.UK, 1998). This Act also established the Youth Justice Board (YJB) to oversee and direct YOT practice. Usually, the police are the first people to contact their local YOT, however, family members and friends can also contact the YOT if they are concerned about a child's behaviour. As well as supporting the child to desist from offending, YOT practitioners also help children and their families in other ways, such as supporting children and their families at court, supervising children serving a community sentence, and maintaining contact with a child whilst they serve a custodial sentence. Whilst YOTs are part of local councils and are separate from the police and the courts, they do work closely with other services, including police, schools, probation and children's services. When a child is first known to the YOT, they are assessed in an attempt to understand the factors that might have brought the child into contact with the YOT. This assessment also helps the practitioner to identify the specific needs of the child, allowing an individualised support package to be put in place. Assessments are conducted using the AssetPlus framework (GOV.UK, 2020), which as a tool offers end-to-end assessment for children (GOV.UK, 2020).

In fairly recent years, research has moved away from a risk-based, offender-related approach to reoffending, and instead, has started to take a more desistance-focused, strengths-based approach (Fortune, Ward, & Willis, 2012). Whilst there is no single theory of desistance, a number of strands have been highlighted as being important, including the role played by social factors (such as social capital). Whilst there is no single definition of social capital, it has been defined as "the links, shared values and understandings in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and so work together" (OECD Insights, 2020). Research suggests that individuals that have strong bonds, for example to family, friends,

romantic partners, employment and education, are more likely to desist (Doekhie, 2017; Farrington, 2015; Hirschi, 1969; Lee, Moon et al., 2017; Sampson & Laub, 1993; West & Farrington, 1973). However, existing literature also emphasises the importance of individual factors, such as the transformation narrative, where an individual replaces their past, criminal self with a new, pro-social self (King, 2013; Liem & Richardson, 2014; Stevens, 2012; Stone, 2015; Stone, Morash et al., 2018; Vaughan, 2007).

Although research suggests that each of these elements play a role in desistance, more recent research has consistently highlighted the importance of the working relationship between the practitioner and child, which falls into the social strand of desistance. A report published by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP, 2016, pg7) stated that having "a balanced, trusting and consistent working relationship with at least one worker" was linked to an increased likelihood of desistance from offending. Nacro (2013) also highlighted the importance of building positive working relationships between practitioners and young adults who have offended, suggesting that such a relationship is an integral part in the desistance process; thoughts echoed by Drake, Fergusson, and Briggs (2014) and Lewis (2014).

Research by Creaney and Smith (2014) posits that when a practitioner is respectful to a child and listens attentively to their narrative; and is also genuine in doing so, barriers to desistance can be overcome, and desistance is made more likely. Furthermore, research has emphasised the need for practitioners to take a more humanistic approach when working with children (Mason & Prior, 2008), with research by Everall and Paulson (2002) showing that children were more responsive to practitioners who presented themselves as allies, rather than authoritative figures.

Developing a 'good quality' working relationship is, according to Prior and Mason (2010), key to engaging children in interventions aimed at increasing desistance; arguing that passive involvement by the child, will result in desistance being less likely. Trevithick (2005) also commented that a practitioner is more likely to be effectively persuasive and directive, if they have a good relationship with the child they are working with. What is not fully understood though, is what constitutes a

‘good quality’ working relationship (Prior & Mason, 2010), which is the focus of this research paper.

Social Bonds theory (Sampson & Laub, 2005) states that offending is a normal activity that is the result of a lack of social controls, which are usually built through social bonds and turning points over a life course. Turning points are referred to by Elder (1986) as changes in the life course that have the ability to alter an individual’s life trajectory. Doherty (2006) also found support for the link between social bonds and desistance, with findings indicating that as the level of social integration increased, the probability of offending decreased. The same was also true of self-control: as a child’s level of self-control increased, the likelihood of offending decreased. The Social Control theory (Hirschi, 1969) sees offending behaviour resulting from social institutions losing control over individuals, and posits that crime occurs when social bonds are either not strong in the first place, or become weakened. Research indicates that individuals who have strong social bonds to institutions will be less likely to commit offences for fear of disappointing those individuals they value (Costello & Laub, 2020).

However, research also emphasises the importance of having quality social bonds, thus indicating that it might not be enough to be in a relationship; the quality of the relationship might also matter (Barr & Simons, 2015).

Individual Factors

A relatively recent research focus has placed increased significance on the role played by individual processes such as identity change, suggesting that desistance maybe more cognitive and individualistic than once thought (Paternoster, Bachman, Kerrison, O’Connell, & Smith, 2016). For instance it has been suggested that an individual who has offended has (1) a ‘*working identity*’ (current) that has linked preferences and social networks; (2) a ‘*positive possible self*’ (the person they wish to be), and (3) a ‘*feared self*’ (the person they fear they might become). Paternoster and Bushway (2009) go on to suggest that an individual is committed to their ‘*working self*’ until they determine that the cost of this commitment is greater than the benefits; and a process named *crystallization of discontent*

occurs when the person links their life failures to the anxiety they feel about becoming their 'feared self'. This is what motivates them to change initially; and brings with it, a new set of preferences and social networks, as the newly emerging sense-of-self (pro-social) begins. McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler, and Maruna (2012) talk about the need for children who have offended to develop a pro-social identity, suggesting that individuals who desist tend to have high levels of self-efficacy; perceiving themselves as having more control over their futures, with a clear sense of purpose in the world.

Youth justice services and the practitioners who work within services, have an important role to play in supporting a child's shift to a pro-social identity (Bateman & Hazel, 2013). It makes sense then, that if a practitioner has a 'good quality' working relationship with a child, they would be in a better position to help support a child shift to a more pro-social identity. Therefore, this paper's focus on exploring what constitutes a 'good quality' working relationship, could potentially have important implications for the way in which practitioners help foster a positive identity in the children they work with, helping them along their desistance journey.

Whereas Laub and Sampson (2001), and indeed Giordano et al. (2002), suggest that identity transformation takes place during the secondary desistance phase King (2013) instead posits that identity formation takes place much earlier. This has significant implications for practitioners in terms of the role they play in offering children recognition that they are desisting successfully, incorporating this sense of achievement into the child's desistance narrative as early as possible.

The findings of the research will be framed thematically based on the perceptions of practitioners and the children, addressing three research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of a 'good quality' working relationship from the perspective of practitioners working within the Youth Offending Service?

2. What are the characteristics of a 'good quality' working relationship from the perspective of children known to the Youth Offending Service?
3. What is the degree of consensus between practitioners and children regarding the characteristics of a 'good quality' working relationship?

METHOD

Methodological Approach

Prior to the commencement of the fieldwork, ethical approval was gained from the Ethics Committee at the University of South Wales. A qualitative research framework was chosen for this study because of its suitability to the overall aim of the study which was to explore the working relationship; which in turn led to the development of the three research questions that elicited perspective, experience and meaning from the participants (Hammarberg, Kirkman, & de Lacey, 2016).

Using a qualitative research approach, this study used semi-structured interviews with both practitioners and children, and focus groups with only practitioners. The rationale for conducting focus groups with only the practitioners was two-fold. Firstly, it was deemed unethical to put a group of young people who had offended, together to discuss sensitive issues, in front of peers; and secondly, for pragmatic reasons, in that working with children is rarely straightforward. Semi-structured interviews were conducted first and were chosen because they allowed the interview to remain concentrated on the desired line of enquiry, i.e. perspectives of a 'good quality' working relationship. Due to its semi-structured nature, optimum use was made of the limited interview time with participants, because the interviewer was able to keep the line of questioning focused, using mainly pre-determined questions (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). However, semi-structured interviews did allow for an element of conversation to take place between the interviewer and the interviewee. Such two-way communication enabled the interviewer to follow topical trajectories within the conversation, where appropriate (Keller & Conradin, 2019).

A focus group was conducted after the interviews, and the themes discussed during the focus group were based on the themes that had emerged from the initial interview analyses. A focus group was used because it allowed the study to gain an in-depth understanding of the practitioner's perspectives of the most frequently stated characteristics of a 'good quality' working relationship, as discussed during the interviews by the practitioners and the children. During a focus group discussion, because the researcher takes on a peripheral role, participants have space to engage in interactive discussions (Krueger & Casey, 2000); and because focus groups are purposely collective in nature, they allow participants to interact and influence each other during the discussion, as they consider each other's perspectives (Patton & Patton, 2002). Furthermore, because the focus group discussion centred on the emerging interview themes, it allowed for an element of triangulation (Bryman, 2015).

Sampling

A total of 18 participants took part in this study: 13 practitioners and 5 children. Whilst this is a small sample group, it is important to highlight that generalisability was not the aim of the paper. Instead, the aim was to provide a rich, contextualised understanding of the working relationship from the perspectives of practitioners and children.

All practitioners worked for a YOT in Wales, and all children were known to the YOTs. As the study was interested in exploring a variation in perspectives among practitioners and children, a heterogeneous purposive sampling method was used, which allowed the study to capture a wide range of perspectives from various angles, affording greater insights to be gained (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The YOT managers were asked if they could offer job role variety in the sample of practitioners, and due to the vulnerability of the children known to the YOTs, the decision as to which children were suitable to be interviewed, was left to the YOT manager. However, the study did request that only children who had reoffended were considered for the sample and the study also requested for the children to be as varied as possible in terms of offence type. The sample group of practitioners was made up of 8 males and 5 females and were aged between 25 and 64 years; and all children interviewed were male, with ages ranging between 14 and 17 years.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted on the transcripts because thematic analysis allowed semantic and latent themes to be identified (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). To conduct the analysis, the researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-step framework because it offered a clear model for doing thematic analysis, which involves: (1) becoming familiar with the data; (2) Generating initial codes; (3) Searching for themes; (4) Reviewing themes; (5) Defining themes; (6) Writing up. Using this framework, data analysis began with the researcher becoming familiar with the material. Interviews and focus groups were transcribed and the transcriptions were read and re-read, with initial thoughts and ideas noted down. Initial codes were then generated, which involved the researcher annotating sentences and paragraphs with key words that they felt captured the essence of what was being said by the participants. This included anything interesting and meaningful. Once initial codes had been generated, themes were identified, and codes were combined into broad themes. Themes were then reviewed and were combined, separated, refined or discarded, where necessary. The researcher ensured that the data coded to the themes were meaningful and made sense; and themes were checked against the material coded into them. The last stage of data analysis involved the researcher developing a thematic map, where themes were organised coherently.

Data analysis revealed four central themes identified by the practitioners and the children as being characteristics of a 'good quality' working relationship: (1) trust, (2) reliability, (3) time and (4) comfort.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Themes

1. Trust and Genuineness

Both the children and practitioners perceived trust to be a significant characteristic of a 'good quality' working relationship. For children, trust was perceived as being able to rely on their Case Worker, for example "*Someone who you know is always going to be there when you need them*". Children emphasised the importance of practitioners being trusted not to judge them "*They're not going to throw it back in my face*". Other characteristics were also mentioned when discussing trust. For instance,

talking about trust in terms of not being ‘messed around’ by the practitioners, such as being able to trust that the practitioner will do what they say they will do; trust that the practitioner will be straight in what they have to say; which ties in with pro social modelling (Trotter, 2009). For example, “*They ain't there just to mess around; to say one thing and do another. If you say something you got to do it... Don't beat around the bush. They're honest and straight up*”. Children also talked about trust in terms of genuineness, for instance “*I don't like fake people...I like honest and straight up...*” For many children trust does not come easily because they have either never had a trusting relationship before, or they had once trusted but had been let down (All Party Parliamentary Group for Children, 2014). Trust is particularly important to these children because a significant number have suffered trauma during their childhood; for instance, it is estimated that 91% of children known to the YOS, who have committed violent offences, have suffered abuse and/or loss (Wright & Liddle, 2014). Traumatic childhoods for these children are not only common, they can also have a significant impact on a child’s wellbeing, both physical and emotional. This is because, the brain is a ‘social organ’, in a constant state of responding to experience. So if a young person has grown up living in constant fear or danger, their brain becomes *hyper*-alert to fear and danger, and *hypo*-alert to pleasure. The brain of a child constantly changes with experience, and as an adult, if you have been raised in a healthy environment and then something bad happens, that injures only a small piece of the whole brain structure. However, toxic stress in childhood (such as abandonment or chronic violence), has a significant negative impact on the capacity to pay attention, to learn, to see where other people are coming from (perspective taking), making it very difficult for a child to behave in a socially acceptable manner. Research has demonstrated that it is possible to rewire the brain, for instance, by making children feel safe and secure; helping them to create a sense of safety inside themselves (Kolk & Bessel, 2017). This could be a possible function of the practitioners who work with the children: to help a child feel safe and secure, in a bid to rewire the brain and assist them in the process of leading a pro-social life. When a child suffers severe trauma, it impacts negatively, their ability to live their life resiliently, with resilience being regarded as “capacity to adapt in the face of challenging

circumstances, whilst maintaining a stable mental wellbeing” (Mind, 2020, n.d.). Over the past twenty years research has extended our understanding of how trauma impacts a child’s wellbeing, including the neurobiology of trauma (Black & Slavich 2016; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016). For instance, early trauma has been linked to dysfunctional neural circuits, dysfunctional behaviours, mental health issues, and difficulty managing emotions (Groger et al., 2016), as well as offending behaviour (Smith et al., 2006; Zelechowski, 2016). Trust has also been tied closely to a child’s self-esteem (McCarthy et al., 2017; Weining & Smith, 2012), including in the context of trauma therapy. For instance, in order for a child to engage fully in therapy aimed at building a child’s self-esteem and altering the child’s negative internal narrative, it is imperative that the child trusts the process of therapy (Bradshaw, 2016). This further highlights the importance of the child trusting the practitioner, and children in this current study commented that they were more likely to engage in any support offered by the YOT if they trusted the practitioner who was recommending the support.

Thus, for many children, trust was seen as a paradox: they had learnt over time that it was safer for them not to trust, including practitioners. It was mentioned frequently by the children, that they were able to spot practitioner insincerity very quickly, and to children, falseness was perceived as a lack of priority and effort on the practitioner’s part; giving the children the impression they were not worth the effort; that the supervision meeting, and any support offered, was more about ticking boxes, than truly wanting to help the children.

Conversely, when practitioners talked about trust, they often talked about ‘professional trust’, which they likened to a pseudo-friendship, for example *“There’s a certain level of gaining trust and gaining their friendship almost; not in the true sense a friendship, but its first name basis”*. Practitioners perceived it necessary to build a pseudo-friendship; a professional relationship, in order to build a foundation. With a solid foundation, practitioners indicated that the work they do with the children; the meetings they have with them, become more natural, allowing the practitioner and indeed the child, to gain more out of the supervision. Whilst many of the younger practitioners perceived it important for

children to like them in order to build a ‘good quality’ working relationship, older practitioners focused more on getting children to respect them. For many practitioners, trust and respect go hand in hand, in that they perceived it would be easier for children to trust them, if they respected them as a professional. Trust could be regarded as something that is intuitive (Exploring Your Mind, 2017), and this ties into what the children said about being able to identify genuineness from practitioners almost instantly. Practitioners also commented that trying to develop a working relationship is made more difficult because not only do time constraints get in the way of the working relationship being allowed to develop more organically, but they are being guided by the agenda of reducing the likelihood of reoffending; with some practitioners choosing to keep this agenda hidden, whilst others stated they were upfront and explicit from the first supervision. The importance of trust was also discussed by practitioners in the context of the Enhanced Case Management model (Youth Justice Board, 2017), for instance *“I think this links back to the ECM model and what we try to do there because the primary aim there is to build a positive relationship; trusting, that they think they can come back to you.”* Whilst the number of first time entrants to the youth justice system has reduced significantly in recent years, the young people that remain in the system often have a complex set of needs, and are often troubled; so in 2015 the YJB piloted a new and enhanced way to work with these children, called Enhanced Case Management (ECM), which uses the Trauma Recovery Model (TRM) (Skuse & Matthew, 2015), which was tested by three YOTs in Wales, over a one-year period. Building on the success of the Welsh pilot, the ECM model is currently being trialled across English YOTs (2019-2020). The ECM approach, using the TRM, implies that desistance from youth offending is a lot more complex than previously thought. The TRM is a psychological approach of working with children known to the YOTs with complex needs and theorises that children need to work their way through various progressive stages before they can successfully engage in any intervention designed to reduce their likelihood of reoffending. These stages are: (1) routine and structure; (2) trusting relationships; (3) processing past experiences; (4) integration of old and new self; (5) adult-guided support

planning; and (6) autonomy within a supportive context (Skuse & Matthew, 2015).

2. Reliability

A characteristic that relates closely to trust is the characteristic of reliability (Trotter, 2009). When practitioners and children talked about the role of trust, they often referred to it in the context of reliability and consistency; thus it could be argued that trust is a broader concept that encompasses other elements, such as reliability. Burton (2019) talked about reliability versus trust and concluded that trust is established when we allow a person at least some responsibility for something that we ourselves value, thus making ourselves vulnerable to the other person. In this sense, children trust that practitioners can be relied upon. Often when practitioners talked about reliability they were referring to the practical aspect of the working relationship, particularly the need for practitioners to keep their word; to do what they say they are going to do, for example *“being honest, punctual, being there when you say you will be”*. For many practitioners, reliability was contextualised pragmatically, not just for the benefit of the child in terms of their reoffending, but also for the practitioner, in terms of smooth running and ease. Some practitioners emphasised the importance of reliability for ECM cases *“with ECM, a big part is consistency and reliability. Things like making sure you have your appointments at the same time, making sure that you as a practitioner are there and are on time... So you are building that trust over time. If you say you are going to do something, then you do something.”*

For other practitioners, the importance of reliability went beyond pragmatics and reducing the likelihood of reoffending. For instance, making sure children are humanised, *“I always try to make sure young people don't feel like a number. I try not to tell them I have another appointment... being responsive to what they need”* Interestingly, practitioners talked of children testing the commitment of practitioners, commenting that as children begin to feel safe with a practitioner, they often test the practitioner's commitment by pushing the boundaries. Thus, on the one hand, from a practitioner's perspective, reliability is often referred to in a practical sense, for many children, particularly those who have suffered trauma, reliability is more to do with knowing they can

emotionally lean on practitioners, knowing they will not give up on them. Reliability in this sense implies predictability, and so when practitioners act in a reliable manner, a child's sense of security is enhanced, and removes the uncertainty that comes from changeable and emotionally inconsistent parenting and upbringing. When practitioners behave reliably, they are helping a child recover, indicating that quality relationships can protect (Prison Reform Trust, 2020).

Whilst trust and reliability were regarded as being important characteristics in a 'good quality' working relationship, practitioners commented that this takes time and according to many practitioners, time is not always available to them.

3. Time

Practitioners remarked that children have learned not to trust people, especially adults, and that learnt behaviour is not going to change quickly and easily; it will take time and effort on the part of the practitioner, for example *"a big part of a good working relationship is consistency and reliability... So you are building that trust over time... They don't trust easily and it takes a long time to get that"*. As indicated here, when building trust between the children and the practitioners, it is important for the practitioners to get the basics right: being on time to scheduled appointments and following through with spoken actions. Practitioners commented that whilst such things appear minor, their impact is often great and do not go unnoticed by the children. According to practitioners, displaying reliable behaviour over a period, is one small step on the long journey to building a healthy working relationship, built around trust. Practitioners also said that in their experience, children are more likely to trust their peers over practitioners, and this preference is not likely to be a quick thing to change, which again reiterates time as being an important element in the process of trust-building.

Furthermore, it was apparent that whilst most practitioners were aware of the important role played by time, often in their experience, the courts were not, for example *"courts are asking us to change five years of pre-established patterns of behaviour within 3 months; sorry we are not going to be able to do it"*. Practitioners also spoke about the individualised nature

of time and progress, commenting that any change in a child's behaviour will take time and the amount of time required will depend on the child concerned. Time is particularly important for highly vulnerable children according to practitioners. Whilst some children will have experienced healthy relationships and so are more trusting of practitioners, for those more vulnerable children, with more complex needs, they often do not understand what a healthy relationship is, and they struggle with the notion of trust, particularly with adults in positions of authority. Practitioners perceived that part of their role is to support children and help them to understand what it means to trust, to develop a healthy- relationship blueprint.

It could be argued then, that the youth justice system is out of sync with what is needed (sufficient time, which is individualised); and whilst the YJB has made a commitment to a 'child first, offender second' approach to youth justice, stating it will ensure children are treated in accordance to their individualised needs, it has yet to fully filter through into practice, according to some practitioners on the ground.

4. Comfort

Feeling comfortable around practitioners was the biggest characteristic spoken about by the children, and ties in closely to some of the characteristics already discussed: trust, reliability and honesty. Children talked of being able to 'hang-out' informally with the practitioner during supervisions, rather than always having to participate in formal meetings, for example "*Someone you can laugh around. Sit around*". Practitioners also saw the value in holding less formal, sit-down meetings, in order to build a good 'quality working' relationship, "*spending three hours walking down Cardiff bay. No eye-contact but you are making that relationship*".

Often when children talked about feeling comfortable around the practitioner, they referred to laughing, such as "*we always have a laugh; we get on... I open myself up. I'm less likely to open up to someone I don't know...You don't feel wary around them; you can chill around them*". This could be seen as an attempt to equalise an unequal power relationship. The children also made reference to 'knowing the practitioner' in the sense that

over time, as they became more familiar, more used to the practitioner, they are able to trust the practitioner; trust they can be themselves, without fear of judgement or rejection, such as *“If I was to work with people I didn't know I would feel uncomfortable. Feeling comfortable is important because you get to speak your mind knowing they're not going to say anything”*. It appears that over time trust is built and the children become less cautious and more comfortable around the practitioners. This lowered sense of caution brings with it greater likelihood of engagement and disclosure, putting the practitioner in a better position to be able to help the child to desist. It might be that the characteristic of feeling comfortable around the practitioner is tied closely to a child's self-worth, particularly because often, the children known to the YOTs have never known what it is like to have another person take the time and effort to get to know them, leaving the young person with a lowered sense of self-worth. When children get the sense that practitioners genuinely want to understand them and to help them, this serves to increase the child's self-esteem. Indeed, an increase in self-esteem has been linked to an increase in desistance, as has the role played by practitioners in verifying a positive identity and increasing self-esteem (Stone et al., 2018), which links to the Self-Derogation Theory (Kaplan & Johnson, 2001), which posits that low self-esteem motivates children to try out anti-social acts in a bid to restore their self-esteem. Kaplan and Lin (2007) found that children with negative deviant identities, who developed negative self-feelings, would decrease deviant behaviour as their social bonding increased, which reinforces the importance of having a 'good quality' working relationship, in a bid to increase a child's social capital. Cheng (2014) supported this link between self-esteem and offending, with correlational results indicating that as the level of moral-self-esteem decreased, the likelihood of offending increased. These results suggest that individual's with high internal risks, such as having low self-esteem and low resilience tend to be more vulnerable to external negative factors, such as peer pressure and poor parenting; findings which have been supported by the Scottish Government (2018). Such findings have implications for youth justice practice and in particular the working relationship, in terms of practitioners ensuring the children they work with are afforded the necessary support to

not only reduce their external risks, but are also offered support to increase their internal protective factors, such as self-esteem and resilience.

CONCLUSION

This small-scale study examined the perceptions of what constitutes a 'good quality' working relationship between the practitioner and child within the youth justice system. The importance of the working relationship within desistance was contextualised within broader desistance literature, specifically: individual factors and social factors. Considering the views of both practitioners and children, findings revealed that whilst both perceived trust to be an important characteristic of a 'good quality' working relationship, inconsistency did exist, with practitioners perceiving reliability and time to be important characteristics, and children perceiving genuineness and comfort to be key. Whilst on the one hand, such incongruence between the perceptions of the practitioners and children could be seen in a positive light, in that it brings challenges to practice; offering a chance for policy and practice to grow and evolve; it could be argued that such disparity might negatively impact the likelihood of a child desisting. If practitioners are unaware of the characteristics of a 'good quality' working relationship that children value, then they could at best, be under utilising the time they have with the children; and at worst, be unknowingly, negatively influencing the way children see themselves and the narratives they hold. It could be argued then that findings have important implications for youth justice practice and a child's desistance. Even though findings were promising in that they offered greater insight into what constitutes a 'good quality' working relationship, these findings may not translate to female children and children outside of Wales. This is because only a small sample group of male children was available to be interviewed, and the study was focused on YOTs in Wales. However, it is important to offer a reminder that generalisability was not the goal of this study; but rather the objective was to offer a deeper, perspective-based understanding of the working relationship. Furthermore, findings of this study might still be widely applicable to male children known to YOTs across the UK, because whilst there will undoubtedly be some differences between YOTs in different regions, many similarities will likely be seen due to YOTs being directed by wider YJB policy. With these limitations

in mind, future research would benefit from including larger samples, which include both male and female children, taken from a greater geographical area. This would allow research to see if perceptions of a 'good quality' working relationship differ not only between practitioners and children across the UK, but also between children themselves (males and females). Greater research attention should also be focused on the impact of a 'good quality' working relationship, specifically addressing the question: What is the impact of having/not having a 'good quality' working relationship on a child's desistance? Whilst acknowledging these limitations, this paper achieved what it set out to achieve: to explore further, the working relationship. Youth justice practitioners might, as a result, be a little closer to increasing a child's likelihood of desisting and be a little closer to affording a child their right to lead a good life.

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