Understanding the Process of Psychological Risk Assessment: Exploring the Experiences of Psychologists, Indeterminate Sentenced Prisoners and Parole Board Members

by

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Abstract

As the name implies, indeterminate sentenced prisoners in England and Wales do not have a fixed release date. Instead, a panel of the Parole Board decides whether or not the prisoner can safely be released or moved to a lower security prison without presenting a significant risk of harm to the public. In order to make these decisions, the Parole Board panel relies on written and oral evidence from a range of professionals, including psychologists, who have assessed the risk of the prisoner committing further serious offences. As part of the risk assessment process, psychologists interview prisoners in order to inform their recommendations to the Parole Board.

Despite the potential implications of psychological risk assessment, there has been little research focused on how it is experienced by those whom it affects. However, there is suggestion within the extant literature that psychological risk assessment carries substantial weight in Parole Board decision making. Additionally, relationships between prisoners and psychologists seem to be characterised by hostility and mistrust. This research aimed to gain greater understanding of the experiences of psychologists, indeterminate sentenced prisoners and Parole Board members in relation to psychological risk assessment. It also explored relationships between psychologists and prisoners and their experiences of the risk assessment interview. Data were gathered mainly from interviews with the three stakeholder groups and analysed using Grounded Theory methodology.

The results reveal pressures and contextual influences on all three participant groups. The prison environment, the organisation and the high stakes nature of the task differentially affect psychologists, prisoners and Parole Board members. Consequently, taking a more systemic approach to understanding and conducting risk assessment is essential in reducing stress and improving the quality and utility of risk assessment.
The results also suggest competing views of the legitimacy of psychological assessment. Psychologists and Parole Board members perceive it as valuable and justifiably influential in parole decision making. Prisoners perceive it as unfair and opaque, a view which contributes towards resentment and mistrust of psychologists. The risk assessment interview is an opportunity for differing perspectives to interact. Therefore, the interview is best understood in intersubjective terms, with participants’ multiply and reciprocally influenced by their own and each other’s attitudes and behaviour. The results also reveal a shared understanding between prisoners and psychologists about features of risk assessment interviewing that are most likely to promote trust, engagement and consequently legitimacy. These elements can be built on to improve risk assessment practice.

Overall, this study has improved understanding of the experiences of the three participant groups. It has highlighted the importance of understanding context when trying to understand criminal justice practice. It has identified the unique intersubjective experience of risk assessment interviewing, and the inevitability of influence on the participants. Finally, it has revealed areas where psychological risk assessment can improve in order to promote legitimacy and procedural justice.
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Abbreviations

ARAIs - Actuarial Risk Assessment Instruments
BPS – British Psychological Society,
Cat C – Category C prison establishment
Cat D/D-cat – Category D prison establishment
EBP – Evidence Based Practice
FPIT – Forensic Psychologist in Training
GT - Grounded Theory
HCR-20 V3 – Historical, Clinical, Risk Management, Version 3
HMIP – Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation
HMPS – Her Majesty’s Prison Service
HMPPS – Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service
IPA – Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
IPP – Indeterminate sentence for Public Protection
ISP – Indeterminate Sentenced Prisoner
MCA – Member Case Assessment
NHS – National Health Service
NOMS – National Offender Management Service
NRC – National Research Committee
OASys – Offender Assessment System
OCD – Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
OM – Offender Manager
OMU – Offender Management Unit
OS – Offender Supervisor
PBM – Parole Board member
PIPE – Psychologically Informed Planned Environment
PCL-R – Psychopathy Checklist – Revised
RCT – Randomised Controlled Trial
RNR – Risk, Needs, Responsivity
SARN-SO – Structured Assessment of Risk and Need – Sexual Offenders
SPJ – Structured Professional Judgement
TC – Therapeutic Community
VRAG – Violence Risk Appraisal Guide
Declaration

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award.

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**Dissemination**

**Publications**


**Conference Presentations**


Foreword

As a practitioner, I have worked both as an employee of the Prison Service, and as a commissioned report writer, where I am paid on a freelance basis to conduct assessments. These commissioned assessments have largely been with men serving indeterminate sentences. They occur when prison or area-based psychology teams do not have enough resources or expertise to conduct the assessment. They can also occur when a team feel they have reached a deadlock with a particular man and want a fresh assessment in order to facilitate progress. During the process of completing these assessments I frequently encountered suspicious and hostile prisoners, who, despite never having met me, were quite sure I was going to “stitch them up”. I also encountered prison-based colleagues who had numerous fractious encounters with particular men and had written them off as trouble makers. What I learned was that despite this hostility and resigned hopelessness, I could usually find a way to engage the prisoner in his assessment. This process made me think about what had caused the hostility and suspicion amongst prisoners, what effect colleagues’ opinions and attitudes had on my views about particular prisoners, and what precisely it was that I had done that enabled the prisoner to engage in the assessment. I realised then how little empirical research there was about risk assessment interviewing, how little was known about the influences on prisoners and psychologists in risk assessment, how these influences played out during the risk assessment process and what psychologists could most usefully do to increase engagement. After reflection and discussion, the role of the Parole Board was also highlighted. As a potentially crucial stakeholder in the process, the role, influence and responsibilities of the Parole Board had to be examined if I were to understand the process of risk assessment in any useful way. This is how the idea of exploring psychological risk assessment with indeterminate sentenced prisoners began.
Chapter One

Chapter One: Introduction

Risk assessment is central to the work of prison based psychologists (Kebbell, 2016). It has been defined as, “the systematic collection of information to determine the degree to which harm (to self and others) is likely, at some future point in time” (Towl, Farrington, Crighton & Hughes, 2013) but in practice psychological risk assessment involves much more than a prediction of the likelihood of a prisoner reoffending.\(^1\) It requires psychologists to consider: the nature and imminence of risk; the aspects of the prisoner’s psychological functioning that underpin his risk; the treatment or risk management options that would be most useful in reducing risk or making it more manageable; and the suitability of the prisoner for release or transfer to less secure prison conditions (Heilbrun, Yasuhara & Shah, 2014). In my twenty four years’ experience as a practitioner, increasing amounts of psychological resources within public sector prisons have been directed to risk assessment tasks. These tasks usually start with reviewing file and other collateral information. Conducting a risk assessment interview tends to follow. Information arising from the interview then needs to be analysed alongside file and other collateral information. The final stages involve collating this information into a report to be submitted to a panel of the Parole Board and ultimately providing the panel with oral evidence relating to the assessment and report.

Risk assessment is equally central to the lives of indeterminate sentenced prisoners (ISPs) who are dependent on favourable risk assessments for their progression through the prison system and ultimately for their release back into the community. The Parole Board can only direct the release of an ISP when it is “satisfied that it is no longer necessary for him/her to be detained in order to protect the public from serious harm” (Parole Board, 2018, “Parole Board Information on Indeterminate Sentenced Prisoners”, para. 3). That is, the Parole Board needs to be convinced

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\(^1\) From here on, ‘risk assessment’ will refer to the process of assessing risk of further offending and risk of harm. There are clearly other forms of risk assessment (e.g., risk for self-harm or suicide) but these are not the focus of this study.
that the prisoner no longer poses a significant risk to the public. In England and Wales, psychologists play an important role in providing evidence to panels of the Parole Board in order to help them make these decisions (Bowers & Friendship, 2017; Crewe, 2012; Shingler, 2017; Shingler & Needs, 2018a). Therefore, psychological risk assessment is a high stakes task for psychologists, ISPs and Parole Board members alike. Given the potential consequences of errors (false positives leading to lengthy unnecessary incarceration, wasting scarce resources; false negatives leading to the public being exposed to unacceptable levels of harm), standards in psychological risk assessment also have wider implications for the public and for Government. It is therefore surprising that so little is known either about the experiences and opinions of key stakeholder groups in risk assessment or about the processes and influences involved (Elbogen, 2002).

Why the Neglect of Process Issues in Risk Assessment Research?

The last twenty years has seen considerable advances in understanding interpersonal approaches to psychological intervention in prisons (de Vries Robbé, Mann, Maruna & Thornton, 2015; Harris, Attrill & Bush, 2004; Mann, Webster, Schofield & Marshall, 2004; Marshall, 2005; Marshall & Burton 2010; Marshall et al., 2005; Shingler & Mann, 2006). It is generally accepted that correctional interventions are more effective when they are positive and motivational and when they engage the prisoner collaboratively in the process. Effective therapists are warm, empathic, encouraging and respectful. Conversely, research into psychological risk assessment has prioritised improving predictive accuracy. Little is known about interpersonal approaches and relationships in risk assessment beyond conjecture based on research into treatment style (e.g., Crighton, 2010; Shingler & Mann, 2006).

Clinical judgement versus mechanical and structured risk assessment. An explanation for the prioritisation of accuracy over understanding interpersonal processes could be partly based in research findings questioning the value of clinical judgement in risk assessment. Historically, risk assessment involved an unstructured, idiosyncratic exchange between a mental health
professional and a prisoner, resulting in an intuitive clinical judgement about risk (Campbell, 2004). When evidence suggested that, in terms of predicting recidivism, such unstructured clinical judgements were often no better than chance (Grove & Meehl, 1996), there was a drive to improve accuracy, largely by taking steps to remove as much clinical judgement as possible from the process. This resulted in the development of actuarial risk assessment instruments (ARAI). These are statistically derived tools which require assessors to identify specific fixed characteristics of the prisoner (e.g., age, number of previous convictions, number of previous convictions for violent or sexual offences) which cannot be changed by deliberate intervention. The presence or absence of these characteristics is scored and scores are entered into an equation or formula to produce a categorisation of risk (Violence Risk Appraisal Guide (VRAG), Harris, Rice & Quinsey, 1993; Static 99, Hanson & Thornton, 2000; and Risk Matrix 2000, Thornton et al., 2003, are commonly used examples of these “second generation” assessment approaches). ARAIs have generally been found to be equal to or better than clinical judgement in terms of predictive accuracy (Grove & Meehl, 1996; Grove, Zald, LeBow, Snitz, & Nelson, 2000; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2009). However, there are limitations to the practical utility of ARAIs. For example, they only enable practitioners to classify individuals as (usually) low, medium, high or very high risk, based on the extent to which they resemble a comparison group. As noted above, the functions of psychological risk assessment extend well beyond the prediction of reoffending, and ARAIs cannot assist with the other functions (Hart & Logan, 2011). ARAIs cannot tell us whether a particular individual will or will not reoffend. They do not tell us anything about the nature or imminence of the risk or the risk of harm. ARAIs do not contribute to psychological formulation, they do not take account of rare risk factors or protective factors, nor do they inform guidance for risk management. They do not provide any capacity for assessing change (Barnett & Mann, 2011; Dematteo, Batastini, Foster & Hunt, 2010). They also do not provide an entirely accurate judgement about risk (Campbell, 2004), and are particularly limited when considering the likelihood that a specific individual will reoffend. Hart, Michie and Cooke (2007) suggest that
individual level predictions arising from actuarial assessments are “virtually meaningless” (p. 60), although this position is not without criticism (Heilbrun et al., 2014). Despite their practical limitations, there is a sense that their structure and empirical foundations and the apparent removal of the need for any clinical judgement confer a level of scientific superiority to ARAIs. They appear to be more objective, less vulnerable to bias and consequently more consistent with psychologists’ views of themselves as scientists (Yen & Tafarodi, 2011, and see below). It has also been argued though, that ARAIs give a misleading “appearance of precision” (Campbell, 2004, p. 82) given their practical and predictive limitations.

In response to the limitations of ARAIs came the development of “structured professional judgement” (SPJ) approaches. SPJs involve the consideration of a list of empirically derived dynamic risk factors, largely psychological features or attributes (e.g., offence-promoting attitudes; offence related sexual interests; poor problem solving) which can then be targeted in treatment (see Barnett & Mann, 2011; Hanson & Harris, 2000; Mann, Hanson & Thornton, 2010). Historical – Clinical – Risk Management-20: Version 3 (HCR-20 V3, Douglas, Hart, Webster & Belfrage, 2013) and the Structured Assessment of Risk and Need for Sexual Offenders (SARN-SO, National Offender Management Service, 2009) are examples of third generation SPJ tools that are commonly used by prison-based psychologists in England and Wales. There is evidence that consideration of empirically derived dynamic risk factors can improve the predictive accuracy of ARAIs (Craissati & Beech, 2003; Eher, Matthes, Schilling, Haubner-MacLean & Rettenberger, 2012; Hanson, Helmus & Harris, 2015) or can reach equivalent accuracy to ARAIs (Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2009). As with ARAIs, it is argued that using an empirically supported structure when making a judgement about risk results in better accuracy for SPJs over an unstructured, intuitive approach (Heilbrun et al., 2014).

It is also possible that changes and developments in prison-based psychological practices have contributed to a focus on accuracy and objectivity and a corresponding neglect of process and context issues (Needs, 2016). An enquiry into a further serious offence in England (Her
Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP), 2006) suggested that prison-based psychological risk assessment might be more effective if it were conducted by “someone not involved in working closely with the prisoner delivering treatment” (p. 54). The recommendation, that psychologists involved in treatment with a prisoner no longer conduct risk assessment with that prisoner, was widely adopted by prison-based psychologists. Additionally, changes to Prison Service psychologists’ work practices in the early 2000s resulted in the drawing of psychologists out of direct intervention work with prisoners, and increasingly into supervisory or risk assessment roles (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Towl & Crighton, 2008). This means that prisoners often only have contact with psychologists when they are being risk assessed, and psychologists frequently have little role to play in alleviating distress. These changes have been made with good intentions, including maximising use of scarce psychological resources and minimising conflict associated with being involved in treatment and assessment with the same client (Ward, 2013). Changes have also been based on the belief that maximising objectivity, focusing on gathering of information about empirically supported risk factors and minimising the need for clinical judgment will result in better risk assessment: namely that which is less biased towards the prisoner and therefore more effective at protecting the public.\(^2\) Some commentators have suggested that the changes in prison psychologists’ practice have coincided with deterioration in working relationships between prisoners and psychologists (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Maruna, 2011), an issue to which I will return.

The drive for objective, unbiased, structured assessment is understandable in terms of the high stakes nature of risk assessment. Nobody wants to make a mistake that results in a serious further reoffence; nobody wants to be subject to the “harsh scrutiny of hindsight bias” (Kemshall, 2009, p. 332). Practitioners involved in high stakes decisions are fearful not only of

\(^2\) It is interesting to note here that whilst steps have been taken to reduce bias in favour of the prisoner, i.e. reduce the likelihood of psychologists making inaccurately low estimations of risk, the evidence actually suggests that clinicians most frequently revise risk estimations upwards. These upward revisions reduce the predictive validity of structured assessments. There is a corresponding suggestion that downward revisions, whilst rarer, “appeared to have been adjusted appropriately” (Wormith, Hogg & Guzzo, 2012, p. 1525).
making errors, but also of being blamed when things go wrong (Adshead, 2014; Kemshall, 1998; McDermott, 2014; Stanford, 2009). It makes sense, then, that researchers and practitioners have sought ways of making the complex and uncertain task of risk assessment simpler and less prone to errors – especially errors for which they might be personally held responsible. They have arguably tried to impose structure and order in order to manage stress and fear resulting from uncertainty (Pycroft, 2014) and make risk assessment more defensible (or defensive, Baker & Wilkinson, 2011). This has arguably contributed to the proliferation of research into risk assessment accuracy. Simultaneously, neglect of research into understanding the role of the psychologist and the role of the relationship between psychologist and prisoner in risk assessment is consistent with the priority to remove the clinician as far as possible from the process.

“Physics envy” and the scientific ideal. The value psychologists place on objectivity in risk assessment and the corresponding neglect of process issues is also understandable when considering the historical context of psychology (Adair-Stantiall & Needs, 2018). Coyle (2007) sums this up as follows:

As psychology developed as a discipline, it became identified with the assumptions of positivism, empiricism and hypothetico-deductivism - in short, the “scientific method”. This was characterised by a striving for objectivity and neutrality and for precise measurement in hypothesis testing, with the assumption that this would enable the researcher to obtain accurate, unclouded information about the psychological and social worlds. It was believed that objectivity and neutrality could be attained by having researchers remain detached from their research so that they would not contaminate the research process. (p. 13)

Psychologists, keen for the status associated with the “proper sciences” (Yen & Tafarodi, 2011) have aimed to define themselves in scientific terms, conducting scientific tasks and assessing and measuring things with “detachment, objectivity and rationality – the guiding principles of Western science” (Henwood, 1996, p. 26). Objectivity is seen as morally superior and
the hallmark of good science (Daston, 1992; Yen & Tafarodi, 2011). Advances in risk assessment have resulted in a more objective and scientific image than ever before. Structured risk assessment tools add credibility, defensibility and potentially a “safety net” (Baker & Wilkinson, 2011, p. 23) to what could otherwise be a rather inexact, indefensible and unreplicable process (Dawes, Faust & Meehl, 1989). Applying an ARAI or adhering to an empirically derived list of risk factors, organised into a checklist or into domains reinforces ideas of the psychologist as a scientist, driven by objective evidence, and not biased or influenced by personal opinion. This is consistent with Coyle’s (2007) argument that a consequence of the positivist epistemological position adopted by the profession of psychology is the broadly held view that anything that exists can be measured, and that as psychological tests become increasingly sophisticated and refined, measurement of psychological dimensions can become increasingly precise. The use of ARAIs, and to a lesser extent, SPJs is entirely consistent with this position.

There is also arguably a tendency not only in correctional psychology (McNeill, 2012; Ward, 2009) but also more broadly in psychological research and practice (Adair-Stantiall & Needs, 2018) to overlook situational and contextual factors, and instead take an individualistic, internalist approach (Ward & Casey, 2010) to understanding behaviour. In line with this prevailing epistemological climate, psychological risk assessment research has tended to prioritise the identification of internally located, psychological characteristics of the individual that increase risk (i.e., the individual’s dynamic or psychological risk factors, e.g., Mann et al., 2010). It has had little to say about the broader environment other than its role in triggering or managing risk or risk factors (de Vogel, De Ruiter, Bouman & de Vries Robbé, 2012; Shingler & Needs, 2018b; Ward & Casey, 2010). It has been argued that internalism is inherently reductionist in that it conceptualises offenders as “disembodied bearers of risk” (Ward & Stewart, 2003, p. 354) rather than seeing them as individual people with strengths, preferences and identities, embedded in social contexts (Ward & Stewart, 2003; Ward & Gannon, 2006). It tends to ignore social and relational issues that might have contributed to offending, but might also be harnessed in order
to contribute to desistance (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2012; Weaver, 2012). Clinical guidance in conducting psychological risk assessments, in particular conducting risk assessment interviews, has similarly tended to prioritise how to gather information from the individual in order to determine the presence or absence of these internally located, psychological factors (e.g., Logan, 2013). This reductionist, internalist approach to offending and consequently to risk assessment arguably limits the extent to which behaviour can ever be understood (Adair-Stantiall & Needs, 2018). Whilst the neglect of process in risk assessment is consistent with the prevailing epistemological climate of psychology as a discipline, it potentially limits understanding both of a prisoner’s offending and psychological functioning (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, 2018) and of how context\(^3\) might influence risk assessment.

**The dominance of the “Risk-Needs-Responsivity” model of correctional treatment.** In the last 20 years, forensic psychological practice has come to be dominated by the “Risk-Need-Responsivity” model of practice (RNR, Andrews & Bonta, 2010). This model describes key principles of effective correctional treatment, with effective taken to mean “resulting in reduced recidivism”. The risk principle states that criminal behaviour can be predicted, and that treatment intensity should be matched to the risk level of the individual. The need principle draws a distinction between the multitude of interpersonal, physical, social and emotional needs and those that are empirically linked to recidivism. It is argued that treatment must target these criminogenic needs (also known as *dynamic risk factors* – see above) if it is to be successful in reducing recidivism. Finally, there is the responsivity principle, which has two threads. *General responsivity* refers to the demonstrated effectiveness of cognitive behavioural and cognitive social learning strategies to change behaviour. A treatment approach adheres to the general responsivity principle if it is cognitive behavioural in its approach. *Specific responsivity* refers to ensuring that treatment is sensitive to the personality and learning needs of individuals – both on

\(^3\) By “context”, I mean context in its broadest sense, both the environment in which risk assessment is conducted (i.e., the prison), the implications of the risk assessment for the particular individual, and the climate of the risk assessment interview (see Adair-Stantiall & Needs, 2018).
a group level (for example, ensuring that treatment for young people is appropriate to their
developmental stage and learning style) and on an idiographic level. There has been considerable
research indicating that treatment programmes based on RNR principles are more effective at
reducing recidivism than those that are not (Andrews & Bonta 2010; Looman & Abracen, 2013).
The extensive evidence base for RNR is largely drawn from studies of group differences – between
those who reoffend and those who do not; between programmes that reduce recidivism and
those that do not. The RNR model is extremely influential and has been widely adopted by
criminal justice systems throughout the world (Looman & Abracen, 2013) including the UK.
Gannon and Ward (2014) suggest that the popularity of RNR stems from the apparent success of
RNR-based treatment approaches in reducing recidivism, from its comparative simplicity, ease of
application to large numbers of offenders and consequent economy, and its focus on risk
reduction and public protection which fits comfortably with the prevailing ethos of correctional
treatment. It provides clear evidence-based guidance for the design and implementation of
effective correctional rehabilitation approaches for policy makers and programme developers and
enables defensible decisions about prioritising scarce treatment resources. It has been described
as, “the only empirically validated guide for criminal justice interventions” (Polaschek, 2012, p. 1).
It is also arguable that RNR has dominated because of its consistency with the idea of “good
science” largely adopted by psychologists (Yen & Tafarodi, 2011).

Risk assessment is a cornerstone of adherence to RNR principles. After all, risk and need
principles cannot be adhered to without an assessment of risk and need (Barnett & Mann, 2011;
Ogloff & Davis, 2004). The use of ARAIs and SPJs is fundamental to the implementation of RNR
models of correctional practice. ARAIs provide a baseline assessment of the risk category into
which an individual falls (the risk principle). SPJs allow consideration of a range of empirically
derived psychological risk factors that can be identified as present or absent in a particular
individual (the need principle). These psychological risk factors can then be used to begin to
develop an understanding (formulation) of the individual’s offending; to make recommendations
for intervention and risk management, and to assess change following intervention or risk management attempts. The centrality of risk assessment to the implementation of RNR-based models is arguably another contributor to the prioritisation of research that improves risk assessment accuracy, and the corresponding neglect of process issues. Responsivity has been identified as one of the least well delineated aspects of RNR, including by RNR proponents (Andrews, Bonta & Wormith, 2011; Polaschek, 2012), and is often reduced to general terms such as ensuring treatment is cognitive behavioural in orientation, and ensuring that the needs of specific groups (such as women, young people, the intellectually disabled) are attended to (McNeill, 2012). Understanding and categorising risk has arguably overshadowed understanding responsivity and process within risk assessment. As noted above, intervention research has taken significant steps towards addressing this gap, with risk assessment yet to follow.

**Summary**

The empirical neglect of the process of risk assessment, including the interview, is consistent with the broader epistemological climate and the high stakes nature of the process. However, this does not mean that process is irrelevant (Shingler & Needs, 2018b). In practice, clinical judgement and expertise are central to the application of SPJs (and to a lesser extent, ARAIs), and to the task of psychological risk assessment more broadly (Hart & Logan, 2011). Psychologists must decide how to gather, analyse and report the information needed to complete the assessment. A substantial amount of this information is usually obtained during an interview which requires considerable clinical skill and judgement (Logan, 2013; Shingler, Sonnenberg & Needs, 2017). The RNR model includes room for professional discretion, but it has been acknowledged by RNR proponents that this is poorly understood and researched (Wormith, Gendreau & Bonta, 2012). Risk assessment takes place within a specific historical and theoretical context and it involves assessment of an individual not a group (Dematteo et al., 2010). It also occurs in a coercive environment (the prison), with challenging power relationships (Crewe, 2011a) and in a broader social and political context (Crighton & Towl, 2008). This would suggest
that the process is not objective in the generally accepted meaning of the word (Kayes & McPherson, 2010). Rather, it involves a degree of interpretation within a range of contextual and interpersonal influences (Shingler & Needs, 2018b). Therefore whether or not an ARAI or an SPJ is used, the role of the psychologist remains central to the risk assessment process (see Peckover et al., 2011 for a similar argument about risk assessment in social work). Developments in risk assessment practice have not removed the need for skilled clinicians to apply, interpret and report them (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Hough, 2010) and motivate prisoners to engage with the outcomes. Add to this the high stakes nature of psychological risk assessment in prisons and the range of functions it is expected to serve, and the result is an extremely challenging process to be negotiated and managed. The absence of research into process issues suggests that the scientific ideal and the internalist, individualist epistemology continues to predominate within forensic psychology, even after other sciences have moved towards non-linear, dynamic approaches (Adair-Stantiall & Needs, 2018; Pycroft, 2014). A better understanding is needed of the experiences of psychologists and prisoners in risk assessment, in order to understand relationships, identify tensions, stresses and potential sources of bias, and reveal existing (and suggest new) aspects of good practice in managing these issues.

The Potential Value of Understanding Process in Risk Assessment

**Influence and bias in a high stakes process.** As already noted, risk assessment is a high stakes business for ISPs and psychologists alike, potentially resulting in significant, life-changing outcomes for both assessor and prisoner. Attrill and Liell (2007) found that risk assessment was perceived as one of the most stressful aspects of the life sentence. It was seen largely as unfair as a result of its focus on past behaviours and corresponding neglect of change, progress and strengths (see also Ward & Fisher, 2006). Crewe (2011b) described psychological assessment as a form of purgatory, particularly for prisoners serving indeterminate sentences, who felt unsure of how to navigate the opaque environment of assessment for fear that “the wrong step might entangle them all the more in the carceral net” (p. 516). Similarly, Liebling (2011) commented on
the ever present threat of risk assessment for prisoners, and how it affected their ability to trust, minimised their sense of self efficacy, left them feeling trapped, vulnerable and hopeless and undermined their skills. Liebling commented that “In this unsafe environment, the experience of being scrutinised and assessed was life-sapping” (p. 542).

In addition to the general perception of risk assessment as stressful and life-sapping, prisoners have their own personality characteristics and life experiences to contend with when embarking on an assessment. Many prisoners will have undergone numerous risk assessments over the course of an indeterminate sentence. It is therefore hard to imagine that an ISP will turn up to an interview as a blank slate, ready to take an objective view on his risk, and ready to answer whatever questions are asked of him in a straightforward, unbiased manner, unimpeded by past experience (Ross, Polaschek & Ward, 2008). When a prisoner is informed that he is due for a risk assessment, he may well be thinking about the process and its implications. His past experiences are also likely to come into play: perhaps an occasion in the past when he was turned down for parole on the basis of a risk assessment, or when he participated in a risk assessment interview which left him feeling humiliated and judged, or in which he felt involved, respected and supported. All of these issues would be likely to impact on his attitudes and beliefs about assessment and assessors, and consequently affect his approach to the current assessment (Shingler & Needs, 2018b).

The psychologist’s perspective is equally important. There is limited published literature which examines the experiences and beliefs of prison based psychologists but there is evidence to suggest that the personal characteristics and experiences of professionals can affect their working relationships with clients (Ross et al., 2008). Decision making is also potentially influenced by characteristics of the decision maker: Griffit & Garcia (1979) found that sentencing decisions were affected by authoritarian personality features of the decision makers. The preparation stages for risk assessment (reading background information about the prisoner, or talking to colleagues about the prisoner) also have a potential to influence the process. For example, forensic
assessments have been found to be affected by the presence of emotive victim experience statements (Jackson, Rogers & Shuman, 2004; Lynett & Rogers, 2000). Imagining the views and perspectives of colleagues or supervisors (Gillespie & Martin, 2014; Katz, 1982), or thinking about the consequences of the prisoner committing a further serious offence (Adshead, 2014; McDermott, 2014; Stanford, 2009) are potentially influencing. Equally, media reporting of an unconnected serious reoffence may have an effect (see below). It has also been argued that, in adversarial proceedings, assessors are vulnerable to bias in favour of the side that instructed them (see Murrie & Balusek, 2007). Research has also suggested that expert assessors are more likely to judge offenders as more dangerous and more responsible for their offending when their offences are described as being a result of causes internal to the offender (i.e. personal characteristics or dispositions) than when causes are externally attributed (Carroll, 1978; Murray, Thomson, Cooke & Charles, 2011). These findings are interesting when considered alongside the “fundamental attribution error” (Jones & Nisbett, 1971). This suggests that people generally tend to attribute the behaviour of others to internal, personal characteristics, whilst attributing their own behaviour largely to external, situational variables. Taken together these findings may suggest that assessors are primed to conclude that offences are attributable to internal, personal characteristics of the prisoner, and consequently are primed to conclude the prisoner is dangerous. Whilst others have questioned the pervasiveness of the fundamental attribution error (Malle, 2006; Malle, Knobe & Nelson, 2007; Sabini, Siepmann & Stein, 2001), there is at least agreement that actors (in this case prisoners) and observers (psychologist assessors) interpret behaviour differently (see also Campbell, 2004). It is possible that assessors are more inclined to look for explanations for offending that are internally located within the prisoner, and less inclined to look for contextual and situational factors that might be equally relevant (Shingler & Needs, 2018b).

In addition to studies of forensic decision making, there are also commonly found short-cuts amongst decision makers generally, which are likely to impact on forensic decision making
(Campbell, 2004; Crighton, 2004; Ireland, 2004; Salovey & Turk, 1991; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Given the complexity of the task of risk assessment, risk assessors could be vulnerable to short cuts, when trying to impose some sort of order and structure on the task (Pycroft, 2014). For example, the influence of the *representativeness heuristic* might mean that decisions are affected by the extent to which a prisoner resembles the assessor’s prototypical idea about high or low risk individuals (see also *category theory*, Rosch, 1978). This is problematic in several ways – first, because it suggests that we overlook individual characteristics and categorise people based on the extent to which they resemble others. Second, because practitioners may all have different views about the characteristics of a prototypical high risk offender, based on training, supervision and previous experiences. This heuristic epitomises a key criticism of unstructured clinical judgement, namely that it is based on idiosyncratic and poorly defined views and theories about risk. Third, when we employ the representativeness heuristic, we tend to overlook other relevant information such as base rates: even if we know that most ISPs do not commit further serious offences, this will not stop us from assessing a prisoner as falling into the high risk group if he is sufficiently similar to our (potentially idiosyncratic) prototype. The more similar a prisoner is to our prototype, the more confident we will be in our decision.

Risk assessors are also vulnerable to their decisions being unduly influenced by their recent experience, or by more easily recalled experiences (the *availability heuristic* - similar to priming effects, Srull & Wyer, 1979; Higgins, Bargh & Lombardi, 1985). More easily recalled, familiar, and recent events tend to be more common, but in risk assessment it is easy to see how we can be overly influenced by significant, serious (but potentially rare) events that stick in the memory, or that are personally salient. When ISPs commit serious further offences, they are frequently subject to significant and intense media scrutiny and speculation (e.g., HMIP, 2006). Cases such as this are easily called to mind and can unduly influence decisions about another prisoner’s risk (Adshead, 2014; Campbell, 2004; Kemshall, 2009; Salovey & Turk, 1991), even more so if we are unfortunate enough to have been involved personally in such a case (i.e., when the
case is more salient). From a risk assessment perspective, it is usually easier to retrieve instances of catastrophic failure than it is to retrieve instances of success, of which risk assessors are not generally informed. To add to the impact of catastrophic re-offences, hindsight bias (Fischhoff, 1975) suggests that once outcomes are known, they tend to be seen as inevitable. Decision makers appear to have little insight into this, as far as their own decision making or the decision making of others is concerned: that is, people have little sympathy for those who get predictions wrong when the outcome is eventually known, even when the prediction was made without the benefit of knowing the outcome. This could potentially increase anxiety amongst decision makers, if they perceive catastrophic outcomes as having been both inevitable yet wrongly assessed at the time.

Finally, practitioners are vulnerable to being swayed in risk assessment decisions by the initial value with which they start (the anchor) and failing to adjust sufficiently (the adjustment and anchoring heuristic). If an assessor reads a report concluding that a man is high risk, their opinion can be biased towards this anchor, and the likelihood is that they will fail to adjust it sufficiently as a result of assessment information. As Ireland, (2004) comments: “This heuristic relates specifically to the tendency to determine your assessment of risk by comparing it to a previous assessment, when in reality your assessment should be independent” (p. 18).

In addition to these heuristics, there are a number of other errors and biases to which assessors could be vulnerable. Trait negativity bias describes the tendency to weigh negative information more heavily than positive information. People attend more closely to information that implies a person has negative or immoral traits. People are also likely to overlook information about positive traits in favour of making a negative character judgment, particularly when the information about the person’s morality is mixed or inconsistent (Lupfer, Weeks & Dupuis, 2000). Trait negativity bias suggests that it may be difficult for risk assessors to revise their character

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4 In fact, Kahneman & Klein (2009) suggest that an absence of regular and timely feedback about decisions is one of the elements that undermine the effectiveness of professional judgements.
judgments about a prisoner regardless of how many good characteristics they exhibit, when there is clear evidence of bad characteristics (e.g., serious offences) somewhere in their history.

Confirmation bias refers to the process of forming hypotheses and then seeking out information to confirm them, rather than engaging in a more balanced search of the evidence (see Fiske & Taylor, 1991 for a summary). Confirmation bias has been found to influence investigators’ attitudes towards suspects’ guilt (Ask & Granhag, 2005). In relation to risk assessment, confirmation bias may cause assessors to seek out information to support an initial impression of riskiness, rather than taking a more balanced approach to weighing up information.

Finally, the need for cognitive closure (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996) refers to an individual’s desire for a firm and unambiguous answer to a question. Psychological risk assessments certainly require psychologists to make clear and definitive statements about risk and need, as well as to make recommendations for a prisoner’s next steps, despite the complexity and uncertainty that so frequently surrounds serious offending. Time pressure, decision making fatigue or general fatigue can all increase motivation for cognitive closure. Alternatively, fear of making a costly mistake may inhibit desire for closure. When under stress people can either avoid cognitive closure, and engage in exhaustive searches of information; or they can engage in “closure-promoting activities without sacrificing their sense of validity. They may generate fewer competing hypotheses, or suppress attention to information inconsistent with their hypotheses” (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996, p. 264). People can experience a tension between the need for validity and the pressure to achieve closure, which is directly relevant to the process of risk assessment in a stressful environment.

To summarise, it seems unlikely that psychologists conduct risk assessment with an entirely clear mind, unencumbered by past experiences and free from bias and the influence of people and systems around them. Overall, it seems reasonable to consider that both psychologists and prisoners bring prior experiences, attitudes and beliefs to risk assessment that are likely to impact on the process, including the gathering of information, the nature of
discussions with colleagues, the dynamics of the interview, and consequently the nature of the information exchanged between prisoner and psychologist. Striving for objectivity under such circumstances is beginning to look untenable. Gaining a greater understanding of risk assessment in context is one way to progress understanding of this complex and multi-influenced task (Shingler & Needs, 2018b).

**The interactional nature of the interview.** Whether or not an SPJ approach is used, risk assessment generally involves a social interaction (i.e., an interview) between prisoner and psychologist. Both parties bring their own histories, experiences and characteristics to this interaction (Ross et al., 2008), as described above. Murakami (2003) describes the interview as “thoroughly and fundamentally social in its construction” (p. 238). The interactional nature of risk assessment is inconsistent with internalism, in which risk assessment interviewing is approached as a linear exchange of information, with the prisoner as a collection of internally defined and located risk factors that are extracted by a series of questions and answers. Another way of looking at the interview is to see it as a unique intersubjective dynamic – a shared understanding that is created between people engaged in a task together in which “they construct a unique entity between them” (Hinshelwood, 2012, p. 140; see also De Jaegher, 2009; De Jaegher, Di Paolo & Gallagher, 2010; Gillespie & Martin, 2014; Weaver, 2012). De Jaegher et al. (2010) describe interactions as mutually constituted – participants in an interaction create the interaction. Beginning to think about the risk assessment process, in particular the risk assessment interview, in intersubjective terms brings the relationship between psychologist and prisoner to the forefront. It means recognising the impossibility of extracting from a prisoner an objective and unbiased account of offending and functioning that remains consistent across interviews. The prisoner and the psychologist are not only operating within the interview and prison context, they are part of the context, which they in turn influence. A number of authors describe the impossibility of separating the person from the environment. Palmer (2004)

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5 Murakami’s paper focuses on research interviews, but the point is applicable to interviews of all types.
questioned the idea that an organism (e.g., a person) ends at their physical boundaries (i.e., their skin), and argued that organism and environment are integrated and inseparable and should be examined as an integrated unit. For example when is an apple a distinct and separate object located in the environment, and when does it become part of the organism – when it is bitten, chewed or digested? In practice, such boundaries are frequently indefinable and on examination, the utility of looking at the world from a rigid, dualist perspective is questionable (Adair-Stantiall & Needs, 2018; Leudar & Costall, 2009; Palmer, 2004).

Relatedly, Ward (2009) and Ward and Casey (2010) argued for a broader and more pragmatic definition of mind, namely the Extended Mind that does more to integrate the range of internal and external factors that affect cognitive processing. The Extended Mind Theory (Clark & Chalmers, 1998) asserts that the mind cannot be defined by the physical boundaries of the brain and skull - it extends beyond the brain and beyond internal processes relevant and idiosyncratic to the individual, and into the context or situation. Our cognitive systems are flexible. We use both internal and external components to facilitate problem solving. We use tools if they are available, (e.g., a pen and paper to solve a mathematical problem) and if they make the cognitive task easier. Menary (2007) described problem solving as a cognitive practice that can incorporate both internal and external components, as long as they work together to solve the problem. For something to be part of a cognitive practice depends on its function, not its location. Ward (2009) suggests that “cognition in human beings is organism centred (the brain plays a special role in recruiting resources to complete cognitive tasks) but not necessarily organism-bound” (p. 251).

Ward (2009) also argues that the knowledge we need to solve problems is tied up in all sorts of social and cultural entities, and suggests that institutions, societies, social interactions, collections of information and cultural norms could all be seen as part of the Extended Mind (see also Gallagher & Crisafi, 2009).

In summary, there is a body of literature that suggests that minds, bodies and interactions (with the environment and other people) are mutually influencing and mutually determining of
cognitions and behaviour, and ultimately of the nature of current and future interactions and environments. Cognitive processes are sufficiently plastic and flexible to enable the employment of whatever resources are needed to solve a problem. Problem solving approaches frequently extend into the environment, into social interactions, and into social and cultural institutions. Social interactions are constituted by the participants, and are arguably not reducible to the contributions of one or both parties. This has resonance for the argument that the interview process in forensic risk assessment is a crucial part of understanding risk and of making decisions about risk. Extended Mind Theory and an intersubjective view of risk assessment interviewing would argue that the interview is part of the prisoner’s and the assessor’s cognitive process. The nature of the interview, the environment in which the interview is conducted, and the contributions of both prisoner and psychologist arguably affect both what the prisoner thinks and consequently says, as well as what the assessor thinks, asks, and how they interpret the answer. An implication of Ward’s (2009) position is that a risk assessment interview is a complex and extended “epistemic action”. That is, the interview is designed to change the knowledge available within an environment to aid cognitive processing. The risk assessment interview is a problem to be solved, from both the perspectives of the prisoner and the assessor. It functions for the assessor to gain information and knowledge from a social environment (i.e., the contact with the prisoner) in order to solve a problem and achieve a goal (which is to understand and reach a conclusion about the prisoner’s risk). The functions for the prisoner are perhaps less clear, and in themselves worthy of further investigation, but may include things like convincing the assessor he is safe to be released, or convincing the assessor that he needs no further assessment or intervention. The traditional reductionist perspective pays no attention to interaction, engagement and context, and this is limiting both to understanding the prisoner, and to maximising the effectiveness of risk management (i.e. the problem solving function of the interview is undermined). The literature points towards the interview as more than a vehicle for information gathering: the climate of the interview, including the nature of the interaction
between parties and how both parties respond to each other, will actively contribute to both the output from the prisoner and the analysis conducted by the assessor (Murakami, 2003). This makes understanding of the interview process in particular, and how it is experienced by prisoners and psychologists a crucial area for research.

**The need for individual level risk assessment.** Some of the criticisms of the dominant RNR model of correctional treatment have already been elucidated. Whilst broad, these criticisms are largely centred on the view that RNR takes a reductionist approach of identifying and removing internally located risk factors (McNeill, 2012; Ward & Stewart, 2003; Ward, Mann & Gannon, 2007; Ward, Yates & Willis, 2012) rather than treating prisoners as individuals with strengths, preferences and identities, embedded in social contexts (Ward & Stewart, 2003; Ward & Gannon, 2006). That is, RNR-informed approaches can be de-individualising and do not always easily allow for consideration of individually relevant risk and protective factors (Beech & Craig, 2007/8; Dematteo et al., 2010; Polaschek, 2012; Ward et al., 2012). Individuals do not fall neatly into groups, and what can work for some people in some situations does not necessarily work for another person in another situation (Hough, 2010; Pawson & Tilley, 2004). Polaschek (2012) notes that checking the presence or absence of a broad list of risk factors is no substitute for a full understanding of how an individual came to commit an offence. Similarly, Ward (2012) emphasises the dangers of focusing on psychological contributors to recidivism and excluding broader social and contextual contributors. Approaches based on comparing individuals against a list of nomothetically derived risk factors arguably leave little room for identifying unique attributions, which may well be risk relevant, but are too specific to ever appear as a criminogenic need in a structured risk assessment tool. The value of idiographic information to risk assessment is substantial. It provides detail about the sorts of specific factors that are likely to result in increased risk for an individual (Dematteo et al., 2010); it also provides information about how specific risk factors are expressed by a specific individual. For example, I assessed an ISP who suffered from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). The OCD had developed as a strategy for
escaping from strong and distressing emotions which had resulted from years of physical and sexual abuse (that is, when he got anxious, afraid, angry or ashamed he would engage in OCD rituals in order to avoid emotional experience and eventually feel calmer). Suppression of emotions or thoughts is not considered to be an effective long term strategy (see Linehan, 1993; Shingler, 2009), and the man’s inability to tolerate strong and distressing emotions resulted in intermittent but significant emotional outbursts, some of which were accompanied by extreme physical violence, culminating in his conviction for murder. The RNR-based approach would have been to treat this individual in relation to his poor problem solving, impulsivity and lack of behavioural controls. As Polaschek (2012) and Mann et al. (2010) suggest, the risk factor of impulsivity is merely an indicator of a psychological propensity to behave in a certain way under a certain set of circumstances. Without attention to the detail of how and why the particular risk factor manifests in an individual, understanding the individual’s offending is limited. In this particular case, engaging the man in a course of treatment focused on thinking through solutions, thinking of the consequences, thinking about the impact of his behaviour on others (all key aspects of standard cognitive skills programmes), would have had minimal impact on the likelihood of future violence if the underlying problem of OCD as a means of emotional suppression was left unaddressed. In this way, idiographic assessment, sensitive to issues of context and process, alongside the application of structured risk assessment tools provided a route to reducing the likelihood of future violence as well as significantly increasing the man’s quality of life.

RNR proponents disagree that RNR overlooks the importance of idiographic information, arguing that the responsivity principle and the professional discretion principle were designed to overcome this. Within the RNR framework, practitioners are directed to take into account individual responsivity factors and if necessary, use their clinical expertise to over-ride the risk and need principles (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Whilst this may be true in theory, as already noted, the responsivity element of RNR has been generally acknowledged to be poorly understood and
researched (Andrews et al., 2011; Polaschek, 2012; Wormith, Gendreau & Bonta, 2012). There are also mismatches between how RNR was designed and how it is implemented (Polascheck, 2012). Consequently, there is a danger that flexibility and an individualised focus in assessment and treatment is not prioritised, potentially resulting in the loss of crucial idiographic information about the nature and extent of risk.

As already suggested, the rhetoric of RNR is consistent with the popular image of the scientific ideal: that is, approaches based on nomothetic data are more precise, valuable and evidence based. Conversely idiographic approaches are seen as subjective, lacking in scientific and empirical support and potentially dangerous (Ogloff & Davies, 2004). This is the umbrella under which psychologists conduct risk assessments with ISPs. Understanding more about the processes of risk assessment, and how psychologists navigate tensions inherent in applying group-derived structured risk assessment tools to specific individuals can only improve risk assessment practice.

The problem of overlooking the relationship between psychologist and prisoner. As discussed earlier, a major consequence of the prioritisation of objectivity and the reliance on RNR approaches has been a failure to develop anything beyond a rudimentary awareness of interpersonal processes in risk assessment. Forensic psychology journals and text books have produced mountains of guidance on areas such as: how to understand and report actuarial risk assessment tools (Craig & Beech, 2011); how to identify which psychological risk factors are particularly important in assessing risk (Hanson & Bussiere, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005; Mann et al., 2010); how to define and identify psychological risk factors reliably (Mann et al., 2010; Webster et al., 2006); how to combine results of static and dynamic tools to further improve the accuracy of risk assessment tools (Beech, Friendship, Erikson & Hanson, 2002); how to report the results of forensic risk assessments (Ireland, 2004) and how to combine theoretical knowledge about sexual abuse and risk assessment in order to maximise the effectiveness of risk assessment (Beech & Craig, 2007/8). However, guidance for practitioners of risk assessment has generally fallen short of clear advice on how to approach the assessment interview from a process
perspective (Elbogen, 2002). A review of a selection of key forensic psychology texts found no mention of issues to do with interpersonal approaches in their sections on risk assessment. It could be argued that a relationship between psychologist and prisoner is unnecessary if the task of risk assessment is to identify the presence or absence of a pre-determined list of empirically derived risk factors (Lowenkamp, Holsinger, Robinson & Cullen, 2012). Greenberg and Shuman (1997) note that “the forensic evaluator is an assessor and usually neutral, objective and detached as to the forensic issues” (p. 53). There is certainly an argument for psychologists to take a detached approach to professional relationships in risk assessment. Attrill and Liell (2007) drew attention to the dilemma faced by assessors involved in treatment with their client. As noted previously, the outcome of HMIP (2006) was that professionals engaging in intervention with clients should not, if at all possible, subsequently conduct risk assessments with those clients – the fear being that treatment providers will be overly motivated to see their treatment as having been successful, and less likely to look critically at their clients’ areas of weakness (see also Greenberg & Shuman, 1997). Similarly, Campbell (2004) suggested that involvement in treatment can compromise objectivity of assessment. The direction of argument in Greenberg and Shuman’s and Campbell’s work is that objectivity in risk assessment (which is undermined by the patient-therapist relationship) is crucial and should be maintained as a priority.

Evidently, it is ethically appropriate for assessors to avoid the dual role of therapist and assessor, in order to avoid ethical dilemmas around issues such as client confidentiality and to avoid conflict between priorities (e.g., community protection vs offender’s rights; Ward, 2013). However, Ward (2013) also points out that avoiding the dual relationship problem is more complex than merely avoiding assessment and treatment tasks with the same client. He argues that it is inevitable that role conflicts will occur for forensic practitioners, including psychologists, working within the correctional environment. Psychologists are generally expected to care about the rights and autonomy of their clients, yet their role in risk assessment may require them to choose between what might be best for the prisoner and what might be best for the public. Ward
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(2013) argues that prisoners may expect a psychologist to be there to help them, regardless of the role the psychologist states they are taking, meaning that prisoners may disclose things that they would otherwise conceal. Additionally, psychologists use their skills and training to extract information from prisoners, which may be used for the benefit of the prisoner or of the public. The inevitability of the dual relationship conflict means that understanding the relationship between prisoner and psychologist is central to understanding risk assessment – it is not reasonable just to “slice off” risk assessment from other aspects of prison based psychological practice, and suggest that it can play by different rules (Ward, 2013). Similarly, whilst Vess, Ward and Yates (2017) note the primary responsibility of the forensic risk assessor to the court (or court-like body, in this case, the Parole Board), they also highlight the importance of rapport between assessor and prisoner in order to facilitate the disclosure needed for risk assessment.

Crighton (2010) stated:

Whatever the theoretical basis used to conduct an assessment, good data gathering will depend on the development of an empathic and trusting relationship. It seems self-evident that few of us would disclose often difficult, generally sensitive, personal information to someone we felt unable to like or trust. This is crucial within psychology, given the extent to which self-report data dominates many assessments. (p. 252)

Here, Crighton highlights the importance of something approximating a therapeutic relationship within risk assessment. Attrill and Liell (2007) outlined a similar perspective: prisoners in their survey recognised the importance of understanding their risk and believed that this was only possible if they felt safe to reflect honestly on their thoughts, feelings and experiences without the fear of negative consequences. Attrill and Liell commented that prisoners were far more likely to share their thoughts and feelings if they believed the process to be collaborative, relevant, and if they felt they have some level of choice and control (see also Shingler & Mann, 2006). Similarly, Marshall (1994) notes:
The more clients are treated with respect, the more self-confidence they will feel and the more self-confident they are, the more likely they are to have the courage to admit to heinous crimes. (p. 561)

Westwood, Wood and Kemshall (2011) also recognise the importance of practitioners having the skills to build positive and effective relationships in order to encourage disclosure of risky behaviours and feelings from sexual offenders being supervised in the community. In order for a risk assessment interview to serve a useful function, suspicions and hostilities must be managed, and honest disclosure and self-evaluation must be encouraged. Drawing from the treatment style literature, an empathic and supportive assessor should be more effective than a cold, distant, objective assessor (Marshall 2005; Marshall et al., 2003) in this respect. Therefore, there is an argument, with some empirical support, for the importance of developing a good relationship in risk assessment.

Thus, psychologists are faced with something of a dilemma when it comes to interpersonal processes in risk assessment. There are arguments for a distant, detached and objective approach. There are also arguments for an engaged, empathic, respectful and supportive approach. As already discussed, risk assessment interviews are inherently social (Murakami, 2003) and assessors cannot help but interact with the prisoners they are assessing. Assessors are unlikely to elicit useful information on which to base an assessment if they fail to gain prisoners’ trust. Radley (1977) emphasises the importance of interaction in social problem solving, and the importance of psychologists engaging rather than merely observing. Reddy and Morris (2009) comment that people come to know and understand others only through their interaction and engagement with them; interaction and engagement provides more information about a person’s thinking, feelings and intentions than does treating the person as an object of interest to be observed and understood. Buber’s (as cited in Reddy & Morris, 2009) philosophical approach to human interaction contrasted I-Thou relationships, involving openness and engagement, with I-It relationships, involving distance between the self and the other, and seeing
the other as an object on which to reflect (Craissati, 2017, also made precisely this distinction). It is not known which position, or which elements of each position are the most useful. It would seem that risk assessment interviews present the worst of both worlds – assessors are neither able to interact and engage sufficiently fully to truly understand the prisoner, nor can they take the position of a mere observer, because the interview simply is a social interaction. There is an argument (see Hinshelwood, 2012 and above) that objectivity in any interpersonal interaction is unobtainable as a result of the shared experience to which both parties contribute (the intersubjective experience). The very notion of intersubjectivity (see Crossley, 1996 and above) implies that all understanding of others is inextricably linked to our experience and consciousness – that interactions create an “emergent” entity that is more than the sum of its component parts (De Jaegher, 2009; De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007; De Jaegher, et al., 2010; Weaver, 2012). Yet risk assessors are constantly reminded of the importance of objectivity and the dangers of compromising this.

In summary, whilst there are arguments both for taking an engaged, empathic and supportive approach to risk assessment, there are also arguments for taking the position of the detached observer. There is insufficient knowledge about process issues in risk assessment to draw comprehensive and definitive conclusions. It is not known how psychologists manage the tensions between competing aims and concerns in risk assessment, for example encouraging disclosure in order to gather the richest information, at the same time as managing suspicion about motives, intentions and consequences. There is little attention in the literature (beyond conjecture based on extrapolation from other fields) to the interpersonal approach of risk assessors. The few accounts of prisoners’ views about risk assessment suggest that they find distant and impersonal approaches frustrating and unfair (Sparks, 1998). This runs the risk of disengaging and alienating prisoners (Liebling, Durie, Stiles & Tait, 2005). Gannon and Ward (2014) highlight the lack of attention paid by correctional psychologists to the therapeutic alliance, and the suspicion and hostility with which psychologists are seen by prisoners (see also
Maruna, 2011). The fact that the psychological literature about the psychologist-prisoner relationship in risk assessment is scarce would suggest that this is not widely considered to be a priority in the current theoretical and practical context of correctional psychology, and this is one of the things that I hope to change in this project.

**The problem of overlooking the prison context.** All parties involved in prison-based risk assessment are arguably influenced by institutional context and culture. Several authors and commentators have considered the particular influence of the prison environment on outcomes. Needs (2010) noted the influence of organisational culture on decision making, commenting on how the traditions and routines of institutions and the relationships between people have a significant (and often unacknowledged) impact on organisational decision making. Crawley and Crawley (2008) noted the relationship between prison culture and the ability of the organisation to meet its goals. Crawley (2004) commented on how cultural norms defining acceptable practice influenced decisions and behaviour. Harding’s (2014) review of the literature concluded that there was good evidence that prison climate affected progress and recidivism amongst prisoners. He suggested that there was support for the idea that prisons with better social climates produced better results in interventions. Similarly, Hough (2010) argued that the content of correctional intervention programmes played only a small part in reducing crime – other factors impacting on the likelihood of a programme being effective included the nature of the prison regime, the ethos of the probation staff, and the personal qualities of the staff (see also Andrews et al., 2011). It has also been suggested that differences in prison climate might help to explain why the positive effects of prison based cognitive skills programmes were not maintained when the programme was expanded from a few select research/pilot sites to a broader range of establishments (Falshaw, Friendship, Travers & Nugent, 2004). Given that this evaluation was longer term and the element of focus (cognitive skills programmes) arguably more robust than a single interview/risk assessment, it is not unreasonable to consider that prison context would have an impact on risk assessment. This implies that, regardless of the baseline level of risk posed by the prisoner and
the skills or experience of the psychologist, there are other influences on the process and outcome of risk assessment. It is also possible that the nature and extent of any influence may differ between institutions, depending on the culture and priorities of those institutions.

The idea that organisational culture and norms impact on outcome is not new, but it has not yet been applied to forensic risk assessment. It is useful to consider how the prison environment in particular influences those within it and the extent to which these influences might play out in risk assessment. It is arguable that prison has a significant impact on those who find themselves within its walls – both those who are directed there by the courts, and those whose association is of a more voluntary nature, namely prison employees. Liebling and Maruna (2005) suggested that “the brutality of prison stems not from the characteristics of individual guards and prisoners…. but from the ‘deep structure’ of the prison as an institution” (p. 9). Rubin (2017) also noted the impact of the structure of imprisonment (both physical and organisational) on prisoners’ behaviour. Sykes (1958) emphasised the power of the prison in shaping a social structure and social roles within it above and beyond the influence of individual personality characteristics.

**The impact of prison on prisoners.** The research into the impact of prison has focused mainly on prisoners. Sykes (1958) described the “pains of imprisonment”, which included the deprivation of liberty, the deprivation of goods and services, the deprivation of heterosexual relationships, the deprivation of autonomy and the deprivation of personal safety and security. Sykes’ view was that the pains of modern imprisonment were no less significant and far reaching than the physical cruelty and brutality of historical approaches to criminality. Liebling and Maruna (2005) highlighted the nature and range of the impacts of imprisonment: “fear, anxiety, loneliness, trauma, depression, injustice, powerlessness, violence and uncertainty are all part of the experience of prison life” (p. 3). Irwin and Owen (2005) also described the broad range of harms caused by prison. They included loss of agency, loss of personal integrity (including loss of privacy and sexual difficulties such as enforced celibacy or fear of unwanted homosexual
advances), anger, frustration and a sense of injustice. Prison can also result in institutionalisation, infantilisation and *prisonisation*, in which prisoners' skills and capabilities are undermined, they become entirely dependent on others for progress, and consequently begin to take on the prisoner role in order to cope with long sentences and endure the pains of imprisonment (di Viggiani, 2007; Liebling, 2011; Irwin & Owen, 2005; Crawley, 2004; Schinkel, 2014; Wyner, 2003).

Goffman (1961) described prison as an example of a *total institution* in that it exerts total control over all spheres of the prisoner’s life – what he does, when he does it and who he does it with. Goffman described how prisoners are required to shed their personal habits, rituals and skills, and adapt to the habits, rituals and expectations of the institution. He described how, on entering prison, prisoners set aside their possessions, their appearance, their name. Despite Goffman’s work being over 50 years old, the issues he raises remain relevant today. It remains common practice for prisoners arriving for their first night in prison to be searched, have their possessions and clothing removed, have a shower and a meal, and be issued with a set of prison clothing (see Crawley, 2004; di Viggiani, 2007; Wyner, 2003). This ritual is suggestive of the setting aside of the non-prisoner identity and the taking on of the prisoner role, a process which may have long term and immutable consequences (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000). Prisoners are not able to choose with whom to associate, when to associate or even whether to associate. Privacy is significantly undermined by the presence of frequent monitoring and observation, itself arguably a means of exerting power (Crewe, 2012; Foucault, 1977). The notion of prison as a dehumanising and stigmatising environment persists (Crewe, 2011b; Wyner, 2003). Prison poses “profound threats to the inmate’s personality or sense of personal worth”, (Sykes, 1958, p. 64) and erodes prisoners’ sense of personal identity, leaving them with impersonal and pejorative labels (e.g., “murderer”, Cullen & Newell, 1999; “bodies to be counted”, Crawley, 2004, p. 140). There is also reasonable expectation that prisoners will face threats of or actual physical harm (see Butler, 2008).
It must also be borne in mind that those who end up in prison are amongst the most damaged and marginalised in society. Many prisoners have been in care as children, and many more have experienced or witnessed violence in the home. Many prisoners have experienced disrupted upbringings, often due to parental substance misuse or imprisonment (Williams, Papadopoulou & Booth, 2012). Many prisoners did not engage with education as children (Williams et al., 2012) and many have never had a job (Hopkins, 2012). The evidence suggests that, as a result of this childhood abuse and turbulence, men who commit offences are more likely to have an insecure attachment style than those who do not (Ansbro, 2008; Ogilvie, Newman, Todd & Peck, 2014), suggesting that many men in prison relate to others in an anxious, mistrusting, hostile or dismissive way. Insecure attachment is thought to result both from harsh, abusive and neglectful parenting but also from inconsistent and unpredictable parenting. It is arguable that the prison system reinforces the dysfunction resulting from these early, insecure experiences. Prison is frequently unpredictable and decisions can seem to be unclear or inconsistent (Crewe, 2011b; Jacobson & Hough, 2010; Strickland & Garton Grimwood, 2012).

Some aspects of prison regimes are experienced as harsh and degrading, as described above. Ansbro (2008) specifically reflects on this issue, noting that “gaps in contact and unclear arrangements simply replicate the behaviour or unreliable attachment figures from the past” (p. 240). This might begin to explain why some research has suggested that imprisonment is in itself criminogenic, in that it results in higher levels of recidivism than alternatives (see Listwan, Sullivan, Agnew, Cullen & Colvin, 2013), with higher levels of security and harsher prison regimes having a greater negative impact on recidivism.

Conversely, Bonta and Gendreau (1990) argued that the impact of imprisonment is not as universally negative as some literature suggests. In their meta-analysis of quantitative prison-effects research, they found little evidence to support claims that imprisonment (including long term incarceration, some aspects of solitary confinement and confinement on death row) had profound and universally detrimental effects. There was recognition that individual prisoners
might respond differently to prison, and there was some evidence that characteristics such as youth and existing coping skills affected the nature and extent of the impact of imprisonment. Similarly, Zamble and Porporino (1990) concluded that, rather than resulting either in either positive changes or deterioration, prison was more like a “behavioural deep freeze” (p. 62). Whilst Bonta and Gendreau’s meta-analysis only included psychometric-based research (phenomenological studies were excluded), Zamble and Porporino used interviews as well as psychometric assessment to explore changes with prisoners. These studies are somewhat out of step with the accounts of ex-prisoners who have written about their experiences (Warr, 2008; Wyner, 2003). In fact, Hulley, Crewe and Wright (2015) suggest that the very adaptations that prisoners make in order to cope with imprisonment mask the presence of problems in research studies but may have long term detrimental effects on personality and psychological health. That is, the pains of imprisonment may be experienced differentially as a sentence progresses (see also Crewe, Hulley & Wright, 2017a). To conclude, the effects of imprisonment are unlikely to be simple, universal or linear.

The impact of the indeterminate sentence. Those serving indeterminate sentences seem to be particularly vulnerable to the negative impact of prison; it is generally considered that the impact of an indeterminate prison sentence is significant and far reaching (e.g., Cullen & Newell, 1999; Jewkes, 2005), and has effects above and beyond the broader effects of imprisonment. Indeterminate or life sentences do not have a fixed duration; prisoners serving life sentences do not have a set release date. They are given a tariff by the sentencing judge, which is the minimum amount of time they will have to spend in prison before they can be considered for release. The Parole Board is responsible for deciding if and when an indeterminate sentenced prisoner can be released, as described above. The exception to this is those prisoners who are given a whole life tariff, and who will consequently never be released from prison. These form a very small proportion of the population of ISPs – at the end of December 2017 there were 61 whole life prisoners in England and Wales, comprising less than half of one percent of the total population.
of ISPs (Ministry of Justice, 2018). The remainder are dependent on risk assessment to secure their release or a transfer to lower security prison conditions.

There are a number of types of indeterminate sentence currently available to the courts. Mandatory life sentences are given when a person is found guilty of murder. The judge has no discretion in such cases – that is, the life sentence is mandatory when a person is convicted of murder. Discretionary life sentences are given for serious offences like manslaughter, rape, and armed robbery, for which the maximum sentence is life imprisonment. They can also be given for second listed offences (see https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/about-sentencing/types-of-sentence/life-sentences/ for more detail) when an offender commits a second serious offence that would usually attract a determinate sentence of ten years or more (the “list” includes terrorism offences, sexual offences and violent offences). As the name implies, these sentences are given at the discretion of the sentencing judge - that is, it is not mandatory to impose a life sentence if the conditions are met.

There are also prisoners currently serving indeterminate sentences under previous legislation which has since been revised, namely Automatic Life Sentences and Indeterminate Sentences for Public Protection. 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) which were available to courts between April 2005 and December 2012, with significant amendments made in 2008 as a result of difficulties in effectively managing the escalating numbers of indeterminate sentenced prisoners. IPPs could be given for serious sexual and violent offences, which would attract a determinate sentence of ten years or more, where the offender had a relevant previous conviction, and where, in the court’s opinion, the offender posed a significant risk to the public of serious harm by the commission of further specified offences.
As of the 31st December 2017 there were 10,173 indeterminate sentenced prisoners in English and Welsh prisons. Around 30% were serving IPPs (3,029), and around 70% were serving other types of life sentences (7,144). Of the people serving IPPs, 87% were post tariff (Ministry of Justice, 2018). The IPP in particular has attracted significant criticism (Strickland & Garton Grimwood, 2013) and was abolished in 2012. Commentaries on the IPP have provided useful insight into the impact of indeterminate sentences. Jacobson and Hough (2010) described IPPs as unfair and unmanageable – they were described in their report as “Kafka-esque” both by the relatives of a man serving an IPP (p. 45) and by the authors themselves (p. 51). This description highlights the complex, disorientating and frightening nature of a life sentence. Jewkes (2005) described the life sentence as a form of bereavement, resulting in loss of social identity. She also commented how being sentenced to life in prison resulted in significant life course disruption – typical milestones of life are denied (e.g., parenthood, employment) or significantly disrupted. Men serving life sentences may consequently experience loss of a sense of control and a sense of purpose. Jewkes went on to compare the impact of being given a life sentence with being diagnosed with a terminal illness: on being sentenced to an indeterminate sentence the person has to cope with an enduring sense of uncertainty, of not knowing when, if ever, this sentence will come to an end. This sense of uncertainty and powerlessness is also reflected by Crewe (2011a and 2011b) and Warr (2008). Lifers have to adjust to prison life at the same time as not knowing when they will return to their normal life. Many prisoners serving indeterminate sentences, especially those who have killed or committed other serious violent or sexual offences, may well be traumatised by their offence (Wright, Crewe & Hulley, 2017). Such prisoners have to cope with the consequences of what they have done and the impact of their offence on their family and friends, as well as the impact on the victim(s) and their families. A “Joint Inspection of Life Sentenced Prisoners” (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2013) found that in many cases, uncertainty, inconsistency and confusion characterised the management of lifers throughout their
sentences, with prison staff at times not knowing how to best advise life sentenced prisoners (see also Crewe, 2011a).

Given the potential effects of imprisonment, the potential impact of a life sentence, the stress and anxiety prisoners have reported about the process of risk assessment and the consequences of risk assessment for the lives and futures of ISPs, it is surprising and somewhat concerning that we know so little about their experiences of risk assessment.

**The impact of prison on psychologists.** There is far less research focusing on the impact of prison on staff, and even less is known about the specific impact on psychologists. Prison is indeed a “strange and demanding environment” (Liebling, Price & Shefer, 2011, p. 43) and prison work is generally considered to be a high-stress occupation (Brough & Biggs, 2010). It would therefore be surprising if those working within prisons were not affected by the nature and context of their work. In a detailed ethnographic study of prison officers lasting several years, Crawley (2004) reported that prison officers thought prison work made them more suspicious and cynical. She reported that there was cultural pressure amongst prison officers not to show feelings of compassion or concern for prisoners. The prison officers reported having become harder, and noted that “the longer one worked in the job the more ‘immune’ to prisoners’ distress one tended to become” (p. 180). Prison officers felt that their training had encouraged them to be suspicious about prisoners, and that the prevailing cultural norms of many prisons reinforced this view as well as cynical views about rehabilitation. Both Liebling et al. (2011) and Ricciardelli and Clow (2016) also reported cynicism amongst prison officers – tending not to trust prisoners, or assuming prisoners would fail in rehabilitation attempts. Cynicism and de-individualising of prisoners was also reported by Warr (2008) in his account of his experiences in prison. In fact, cynicism and depersonalisation are both features of burn-out (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001) which may suggest that it is the stressful prison environment that contributes to the manifestation of these characteristics in prison staff. Schaufeli and Peeters’ (2000) review of the literature suggested that stress amongst prison officers did indeed contribute to negative job-
related attitudes, including scepticism and cynicism. However, despite the cynicism, Ricciardelli and Clow (2016) reported that prison officers’ attitudes towards prisoners became more understanding and more positive over time. New prison officers ascribed to stereotyped attitudes towards prisoners as dangerous and violent criminals, but over time, prison officers became more aware of prisoners’ individuality and humanity (“these guys are human, they’re just like me”, Ricciardelli & Clow, 2016, p. 19). Liebling et al. (2011) also reported positive attitudes amongst prison officers, who tried to build relationships with prisoners and saw rehabilitation as central to their role. However, prisons are all different. Liebling et al. (2011) pointed to variability in prison officers’ attitudes and beliefs and variability in culture across prisons (see also Crewe, 2008).

Whilst it is not unreasonable to conclude that prison work impacts prison staff (and burn-out has been described as more of a social phenomenon than an individual one, Maslach et al., 2001), the nature and extent of the impact is likely to be multiply determined, and depend on the nature of the prison and of the individual staff member – it is unlikely to be a simple cause and effect relationship.

Little is known specifically about prison psychologists, about their views about prison work and how it impacts on them. Prison-based psychological work is undoubtedly complex and demanding, with a myriad of relationships, tasks and responsibilities to be managed (Boothby & Clements, 2000; Magaletta et al., 2016). J. Warr (personal communication, January 2015) investigated the roles, attitudes and experiences of psychologists working in prisons in the United Kingdom. This investigation included exploration of psychologists’ attitudes towards prisoners, rehabilitation and punishment. He concluded that psychologists differed in terms of their views of the function of prison (punishment versus rehabilitation) and of their primary responsibilities (prisoner welfare versus public protection). Warr also described four distinct generations of psychologists, which he suggested were related to changes in Prison Service psychological services from an organisational and occupational service, via an individual prisoner, welfare-orientated service, culminating in a service dominated by managerialism and offending behaviour.
programmes (see Crighton & Towl, 2008; Needs, 2016). Whilst classification of psychologists in terms of their attitudes towards prisoners, rehabilitation or their role is unlikely to be straightforward, Warr’s work suggests that psychologists could well be influenced by the organisation and by fluctuations in the priorities of Prison Service psychological services.

More generally, research suggests that forensic mental health practitioners, including psychologists, experience significant levels of burnout. Elliott and Daley (2013) found that the main sources of stress on forensic mental health practitioners were conflicts between work life and home life, clients’ challenging behaviour, clients’ poor skills, low job status, lack of support within the workplace and bureaucracy. Whilst only a small proportion (around 6%) of the participants in this study was psychologists, an investigation specifically focusing on correctional psychologists revealed similar results. Correctional psychologists seemed to be particularly vulnerable to occupational stress and burnout when compared to psychologists working in other settings (Senter, Morgan, Serna-McDonald & Bewley, 2010). The authors found that correctional psychologists experienced greater degrees of burnout, reported lower levels of job satisfaction and a significantly lower sense of competence and personal production at work relative to psychologists working with veterans or in counselling centres. Gallavan and Newman (2013) similarly suggested that correctional mental health professionals might be particularly vulnerable to stress and burnout due to working within highly bureaucratic institutions with clients who exhibit negative behaviours (both correlates of burnout). The three key dimensions to burnout are “an overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 399). These features could have a substantial impact on a range of tasks conducted by psychologists working within prisons (Gallavan & Newman, 2013), including conducting risk assessments. Finally, Gallavan and Newman noted the vulnerability of correctional mental health professions to work-related secondary exposure to traumatic stress, for example, listening to clients’ accounts of their traumatic childhoods; and listening to or reading detailed accounts of serious violent and sexual
offences, some resulting in the death of the victim. They commented that “secondary traumatic stress can put ‘human service providers’ at greater risk of negative outcomes, including depression, posttraumatic stress and poor professional judgement” (p. 116).

In addition to the potential impact of the prison environment on psychologists, it is worth considering the role of psychologists within prisons and how they are perceived by prisoners and by other staff groups. Again, research here is limited, but some investigations have highlighted troubling issues in the profile and reputation of psychologists. There is suggestion of views amongst prisoners in England and Wales that correctional psychologists are untrustworthy and hostile (Maruna, 2011; Warr, 2008). Sparkes (1998) in a survey of life sentenced prisoners found that lifers experienced significant frustration with and suspicion about psychological assessment, which they saw as carrying “disproportionate weight” (p. 22). Additionally, lifers resented brief and infrequent interviews by psychologists who did not know them, yet whose opinion could make a significant difference to their progression. This view was also reflected by Crewe (2011a). There are a number of commentaries in the literature about the particular influence prison psychologists are seen to have in relation to parole decisions (Crewe, 2012; Sparkes 1998). It is not actually known whether Parole Board decisions are more influenced by psychologists’ reports than by those of other professionals: in fact Forde (2014) suggested that parole decisions were most consistent with recommendations from Offender Managers. Nevertheless, the view within prisons is that “it was psychologists who held the key to captivity or release” (Crewe, 2012, p. 121). It is this belief amongst prisoners that will arguably impact on the risk assessment process, and this view needs to be explored further, from the perspectives of psychologists and Parole Board members, in addition to that of prisoners.

Finally, it is possible that negative views of psychologists are not confined to prisoners. Crawley (2004) noted that whilst prison officers often had negative and resentful views about specialist staff working in prisons, psychologists seemed to be “particularly begrudged. They were regarded by the majority of my interviewees as a high-profile occupational group who, in the
current treatment/risk-oriented climate, got a disproportionately high level of the prison’s available financial resources and a status that was undeservedly influential” (p. 172). Crawley went on to say that prison officers tended to see themselves as equally skilled as psychologists in terms of their ability to “read” prisoners and predict what they would do. This devaluing of the profession of correctional psychology was also noted by Gannon & Ward (2014). Psychologists’ views about their working relationships with colleagues are unknown, and more knowledge is needed generally, about the experiences of psychologists working in prisons, and specifically how this might impact on the risk assessment process.

To summarise, there is evidence to imply that psychologists may well be impacted by the prison context. There is the potential for stress and burnout, to which correctional workers seem particularly vulnerable, and the consequences of which could impact on all aspects of the risk assessment process. Prisons are highly bureaucratic organisations and prison staff, including psychologists, are exposed to disruptive and problematic behaviour from prisoners. There is also some evidence to suggest that psychologists have difficult interpersonal relationships to manage with both prisoners and colleagues. These elements arguably affect psychologists as they go about the complex and high stakes task of risk assessment. Understanding more about psychologists’ experiences of risk assessment, what it feels like, how they go about it, and how the context affects them in their work, are important steps in understanding any relational problems and taking steps to repair them.

Summary

The risk assessment interview, the experiences of ISPs undergoing risk assessment, and psychologists conducting risk assessment are valid and urgent targets for investigation. Additionally, the Parole Board feature heavily in understanding more about the context of risk assessment: after all, they are ultimately making the high-stakes decisions. There appear to be many and varied tensions that influence risk assessment practitioners and prisoners, most of which are poorly understood. Improving knowledge and understanding in this area would
arguably improve both the experience of risk assessment, and also the extent to which psychologists can provide the best service to prisoners, the Parole Board and the public.

**Aims of this Project**

There has been a drive towards scientific objectivity in risk assessment. A broader look at the literature would challenge the utility and achievability of this and suggest that a contextually informed and nuanced approach would be more realistic and useful (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, 2018; Shingler & Needs, 2018b). It is also true to say that very little is known about the experiences of prisoners and psychologists in risk assessment, what it feels like for them, how they approach it, and what good and poor risk assessment practice looks like. This is despite significant progress over the last twenty years in understanding process issues in correctional treatment. It would seem that risk assessment is yet to learn from these advances, and little is known about effective interpersonal approaches to psychological risk assessment, beyond clinical opinion drawn from the treatment process literature. This project begins to explore some of these issues, and answer some of these questions. Specifically, the broad research questions can be summarised as:

1. What are psychologists’ experiences of conducting risk assessment with indeterminate sentenced prisoners?
2. What are indeterminate sentenced prisoners’ experiences of psychological risk assessment?
3. What are Parole Board members’ views and experiences of psychological risk assessment?
4. How do prisoners and psychologists experience risk assessment interviews and what represents good interview practice?
5. How can understanding the experiences of the three stakeholder groups inform understanding of process issues in prison-based psychological risk assessment?
6. What can we learn about effective approaches to psychological risk assessment?
Chapter One

Chapter 2 describes the methodological approach to answering these questions. Chapters 3-6 address the first four research questions summarised above, reporting the analyses of data relating to psychologists, prisoners, Parole Board members and the risk assessment interview respectively. Chapter 7 offers theoretical reflections in relation to process and relationships in prison based psychological risk assessment. Finally, Chapter 8 draws on the knowledge gathered about the needs and experiences of key stakeholders to offer suggestions for improving risk assessment practice, thereby improving the experiences of and quality of services provided to prisoners and the Parole Board, and ultimately the general public.
Chapter Two: Methodology

As noted in the previous Chapter, this project aimed to learn more about the needs and experiences of key stakeholders in psychological risk assessment, namely qualified psychologists, indeterminate sentenced prisoners (ISPs) and Parole Board members (PBM). This knowledge would then be used to develop theoretically sound explanations of the processes involved in psychological risk assessment. The intention was to apply these explanations to the practice of risk assessment with ISPs in order to improve prison-based risk assessment practice. This chapter provides an account of the methodological approach to the project. It includes a review of the methodological considerations and research design. It describes the steps taken to recruit participants and gather data from them. It provides an account of the procedures used to analyse the data. Finally, it considers some specific ethical and reflexivity issues relevant to the project.

Methodological Issues

Choice of methodological approach. As an aim of this project was theory development, and given the lack of extant literature on process issues in psychological risk assessment, a Grounded Theory (GT) approach to data collection and analysis was chosen. GT is particularly suited to research areas lacking specific literature or extant theory (Urquhart, 2013); that is, the origins of GT prioritised the generation of new theory over theory-derived hypothesis testing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). GT methodology seeks to develop context-specific theories inductively, grounded in data and tends to take its “direction from the field rather than literature” (Heath & Cowley, 2004, p. 147).

The aims of this project in relation to theory development meant that Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) would not have been an appropriate methodological choice (i.e., it does not easily enable theoretical development). Similarly, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; e.g., Smith & Eatough, 2007) was not appropriate as the aims required a broader approach rather than a detailed understanding of the lived experiences of a small number of participants.
Also, IPA tends to sample participants from a homogeneous group (Smith & Eatough, 2007) whilst GT encourages engagement with the perspectives of different groups of participants (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). That is, GT enables exploration of the complexities of different perspectives (in this case, psychologists, ISPs and PBMs) on a given issue or process (i.e., psychological risk assessment).

GT methodology allows for exploration of what makes something effective in practice in order to provide a general explanation of a process, derived from a larger number of participants than generally used in other qualitative methods (Creswell, Hanson, Clark-Plano & Morales, 2007). Most importantly, GT approaches are particularly useful when studying human interactions and social processes (Cooney, 2010). Finally, taking a GT approach also meant specific GT methodology (i.e., coding procedures) could be used to identify categories of meaning in the earlier stages of analysis (i.e., stopping short of theorising). This enabled descriptive analysis where appropriate and useful for informing practise (e.g., Shingler, 2017). GT methodology procedures for coding and categorising are well established (Urquhart, 2013).

GT is generally conceptualised as an iterative process, in which data collection and analysis are conducted in parallel. Initial data collection and analysis informs the source and focus of the next steps in data collection. This is known as “theoretical sampling” and was described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as follows:

Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyses his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. The process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory. (p. 45)

This approach was ideally suited to gaining an understanding of psychologists, ISPs and PBMs, as it meant I could discuss issues arising from data collection with one participant group during subsequent data collection.
Epistemological Considerations

It has been suggested that early versions of GT were more positivist in their philosophical orientation which was inconsistent with my approach to this research. It should be borne in mind though that Glaser and Strauss developed GT in a positivist research climate, so their contemporaneous descriptions of their methodology had to bridge the gap between the epistemological climate of the time and their new approach to analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As GT has developed it has become more flexible and less wedded to any one epistemological position (Charmaz, 2006; Urquhart, 2013). This means that GT can be utilised from a number of philosophical standpoints. In my project, I began from the position that my research data would be contextual, and would be meaningless without an understanding of participants’ roles, environments, experiences and social and interpersonal settings. For example, whilst there might be agreement about the basics of psychological risk assessment as an entity, participants’ experiences and views about its role, purpose and priorities are likely to be dependent on their social and personal contexts (i.e., one would expect ISPs, whose liberty is arguably at least partially dependent on psychological risk assessment to have different views to psychologists, for whom psychological risk assessment forms one part of a range of professional responsibilities). I wanted to gain a rich understanding of participants’ views and experiences of psychological risk assessment which are, in my view, at least partially socially constructed, and inextricably linked with and embedded in participants’ social roles, positions, and power relationships.

Choice of data collection approach. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with psychologists, ISPs and PBM s. Additional data were gathered during “member checking” exercises (Creswell & Miller, 2000) with these participant groups. The data collection procedures are described in detail below. As different participant groups’ personal thoughts and experiences of risk assessment were of the greatest interest here, individual interviews were considered to elicit the most detailed descriptions.
Whilst conducting focus groups was considered as an alternative method, the organisation and management of these, and the ethical issues associated with collecting focus group data in this context rendered them less suitable. For instance, conducting focus groups with prisoners presented a number of security issues that would have been challenging to overcome, and might have involved having an additional person (such as a prison officer) present during data collection. There was a risk that this would unduly constrain prisoners from being frank about their experiences. Focus groups might also have presented a significant risk to confidentiality, as I would not be able to control how data shared within a focus group were used by other participants in the group. With regard to psychologists and PBMs, there were logistical problems with gathering together a number of people at the same time and place for a focus group discussion. There was also a risk that focus groups would end up reflecting consensus or the views of the most dominant and vocal members, and fail to give voice to quieter members, or to dissenting perspectives.

**Design and Method**

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with qualified prison-based psychologists, ISPs and PBMs. Interview data were analysed using Grounded Theory methods. Member checking exercises (Creswell & Miller, 2000) were conducted with psychologists, an ISP and PBMs both to check the relevance of the emerging results and gather more data where appropriate.

The study was ethically approved by the University of Portsmouth’s Science Faculty Ethics Committee. Approval for the study was also obtained from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) National Research Committee (NRC). Such approval is required in order to conduct any research with prison staff or prisoners. NRC approval enables researchers to request access to prisoners and prison staff but it is no guarantee of access. This was negotiated with

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6 University of Portsmouth Science Faculty Ethics Committee approval letter and form UPR16 are provided in Appendix A.
individual prison establishments and Regional Psychologists (i.e., qualified psychologists responsible for psychological services in a specific geographical area of England and Wales).

Access to PBM was negotiated first with the Head of Member Development and Practice and second with the Head of Business Development.

**Participants and recruitment.** Participants were recruited from three groups: (a) qualified psychologists, employed by Her Majesty’s Prison Service and currently working in prisons, who conducted, supervised or managed risk assessments with indeterminate sentenced prisoners; (b) indeterminate sentenced prisoners who had had a psychological risk assessment completed on them; and (c) Parole Board members. There was no connection between the prisoner and psychologist participants who were recruited; i.e. I did not seek to identify prisoners who had been assessed by specific psychologists and interview both parties.

In total, 29 participants were recruited for interview (11 psychologists, 10 ISPs and 8 PBM). Starks and Brown Trinidad (2007) suggest that recruitment of between 10 and 60 participants is typical for a Grounded Theory study. Whilst additional participants could have been recruited for interview, analysis indicated data saturation had been reached with the current number — that is, new ideas and patterns had ceased to emerge.

**Psychologists.** As already indicated, 11 psychologists participated in an interview, ten women and one man. All the psychologists described their ethnicity as “White British”. A summary of their characteristics is provided in Table 2.1. All were Chartered and Registered psychologists. Nine psychologists had only worked in a prison setting. Six were regularly conducting risk assessments; four were 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.

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7 Statistics about the gender composition of different functions of the NOMS workforce are not in the public domain but my personal experience of working in and around the prison service for over twenty years suggests that the vast majority of prison based psychologists are women.
Psychologists were recruited via NOMS Regional Psychologists. Regional Psychologists were provided with information about the project (information sheets are provided in Appendix B1) and were asked for their permission to recruit participants. Psychologists volunteered for the study and convenience sampling was used to select participants. Individual psychologists were provided with information about the study and a consent form (see Appendix B1). I engaged in email correspondence in order to answer questions, gain informed consent and arrange a mutually convenient interview time.

Psychologists were eligible for the study if they were qualified, employed by NOMS, currently working within a prison and had experience of conducting, supervising or managing risk assessments with ISPs. Psychologists were excluded if they were unqualified.

**Prisoners.** As already stated, ten ISPs participated in a research interview. A summary of their characteristics is provided in Table 2.2 below. Seven prisoners described their ethnicity as ‘White’, ‘British’ or ‘White British’; one as ‘Black British’, one as ‘Black Caribbean’ and one as ‘Mixed Race’. Six were serving mandatory or discretionary life sentences, three were serving

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5 I did not recruit psychologists (or prisoners) from within the High Security Estate. High Security prisons were excluded from the study for issues of practicality as well as potential differences in the types of assessments and issues facing assessors and prisoners.

9 The collection of demographic information was intentionally left until the end of the interview, so as to minimise the extent to which the interview felt like an extraction of information rather than a more mutually engaging discussion. Demographic questions were left deliberately broad (e.g., “How would you describe your ethnicity?”) to reinforce this point. It was made clear to prisoners that they were under no obligation to provide demographic information.
Chapter Two

Indeterminate Sentences for Public Protection (IPPs) and one was serving an Automatic Life Sentence.\(^{10}\) Four men were yet to reach their “tariff”\(^{11}\) and six men were post-tariff. The most recent psychological assessments for these prisoners were conducted between 2009 and 2015.

Prisoners were recruited from two geographically convenient prisons. Prison 1 was a Category B establishment and Prison 2 was a Category C establishment.\(^{12}\) Recruitment procedures were different for each prison, and as an external researcher, I had to comply with the preferred arrangements of the particular prisons. The specific prisoner recruitment procedures for each prison are described below.

Table 2.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Prisoner Participants</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Sd</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>45.22 years</td>
<td>9.67</td>
<td>26-57 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time served on current sentence(^{13})</td>
<td>13.72 years</td>
<td>9.54</td>
<td>4-34 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of previous sentences</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>0-10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(Prison\ 1.\) A database of all ISPs referred for psychological assessments was kept by Prison 1 and used to identify participants. The database was anonymised and randomised. Prisoners were selected from the database and compared against the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see below) until five eligible men were identified. Information letters and consent forms (see Appendix B2) were then sent to these five men. This process resulted in three men who agreed to participate. I met with each man to obtain informed consent.

\(^{10}\) Descriptions of these sentence types can be found in Chapter 1, Introduction.

\(^{11}\) The tariff is set by the trial judge and is the minimum term prisoners must serve before they can be considered for release.

\(^{12}\) 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 (MOJ) 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” (MOJ, 2011).

\(^{13}\) One participant had served 15 years, been released, then been recalled to custody and served a further 4.5 years. His total time served (19.5 years) was used for this calculation.
Chapter Two

*Prison 2.* In Prison 2 potential participants were identified by prison based Offender Supervisors (OSs). OSs are prison officers with specific additional training in sentence management. This process identified eight men who were sent information sheets and consent forms. I met with all eight men for an introductory discussion. This process resulted in seven ISPs who consented to participate. One man was excluded as he did not meet the inclusion criteria which are outlined below.

*Prisoners’ inclusion and exclusion criteria.* Prisoners were eligible for participation in the study if:

- They were adult males currently residing in Category B, C\(^{14}\) or D\(^{15}\) establishments.
- If they were currently serving an indeterminate sentence of any type.
- If they had had a psychological risk assessment report conducted during their current sentence.

Prisoners were excluded from participation if:

- They were identified by prison records as posing an immediate risk to staff safety, as they needed to be interviewed alone in a private room.
- They were identified in prison records as posing an immediate risk of self-harm or suicide.

Whilst the study was not likely to cause harm, what arises in research interviews can be unpredictable and it is not ethical to expose particularly vulnerable people to additional risk.

- They were identified by prison records as currently receiving treatment for psychotic illness, as it was important that participants were able to reflect meaningfully on their experiences. Any individuals who were receiving treatment for depressive or anxiety disorders were included.

\(^{14}\) See footnote 12.

\(^{15}\) Category D prisons are for prisoners who present a low risk and “whom can be reasonably trusted not to abscond” (MOJ, 2011). There were no Category D prisoners in the research sample.
• They were not able to speak English. There would have been practical and resource difficulties associated with using an interpreter. Additionally, the use of an interpreter would have interfered with the free exploration of issues with participants.

• They were currently subject to deportation arrangements. One of the aims of the study was to explore the impact of serving an indeterminate sentence on the process of risk assessment. Individuals subject to deportation would arguably have different perspectives and priorities which the study did not have the capacity to explore.

Individuals were excluded if there was any doubt about their deportation status.

There were no restrictions regarding the types of offences that participants had committed.

**Parole Board members.** Eight PBMs participated in the study (four men and four women).

The demographic characteristics of these PBMs are summarised in Table 2.3 below. Two of the PBMs were psychologist members, one was a psychiatrist and five were independent members.

All PBMs described their ethnicity as “white”.

Table 2.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of Parole Board Participants</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>60.6</td>
<td>8.62</td>
<td>44-70 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time on the Parole Board</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>4-11 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

PBMs were recruited via a circular email to all members and a personal appeal for participants at a training event. This identified fifteen volunteers who were contacted by email, and provided with information sheets and consent forms (see Appendix B3). Six people, selected for convenience, eventually participated in an interview. Two further interviews were arranged by a Parole Board administrator on a mutually convenient date. These two participants were
provided with information sheets and consent forms prior to the interview date and gave their informed consent to participate.

There were no specific exclusion criteria for PBMs as any serving member of the Board was considered eligible.

**Materials and procedure.**

*Interview guide development.* Interview guides for each participant group were developed prior to data collection: these can be found in Appendix C.

The interview guides for psychologists and prisoners covered the same domains, relevant to the Research Questions, namely: (a) participants’ experiences of, and thoughts and feelings about risk assessment, including the interview; (b) their views on the professional relationship between prisoners and psychologists during risk assessment, including the interview; (c) their views on the context of risk assessment, including the high stakes nature of risk assessment for ISPs; and (d) their overall views on what constitutes effective and ineffective practice in psychological risk assessment.

The interview guide for the PBMs was constructed differently, as PBMs do not engage in risk assessment interviewing. Therefore, in order to gather data relevant to the Research Questions, the following domains were explored with PBMs: (a) the weight given to psychological assessment in Parole Board decision making, (b) the interface between Parole Board members and psychologists, and (c) their views about good and bad practice in the risk assessment process.

Interviews were piloted with two qualified psychologists in January 2015, after which some minor refinement of the interview guide was undertaken. Given the practical and organisational challenges involved in recruiting ISPs and PBMs, no attempts were made to pilot the interviews with these groups.

*Individual interviews.* Interviews were conducted either in person in a private interview room or on the telephone due to geographical distance/convenience. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder.
Eleven psychologists were interviewed between May 2015 and July 2015. Six interviews were conducted face to face and five by telephone. Interviews lasted between 55 and 85 minutes. The majority of the psychologists were unknown to me but in two cases there had been some prior professional communication between myself and the participant. In all cases, steps were taken to build rapport with participants, and make them feel comfortable with and confident about the purpose of the interview and the boundaries of confidentiality.

Ten adult male prisoners, three from prison 1 and seven from prison 2, were interviewed between April 2015 and March 2016. All of the interviews were conducted in private interview rooms within the prisons. Interviews lasted between 27 and 90 minutes. All of the prisoners were previously unknown to me.

The interviews were conducted flexibly in that the order of questions and the time spent exploring each domain was determined by participants’ individual contributions. This was to allow responsivity to and exploration of issues raised by participants. Within each domain, initial questions were phrased so as not to constrain participants’ responses. For example, the first question to psychologists was: “What I am most interested in is what it is like for you to conduct risk assessments with indeterminate sentenced prisoners – how you think and feel about it. Can you tell me a bit about your experiences?” Initial, broad questions were followed by more focused questions if and when further prompts were required. I intentionally avoided phrasing questions in such a way that might lead participants towards any specific agenda (Potter & Hepburn 2008). For example, I intentionally did not explicitly ask about possible influences on participants in relation to risk assessment in order to prevent participants from searching for possible influences of which they were previously unaware. I was clear about wanting to hear about both positive and negative experiences and about examples of what participants considered to be good and poor practice.

Eight PBMs were interviewed between September and November 2016. Two interviews were conducted in person, and six by telephone. Interviews lasted between 34 and 65 minutes.
Chapter Two

The approach to and the style of the interviews with the PBMs remained consistent with the description above. However, as more of the PBMs interviews were conducted by telephone, the interviews started with some general questions about the PBMs’ professional background, the length of time they had been a PBM, and their experiences as a PBM to date. This was with the intention of building rapport and to identify any specific areas of interest that could be followed in the interview. As the interview progressed into the topic domains, the first broad, exploratory question was as follows: “I am interested in what you think about risk assessments conducted by psychologists. Can you tell me a bit about your experiences?”

As noted previously, interviews with prisoners and psychologists were scheduled in order to allow for theoretical sampling – issues arising from interviews with prisoners could be used to inform and shape interviews with psychologists, and vice versa. The interviews with the PBMs by necessity were completed after the interviews with psychologists and prisoners were complete. However, this still allowed the PBMs interviews to be informed by the contributions from the other participant groups.

The anonymity of participants was maintained by the use of unique research numbers, allocated to each participant at the beginning of their interview. Participants were advised to use only their research numbers in any correspondence with me (for example, if they wished to withdraw). In the subsequent reporting of the results, participants were allocated a pseudonym. The identity of the single male psychologist interviewee was protected by the use of a number of gender-neutral pseudonyms for the psychologist participants.

At the end of each interview, participants were given an opportunity to ask questions and provide comments and feedback. They were provided with a copy of the debriefing information either in person or by email (see Appendices B1, B2 and B3). The debriefing information included details of how to withdraw and the timescale within which they should do this. None of the participants withdrew.
Analysis. Interviews were transcribed using a transcription convention derived from Edwards and Potter (1992) which can be found in Appendix D. All identifying information was removed during transcription, including participants’ names, third party names, prison names and geographical locations. Once the interviews were transcribed, participants were not identifiable by name from the transcripts. Transcripts, interview recordings, records of names, research numbers and pseudonyms were kept securely throughout the project in password protected, secure (encrypted) computer files. Lists of names, research numbers and pseudonyms were stored separately from transcriptions and interview recordings.

The initial stage of analysis was that of becoming immersed in the data, firstly during the process of transcription, described above, and then by reading and re-reading transcripts. The next stage was the process of “open coding”. This involved line-by-line analysis of each transcript and the identification of discrete units of meaning (Charmaz, 2006; Urquhart, 2013). Open coding was accompanied by extensive discussions in supervision to facilitate reflection on and refinement of the initial open codes. An example of open coding of part of a transcription of a psychologist’s interview is provided in Appendix E. Open codes remained descriptive during this initial stage, using participants’ words wherever possible and remaining close to participants’ accounts of risk assessment.

As themes and patterns began to emerge during open coding, the analytic process began to identify how open codes could be organised to form higher level selective codes or categories. “Selective coding” (Urquhart, 2013) involved looking for different examples of the same open codes within and across interviews (whilst remaining attentive to the presence of new ideas). It also involved grouping together different open codes that seemed to describe dimensions of the same concept, looking for dimensions within a category of meaning and looking for codes that represented opposing ends of a continuum (also described as “axial coding” by Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Selective coding was completed via a process of constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967): that is, repeatedly reviewing codes and the associated quotations, memo writing,
hypothesising about the nature of participants’ experiences, and checking out these hypotheses in ongoing research interviews (i.e., theoretical sampling, as defined above; see also Charmaz, 2006).

Memo writing (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was a central component of this stage of analysis. Memo writing refers to the practise of moving from coding to beginning to theorise about the nature and definition of concepts or relationships between concepts, or making links to the broader literature. It can raise questions to attend to as analysis progresses, point to things to look for to support or discount developing hypotheses, and suggest where data should be collected from next.

The next stage of analysis was to organise selective codes into higher level categories of meaning, including theoretical categories where appropriate. This was again done using constant comparison and memo writing. Whilst open coding and the first iterations of selective coding were conducted with openness to the data and flexibility to what was emerging, further selective and theoretical coding were completed in order to address the research questions. That is, analysis focused on addressing the following:

1. Understanding psychologists’ experiences of conducting risk assessments with ISPs.
2. Understanding ISPs’ experiences of having risk assessments done by psychologists.
3. Understanding PBM’s views about psychological risk assessment and their experiences of using psychological risk assessment in their work.
4. Understanding prisoners’ and psychologists’ experiences of risk assessment interviews and what represents good interview practice.
5. Understanding more about process issues in prison-based psychological risk assessment.
6. Identifying effective approaches to psychological risk assessment.

In order to address the first three questions, analysis focused largely on the data gathered from the corresponding participant group. However, awareness of the categories emerging from the data set as a whole allowed for reflection on similarities and differences in the experiences of
different participant groups. In order to address the fourth question, analysis focused on the psychologists’ and prisoners’ transcripts together. This enabled consideration of consistent as well as competing perspectives. It also allowed for understanding of each group’s priorities, where they overlapped and where they were different.

By way of illustration, detail of a small part of the analytic process relating to the fourth question (namely gaining an understanding of the risk assessment interview) can be found in Appendix F. Appendix F illustrates how open codes from psychologists’ and prisoners’ transcripts were grouped together into the preliminary category “collaboration” during the first stage of selective coding. Appendix G then provides an example of work in progress in relation to the higher level selective code “collaborative engagement”. Appendix G shows the progress from the initial stage of selective coding (shown in Appendix F). As analysis progressed, the title of the selective code was refined, as was the breadth of open codes subsumed within it. Appendix G also shows how the process of memo-writing enabled definition of each open code in relation to the higher level selective code. This process of memo-writing enabled the refined definition of “collaborative engagement” to be reached. This is reported along with other aspects of the analysis relating to the risk assessment interview, in Chapter 6.

The analysis relating to the first four research questions listed above was drawn on in order to address the fifth and sixth research questions, along with ongoing selective coding, theoretical coding and memo-writing relating to the data collected from all three participant groups.

The process of open coding is described here as preceding selective coding. However, in practice and in line with the approach to the interviews and the principles of Grounded Theory, the process of analysis was iterative, with open coding and selective coding often occurring simultaneously.
Peer debriefing and member checking. A number of steps were taken following the first iterations of analysis to check the validity of the emerging codes and categories and explore issues arising from analysis with those who could help to understand processes more clearly.

Firstly, emerging open codes were discussed and refined in supervision, as was the overall scheme (“peer debriefing”, see Creswell & Miller, 2000; see also Urquhart, 2013). Secondly, “member checking” exercises were conducted (Creswell & Miller, 2000) in which the preliminary results were discussed with qualified psychologists, PBMs and ISPs. These sessions followed a similar structure: results were presented to the participants, with time allowed for discussion and reflection. Then emerging theoretical ideas were presented in the form of questions to allow for further discussion and reflection. This process allowed for both checking the validity of the analysis, and considering the next analytic steps. I used professional networking opportunities to identify and recruit participants from all three groups for this stage of the analysis. All participants were informed of the purpose of the exercises, and gave their informed consent to participate.

Psychologists were consulted in three group sessions and two individual interviews between June 2016 and July 2017. In total, 18 qualified, prison-based psychologists participated in these discussions. One ISP, currently on license in the community, participated in a member checking exercise in March 2017. Efforts were made to recruit additional ISPs for member checking. One ISP withdrew consent immediately before the interview was due to start. Further efforts were frustrated by organisational constraints. Finally, seven PBMs participated in a group presentation and discussion session in June 2017. Two participants were psychologist members, four were independent members and one was a Judicial member. Additionally, as a result of conducting research with PBMs the opportunity arose to present emerging results at the Parole Board conferences in December 2016 and November 2017. The questions and discussion arising from these presentations facilitated further review and refinement of the analysis.
Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations relevant to interviewing prisoners. There are a number of specific ethical issues to consider when conducting research with imprisoned men. Firstly, there are the additional challenges involved in ensuring that consent to participate is fully informed (McDermott, 2013). In order to overcome this, I ensured that I was clear with prisoners that there would be no consequences, negative or positive, to their participating or choosing not to participate. Prisoners were provided with detailed information about the study and had the opportunity to ask questions. I made it clear that they could stop the interview at any time, and that they could refuse to answer any question without giving a reason. I was also clear that the interviews were for research purposes only and would have no impact on any actual psychological risk assessment they might have in the future.

Secondly, issues of confidentiality present challenges, given that maintaining security and safety is the priority in a prison environment. I was therefore clear in the information sheets, consent forms and in my discussions with prisoners about the limits of confidentiality. In line with NOMS guidance, I was clear with prisoners that I would have to report disclosures about the following to the relevant prison authorities:

- Behaviour that was against prison rules and could be adjudicated against.
- Undisclosed illegal acts (previous or planned).
- Behaviour that was harmful to the prisoner (e.g., intention to self-harm, commit suicide).
- Current or planned behaviour that was harmful to any third party.
- Anything that raised concern about terrorist, radicalisation or other security issues.

I made it clear in the pre-interview discussions that I did not want prisoners to disclose information that would result in my having to breach their confidentiality. I did not ask any questions about these things, and I made it clear that I would discourage prisoners from disclosing things I would have to report. There were no problems with prisoners making problematic disclosures and I had no need to pass on any information to the authorities.
Another limit to confidentiality was the inevitability of some prison staff knowing which prisoners had volunteered to participate. Privacy is limited in prison (di Viggiani, 2006, 2007) and as an external researcher, I needed support and assistance to recruit and interview prisoners. I made sure that prisoners were aware of my contact points in the prisons and prisoners were advised not to participate unless they felt happy about this person knowing about it. I was also clear that whilst some staff would inevitably know that a prisoner had participated in my research, the content of the research interview would remain confidential (within the limits described above). Additionally, I made it clear in the information sheets and the pre-interview discussions that I was obliged to inform prison staff if I was concerned for a prisoner’s welfare following an interview. This situation did not arise.

**Conducting an interview about interviews: Some reflexive thoughts.** There were two main issues to consider here. Firstly, I was interviewing (particularly) prisoners and psychologists about their experiences of being interviewed and interviewing. This required reflection on the nature of my research interview and how that might or might not mirror experiences of being interviewed or interviewing. How would people respond to being interviewed? How would my approach to interviews impact participants’ reflections and disclosures about their own experiences as interviewers or interviewees? It was crucial that I remained alert to these issues and addressed them openly, if necessary. I used skills within the research interviews that I would similarly use in risk assessment interviews, aimed at putting participants at ease and building rapport and some participants commented on feeling comfortable within the research interview. I engaged participants in debriefs where possible to enable them (and me) to reflect on the experience of being interviewed for this research. An additional consideration when interviewing prisoners about their experiences of being interviewed was to be mindful of power relationships in the context of an exchange of knowledge (Foucault, 1977). In research interviews, the interviewer usually holds the power, making the decisions about what will be discussed, when and how and how the answers will be interpreted (Kvale, 2006) – this mirrors power issues
experienced by prisoners every day. I took steps to address power issues in my approach to recruiting and interviewing participants, including ensuring consent was fully informed, giving participants some control over the interview, and giving participants the opportunity to ask me questions about the research or about my role or professional background (that is, I did my best to ensure that the interview was not entirely a “one-way dialogue”, Kvale, 2006, p. 484). I also ensured that I was clear both in written information and in discussions that the information gathered in the interviews would not have any positive or negative consequences for prisoners – that is, it would not be used to judge them (Foucault, 1977). It would be naïve, though, to presume that this changed the power relationship. The interviews were ultimately conducted for my benefit, and I made the decisions about how information gathered during interviews would be interpreted and reported. Understanding power issues in prison is a current topic of research in and of itself (see Crewe, 2011a and b; Crewe, 2012) and ultimately, many participants (including prisoners) reflected openly on power issues during the research interviews. These ended up forming part of the analysis (see Chapters 3, 4, 5 and 7).

The second consideration was my own role in the research process. As a practising psychologist, with over twenty years’ experience in conducting risk assessment interviews, it was inevitable that my experiences would “contribute to [my] understanding of the social processes observed” (Heath & Cowley, 2004, p. 143) and that they would influence my approach to the interviews, my questioning and my interpretation and analysis of the data. My approach to risk assessment has always been one of inclusion of and collaboration with prisoners (as evidenced by my previous work, Shingler & Mann, 2006). I recognise that I value these attributes and it is inevitable that my behaviour during the research process reflected this. Charmaz (2006) recognises the researcher’s role, noting that the researcher cannot be removed from the analytic process. She recommends recognition of and reflection on the researcher’s position, opinions, biases and experiences in order to inform the research. Potter and Hepburn (2008) specifically warn against the “deletion of the interviewer” (p. 285) and note the importance of the
interviewer’s contributions being represented in the transcription. My choice of GT methodology allowed for reflection on my views and experiences; considering these issues formed part of the process of analysis. However, it was equally essential that participants were active in the research process. The research needed to be shaped by participants’ contributions rather than participants being passive subjects under investigation (Pidgeon, Turner & Blockley, 1991). This meant that both my experiences and those of the participants would contribute to data collection and analysis. Pidgeon et al. (1991) describe how “the investigator and the investigated display an interdependence” (p. 155; see also Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). If risk assessment interviews themselves are socially constructed (see Chapter 1), then so were my research interviews (Kvale, 2006; Murakami, 2003; Potter & Hepburn, 2008). The information I gathered was a product of the nature of the interview, of the interaction between myself and the participants and the relationship between us. This needed to be acknowledged during data collection and analysis.

**Organisation of Manuscript**

The findings are presented in the following four empirical chapters, reflecting the first four research questions described above:

Chapter 3: Psychologists’ experiences of psychological risk assessment.

Chapter 4: Prisoners’ experiences of psychological risk assessment.

Chapter 5: Parole Board Members’ experiences of psychological risk assessment.

Chapter 6: Prisoners’ and psychologists’ perspectives of the risk assessment interview.

The final stage of analysis involved drawing together the results from all of these analytic stages, in order to address the fifth research question listed above, namely understanding broader process issues in psychological risk assessment. Drawing together knowledge from the analysis about effective approaches to psychological risk assessment and using this to reflect on implications for practice was also relevant here. Therefore the final two chapters are as follows:

Chapter 7: The developing Grounded Theory of process issues in psychological risk assessment with ISPs.
Chapter Three: Psychologists’ Experiences of Conducting Risk Assessments with Indeterminate Sentenced Prisoners

This chapter reports the results arising mainly from the analysis of the contributions of qualified psychologist participants, via individual interviews and member checking exercises (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The psychologist participants are described in detail in Chapter 2.

Analysis reveals one overarching category explaining psychologists’ experiences, that is, “The Challenging Context of Risk Assessment”. This comprises two distinct elements, as described in Figure 3.1 below. The challenging context provides the backdrop for the other major category of meaning, “Risk Assessment as a Weighty Task”, which in turn, comprises three distinct elements, as illustrated.

The Challenging Context of Risk Assessment

Analysis suggests that psychologists experience the context in which they conduct risk assessment as challenging because it can impact negatively on their work. In particular, there are two elements of the context that are repeatedly discussed as affecting psychologists. First, psychologists describe pressure resulting from having to work with limited resources. Second, they describe pressure resulting from a range of physical and interpersonal features of the environment. The subsequent category “Risk Assessment as a Weighty Task” is embedded within and exacerbated by this challenging context, all of which has to be navigated and managed.

16 Throughout the thesis, the pronoun “she” is used to refer to psychologists and the pronoun “he” is used to refer to prisoners. This reflects the majority membership of each group within HMPPS. It is not intended to diminish the role and contribution of male psychologists to the study or the issues facing male psychologists and female prisoners.
Pressure of limited resources. Psychologists’ contributions suggest a sense of pressure resulting from conducting risk assessment in a climate of limited time and resources. There seems to be a constant balancing act of meeting needs with managing resources (Shingler et al., 2017; McDermott, 2014). Although some participants feel they have sufficient time to do their assessments in a way that matches their standards, these participants remain aware of the demands on them, and the need to meet deadlines. The experience of time pressure and of limited and constrained resources is described by a number of participants, and summed up by Vicky:

I think it's the, the time pressures in terms of doing, er lots of things going on, lack, lack of resources nationally really across the Prison Service. We’re all trying to do much more work than fits into our hours.
Psychologists describe trying to keep time pressure out of the risk assessment interview itself, establishing the interview as a priority task within the process (Shingler et al., 2017). Many feel that other aspects of the assessment process are more likely to be compromised by the lack of resources. Examples include limiting the thoroughness of an assessment:

I think when I was based in an establishment, again, there were pressures to get a certain number of risk assessments completed within a set period of time. So very often, although it wouldn’t necessarily have been personal choice, erm, a lot more of the exploratory stuff had to be left as recommendations at that time, because again, we were limited to one or two interviews which doesn’t really get you that much information.

(Ava)

Here, Ava describes how her professional standards are compromised by time pressure, in that she could not conduct her assessment as she would choose. Similarly, Sam describes how “front end assessment is where we feel we should be, where ideally we would like to be, erm, but resource issues means that, that’s not going to happen, you know”. This is echoed by participants in member checking exercises, who describe how pressure on psychological services means they are constantly “fire-fighting” to meet Parole Board demands, rather than providing assessments in a strategic and meaningful way from the outset that can inform the remainder of someone’s sentence in prison and the community. These experiences are consistent with the concept of “moral distress”, one cause of which is institutional constraints preventing professionals from taking action they believe to be morally right (Epstein & Hamric, 2009). Moral distress is often a symptom of deeper organisational problems and can arguably contribute to burnout amongst workers (Epstein & Hamric, 2009). Psychologists seem particularly vulnerable to moral distress when organisational priorities conflict with their ethical priorities and responsibilities to clients (Austin, Rankel & Kagan, 2005), as described by Ava and Sam above.

Time and resource pressure seem particularly to affect assessment-related tasks requiring thought and reflection (see Nolan & Walsh, 2012). For instance, Karen and Maria both describe
the report writing stage as being affected. Additionally, Karen believes that “…in terms of the thinking space, erm and the supervision, those are the spaces I think that get attacked from the time and resource issue the most”. Jamie reports that the quality of psychological risk assessment reports is assessed purely by virtue of the number of reports completed and whether or not they meet the deadlines, as opposed to any review of the content or style of the report. This suggests that resource pressure can impact on the opportunity for proper reflection on the process and products of psychological assessment, at least for some psychologists. Similarly, Ava, Charlie and Vicky describe either giving or receiving supervision that is time compressed. Karen believes that “because of the demands on the work, and the erm, and the development of the actual person as a psychologist can really get lost”. Conversely, Vicky describes the value she places on supervision over and above other tasks, and how, “I do actually find that with the supervision, that tends to be the thing that I then prioritise and will work around”. Nolan and Walsh (2012) suggest that in addition to resource pressure, the crisis-heavy prison environment can interfere with reflective processes, potentially resulting in double jeopardy for psychologists. A number of psychologists describe how they miss supervision - there is no requirement for the work of qualified psychologists to be supervised - and how they value peer discussion and feedback when it is possible to find time for this. Jamie indicates that supervision for qualified staff would go a long way to address some of the difficulties identified in staff-prisoner relationships in risk assessment (Crewe 2011a; Maruna, 2014; Shingler et al., 2017). Nolan and Walsh (2012) also highlight the value of clinical supervision in untangling and understanding complex relationships in prisons. Seeking supervision is potentially a means of coping with some of the stress related to conducting risk assessment (see below), and it is perhaps not surprising that in a busy and time pressured working environment, time for thinking and reflection was squeezed out. This would seem to be

17 It is interesting to consider whether this issue begins to explain some of the apparent mismatches between the prisoners’ experiences of cold and distant interviewing styles, and the psychologists’ commitment to collaborative, respectful and human-to-human interviewing (see Shingler et al., 2017): if prisoners experience an interview positively but this is followed by a report that has been given less time, attention and reflection, then they may well feel tricked or “stitched up”. This is speculation, but worthy of further discussion and consideration.
to the detriment not only of the profession, in terms of psychologists’ development and well-being (Clarke, 2013), but also to the detriment of prisoners, whose futures are to some degree dependent on psychological risk assessments (see below and Chapter 4).

In response to time and resource pressures, psychologists describe a process of balancing and negotiating resources and not succumbing to pressure to rush assessments or do more with less. In this way psychologists strive to maintain their professional standards and resist managerialism (Bryans, 2008; Cheliotis, 2008):

I think, there is something ethically for me about holding the line with your own managers and your own, er, sort of er, service I suppose. In terms of saying ‘I, I’m not going to do that within that period of time. If you want me to do a piece of work that is thorough and it’s OK, I can’t do that’. (Karen)

Time pressure also has implications for the assessment experience. Both psychologists and prisoners believe that a rushed assessment is more likely to be experienced as anti-collaborative and disrespectful (Shingler et. al., 2017). In response to a question about how having limited time might impact on the interview, Ava comments:

Erm, we were obviously taught to start off with easier subjects, so we wouldn’t go straight into asking about the offence. But even, even so, you don’t necessarily know where their difficulties lie at that stage, so you just think, well I’ll explore school first, but that actually might have been quite traumatic, traumatic for them. So it just, it made it feel very distant and rushed and quite pressured so it wasn’t an experience that was enjoyable.

This view is also reflected by some prisoner participants, such as Malcolm:

I think sometimes n’that, cos, their jobs are so, erm, more paperwork n’things, n’interviews are very short. N’when you’re long doing a long time, it’s like y’feel like you’re left on a shelf sometimes.

Given that both prisoners and psychologists identify retention of the individuality of prisoners as central to good risk assessment interviewing (Shingler et. al., 2017) it is troubling that
prisoners feel disregarded and side-lined by a rushed assessment. Ezra (prisoner) describes a compressed time frame as where “a lot of things go wrong”, and believes that more time would result in “less pressure on both parties innit... obviously they have more time to get the right information that they need to, do their report, obviously the prisoner may be more at ease. It just, it opens up”. Malcolm describes a positive encounter with a psychologist, which was a good experience partly because “he gave me time, n’t that yeah”. Psychologists also describe the value of taking more time to conduct an assessment, for example:

**Interviewer:** erm in terms of the time, erm, can you tell me what difference that’s made to your relationship with the prisoners, having more time?

**Ava:** erm it’s made a huge difference. I mean, er, even just having a whole session to dedicate to introductions, rapport building, consent, making sure that all of that is thoroughly understood, and making sure that the prisoner knows exactly what that experience is going to be like and building that relationship up.

As Ava notes, psychologists and prisoners value the opportunity to have a pre-assessment meeting, to discuss the assessment process, and ensure consent is properly informed and not a “paper exercise” (Karen). Psychologists and prisoners comment that this sort of meeting increases rapport, makes prisoners feel more valued as individuals, builds trust, and breaks down barriers (see Chapter 4 for more detailed discussion of the value prisoners place on feeling known by assessors). Pre-assessment interviews might well provide an opportunity for both parties to begin to feel more familiar with each other, to experience each other’s interpersonal style, feel oriented to each other and the interview, and implicitly negotiate “positions” they will take during the assessment process (Murakami, 2003). Whilst psychologists might be concerned about time implications here, it is worth considering that an investment of time in this way may actually save time in the long run, by virtue of greater cooperation from prisoners and reduced complaints (Shingler & Mann, 2006). It may also contribute to a sense of greater legitimacy of psychological assessment from prisoners (see Chapters 4 and 8).
Pressure of the environment. Another element to the challenging context of risk assessment is the pressure created by elements of the physical and interpersonal environment. Analysis suggests that features of the prison environment can demotivate, devalue and stereotype psychologists. The negative impact of the prison environment on staff has been previously noted (Clarke, 2013; Crawley, 2004; Elliott & Daley, 2013; Gerstein, Topp & Correll, 1987). The findings below reflect the impact of the prison environment specifically on psychologists.

Psychologists describe the prison environment as “oppressive” (discussion group participant) and “depressing” (Laura). Prisons are noisy, often overcrowded and it is possible that the physical attributes of prison environments themselves contribute to stress (Evans, 2003). Some psychologists note the insular nature of prison work which is largely “shut off from the outside” (Karen). This sense of isolation is also reflected in participants’ questioning of the lack of information sharing between prison service psychologists and National Health Service (NHS) colleagues. Psychologists’ contributions generally suggest a sense of feeling “very isolated and very alone” (Karen) in conducting risk assessment, in that colleagues tend to wait for psychological reports before preparing their own reports, rather than working collaboratively as a team. Baker and Wilkinson (2011) suggest that a danger of isolation within teams or organisations is the tendency towards “groupthink” (p. 19), and a consequent lack of creative and reflective thinking. They suggest that if you are familiar with everyone around you and how they are likely to respond to your decisions or opinions, this is less likely to prompt critical thought than having to present decisions to an unfamiliar group. This has clear implications for the risk assessment process, in terms of ensuring decisions are thoroughly considered and questioned. The sense of isolation experienced by psychologists also contributes to the weight of responsibility they feel when conducting risk assessments, which is discussed in the next section.

Other environmental factors noted by participants include fear for personal safety, which has been identified as a source of stress amongst correctional workers (Schaufeli & Peeters,
2000). Claire notes that she feels “more vulnerable now in the, in the interview place” and “the wings don’t feel as safe anymore”. She attributes this largely to budget cuts resulting in fewer prison officers on the wings.

In addition to the physical environment, psychologists also experience interpersonal pressure associated with their working relationships with prison staff and prisoners. For instance, Steph feels like a “hindrance” to prison staff. Laura believes that prison managers do not think psychologists contribute anything useful to the establishment. Crawley (2004) similarly found negative and resentful attitudes towards psychologists amongst prison officers. Research has suggested that relationships with co-workers and co-operation amongst staff are important to psychologists working in prisons (Boothby & Clements, 2002) and contribute towards a sense of job satisfaction. Relatedly, Nolan and Walsh (2012) describe the intersubjective web of professional relationships amongst prison staff, with expectations, attitudes, and previous experiences influencing interactions. Feeling disregarded by colleagues, whether or not that is an accurate perception of colleagues’ opinions, could impact on psychologists’ well-being, and is unlikely to facilitate the process of conducting a risk assessment.

Psychologists also face challenges in their working relationships with prisoners. First, there is the complexity of risk assessment and the pressure of working with challenging clients with a range of psychological problems. Karen and Sam both note that, as qualified psychologists, they tend to be allocated more complex assessments. In fact, Lorna suggests that:

Because there is, erm, there isn’t the resources for us to get involved as standard, which means that an issue that arises from that is we tend to get involved in a case where there’s no obvious solution. It’s not a case of writing a simple violence risk assessment and saying at the end of it, ooh, why not the thinking skills programme? It’s, erm, if that was the case, that would have probably been done, we wouldn’t have been called anywhere near it. So the issue is you’re often working with people where there’s no, no neat solution.
This can result in a “lack of respite of kind of non-complicated work”, with psychologists working on “complicated case, after complicated case, after complicated case” (Charlie). Psychologists talk about working with a range of difficult prisoners, and coping with challenging behaviour in interviews, such as extreme paranoia (Claire, Laura), other features of personality disorder (Alex, Claire, Sam, Lorna, Laura), being sexualised by prisoners (Karen), extreme hostility and suspicion (Maria, Laura), and abusive and threatening behaviour (Claire). Relatedly, Karen and Lorna describe being stereotyped by prisoners as either “psycho-babes, and all this sort of, the young, the young forensic psychologist” (Karen), or “young unqualified people, to just sort of test out and have the prisoners as guinea pigs” (Lorna). There is a general view amongst psychologists (which is supported by prisoners) that they are not trusted by prisoners, who view them with hostility and suspicion (see also Maruna, 2011; Warr, 2008 and Chapter 4).

Some contributions indicate that the perceived negative view of psychologists within prisons might be an unforeseen consequence of changes to psychologists’ working arrangements, which brought psychologists out of prisons and into regional teams. This means that in some geographical regions, psychologists are “parachuted in” (Steph, psychologist) to conduct risk assessments, rather than being an integral part of the prison team. Prisoners describe wanting psychologists to be more integrated with wing life, in order to provide opportunities for informal contact with psychologists that could help to “break down those barriers” (John, prisoner; see Chapter 4 for further discussion), and undermine the sorts of stereotypes described above. Laura sums up this issue:

I actually think in some ways, it’s more difficult now that we’re regionalised. Erm because when we were establishment based and spending a lot of time working with different members of staff and knew them all, the stereotypes are there … individuals who have those kind of attitudes, and then you have others who don’t have those kind of views, but you’ve got the opportunity to be challenging them and, and, and addressing those. And when you do that face to face work, and likewise with the offenders, I think the difficulty
at the moment is that now that we’re regionalised we don’t, I don’t know any of the staff in the establishment I now work at. Er, I also don’t know any of the offenders that work there. If you’re on the wing and out and about and, and people get to know you and when you’re doing interventions work with groups, people get to know you. Erm, they might hate you but they might talk about you in positive terms ... and now, I guess we’re more removed from that.

Other participants note the value of being more embedded within a staff team, and in some areas, there are moves to re-establish this model of working (in other areas, this model of working was always retained). The importance to psychologists of good working relationships with colleagues has previously been noted (Boothby & Clements, 2002). There is also evidence that a lack of social support is related to burnout (Maslach et al., 2001) and feeling unsupported, judged or irrelevant to colleagues may have significant implications for psychologists’ well-being and consequently their effectiveness in risk assessment.

The pressured experiences with staff and prisoners described above are not common to all participants. Some psychologists describe enjoying the process of assessment - learning about a prisoner and reaching an understanding of the prisoner and his difficulties. For example:

What I like about it, I suppose I like working with prisoners. So actually getting to work with someone face to face and try and understand their case is what’s most interesting.

(Alex)

Similarly, Maria describes risk assessment as involving “creative tension” and a “voyage of discovery”. Balanced with these creative and positive experiences is evidence of the negative experiences described above, of managing challenging relationships with both colleagues and prisoners, feeling unsafe, whilst working in an environment that renders psychologists vulnerable to stress and burnout (Ellerby, 1998; Gerstein, et al., 1987; Senter, et al., 2010). Additionally, it is possible that the actual relationships between correctional workers and prisoners can further exacerbate stress and contribute to burnout, as noted by Gerstein et al. (1987):
It seems that the most important contributor to fostering or reducing staff burnout in correctional institutions is the staff’s relationships with the inmates … Interactions with this group contribute to burnout especially when these interactions are negative, unrewarding, and draining. (p. 362)

Similarly, Schaufeli and Peeters (2000) note that, amongst correctional officers, positive contact with prisoners is associated with a sense of accomplishment, whereas negative contact with prisoners is related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation. When stress and burnout result in depersonalisation of and detachment from clients (Maslach et al., 2001), this could have significant implications for the process of psychological risk assessment (Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000; Gallavan & Newman, 2013). If burned-out staff seek to create emotional distance between themselves and clients in order to ameliorate emotional exhaustion and protect themselves (Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000), this arguably increases the likelihood of negative, unrewarding and draining interactions with prisoners, which in turn exacerbates existing stress and burnout. A distant interpersonal approach is also diametrically opposed to the interviewing approach that psychologists and prisoners agree is best practice - namely that which achieves some level of human connection between psychologist and prisoner, and respects the human integrity of the individual prisoner (Shingler et al., 2017). Experiences that result in increased distance from and depersonalisation of prisoners need to be highlighted and addressed.

Summary: The challenging context of risk assessment. Psychologists conducting, supervising and managing risk assessments experience a sense of pressure resulting from lack of time and resources. Operating in this climate adds another level of pressure to an already challenging work environment (Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000; Senter et al., 2010; Boothby & Clements, 2002). Environmental pressure points include aspects of the physical environment, a sense of physical and professional isolation and challenging relationships with other prison staff and prisoners. Time and resource pressure may well interact with environmental pressures: rushing an assessment due to time pressure can damage already fragile relationships between
psychologists and prisoners (Maruna, 2012; Gannon & Ward, 2014); fractured and unrewarding relationships with prisoners may in themselves exacerbate stress (Gerstein et. al., 1987; Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000). Psychologists working in prisons may be at increased risk of burnout (Senter et al., 2010) with the consequences of burnout itself (emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation of clients) potentially further exacerbating existing tensions in relationships between psychologists and prisoners.

Despite this seemingly bleak picture, some participants describe the enjoyment and fulfilment they get from conducting risk assessments. Other work has found a similar tension between the enjoyment of correctional psychological work and the stress and anxiety resulting from it (see Clarke, 2013 for a summary), and it seems that, as previously discussed, there is a balancing act at work here (Shingler et al., 2017).

**Risk Assessment as a Weighty Task**

Psychologists’ descriptions of risk assessment suggest that it is a weighty task with numerous demands and responsibilities to be balanced. Their responsibilities to multiple stakeholders and the associated high stakes nature of the task weigh heavily on some psychologists, creating stress and anxiety. There is weight associated with the sense of personal responsibility to get risk assessment right, alongside an awareness of the consequences of getting it wrong. There is also the weight of others’ expectations, that psychological assessment must provide the answers in difficult cases. Finally there are the challenges of training new staff in conducting a high stakes task.

**Weight of personal responsibility.** Analysis indicates that psychologists experience risk assessment as a “massive responsibility” (Karen and Sam). The weight of responsibility is described as both immediate and future related. The immediate responsibility lies in psychologists making recommendations that have significant consequences for the prisoners being assessed, as if “this is my, this is my life right now, erm, in your hands” (Laura). The responsibility of conducting the assessment, reaching recommendations, and giving oral evidence
to panels of the Parole Board is experienced by some psychologists as stressful and anxiety provoking. Laura describes her experience of conducting risk assessments as follows:

It does feel like a really thankless task sometimes and that’s why I don’t actually like doing risk assessments all the time. I, this last couple of years I’ve, I’ve felt like that’s been my job constantly, and I haven’t enjoyed it partly because of the anxiety.

There is also a sense of future responsibility in that the interaction with the prisoner during risk assessment might determine his attitude towards psychologists in general, as well as his attitude towards other professionals. Karen describes herself as a “gatekeeper to other services” in that her involvement might determine how well a prisoner engages with other elements of the criminal justice system (see Tyler, 1990). Sam and Steph both describe the potentially long-lasting impact of a negative experience with a psychologist, as does Lorna:

Erm, I think psychologists, we, we are as fallible as all different professional groups. There will be individuals who, you know, do fulfil aspects of that stereotype of presenting themselves as an expert and maybe rushing in to do one, one interview and then not coming back or not doing a thorough disclosure. And I think like anything, any element of, not necessarily unprofessional practice but practice that falls below best practice, gets remembered, rehearsed, regurgitated, and it can take a lot of repairing to, you know, one damaged experience, unfortunately in a prisoner’s mind because it was so damaging, can outweigh many positive experiences.

Psychologists are clear about the potential consequences of a negative assessment experience, recognising how prisoners are affected both by their own experiences with psychologists, and also by the experiences of their peers. Proulx, Tardif, Lamoureax and Lussier (2000) note the importance of clients being engaged in the assessment process in order to have a meaningful role in their risk management. The idea that a single negative experience of psychological assessment might compromise a prisoner’s willingness to engage in risk management needs to be taken seriously (see also Warr, 2008) – psychologists recognise this and
this adds to the sense of pressure and personal responsibility they feel to get risk assessment right.

The responsibility of risk assessment is multi-faceted. Psychologists variously report feeling responsible to the prisoner (Karen, Ava, Claire, Vicky and Laura), the Parole Board (Karen, Claire and Laura) and the general public (Maria, Alex, Claire, Sam, Vicky and Laura). Some psychologists feel clear about where their primary responsibility lies. For example, Alex states “I do ultimately feel most responsible to the public”. However, most participants (including Alex) recognise tension in the direction of their responsibility, and comment on the challenges of meeting the needs of all the people to whom they feel responsible (Austin, Kagan, Rankel & Bergum, 2008). Steph explicitly talks about the weighty process of balancing these responsibilities:

We do go in with that in our mind, that we’re there to, erm, protect the public, which I suppose in a way takes a little bit of that neutrality away... but I think we have to balance that with the needs of the prisoner, erm and think, you know, erm about that, you know, that capacity to change and erm, you know, there’s - but I suppose it’s a bit of a balancing act, it’s really difficult.

Alex describes the deliberation that goes into this balancing act, in terms of “is the recommendation the right one? And is it, you know, is it, am I not being too overly cautious or overly, erm, lenient in kind of my view”. The idea of risk assessment being a difficult balancing act is discussed in Chapter 6 (see also Shingler et al., 2017) and it seems from these results that psychologists are negotiating a difficult balance in a broader sense than the risk assessment interview itself.

In addition to considering the weight of the current and future responsibility and balancing up the needs of multiple, competing stakeholders, there is a keen awareness of the consequence of errors of judgement in risk assessment – that is, the fear of clients committing further offences:
I think erm, none of us want victims, do you know what I mean? I’m sure erm one of our main drivers is that we want to prevent people being future victims, and I think that, yeah, I think those sorts of thoughts are behind some of the ways that we behave in assessments. (Sam)

Here, Sam indicates how thoughts about potential reoffending, and fear of being “the person that missed something that was relevant” might impact psychologists’ approach to assessments. Adshead (2014) explicitly suggests that the motivation to avoid blame for clients committing serious further offences could act as a “powerful inducement to detain longer” (p. 8). Similarly, Stanford (2009) and McDermott (2014) discuss the implications for professionals working in a climate of fear – both fear of clients harming themselves or others and fear of “being blamed when things go wrong” (Stanford, 2009, p. 1065). Stanford argues that fear of errors has a coercive impact on practice; Adshead (2014) comments that practitioners are vulnerable to making decisions on the basis of avoiding judgement and criticism by colleagues rather than on the basis of the risk and needs of the clients. Stanford argues that social workers are more vulnerable to “defensive and morally conservative practices” (p. 1078) when they feel unsafe. In this way, the approach to and conclusions of psychological assessments could be determined by broader contextual issues that are not directly related to an individual prisoner’s risk (Gobeil & Serin, 2010). This prospect will be explored in more detail in Chapter 7. The sense of the weight given to psychological assessment, and the consequent fear of errors, might go some way to explain why psychologists have been described as more risk-averse than other professionals (Forde, 2014). This idea is supported by some participants in this study:

Usually that the psychologist is saying no they’re too risky and other people are saying it’s OK for them to move on. So I think it’s probably not, probably less usual for it to happen the other way (Laura).

There are challenging ethical issues here: if psychologists make recommendations in risk assessments in order to (understandably) avoid the “harsh scrutiny of hindsight bias” (Kemshall,
2009, p. 332), how does this impact on their consideration of their clients’ needs? As the psychologists who participated in this study suggested, the “client” can refer to the prisoner, the public (which must include the prisoner’s family and friends in addition to the victims) and the Parole Board. The client group arguably also includes the government or state, raising both the political implications of some sensitive risk assessments and also the economic implications of unnecessarily extended imprisonment. The British Psychological Society’s (BPS) Code of Conduct (BPS, 2009) stipulates that psychologists must balance up the competing needs of different clients, but psychologists may also need to be aware of the extent to which their own needs impact on their practice. It is not possible to draw any conclusions from the data collected for this study about the extent to which psychologists make overly cautious recommendations in order to contain their own anxiety. However a number of participants suggest that psychologists could be risk-averse in their recommendations, which has significant implications for practice. It is likely that supervision, reflection and peer discussion are part of the solution here (see Chapter 8).

Not surprisingly, given the weightiness of responsibility, exacerbated by the challenges of the context, psychologists describe taking specific behavioural and cognitive steps to cope. Notably, participants describe reminding themselves of their limits and the limits of risk assessment itself. For example, several participants are explicit that:

It’s not us that are making the decision. We are providing an opinion to the Parole Board which they may or may not agree with, but they are ultimately making that decision. (Ava)

The reminder that “it’s the Parole Board’s decision” (Karen) seems to help some psychologists to manage the burden of responsibility, as expressed by Vicky:

I think it comes back down to again the reminding ourselves of the fact that the ultimate decisions isn’t ours. … Erm, for me I need to be able to let some of that go and actually, I’ve done the best I can, the decision lies with somebody else because it’s too much responsibility.
This reminder of the limits of their responsibility helps psychologists to feel less isolated and more “part of a bigger picture” (Ava) or part of a team (Karen, Maria). Similarly, psychologists remind themselves of the limitations of risk assessment itself, in that “risk assessment is not an absolute science is it? It’s not a science and we get it wrong” (Steph). Psychologists acknowledge that risk assessments are “down to a matter of opinion” (Maria). This frank and open recognition of the limitations of risk assessment is also welcomed by Parole Board members (see Chapter 5) and seems to help some psychologists cope with the weighty nature of the task.

Finally, psychologists talk about managing responsibility via maintaining their professional standards. This is achieved by discussing the assessment with other professionals involved with the client (taking a team approach, see above: Maria, Alex); and seeking peer consultation or supervision (Charlie, Vicky, Laura). Supervision and peer support have been identified as factors that can ameliorate work related stress in correctional workers, especially women (Lindquist & Whitehead, 1986; Van Voorhis, Cullen, Link, & Wolfe, 1991). Importantly, maintaining professional standards also means ensuring assessments are thorough, defensible and evidence-based (Ava, Alex, Steph) – Claire sums this up well:

I’m kind of mindful that it probably holds a lot of weight, and it probably just compounds my own personal belief that when you write a report you write it to the best of your ability, and make sure it’s defensible, erm and that it’s well researched where it needs to be, it’s well evidenced based, and it’s not some kind of hare-brained ideas and proposals, it’s realistic.

**Weight of expectation.** In addition to the weight of responsibility, psychologists report a weight of expectation from key stakeholders in relation to their assessments. A number of psychologists describe the emphasis given to their risk assessments in Parole Board decisions as summed up by Alex:

You have to be mindful that, you know, for them there is no, there’s no fixed date when they’re getting out … and a lot rides on the psychologist’s assessment. Erm, so I think,
erm, you just, you have to be er, kind of empathic about that really and just recognise that for them this could cause a lot of fear. Because, you know, if the psychologist is saying something that is really negative, it can, it can change the course of the parole outcome.

Alex’s summary of the power psychologists hold in relation to decisions about the progression of ISPs is consistent with the analysis of prisoners’ contributions to this research (see Chapter 4) and also with other investigations into prisoners’ experiences of prison life (Crewe, 2011a; Crewe, 2012; Warr, 2008). Psychologists’ impressions that the Parole Board put a great deal of emphasis on psychological opinions when making decisions are similarly consistent with analysis of PBM’s interviews (Shingler, 2017; Shingler & Needs, 2018a; and see Chapter 5). The weight psychologists’ assessments can carry with the Parole Board is linked to other professionals’ reliance on psychological risk assessment. Psychologists report that frequently, Offender Managers and Offender Supervisors18 “won’t make an opinion of their own until they’ve seen ours” (Charlie) and they want the psychologist’s report in order to finalise their own assessment:

My deadline is 4 weeks before everyone else’s to give them time to, to read yours, decide what they think. Erm and I think that can be helpful, but it can make you feel very isolated and very alone and feel like there’s a lot of responsibility on your shoulders (Karen).

Karen’s comment encapsulates both the sense of weight and responsibility (see above), as well as the personal impact of this. Other psychologists describe the reliance on psychological opinion as “scary”, “stressful” (both Charlie) and “overwhelming” (Alex). Laura explains that sometimes stakeholders have “that expectation that the psychologist is going to have this sudden, I dunno, they’re expecting your [report] is suddenly going to explain everything”. Psychologists feel the pressure of this expectation to know the answers and to provide a clear-cut recommendation. The reality is that psychologists generally have to deal with chronic uncertainty.

18 Offender Managers are community based probation officers who manage a person’s sentence once s/he is released from custody. Offender Supervisors are prison-based, and can be probation officers or specially trained prison officers who manage the progression of a person’s sentence whilst they remain in custody.
(as discussed earlier) where the situation is often “...muddy and it’s not so clear” (Alex) especially when working with complex clients where “there is no obvious route for this person” or “where a path forward erm is, can at times be almost impossible to identify” (Lorna). Similarly, McDermott (2014) describes the challenges for healthcare professionals in “determining the ‘right’ interventions for individual patients amid the ‘swirl of data’ surrounding them” (p. 183; and see Kemshall, 1998). Austin et al. (2008) suggest that the weight of others’ expectation is a factor in psychiatrists’ experience of moral distress, and similarly note the uncertainty in psychiatry when making life changing decisions, “In psychiatry we know we’re limited” (p. 92, italics in original).

Psychologists describe balancing up evidence in the face of such uncertainty in order to make sensible and useful recommendations which are fair and proportionate for prisoners as well as sufficiently mindful of public protection: Austin et al. (2008) make the same point in relation to psychiatry. The weight given to psychological opinion in such important yet finely balanced decisions contributes to the sense of risk assessment as a “massive responsibility” as discussed above. Other participants discuss the value of a range of opinions in risk assessment and how this could make risk assessment more thorough and balanced. The reliance of other professionals on psychological assessment may well undermine this thorough multi-disciplinary approach (which Sam highlights as a strength of assessment within NHS settings). A “relational responsibility” approach to risk assessment (Austin et al., 2008), in which different professionals with different training, experience and priorities come together to provide their own perspective on a problem may well be part of the solution. A range of perspectives could facilitate the identification of different strengths and concerns which could result in a more rounded and comprehensive assessment of a prisoner. This in turn could contribute to alleviating the burden on psychologists, improving perceptions of fairness and balance amongst prisoners, as well as providing a better service to the Parole Board and the public. Some participants feel that a lack of confidence in risk assessment amongst other professional groups could underpin the reliance on psychological assessment. This in itself is worthy of investigation, to understand both whether a lack of
confidence is inhibiting relational responsibility in risk assessment, and what steps can be taken to build confidence amongst other professional groups.

**The trainee dilemma.** Many psychological risk assessments are completed by unqualified Forensic Psychologists in Training (FPITs). Qualified psychologists supervise FPITs and take clinical responsibility for their work. Contributions from both psychologists and prisoners suggest that FPITs conducting high stakes risk assessments presents significant difficulties, because “we have some who are, you know, refuse to be seen by a trainee, they want qualified” (Charlie), and “since I’ve got qualified a couple of the men that I’ve met with, one of their first questions is, ‘Are you a trainee?’ And one of them said, ‘I wouldn’t continue with you, if you were a trainee’” (Karen). Several psychologist interviewees empathise with prisoners’ perspectives; after all, prisoners are dependent on psychological assessment for progression through their sentence:

> I think some just genuinely don’t think that a trainee would be competent enough. The word “trainee” kind of indicates, a bit like, would you go and have a trainee hairdresser? Does kind of instantly make you think “ooh would they do it right?” (Claire)

And,

> A lot of us were trainees at that time and there was a perception, I can completely understand why by the title alone, that they were sending young unqualified people to just sort of test out and have the prisoners as guinea pigs. (Lorna)

These participants recognise why prisoners might be anxious about being assessed by an FPIT (see also Crewe, 2011a & b), a view which was also found amongst prisoner participants:

> They bring in trainees that are still studying, yet they’re writing reports about us that have a swing on our life, and they’re younger than us. (Martin, prisoner)

It might seem that the solution to this problem would be to have high stakes risk assessments conducted exclusively by qualified psychologists. However, as Jamie notes, this would be to the detriment of the profession, as no new psychologists would then ever become competent in risk assessment. This then presents the challenge of helping FPITs develop
competence in risk assessment, given that “it’s difficult to train somebody properly in risk assessments without them, without them doing them” (Charlie). Risk assessment is a high stakes task and “it’s not like they’re doing a trial run” (Charlie). Interestingly, some prisoners also recognise this. For example, John said:

Nobody can just wake up one morning and become a qualified psychologist.

Shawn’s view was similar:

They have to learn in the real world setting. A chef doesn’t stay at home and cook in the kitchen. He goes into, er, a restaurant kitchen to train in the field.

This is a challenging issue: how can psychologists in training develop competence in a difficult task, with significant short and long term implications, without actually carrying out the task? Learning by doing is arguably central to developing expertise in complex tasks (Sookermany, 2012). Yet, to allow FPiTs to conduct risk assessment creates the opportunity for errors that could put the public at risk and/or damage working relationships with prisoners which in itself could have long term risk management implications (Proulx et al., 2000). The current solution to this dilemma is that of supervised practice, in which trainees’ work is overseen by qualified psychologists who take clinical responsibility for decisions and outcomes. This requires significant investment from supervisors and also raises challenging issues of responsibility for supervisors:

I think there’s an added challenge of allowing someone to develop their voice as a practitioner; allowing them to make decisions, but particularly in the world of psychology, you know, also balancing that with the fact that I am accountable. (Lorna)

And similarly:

So having kind of the final overview and knowing the responsibility of the assessment and the outcome kind of comes back to you, when you’ve not met that individual and you are relying on the trainee passing on the information or erm being aware of the most important things to pass on because I don’t know what they’re not telling me. (Vicky)
This balance for supervisors, of developing trainees as competent and autonomous practitioners at the same time as being ultimately accountable for trainees’ risk assessments adds another element of weight to the already significant burden of responsibility, as described by Vicky above and elucidated earlier in this chapter.

The final strand to the trainee dilemma is qualified psychologists’ talk about how their practice has changed and improved with experience. A number of participants compared their approach to risk assessment when they were in training unfavourably with their current approach. Several talked about feeling daunted by risk assessment as trainees:

Erm, I would say that probably my experience has changed over time. When I initially started doing risk assessments, erm, it was when I first became a trainee, which was in a high security establishment. And although I had some guidance, I didn’t really get formal training and I suppose I was quite daunted by that and particularly because of the client group, erm, and additional to that I would say that the, the level of stress, work pressures, deadlines, case load, everything there was just huge. So it was, it was quite a pressured experience. (Ava)

Here, Ava reflects on how inexperience added to the environmental and interpersonal challenges, making risk assessment even more pressured and stressful. According to participants, FPITs seem to be particularly vulnerable to errors in key interpersonal skills that facilitate rapport building and enable prisoners to feel more comfortable and included in the assessment process, for example:

I think when you start, you know, we, we sort of drum into ourselves and into, into other people the importance about, you know, erm, competence, about confidentiality, about professionalism and boundaries, erm to the point where I think, you know people go in, go into an interview and think right, I must be very professional, I must have this and that, and can over-s, overlook sometimes the fact that you know, you’re just a person, you’re dealing with a person. (Alex)
Alex’s description encapsulates how lack of experience can result in interview behaviour that is distant and lacking in humanity, both of which have been found to be counterproductive in risk assessment interviewing (Shingler et al., 2017). Similarly, Maria describes how a lack of experience could result in over-reliance on specific techniques in interviews that in turn could undermine the process as a whole:

When I was less experienced, when you go on your training for your offending behaviour programmes and things, 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… and obviously you know why you’re doing it and you know why it’s important. So erm, 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 (sighs) erm, yeah, I think it’s about confidence in your own ability to kind of make a judgment as well.

Maria’s description is consistent with Stiles, Honos-Webb and Surko (1998), who describe the therapeutic alliance not as a technique in itself but as reflecting “the responsive use of techniques” (p. 448). A number of psychologists describe how FPITs are more vulnerable to rigidity in assessments, tending to stick to the script rather having “some kind of free-flowing conversation where you’re eliciting information which prob- which format tends to mean you can get more useful information” (Claire). Additionally, Alex describes how experience and confidence enables psychologists to communicate more naturally during risk assessment interviews:

So I think you move from a point where you have perhaps quite a fixed interview schedule, thinking I need to hit these points to erm a position where you go into the interview and can just say, you know, “So why are we here? Tell me about yourself, tell me about your life. How did you get to be in this position?” And you have a much more, to be able to have a much more natural conversation which nevertheless ticks all those points on your list.
There is related evidence from research into treatment outcomes that clients do better in therapy when they perceive their therapists to be confident and competent (Saunders, 1999) – it is plausible that a natural, relaxed, informal and yet focused style is an indicator of confidence and competence. Add to that the need to develop a working alliance via the responsive use of specific techniques (Stiles et. al, 1998), for which there can never be a manual, and it is easy to see how less experienced psychologists may run into difficulties.

It seems, then, that FPITs are more vulnerable to a “tick box” approach (Karen and Steph, psychologists; Martin and Ezra, prisoners; Shingler et al., 2017) to risk assessment interviewing. It is worth also considering the role of structured professional judgement (SPJ) tools in creating or prolonging this vulnerability. Interestingly, some of the (qualified) participants describe how the use of SPJs helps them to “kind of set the boundaries and give your work credibility” (Alex). Being thorough, conscientious and using established, empirically derived SPJs seem to provide psychologists with the reassurance that they are doing a difficult task not only to the best of their ability, but defensibly, using the most widely accepted and familiar knowledge to support them in their decision making. This is consistent with Clarke’s (2013) view that feeling competent and developing competence as a professional is a key component of workplace resilience. Feeling more confident in turn helps with managing the responsibility of high stakes assessment. However, for FPITs who may be looking for reassurance in the use of an SPJ, but are yet to develop a way of incorporating a structured risk assessment into a natural conversation, the use of SPJs may impact negatively on their interpersonal approach to the risk assessment interview. Finding the balance of “having natural conversation which nevertheless ticks all those points on your list” (Alex, above) would seem to be a priority of risk assessment training (Shingler et al., 2017).

In summary, psychologists talk about greater experience enabling them to be more confident, thorough, measured, more responsive to prisoners’ needs, and more able to communicate naturally during an assessment. These are important skills to facilitate the
development of rapport and build trust and confidence in prisoners being assessed (Shingler et al., 2017). Related to this is the notion of future responsibility, and being a “gatekeeper” (Karen), which is explored in relation to the weight of responsibility above. It is acknowledged by both prisoners and psychologists that when prisoners have poor assessment experiences, in which they feel demeaned, ignored, de-personalised or stereotyped, this could impact their future engagement both with psychological assessment and also with risk management in general (as described by Lorna, above). It is possible that being assessed by trainees, especially those who lack experience and confidence to have fluid but professional boundaries, a natural conversational yet assertively focused style, and make a human connection, could unwittingly contribute to the troubled relationships between psychologists and prisoners identified in this study and reported elsewhere in the literature (Maruna, 2011; Gannon & Ward, 2014).

Summary: Risk assessment as a weighty task. Risk assessment is experienced as a weighty task by psychologists, who describe a burdensome sense of personal responsibility to get risk assessment “right”, and meet competing demands as best they can. Psychologists cope with the responsibility for making life-changing decisions, as well as dealing with others’ expectations of them to know the answers or be able to solve the problems at hand. This contributes to a sense of stress and pressure resulting in risk assessment being a negative experience for some psychologists. Additionally, some prisoners do not want to be assessed by trainees when so much is at stake. Psychologists empathise with this, yet are often left with little option, as a result of resource pressure. The dilemma of developing competence amongst trainees is experienced as challenging, in that the best way to learn is to do the task. However, it is apparent that the improvements in practice that come with experience potentially have far-reaching consequences in terms of psychologist/prisoner relationships, the legitimacy of psychological assessment and future risk management.
Chapter Three

Summary and Conclusions

Prison-based psychologists conduct risk assessments within a challenging context, characterised by pressure of limited resources and of the environment. The context creates stress and anxiety, which is exacerbated by the weightiness of the task. Risk assessment is experienced as a significant personal responsibility. Psychologists feel the weight of expectation from key stakeholders. Qualified psychologists also have to manage the dilemma of trainee psychologists conducting high stakes risk assessment. However, the picture is not entirely bleak, and the negative experiences are balanced with sense of creative discovery and satisfaction, as well as high professional standards and a sense of realism about the limitations of risk assessment. It is important to understand more about the experiences of this little researched group; increased understanding can pave the way for recommendations that will act to ameliorate some of the stress, as well as improve the service offered to stakeholders, including prisoners and the Parole Board. These are discussed further in Chapters 7 and 8.
Chapter Four: Indeterminate Sentenced Prisoners’ Experiences of having Psychological Risk Assessments

This chapter reports the results arising mainly from the analysis of the contributions of indeterminate sentenced prisoners (ISPs). The prisoner participants are described in detail in Chapter 2. Analysis reveals a multi-layered experience of risk assessment (Figure 4.1). First, and consistent with the analysis of the psychologists’ contributions (see Chapter 3), the negative impact of the prison environment is summed up by the super-ordinate category “Volatility, Violence, Suffering”. This is depicted as the backdrop to the other aspects of prisoners’ experience, as prisoners and risk assessment are embedded within, and impacted by, the prison environment. Within the environment, and depicted as more directly influencing the process of risk assessment, are two sub-categories, “Feeling Stuck, Powerless and out of Control”, and “Psychologists as Untrustworthy yet Powerful”. In the interviews, prisoners spontaneously talk about other aspects of their prison lives that do not relate directly to risk assessment. It is likely, therefore, that these categories are relevant to prisoners’ broader experiences of serving indeterminate prison sentences, and some of the quotations provided are not exclusively about risk assessment. However, risk assessment is described by a number of prisoners as being part of their prison experience. It is reasonable to conclude, then, that issues affecting prisoners generally are also relevant to risk assessment. Finally, the category labels reflect the negative experiences reported by prisoners, as these were the most commonly described. Nonetheless, a number of prisoners describe a greater sense of self-efficacy in relation to managing their life sentences, a more positive attitude towards a system which they see as helpful and supportive, and more positive relationships with psychologists. These experiences will be described where relevant to each category to provide balance and as ideas for overcoming the more pervasive negative attitudes and experiences described by prisoners.
Violence, Volatility, Suffering

Colin describes how “there’s suffering going on that, that people don’t know about” in prison. It is within a context of suffering that psychological risk assessment is conducted. Prisoners describe a range of areas of suffering, including threats to their physical safety, emotional and interpersonal suffering, feeling disconnected from their lives outside of prison and feeling infected by prison culture and norms. The sense of prison as causing suffering is entirely consistent with Sykes’ (1958) reflections on the “pains of imprisonment”. Ron, Malcolm and Daniel’s experience of suffering involves fearing violence, witnessing violence, or being the target of threats or actual violence. John describes his experiences of violence in prison, where physical assaults come out of nowhere, and “the slightest little thing can escalate”:

I mean I’ve seen guys get their throat cut over moving somebody’s toast on the toaster. I couldn’t believe - that was a shock to me. I’d never seen anything like that in my life, but that’s what you’re dealing with.

Di Viggiani’s (2007) prison ethnographic research describes similar examples of extreme violence arising from insignificant events. Sim (1994) reflects on violence as central to prison life. Blagden and Perrin (2016) describe the impact of constant fear for personal safety amongst a
group of sexual offenders; fear interfered with their ability to think and reflect on their problems and past behaviour, something that is an essential requirement of risk assessment.

Both Malcolm and Jim talk about seemingly trivial things taking on greater significance in prison. In the same way that John describes how physical violence could arise out of apparently insignificant slights, Jim reflects on how things that one might take for granted or not even notice outside of prison (such as missing a gym or library session) take on a much greater significance in prison, and cause more emotional distress:

Things take on a weight that you don’t understand if, if, if, if you don’t - I’m not saying if you haven’t been in prison but if you don’t know the prison environment quite well, or you don’t understand the disproportionate weight that goes with some things, or the potential for what might be going on.

Jim’s comment is similar to Colin’s contribution in the first line of this chapter – the sense that prisoners are somehow isolated from the rest of the world, and that outsiders would struggle to understand what prison is like (see Stein & Tuval-Mashiach, 2015). Jim explains how “it’s a really lonely experience going through prison”. In general, emotional and interpersonal suffering is described by a number of participants (as well as by Irwin & Owen, 2005; Liebling & Maruna, 2005; Sykes, 1958). Malcolm describes prison as suffocating:

N’t that’s the madness, y’know what I mean, cos you can get - sometimes I get up in the night times crying. I get up sometimes and I feel like y’know suffocated, like the walls are closer, suffocated, need air, n’t that can’t breathe, thass, I think that’s institutionalisation.

Similar to Malcolm’s description of feeling closed in, Daniel describes how emotions are repressed in prison (di Viggiani, 2006), meaning “it’s hard cos you haven’t really got an outlet” when feeling stressed or angry. Peter believes prison “makes you more bitter against the system”

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19 Crawley (2004) similarly suggests that working in prisons results in prison officers supressing feelings of concern and compassion for prisoners. This would imply that the prison environment itself has an impact on emotional expression, rather than this being solely a psychological characteristic of some prisoners.
which he feels has done nothing to rehabilitate him (see also di Viggiani, 2007; James, 2003).

Peter experiences prison as harsh and degrading:

They treat you like dogs and expect you to behave like saints, and it doesn’t work like that. You can’t kick a dog and expect it to love you, you know, but that’s, that’s how the system works.

Malcolm describes suffering resulting from being separated from families:

My mum my grandmother, she got kids bangin on her front door tryin to rob her. Yeah because these are real things y’see, y’see when you’re a lifer, you’re powerless n’that yeah for things outside. You only got phone calls, n’you got people round you n’that yeah, it’s hard n’that if you’ve got kids n’things, you your girlfriend’s in prison or summin, your girlfriend’s on drugs, or your girlfriend’s outside, or she’s struggling to come to visit you. N’sometimes those are the most important things to a lifer, cos this is your people, it’s the bond.

It is apparent from Malcolm’s comments that he finds it difficult to cope with the worry about his family. The sense of powerlessness he feels as an indeterminate sentence prisoner exacerbates this (powerlessness will be discussed in more detail in the next section). Schinkel (2014) describes a similar sense of powerlessness over outside relationships amongst her sample of long term prisoners. In her sample, participants coped with long sentences by narrowing their horizons to their prison lives, trying to shut out the outside, including blocking contact with family and friends and “keeping your head inside the walls” (p. 73). This approach implies that some prisoners cope with prison via “role segmentation” (Ashforth et al., 2000), that is, forming distinct and non-overlapping roles (“prisoner”, “non-prisoner”). According to Ashforth et al., role segmentation makes transition between roles (i.e., returning to the non-prisoner role) much harder, thereby extending the suffering experienced in prison into future life. Thus, a role segmentation approach to coping with prison life is likely to exacerbate loneliness and interpersonal suffering in the long term.
Some participants report a more positive approach to managing their lengthy and unpredictable sentences. Retaining a sense of one’s own identity and not succumbing to the “prisoner” role seem to be instrumental in this. John describes how being “my own man” has been an important aspect of his ability to cope.\(^\text{20}\) This has implications for rehabilitation that are beyond the scope of this chapter.

A number of prisoners describe the specific impact of prison on their ability to trust, for example:

Trust in prison is a very difficult thing, because obviously there’s a lot of predators in prison who try to gain people’s trust for sinister reasons. So you have, you know, you been, you’re guard’s up. (John)

Peter talks about the expectations on prisoners participating in group treatment programmes:

And you gotta trust them people to keep what’s said in that room, which is near on impossible.

Peter also describes how showing emotion makes prisoners vulnerable (see also di Viggiani, 2006):

In this environment you cannot show your weaknesses because you, you know, you got more inmates sat round you in these courses and some of them will take advantage of you being emotional.

These descriptions are particularly salient when considering risk assessment, where prisoners are expected to disclose sensitive, personal information to the people assessing them. Clearly some are doing this in a context of feeling vulnerable and unable to trust others. Referring again to Ashforth et al. (2000), this means that prisoners have to make a transition from the “prisoner” role, defined by emotional guardedness, suspicion and distance from others, to the

\(^{20}\) John was one of only two participants who had never been in prison prior to his current conviction and indeterminate sentence. This may help to explain why he was more able to retain a sense of his non-prisoner role/identity.
“risk assessment interview participant” role in which they are expected to be fully open about thoughts and feelings. Given that these roles are so distinct, transition is likely to be challenging (Ashforth et al., 2000). This underlines the importance of understanding the context in which risk assessment is conducted and how that context may influence what is disclosed during a risk assessment interview (Crighton & Towl, 2008; Shingler & Needs, 2018b; and see Chapter 7 for further discussion).

Some prisoners specifically describe the negative impact of the prison environment and their peers on risk assessment. Shawn describes how you can “hear these horror stories [and] you believe them”. Both prisoners and psychologists mention the influence of the publication “Inside Time” on prisoners’ attitudes towards psychologists, and how detrimental this could be to prisoners’ capacity for trusting relationships with psychologists. John reports that he “managed to distance myself from the negativity, because, believe me, it is, if you get caught in that it is very difficult to break away from it”. He believes that psychological risk assessment should happen very early in someone’s sentence “because when somebody first comes into prison, you’ve got a very small window to capture them before they get all the negativity brought up”. Prisoners are thus caught within a complex web of relationships in prison (Nolan & Walsh, 2012) that have the potential to exert powerful influence on their expectations and behaviour (Pycroft, 2014), including within risk assessment. For example, collective opinion of psychologists as untrustworthy and adversarial could create expectations of untrustworthiness amongst prisoners who have never met a psychologist. This in turn potentially creates even greater barriers for psychologists to overcome in the risk assessment interview - there is certainly evidence that expectations influence outcomes in other settings (Ross et al., 2008). Similarly, Safran and Muran (2000) note how clients’ interpersonal expectations and beliefs influence their behaviour, which in turn affects the behaviour of therapists. Expectations of untrustworthiness from prisoners will inevitably impact their behaviour in risk assessment interviews – how they respond to particular

21 https://insidetime.org/, a national newspaper for prisoners and detainees.
questions, the fullness of their answers, the openness with which they describe their current and previous difficulties. Psychologists will inevitably make interpretations and judgements about the nature of the prisoner’s behaviour in the interview, and how this might (or might not) relate to the nature and extent of his risk (Shingler & Needs, 2018b). Awareness of these complex processes is essential in breaking out of these unhelpful and self-perpetuating patterns (Pycroft, 2014). Psychologists having the knowledge and confidence to acknowledge, name and collaboratively reflect on prisoners’ expectations of psychologists in risk assessment could also help here. Safran and Muran (2000) describe the value of metacommunication in mending ruptures to the therapeutic alliance and this is equally relevant to the working relationship in risk assessment. Additionally, reaching prisoners earlier in their sentences, before they are unduly influenced by the negative attitudes and expectations of others, could contribute to more engagement and cooperation with risk assessment.

John speaks comparatively positively about prison, and how it has helped him to identify and address the problems that resulted in his offending. He (and others) emphasise the importance of developing an understanding of themselves and their crimes (Ferrito, Needs & Adshead, 2017) for example:

Well, for me, I think you have to really look at erm, you know why you’ve done what you’ve done. Nobody – I’m in for [a serious violent offence]. Nobody just wakes up in the morning and, you know decides they’re gonna try and [commit a serious violent offence].

John emphasises the value of supportive relationships with prison staff in enabling him to achieve this understanding (Ferrito et al., 2017):

I was very lucky that I engaged with people who could help me talk about it and could help me understand that, you know, there is erm a process that you go through, you know, all the guilt and all that type o’ stuff. But you’ve got, you you’ve got to talk about it.

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22 Details of offence have been removed to protect the anonymity of the participant.
John’s experience of the value of supportive and empathic professionals in helping him to address his offending is consistent with findings from Lowenkamp, Holsinger, Robinson, and Alexander (2014) which indicated that clients of more motivational probation officers had better recidivism outcomes. There is also evidence that a warm, empathic and directive treatment style yields treatment gains not obtained by hostile therapists (Marshall et al., 2005).

**Summary: Violence, volatility, suffering.** Prisoners describe the environment in which they live on a daily basis as characterised by violence, volatility and suffering. The contextual issues will be explored in more detail in Chapter 7, but it is reasonable to conclude that as risk assessment is conducted within such an environment, it cannot fail to be impacted by it (Harding, 2014; Hough, 2010; Rubin, 2017). Even within this environment, some prisoners are able to find opportunities for change and growth. Supportive relationships with staff and prisoners having the confidence and strength to retain a sense of agency and a sense of their own non-prisoner identity (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) seem to facilitate prisoners to make use of these opportunities.

The next section goes on to explore the two sub-ordinate categories which describe prisoners’ experiences of having risk assessments completed on them. When considering the categories of “feeling stuck, powerless and out of control” and “psychologists as untrustworthy, yet powerful” it is important to bear in mind that these specific sets of experiences sit within an already hostile and unsympathetic environment. This is particularly interesting and challenging when one considers what is required of prisoners in risk assessment interviews. They are asked to reflect at length and in depth on the full range of their offending, as well as on the catalogue of psychological, social and environmental problems that they have experienced throughout their lives, at all times knowing that the outcome of the interview could mean the difference between possible release, move to a lower security, “open” prison, or a further lengthy period of incarceration.
Feeling Stuck, Powerless and Out of Control

As discussed in Chapter 1, the life sentence has a significant and far reaching impact (Cullen & Newell, 1999; Jewkes, 2005) and this is reflected in the contributions of the prisoners in this study. Descriptions of personal reactions to receiving a life sentence are coloured by a sense that their futures are no longer their own and that they are now a tiny part of a much bigger system. John explains how when he received his life sentence “the impact is incredible. It is, it is, it’s incredible because you know, that light is very far off and you think about how am I going to get there”. Ezra explains:

When I got a long sentence I thought to myself, OK, I’ll be able to address whatever they feel say I need to address beforehand. But every time I get closer, the goal posts, the goal posts get moved a bit further, yeah, understand?

Ezra’s description reflects the sense of stuckness and powerlessness, in that the steps he thinks he is taking to progress do not necessarily result in the outcome he expects. Ezra’s experience of his IPP sentence as unrelenting and arbitrary is consistent with other commentaries (Jacobson & Hough, 2010; Strickland & Garton Grimwood, 2013). A number of other participants describe the feeling of being stuck in prison by virtue of the indeterminate sentence, not knowing for certain when or if they will ever be released. There is a sense of life being wasted by waiting around in prison for things that may or may not help you to progress as described by Jude, who reflects “I could wait two years to get a place on the assessment just to be told I don’t need to do it, right?” Peter describes how he is “just sat here waiting for things to happen” and Malcolm explains how he is “just hangin’ on n’hangin’ on, thinking well, where’s this move, like? Like when am I goin’ to see this new, this new course I’m gonna do or whatever?” The frustration of feeling “warehoused” whilst waiting for courses is noted by Blagden and Perrin (2016, p. 37); Jewkes (2005) similarly describes pointless waiting, not knowing when, if ever, the indeterminate sentence would come to an end, as summed up by Peter:
Chapter Four

It’s like I said to you, it’s just, just dead end, it’s just er, just wake up and think “another day, another day, another day” and that’s how it works, it’s just a total waste of time.

Colin says “It’s done its job the life sentence now”, explaining “well it’s finished me, I’ve got nothing”. His comments reflect a sense of resignation and hopelessness about his situation, in that he feels stuck and powerless to do anything about it. Colin’s experience mirrors the findings of Schinkel (2014) who describes a sense of resigned acceptance amongst her participants, as a means of coping with long prison sentences. Malcolm describes a similar sense of being lost in the system, overlooked and forgotten about:

N’when you’re long doing a long time, it’s like y’feel like you’re left on a shelf sometimes.

Prisoners’ experiences of being stuck in the system, of lacking any sense of agency over their lives or the progression of their sentences (Goffman, 1961; Irwin & Owen, 2005; Liebling, 2011) are particularly salient when it comes to risk assessment. ISPs are dependent on favourable risk assessments and positive Parole Board decisions in order to progress through the prison system and into the community on a life license. To this end, the sense of powerlessness and lack of control experienced by ISPs is real - ISPs do not actually have control over their futures and can feel “powerless to do anything about it so you just get on with it” (Colin; and see Crewe, 2011b; Goffman, 1961; Jewkes, 2005; Warr, 2008). Decisions are made about ISPs by professionals in prison and by the Parole Board, so, as Ron says “they don’t know when they’re going to walk out that door”. Similarly Shawn explains “it’s not pleasant because one person’s opinion can affect your future”. Risk assessment is experienced as an integral “part of the process really that you’ve gotta go through” (Colin); “part of the system” (Peter) and “part of the process of being a life sentenced prisoner” (Shawn), further reinforcing prisoners’ lack of choice and control. Martin specifically states that “I haven’t got a choice in the matter”. Malcolm resigns himself to a lack of control over risk assessment:

Well it don’t bother me cos erm I know I’ll have to do that anyway to get out as a lifer, I have to, you have to do what they tell you to do.
Contrastingly, Ezra recognises the subtleties of choice:

You have got a choice, innit whether to go for that assessment or not to go for that assessment. But like I say there are always pros and cons, understand, and it’s whether or not you are willing to take the consequences on board or not.

For ISPs the consequences are potentially life changing – they could mean the difference between release or not, progression to open prison (as a key step towards release) or not, as explained by Daniel:

You know but my thoughts are, I’m, on the one hand, I’m nervous about it because like these reports could determine whether I get my D-cat or not. D’you know what I mean?

Daniel describes his feelings about the process of his current parole review: “I just feel like I don’t know where I am. I feel helpless”. This experience is consistent with Liebling (2011) who describes prisoners as feeling trapped, vulnerable and hopeless as a result of risk assessment.

Daniel also describes how the whole parole process (including assessment) has affected him:

I’ve never been so stressed in my life like after my erm adjournment. This time a few weeks ago I had to go healthcare like, I felt I was having a heart attack, like. They said it’s down to like, stress and anxiety.

Risk assessment is experienced similarly negatively by many of the participants, and in this way, it is another element of suffering. Participants describe risk assessment as “daunting” (John and Jude) “horrible” (Colin), “terrible” (Ron), and “stressful”, “scary”, and “disconcerting” (Shawn; see Attrill & Liell, 2007, Crewe, 2011b and Liebling, 2011 for similar descriptions of prisoners’ experiences). The “pains of risk assessment” (Shingler et al., 2017, p. 4), then, are at least partly attributable to the lack of control over one’s own destiny, the sense that one’s future is in someone else’s hands, and the arbitrary and opaque nature of risk assessment, as summed up by Jim:

I think the high stakes nature of risk assessment for ISPs is really important because you can sit there second guessing, have no idea what’s going on. It’s so nerve-wracking,
particularly when you come up on, on, erm, parole in an open prison. So terrified that any bit of information, you know, I walked on the grass yesterday, you know, is there going to be a report in about that? Not knowing what they think or what they know and erm it’s just really terrifying. It is really terrifying. And that’s not, I would, that’s not me saying that, it’s really common amongst a lot of people I’ve known.

Shawn similarly reflects on the high stakes nature of risk assessment, and how a risk assessment could determine his future:

So you’re constantly trying to second guess in your head, and you can’t, it’ll be on the day we’ll have a very deep discussion I’m sure. But you can’t help worrying and thinking about it, erm, and the same with reports. If, if you’re having an interview, and someone’s going away to write a report: what’re they gonna say, how’s this gonna affect me?

Both Jim and Shawn describe trying to “second guess” the assessor’s thoughts and opinions during assessment, and both are conscious of how things they have said or may have done (however trivial) might affect them. This experience of competing subjectivities, and how this might affect the assessment process and the participants, will be explored in more depth in Chapter 7.

Whilst a number of prisoners describe a lack of power and control over their lives and futures, there is a sense from others that it is possible to influence risk assessment decisions. John describes how he approached his sentence with clear goals, and engaged immediately with the help he was offered in order to understand his offending and deal with the psychological problems that contributed to it. However, many prisoners are not equipped with this level of insight, skill and forethought. Indeed, a number of prisoners seemed to lack a basic understanding of their situation: one man in this very small sample did not understand the nature of his indeterminate sentence – he believed he had a release date. John notes this, commenting “you [get] people doing IPP sentences who don’t even understand the sentence”. Whilst recognising the importance of risk assessment, some prisoners do not understand it, and what they need to
do to influence it. Some do not understand static risk assessments and how they are calculated; others do not understand that risk assessment focuses on the risk of future reoffending, and may not be determined solely by good prison behaviour. When asked what he thought a good risk assessment would be like, Colin responded “Er, a risk assessment, risk for, I don’t know really, cos I, risk for what?” This man has been in prison for over thirty years yet does not seem to understand what risk assessment is. It is unlikely, then, that Colin would feel he had any power to influence risk assessments and their recommendations. Colin’s experiences seem not to be unique or even that unusual. A joint inspection of the management of life sentenced prisoners (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection, 2013) found that in many cases, uncertainty, inconsistency and confusion characterised the management of lifers throughout their sentences, with prison staff at times not knowing how to best advise them (Crewe, 2011b). Shingler et al. (2017) discuss the importance of clarity and transparency in the risk assessment interview, and it seems that this needs to be extended to cover the whole process of the indeterminate sentence and risk assessment in general. Interestingly, there is some motivation to make other aspects of the process, including Parole Board decision making more transparent (Hardwick, 2017) which can only improve perceptions of fairness (Tyler & Huo, 2002) and hopefully increase the sense of risk assessment as a collaborative process (Shingler & Mann, 2006; Shingler et al., 2017).

In addition to the stress created by the implications of assessment, the actual process of assessment can be stressful, including reliving details of offences, described by some as “frustrating” (Daniel) and “draining” (Shawn). Some prisoners feel risk assessment weights the past too heavily and they want more focus on the future. Shawn describes a positive assessment experience in which “there was positive engagement about the future and about how I felt about life not, not on a murder that happened twenty five years ago”. John feels that being goal directed, and having a sense of hope for the future have been key to his success. Malcolm explicitly describes the value of hope for him, which a more future-focused assessment could provide:
Give em hope I suppose, by saying, oh, you will get out in the end, you will get through this. Cos a lot of time you don’t hear it, you don’t hear that mention. You don’t hear like you are, one day you are gonna get out, n’that yeah. You do hear it sometimes probably but I never heard it.

Similarly, Daniel believes that a focus on strengths or “the good stuff” would result in a more hopeful and balanced approach to assessment and intervention:

I used to say every now and again “Why can’t we talk about some good stuff? Like why are we s’like two and a half years in therapy and all we wanna talk about it all the bad? Why doesn’t nobody wanna talk about the good?” D’you know what I mean? It’s like sometimes you talk about so much bad it’s like you can forget that there was ever any good. Just like I find, you know, I think thinking about the good stuff I, I, I think’d be just a healthy as thinking about the bad stuff.

Daniel’s view is consistent with strengths-based approaches (Ward & Stewart, 2003) which describe the advantages of broader and more positive intervention models, including increased motivation and more complete, holistic and individually relevant intervention and risk management planning. Taking a similar approach to assessment, which explores strengths and goals alongside problems and deficits, could begin to overcome some of the hopelessness and fear experienced by prisoners.

Psychologists as Untrustworthy yet Powerful

On the whole, the prisoners interviewed for this study report not trusting psychologists (see also Crewe, 2011b; 2012; Maruna, 2011; Sparks, 1998; Warr, 2008). Martin extends this mistrust to the entire profession “I think their credibility’s completely in tatters”. Some prisoners are cynical about psychologists’ motives. For example, Jude believes “they are thinking about the pay cheque rather than the job”. A more commonly reported suspicion is that psychologists are motivated by finding reasons to keep prisoners incarcerated, for example, “I felt they were trying to nit-pick and keep me in for nothing really” (Colin). There is suspicion that psychologists
deliberately try to trick prisoners into disclosing things that would indicate risk – for example Malcolm describes being asked “a trick question”. Peter describes his perspective:

[Psychologists] ask you these repetitive questions, thinking you’re not going to click on that they’re repetitive questions about the same thing, wait for you to give a different answer, so then they can pounce on you and go, “Well you said this earlier, you said that earlier, and you said this earlier”. They’re just trying to catch you out, make your life in here longer.

Warr (2008) similarly reported his view that psychologists were “…not there to help me but to aid and abet the prison in controlling me” (p. 214). For some men, mistrust of psychologists has arisen from personal experiences in which they have felt misled or misrepresented. For others mistrust is a result of listening to prison talk about psychologists and risk assessment, as described above. Mistrust also seems to be either created or exacerbated by a sense of distance from psychologists (Shingler & Needs, 2018b):

They are in the prison all day. The only time you see them if is they are risk assessing you, if they’re doing a facility course. They don’t want to sit down and interact with you on a normal - and I have to say that’s a very bad approach. (Ezra)

Ezra goes on to explain that if psychologists could “find time to engage with prisoners on a normal day to day basis” then that would make a substantial difference to working relationships in risk assessment. In the same way that prisoners describe interpersonal distance and a lack of humanity creating suspicion and hostility (see Chapter 6 and Shingler et al., 2017), physical distance is seen as equally unhelpful by prisoners. Physical distance is seen to reduce the opportunity for a human connection (Shingler et al., 2017) as well as reducing opportunities to break down barriers of suspicion and mistrust. It may also be that more contact with psychologists outside of the risk assessment interview, more familiarity with psychologists, their interpersonal styles, expectations and ways of working, enables easier role transition from
“prisoner” to “risk assessment participant” (Ashforth et al., 2000), making the actual process of risk assessment less stressful for prisoners.

As well as being physically distant, prisoners see psychologists as experientially distant from them. There is a sense of psychologists being so different from prisoners that they could not possibly understand them or their lives:

And psychologists are coming from, without, without no disrespect but you’re coming from a normal, whatever you could class as normal but there the standard hierarchy or standing in life. You’ve never really gone without food, you’ve never been homeless, you’ve never had a dysfunctional family, nine times out of ten, er, yeah, poor education.

(Ron)

Clearly Ron is making assumptions about psychologists here, and there may well be psychologists working within Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) who have experienced significant life-course adversity. However, there is also likely to be some truth in Ron’s perspective – in many cases, there is a substantial experiential distance between prisoners and psychologists. One area in which this is most apparent is that of age and gender: whilst specific figures are not available in the public domain, experience indicates that a large number of psychologists working in HMPPS are women, and many, especially those still in training, are likely to be much younger than the men they are assessing. Martin sums up his feelings of resentment about this:

They bring in trainees that are still studying, yet they’re writing reports about us, that have a swing on our life and they’re younger than us.

Having high stakes assessments completed by trainees is particularly challenging for some prisoners (Crewe, 2011a). The idea of “people with no experience, or very little life experience, having control over your life” (Jude) can cause substantial resentment. This reluctance to be assessed by trainees is also acknowledged by psychologists’ descriptions of the “trainee dilemma” (see Chapter 3). Jim suggests potential reasons for this resentment:
I think there’s a, there’s a cultural problem in that people in prison, prisoners particularly I think it’s, you know, it’s an easier place, I think there’s a gender issue as well, in that, erm, er, you know, wicked witch of the west, kind of, er, you know, definitely gendered. I don’t know what percentage of prison psychologists are women but it’s pretty high and erm, you know, I think that a lot of men in prison have issues [around], relationships, bad histories, that kind of thing. There’s a culture and I think it’s gendered, of mistrust and, I don’t know how you change that.

Whilst some of the resentment and suspicion around trainee psychologists may be to do with prisoners’ misogynistic attitudes or beliefs, it is also important to recognise that it might be a completely normal reaction to having much younger people make life changing decisions, as described by Claire (psychologist) and discussed in Chapter 3 (“would you go and have a trainee hairdresser? Does kind of instantly make you think, ooh, would they do it right?”). Many of us might feel uncomfortable with a General Practitioner or other medic who is substantially younger than us. It is not unreasonable to want someone with skill and experience to make a recommendation that could mean the difference between release and additional years in prison. There is no clear solution to this problem, other than substantial efforts in interviews to listen, understand, treat prisoners as individuals and make a human connection with them (Shingler et al, 2017). What is apparent from the prisoners’ contributions is that being assessed by young, unqualified psychologists undermines their trust in the profession of psychology and affects their perception of the legitimacy of psychological assessment in general (Shingler & Needs, 2018b; and see Chapter 7 for further discussion).

Another element to prisoners’ mistrust of psychologists results from prisoners not feeling known or respected as individuals. Malcolm, Peter, Martin and Ezra all believe that psychologists pay too much attention to prisoners’ files and do not spend enough time with the prisoner himself:
Cos the problem with some psychologists is like they can believe the paper too much.

They read, but not see the person. (Malcolm)

Ross et al. (2008) similarly comment on the potential for correctional workers to make decisions about a prisoner before they meet them, partly as a result of the allocation of pejorative labels within prison records. A number of prisoner participants make comments indicating the value of feeling known as individuals. Shawn’s comments suggest that spending more time with the psychologist in an assessment enabled him to overcome his barriers and experience her as more trustworthy, which in turn enabled him to discuss his problems more openly:

It has been suggested that I’m sometimes too guarded and too defensive and not open enough with the professionals who I’m working with. I was so comfortable [when the psychologist spent more time with me] I could be completely open. Anything could be discussed and I didn’t feel uncomfortable discussing matters.

There is a view amongst the prisoner participants that having more contact and time with the psychologists results in a more accurate assessment. Peter directly attributes his dissatisfaction with his assessment to the lack of contact he had with the psychologist, commenting “how can someone form an opinion of you who’s never met you?” (see also Crewe, 2011b; Schinkel, 2014; Sparks, 1998). The procedural justice literature reveals that decisions that feel fairer elicit greater cooperation (Tyler & Huo, 2002): prisoners’ comments suggest that greater contact with the psychologist is one requirement for the perception of fairness. A greater level of professional interpersonal contact and more familiarity could also facilitate psychologists’ ability to be responsive to the individual prisoner (Stiles et al., 1998). However this suggestion will cause consternation amongst some about the objectivity of assessments in such circumstances.

There is an argument that psychologists might be more vulnerable to bias when they know prisoners better23 (HMIP, 2006). Or greater familiarity could result in unstructured clinical

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23 Interestingly, Grove et al. (2000) suggested that bias might be a reason for clinical judgement not outperforming mechanical procedures, but did not make any comment about whether clinical judgement tended to result in false positive or more false negative predictions. Their commentary, pointing to the
judgement interfering with risk assessment accuracy. It must be borne in mind here that although actuarial assessment tools have generally been shown to be more accurate than clinical judgement, they fall short of being entirely accurate, and they do not consistently outperform clinical judgement. Grove et al. (2000) found that in approximately half of the studies examined as part of a meta-analysis, there was no difference in the accuracy of clinical judgement and mechanical prediction. There are also limitations with regard to using nomothetic data to make individual level predictions – as noted in Chapter 1, Hart et al. (2007) suggest that individual level predictions arising from actuarial assessments are “virtually meaningless” (p. 60). This demonstrates the limitations of actuarial assessments, and the inevitability that clinical judgement will play a part in determining risk and need on an individual basis. There is a body of literature that discusses the balancing of theory with clinical expertise and experience (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Lilienfeld, Ritschel, Lynne, Cautin, & Latzman, 2013; Lowenkamp et al., 2012), and the value of this approach in complex cases. These issues will be discussed in more depth in Chapters 7 and 8.

The final, and one of the most important, threads to prisoners’ mistrust of psychologists is the view of psychologists as “the quiet ones with the power: what the psychologist says goes” (Shawn; see also Crewe, 2011b; Sparks, 1998; Warr, 2008). Jude believes psychologists have “too much” power and Ron describes the prison system as “psychology top-heavy”, where “everything’s a mind game”. Shawn describes how he sees psychologists holding the power in relation to release and progression decisions:

Even on parole boards, quite often, probation, wing staff may say “yeah, this person’s ready to progress” and psychology have said, “actually we think he’s still got a few risk factors that need working on”. Ok we’ll err on the side of caution and do that. So, so they’re seen as having a lot of power and influence in sentences.

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tendency in clinicians to overlook base rates, and their vulnerability to the representativeness and availability heuristics (see also Ireland, 2004) might suggest that clinicians are more vulnerable to false positives – predicting recidivism which does not occur.
Similarly, Martin believes the psychologist’s report “tips the scales” for ISPs in Parole decisions. Ezra feels that psychological assessment decisions can have “a dramatic impact” on ISPs. Jim is more explicit about how he thinks psychologists’ reports influence parole decisions:

If you’ve got an OM\(^{24}\) supporting you and a psychologist who’s not, you’re probably in trouble. If you’ve got a psychologist who’s supporting you and your OM isn’t, there’s more chance I think. Even if your OM is the person that, if you’ve got a psychologist who says “we think this person’s got an x, y, z”, you know, puts a fancy looking name on it, you’re really in trouble.

Jim’s experience is consistent with Crewe (2012), who reported the view that “it was the psychologists who held the key to captivity or release” (p. 121). Arguably in a coercive environment, there is a power imbalance in all relationships, and the psychologist/prisoner relationship is no different – the sense prisoners describe of being generally powerless in prison is described above. However, there seems to be something about the relationship between prisoners and psychologists that brings this power difference into sharper focus. For some prisoners, this seems to be about the magnitude of the power psychologists have, by virtue of the weight given to psychological reports (see Chapters 3 and 5), and the nature of the indeterminate sentence, as described above (and see Crewe, 2012; Warr, 2008). For others, the resentment of psychologists’ power stems from its being held by people who prisoners perceive as not being entitled to hold it, namely young and unqualified psychologists (see Chapter 3). For other prisoners, resentment stems from the power psychologists are perceived to have over how information is recorded and interpreted, when written information is so crucial to prisoners’ progression. A number of prisoners describe inaccurate information being recorded about them during assessments, and having no power to correct it. Some prisoners feel that decisions about their current situation and their futures are then made partly on the basis of inaccurate information – after all, errors would not be so problematic if they were inconsequential. Jude

\(^{24}\) OM is an abbreviation of “Offender Manager”, a community-based Probation Officer, responsible for the overall coordination of a prisoner’s sentence plan.
explains how incorrect details may have been removed from his prison file “but they still get used against me by psychologists and facilitators”. Martin similarly describes how something he said in an assessment was misinterpreted pejoratively in a psychological report:

Anyway she wrote in there that I said that I wouldn’t be upset or sad if my Nan died. Right now in my head I’m thinking “hmm, I would never say something like that. For a start my Nan’s like my mum so why would I?” What I said to her was I wouldn’t like to mope around, I’d try and keep things goin’ and not be erm, cos I know she wouldn’t want me to be like that. And what she’s gone then is she’s gone back and wrote that I wouldn’t be sad or upset.

There is a view from some prisoners that challenging errors could make things worse for them, in that their challenging could be interpreted through the lens of risk:

Daniel: I s’pose a lot of it depends on how the person puts themselves across y’know what I mean? But, you know if you’re told that you’ve got certain issue and you don’t agree with that, and then you kind of like try and put it across, they’ll make another issue. So not only have you got the issue you don’t agree with, you know, like you know, like mine - like kind of, I explained a few things, I got then minimisation of culpability put as a risk factor. D’you know what I mean? But it’s like...

Interviewer: Yes I understand, so when you try and challenge something almost the process of challenging it becomes a problem?

Daniel: Exactly yeah. So it’s like it’s a difficult situation like. Sometimes you just feel like, I mean I often describe, I feel like a dog with a choke chain. D’you know what I mean? You know, it’s, it’s, you know every time it’s like you feel you wanna kind of, be you and you know, walk off in this direction or go and you know do something, it’s like getting yanked back. It feels like you’re being choked, like. It’s just, it’s very difficult.

Daniel’s comments sum up his sense of powerlessness generally, and in particular how a lack of control over written information contributes to this. Liebling (2011) also reported that
prisoners felt unable to challenge things they disagreed with in case it went against them (see also Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland, 1956). Prisoners seem to be in a lose-lose situation (a “double-bind”, Bateson et al., 1956, p. 251) - if they challenge something, it can go against them, if they do not challenge something, wrong information can be recorded which might end up being used in an assessment:

There’s been reports like I’ve had an obsession with er knives all me life and I haven’t. It was mentioned by a probation officer who didn’t like me when I first come away and it’s stuck with me in every report ever since. But you can’t get rid of it, you can’t get it writ out. There’s a few things like that, that you can’t get rid, er writ out because they’ve been mentioned in the past and they stay in every report. (Colin)

Jim similarly notes how mistakes can become fact:

And you know in some examples, there are, are objective fictions in it, it’s actually just wrong in some points. And it then becomes a battle whether you say, “ok they say I was 16 when this happened but actually I was 18”. Do I just, cos I’ve tried to battle this and I can’t prove it, do I just accept that I was 16 and we’ll go with the truth that I was 16 even though I was 18? And it can be really quite, it can be really quite erm straightforward things that are just wrong that end up kind of becoming the truth.

Jim describes the “psychological portfolio” that is built up on ISPs over the course of a sentence. In his view, psychological information can become almost an entity in itself (see also Padfield, Liebling & Arnold, 2000). Sam (psychologist) also recognises the control psychologists have over how information was recorded and interpreted:

[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.

This level of control over information is problematic for some prisoners, especially given the permanence of prison based files, as described above. It is easy to see how this undermines the relationship between prisoners and psychologists. When prisoners feel clear about the truth
of something, yet see psychologists as insisting on their version of the truth this can be experienced as “your risk assessment is done with their answers not your answers” (Jude). This is particularly relevant to minor details of someone’s life or offending that can take on greater significance in prison, as described above. It epitomises the power psychologists have over the “truth” when compared to prisoners. It is important to note here that both psychologists and prisoners in this research provided examples of incorrect facts being included in prisoner files – feeling that incorrect information is being held and used to inform decisions about the future (from a prisoner’s perspective) cannot be assumed to be a consequence of denial or prisoners’ paranoia or suspicion. There is evidence that inaccurate or out of date information has been a long-standing problem for ISPs (Padfield et al., 2000) and not one confined to this sample. I have also had experience as a practitioner of finding errors in prison records and conclusions based on incorrect information, yet being unable to remove them.

In addition to information being interpreted wrongly, recorded wrongly, and being seemingly set in stone, prisoners also describe the lack of control they have over psychological assessment reports. Peter, Shawn and Martin all describe times where they queried reports, yet little or nothing was changed:

You might be asked to briefly have a meeting, anything you want to say about it? Yeah, we’ll take that on board. And then you’re sent away and quite often nothing changes anyway. (Shawn)

Jim expresses a similar view, and notes that despite assurances, there is often very little collaborative discussion of reports:

One thing that I think is that erm, in terms of something feeling collaborative, is that before it becomes set in stone, that actually there is a process whereby you can talk, you know, you can talk about things and things can be changed … In a report for example, and that doesn’t tend to happen.
Some prisoners interpret refusal to change reports as evidence of the power of psychologists to control information. It is experienced as anti-collaborative and undermines the relationship between prisoner and psychologist, reinforcing power differences. Jim’s comment above suggests that he would have valued explicit negotiation about the content of reports. A greater focus on negotiation throughout the assessment process might also be useful – part of the discussions around consent might focus on how the psychologist and prisoner might deal with any disagreements, or how the report could be most usefully disclosed to the prisoner. This level of explicit responsiveness (Stiles et al., 1998) communicates a genuine commitment to collaboration and to individually-relevant practice, both of which are identified as elements of good interpersonal practice in risk assessment (Shingler et al., 2017). It is apparent from the interviews with psychologists that some psychologists engage in practice of this standard. It is apparent from the interviews with prisoners that the practice of some psychologists falls short of this.

Finally, whilst the majority of the prisoners in the sample report some challenging views about and experiences with psychologists in prisons, there are also examples of more positive attitudes to psychologists and the role psychologists can play in helping prisoners to progress through their sentences. Malcolm believes that psychologists are “there to help you, innit?” Daniel believes “psychology and that you know, is value, you know can be a valuable thing and it’s helped me a lot, you know”. John explains:

A psychologist is a professional person, right? They’ve done probably a degree, a masters or a doctorate right? They are, er, professional in their field erm and I’m quite happy with a professional doin’ their job with me because I know that I had a problem that needed to be helped with.

There is a sense of respect for psychological knowledge in these comments. Additionally, in the same way that some psychologists empathise with prisoners who do not want to be assessed by trainees, some prisoners empathise with the challenges of training psychologists in
risk assessment without them actually doing them, as described in Chapter 3. Similarly, Malcolm explicitly empathises with the challenges psychologists face in risk assessment:

Malcolm: but it’s hard, it must be a hard job being a psychologist. You’re a psychologist right?

Interviewer: I’m a psychologist, yeah.

Malcolm: it must be a hard job, innit? You gotta make decisions about people.

Interviewer: it is hard yeah.

Malcolm: weigh em up. ‘N’ you gotta get it right.

John goes on to say that engagement with psychologists “should be er, er, a sort of quite a, a, a mandatory thing”, because mandatory engagement with psychologists early in a prisoner’s sentence would increase the chances of positive rapport being developed, and undermine more negative attitudes towards psychologists, partly attributable to negative prison talk (see above). This is consistent with the views of some of the psychologist participants, who want to see more “front end assessment” (Sam) at the beginning of the indeterminate sentence. Sam’s comments suggest that this approach would result in fewer prisoners ending up stuck in the system. It would seem that both psychologists and prisoners are able to recognise and empathise with the challenges that each other face. Perhaps bringing this empathy and understanding into risk assessment, and explicitly naming and exploring some of the challenges, is a step towards resolving them (Safran & Muran, 2000).

Summary and Conclusions

ISPs feel stuck in a system over which they have no control. There is a sense of powerlessness, uncertainty and fear around risk assessment: not knowing how to achieve a positive recommendation, feeling powerless over the future, and in some cases, not understanding risk assessment. There is also a sense of hopeless resignation in prisoners’ descriptions of the system. They describe a system that does not work, is tough and judgemental and that will never change. Prisoners are part of this system and have no choice but to go along
with it if they want to progress. Risk assessment is also seen as part of this controlling and intangible system and it is a high stakes business for ISPs. It is frequently experienced as negative and demotivating. Those who have managed to navigate the system and have more positive attitudes to it can distance themselves from prison negativity, get clear and supportive advice from staff, and retain a goal-oriented approach to their sentence and their futures. Added to the general feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty is the view that psychologists hold considerable power in relation to risk assessment, but are not to be trusted. Prisoners tend to perceive psychologists as aloof and removed from them and their lives, with little concern for prisoners’ individuality. There is a general feeling of resentment about psychologists’ power, particularly when prisoners feel that the psychologist in question is not entitled to hold it (as in the case of young and unqualified psychologists). Finally, prisoners resent the power they see psychologists as having over the recording, interpretation and use of information, especially when that information is seen as contributing to prisoners remaining stuck in the system. Despite this bleakness, there are pockets of mutual understanding and empathy. A more explicitly responsive and collaborative approach to risk assessment that brings some of these challenging issues into the forefront might be a step towards a more engaging risk assessment experience, in which prisoners can feel that they have more of a stake.
Chapter Five: Parole Board Members’ Views and Experiences of Psychological Risk Assessment

The previous two chapters reported the analyses of first psychologists’ and then ISPs’ views and experiences of psychological risk assessment. This chapter reports the analysis of the contributions of Parole Board members (PBM). Their role in the process is slightly different to that of psychologists and prisoners, as they do not participate in risk assessment interviews or in the construction of risk assessment reports. However, Parole Board members are the main consumers of psychological risk assessment, in that the vast majority of psychological risk assessments in a prison setting are completed in order to inform Parole Board decision making (see Chapter 1). Therefore understanding the perspective of PBM is essential to understanding the process more broadly.

Analysis indicates that PBM see themselves as playing a central role in judging the credibility of evidence in order to ensure fair decision making; consequently, the central theoretical category presented here is that of “PBM as Arbiters of Fairness”. Analysis also indicates the impact of organisational pressure on this role: at times, resource and other pressures directly affect PBM’s ability to ensure fairness. The analysis of the contributions of Parole Board members is summarised in Figure 5.1 below.

Two elements are required in order for assessment to be judged as meeting standards of fairness, namely “Clarity and Thoroughness” and “Facilitating Understanding”. Risk assessments provided by prison based psychologists generally meet these standards and consequently, PBM tend to view “Prison Psychologists as Credible Experts”. This view of psychologists begins to explain the weight that PBM attach to psychological evidence, which is discussed in more detail below.
Parole Board Members as Arbiters of Fairness

Analysis of PBMs’ contributions suggests that they see their role as standing up for and ensuring fairness. This is consistent with Lackenby’s (2018) study which identified independence and fairness as fundamental principles of Parole Board decision making. In order to maintain standards of fairness, PBMs judge the credibility of evidence presented to them by professional witnesses. A number of PBMs describe their role as scrutinising both the expert and the evidence presented by the expert. For example Fiona describes oral hearings as “where you are, your opinion, your, your judgement is being tested”. Frank is explicit in his view of PBMs’ role:

There’s a credibility issue isn’t there? Whenever you read a specialist report you are judging its credibility.
Chapter Five

In addition to judging the credibility of professional evidence by standards of fairness, PBM see it as their duty to maintain the highest standards of fairness in Parole Board practice. Frank describes the importance of fairness to him in his Parole Board work:

As a duty member for example, you’re trying to solve practical problems, or unravel something that’s been, gone wrong or can’t be provided or whatever. I think, yeah, you always think about the fairness to the prisoner.

Being concerned with fairness is consistent with principles of procedural justice—criminal justice decisions that are perceived to be fair are more likely to be complied with (Tyler, 2003; Tyler & Huo, 2002).

Analysis indicates that independence is a central feature of fairness: that is, independent assessment is more likely to be seen as fair.25 PBM’s focus on independence of opinion when judging the credibility of evidence is entirely reasonable—research has suggested that experts instructed by “the defence” tend to assign lower risk scores to clients than those instructed by “the prosecution” (Murrie, Boccaccini, Guarnera & Rufino, 2013). Independence is also central to procedural justice: Tyler and Huo (2002) found that evidence of even handedness and objectivity in decision making enhanced perceptions of fairness. In turn, perceptions of fairness seem to be closely aligned with perceptions of legitimacy (Sparks & Bottoms, 1995). It is therefore unsurprising and entirely legitimate that PBM report scrutinising the work of psychologists and are concerned about anything that they see as undermining independence or fairness.

The priority given to independence by PBM is also consistent with the broader organisational context of the Parole Board. The Parole Board is an independent body, independent of government but sponsored by it (but ironically, at the time of writing, housed within Ministry of Justice office buildings). The Board is committed to defending its independent position, and to maximising both independence and perceptions of independence (Hardwick, 2017; but see also Padfield et al., 2000; Padfield, 2018). PBM strive to ensure that all participants

25 The online Collins English Dictionary lists “impartiality” as a synonym of “fairness”. https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/fairness
in Parole Board decision making are aware of this position: for example, it is usual for the
chairperson of a panel of the Parole Board to state clearly the independent position of the Board
at the outset of an oral hearing. Similarly, the first line of content on the homepage of the Parole
Board website states “The Parole Board is an independent body”. Overall, analysis indicates that
maintaining standards of independence is central to PBMs’ perceptions of their own legitimacy.

PBMs look for qualities of balance and open-mindedness when making judgements about
fairness and independence, as illustrated by Fiona:

When, erm, people do look at both evidence for and evidence against in parallel, I like
that. I think it shows that somebody is open minded about what their conclusion’s going
to say and they haven’t sort of gone down one road without thinking about the counter
evidence and so forth. That’s another factor that that helps me sort of determine the
relevance of that information.

Graham identifies very similar standards when describing his approach to decision
making:

I think one has to approach things in an open minded and even handed way. Erm, and, er,
I, I think that’s in a way that’s been the greatest thing for me, is you know, coming to
each situation afresh, not prejudging it, erm, judging the issues but not the person, er, I, I
think is very, is very important. (Graham)

PBMs achieve fair and independent decision making by discussion with colleagues (Fiona
and Rebecca). Discussion can be used for “testing my own thinking” (Vivienne) in order to
maintain open-mindedness and guard against bias and emotionally driven decisions. Vivienne
describes how she tends to “use different voices to challenge myself” when conducting a single
member hearing. There is also recognition of the need for Parole Board decisions to be reflected
upon and not rushed, for example:

26 https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/parole-board
So if, if I feel those boxes are ticked, we’ve been thorough, we’ve been fair, we’ve explored those difficult areas, we’ve been complete in our in our exploration of issues not rushed or, or cut corners. (Fiona)

Therefore, this implies that fair decisions are made via detailed, reflective thinking or discussion with others, to ensure that all issues are attended to and biases are identified and explored. That is, detailed and reflective discussion about a decision is central to the fairness and independence of that decision.

Parole Board decision making often involves considering differing expert opinions. When considering applications for release or progression, PBMs are frequently presented with assessments from both a prison-based psychologist and a psychologist instructed by the prisoner or his legal representative. This is particularly likely in challenging and complex cases. These assessments may not agree and PBMs have to make a judgement about which assessment is most robust and convincing (Lackenby, 2018):

You’ve got conflict in reports which you often have with psychs. And you know, the solicitor’s got an independent report. You’ve got to weigh the two reports together and decide which one you like best. And, and that does you know, that does involve a degree of challenging you know, one, one against the other. Erm and you’ve got to be fair to the prisoner. (Graham)

In these situations, PBMs favour truly independent psychological assessment, regardless of who provides it:

Those I would describe as independent experts, it’s a very loose term, erm, they know what they’re doing, maintain their independence, and generally are very experienced in presenting their evidence. (Steve)

Psychologists commissioned by prisoners’ legal representatives whose assessments do not live up to PMBs’ expectations of independence are judged harshly. Frank describes how the

27The term “independent psychologist” is generally used as shorthand for a psychologist instructed by the prisoner or his legal representative, and who is therefore “independent” of the prison service.
Parole Board have “quite a strong line on independent psychologists who just look to you like they’re writing for the penny”. Likewise, assessments where independence seems to be compromised hold less value:

Well I mean there are some psychology reports that’s, erm, you get, and I, I won’t dwell on, on, they, they tend to come from independents [inaudible]. You know, they are an independent psychologist report and erm yeah you know their duty is to the court et cetera, et cetera. That, you know, they’re saying what the prisoner wants, erm, and I, I don’t find them terribly helpful. (Graham)

Thus, judgements about the independence of psychological evidence are closely aligned with judgements about credibility, which is explored in more detail below.

Despite the priority given to fairness and independence, analysis reveals that organisational factors can interfere with the fairness of the parole process (Padfield et al., 2000; Padfield, 2018). Similar to the psychologists’ descriptions of being impacted by the broader challenging context in which they work (see Chapter 3), PBM talk explicitly about their practice being constrained by the “system”:

You have a set of measures imposed on your activities, which try to push you in a certain direction. Your options if you haven’t got sufficient information are to adjourn or defer. Now there is pressure to reduce the number of adjournments, and pressure to reduce the number of deferrals, ok, because those are seen as bad outcomes. Closing a hearing is seen as a good outcome, forget which way it’s going to go. (Steve)

Steve describes feeling pressured to “close a hearing” or reach a definitive outcome, regardless of what that outcome might be. This observation suggests that at times “the requirements of the organization tend to overshadow the needs of individuals” (Loveday, 1999, p. 361). Steve recognises this situation as being common to many large organisations, in which professionals can become slaves to outcome measures rather than best practice (Bryans, 2000; Loveday, 1999). The impact of organisational demands and priorities on professional decision
making and behaviour has been discussed elsewhere in the literature (Crawley & Crawley, 2008; Epstein & Hamric, 2009; Needs, 2010) and it should not be surprising that PBM s experience organisational pressures on their work.

Relatedly, Fiona talks about how elements of the system beyond the control of PBM s affect both practice and efficiency:

Sometimes erm one of the things that we find is that we set three month directions for a psych report and then they come back and “sorry we just don’t have the resources, it’s gonna be five months”. That’s quite difficult. You don’t want these cases to, to, to drag on; people are sat in in closed conditions, so sometimes there are mountains that are difficult to climb and get over really. (Fiona)

Here, Fiona describes the delay caused by directing a psychological assessment, and how such delays can impact on the hearing and on the prisoner – it is apparent that the resource pressure experienced by the psychologists in this study (see Chapter 3) also affects Parole Board practice. In fact, David indicates that resource pressure could potentially influence the decision of a PBM to request a psychological assessment at all:

I think frequently er, from an MCA point of view erm, the decision whether to ask for a psychology, psychological risk assessment erm, it it causes huge delay, in which time things rarely get any better.

Lack of psychological resources to complete the number of risk assessments within the Parole Board’s deadline is noted as problematic by a number of PBM s, including Frank:

We’re making huge demands on a limited resource. Sometimes that comes back as, erm “the erm, psychological services in x area have reviewed this and they can’t do it for another nine months”. Oh bloody hell. That doesn’t seem very fair on the prisoner.

In the quotations above, Frank and David describe how the delay caused by requesting a psychological assessment affects the fairness of the whole parole process. PBM s are frustrated by

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28 MCA is an abbreviation of “Member Case Assessment”, the process by which a single PBM decides what information is needed for a future panel of the Parole Board to make a decision about a prisoner.
organisational resource pressures creating additional problems for often vulnerable prisoners, as explained by Vivienne:

> And those delays are nightmares, absolute nightmares, you know, most of all for prisoners of course. Erm so, yeah I had one today where a report was due on the 31st August. And 28th August this form comes back. Where the delay was, I don’t know. So “no we can’t provide this report we haven’t had any contact with them”. And actually fair enough in that case but erm it it’s going to delay the man’s hearing.

**Summary.** In summary, analysis reveals that PBMs see themselves as arbiters of fairness. This means that they judge the credibility of evidence presented to them in order to maintain fairness throughout the parole process. Fairness is a central priority for PBMs, and independence is a key feature of fair assessment and decision making. PBMs are concerned about organisational pressures that affect their ability to maintain standards of fairness. Fair, even-handed, neutral and unbiased decision making is more likely to be seen as legitimate and more likely to be complied with (Sparks & Bottoms, 1995; Tyler & Huo, 2002). This is crucial when Parole Board decisions, even positive, progressive decisions, are often tempered by requirements for further intervention or monitoring, or by strict license conditions with which prisoners must comply. The perception of PBMs as arbiters of fairness is therefore entirely consistent with effective approaches to criminal justice.

As described in Figure 5.1, analysis identifies two elements to high quality, credible evidence that is seen to be both fair and independent: (1) clarity and thoroughness and (2) facilitating understanding (that is, the extent to which the assessment facilitates understanding of the individual prisoners’ functioning). These elements will now be discussed in more detail.

**Clarity and Thoroughness**

PBMs value psychological assessments that are clear and concise (Benn & Brady, 1994). Rebecca notes that “the ones that are clear in their formulation of the problem, of the scenarios that might happen, and the recommendations they’re making erm, are the most helpful”. Clarity
was identified as a key element of good risk assessment interviewing (Shingler et al., 2017; and see Chapter 6). The results presented here suggest that the importance of clarity extends beyond the interview, into the report writing and beyond.

PBMs value the detail and thoroughness provided in psychological risk assessments. They identify a number of areas that they want psychological assessment to cover, including identifying and quantifying outstanding risks (Frank), identifying aggravating and protective factors (Frank), discussing treatment and progression options (Frank, Vivienne, Steve, Fiona, Gail), and providing commentary on the release plan (Vivienne). Of particular note is the comprehensive case history usually provided in psychological reports, which Vivienne describes as going “from soup to nuts”, that is, “from the very beginning to the very end”. PBMs view psychologists as the professional group most likely to do such a thorough search of collateral information. They also recognise that psychologists take more time to complete an assessment which facilitates a more thorough approach:

You know they, they’re, they’re conducting very in-depth interviews with people which I don’t think OMs and OSs either know how to do, and it certainly is the case with OMs when people are in prison they haven’t got the time to do. Erm you know so the OMs have limited contact and very often, you know, have one video interview before a parole board hearing and effectively go with what the OS has said to them about things, erm, you know. And the psychologist gets two or three erm hours of going into depth into lots of areas. (David)

The fact that psychologists tend to spend more time interviewing prisoners for risk assessments is seen in itself as adding weight to their evidence:

So you know, you place it very highly, erm, because of that amount of time that they’ve been able to spend. (David)

And:
I think the fact that more time has been spent in that face to face interaction for you to produce the report carries weight. And I always look and see how much time erm a prisoner spent with the psychologist, it could be two sessions, or five and a half hours or, you think well that’s a lot more than the half an hour that the Offender Manager was able to spend, erm so it’s a big investment. (Vivienne)

PBMs like structured and well organised reports which, it could be argued, impose some level of clarity on a complex situation. They also like evidence-based assessments that use a structured professional judgement (SPJ) approach. Many PBMs mention the weight they attach to such assessments. Analysis suggests that the use of SPJs contributes to clarity and thoroughness. SPJs provide a clear account of how decisions have been reached, thus facilitating fairness:

I think, in in cases where you have very good examples of well, er of well formulated assessments that have clearly been through peer review, if not supervised if they’re trainees, that they’ve clearly followed erm er a logical structured framework, whether it’s HCR29 or whatever, if you can see very good clear due process (Fiona).

This helps to explain the value PBMs placed on SPJs: they help PBMs make sense of extensive and complex information by imposing structure and order. The additional value of SPJs is that they are grounded in research. This means that assessments that use an SPJ tend to be judged as more credible by PBMs:

As somebody considering evidence, I, I know that I, erm I’m drawn towards evidence which, which uses sort of the best practice tools that we’re all familiar with. So you know, that’s something that gives me much more confidence in the evidence. I, I’m much more comfortable receiving that kind of evidence because I know it’s it’s, you know, grounded in research, it’s structured, it’s erm you know, it’s it’s followed a format which has been well thought, you know, well designed if you like. So that’s a huge factor I think. (Fiona)

29 By “HCR”, Fiona is referring to the “HCR-20” (Historical-Clinical-Risk Management -20; Webster, Douglas, Eaves & Hart, 1997), a structured professional judgement tool used for assessing risk of violence.
Fiona’s comments here imply that the standardisation and thoroughness of structured approaches provide reassurances of credibility. Frank agrees with this:

Yes cos that’s giving you a statistical basis and a systematic categorisation and a comparison across a group, erm, linking it all to established standards like international doo-dah of thing. Erm it’s, it’s, it feels that little bit more credible than just a psychologist putting their finger in the air and saying “this man might be a bit psychopathic”. You don’t know what definitions they’re using and how it compares to your definition and you’ve got no comparative, nothing to compare it to.

Frank’s comments suggest that the standardisation of SPJs makes for fairer, more transparent assessment that is less vulnerable to bias. In this way the clarity and thoroughness provided by psychological assessment that uses SPJs contributes to perceptions of fairness and independence. This perspective is consistent with that of the psychologists. For example, Alex comments that SPJs help to “kind of set the boundaries and give your work credibility” (see Chapter 3). There is concern amongst some psychologists, though, that the reliance on SPJs might “stop psychologists from thinking” (Steph, psychologist) and might interfere with the individual level understanding of prisoners that is important in good risk assessment (Boer & Hart, 2009; Lowenkamp et al., 2012; Shingler et al., 2017). From a PBM’s perspective, the value placed on nomothetically derived SPJs does not seem to be at the expense of reaching an individual level understanding of individual prisoners. In fact, PBMs feel very strongly about an individualised approach, which is discussed in more depth below.

Whilst PBMs like clear, thorough reports, a consistent criticism of psychological assessments is that they are too long. The length of psychological assessments can interfere with clarity and utility:

You value the psychological input, you like the systematic approach. You wish you didn’t have to read through so much stuff to get to it. (Frank)
Unhelpful assessment reports are “woolly” (Steve); “vaguely written” (David); “superficial” (Graham, Steve); lack a clear recommendation or conclusion (Frank, Steve, Fiona); and are “long, rambling and ill structured” (Frank and also Rebecca). These descriptions highlight the value of clarity, conciseness and thoroughness in all risk assessments, including psychological risk assessment.

Finally, clarity requires explicit delineation of the limitations of psychologists’ knowledge and of risk assessment in general:

And again that’s one of the problems with some psychological risk assessment is that they come across being very woolly. Erm, and partly that’s due to the fact that, I think the authors are trying to write around the issue without saying “I don’t know” or “I can’t say”. And it would be much easier and far more succinct for them to be able to say “it’s not possible to say, however these are the alternatives”. (Steve, PBM)

The importance of clarity of limitations is also emphasised by the psychologist participants in this study:

Not, not feeling that because we’re the psychologists, we’re the professional, we have to come up with an out and out answer. Being able to go “actually, this is what we think but we are aware that this information is missing”, or “this might not be right so this, this, this could be the other possibility”. (Vicky, psychologist)

Clarity about potential limitations is a feature of ethical risk assessment (Vess et al., 2017), and the psychologists in this study manage the responsibility of risk assessment by reminding themselves of these limitations. For example, Steph (psychologist) emphasises “Risk assessment is not an absolute science is it? It’s not a science and we get it wrong”. Maria notes that risk assessments are “down to a matter of opinion” (see Chapter 3 for further discussion). Analysis suggests that PBMs similarly value clarity about what a risk assessment can and cannot tell them. Understanding this perspective in relation to oral hearings could help to alleviate some
of the anxiety experienced by psychologists in hearings (Shingler, 2017) who can feel pressure to “provide a definitive answer” (Steve).

**Facilitating Understanding**

Analysis suggests that gaining a deep understanding of prisoners as individuals, of their functioning and of their offending is a priority for PBMs (Lackenby, 2018). They indicate that this understanding, which is frequently found in psychological assessments, helps them to make fairer decisions and recommendations:

A psychology report is much more about “this is what’s driving this guy” and “this is what I think he needs to do to address the factors that are driving this”. And (sighs) I dunno, I mean using the house analogy again, you know, unless you know what’s causing your subsidence, you’re you’re going to struggle to put it right. And, and so often you, you, you know, we dive straight into a list of risk factors, you know, drugs, alcohol, relationship problems blah blah blah. Yeah, but where did all this start, where’s all this coming from? Why, why, what, why did he get into alcohol? Er, and some of them it’s school friends but others, you know, they’ve had some sort of trauma and they’ve [inaudible] out, and to me unless you, unless you can understand that, you’re not going to get very far in in sorting out the mess. (Graham)

Graham’s comments highlight PBMs’ desire to understand a prisoner’s problems, as well as the role psychological assessments play in helping them to achieve this. Steve expands on this:

Because obviously somebody who’s trained as a psychologist is used to looking at problems in a certain way, er which is a completely different perspective [inaudible] or a different perspective. There’s more you can offer more in terms of presenting explanations.

Fiona believes that psychologists provide “much more analysis than perhaps is readily available in any of the other reports”. In general, depth of understanding and analysis is seen as characteristic of psychological evidence (compared with evidence from other professionals) which
adds value to the assessment process. PBMs’ descriptions indicate how psychological formulation facilitates understanding of the prisoner and his difficulties:

I find the way that they do their formulation, erm I don’t always agree with the formulation but you know, I find the way that they do the formulation, I find that very helpful cos I always like to try and understand, well what’s going on behind the surface d’you know what I mean? (Graham)

Formulation is seen as supporting the assessment and decision making process, in that it facilitates decisions that are more informed, more comprehensive and consequently fairer. Gail explains how formulation could lead to more effective decision making:

A narrative explanation of what’s going on here, why it’s going on, what can be done about it, what needs to be in place. Because it’s often very difficult as, as a, you know, as a person who’s assessing the risk and assessing the risk management plan, when, when you’ve basically you’ve got a list of, of things, you’ve got a list of things, a list on one side and a list on the other side, you know. I, it’s nicer to have something that says, well actually the really important factors here are...

Similar to Graham’s comments above, Gail notes how understanding the cause of a problem can help to inform recommendations about how to solve it – that is, understanding risk can lead to better management of risk, both in prison and in the community. It is interesting to note, despite the value placed on SPJs by PBMs (described above), individualised understanding is the priority. It seems that there is a balance to be struck between the credibility provided by SPJs and the value of an individualised approach. It is possible that formulation can facilitate this balance. Formulation draws on the information gathered by SPJs in order to provide an explanation of an individual’s psychological dysfunction, including his offending (Hart & Logan, 2011). Analysis of the details of the current and/or previous offending (drawing on information both from the prisoner’s self-disclosures and from official records) can also assist with formulation, and, it could be argued, is an essential element of developing a robust individualised
formulation (West & Greenall, 2011). It is also important to bear in mind here that existing SPJs are limited by the state of the research at the time of their development. In more recent years other factors have been identified that are at the very least “promising” (Mann et al., 2010) in terms of their relationship to recidivism (Ogilvie et al., 2014; Velotti, Elison & Garofalo, 2014; and see Chapter 6). Therefore, in order to develop a comprehensive, individualised formulation, psychological assessment could include the use of established, evidence based structured risk assessments alongside offence analysis and a broader awareness of the literature. This approach would be consistent with Vivienne’s perspective of wanting assessments that go “beyond the basic business” and provide a greater depth of understanding and explanation, as also explained by Fiona:

If you’ve got structured assessments which stand alone and don’t particularly tell you anything at the end of it other than “I think he’s high risk”, that’s all well and good but there’s er, you know, what do you do with that risk? Er you know there are questions that come from that. So I think when erm when er structured tools are used erm properly and erm that assists in a formulation that helps understand the case and a way forward, that’s the sort of dream ticket if you like.

In summary, analysis indicates that a central feature of fair and independent assessment is that it facilitates an understanding of the individual prisoner. Understanding the factors that contributed to an offence or to general dysfunction enables better and fairer decisions about what needs to be in place to manage them. Psychological risk assessment is particularly valuable in providing this individual level understanding – in particular, psychological formulation has a central role to play. Assessment that combines the use of an SPJ with an explanatory narrative or individualised formulation is maximally useful to many PBMs (Dematteo et al., 2010; Polaschek, 2012; Hart & Logan, 2011).

**Summary.** Parole Board members see themselves as arbiters of fairness: they judge the credibility of evidence before them in order to maintain standards of fairness and independence.
Analysis reveals that thorough and detailed assessment that is clearly presented and provides an individual formulation is most likely to be judged as meeting standards of fairness and independence. Such assessment consequently facilitates fair and independent decision making. Risk assessment evidence from prison-based psychologists tends to meet standards of fairness, independence, thoroughness and depth of understanding (and some psychologists manage to meet the standards of clarity and conciseness as well). This begins to explain why PBMs tend to view psychologists as credible experts, as described in more detail below.

Prison Psychologists as Credible Experts

The analysis indicates that PBMs view psychologists as “highly trained experts” (Vivienne) and “highly qualified professional[s]” (Graham). The majority of PB participants explicitly comment on the generally high standard of the psychological evidence they have encountered. Consequently, PBMs respect psychological knowledge, expertise and training, and value the contributions of both qualified and trainee psychologists to the assessment process. David describes psychologists as follows:

Well [psychologists are] a, a, a greater professional at the end of the day. Everybody kind of looks up to their, their level of insight and the, the way they conduct their interviews, case formulation.

PBMs want psychological input to the most complex and challenging of cases, as this is where specialist knowledge is most valuable:

I think in cases which are, seem stuck or there are real anxieties about the, aspects of presentation or details of the offence which are just troubling us as a Board, sometimes you know having a psychological assessment or deferring for a psychological assessment could feel like a way forward. (Fiona)

Fiona also explains how psychological assessment can provide clarity and direction in complex cases.
Yeah, I think there’s erm, erm from an offence perspective if there remain questions about motivation for the offending or if there’s lack of clarity about erm, the main driving factors or the risk factors. So you know that’s kind of going back to basics really. But you know even in open conditions you can have a case where you think “d’you know what, I’m really, I still don’t really feel I understand this offence” (laughs). And it’s those kind of cases I think erm, psychological assessments can be really helpful.

This highlights the link between clarity and depth of understanding and helps explain how the joint presence of these features results in value being placed on psychological assessment.

In addition to other professionals looking up to psychologists (as described by David, above), a number of PBMs talk about the added value of psychological assessment, over and above the assessments provided by other professionals, for example:

And Offender Managers, erm, are and some are very good, some are on a learning curve to put it politely. Erm but they’re much more generalists. Erm, the psychs are more specialist and, and they’re at a higher – in my view, they’re at a higher level. (Graham)

This reflects the general view described above of psychological evidence providing a greater level of understanding and insight into prisoners’ problems. As noted by Fiona above, psychological assessment is seen as providing “much more analysis than perhaps is readily available in any of the other reports”. This perspective is consistent with the contributions of the psychologist participants in this study:

I feel kind of confident and competent when I’ve read the other reports that have been put forward, say from his, erm, for his parole from other professionals. I think “oh actually, there’s a big gap here that I can help address”. Erm, so I think in cases like that I feel, erm, I feel like I can add something, erm, quite useful and valuable. (Maria, psychologist)

And similarly:
I suppose if I’m comparing sort of me doing risk assessments compared to my colleagues in OMU\textsuperscript{30} doing an OASys,\textsuperscript{31} I think psychologists tend to, I think this is a good thing, I think we tend to think more about formulation, which means that we are less likely to just produce a list of sort of disparate risk factors and say you know “these are all the things he needs to work on”. We’ll try and form some sort of narrative to think about what exactly, you know, that difference between presence and relevance of risk factors I think is a particular issue as psychologists we’re trained to think about. (Lorna, psychologist)

Therefore, there is a view both amongst PBMs and psychologists that a psychological assessment provides a deeper level understanding that is valuable in parole decision making.

However, PBMs’ view of psychologists as credible and “highly trained experts” (Vivienne) means that PBMs can have unrealistically high expectations of psychological assessment. At times, psychologists seem to be expected to solve complex problems which in reality are surrounded by uncertainty:

Some Parole Board members do believe that a firmer answer is possible when actually it’s not. (Steve)

And also:

I think the psy, the Parole Board often want the psychologists to be a bit magical, see into the person, erm, tell them what needs to happen when, when sometimes, they’re asking, they’re asking the impossible. (Rebecca).

This tendency to expect psychologists to know all the answers is also expressed by the psychologist participants:

Perhaps there is that expectation that the psychologist is going to have this, sudden, I dunno, they’re expecting your [report] is suddenly going to explain everything. (Laura, psychologist)

\textsuperscript{30} OMU = “Offender Management Unit”, the unit within the prison responsible for coordinating a prisoner’s sentence plan and parole hearings.

\textsuperscript{31} OASys = “Offender Assessment System”, a generic, structured assessment process used with the vast majority of prisoners.
This reinforces the role of clarity as central to maintaining fair and balanced expectations: clearly explaining the limitations of psychological assessment and also the limitations of risk assessment itself is essential (Vess et al., 2017).

Also worthy of comment is PBMs’ descriptions of assessment evidence provided by trainee psychologists. Several PBMs comment that reports by trainees could be as good as those by qualified psychologists. Vivienne is “pretty clear that that doesn’t affect my judgement of a report, the fact that they’re a trainee”. There is a view that the more complex assessments might require a qualified psychologist, but on the whole, PBMs describe feeling satisfied with the service they get from trainees. Given the challenges described by prisoners and psychologists in relation to trainee psychologists conducting high stakes risk assessment (described in Chapters 3, 4 and 6) it is interesting that the main decision makers in these high stakes processes are generally unperturbed by psychological evidence provided by trainees.

To summarise, analysis suggests that psychological risk assessment generally meets PBMs’ standards of fairness and independence by virtue of their clarity, thoroughness and focus on providing an individual-level formulation. The consequent view of psychologists as credible experts means that PBMs have high expectations of psychological assessment. This begins to explain why the PBMs interviewed for this study tend to weight psychological assessment heavily in their decision making, as summed up by Graham:

They’re there to give us a, a high level professional risk assessment. It’s a complex issue that – if you don’t take what they’re what they’re saying seriously why why do we bother?

There are numerous contributions supporting the view that psychological opinion is weighted heavily in parole decision making, for example:

I think the psychological assessments are often one of the most important assessments in in, to me, they’re the most important assessments in a, in a dossier. (Graham)

Also,
It can be seen as quite a, a, er, a critical document in cases which are complex and there’s anxieties about certain issues. But they are important. I think they have a real relevance and a real weight in those sort of cases. (Fiona)

And finally,

Erm, I give a, a lot of weight. Erm but I, I, I expect to - I look to it for a lot of weight.

Sometimes it provides it, sometimes it doesn’t. I expect to get added value. (Rebecca)

The view that psychologists’ opinions hold significant weight in Parole Board decision making is found amongst the psychologist and prisoner participants in this study (see Chapters 3 and 4). It has also been expressed elsewhere in the literature. However, the extant literature implies that this weight is somewhat arbitrary and is resented by prisoners (Crewe, 2012; Sparks, 1998). Conversely, the results presented here suggest that PBMs weight psychological opinion heavily only because it meets their standards of credible evidence, namely fairness, independence, thoroughness and depth of understanding. The psychologist participants hold similar views, that the weight given to their assessments is justified by virtue of the quality and depth, for example:

I think that, that, the, the clout only comes because we’ve got some kind of defence, hopefully defensible kind of decision making processes, good risk assessment tools, that we can be interrogated about at the parole hearing and, and be pushed on those opinions and to see, you know, are we just being really a bit mean and biased, erm, or have we got a good point. (Alex, psychologist)

Also worthy of note here is the view expressed by David, who feels that a disadvantage of having a psychological assessment as part of a parole dossier is that other professionals are less likely to give their view, and more likely to agree with the conclusions of the psychological assessment:

They’re very useful, they’re very insightful, the vast majority of them are very well put together, they’re very professional. Erm the the problem is that the other professionals,
ninety-nine times out of a hundred will then fall in line behind that report. So it’s actually almost dispense with the other, frequently get the psychologist to give evidence first because unless we or the, erm, solicitor budges them on anything, then, then we know that the OM and the OS are just going to fall in line behind them. Very rarely do they, you know, disagree.

This is again consistent with the views of the psychologist participants (see Chapter 3) who feel the weight of expectation from colleagues who rely on psychological assessment in order to form their own opinions. There is a suggestion from some participants in this project that other professional groups may lack confidence in risk assessment. This might be one explanation for the reliance on psychological assessment. There is argument for taking a “relational responsibility” approach to risk assessment in Parole Board decision making (Austin et al., 2008) as discussed in Chapter 3, which facilitates different professionals to conduct risk assessment together, rather than relying on one professional voice. Such an approach would be welcomed by the psychologists in this study, and was actually suggested by a Parole Board member in one of the presentations of this research. This will be discussed further in Chapter 8, which focuses on implications for practice.

Summary and Conclusions

The main analytic category reported here is that of “Parole Board Members as Arbiters of Fairness”. In order to maximise the potential for fair and independent assessment within the context of organisational pressures, PBMs judge the quality of the evidence presented to them, either in writing (in reports) or in oral evidence (at parole hearings). The analysis described above reveals the priority given to fairness and independence by Parole Board participants when judging the credibility of evidence - PBMs see themselves as having a central role to play in maintaining standards of fairness throughout the parole process. On the whole, psychological risk assessment meets these standards of fairness and independence by virtue of two key features. Firstly, psychological risk assessment is generally viewed as clear and thorough. Secondly, psychological
risk assessment facilitates understanding of prisoners. Consequently, psychologists tend to be viewed as highly trained and credible experts by PBMs. It is for this reason that PBMs give weight to psychological risk assessment in their decision making.

PBMs want psychological reports (especially in complex cases) because they value them and feel that they help them to make better informed decisions that are fairer to prisoners. In this way, PBMs view psychological risk assessment as carrying legitimate weight. Psychologists agree with this perspective, despite the stress and anxiety that the weight of responsibility can hold for them (see Chapter 3). Conversely, the prisoners interviewed for this research resent and mistrust the perceived power of psychologists in risk assessment. It would seem, then, that both psychologists and the Parole Board have some work to do in increasing the legitimacy of psychological assessment in the eyes of prisoners (Shingler & Needs, 2018a) and these competing perspectives of legitimacy will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 7 and 8.

The priority given to clarity and transparency in relation to perceptions of fairness is particularly noteworthy here. Clarity is central specifically to good risk assessment practice (Shingler et al., 2017, and see Chapter 6) and more generally to perception of decisions as procedurally just (Tyler & Huo, 2002). Clarity is also central to PBMs’ judgements about fairness and independence. There are moves to make the entire parole process more transparent and open (Hardwick, 2017, and see Chapter 3), especially in the light of the Worboys affair\textsuperscript{32} (see Chapter 7). For example, members of the public can now request a summary of a Parole Board decision about a prisoner’s release.\textsuperscript{33} Steps to improve the legitimacy of the work of the Parole Board amongst the general public are positive and progressive. However, the extent to which this clarity is extended to prisoners during the process of applying for and being assessed for parole is uncertain. Currently, there are a number of ways in which the clarity and transparency of Parole Board decision making could be improved. First, parole hearings are frequently subject to deferral

\textsuperscript{33}https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/decision-summaries
and delay (Padfield, 2018) and the reasons are not always communicated in a timely fashion. This means prisoners particularly can be left knowing their hearing has been cancelled but not knowing why. Second, prisoners are informed of their parole decision in writing. The accessibility of these decision letters is often questionable, especially given the limited literacy of many men in prison – in fact Hardwick (2017) described them as “pretty incomprehensible”. Steps to improve clarity of written communications would be beneficial. Third, oral hearings can similarly seem shrouded in mystery. Prisoners and professional witnesses are expected to answer the questions put to them, but with little understanding of why the questions are being asked. A decision is made in private by the panel of the Parole Board; prisoners (and witnesses) receive a letter within fourteen days of the parole hearing explaining the decision. In addition to being inaccessible, these letters are often delayed by the sheer size of the organisation, and feel impersonal and distant (Padfield, 2018). Hardwick (2017) suggested that consideration should be given to PBM verbally informing prisoners of their parole decision on the day of the hearing – this would be a positive step in terms of clarity of the process of decision making, and also accountability for decisions. Exploration of prisoners’ perceptions of the fairness, independence and accessibility of the parole process did not form part of this study, but this area is surely well overdue investigation.

Analysis also indicates that organisational pressures, particularly around limited resources, impact fairness. This reflects the broader argument in this thesis around contextual issues in risk assessment and the importance of understanding the broader influences on risk assessment practice (Shingler & Needs, 2018b). The context of risk assessment has been found to have an impact on both psychologists and prisoners in this study. It seems that Parole Board members are similarly affected by the broader organisational context and also arguably the social and political context in which they work. These issues will be discussed further in Chapter 7.
Chapter Six: Prisoners’ and Psychologists’ Experiences of the Risk Assessment Interview

The analysis reported in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 has explored the perspectives of psychologists, indeterminate sentenced prisoners (ISPs) and Parole Board members (PBM) in relation to psychological risk assessment, thereby addressing the first three research questions identified in Chapter 1. In this chapter, I intend to address the fourth research question, namely understanding ISPs’ and psychologists’ experiences of the risk assessment interview.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the interview is central to the risk assessment process. It is one of the primary sources of information from which the risk assessment report and recommendations will be constructed. It is also where the perspectives of the psychologist and prisoner come together in a social interaction (Murakami, 2003; Shingler & Needs, 2018). Whilst there is value in understanding each perspective separately (McDermott, 2014), consideration of the relationships and interconnectedness between groups is also essential (Wolf-Branigin, 2014). Given the social nature of the risk assessment interview, the perspectives of interviewee and interviewer are complementary and cannot be defined or understood in isolation (Gillespie, 2012). Reflecting on the analyses reported in Chapters 3 and 4, it is likely that these perspectives will frequently clash. Psychologists feel a weight of responsibility to get risk assessment right and meet the needs of varying stakeholders, including ISPs. ISPs do not trust psychologists and suspect them of nefarious motives. Both psychologists and ISPs believe that the Parole Board weigh psychological evidence heavily in their decision making. PBM agree that they prioritise psychological assessment in their role as arbiters of fairness (see Chapter 5) and consequently want psychological risk assessments to help them in their decision making (Shingler, 2017). This makes the risk assessment interview between ISP and psychologist a high stakes business for all involved.
Navigation of the risk assessment interview is therefore crucial to the entire risk assessment process. As described above the interview is an opportunity (that may or may not be taken) for recognition of differing perspectives on the assessment process. It is an opportunity to understand one’s role or position in the process (Ashforth et al., 2000; Murakami, 2003) and for (implicit or explicit) negotiation of relationships (Gillespie, 2012). The role of the interview in influencing perspectives and interpersonal relationships potentially extends beyond one risk assessment report or one Parole Board review. This sense of future responsibility attached to interactions between service users and criminal justice professionals is explicitly recognised by Tyler (1990) and also by the psychologist participants in this study (Chapter 3). The nature of an encounter between an ISP and a psychologist has broad ramifications for ISPs’ perceptions of psychologists and risk management attempts. The interview is therefore a key opportunity to build rapport, understanding and respect. It is also an encounter that could facilitate the development of mistrust or reinforce existing suspicion and resentment. Thus, this chapter also begins to address the fifth research question, namely developing an understanding of process issues in risk assessment more generally.

This chapter reports analysis of the contributions from ISPs and psychologists relating specifically to their experiences of the risk assessment interview. The findings described in this chapter can also be found in Shingler et al. (2017) and this chapter draws heavily from that paper.

Overview of Results

Analysis identifies five sub-ordinate categories relating to the risk assessment interview and to the interpersonal relationships within it (see Figure 6.1). The five sub-ordinate categories reflect both groups’ perceptions of the gold standard approach to risk assessment interviewing. These categories of meaning (“Emphasising Clarity and Transparency”, “Collaborative Engagement”, “Making a Respectful, Boundaried yet Human Connection”, “Respecting Individuality” and “Having a Purposeful Conversation”) are described in detail below.
As can be seen from Figure 6.1, 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 sub-ordinate categories. In other words, the necessity of balancing often contradictory demands, requirements and aims of risk assessment interviewing is the common thread linking the five categories of meaning.

The description of the five sub-ordinate categories below is not presented in any particular order of importance or prominence (i.e. all categories appear 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). Whilst the theoretical category of 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 by both psychologists and prisoners as crucial in risk assessment interviewing. Clarity and transparency, in turn, are seen as central to the building of rapport. Psychologists describe how clarity about the process of risk assessment from the outset assists with the development of rapport:

I think then have a clear outline of what, kind of how long the risk ass-, the interview should take, and what kind of things you’ll be covering with them. Erm, so again, they’ve kind of got er, a bit of an agenda and they can build up a bit of a, a relationship. And kind of know how long this is going to go on for, are they gonna see you every day for however long, or have they got clear expectations and I think it helps with building up a rapport.

(Vicky, psychologist)
Similarly, John (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.

Psychologists’ accounts also emphasise the value of communicating a transparent approach via their behaviour during assessment. Examples of this include 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 and transparent communication. They 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 it, because I’ll not get my Cat D this year, but they’re right and they’ve explained why”. (Shawn, prisoner)

The value placed on clarity is consistent with the priorities of PBMs in judging the credibility and fairness of evidence (Shingler, 2017; Shingler & Needs, 2018a; and see Chapter 5). It is also consistent with procedural justice. Tyler and Huo (2002) found that clarity about decision making was 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. It could enable prisoners to have more understanding of the motives and intentions of the psychologist, or at the very least reduce the chances of prisoners inferring harmful or detrimental motives, which some prisoners in this study were inclined to do (see below, and Chapter 4). Crighton (2010) similarly notes the importance of trust in promoting disclosure of sensitive information during risk assessment.

Conversely, Shawn (prisoner) describes feeling anxious and mistrustful when an interview felt secretive:

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”.

Chapter Six
This sense of uncertainty and fear about what sort of opinion a psychologist might be forming is also expressed by Jim (prisoner):

I think the high stakes nature of risk assessment for ISPs is really important because you can sit there second guessing, have no idea what’s going on, it’s so nerve-wracking, particularly when you come up on, on, erm, parole in an open prison, so terrified that any bit of information, you know, I walked on the grass yesterday, you know, is there going to be a report in about that? Not knowing what they think or what they know and erm it’s just really terrifying. It is really terrifying.

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 can help to build trust, which can potentially increase both the view of risk assessment as procedurally just and prisoners’ acceptance of risk assessment decisions.

The difficult balancing act expressed within the category of emphasising clarity and transparency is that of having to balance the advantages of clear and unambiguous communication with potentially deceptive elements present in risk assessment interviewing, including strategic efforts to build rapport (Crewe, 2012). Ezra (prisoner) describes how psychologists use their skills to create rapport and encourage disclosure which could 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 reflects the power psychologists have in relation to prisoners in the interview situation. Psychologists use their skills to elicit disclosure (see Kvale, 2006) which may not end up benefitting the prisoner (Appelbaum, 1997; Odiah & Wright, 2000). Kvale also describes 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 tend to 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). In fact, analysis of the prisoners’ contributions suggests a general tendency towards mistrusting psychologists (see Chapter 4 and Maruna, 2011; Warr, 2008). Feeling suspicious of psychologists is likely to counteract the view of risk assessment as procedurally just and increase suspicion about psychologist’s motives and intentions (Tyler & Huo, 2002), as described above (and see Chapter 4). This makes the development of a trusting relationship a central component of an effective risk assessment interview. It is 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). Similarly, 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. The resultant lack of choice is recognised explicitly by both psychologists and prisoners. Karen (psychologist) states “I still think the whole context is you know, there is a reality that this is going to go ahead without, without you”. Martin (prisoner) explains “I don’t know how it sits with me because, I haven’t got a choice in the matter” (see Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of prisoners’ lack of power and autonomy). Consequently, collaborative engagement involves an act of balancing, namely striving to involve prisoners whilst recognising the inherently coercive environment (Crewe, 2012; Meloy, 2005; Miles, 2016) 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 (Shingler & Mann, 2006; Ward & Connolly, 2008).

Psychologists describe taking time to ensure the risk assessment process and its implications are fully understood by prisoners: in this way, “emphasising clarity and transparency” is essential in working collaboratively. Collaborative engagement also involves answering questions, giving prisoners an opportunity to express their views, listening to their views and incorporating them into reports, thus maximising choice wherever possible. Proper collaboration therefore means remaining open to a range of explanations for prisoners’ behaviour that may or may not come under the umbrella of a structured professional judgement (SPJ) risk assessment tool (see “Respecting Individuality” below for further discussion). The pinnacle of true collaborative engagement in risk assessment would be for psychologist and prisoner to be engaged in a “joint process of sense-making” (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007, p. 500) which results
in a mutually constituted psychological formulation. This level of collaboration can only take place if the psychologist respects the individuality of the prisoner they are assessing.

Despite psychologists’ commitment to a collaborative approach, several prisoners describe experiences of psychological risk assessment that are 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)

And:

But to me, they ask you questions where they already know the answers, basically. (Peter, 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, 2011b). It suggests an approach lacking in respect for the individual (see below) and potentially emphasises power differences. Examples of non-collaborative practice include risk assessments that do not involve an interview at all. More subtle non-collaborative approaches include psychologists not taking time to fully explain and discuss a report. Maria (psychologist) describes the detrimental effect of “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”. 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 non-collaborative interview practice being like a “job interview”, involving “firing questions”. This is the antithesis of the “two-way dialogue” described by Shawn above. Thus, non-collaborative 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).
Ferrito et al. (2017) highlight the value prisoners place on achieving understanding of themselves and their offending. This may be particularly relevant to those who have committed catastrophic offences involving the loss of life, and who might well be traumatised as a result. The prisoners’ contributions suggest that non-collaborative assessment approaches not only potentially reduce the information available for risk assessment but also have the potential to add to risk by increasing emotional distress amongst men who may already be traumatised.

The value placed on collaborative engagement described here is in line with previous clinical observations by Shingler and Mann (2006) who recommended a collaborative approach to risk assessment with sexual offenders. Additionally, research supports involvement in decision making (Leventhal, 1976; Tyler, 1990), and having a voice has a powerful effect on the perception of fairness. In turn, fairness significantly impacts the likelihood of accepting decisions (see Paternoster, Brame, Bachman & Sherman, 1997, for a summary; Tyler & Huo, 2002). Similarly, Thibault and Walker (1975) emphasise 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). Whilst psychologists talk about the importance of collaboration, a number of prisoners describe how this seems to end with the written report, for example:

I think, I think one thing that I think is that erm, in terms of something feeling collaborative, is that before it becomes set in stone that actually there is a process whereby you can talk, you know, you can talk about things and things can be changed, in a report for example. And that doesn’t tend to happen. (Jim, prisoner)

And:

Once you’ve had your assessment or your final meetings the report gets written. You might be asked to briefly have a meeting, anything you want to say about it, “Yeah, we’ll
take that on board”. And then you’re sent away and quite often nothing changes anyway.

(Shaun, prisoner)

A truly collaborative approach includes negotiation and discussion throughout the process, including the final report. Proulx et al. (2000) suggested that a failure to develop a collaborative relationship with clients was one explanation for failures in community risk management: for example, clients who do not trust their supervising probation officer are unlikely to disclose examples of poor coping or lapses into substance use. This view is supported by the accounts of participants in this study. Similarly, Hanson and Harris (2000) found that non-cooperation with community supervision was a predictor of recidivism amongst men who had committed sexual offences: therefore, as Proulx et al., (2000) note, achieving cooperation is an essential element of managing risk. Arguably, when working with ISPs, the process of achieving cooperation starts with prison-based risk assessment. 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 is described as psychologists balancing their professional duties and responsibilities with connecting with prisoners as human beings (Levitt, Butler & Hill, 2006; Ross, et al., 2008). 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. More generally, a sense of social and interpersonal connectedness has been associated with healthy interpersonal functioning and resilience (Townsend & McWhirter, 2005).

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).

Focusing on prisoners as fellow human beings potentially reduces the likelihood of “othering” – seeing another group as fundamentally different to ourselves. “Othering” creates semantic barriers and reduces openness to alternative meanings or explanations (Gillespie, 2011), thereby undermining the exploration and understanding characteristic of good psychological risk assessment (Shingler, 2017, and see Chapter 5). Alternatively, prisoners’ search for meaning and understanding of themselves (Ferrito et al., 2017) could be facilitated by a human connection that enables them to be open to “transformation” of their perspective (Gillespie, 2011; see also Stern et al., 1998).

Despite the value placed on a human-to-human relationship in risk assessment, participants highlight the difficult balancing act of engaging with prisoners as human beings whilst maintaining appropriate professional distance. It is generally understood that psychologists should not disclose some personal information (“home addresses and telephone numbers and registration plates”, Martin, prisoner). There are 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 continuous process of balancing an unboundaried personal style which risks compromising judgement, personal safety and professional integrity with an overly distant and remote style. Overly distant and formal practice is more frequently noted as problematic and is seen as limiting understanding of the prisoner by
the psychologist. This in turn could result 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)

These quotes highlight the interactional nature of trust – how the behaviour of the psychologist can impact the prisoner’s capacity for trust (Gillespie, 2011). More broadly, the entire context and implications of risk assessment with ISPs is hardly conducive to open, trusting dialogue (Shingler & Needs, 2018b; and see Chapters 1 and 4). The quotes above also highlight the constantly evolving nature of the interview – Martin’s comment implies that one exchange might be enough to undermine trust. This suggests that the balancing act is complex and precarious, and not something that is simply achieved and then maintained. The balancing of boundaries is 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 describes 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 whilst 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’t 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 et al., 2010; Feeley & Simon, 1992; Lowenkamp et al., 2012; Polaschek, 2012; Ward & Stewart, 2003; Ward et al., 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). This approach is experienced as lacking in legitimacy (Crewe, 2012; Sparks & Bottoms, 1995) by the participants in this study.

Participants also describe how resource constraints and task demands can result in psychologists becoming overly focused on “the output and the concrete product” (Karen, psychologist; see Chapter 3 for further discussion of the impact of resource issues on psychologists). A consequence of this is risk assessment that becomes mechanical, like a
“production line” (Sam, psychologist) or “sausage factory” (Alex, psychologist), resulting in a potential loss of individuality. Again, Feeley and Simon (1992) discuss new penology as both a cause and a consequence of dealing with too many clients with too few resources, as is reflected by the participants in this study. Less experienced practitioners seem most at risk of slipping into formulaic “tick box” approaches (Karen and Steph, psychologists; Martin and Ezra, prisoners) rather than thinking about the individual and responding to his specific interpersonal style and context.

The problematic “tick-box” approach identified here 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 & Stewart, 2003; Ward & Gannon, 2006). Moves towards strengths-based assessment and the incorporation of protective factors (de Vries Robbé, Mann, Maruna & Thornton, 2015) are useful ways in which this problem can be ameliorated. Paying attention to strengths and protective factors rather than focusing exclusively on risk has the potential to reduce the drift towards overly pejorative interpretations of prisoner behaviour, which prisoners experience as frustrating and de-individualising. In the following extract Peter relates how descriptions of his childhood experiences resulted in what he felt to be 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 – [but] 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 Peter felt that his individual experiences were ignored and interpreted in a contextual vacuum that lacked an understanding of him as an individual embedded within contemporaneous cultural and social norms. These experiences were then used against him to support the presence of risk. Peter’s disclosures point to the need for psychologists to be open to prisoners’ perspectives and explanations for offending. An open discussion about the motivation for an offence is one in which all options are considered and explored, and the psychologist takes time to understand the explanations that might fall outside of the factors listed in an SPJ. As mentioned in Chapter 5, SPJs are only as good as the state of the empirical evidence at the time of their development. There have been and will continue to be advances in understanding of determinants of offending and in discovery of predictors of recidivism that are “promising” or “worth exploring” (Mann et al., 2010) but that are yet to find their way into SPJs, such as attachment style (Ogilvie et al., 2014) and shame (Velotti et al., 2014). In fact Mann et al. (2010) explicitly state that:

We do not believe the risk factors listed so far are an exhaustive list of possibly relevant risk factors. Further research is likely to identify new risk factors and refine the definitions of risk factors already shown to empirically predict recidivism. (p. 207)

Despite the advice of Mann et al., there seems to be a tendency to treat the contents of SPJs like “an exhaustive list”. Yet in order to fully respect individuality, psychologists must remain open to taking a broader view when working to understand prisoners’ offending. They must step outside of SPJs and into the wider psychological literature. In this way, openness in its broadest sense is essential to respecting individuality.

The task for psychologists, then, is to keep the individual at the forefront of the risk assessment process – after all, “a person is not a data point” (Lowenkamp et al., 2012, p. 11). Given the views of the prisoners in this study, an individualised approach is likely to lead to greater perceived legitimacy of psychological risk assessment and potentially greater co-operation
with and acceptance of the process and outcomes (Proulx et al., 2000; Tyler & Huo, 2002; Shingler & Mann, 2006).

**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. 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 focused, 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 yet 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 psychologists as being focused on the task (i.e., having a clear purpose) at the same time as flexibly dealing with a changing situation (Levitt et al., 2006). 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 working 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. The focused and aims-driven approach is consistent with the idea of
directiveness, a feature that Marshall et al. (2003) found to be a characteristic of effective correctional therapists. Psychologists and prisoners both feel that a rigid, scripted approach to interviewing is detrimental to the aims of the interview. Logan (2013) similarly describes the need to remain imperceptibly in control of the interview (i.e., having a clear purpose and direction) at the same time as not allowing interview schedules to dominate. Having a purposeful conversation sums up this balance: risk assessment interviewing has aims and some structure but if it is conducted in a natural and conversational manner, it is perceived as more engaging and reassuring. Prisoners arguably 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 subordinate categories described above. Participants talk about a range of areas that need to be balanced in risk assessment, and talk about the challenge of maintaining balance given the numerous pressures, both professional and personal. The challenges of maintaining balance form the centre of the developing Grounded Theory of risk assessment interviewing presented here. The notion of forensic work involving the balancing of competing demands, needs and responsibilities is discussed elsewhere in the forensic literature (Appelbaum, 1997; Austin et al., 2008; Ward, 2013).

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. Maintaining balance requires responsivity to an ever changing situation. Therefore, whilst a “balancing act” might generally be visualised as trying to remain stable on a see-saw or “teeter-totter” (Linehan, 1993), the dynamic and multiply
influenced nature of the interview renders this analogy rather simplistic. As already noted, in a risk assessment interview, there is no single point of balance to achieve and maintain. Rather, there is a constant process of movement along a number of inter-related dimensions (five of which are described here), any of which may be balanced or unbalanced at any one time. The analysis reported above has also pointed out relationships between these dimensions of effective interviewing – therefore, achieving balance on one dimension is liable to affect the balance of others. This rather suggests that the arrows within Figure 6.1 at the beginning of the chapter should also link category to category, as it is the interaction between the state of each category that determines the extent to which balance is achieved in any given moment. The skilful psychologist navigates the complexities of the interview via careful and responsive movement along these dimensions whilst remaining aware of the potentially destabilising influences of the broader context and implications of the risk assessment. The use of the word “navigation” here and throughout this chapter suggests a nautical analogy might offer more comprehensive insight into the dynamics of the interview. For example, the skipper of a yacht on a transatlantic journey has an aim and a goal – to reach her destination unharmed and intact. In order to achieve this goal the skipper has to respond to ever changing weather conditions: sometimes the weather is favourable, sometimes it is unfavourable. Sometimes the weather has been correctly forecasted, sometimes it is unpredictable. The skipper cannot withdraw from the weather. She cannot ignore it, fight it, or give up and do nothing. She must navigate the yacht through the weather and through the sea, remaining aware of and taking action to manage the movement of the sea and the wind conditions. The yacht does not remain on a rigid course, ploughing on straight, regardless of the wind; sometimes it has to tack and seemingly sail away from the target destination in order to make progress towards the ultimate goal. If the wind suddenly changes, so must the skipper respond by changing the configuration of the sails. The skipper must deal responsively with the conditions, whilst keeping an eye on the ultimate goal. The skipper must also ensure the safety of all on board – looking after the well-being of the crew during a
potentially perilous journey is an essential part of being the skipper. The crew also have an important role to play in contributing towards achieving the final goal – if everyone is working together, agreeing on the final destination, and on the best route to take to achieve it, then the journey is less perilous and more efficient. The crew must be able to contribute to the initial plan, and give feedback to the skipper from their perspective: sometimes crew members will see things that the skipper misses, or cannot appreciate from her position. On the other hand, sometimes the skipper can see the bigger picture much more clearly than the crew, and must clearly, firmly and respectfully hold her position.

Imagining the psychologist as the skipper and the prisoner as a crew member enables reflection on the role that both parties play in navigating the risk assessment interview. However, no analogy is perfect: in an interview, the context and setting arguably affect and are affected by the content and climate of the interview. It is stretching the analogy somewhat to suggest that the approach to sailing the yacht might have an impact on the sea or weather conditions. Nevertheless, the task of the risk assessment interview is to maintain the stability of the encounter whilst steering a course through sometimes challenging and unpredictable conditions, keeping the safety and integrity of all involved as a priority, in order to achieve an ultimate goal. The goal is much easier to achieve if the assessor and assessed are working towards it together – if aims and objectives and methods have been agreed collaboratively. Given the potential for harm on such a journey, keeping a close eye on the well-being of the prisoner is also crucial – as is maintaining one’s own strength and resilience as a practitioner (Clarke, 2011).

The analysis of the contributions of the psychologists and prisoners as separate groups can begin to provide some insight into the issues that might impede balance, or alternatively might interfere with successful navigation of the interview. Firstly, the resource pressure experienced by psychologists risks the integrity of the interview. A rushed interview is experienced as lacking in collaboration, negatively affecting the development of rapport, and resulting in de-individualisation of the prisoner. Rushing also reduces time available for proper
explanations of processes and intentions, thereby affecting the capacity for clarity. In this way, the broader organisational pressures experienced by psychologists can affect the interview process.

Secondly, prisoners’ and psychologists’ expectations of each other can interfere with balance from the outset. Analysis of both groups’ contributions indicate prisoners’ tendency to view psychologists with mistrust and hostility. This is consistent with extant literature (Crewe, 2012 & 2011b; Maruna, 2011; Sparks, 1998; Warr, 2008). Building a trusting relationship with another has been suggested to be integral to openness to alternative explanations and perspectives (see Gillespie, 2011). In this way overcoming barriers of mistrust is essential to achieving balance or successfully navigating the risk assessment journey. The five categories presented here provide some guidance as to how psychologists can begin to overcome barriers to trust. The analysis suggests that interviews that begin with clear and transparent explanations and that encourage collaboration and team work between psychologist and prisoner are more likely to encourage the development of a trusting relationship. Likewise, interviews that prioritise developing a respectful human connection (within appropriate professional boundaries), that focus on understanding the prisoner as an individual and that do so in a warm, natural conversational manner are experienced as more effective in bringing down barriers of hostility and mistrust.

There is also the issue of power to be considered. Chapter 4 describes prisoners’ experiences of lacking power and autonomy in their prison lives generally, as well as specifically in relation to risk assessment. Prisoners believe psychologists hold the power, and resent the influence psychologists are perceived to have over parole decisions. However, PBMs are clear that their attribution of power and influence to psychological evidence in decision making is a result of the superior quality of psychological evidence. Psychologists recognise the power attributed to their evidence. Whilst this adds to stress and weight of expectation, psychologists also believe that it is justified, by virtue of the thoroughness, clarity, depth and analysis provided in their
assessments. These power dynamics are present in the interview (as described above) and are likely to have an impact on balance. If prisoners see psychologists as having such a powerful voice in determining their futures, how does this affect their ability to trust them enough to be truly open? Even if they trust the individual psychologist, the context in which the assessment is being conducted surely interferes with meaningful engagement on the part of the prisoner. Evidence suggests that many prisoners seek the depth of understanding of their dysfunction and their offending that proper engagement with psychological assessment can bring (Ferrito et al., 2017). Yet the context of the assessment and the potential implications of it could well interfere with this search for meaning. There is no straightforward solution here, other than recognition of these competing perspectives, and of the broader context of risk assessment (Shingler & Needs, 2018b).

Finally, there is the “trainee dilemma” to be considered in relation to the interview. Analysis reported in Chapters 3 and 4 suggests that prisoners particularly resent psychological power when it is held by trainees. Consequently, many prisoners do not want to be assessed by trainees when the stakes are so high. Psychologists recognise this and see the legitimacy in prisoners’ concerns. Psychologists also identify the challenge of navigating the difficult balancing act within the interview 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 in order to maximise co-operation and engagement, this is a matter of judgement, as described by Maria (psychologist) in Chapter 3. The issue of unqualified psychologists conducting high stakes risk assessments concerns both prisoners and psychologists who participated in this study. However, PBMss are satisfied with assessments conducted by trainee psychologists and generally judge them as equally credible and fair as those presented by qualified psychologists (see Chapter 5). As has already been noted, this presents challenges in terms of competing views of the legitimacy of psychological assessment that need to be overcome if psychologists are to make any progress in improving the process of risk assessment.
It could be argued that the post-RNR manualisation of risk assessment (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Marshall, 2009) has made balance more challenging to achieve. The extensive guidance accompanying most SPJs, alongside the requirement in some cases for practitioners to attend and pass inter-rater reliability training, arguably leaves less room for clinical expertise in risk assessment. Professional discretion was recommended by Andrews and Bonta (2010), but seems side-lined in many applications of RNR (Gannon & Ward, 2014). The notion of working with offenders being a craft (Hough, 2010) that requires skill, experience and responsivity to the uniqueness of the situation (Lowenkamp et al., 2012; 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 SPJs should be abandoned in favour of a return to clinical judgement: this would be to ignore available evidence (see Dawes et al., 1989). Rather, SPJs may not be enough to form a comprehensive understanding and formulation of an individual prisoner’s risks, strengths and treatment needs (Boer & Hart, 2009; Lowenkamp et al., 2012) and may even “…stop psychologists from thinking” (Steph, psychologist). This is consistent with the preferences of the Parole Board reported in Chapter 5: whilst PBMs value the credibility provided by SPJs, they also want the depth of understanding provided by individualised psychological formulation. The current findings suggest that a more flexible, nuanced and balanced approach to risk assessment interviewing is more valuable. It is more likely to achieve the information gathering, motivational, and engagement-in-risk-management-services functions of the interview, and it is more likely to meet the needs of a key stakeholder group, namely the Parole Board. The implications for practice of these results, alongside the results from other strands of this project will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8.

**Summary and Conclusions**

In summary, the management of the process of the risk assessment interview 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 most effective approach 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 (see Chapters 3, 4, and 7). Awareness of the (sometimes) competing perspectives of psychologists, prisoners and PBM's can help to determine the most effective approach, as can awareness of the broader context and implications of the risk assessment. The identification of the five categories of meaning described above also provide guidance for psychologists (and other professionals conducting high stakes risk assessment) in creating an interview context that is most conducive to successful navigation of the process. The five categories potentially facilitate the gathering of rich information and enable the prisoner to be invested in a process that is experienced as fair, honest and reasonable - potentially increasing compliance.

The notion of risk assessment as a difficult balancing act is the key theoretical finding reported here. Throughout risk assessment interviewing, interpersonal as well as wider contextual factors exert pressure on the interview (Shingler & Needs, 2018b), continually threatening its balance. The task of the psychologist is to respond to the ever-changing conditions whilst remaining focused on the overriding goal. The goal is easier to identify and to achieve if the psychologist and prisoner are working collaboratively together. 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.

This chapter reports the analysis of one key interaction in the risk assessment process, namely that of the interview. The interview has emerged as a dynamic process, involving the need for constant responsive movement on the part of the psychologist. The influences on the interview are multiple. They include the environmental, resource and interpersonal pressures
exerted on psychologists on their work. The psychologist is working under the weight of others’ expectations as well as the weight of responsibility they feel in risk assessment. Prisoners are similarly influenced by their environment – an environment that renders them powerless and lacking control over their lives and futures. Prisoners’ perceptions of psychologists as untrustworthy yet powerful surely have a role to play in how they approach the interview. Finally, the Parole Board want the high quality, credible, balanced evidence provided by psychologists in order to enable them to fulfil their role as arbiters of fairness. The consequent weight given to psychological assessment by the Parole Board adds pressure for psychologists and adds reason for prisoners to remain suspicious and resentful of psychologists’ role in risk assessment. This points to the need to understand risk assessment in its entirety in complex, dynamic terms. The following chapter will begin to explore some of these issues in more depth, drawing in more detail on concepts such as intersubjectivity and complexity theory.
Chapter Seven: The Nonsense of Objectivity: Context, Influence and Intersubjectivity in Psychological Risk Assessment

In Chapters 3, 4 and 5, I reported findings about psychologists’, prisoners’ and Parole Board members’ perspectives of psychological risk assessment. Throughout these chapters, the relationships between the three groups, their influence on each other, and the contextual influences on risk assessment have become apparent (Wolf-Branigin, 2014). In Chapter 6, I reported findings relating to one example of an interaction between two stakeholder groups, namely that of psychologists and prisoners in the risk assessment interview. In this chapter, the tensions between psychologists and prisoners and the constant navigation of a difficult balance emphasised the interpersonal and mutually influencing nature of risk assessment. In this penultimate chapter, I discuss relationships, context and systemic issues in risk assessment in more detail, drawing both on the results from this project and the broader literature. The following and final chapter will draw on this and the previous analytic chapters in order to make recommendations for improving risk assessment practice.

Organisational and Environmental Influences in Psychological Risk Assessment

The results presented in chapters 3, 4 and 5 indicate that psychologists, indeterminate sentenced prisoners (ISPs) and Parole Board members (PBMs) are all influenced by the environment and organisation within which they live and work. Psychologists feel the pressure of limited resources, of difficult interpersonal relationships, and of the weight of responsibility and expectation. ISPs experience violence, volatility and suffering and feel powerless and lacking in control over their lives and futures. PBMs describe organisational constraints on their practice. Additional findings, reported in the following sections, support the presence of substantial organisational influences on all three participant groups.
**Indeterminate sentenced prisoners.** As described in Chapter 4, ISPs are, perhaps unsurprisingly, the most explicit in their descriptions of an over-arching system, which is experienced as harsh, uncaring and unpredictable, and within which they feel powerless and forgotten, for example:

I just think that they think now we’re lost in the system because the IPP’s been abolished, as it was known as. Erm and we’re still here with it. They just think we’re in limbo so they think, “Just deal with the people who are getting out next week”. That’s the easiest thing to do. (Martin)

And it’s just, I feel like nobody – not here not the st, you know the staff here are good as gold but I feel like with this whole system with the parole, I just feel like my outside probation, and like you know Parole Board and, you know, they just really don’t give a shit about me. D’you know what I mean? (Daniel)

Psychologists, psychological risk assessment, PBMs and the parole process are part of the system, and ISPs participate in risk assessment within this context of powerlessness, coercion and in some cases, resentment. This is reflected in the analysis of ISPs’ contributions (see Chapter 4). The inherent coerciveness is also reflected in the discussion of collaborative engagement in Chapter 6. Collaborative engagement refers to the need to involve prisoners in risk assessment and give them choice within the limitations imposed by the coercive environment.

**Parole Board members.** Whilst the effect of the system on PBMs may lack the depth, weight and tightness experienced by prisoners (Crewe, 2011b) it is certainly present in their interviews. PBMs talk explicitly about being constrained by the system, an issue which was explored in detail in Chapter 5 (and see Padfield et al., 2000), but for example:

One of the problems I have right through the criminal justice system is that there’s a tendency to count out-outcomes and output without considering what is needed within that particular case. Ok so there is a - most Parole Board members will try and resist that but there is some subliminal pressure there to close the case and if I don’t do this, it’s
only going to come back. Or at least it can come back in two years or one year or whatever. So rather than viewing cases as an ongoing, living, breathing thing that may change and evolve within the timescales set by the reviews, you’re limited by the review.

(Steve, PBM)

Steve’s talk about how the system exerts “subliminal pressure” on his practice indicates that his choices about how to deal with a review are limited. Chapter 5 similarly explains how elements of the system over which the Parole Board has no control affect the efficiency and fairness of the service they provide. The findings in this and other studies (Lackenby, 2018) highlight the priority given to fairness and independence by PBMs. Consequently, the belief that the system compromises PBMs’ ability to fulfil their role as arbiters of fairness would arguably be troubling for them.

**Psychologists.** Psychologists are the least explicit of the three participant groups in their descriptions of a system as having power over them. Nonetheless, psychologists’ descriptions of their work suggest that some decisions are not in their hands, and some ways of working are not, or have not always been, what they would choose in order to maintain their own professional and personal standards. Chapter 3 describes the impact of resource pressures and the management and allocation of psychological resources on psychologists’ risk assessment practice. Psychologists’ contributions also suggest other pressures and expectations. For example, Steph describes how “any risk assessment that we do has to have a structured risk assessment”. There is no value judgement here: using a structured risk assessment tool may well result in a better assessment and a psychologist might well choose to employ a structured risk assessment tool anyway, based on the current evidence (Heilbrun et al., 2014). However, Steph’s description of the process indicates that her professional choice is limited by the expectations of the system.

Psychologists also describe how their approach to assessment is constrained by the drive to meet Parole Board demands:
I think there’s also issues that, that come from the kind of Parole Board side of things, in terms of people wanting risk assessments, when they need them by, erm, you know meeting deadlines. (Charlie)

It becomes confused and mixed up and messy. A Parole Board have done this thing, this piece of work, it goes to another Parole Board, the other Parole Board says “Oh well, well why haven’t we considered this? Ok we need another risk assessment”. And how many times do you look back and you think “Oh my god, this person has had so many risk assessments done”. You know, why are we doing all these things? Why, why are we, why aren’t we just doing a good risk assessment? (Sam)

In this way, the resources provided by the system, the expectations of the system and the priority given by the system to servicing Parole Board reviews means that professional decision making can be limited. Chapter 3 also discusses changes to the model of delivery of psychological services, how these changes have interfered with psychologists’ relationships with colleagues and prisoners and how this has affected assessment practice. This is another way in which the system, in this case, decisions about the management and organisation of psychological services, influences risk assessment practice.

It is apparent, then, that psychologists are directly affected by the system within which they work. Consequently it is systemic, organisational influences that partly determine how psychologists conduct risk assessments rather than the approach being driven solely by the professional judgement of the psychologist. The notion that organisational culture and priorities directly affect professional practice is not new (Needs, 2010). Some organisational influences are clear and explicit, such as the priority given to meeting Parole Board needs, and the necessity of using SPJs, as described above. Other influences are less clear, and may not be apparent even to those affected by them, such as the extent to which one’s professional actions are reinforced or punished by colleagues, clients or the organisation (Needs, 2010). Adshead’s (2014) provocative suggestion that risk-averse practice could be negatively reinforced by reduced anxiety about
outcome is an example of this. Add to this the inevitable cognitive influences, biases and heuristics which infiltrate all complex decision making (see Chapter 1) alongside the values and priorities of psychology as a profession (again, see Chapter 1), and it is clear that the nature and extent of influences on risk assessment are significant.

Both ISPs and PBMs are explicit about the effects of the powerful and controlling system. However whilst psychologists talk about influences on their risk assessment practice, such as regionalisation, Parole Board directions and limited resources, they are not explicit about these being elements of a bigger, influencing system – their comments are more indirect. The reasons for this are unknown. Perhaps psychologists are more accepting of the constraints and limitations upon them, and simply get on with the job within those constraints. Perhaps psychologists are so deeply embedded within the system that they no longer notice its influence. Perhaps, when compared to ISPs and PBMs, psychologists are more likely to feel aligned with the system. Psychologists are employed by the Prison Service after all, whereas prisoners are explicitly under the control of the prison system, and PBMs are independent of the Prison Service and strongly value their independence (see Chapter 5; Hardwick, 2017; Lackenby, 2018; Shingler, 2017). It may also be that prisoners, and to a lesser degree PBMs, construe the system as a tangible, single entity, with its own (especially according to prisoners, usually nefarious), purpose. This single entity view is certainly consistent with the prisoners’ talk in this study – they refer to “the system” by name. It is possible that psychologists are more aware of the range of potential influences, rather than attributing them to a single source, an issue which will be discussed in more depth below. Whatever the reason, whilst psychologists do not explicitly describe being constrained by a system, both ISPs and PBMs believe there are organisational constraints on psychologists:

I don’t know across the board, in this prison, er, the psychologists who work here, they seem to have a certain line to follow. (Jude, prisoner)

But like I say they got to stay within their framework where they work innit? (Malcolm, prisoner)
I mean maybe it’s complete fantasy on my part but forensic psychologists’ training in prison, er, is about knowing whether they’ve followed the right rules or not. (Gail, PBM)

These quotes may well reflect the increasing manualisation of psychological practice, characterised by adherence to rules and guidelines, which has been commented on elsewhere in the psychological literature (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Marshall, 2009). They may also reflect the preponderance of less experienced, trainee psychologists applying manualised approaches to risk assessment: Sookermany (2012) suggests that following the rules is a characteristic of lower level, or novice practice. The dominance of manualised, structured risk assessment procedures has been discussed in depth earlier, and will be discussed again below. What is apparent from these quotes, though, is that if there are organisational, professional or manual-based constraints on psychological risk assessment practice in prisons, then they are apparent both to prisoners and PBM.

To summarise so far, analysis suggests that psychologists, ISPs and PBM are influenced and constrained by the environment and organisational context. This seems to be acknowledged directly by some participants, and obliquely by others, suggesting complex and unclear patterns of influence.

Social and Political Influences

In addition to the immediate environmental and organisational influences described above, it is likely that prison-based risk assessment with ISPs is subject to significant political and social influence. A number of participants referred to such influences:

I just feel like I’m just a political pawn right now. (Daniel, prisoner)

You’re kind of thinking about the Anthony Rice34 cases and some other people that I’ve met in custody who are back in because they’ve gone out and committed, you know, kind of horrendous offences. (Alex, psychologist)

34 In 2005, Anthony Rice murdered Naomi Bryant, nine months after being released from a life sentence for attempted rape. This event was subject to a serious case review by the HMCIP.
Crime and punishment is a topical issue, and one that increasingly preoccupies governments (Coyle, 2005). Psychologists, prisoners and the process and outcomes of psychological risk assessment cannot be immune to these pressures – Crighton and Towl (2008) certainly agree that prison-based psychological work “takes place in a social, economic and political context” (p. 4). Ward and Stewart (2003) argue that correctional practices (assessment and intervention) and politically driven correctional policy are inextricably linked; they argue that punitive social and political attitudes towards people who have committed sexual offences have resulted in a reluctance to embrace positive treatment approaches for this group. Ogloff and Davies (2004) highlight the reflexive relationship between politics and rehabilitation policy - governmental anxiety about crime leads to harsher sentencing regimes and more people in prison. This could easily be extrapolated to risk assessment and Parole Board decision making – governmental anxiety about crime arguably leads to cautious risk assessment practice, harsher decision making and fewer people released from prison (see below; Simon & Feeley, 2001).

Prisoners are therefore affected on a daily basis by political views and priorities – that is, the futures of ISPs are determined by factors other than their risk (see Chapter 1).

The indeterminate sentence is particularly political, both in its origin and its implementation (Coyle, 2005) and there have been numerous changes to the structure and application of the indeterminate sentence since its inception in 1965. The Indeterminate sentence for Public Protection (IPP) is a good example of the consequences for individual prisoners of political appetite to be “tough on crime”. The introduction of the IPP in 2005 resulted in a significant increase in the number of ISPs with which the Prison Service was ill equipped to cope. As a result of this and other problems (Strickland & Garton Grimwood, 2013), the IPP was amended in 2008 with the aim of targeting it more precisely to serious offenders. Despite these

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35 The mandatory life sentence was created in 1965 as a result of a political decision to abolish the death penalty. As Coyle (2005) notes, in the years following the introduction of the life sentence the number of convictions for murder rose considerably – not because of a sudden increase in murders, but because courts were more comfortable convicting someone for murder knowing that they were not sentencing them to death.
amendments, the IPP was generally perceived as unfair and unworkable (Strickland & Garton Grimwood, 2013). The IPP sentence was described as one of the “least carefully planned and implemented pieces of legislation in the history of British sentencing” (Jacobson & Hough, 2010, p. vii), and was eventually abolished in 2012.

The IPP is now generally recognised as an ineffective policy with unintended and unmanageable consequences. These included too many ISPs in prison with short tariffs, unable to access the interventions recommended for them, and without which they would not be considered for release. However, there are still prisoners serving IPPs who are awaiting risk assessments, Parole Board reviews, or to access places on offending behaviour programmes that they need to demonstrate a reduction in risk. They may well have been ineligible for an indeterminate sentence if they had been convicted after the amendments in 2008, or after the IPP was abolished in 2012. They will be seeing other people, with similar criminal histories, and similar offences, being given determinate sentences under new sentencing law and being released before them. It is easy to see why the prisoners who contributed to this study felt “stuck and out of control” (Chapter 4) in relation to their indeterminate sentence.

If sentencing law is politically influenced, then so is early release. Despite significant reductions in direct political involvement in decisions about ISPs, the Home Secretary still retains the power to prevent ISPs from moving to open prison conditions. Panels of the Parole Board can

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The Parole Board was created in 1967, as a means of reviewing suitability for early release from prison sentences. However, until relatively recently the Home Secretary retained total control over the futures of ISPs – s/he made the decisions about release and progression to conditions of lower security at a time when the ISP was not entitled to see any reports written about him, and was not provided with any explanation of why his application for release or a transfer to less secure prison conditions was refused (Arnott & Creighton, 2006). The Home Secretary had the power to ignore the recommendations of the Parole Board for release without having to give any explanation or justification. Cullen and Newell (1999) commented on the extent to which lifers at that time were unwillingly caught up in the political climate – the behaviour of one lifer on license had the potential to influence the treatment of all lifers in the system, as “the public acceptability of early release” was explicitly stated as part of the process of considering applications. The decision to release was explicitly a political one. This state of affairs remained until 1991 for discretionary lifers, and 2003 for mandatory lifers – the decision about release for these groups now rests with the Parole Board. Similarly, until 2002, the Home Secretary made decisions about tariffs in the cases of life sentenced prisoners, with the capability to over-rule the recommendation of the trial judge who presided over the case (see McQueirns, 2005) – a change in the law in 2002 means that the tariff is now set by the trial judge in open court in all adult life sentence cases.
recommend transfer to an open prison, but the final decision rests with the Home Secretary. It is arguable that such decisions are influenced by perceptions of public acceptability, whether explicitly or not.

Risk assessment decisions and recommendations then, are inevitably influenced by the prevailing political climate. There is general agreement in the psychological and criminological literature that attitudes towards crime and punishment are becoming increasingly harsh, and criminal justice policy is increasingly prioritising reducing risk over rehabilitation and improving the lives of “criminals” (e.g., McCulloch & McNeill, 2007; Ward & Birgden, 2007; Ward & Connolly, 2008). McNeill (2012) commented that UK approaches to rehabilitation are increasingly influenced by preoccupation with public protection and risk reduction. Protecting public safety is the priority (Stanford, 2009), and given the potential risk to the public when ISPs are released, such decisions are a particular focus of the “intense media and political scrutiny” described by Baker and Wilkinson (2011, p. 13). There is a sense of fear and panic amongst the public in relation to risk and “moral panics invariably give rise to calls for increased regulation and state intervention to address the ‘crisis’ and alleviate public fears” (McLaughlin, 2006, p.1265). Society’s and government’s unwillingness to tolerate risk results in organisational policy that is in turn driven by fear of errors, intolerance of risk and a drive for certain safety (Stanford, 2009). Agencies are anxious about identifying and managing risk as “reputational risk and professional liability are now very powerful forces influencing the way in which professionals respond to risk” (McLaughlin, 2006, p. 1067). This creates a climate of fear amongst front line staff who are required to make decisions about risk within this organisational culture (see Chapter 3 and McDermott, 2014). This was described explicitly by Karen (psychologist):

37 The climate of fear about the release of indeterminate sentenced prisoners would seem to be largely misplaced, and most probably a result of biases and heuristics, including priming effects (see Chapter 1). Despite the seriousness of the crimes that attract mandatory and other life sentences, the rate of reoffending of life sentenced prisoners is low. Once released, the majority of life sentenced prisoners are successfully resettled into the community, with only 2.2% of those serving a mandatory life sentence and 4.8% of those serving other life sentences reoffending in any way - this is compared to 46.9% of the overall prison population (HMI Probation and HMI Prisons Joint Inspection Report, 2013). Lack of attention to base rates is in itself a form of bias that can mislead judgements about risk (Gigerenzer, 2002).
You’ve got to defend your position and your actions. And there’s always this, you know, sometimes I hear about various processes, erm, that, they’ll use the phrase sort of “covering arse”, and it feels – I suppose that links in a little bit with the risk-averse kind of thing around risk assessments and I think that can, that can have an impact.

Such fear is understandable when practitioners are working within a “rhetoric of risk” (Stanford, 2009, p. 1067) and are subject to “critical colleagues and managers and a litigious, hostile public” (McLaughlin, 2006, p. 1067). Kemshall (2009) addresses the context in which psychologists make decisions about risk, commenting that there is general public mistrust and lack of confidence in professional competence (Baker & Wilkinson, 2011; Gannon & Ward, 2014; Simon & Feeley, 2001). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the implementation of increasingly coercive risk management measures tends to elicit relatively little criticism from the public (McLaughlin, 2006).

Prisoners’ rights are not politically popular, and there is arguably social pressure on correctional psychologists to prioritise public protection - no psychologist wants to be the focus of a serious case review, having to justify a recommendation to release someone who went on to commit a serious offence under the “harsh scrutiny of hindsight bias” (Kemshall, 2009, p. 332). Similarly Adshead (2014) suggests that the litigious and risk-averse social climate may contribute to risk-averse practice amongst psychologists, as noted above and discussed in Chapter 3. Some of the psychologists in this study were explicit about their proneness to risk-averse practice (see Chapter 3; see also Forde, 2014). Baker and Wilkinson (2011) similarly reflect on the difficulties faced by professionals when decision making becomes “defensive” rather than “defensible”, and Stanford (2009) suggests that “social workers have adopted a more defensive and morally timid position in

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38 Forde (2014) found that prison based forensic psychologists were half as likely as Offender Managers to make positive recommendations for ISPs being considered for parole. However, this result is not straightforward, as the sample of ISPs in the study had all been referred for an externally commissioned psychological assessment, suggesting that their histories, treatment needs and presentation were likely to be disproportionately complex, and not representative of the indeterminate sentenced population as a whole. However, this result requires thought, especially when considering the relatively low level of re-offending of ISPs.
response to the pervasive and insidious political and moral conservatism of neo-liberal risk society” (p. 1067).

It seems inevitable that social and political attitudes about risk influence prison-based risk assessment practice. The psychologists in this study described the weight of responsibility on them during risk assessment – in terms of getting the decision right and meeting the competing demands and expectations of the Parole Board, the public and the prisoner (Chapter 3). The broader social and political climate is likely to contribute to this weight. Psychological assessment came under such public scrutiny in relation to the investigation of a serious further offence committed by Anthony Rice (HMIP, 2006) which has been referred to throughout this thesis. The outcomes of the investigation into the assessment and treatment of Mr Rice had direct implications for psychological risk assessment practice. During the writing up of this project, social and political influences on prisoners, psychologists and Parole Board decision making were again brought to the fore by the case of John Worboys. A Parole Board decision to release Mr Worboys, a man who was convicted of a number of serious sexual offences against women, resulted in media outcry, especially when it transpired that Mr Worboys had not admitted to the full range of sexual offending of which he was suspected. The release decision was challenged by a number of parties, including the Mayor of London, alleged and proven victims of Mr Worboys and “News Group Newspapers Ltd”. Mr Worboys’ case was judicially reviewed, the decision to release him was overturned, and Mr Worboys’ case was referred back to the Parole Board for a fresh assessment by a newly constituted panel. The Sun newspaper referred to “a bungling Parole Board decision” and referred to Mr Worboys as a “monster” (Engineer & Rogers, 2018). One of the psychologists involved in providing evidence to the Parole Board in this case was named in a number of national newspapers along with disparaging comments about her approach to assessment (“Shrink who urges leniency for pervs backed rapist Worboys’ release”, Pollard & Lucas, 2018). Thus, public opinion about a man’s release from prison had a direct influence on the work of the Parole Board and the progression of an ISP. The extent to which the Worboys episode
has affected psychological approaches to risk assessment of high profile prisoners is unknown, but it is reasonable to think that there would be some influence. There are not many psychologists who would relish having their names and opinions revealed in the national press in a way that calls into question their professionalism. Echoing Clark (1993), there is a significant risk of further devaluing the skills and experience of correctional psychologists if it seems that their opinions are influenced more by social and political pressure than by psychological investigation and formulation. Ward and Birgden (2007) specifically highlight the potential intrusion of social and moral values into risk assessment, and warn psychologists of the need to remain mindful of such influences.

Also worthy of discussion here is the extent to which the proliferation of Structured Professional Judgement (SPJ) approaches to risk assessment has been a response to the need to manage risk in a defensible way. The use of SPJs is consistent with the prevailing theoretical climate (see Introduction) and SPJs have credibility with the Parole Board (see Chapter 5). The focus on identifying and addressing internally located risk factors simplifies an often complex and dynamic picture (Pycroft, 2014) which makes the process feel more manageable and contained. The results of this study suggest that the application of SPJs provides reassurances of credibility and accountability for psychologists, particularly those in training (Chapters 3, 5 and 6; Gannon & Ward, 2014). Unfortunately, it seems that such reductionist approaches to risk assessment also reduce its perceived legitimacy amongst prisoners (McNeill, 2012), potentially further increasing the interpersonal demands on psychologists via challenging and hostile relationships with prisoners (see Chapter 3). Additionally, whilst SPJs have a role to play in increasing accountability and transparency, there is the concern that they might “stop psychologists from thinking” (Steph, psychologist; see Chapters 3 and 5) as a result of their detailed guidance and instructions. Gannon and Ward (2014) and Marshall (2009) both argue that over-rigid manualisation restricts clinicians’ capacity for responsiveness, which is a feature of effective practice (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Shingler et al., 2017). Arguably SPJs have also contributed to a narrowing of knowledge and
expertise amongst prison-based psychologists. That is, there is a risk that the proliferation of SPJs has resulted in a generation of psychologists who are well versed in their application, but who may lack the clinical skill to deal responsively with a unique assessment interview, and who may lack the depth and breadth of knowledge needed for a thorough, individual, holistic risk assessment. Similarly, McLaughlin (2006) noted that managerialism and accountability have contributed to a loss of professional autonomy in social workers (and arguably other professional groups involved in delivering human services, see Loveday, 1999), commenting:

> Procedural attempts to reduce uncertainty, especially in a climate in which a concern with risk minimisation is all pervasive, are also criticised as leading to a situation in which there is little room for professional discretion, as failure to follow the correct procedure can leave the worker vulnerable to disciplinary or judicial action if things go wrong. (p. 1265)

McLaughlin (2006) suggests that professionals can become dependent on following procedure in order to ensure that, in the worst case scenario (such as a serious further offence committed by an ISP on release or in open prison conditions) decisions can be defended. Prisoners’ and PBMs’ observation that psychologists are constrained by the system and have to “follow the right rules” (Gail, PBM – see above) is relevant here. It seems that organisational requirements, arguably determined partly by the rhetoric of risk and the need for organisations in the public eye to minimise risk are at least partly responsible for driving psychological risk assessment practice.

There is not universal agreement that manualisation is inevitably deleterious, and Mann (2009) argues convincingly that “[treatment] manuals are not meant to replace therapist skill, creativity and judgement” (p. 127). Balancing the value of SPJs with individually responsive assessment should be a central goal of correctional psychological practice, and suggestions for achieving this are discussed in the following and final chapter.
Interactional Influences

In addition to environmental and organisational influences, the results reveal influences relating to the interactions between participant groups. The risk assessment interview, a key interpersonal interaction, is described in detail in Chapter 6. The further analyses that follow describe the interactions between other participant groups.

**Psychologists and Parole Board members.** Analysis reveals reciprocal influence between psychologists and PBMs in the risk assessment process. Firstly, analysis suggests that the Parole Board has power over psychological assessment. PBMs provide “directions” to psychologists in the lead up to a parole review. Directions specify what the panel of the Parole Board wants from a psychologist in order to most usefully assist decision making in a particular case. PBMs also have some control over the timescale within which psychologists must complete assessments: the Parole Board sets dates for hearings and identifies the deadlines for reports to be prepared. The following quotes illustrate the experiences of two psychologists in relation to Parole Board directions:

So we get allocated, erm, a case, erm, usually, the Parole Board, it’s usually a directed from the Parole Board. (Karen)

Sometimes Board members or Judges erm, dictate “I want this”. It’s not your place to query – we’ve had lots and lots of situations which, which feel like – lots and lots that’s not fair no, a minority in the grand scheme of things a minority but cases in which Judges have been too, erm, forceful in determining stuff you know, so we’ve had to comply having taken advice. We’ve had to for example, provide evidence for erm PCL-R scores, and then Judges, Judges have gone through saying “well I don’t think that’s evidence of that”. Yeah, so erm, you know, so the flip side of it, you know, Judges are very powerful people aren’t they? (Sam)

These quotes evidence the sense of power that psychologists perceive the Parole Board to have over their practice, both in terms of who gets assessed and how that assessment is
completed. The power held by the Parole Board over psychologists is apparent across the contributions from different participant groups, with recognition that, even with discussion and negotiation which seems to take place, ultimately “If the Parole Board makes a direction, it has to be complied with” (Vivienne, PBM). The power of the Parole Board to direct psychological assessment means that psychological resources are increasingly diverted to servicing the Parole Board’s needs. In this way, the needs and priorities of the Parole Board directly influence the broader system of organising and prioritising psychological resources. Jamie (psychologist) describes the constant “firefighting” to meet the demands of the Parole Board, implying that other work and possibly more productive approaches to assessment are sidelined, as also described by Sam (psychologist):

I think it’s the wrong way round, and I think we’ve talked about this numerable times; I’d say that front end assessment is what we should be doing.

The pressure to get risk assessments done in order to meet Parole Board needs (which are undeniably important) illustrates the power the Parole Board has over psychologists, psychological practice and also the broader system.

Conversely, psychologists are also seen to have power and influence over the Parole Board. This power is in relation to both PBMs’ respect for psychological skill and practice and to the weight given to psychological assessments by PBMs (see Chapter 5) and recognised by all three participant groups:

And what I’ve seen is that a lot of psychological reports, that’s, that’s tips the scales for them a lot of the time. (Martin, prisoner)

I do think that that a lot of credence is given to the psychology report. (Rebecca PBM)

Erm I think, I do feel that the Parole Board put, put a lot of weight on us, erm, as psychologists. (Maria, psychologist)

The results reported in Chapter 5 suggest that PBMs do indeed value psychological assessment, and place significant weight on it in their decision making. This in turn implies that
prisoners’ views of psychologists as powerful in relation to release and progression decisions (as reported in Chapter 4 and elsewhere in the literature, Crewe, 2011b; Sparkes, 1998; Warr, 2008) have some basis in reality. PBMs want psychological reports to help them reach decisions (especially in complex cases) because they value the depth of understanding they provide, and feel that this helps them to make fairer and more independent decisions. Psychologists see their role as providing a deeper level of understanding of prisoners, and see risk assessment as a weighty task, given the time and attention to detail that is required (see Chapter 4). Consequently, psychologists and PBMs agree that psychological evidence adds value and that the weight given to psychological evidence in the parole decision making process is legitimate (see Chapter 5).

To summarise so far, psychologists are influenced and constrained by Parole Board practice yet also have power within that process. Psychologists can be negatively affected by this weight, as described in Chapter 3, at the same time as believing that the weight is justified and reasonable. PBMs’ views about the quality of psychological risk assessment, and the added value brought to risk assessment by psychological skills and knowledge (Shingler, 2017; and see Chapter 5) mean that demand for psychological input is high. This in turn influences the amount and distribution of psychological resources within the broader system – the organisation prioritises psychological resources for meeting Parole Board demands. The value placed on psychological knowledge and expertise has arguably altered the make-up of the Parole Board itself: before 2003, psychologists were not recruited as Parole Board members. Since 2003, the number of psychologist members has risen from four to around thirty three currently.39 Additionally, the power of psychological opinion in Parole Board decision making has significant consequences for prisoners and implications for relationships between psychologists and prisoners, an issue to which I will now turn.

Psychologists and prisoners. The analyses reported in Chapters 3 and 4 conclude that prisoners view psychologists as untrustworthy but powerful. They see psychologists as having significant power in the process of progression towards release, but also more broadly within their prison lives, for example:

What the psychologist says goes. So you could go, I dunno, maybe to a progressive, not a hearing but a meeting in prison, cat C or what have you, everyone’s saying yeah, great, fantastic, move him on. Psychology, “Well we think he’s still got outstanding areas”.

They’re seen as the over-arching power. (Shawn, prisoner)

Some psychologists recognise the power they have over prisoners and see prisoners’ perspectives as “…this is my, this is my life right now, erm, in your hands” (Laura, psychologist). Similarly, Alex (psychologist) recognises the power psychologists have to determine the future for prisoners, in that “if the psychologist is saying something that is really negative, it can, it can change the course of the parole outcome”.

Prisoners’ and psychologists’ contributions suggest that psychologists’ power results in mistrust and resentment from prisoners, as described in Chapters 3 and 4. Prisoners believe that psychologists are likely to prevent them from making progress towards release. Prisoners mistrust psychologists’ intentions and can interpret psychologists’ behaviour in a hostile and suspicious way. Prisoners’ attribution of hostile intentions to psychologists suggests that psychologists do not always have the motive-based trust needed for their assessments and decisions to be seen as procedurally just (Tyler & Huo, 2002). In other words, the results suggest that psychological risk assessment lacks legitimacy in the eyes of prisoners. Thus, prisoners’ perspectives of legitimacy are misaligned with those of psychologists and PBM's. Prisoners seem to feel this lack of legitimacy most keenly in relation to assessments completed by young psychologists, unqualified (trainee) psychologists, and psychologists who are seen as not knowing the prisoner (not having spent enough time with them, not encountering the prisoner in any context other than the assessment), as described in Chapters 3, 4 and 6. Prisoners’ views of psychological input as powerful, yet
mistrusted, resented and unjustified are consistent with extant literature (e.g., Crewe, 2012; Warr, 2008) but inconsistent with what is known about good assessment practice: perceptions of fairness are key in terms of compliance (Tyler & Huo, 2002). In a nutshell, fairness matters.

**Psychologists, prisoners and the risk assessment interview.** Prisoners and psychologists come together in the risk assessment interview. The interview is inherently social (Murakami, 2003, and see Chapters 1 and 6) in that it involves (usually) two participants interacting to exchange information relevant to the task of completing a risk assessment. Given the high stakes nature of risk assessment, navigating the balance to maintain an effective interaction is challenging (Shingler et al., 2017, and see Chapter 6). An effective interaction is one that meets the aims of the specific risk assessment as well as maintaining the involvement of the prisoner and achieving procedural justice (Shingler et al., 2017). Examination of psychologists’ and prisoners’ perspectives in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively provides some insight into the sorts of pressures, fears and anxieties experienced by each group that are liable to affect the interview. Psychologists’ risk assessment work is characterised by time pressure, negative interpersonal interactions and a weighty sense of competing responsibilities. Psychologists are inevitably influenced by the prevailing theoretical climate of modern correctional psychology. The influence of the Risk-Needs-Responsivity model (Andrews & Bonta, 2010, and see Introduction) is considerable. The drive for scientific objectivity (Adair-Stantiall & Needs, 2018; Yen & Tafarodi, 2011) and the fear of errors associated with unstructured clinical judgement are also relevant (see Introduction). Psychologists are also prison staff and subject to the rules, regulations and culture both of the Prison Service and of the specific prison(s) in which they work. Finally, psychologists are individuals, with their own personal life experiences, attitudes and biases.

In turn, prisoners’ experiences are characterised by violence, volatility and suffering. They feel stuck and out of control. They do not trust psychologists but see them as having significant power over them and their futures. Prisoners, similar to psychologists, are subject to the rules, regulations and culture of the prison and the wider Prison Service. They are affected by
experiences in other prisons, with other elements of the criminal justice system (such as the police, the courts), and with other criminal justice professionals. As discussed above, prisoners are also vulnerable to social and political attitudes towards crime and perpetrators of crime. The influence of existing dysfunction and experiences of social exclusion are particularly relevant to this group (Williams et al., 2012), as are difficulties relating to others (Ansbro, 2008, and see Introduction) and the unique experiences and attitudes of each prisoner. There are also the competing perspectives on the legitimacy of psychological assessment to be considered – psychologists believe it is legitimate, prisoners do not.

It is apparent, then, that there are a myriad of interacting influences on psychologists and prisoners in all aspects of their lives (Vallacher, Read & Nowak, 2002). All of this complexity is liable to have an impact on how the psychologist and prisoner approach the interview, how each person views the other, how these perspectives influence behaviour, and how this behaviour is assessed and interpreted (Shingler & Needs, 2018b). However, understanding the “individual within their context” (Lewis, 2014, p. 223) is equally essential when gathering and analysing information collected during risk assessment interviews, which is discussed in depth below.

The issue of trust merits particular attention here. It is generally believed that the creation of a trusting environment is essential to facilitating the sorts of disclosures that are needed for risk assessment (Attrill & Liell, 2007; Crighton, 2010; Marshall, 1994; Shingler et al., 2017; Westwood et al., 2011). Some prisoners may be inherently distrustful, as a consequence of poor early attachments (Ansbro, 2008). It is likely that prison exacerbates existing problems with trust: prison is unpredictable and violent (di Viggiani, 2007; Needs, 2016; Sim, 1994) and surviving the environment means inhibiting emotional expression and hiding vulnerability (di Viggiani, 2006; Chapter 4). As discussed throughout, prisoners are particularly distrustful of psychologists. This presents specific problems for prisoners in risk assessment interviews in which requirements are diametrically opposed to the requirements for survival in prison: prisoners are expected to reflect openly and honestly on their offending, their life, and early experiences, showing their
flaws, and recounting events that are potentially traumatising. This has to be done in the context of knowing that the psychologist’s judgements might mean the difference between release and further incarceration. In a worst case scenario, a prisoner may come to an interview with existing problems with trust, which are exacerbated by the volatile and hostile nature of prison, to be faced with a psychologist he has never met, but whom he believes to be untrustworthy and motivated to keep him in prison. He has to make a transition from the prison wing, an environment in which showing weakness makes him vulnerable, into an interview room where he is expected to reflect honestly on his worst flaws. This is a substantial role transition for anyone to make, not least someone experiencing some or all of the trust and interpersonal conflicts described above. This transition could be even harder if the prisoner has had no or very little notice of the interview and therefore very little time to prepare himself for the role transition (Ashforth et al., 2000, and see Introduction and Chapter 4). These difficulties are likely to affect the prisoner’s behaviour in the interview – how he speaks to the psychologist, how he interprets the questions, and how he answers. This might be either compounded by a previous experience of a risk assessment interview that went badly, or ameliorated by an experience in which the psychologist managed the difficult balancing act skilfully and responsively (Shingler et al., 2017).

In turn, the psychologist may well be feeling time pressure to get the assessment done, pressure of responsibility and pressure from colleagues, including the Parole Board, whom she knows will attend carefully to what she says. She may also feel the social pressure of potentially putting the public at risk and the professional pressure of needing to be objective and scientific in her approach. She may be a trainee psychologist, struggling to attain professional credibility (see Chapters 3 and 4), which seems to be central to the development of trust (Levitt, Butler & Hill, 2006).

This example highlights a number of personal and contextual barriers to building the trusting relationship that is seen as best practice. It certainly points towards the need for considerable clinical skill amongst psychologists - how else is one to navigate the challenging
balancing act described in Chapter 6? Psychologists would surely be assisted by sophisticated understanding of responsiveness, of understanding what is needed in a situation to maintain balance, depending on the individual prisoner, the context, and the implications of the assessment (Stiles et al., 1998). Complex clinical encounters require complex and sophisticated skills that are most probably not amenable to manualisation (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Marshall, 2009; Shingler et al., 2017). In the words of Wilson and Holt (2001) in relation to medical practitioners:

Clinical judgement in these circumstances involves an irreducible element of factual uncertainty and relies to a greater or lesser extent on intuition and the interpretation of the wider history of the illness. In such cases uncritical adherence to rules, guidelines, or protocols may do more harm than good, and tools for dealing with complexity ... may be helpful. (p. 687)

The need for psychological skill and expertise in navigating the interpersonal relationship in risk assessment is not a particularly popular idea. The drive for objectivity has reduced attention on the relationship with an accompanying fear that building a relationship will result in assessments that are overly positive and biased towards the prisoner. The results of this study, seen in the context of the broader literature, suggest that relationships exist in risk assessment whether we like it or not, both within and outside the interview. The results also point towards much broader influences on risk assessment that are simply unavoidable.

The Intersubjective Nature of Risk Assessment

The interview. The complex network of relationships culminating in the risk assessment interview suggests that understanding it in intersubjective terms would help practitioners to navigate the difficult balances discussed throughout this thesis. An intersubjective process, as discussed in the Introduction, is one in which each player’s thoughts, feelings and responses are influenced both by their own experiences, memories and relationships, but also by the behaviour and approach of the other players, in other words:
I experience you, and you me, with memories of previous relationships and events, some of which may be in my conscious awareness, others not. It is these elements of instinctive in-the-moment reactions that have a direct impact on the outcome of a particular encounter. (Nolan & Walsh, 2012, p. 164)

The intersubjective web is more than a sum of its component parts – rather, each interaction creates a “unique entity” (Hinshelwood, 2012, p. 140) by virtue of the uniqueness of each individual, each individual’s prior experiences, and their views, attitudes and circumstances. De Jaegher and Di Paolo (2007) similarly describe how an interaction emerges from the input of the participants but also in turn influences the participants; they argue that an interaction “constitutes a level of analysis not reducible, in general, to individual behaviours” (p. 492). This implies that every risk assessment interview is unique, determined by the experiences, personalities and interpersonal styles of the psychologist and prisoner, and that can in turn shape the experiences, behaviours and attitudes of the psychologist and prisoner, both in the current and future interactions. That is, each risk assessment interview creates its own reality, determined by (but not reducible to) the input of the participants and the broader context. The interaction of the psychologist and prisoner creates new meaning between them (De Jaegher, 2009) that could either exacerbate existing tensions or move understanding on to a new level (Salvatore, Gelo, Gennaro, Manzo & Al Radaideh, 2010; Stern et al., 1998). Given the importance of formulation in risk assessment (Hart & Logan, 2011; Sturmey & Lindsay, 2017; Chapter 5), an approach that enables the development of a deeper understanding of psychological functioning for both psychologist and prisoner could have significant advantages (Ferrito et al., 2017).

This approach to understanding risk assessment also implies that it should not be surprising when two interviews result in slightly (or very) different information being shared and discussed, even if the same questions are asked or the same SPJ is used. To paraphrase Tilley (2000), like does not always produce like. This is an inevitable consequence of the emergent,
intersubjective nature of the interview rather than necessarily evidence that the psychologist is biased or the prisoner is dissimulating.

Taking an intersubjective approach to understanding risk assessment interviewing brings responsiveness clearly to the fore. As Nolan and Walsh (2012) note above, encounters can be shaped by “instinctive in-the-moment reactions” (p. 164). Given the complexities of the influences (both internal and external) on both psychologist and prisoner, the need for psychologists to be awake and responsive to moment-by-moment changes in the prisoner’s behaviour or the climate of the interaction is central, as discussed in detail in Chapter 6. The ability of the psychologist to be truly responsive within the interview could be one element that determines whether the co-created meaning is progressive or divisive (Stern et al., 1998).

The view of the interview as an emergent, intersubjective process is rather inconsistent with the focus on objectivity described in the Introduction. The priority given to scientific objectivity in risk assessment has resulted in decision making processes that are structured with the aim of eliminating any personal bias or other influence. Yet, as the results of this study have demonstrated, risk assessment is almost certainly subject to a range of contextual and interpersonal influences, and therefore can never be objective in the generally accepted meaning of the word (Kayes & McPherson, 2010). It inevitably involves a degree of interpretation and a degree of reactance, in that the act of assessment affects what is being assessed. The results of this study indicate that there are numerous influences on all parties. The results also imply that the interpersonal interactions that are central to risk assessment create new, emergent realities, dependent upon, but not reducible to, the contributions of the participants within the context – all of which will be unique. That is, meaning and understanding are generated by the interaction (De Jaegher, 2009). It is naïve to think that all of this can be simply laid aside in order to conduct an objective risk assessment, free from influence. Crighton and Towl (2008) made a similar observation about psychological practices:
Because psychology is generally portrayed as a “scientific” endeavour, broader contextual understanding may be neglected or even worse ignored, often under the guise of misunderstood notions of “objectivity”. (p. 4).

Adair-Stintall and Needs (2018) also reflect on the neglect of context within forensic psychology. Their explanation for this lies partly in managerialist approaches to correctional work (Bryans, 2000; Loveday, 1999; see Introduction/Chapter 5). It also lies partly in the RNR-driven evaluations of correctional interventions which prioritise simple, deterministic, cause-and-effect investigations, characterised by the gold-standard Randomised Controlled Trial (RCT) – if two randomly allocated groups of prisoners are given either an intervention or no intervention, the differences in outcome will tell us how effective the intervention is. Such approaches facilitate organisational decision making and resource planning, but entirely neglect the innumerable contextual issues that might influence the effectiveness of the intervention (Byrne, 2013; Moore et al., 2015; Tilley, 2000). For example, prison culture may well influence the effectiveness of interventions (Falshaw, Friendship, Travers & Nugent, 2004), as may therapist style (Marshall et al., 2003). Then there is the myriad of individual differences between prisoners to consider that could affect individual responsiveness to treatment. Large scale RCTs and other quasi-experimental designs looking at broad group differences conceal the role that both context and individual difference have to play in determining outcomes (Byrne, 2013; Moore et al., 2015; Pawson & Tilley, 2004; Tilley, 2000).

The predominantly internalistic approach to correctional research and risk assessment is inconsistent with the potential impact of both subtle and overt contextual influences which have been described throughout this thesis. As discussed previously, RNR-based approaches tend to construe risk factors as internal properties of the prisoner. The role of psychologists in assessment and intervention is therefore to identify and address them. Consideration of issues that might muddy this (i.e., taking a different view of risk factors as not necessarily reducible to internal, individualistic elements; considering the potential for contextual/systemic influences to affect
how a prisoner presents in an interview) risk being laid aside (Lewis, 2014) or simply not recognised as relevant and therefore not examined. This might be particularly relevant if the psychologist is inexperienced and overly reliant on structured assessment methods, and/or insufficiently informed of other relevant literature (Gannon & Ward, 2014; and see Chapters 3 and 5). Taking account of and trying to understand the broader context and the role of context in determining behaviour during risk assessment would help psychologists to reflect in a more nuanced way on the extent to which any particular behaviour is *deviant* or *offence-paralleling* (e.g., Jones, 2010; Shingler & Needs, 2018b). The extent to which the prisoner’s disclosures and behaviour in the interview actually reflect his risk and how much they reflect his response to the current context must be carefully attended to. The results presented in the previous chapters have discussed the importance of an individualised approach to assessment – and this means understanding the individual within their context. The narrow application of RNR-based SPJs could be at the expense of a more idiographic and contextual approach to assessment, even though such an approach is valued by prisoners, PBMs and psychologists, and is consistent with literature about professional and evidence based practice (Dematteo et al., 2010; Gannon & Ward, 2014; Lowenkamp et al., 2012; Shingler, 2017; Shingler et al., 2017).

Understanding more about the experiences and perspectives of psychologists and prisoners enables greater understanding of how these perspectives interact within the interview setting. It also means recognising that the risk assessment interview is more than a linear exchange of information that will be identical every time. This is not to suggest that risk assessment interviewing is inevitably partisan and biased, rather that the influences on the interview are complex, extensive and far reaching. Understanding them, reflecting on them and being prepared to challenge one’s own biases (Prescott, 2018) is preferable to prioritising unhelpful ideals of objectivity. Lilienfeld et al. (2013) suggest that good and poor scientists are probably equally prone to bias but “the crucial difference is that good scientists are aware of their propensities towards bias and make concerted efforts to compensate for them” (p. 896).
Lilienfeld et al. (2013) also point towards the need for psychological practice to balance clinical expertise and interpretation with empirically derived knowledge (and also with client preferences and values). This approach is reflective of Toulmin’s (1982) description of science: the need for a commitment to rationality and objectivity alongside acknowledgement that all science involves interpretation, and that interpretation in the context of a well-defined science is not necessarily arbitrary or idiosyncratic. This research has provided some initial insights that could facilitate practitioners in taking a more reflective (and honest?) approach to assessment.

**Psychologists, prisoners and Parole Board members: An inter-subjective web.** The interview is one element of the risk assessment process that has been brought into sharper focus during this research (Shingler et al., 2017). However, the discussion above has highlighted the broad reach of the “intersubjective web” (Nolan & Walsh, 2012, p. 166) of relationships in risk assessment. It is apparent that there are organisational and environmental influences on psychologists, ISPs and PBM s alike. It is also apparent that there are complex interactional relationships between these groups. As with the risk assessment interview, there are reciprocal interactions between stakeholder groups and between stakeholder groups and elements of the broader context. That is:

- Parts have causal implications for the whole, interactions among parts have causal implications for the whole, parts have causal implications for each other, and the whole has causal implications for parts. (Byrne, 2013, p. 218)

The competing perspectives of the legitimacy of psychological risk assessment, described above, illustrate the complex intersubjective web of relationships. For example, if a prisoner does not trust the psychologist assessing him and believes her motives are nefarious (i.e., to stitch him up and keep him in prison), this would arguably influence the information that the prisoner shares during the interview, which then informs the risk assessment. If a prisoner believes that psychological assessment has power but not legitimacy, whereas Parole Board members believe the weight they attribute to psychological assessment is entirely legitimate, this could affect
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prisoners’ perceptions of the fairness and independence of the parole process. Consequently, these competing perspectives of legitimacy have potentially substantial implications for the perceived and actual legitimacy of the entire parole process, not just the risk assessment interview. Prisoners’ perceptions of the parole process and of the fairness of Parole Board decision making are currently unknown and surely long overdue investigation. In the meantime, bringing these competing perspectives to the fore provides an opportunity for psychologists and PBM to work to improve the image and legitimacy of psychological assessment. There is some indication in the literature of how this might be achieved. For example, building good interpersonal relationships with prisoners, giving prisoners a voice and treating prisoners with humanity, fairness and respect (Sparks & Bottoms, 1995; Shingler et al, 2017; Tyler, 2006) are central. Collaboration may well also increase perceptions of legitimacy (Lewis, 2014; Shingler & Mann, 2006; Shingler et al., 2017). Procedural fairness, including clarity, is also important (Brunton-Smith & McCarthy, 2016; Shingler et al, 2017). Brown and Toyoki (2013) suggest that providing opportunities for self-reflection, self-development, improvement, progression and building a new identity all contribute to a sense of legitimacy amongst prisoners – it is clearly apparent that risk assessment could meet all of these suggestions if it is done with clinical skill, humanity and with a holistic approach to each individual prisoner (rather than the “pin-cushion” approach characteristic of RNR-based approaches, Ward & Stewart, 2003, p. 354). Conversely, Brown and Toyoki (2013) also found that prisoners perceived an institution as lacking in moral legitimacy when they felt it was not concerned with making them better people. Prisoners felt dissatisfied with sentence plans when they were experienced as controlling rather than helpful. Prisoners who felt controlled by the system, who felt that prison made them worse and did nothing to help them, and who felt that they were subject to unfair and inappropriate treatment experienced the institution as lacking in legitimacy. Similar results were also found by Brunton-Smith and McCarthy (2016): opportunities for work and education were associated with higher levels of perceived legitimacy amongst prisoners. Spending more hours locked in cells was
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associated with lower perceived levels of legitimacy. There are some clear implications here, both for psychological risk assessment practice and for correctional practice more generally, which will be discussed in the following and final chapter.

The intersubjective web within the prison context. Of course, the intersubjective web within a prison extends beyond interactions between psychologists, prisoners and PBMs. Prisons are complex places and there are numerous individuals and teams who interact and influence each other. Individuals living and working within prisons are influenced by their own attitudes and experiences as well as by their environment, context and their interactions with others (Vallacher et al, 2002). Psychologists, ISPs, PBMs and other members of prison staff who contribute to risk assessment have numerous professional and personal roles. People in differing professional roles have differing priorities and responsibilities. For example, a psychologist makes an appointment to see an ISP to discuss an assessment. The ISP is suspicious of psychologists. The assessment is for a parole review, so the ISP is anxious about the outcome (it could result in a progressive move, or two more years in closed conditions). The psychologist recognises the importance of collaboration and has given the ISP plenty of notice about the meeting and intends only to discuss consent for the assessment. On the day of the appointment, there is a wing lockdown due to staff sickness, this means that prisoners who are not going to work have to remain in their cells. The priority of the wing staff is to maintain a safe environment in the context of insufficient staff, to ensure that prisoners receive their meals and any urgent business (such as medical treatment) is attended to. The ISP is therefore not told why the psychologist is not coming to see him (it is not perceived as urgent business). He remains locked in his cell and misses the appointment – he does not know why. The psychologist is then on annual leave so cannot rearrange the appointment until a week has passed. The psychologist writes to the ISP to tell him this but in the confusion of staff shortages the letter is never delivered.

This example illustrates how prison officers and the prison system as well as the individuals involved all influence the beginnings of this assessment – multiple systems collide and
potentially, yet unwittingly, reinforce hostile attitudes towards psychologists, despite the collaborative intentions of the psychologist. The attitudes of the prison officers could further influence the assessment: a prison officer who respects psychologists is likely to respond more empathically to the ISP’s enquiry about the psychologist’s absence than a prison officer who holds psychologists in contempt. Differing attitudes amongst prison officers towards prisoners would have a similarly differential effect. It is not difficult to see the emergent outcomes here – the outcome is a unique result of the interaction of multiple complex components. Change in any one component may or may not result in a different outcome. It is only by understanding the components, the context, and the interaction of the components with each other and with the context that one can begin to make any sense of the outcome (Byrne, 2013; Tilley, 2000).

This example illustrates how the intersubjective web of relationships that influence risk assessment extends beyond the people who are directly involved in the interview. Other prison staff, the prison regime and the organisation of the wider prison service all have the potential to exert influence over a risk assessment (Ross et al., 2008). Wilson and Holt (2001) similarly comment (in relation to health care) that:

Individuals and their immediate social relationships are further embedded within wider social, political, and cultural systems which can influence outcomes in entirely novel and unpredictable ways. (p. 685)

The idea of psychological risk assessment comprising multiple, complex relationships, embedded within an equally complex and dynamic context, forms the focus of the following and final section of this chapter.

**Psychological Risk Assessment as a Complex, Non-Linear and Dynamic System**

To summarise, there are multiple influences on each participant group within the process of risk assessment, including complex and reciprocal power relationships. It is apparent that interactions, power relationships, and contextual influences in risk assessment are not simple or linear - they are complex, multiply influencing and constantly changing. Pawson and Tilley’s
(2004) description of intervention programmes as “sophisticated social interactions set amidst a complex social reality” (p. 6) could equally apply to risk assessment. In addition to the influences on psychologists, prisoners and PBMs, there is the wider context to consider, as illustrated above. The term “context” is used here in the broadest sense, to include “systems of interpersonal and social relationships” (Pawson & Tilley, 2004, p. 8) as well as physical environment of the prison, the prison system, the wider social and political perspective on risk, the implications of the risk assessment, the pressures on psychologists and prisoners and the climate of the interview (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, 2018). Adair-Stantiall and Needs (2018) similarly suggest that any discussion of context must include the idea of “constant dynamic reciprocal interplay” (p. 10) between individuals and environment.

Figure 7.1 summarises the influences and tensions experienced by psychologists, ISPs and PBMs in relation to psychological risk assessment. These are the common issues within each group – clearly in any specific risk assessment, there are unique influences, biases and vulnerabilities relevant to each specific individual (see Vallacher et al., 2002). Figure 7.1 shows that each group influences and is influenced by the other groups (represented by the overlapping circles). Each group influences and is influenced by the wider system (represented by their embeddedness within the system and by their porous boundaries – Tilley, 2000). Some of these influences have been investigated in this research. For example, psychologists and PBMs influence each other – both have power and influence over the other’s practice. Psychologists and PBMs have power over ISPs in relation to decisions about release and progression through the system. Psychologists, ISPs and PBMs are constrained and influenced by the broader system. Other interactional influences remain unknown, for example, the relationships and interactions between ISPs and Parole Board members and the extent to which ISPs exert any influence on the broader system.

A limitation to this illustration is that it depicts the system as a discrete, boundaried entity. Of course, it is possible to construe this system in such simple terms, for example, “the
prison system” or even “the individual prison” which impacts all those who operate within it. Yet given the preceding discussion, this seems limited. One only has to consider the prison system for a moment to realise that this, in itself, is multiply influenced, by politics, by public opinion and by the populist press (e.g., Spurr, 2017 and see above). It is therefore arguably more useful and realistic to take a “systems-level” approach (Pycroft, 2014, p. 18) to understanding influences in risk assessment. Each individual is both a component of the various systems in which they live and work and also a system in themselves (Pycroft, 2014). Individual-level systems and components of systems react with each other, and change and develop in response to these interactions (Byrne, 2013; De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). Systems also interact with their contexts, which themselves are populated by other systems (Adair-Stantiall & Needs, 2018; Plsek & Greenhalgh, 2001). Interactions between systems (individual, organisational and social) create new systems that are unique to the context and nature and extent of the interaction (De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). As has been discussed already, this means that the interaction of the components of a system creates a new and emergent system (Byrne, 2013; De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). Given the sensitivity of iterative interactions to contextual elements such as behaviour, setting or mood, and the non-linear nature of such interactions, the emergent system can be unpredictable and is more than, or different to, the sum of its parts (Adair-Stantiall & Needs, 2018; Lewis, 2014; Plsek & Greenhalgh, 2001; Pycroft, 2014; Vallacher et al., 2002; Wilson & Holt, 2001).
Figure 7-1. The positions of three stakeholder groups in psychological risk assessment

The yellow background represents the broader system in which each group operates, and within which the process of risk assessment is conducted. The central three-way overlap (dark blue) represents the interactions between the three groups in the risk assessment process. The overlap between psychologists and prisoners (light blue) represents the risk assessment interview.

In the example given in the preceding section, each individual player in the risk assessment process is part of their own complex and multiply-influenced system. The psychologist, ISP and prison officer are all systems within themselves. They each interact with each other and also with other, larger systems, such as the Parole Board, the specific prison within which they live/work, and the broader Prison Service. This results in a “rich and complex network of interconnectedness” (Lewis, 2014, p. 228). Interactions are complex and non-linear (Vallacher et al., 2002). A big change in one system can have very little impact on interacting
systems. For example, a change of Government often has no discernible effect on prison policy, and almost certainly has no effect on day-to-day prison life, at least in the short term. Alternatively, a comparatively small change in one individual-level system can have a significant impact on other individuals and systems. For example, the consequences of the Parole Board decision to release John Worboys (described above) were described as follows in a letter to the Home Secretary from the interim chair of the Parole Board:

A single problematic and complex case has precipitated a radical reform which has the potential to cause considerable uncertainty, delay and cost to the public purse. There is also the risk of unfairness and unnecessary prolonged incarceration of prisoners who have been assessed as not putting the public at risk of serious harm. (Corby, 2018)

Nowhere is the complexity of the interaction and the emergent nature of the interaction more apparent than in the risk assessment interview. As discussed throughout, the interview is central to the process of psychological risk assessment. It is where information is discussed and exchanged; it is where relationships and perceptions are formed, and decisions with far-reaching consequences are reached. Both players in the interview are multiply influenced, and the high-stakes nature of the task means that both parties potentially have much to lose. The complexity of the interview has, for most part, been neglected in favour of standardised approaches, understandable in the current social and political climate. However, this research brings the complex, interpersonal, intersubjective nature of the interview to the fore, and invites consideration of how practice might be improved by a change in epistemological direction.

Viewing the process of risk assessment as a system in itself, created by the interacting individual-level systems of the psychologist, the ISP and the Parole Board, and being conducted in a broader organisational, social and political context, itself populated by numerous, complex, interacting systems, is arguably the most effective route to understanding and improving the process. This means embracing and working with complexity. Lewis (2014) discusses the temptation for professionals to ignore the “shadow system”, or the network of influences and
sources of information that may be unknown to the professional. However, it is arguably more
effective in practice to try and reveal and understand systemic influences and work with them
(Vivian-Byrne, 2002). It also suggests the necessity of looking at the system of risk assessment as a
whole and considering interactions and interconnectedness between participating groups (Wolf-
Branigin, 2014). Whilst it is not possible to understand a whole system merely by partitioning out
component parts (as discussed above), there is value in first understanding the roles and
experiences of the component parts as part of the process of understanding the whole system
(McDermott, 2014), as has been done in the preceding chapters.

Summary and Conclusions

In summary, rather than making attempts to remove all potential influences from
psychological risk assessment, we should be working to gain a deeper appreciation and
recognition of influences and interactions, in order to understand their role in high-stakes
decision making, and enable reflection on potential sources of influence and bias. To date, prison-
based psychologists have tended to approach risk assessment interviewing as a linear process of
extracting information. We ask questions, those questions are answered, and we cross reference
the answers to those questions with our structured risk assessment tools, and use these to
compile a report with recommendations. The argument here is that risk assessment is better
understood as an emergent, intersubjective process, which is part of a complex system, and which
is also a system within itself, created by the unique interactions of unique participants. This
means that traditional notions of objectivity of psychological assessment are simply nonsensical –
objectivity cannot possibly be achieved when professional and client create an emergent system
between them. The results of this research provide an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the
potential influences and dynamics in risk assessment, in order to be prepared for them, and to be
prepared to acknowledge and address them. The following and final chapter attends to this vital
element – reflecting on implications for practice. The results also suggest that the time may be
ripe for prevailing cognitive-behavioural, RNR-based approaches to risk assessment to begin to
integrate more with systemic approaches (Vivian-Byrne, 2002). Perhaps it is indeed time for an epistemic shift in understanding risk assessment – as a complex and dynamic system of interconnectedness rather than an objective, linear exchange of information.
Chapter Eight: Looking Forward: Implications for Psychological Risk Assessment Practice and Future Research

In this final chapter, the discussion turns to what can be learned from this project to inform prison-based psychological risk assessment. My intention from the outset was that this research would contribute to improving psychological risk assessment for the three stakeholder groups; consequently, the recommendations are heavily weighted (but not restricted) towards psychologists’ risk assessment practice. This chapter also addresses both the limitations of this research and ideas for developing this research area further.

Drawing together the analysis and discussion reported in the previous chapters, there are a number of central implications which inform the recommendations for practice. Firstly, psychologists need to take a contextually sensitive approach to the process of risk assessment. As discussed in the Introduction, risk assessment is a central task for prison-based psychologists. It is informed by a plethora of scientific evidence aimed at helping us to define and identify features which distinguish high risk men from low risk men. However, the results of this research indicate that psychologists must attend not only to problem solving in risk assessment (i.e., identifying risk factors and making recommendations about risk management) but problem setting (Schön, 1983). Psychological risk assessment takes place within an interpersonal, physical and social context. The arguments in the previous chapter, derived from the findings from this study and from the extant literature, suggest that psychologists, indeterminate sentenced prisoners (ISPs) and Parole Board members (PBM)s are multiply and reciprocally influenced by their own experiences and values and by organisational, political and social pressures. For psychologists, there is pressure of working within a sometimes hostile environment, characterised by challenging relationships with prisoners and colleagues. There is a sense of isolation attributed to working within a prison environment. There is also the weightiness of risk assessment in terms of
social and political intolerance of risk; a sense of responsibility for recommendations in the context of high Parole Board demand; and the reliance of other professionals, including PBMIs, on psychological assessment. ISPs experience violence, volatility and suffering in prison; they feel powerless and out of control. They mistrust psychologists, whom they perceive as excessively and unjustifiably powerful. PBMs feel constrained by organisational pressure. They value psychological knowledge and expertise, and see themselves as “arbiters of fairness” in relation to risk assessment and the parole process.

The influences described above interact in risk assessment, which is consequently best understood as a complex system, emerging from the interaction of numerous other systems, embedded within a specific context (which is a system in itself, and populated by numerous other systems). Therefore, taking a contextually sensitive approach includes an appreciation both of the physical, social and political setting of risk assessment and of the interpersonal context created within the interview (and other relevant interactions - Adair-Stantiall & Needs, 2018). A contextually sensitive approach also involves taking steps to change or develop practice in order to respond to the needs and priorities of key stakeholders. The recommendations delineated in this chapter provide some suggestions about how to do this in a way that maintains the integrity of psychological risk assessment.

The second implication, leading directly from the concept of risk assessment as a complex, dynamic system, is that the risk assessment interview is most usefully understood as an emergent, intersubjective process. Psychologists and prisoners come together in the risk assessment interview in which their perspectives collide and interact to produce a new and unique intersubjective experience (which, like other social interactions, is a system in its own right, De Jaegher & Di Paolo, 2007). Understanding the risk assessment interview in intersubjective terms means firstly, reconsidering notions of objectivity which have dominated risk assessment practice over the last few decades (see Introduction) and secondly, paying greater
attention to the psychologist/prisoner relationship in risk assessment. The recommendations for practice are made with these issues in mind.

The third and final implication is the need to maintain and increase perceptions of legitimacy. The results of this study indicate that psychologists and PBMs believe the weight attributed to psychological assessment is legitimate by virtue of its thoroughness, clarity and focus on facilitating understanding of the prisoner. ISPs’ views of the legitimacy of psychological risk assessment are diametrically opposed to this – they mistrust psychologists whom they perceive as unjustifiably powerful. Therefore a key implication for practice is to maintain the legitimacy of psychological assessment in the eyes of PBMs at the same time as increasing legitimacy in the eyes of ISPs. This means working to increase ISPs’ view of psychological assessment as fair and respectful (Liebling et al., 2005; Sparks & Bottoms, 1995). The recommendations suggest some ways in which this might be achieved.

**Implication 1: Improve Contextual Sensitivity**

**Improve psychologists’ contextual sensitivity.** The first step towards a more contextually sensitive approach to risk assessment is improving awareness of the relational, physical, social and political contexts in which stakeholders operate. The results presented throughout this thesis enable greater understanding of the perspectives of ISPs and PBMs. There is value purely in increased awareness of other perspectives and subjectivities within risk assessment. Using this knowledge to improve practice is the second step of a contextually sensitive approach. Suggestions for how this might be achieved are discussed later in this section, and are summarised in Table 8.1 below. However, every psychologist, ISP, PBM, every risk assessment and every context is different. Therefore one must consider the unique context created by the interaction of the stakeholders and their specific biases and influences during the production of a unique risk assessment (Adair-Stantiall & Needs, 2018). Additionally, and as discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, risk assessment in general, and a single risk assessment interview in particular is dynamic and constantly changing. Psychologists must be ready to respond to the dynamic conditions
created by this unique set of interactions in a moment-by-moment way if they are to complete the task and retain (or regain) a sense of legitimacy from their clients. There is an argument that this level of contextually sensitive responsiveness is the essence of expertise (Sookermany, 2012) and this will be discussed in more depth later in this chapter.

Table 8.1

**Summary of Recommendations for Improving Contextual Sensitivity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General recommendation</th>
<th>Specific recommendation for practice</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Improve psychologists’ contextual sensitivity.</td>
<td>Reflective supervision for qualified psychologists. Reflective supervision is also pivotal in supporting psychologists to develop resilience, manage stress, maintain professional standards, develop clinical expertise and avoid bias.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve sensitivity to the needs and experiences of prisoners.</td>
<td>Improve standards of safety, dignity and respect in prisons. Psychologists must be aware of the impact of prison and the impact of risk assessment on prisoners. Explicit discussion of prisoners’ fears and anxieties when conducting risk assessment. Pre-assessment interviews as standard. Give prisoners plenty of notice of assessment and avoid cancellations. Ensure prisoners are given time at the end of the interview to prepare to return to the wing. Clarity of process, opinion, developing formulation and written conclusions. Greater negotiation throughout the assessment process. Clarity from HMPPS about the life sentence, the process of parole etc. Improving processes for identifying, verifying and removing errors in prison files. Give psychological assessment a more formative role, emphasising the rehabilitative function of assessment. Consider prioritising</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Improve sensitivity to the needs and priorities of PBMs

- Improve working conditions for psychologists.
  - Integrate psychologists more firmly within the staff teams in their workplaces to increase contact with both colleagues and prisoners.
  - Increase opportunities for collaborative working with psychologists and other colleagues working in similar settings.
  - Take confidence from the positive views of PBMs about psychological assessment.
  - Take a more contextually sensitive approach to correctional practice in general.

**Improve contextual sensitivity via reflective practice.** One way in which contextual sensitivity could be improved is via ongoing reflective supervision for qualified psychologists conducting risk assessments. Reflective supervision should provide a forum for psychologists to explore their clinical work, their decisions and concerns. It should promote reflection on influence and bias and encourage supportive but challenging scrutiny of practice. There is no legal requirement for qualified psychologists to receive clinical supervision (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2017) but a number of psychologist participants indicated that it would be beneficial. In fact the BPS’s Practice Guidelines (BPS, 2017) specifically suggest that consultation or supervision is central to
overcoming bias. Similarly, Nolan and Walsh (2012) suggest that clinical supervision or peer debriefing can facilitate reflection on intersubjective processes, in order to recognise any influences on client and professional that may or may not have been in conscious awareness at the time of the interaction. They comment that “being aware of the way in which this intersubjective web impacts on thoughts and feelings is crucial in addressing practice behaviour” (Nolan & Walsh, 2012, p. 167). Croskerry, Singhal and Mamede (2013a) note that raising awareness of bias is a prerequisite for addressing its influence on decision making. Relatedly, as noted in the previous chapter, Lilienfeld et al. (2013) suggest that a difference between good and poor practitioners is not proneness to bias, but awareness of bias and willingness to take steps to ameliorate its effects. Reflective supervision slows down thinking and decision making processes and forces participants to examine the reasoning behind their decision making (Croskerry et al., 2013a; Croskerry, Singhal & Mamede, 2013b). Such slowing down and detailed examination of reasoning and conclusions could allow practitioners to consider the extent to which their assessment had been influenced by any idiosyncratic theories and beliefs about risk (the “representativeness” heuristic). It could help to ensure that practitioners are not unduly influenced by any recent media coverage of serious offending (the “availability” heuristic), as well as ensuring that conclusions are independent and well supported and not overly anchored in previous assessments (“anchoring and adjustment” heuristic). Supervision throughout the risk assessment process could reduce vulnerability to confirmation bias by identifying a comprehensive range of hypotheses and systematically reviewing evidence for and against each one. Reflective supervision therefore enables bias and influence to be brought to the fore and addressed, thus resulting in risk assessment that is more balanced and fair. Such assessment would both meet Parole Board standards and potentially contribute towards improving perceptions of the legitimacy.

on organisational and interpersonal contexts during supervision. This involves considering, amongst other things, the environmental input, including resources, expectations and competing demands and responsibilities. The physical and interpersonal environment of prison-based risk assessment seems to contribute towards psychologists’ experience of workplace stress (as described in Chapter 3). It is also apparent that psychologists are impacted by a general lack of resources. This increases stress and pressure as well as impacting professional decision making in risk assessment (and probably in other areas of work not explored by this study – see Chapter 3 for more discussion of resource pressures; see Croskerry et al., 2013a for a discussion of organisational contributors to bias). Calling for more resources is clearly important, but in the climate of austerity, unlikely to result in significant change. Therefore the challenge is to improve risk assessment by changing and adapting practice within existing resource models, and making best use of existing resources. Supervision could support psychologists to cope with the stress caused by resource pressure by providing time to reflect on and take steps to manage its effects and assisting with planning and time management if necessary. Supervision could also ensure that psychologists do not engage in premature cognitive closure (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996) during risk assessment as a result of resource pressure. Additionally, supervision could help psychologists to “hold the line with their managers”, as described by Karen (psychologist) and resist inappropriate organisational pressure to compromise standards as a result of insufficient time and resources. A number of psychologists talked about the importance of maintaining professional standards as a means of coping with stress and responsibility – if psychologists know they have been thorough, consulted the literature, consulted numerous other professionals involved with the prisoner, addressed any issues of bias and influence by engaging in supervision, then they can feel confident in their assessment. It is therefore crucial that psychologists maintain and develop their own clinical skills and knowledge. Keeping abreast of research relating both to the practice of risk assessment and to understanding the various client groups with which they work is central to maintaining professional standards. This can be done via supervision and training, and also via
independent, self-directed learning. Given the time constraints on psychologists, psychology managers could reflect on how they could support practitioners to keep up to date with relevant research and practice developments. Focusing on maintaining high professional standards is an important coping strategy that needs to be encouraged, supported and disseminated. It should also be noted here that psychologists could attend to the feedback provided by the Parole Board participants in this study who generally viewed psychological assessment as being of a high standard (Shingler, 2017; Shingler & Needs, 2018a; and see Chapter 5). This should provide reassurance that psychologists are doing a good job in assessment and that they are generally maintaining high professional standards.

The human performance system also directs consideration of features of the performer, namely the professional undertaking the task, in terms of skills, motivation, resilience, et cetera. As discussed in Chapter 3, qualified psychologists conducting risk assessments experience stress and weight of responsibility caused partly by the complex and demanding nature of the assessments they complete. Risk assessment is a complex task that requires significant knowledge and clinical skill. In particular, a broad knowledge of the psychological literature relating to the range of behavioural and psychological problems presented by men serving indeterminate sentences is needed for balanced and unbiased risk assessment practice (as discussed in Chapters 5 and 6). Supporting psychologists to develop their skills and knowledge is crucial, and supervision has a central role to play in this.

The stress experienced by psychologists in risk assessment is attributed to features other than the clinical complexity of the work. A number of psychologist participants indicated that anxiety about weight of responsibility contributed to cautious and risk-averse recommendations – thus stress potentially contributes directly to bias. Reflective supervision for psychologists could go some way to addressing these varied sources of stress and maintaining psychologists’ well-being. It could enable reflection on and management of sources of stress (including anxiety about responsibility) which in turn could enable reflection on and challenging of influence and bias.
Supervision could provide an opportunity to get assistance with clinical complexity thereby reducing the sense of stress and diluting the weight of responsibility. Supervision and peer support have been identified as factors that can ameliorate work related stress in correctional workers, especially women (Lindquist & Whitehead, 1986; Van Voorhis et al., 1991) and Clarke (2013) highlights supervision, feedback and peer debriefing as useful ways to guard against or ameliorate the impact of burnout. Relatedly, Nolan and Walsh (2012) suggest that awareness of the complexities of workplace relationships can improve well-being and improve practice – reflective supervision is the ideal place for untangling such complexities. More generally, supervision has a role to play in creating more supportive environments for psychologists to conduct risk assessment. In their review of strategies for reducing bias in medical diagnosis Croskerry et al., (2013b) identify supportive and friendly environments as contributing to better decision making.

Another strand of the human performance system is considering the consequences of professional actions – whether some professional actions or decisions are explicitly or implicitly punished or reinforced by peers, colleagues or clients (see Needs, 2010 for examples). Supervision enables reflection on all aspects of risk assessment practice, including recommendations. It enables consideration of the extent to which risk assessment practice is shaped by the reinforcing or punishing responses of clients and colleagues. For example, do hostile responses during disclosure result in psychologists compressing or avoiding collaborative report disclosures? Do cautious or risk-averse recommendations serve partly to reduce anxiety amongst psychologists (Adshead, 2014)? There is a broader issue here about whether risk-averse practice might be partly attributable to the influence of the social and political context. Reflective supervision is not going to change the social and political landscape, but it would allow for consideration (and where necessary) attenuation of this influence. Ensuring that risk assessment is driven by good science and clinical expertise and not by the reactions of clients or colleagues or by populist demands to be tough on crime is one potential step toward regaining legitimacy (Clarke, 2013; see also
McGuire, 2010) as discussed in Chapter 7. This also highlights an area for future research – understanding the extent to which psychologists are aware of how contingencies operate in risk assessment would be a useful avenue for exploration.

To summarise, reflective supervision for psychologists could make a considerable difference to the process and context of risk assessment. It facilitates reflection on all elements of the context, both environmental and interpersonal, and encourages hypothesising about the nature and extent of influences on both psychologist and prisoner. The bringing of influence and bias into conscious awareness arguably reduces their effect (Croskerry et al., 2013), thus resulting in fairer and more comprehensive risk assessment. This in turn has the potential to influence perceptions of legitimacy. Supervision provides emotional and professional support for psychologists, thus reducing potential for both bias and burnout (which are arguably related, see Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000; and Chapter 3). It also enables reflection on one’s own skills, knowledge and judgement, thus potentially increasing clinical expertise and responsiveness to prisoners’ needs, which again is likely to increase perceptions of legitimacy.

**Improve sensitivity to the needs and experiences of prisoners.** Turning next to the context of risk assessment for prisoners, the results of this study indicate that the prison environment impacts on prisoners in a way that causes suffering. Some prisoners describe how prison causes them worry about what is going on with their friends and families in the community; it undermines their ability to be emotionally open; it makes them fearful for their personal safety. The results also highlight the challenges of trusting others within a prison environment, and how the environment can compound existing hostile schemas (see Chapters 4, 6 and 7). Blagden et al., (2016) found that sex offenders’ ability to reflect on their past behaviour was inhibited by fear of violence and lack of acceptance as a human being. Prisoners who are living daily with fear and feel dehumanised by their experiences could therefore struggle to engage meaningfully in a risk assessment interview that requires reflection, honest acknowledgement of errors, and the making oneself vulnerable via disclosure of thoughts and feelings. This suggests that a key element of
improving risk assessment is improving the environment in which it occurs. Safe prisons, in which prisoners feel physically safe and treated with dignity and respect, are more likely to facilitate open reflection in risk assessment interviews. This would increase the richness of the information available to risk assessors, potentially enabling assessors to be more effective in making judgements about risk and risk management.

Improving psychologists’ sensitivity to the context of risk assessment for prisoners would be facilitated by awareness both of the general effects of prison life and the specific fears prisoners experience around risk assessment. There is an extensive body of research about the prison environment and the impact of imprisonment and psychologists working in prisons should be familiar with this. This could help psychologists to understand prisoners’ behaviour within their context, thereby equipping psychologists to support prisoners through the stress of risk assessment. Greater awareness of the context of risk assessment for prisoners could also help psychologists to differentiate (or at the very least reflect on) what might be evidence of ongoing risk, uncooperativeness, resistance or suspicion and what might be someone struggling to manage fear, stress and anxiety. This is likely to reduce psychologists’ vulnerability to the fundamental attribution error (Jones & Nisbett, 1971) by increasing awareness of other possible determinants of prisoners’ behaviour.

Explicit discussion of prisoners’ experiences and fears during the process of risk assessment is another way to address elements of the interpersonal context. As discussed in Chapter 4 and throughout, there is a general view amongst prisoners that psychologists are not to be trusted. Directly acknowledging and talking openly about fears, barriers and suspicions is arguably a step towards resolution (Safran & Muran, 2000). Expressions of empathy and understanding from psychologists about issues of mistrust and other challenges would arguably contribute towards a more human approach that has been identified as an element of good practice in risk assessment interviews (Shingler et al., 2017). Increasing the extent to which psychologists are perceived as
trustworthy is also central to increasing their legitimacy (Sparks & Bottoms, 1995; Tyler & Huo, 2002).

As discussed in Chapter 4, some prisoners cope with prison-based suffering by narrowing their horizons to that of the prison world (Schinkel, 2014). Whilst this “role segmentation” approach to coping (Ashforth et al., 2000) might assist some prisoners to cope with prison life, it can make transition to community living more challenging. More immediately, the “prisoner” role, with its untrustworthiness of others, fear of violence, emotional closedness and inward focus, could make the transition to “risk assessment interview participant” particularly challenging, as discussed in Chapter 6. Ashforth et al. (2000) note that people have to prepare themselves psychologically for role transition – they describe perhaps needing to “psych oneself up” for a job interview or calm oneself down to deal with an irate client. This has implications for prisoners transitioning from the roles of “prisoner” to “risk assessment participant” given the different demands and expectations of these roles. The need to prepare for role transition may explain why, in the author’s clinical experience, prisoners often find it hard to deal with a cancelled, postponed or unexpected interviews (e.g. if prison staff fail to inform a prisoner about a planned interview) – either the prisoner has prepared himself for a role that he no longer needs to take and subsequently needs to shed, or he has not had the chance to prepare himself as he was not expecting to take that role. It may also help to explain why a pre-assessment interview has been described in such positive terms by prisoners and psychologists during this research.

The general view of a pre-assessment interview is that it provides an opportunity for prisoners to orient themselves to what is expected of them during the risk assessment process, for psychologists and prisoners to orient to each other’s interpersonal style and implicitly or explicitly negotiate their positions within the interview process (Murakami, 2003). It provides an opportunity for prisoners to ask questions about the assessment process, and for psychologists to openly explore barriers to trust and engage with prisoners to identify what would help them as individuals to build trust in the assessor. Pre-assessment interviews enable full and
comprehensive discussion of consent, but without any expectation that consent will be granted there and then – that is, ensuring consent is properly informed and not a “paper exercise” (Karen, psychologist). The prisoner is given time and space to think about the nature and implications of the assessment and discuss it with friends, family or legal representatives before he gives consent (or chooses not to). Thus, a pre-assessment interview can facilitate the building of rapport between psychologist and prisoner: as there is no expectation that the actual assessment will begin, it gives psychologists and prisoners a less pressured opportunity to get to know each other. In this way, a pre-assessment interview facilitates the process of role transition, providing prisoners with some expectation of what the role of “risk assessment participant” will entail on this particular occasion and thus facilitating role transition on subsequent occasions when the work of assessment is the focus.

A pre-assessment interview has the additional advantage of increasing the number of contacts between psychologist and prisoner. Discussions about consent and process are essential, whether in a pre-assessment interview or at the beginning of the first assessment interview, so the addition of a pre-assessment interview would not necessarily increase the overall amount of time spent on the risk assessment (and there is an argument that it could reduce time spent in the long run: Shingler & Mann, 2006). This is an example of how resources might be redistributed to improve the context of risk assessment for prisoners, as discussed above. This alternative distribution of resources gives prisoners time to think and allows more time and space for the building up of a working relationship. It communicates a very different message to turning up to an interview with a consent form and an expectation that the prisoner will sign it and immediately begin the assessment interview. It is more respectful of prisoners’ choices and individuality and consequently could contribute to a sense of greater legitimacy. Chapters 4 and 6 describe how prisoners resent the lack of time psychologists spend with them, yet how prisoners value feeling known as individuals. Having more contact with the psychologist over the course of an assessment can enable prisoners to overcome barriers to trust and openness. Taking additional
time in a pre-assessment interview to ensure clarity of purpose, to establish rapport and build trust is welcomed by both psychologists and prisoners. This approach would arguably increase perceptions of fairness which is central to good criminal justice practice and good compliance with decisions (Tyler & Huo, 2002). A pre-assessment interview could also ameliorate perceptions that an assessment is being rushed. Rushing an assessment has been identified in this study as undermining trust and efforts to build rapport. Rushing also compromises the sense of individuality that is valued by psychologists, prisoners and PBMs. Whatever the time pressures on psychologists, the building of the interpersonal relationship between psychologist and prisoner cannot be rushed or compressed if psychologists are to be seen as credible, legitimate and procedurally just. The more risk assessment is perceived as collaborative rather than bureaucratic or adversarial the better the platform for engaging intersubjectively.

Returning to the issue of role transition for prisoners, there are other simple, practical steps that could support prisoners in managing this (and other sources of stress and anxiety) and that also communicate respect for the challenges prisoners face in risk assessment. These include ensuring that prisoners are given plenty of notice of planned interviews to give them time to prepare. Appointment letters should be delivered in person if necessary to reduce the risk of letters sent in the prison internal mail never reaching the prisoner. Prisoners should be given time at the beginning of every interview to ask any questions, express fears or concerns, clarify things, or re-negotiate consent. Finally, prisoners should be given enough time at the end of the interview to re-adjust to returning to the wing environment.

Part of prisoners’ experience of suffering in prison is attributed to the lack of power and control they feel they have over risk assessment and over the progression of their sentences. This seems to be exacerbated for some by a lack of clarity about the assessment process and about the psychologist’s views and opinions (see Chapter 4). This suggests that clarity throughout the assessment process is central to reducing prisoners’ experience of suffering. This includes clarity about the process, but also about developing formulations and opinions (Shingler et al, 2017, and
see Chapter 6) and clarity within the final written report. It is arguable that increasing clarity and negotiation around the final report could improve perceptions of legitimacy, as it could contribute towards prisoners feeling that they have more of a voice throughout the risk assessment process (see below for further discussion). There is a broader issue here relating to the need for clear explanations about the nature of an indeterminate sentence and ensuring prisoners understand and get the support they need to navigate the process of applying for parole and being reviewed by the Parole Board (see Chapter 4). Given that a Criminal Justice Joint Inspection (2013) found that the management of indeterminate sentenced prisoners was characterised by confusion and uncertainty, this seems to be an urgent area for improvement. Of course, engaging with prisoners to gain more information about key areas of misinformation or lack of knowledge about the indeterminate sentence and parole process and how these things could be improved is crucial and suggests another area worthy of consultation and research.

Another element of the powerlessness experienced by prisoners is the lack of control they feel they have over file information. File information was described by prisoners as often inaccurate yet not amenable to change. It undermines principles of procedural justice to hold incorrect information on prison files, especially when file information has such a central role to play in formulating risk assessments (e.g., Webster, Douglas, Eaves & Hart, 1997). It behoves the prison authorities to overhaul the way information is recorded and kept about prisoners, and there need to be easier ways for errors to be identified, verified and removed (see Chapter 4). This is not to say that prisoners should have the final say on what goes into their files. However, if file information is perceived as inaccurate and contributes to decisions being perceived as unfair, then this has significant implications not only for the perceptions of fairness of the parole process, but the fairness of all prison-based decisions about prisoners. Any undue influence of the anchoring and adjustment heuristic could also be attenuated by the presence of more accurate records.
Increasing the clarity, transparency and accessibility of the parole process as a whole is also advised. Whilst there are some initiatives in place to improve the public transparency of Parole Board decision making (see Chapter 5), it is not yet clear how much any improvement will extend to prisoners. Yet prisoners are central to the process. In the interests of justice and legitimacy prisoners must be able to fully and meaningfully participate in the whole parole process, not just risk assessment. Improvements to a number of elements of the parole system could improve the context for prisoners, several of which are currently on the Parole Board’s agenda for change (Hardwick, 2017). These include improving the clarity and accessibility of Parole Board decision letters and considering whether Parole Board chairs could inform prisoners of their decision on the day of the hearing (see Chapter 5). Steps to improve clarity and accessibility can only improve perceptions of fairness (Tyler & Huo, 2002) whilst increasing the sense of risk assessment and parole decision making as a legitimate, collaborative process (Shingler & Mann, 2006; Shingler et al., 2017). Currently, little is known about prisoners’ perceptions of the fairness, independence and accessibility of the parole process and exploration of these issues did not form part of this study. This area is well overdue investigation and should be a priority for future research.

The context of psychological assessment for prisoners could also be improved by considering the structures and processes around risk assessment, in terms of how referrals for assessment are made and prioritised. A number of psychologists in this study talked about resource pressures meaning that psychological assessment tends to be reactive rather than proactive. That is, assessments are generally completed to meet Parole Board demands rather than conducted at the stage in the prisoner’s sentence when it would be most helpful to him to identify risks and needs in order to facilitate progression through the system (see Chapters 3 and 7). This can result in prisoners having repeated psychological assessments, or not having an assessment until many years into their sentence. As discussed in Chapter 4, delayed assessment can increase the time available for negative peer influence. It may also make it more difficult for assessors and prisoners to agree on rehabilitative goals – the prison environment will naturally inhibit the display of some
problems (such as substance misuse, problems in intimate relationships) and lengthy absence can convince prisoners that problems have been overcome (Ross et al., 2008). Engaging with prisoners earlier in their sentences might be one way to ameliorate these interfering factors. Delayed assessment also means that rehabilitation opportunities can be lost or substantially delayed, which causes frustration and resentment amongst prisoners (see Chapter 4). Conversely, one prisoner reported that he would not have been ready to engage in the assessment process earlier in his sentence due to drug addiction and a generally nihilistic attitude. So, as with many other aspects of assessment, the timing of assessment has to be responsive to the individual prisoner (Shingler et al., 2017). Nevertheless, there are some broader benefits to offering ISPs the opportunity to engage in psychological assessment early in their sentences. If psychologists are seen to proactively use their professional expertise and judgement to identify prisoners who need input rather than being driven by Parole Board directions, this could begin to communicate the message that psychologists are there to assist prisoners with progression and use any power they have constructively and with rehabilitative goals. This change in timing and emphasis would clearly require restructuring of psychological resources and expertise at a time when resources are stretched and the drive to meet Parole Board demand is strong. However, currently there is suspicion amongst prisoners that psychologists are there to “nit-pick and keep me in for nothing really” (Colin, prisoner and see Chapter 4) and the link between (often negative) psychological opinion (Forde, 2014) and Parole Board decision making tends to reinforce this message. Separating these threads, so psychological assessment is seen as formative (identifying problems early and developing a plan to manage them in a timely fashion) rather than summative (presenting an unfavourable decision at a Parole Board hearing) might well improve perceptions of legitimacy and reduce resentment about psychologists’ power. This would also potentially reduce the burden of responsibility for psychologists, and ensure that psychological resources are targeted where most needed. Implementation of this recommendation would require engagement and negotiation both with managers of psychological services within prisons and
with the Parole Board to identify prisoners for whom a psychological assessment is most beneficial, in terms of understanding risk and protective factors, and planning sentence progression. This in turn could improve the context for psychologists via improved awareness from PBM's of the pressures on psychologists to deliver assessments to meet Parole Board needs.

Finally, and relatedly, a greater awareness of the themes of powerlessness, mistrust and resentment towards psychologists from prisoners could support psychologists in taking greater care to engage prisoners collaboratively in risk assessment. It could, for example, focus psychologists’ attention more firmly on building trust and rapport with prisoners. This will be explored in more depth below as a central element of the intersubjective nature of risk assessment, and as a key step towards increasing perceptions of legitimacy amongst prisoners.

**Improve sensitivity to the needs and priorities of Parole Board members.** Turning to the experiences and priorities of PBM's, key findings from this study are (1) the importance PBM's place on fairness and independence and (2) the credibility PBM's attribute to psychological knowledge and opinion. These two strands are closely linked, in that psychological evidence is seen as credible largely because it meets standards of fairness and independence. Maintaining this role, as providers of fair, comprehensive and independent assessment is central to maintaining a sense of legitimacy with the Parole Board. Psychologists can draw confidence from PBM's views of psychological assessment as credible and therefore holding legitimate weight in their decision making. The specific features of psychological assessment identified in this study which promote PBM's views of psychologists as “credible experts” are their clarity and thoroughness and their role in facilitating individual level understanding of prisoners (see Chapter 5). I will address these two priorities in turn, with suggestions for maintaining standards and improving practice.

The importance of clarity and thoroughness has already been discussed as central to improving the context of risk assessment for prisoners. It seems that it is equally important to PBM's. As noted in Chapter 5, to be maximally beneficial to PBM's, psychologists’ reports must be
clear, concise and thorough (Shingler, 2017). They need to include a comprehensive history of the prisoner, and explore both risk and protective factors, before explicating and evaluating potential intervention and risk management options. Clarity of limitations is also important. Psychologists need to identify what they do and do not know and express their view based on the available information. Some PBMs are explicit that clarity of limitations is preferable to hedging one’s bets, which is seen as woolly and convoluted. A clear and thorough approach, including honest appraisal of limitations, should be maintained and encouraged. In addition to being respected by PBMs, clarity about limitations seemed to help some psychologists cope with the weightiness of risk assessment. Psychologists could reflect (in supervision or peer discussion – see above) on the limitations of the science of risk assessment in general, and also on their own opinion in risk assessment. Additionally, honestly discussing limitations with prisoners could help with improving the legitimacy of psychological assessments – it is honest and transparent, and goes some way towards ameliorating power differences. Consider the difference between “Yes, this is my opinion, and I have reached it through these steps, and have tried my hardest to be fair and balanced. But at the end of the day it is my opinion, and someone else might disagree” and “I have completed a thorough risk assessment and concluded that...”. Clarity about potential limitations is a feature of ethical risk assessment (Grisso & Appelbaum, 1992; Vess et al., 2017), and it is essential that psychologists bear this in mind when constructing reports and making recommendations.

Balanced with PBMs’ desire for thorough and detailed reports is a desire for brevity. It seems that clarity can be occluded by length. Some PBMs applaud the use of Executive Summaries, in which the headlines of formulation, opinion and recommendation can be brought to the fore, supported in the main body of the report by the thoroughness and attention to detail described in Chapter 5.

One element of psychological assessment that was noted by a number of PBMs as bringing clarity and credibility was the use of Structured Professional Judgement approaches (SPJs
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– see Introduction for a description). SPJs bring structure and order to complex assessments. They provide a clear account of how decisions have been reached, thus facilitating accountability and fairness. SPJs are also based on the findings of extensive research into the relationship between psychological variables and recidivism, thus conferring a level of scientific credibility (despite limitations resulting from the state of the contemporaneous research knowledge, Mann et al., 2010, and cautionary words about tendencies to over-simplification, Polaschek, 2012). SPJs generally outperform unstructured clinical judgement when drawing conclusions about risk (Grove et al., 2000; Grove & Meehl, 1996; Hanson & Mourton-Bourgon, 2009). Unsurprisingly, therefore, psychologists’ use of SPJs contributes to PBMs’ perceptions of clarity, thoroughness and credibility. Relatedly, psychologists report that the use of SPJs gives them confidence in their assessment and is thus another way of coping with the weight of responsibility. However, whilst PBMs value the credibility and clarity provided by SPJs, they also want the depth of understanding provided by individualised psychological formulation. The opportunity to reach an understanding and make sense of catastrophic events is also valued by prisoners (Ferrito et al., 2017).

Formulation draws on the information gathered using SPJs, and ideally from the broader psychological literature (Gannon & Ward, 2014) in order to provide an explanation of an individual’s psychological dysfunction, including his offending (Hart & Logan, 2011). That is, whilst an SPJ is an important element of psychological risk assessment, the application of an SPJ alone is not enough to meet the needs of the Parole Board. An individual level understanding, which PBMs reported was generally provided by the depth of analysis, attention to detail and formulation within psychological assessment, was as much a characteristic of fair and credible assessment as was the clarity and structure provided by SPJs.

Therefore, a central recommendation from this study is that all psychological risk assessments with ISPs should prioritise the inclusion of individual formulation. Formulation is explicitly mentioned by PBMs and psychologists as being valuable, and it is entirely consistent with the preferences of prisoners who want to feel that they are being seen and treated as
individuals rather than having a formula or framework applied to them (see Chapters 4 and 6). Individualised formulation could also help to guard against the inappropriate use of the representativeness heuristic in risk assessment by directing attention to individually relevant risk factors rather than prototypical ideas about what constitutes high or low risk. This is not a recommendation to cease the use of SPJs. Rather, there needs to be a balance of the use of SPJs with a broader knowledge of the psychological literature, clinical expertise and acknowledgment of the values and preferences of the client or service user (Lilienfeld et al., 2013). That is, risk assessment that meets more of the features of Evidence Based Practice (EBP, see Lilienfeld et al., 2013 and see below for more discussion) is most valued and respected by two key stakeholder groups. Psychological formulation seems to bridge the gap between the use of SPJs and the desire for an individual approach. There is a broader argument here about the role of SPJs and the extent to which they have contributed towards a narrowing of psychologists’ knowledge and expertise and that will be discussed in more depth below.

Recognise and ameliorate the environmental and interpersonal pressures on psychologists. As described in Chapter 3 and summarised above, the context of risk assessment for psychologists is challenging, and there are a number of ways in which this could be improved. The sense of isolation and irrelevance to prison management described by some psychologists in Chapter 3 could be addressed by working on ways to integrate psychologists more within the prison establishments in which they regularly work. This could be achieved via both regular informal contact between psychologists and other staff groups, and psychologists contributing to institutional problem solving. This has the potential to raise the profile and credibility of psychologists within prisons (Hall & Darroch, 2010) and ultimately increase the legitimacy of psychological practice. If psychologists feel more part of the prison team, they are more likely to feel supported and accepted and are arguably less vulnerable to stress and burn out. Improving relationships with prison colleagues is key to improving job satisfaction for psychologists (Boothby & Clements, 2002), and being present in the establishment and available to provide informal
advice and support to other staff groups is invaluable in promoting the image of psychologists. There is also evidence that a lack of social support is related to burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli & Leiter, 2001) and feeling unsupported, judged or irrelevant to colleagues may have significant implications for psychologists’ well-being and consequently their effectiveness in risk assessment.

Psychologists’ wellbeing could be further supported by more collaborative working with colleagues from different establishments and colleagues working in different organisations with similar client groups (e.g., NHS or private forensic healthcare settings). This could assist psychologists in developing the breadth of knowledge I have argued that they need to conduct legitimate, holistic and ideographic risk assessment (Gannon & Ward, 2014; and see Chapter 5). It could also ameliorate feelings of professional isolation, and help psychologists deal with the pressures of responsibility and expectation, by virtue of peer consultation, supervision and sharing of good practice. Such inter-agency working could also help to address issues of bias and influence; challenge and discussion with colleagues from different organisations with different perspectives is more likely to uncover organisational bias that someone embedded in the organisation might overlook (Baker & Wilkinson, 2011).

More generally, and not related directly to risk assessment practice, a more contextually sensitive approach to correctional research would undoubtedly begin to deliver the message that context is important. The Medical Research Council’s guidelines for evaluations of complex interventions (Moore et al., 2015) as well as Pawson and Tilley’s (2004) “realist evaluation” provide contextually sensitive alternatives to the gold standard RCT so prized by correctional researchers (Byrne, 2013). Paying attention to the myriad of influences that might determine the effectiveness of an intervention will reinforce the idea that context is crucial in determining what does and does not work in correctional research.

**Implication 2: Take an Emergent, Intersubjective Approach to Risk Assessment Interviewing**

Psychologists and prisoners come together in the risk assessment interview. Prisoners’ expectations of the psychologist (e.g., of untrustworthiness? Of respect and decency?) inevitably
affect their interview behaviour (see Chapters 4, 6 and 7; Safran & Muran, 2000). Prisoners’
behaviour will in turn affect psychologists’ behaviour and psychologists’ interpretations and
judgements about the prisoner (Safran & Muran, 2000; Shingler & Needs, 2018b; and Chapters 4
and 7). Awareness and understanding of these complex, intersubjective processes is essential
(Nolan & Walsh, 2012; Pycroft, 2014), placing the relationship between psychologist and prisoner
firmly back on the agenda. Gaining a greater understanding of interpersonal processes in risk
assessment was a central aim of this research, yet this is just the beginning. The interpersonal
relationship, including clinical skill and expertise in risk assessment, requires more attention at
every level – research, training, supervision and individual reflection. The results of this and other
research suggests that psychologists have some work to do in addressing perceptions of mistrust
and legitimacy in their relationships with prisoners. Taking steps to improve interpersonal
approaches to risk assessment interviewing will be central to improving perceptions of legitimacy.
The recommendations detailed below and summarised in Table 8.2 provide some suggestions
about how this can be achieved.

**Prioritise psychological skill and expertise in risk assessment interviewing.** Toulmin (1982)
argues that is it not possible to engage in the detached observation of a fellow human being,
rather “…the interaction between scientists and their objects of study is always a two-way affair”
(p. 97, italics in original). As has been argued in Chapters 6 and 7, understanding the risk
assessment interview in intersubjective terms means that psychologists’ clinical expertise in
navigating the interpersonal elements of the interview must be prioritised. The results of this
study have indicated that psychologists who are able to build effective working relationships with
prisoners in risk assessment are perceived as having greater legitimacy. This in turn enables
prisoners to contribute more openly to assessment, meaning that more information, essential for
understanding and assessing risk, is available to the psychologist. It also means that prisoners are
more likely to perceive such assessment as procedurally just, which in turn implies greater co-
operation from prisoners both with assessment and risk management recommendations. As has
been discussed throughout, the dominance of RNR-based approaches to assessment and intervention as implemented in UK prisons has resulted in a sidelining of psychological expertise both in general and more specifically in relation to prisoner/psychologist relationships. In many cases, risk assessment has become largely restricted to the application of an SPJ with the psychologist tending to be viewed as “a passive implementer whose discretion should be utilized only in exceptional circumstances” (Gannon & Ward, 2014, p. 437, italics in original). This sidelining is not entirely attributable to manualisation: arguably, it is also a consequence of resource pressure and the focus on objectivity within a social and political climate of intolerance of risk (Chapter 7; Gannon & Ward, 2014). Gannon and Ward (2014) argue that RNR is overly narrow in its focus and that “Evidence Based Practice” (EBP) provides greater breadth and can encompass RNR approaches. EBP comprises three elements: (1) considering the best available research evidence about whether and why an approach works, (2) clinical expertise, comprising clinical experience and clinical judgement, in which the clinician uses their skills to determine the most effective approach for their individual client within the specific context, and (3) client preferences and values – any psychological approach is unlikely to be successful if the client point blank refuses to engage with it (Lilienfeld et al., 2013). Lilienfeld et al. (2013) conclude that “In sum, EBP comprises the thoughtful integration of the best available scientific evidence concerning psychotherapy with clinical expertise and client preferences/values” (p. 886). This arguably requires broader knowledge of the psychological literature than that which supports RNR-based approaches (see Chapters 5 and 7). A broader range of knowledge amongst psychologists will enable more sophisticated individual formulations that attend to criminogenic needs, “promising” risk factors (Mann et al., 2010, and Chapters 5 and 6) as well as issues that may be more salient to the client (for example, trauma or attachment style). SPJs remain central, but need to be informed by clinical experience and knowledge and recognition that the risk assessment interview is an interpersonal process. Gannon and Ward (2014) believe that psychological expertise in developing working relationships with prisoners is central to the delivery of EBP, and this is
consistent with the results of this research. Paying more attention to the risk assessment relationship would also arguably begin to halt the decline in respect for psychologists among prisoners, and go some way towards restoring perceptions of legitimacy (Bottoms & Rose, 1998, as cited in Liebling et al., 2005; Sparks & Bottoms, 1995). The results reported in detail in Chapter 6 (and in Shingler et al., 2017) describe features of the interpersonal approach to the risk assessment interview that are mutually understood by psychologists and prisoners to be effective in building rapport, eliciting information and promoting procedural justice. These five distinct but overlapping categories are discussed below, with specific pointers for applying these to practice.

Table 8.2

Summary of Recommendations for taking an Intersubjective Approach to Understanding the Risk Assessment Interview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General recommendation</th>
<th>Specific recommendation for practice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prioritise psychological skill and expertise</td>
<td>Emphasise clarity and transparency. Engage prisoners collaboratively throughout the risk assessment process: give prisoners a voice throughout. Take opportunities to negotiate elements of the process with prisoners. Make a respectful, boundaried, yet human connection with prisoners. Respect prisoners as individuals; maintain a focus on individuality throughout assessment. Prioritise individual formulation. Attend to strengths/protective factors as well as problems and risk factors. Take a “purposeful conversation” approach to interviewing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconsider understanding and expectations of objectivity</td>
<td>Understand objectivity as a balance of scientific data with expert interpretation. Move away from fruitless approaches that aim to eliminate bias; accept the presence of bias in an interpersonal encounter. Work to identify and overcome bias in reflective supervision.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evidence Based Practice, including, but not limited to, RNR, should be the dominant force in correctional psychology.

The category “emphasising clarity and transparency” indicates the need for clarity of process and purpose; clarity of limitations and clarity about developing opinion. Psychologists should communicate openness, for example by sharing interview notes, sharing developing opinions and formulations, acknowledging and addressing factual errors, and explaining things openly, clearly and non-defensively. The importance of clarity in helping prisoners to deal with the uncertainty and stress of risk assessment (and thereby improve the context of risk assessment for prisoners) is noted above, as is PBMs’ need for clarity. Openness and transparency promotes trust amongst prisoners, which in turn increases comfort with disclosure; and clarity is central to perceptions of procedural justice (Tyler & Huo, 2002).

“Collaborative engagement” directs practitioners to properly facilitate prisoners’ involvement in risk assessment, thereby enabling the mutually constituted understanding that can emerge from interpersonal interactions of this nature (De Jaegher, 2009; Salvatore et al., 2010). Explaining things clearly and taking sufficient time are part of the process of collaboration. Other strategies for promoting collaboration include giving prisoners the chance to express views and giving prisoners choice where possible. For example, prisoners can have some choice about how a report is disclosed or when interviews are conducted (practitioners could be flexible to start interviews later than usual or finish earlier to accommodate prisoners’ employment or other activities). Prisoners views should be represented in reports: even in cases of disagreement, psychologists’ opinions may not change but prisoners’ perspectives can still be heard. Whilst I would clearly not advocate psychologists changing their opinions to fall in line with prisoners’ or colleagues’ preferences, I would emphasise the need to listen properly to prisoners’ perspectives and look for validity that can be highlighted and supported – looking for the “kernel of truth” (Linehan, 1993, p. 242). Linehan urges therapists to remember that “the patient’s thoughts on the
matter may make substantial sense” (p. 242), and the same approach can be applied to risk assessment. Prisoners’ views on wording of facts, opinions or recommendations can have validity, as can their views about the recommendations themselves. Ultimately, if a prisoner simply cannot countenance a particular recommendation (for example, if participation on a programme will take him to a prison many miles from family support) it will have limited use in helping him to reduce or manage his risk (Lilienfeld et al, 2013). Proper negotiation of risk assessment reports in this way could go some way to increasing perceptions of legitimacy. A number of prisoners described how they were given a draft report by a psychologist and told that this could be discussed and negotiated. In practice, nothing changed in the report. Prisoners’ comments (discussed in detail in Chapter 4) indicated that they would value explicit negotiation about the content of reports (Safran & Muran, 2003).

A greater focus on negotiation throughout the assessment process might also be useful and could contribute to making risk assessment less adversarial (Barnett & Mann, 2011). Part of the discussions around consent might focus on how the psychologist and prisoner might deal with any disagreements, or how the report could be most usefully disclosed to the prisoner. This level of explicit responsiveness (Stiles et al., 1998) communicates a genuine commitment to collaboration and to individually-relevant practice, both of which are identified as elements of good interpersonal practice in risk assessment (Shingler et al., 2017). As an example of an explicitly collaborative approach, a number of psychologists described discussing developing formulations throughout the process of risk assessment interviewing, so in the final report, there were no surprises. Drawing from my own risk assessment practice, informed by this research, I have similarly begun to share elements of my reports during the assessment process. I have shared developing formulations and shared summaries of background information or offending information, so prisoners can see how a report might be building up. I have also discussed possible recommendations from the outset, and then as I have narrowed down the options during the assessment, I have discussed this too. I have listened to prisoners’ objections about
recommendations and tried to find compromises that address any concerns I have about outstanding need as well as meet prisoners’ priorities (Lilienfeld et al., 2013). This gives prisoners a say in the development of the whole report, not just in how the assessment will be conducted, and how the information will be disclosed. I have also listened to objections from prisoners about my use of specific phrases or sentence structures – I will revise things to be clearer but will also revise things that prisoners feel are particularly negative or pejorative (although of course I try hard to be neither) as long as the overall message in the report remains the same. I have found this approach to be more effective and to nurture more respect and engagement from prisoners.

“Making a respectful, boundaried yet human connection” refers to the need to connect with prisoners as human beings at the same time as maintaining professional boundaries – after all these are not friendships but professional relationships. Descriptions from psychologists and prisoners of how this is achieved in practice include psychologists interacting with prisoners as they would with 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 adopting a normal, friendly interpersonal style. Informal contact with psychologists outside of the assessment context is seen as invaluable by prisoners and increases the extent to which psychologists are seen as human beings by prisoners. The balancing of boundaries is crucial here – being neither emotionally over-involved, nor distant and overly “professional”. The issue of prisoners maintaining differing roles and having to transition between roles was discussed above, but the importance of making a respectful, boundaried yet human connection brings psychologists’ roles into focus, and this is something that could benefit from attention in future research. How psychologists perceive and experience their role is interesting in terms of boundaries with clients – being friendly and “human” at the same time as professional – and meeting the needs of prisoners, the Parole Board, the institution and the public. Psychologists need to maintain a number of roles at any one time (and this is only in relation to risk assessment
– they may have numerous other professional roles to contend with, as well as personal roles) and this can be challenging and stressful (Ashforth et al., 2000). Oral Hearings may well create role conflict – psychologists are taking the role of the professional witness aiming to give clear and unbiased evidence to the Parole Board as well as that of supportive psychologist, aimed at maintaining engagement with the prisoner. There is evidence that role conflict is a persistent source of work-related stress amongst prison staff (Armstrong & Griffin, 2004; Schaufeli & Peeters, 2000) and this is consistent with psychologists’ descriptions of oral hearings as a particularly stressful element of their job. Understanding more about the roles psychologists take in relation to risk assessment, and the presence and impact of role conflict would be fruitful avenues for further research.

Prisoners’ mistrust of psychologists was partly attributed to the physical distance between psychologists and prisoners with some psychologists being regionally based rather than establishment based. This means that they tend to be less visible within prisons, and lack opportunities for informal contact with prisoners that can create the “human connection” described above. Lack of contact between prisoners and psychologists undermines the development of rapport and ultimately trust. Taking more time to conduct an assessment or redistributing time to have more contacts with the prisoner (as described above) is a way in which psychologists can demonstrate their commitment to a human approach as well as to individuality in assessment (see below). Working towards psychologists being more present in and integrated with their regular workplaces would allow prisoners to have more contact with psychologists outside of the risk assessment interview and more familiarity with the psychologist’s interpersonal style, expectations and ways of working. This could help to facilitate the role transition from “prisoner” to “risk assessment participant” discussed above (Ashforth et al., 2000), thus reducing stress for prisoners in risk assessment.

Relatedly, “respecting individuality” reflects the importance of being treated as an individual, with individual needs and concerns. Taking time to listen to a prisoner’s concerns or at least work
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at his pace is a more human approach that also increases perceptions of respect for individual needs and integrity. However, individuality has to be balanced with the general requirement for psychologists to use SPJs when conducting assessments – that is, psychologists must find a way to acknowledge individuality within the application of SPJ assessment approaches. Overly structured approaches are experienced as lacking in legitimacy by prisoners, and have the potential to objectify prisoners as “disembodied bearers of risk” (Ward & Stewart, 2003, p. 354). Toulmin (1982) notes the “the tendency of science and technology to treat things and people as objects and so to dehumanise people by disregarding their subjective interests, values and feelings” (p. 105, italics in original; see also Needs & Towl, 1997). This objectification can be unwitting, and was arguably reflected in the way that some participants in this study talked about prisoners – for example, referring to them as a “case” rather than an individual, a person, or a man. Ron, one of the prisoner participants, also articulated how the standard language of criminal justice can be inherently disrespectful, explaining “when you turn around ‘n calling us offenders and then when you equate everybody the same”. This is diametrically opposed to the essence of respecting individuality; in fact recent guidance on the respectful descriptions of research participants advises against pejorative and dehumanising language (Willis & Letourneau, 2018). Individualised formulation, based on the application of an SPJ, and using inclusive and non-pejorative language, is arguably the most effective way to achieve a respectful, individualised yet empirically sound assessment. As Hart and Logan (2011) suggest, assessment needs to move “from formula to formulation” (p. 83) in order to respect individuality and increase its legitimacy, as well as its usefulness to PBMs.

Taking a holistic approach that attends to strengths and protective factors as well as problems and risk factors seems to be central to a truly individualised assessment, and seems to be a key element of increasing its legitimacy (Barnett & Mann, 2011). Powerlessness and suffering amongst prisoners in relation to risk assessment seemed to be exacerbated by its inherently negative focus (Attrill & Liell, 2007; Ward & Fisher, 2006). The focus on past problems, offences
and dysfunction is experienced as demotivating by prisoners, who want more focus not only on strengths but also on future plans. This is entirely consistent with the literature which describes the advantages of broader and more positive intervention models (Ward & Stewart, 2003). These include increased motivation and more complete, holistic and individually relevant intervention and risk management planning. There is evidence to support the efficacy of more strengths-based and future-oriented approaches to assessment and treatment (de Vogel et al., 2012; de Vries Robbé, de Vogel & Douglas, 2013). Psychologists should therefore ensure that risk assessment is a balance between identifying risk factors, identifying strengths and protective factors and planning for the future (Barnett & Mann, 2011; de Vries Robbé, Mann, Maruna & Thornton, 2015). A number of more recent assessments facilitate this process (Risk and Success Factors Assessment (RSFA): National Offender Management Service (NOMS), 2013; Structured Assessment of Protective Factors (SAPROF): de Vogel et al., 2012) although the emphasis remains firmly on identifying risk. This is an opportunity for psychologists to take the lead in developing assessment approaches that balance strengths with deficits, and balance focus on the past with focus on the future. This will arguably provide a greater sense of hope, which in itself is associated with desistance and effective risk management (Maruna, 2001).

Finally, “having a purposeful conversation” reflects the importance of conducting a purposeful, goal-directed interview in a natural, conversational manner. This facilitates rapport building and puts prisoners at ease. Kendall, Gosch, Furr and Sood (2008) describe “flexibility with fidelity”, which reflects this category of meaning. There is related evidence from research into treatment outcomes that clients do better in therapy when they perceive their therapists to be confident and competent (Saunders, 1999) – it is plausible that a natural, relaxed, informal and yet focused style is an indicator of confidence and competence.

The five categories described above provide some guidance to psychologists (and other professionals) about interpersonal techniques that could be used within the interview. However, there is convincing evidence that it is not the use of specific techniques themselves that result in
enhanced rapport but “the responsive use of techniques” (Stiles et al., 1998, p. 448; see also Stern et al., 1998) built on a bedrock of trust and respect (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Landy et al., 2016). Navigating the difficult balance of the risk assessment interview requires responsivity to an ever-changing situation, as described in Chapter 6. The skilful psychologist navigates the complexities of the interview via careful and responsive movement along these dimensions (and probably other dimensions that have not yet been uncovered) whilst remaining aware of the potentially destabilising influences of the broader context and implications of the risk assessment. The way in which the psychologist goes about the navigation is entirely dependent on the context (Schön, 1983; Sookermany, 2012). Therefore, the management of the process of the risk assessment interview is a challenge of professional practice and psychological skill (Hough, 2010) within a unique situation. It is therefore impossible to manualise the skills and attributes needed for risk assessment interviewing. However, manuals have a role to play in maintaining treatment or assessment integrity (Mann, 2009) by focusing attention on key empirically derived psychological variables that require attention (Hart & Logan, 2011) and psychologists (especially those in training) understandably want information and suggestions about how best to engage in a clinical interaction. The answer, therefore, is yet again to strike a balance. We do not want to manualise everything, nor do we want to manualise nothing and return to the era of unstructured, unguided and potentially partisan clinical judgement. Marshall (2009) and Gannon and Ward (2014) both advocate the use of practice guidelines, that is, “manuals that guide practice and hold key aims and objectives but also allow for clinical flexibility” (Gannon & Ward, 2014, p. 443). This approach also reflects Mann’s (2009) suggestions for the most effective approach to the manualisation of psychological tasks. Thus the results of this study, especially those presented in Chapter 6 (and Shingler et al., 2017), provide clinical guidance which must be applied with responsiveness in order to be maximally effective (Schön, 1983; Sookermany, 2012).

Reconsider understanding and expectations of objectivity. As has been argued throughout, the focus on objectivity in risk assessment has resulted in the sidelining of the relationship
between psychologist and prisoner. The focus on objectivity is partly a consequence of the literature base indicating the relative superiority of ARAIs and SPJs in identifying recidivists and the relative weakness of clinical judgement (Grove et al., 2000; Grove & Meehl, 1996; Hanson & Mourton-Bourgon, 2009). It is also partly a consequence of the positivist epistemology that dominates correctional psychological practice (as well as other professions, Schön, 1983; and see Introduction). Research attention has prioritised the development of structured risk assessment tools in a drive for “technical rationality” which seeks to make problem solving “rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique” (Schon, 1983, p. 21). Consequently, clinical expertise, and in particular the relationship between assessor and assessed has been at best overlooked and at worst deliberately removed from the process for fear that any role for clinical judgement and expertise will result in biased and partisan assessment. However, as Schön (1983) goes on to note, real-world problem solving is often not reducible to such technical rationality, especially when it involves complexity, uncertainty and uniqueness, or when information needed for problem solving is confused or conflicting. The results and discussions presented throughout this thesis are consistent with this argument and point to the extensive interpersonal, environmental, social and political influences on psychologists, ISPs and PBMs. As discussed in Chapter 7, this implies that any attempt towards achieving rigid ideas of objectivity is simply nonsensical. Prioritising understanding of and promoting the relationship in risk assessment does not inevitably mean that the resulting assessment will be biased and unscientific. Rather, there needs to be a shift in how we, as psychologists, understand and apply notions of “objectivity” in risk assessment. The results presented here suggest that a more balanced and nuanced approach to objectivity would be more fruitful and legitimate – an approach that recognises that interpretation and objectivity/rationality are not mutually exclusive. As Toulmin (1982) notes, “to be objective does not require us to be uninterested, that is, devoid of interests and feelings; it requires us only to acknowledge those interests and feelings, to discount any resulting biases and prejudices, and to do our best to act in a disinterested way” (p. 106; italics in original). Thus,
Toulmin argues that objectivity should be understood as unbiased, non-partisan practice, not practice that is devoid of interpersonal input or influence. Toulmin (1982) also argues that making interpretations in order to understand a concept does not automatically render that understanding subjective and unscientific. Interpretation is not without a basis in scientific knowledge, rather it is “the outcome of experience and discrimination” (Toulmin, 1982, p. 103). In practice, making interpretations is inevitable in any form of engagement, and an ideal of objectivity based on distance and detachment is not easily reconcilable with the intersubjective approach to understanding risk assessment proposed here. Interpretations arise from a balance of empirically derived knowledge with practice-derived knowledge. Sookermany (2012) reflects on the need for contextually sensitive and flexible skill in solving complex interpersonal problems, which, as noted above, is not amenable to manualisation. There is a body of literature that discusses the balancing of theory with clinical expertise and experience (Gannon & Ward, 2014; Lilienfeld et al., 2013; Lowenkamp et al., 2012) and the value of this approach in complex cases. This is the direction that I propose psychological risk assessment should take - making the best use of SPJs alongside a broad knowledge of the psychological literature, complimented by the reflective application of clinical expertise and informed by the context and by client needs and values (Lilienfeld et al., 2013; Sookermany, 2012). This alternative view of objectivity involves acknowledging the inevitability of bias, reflecting on its presence and effects, and taking steps to ensure that practice is balanced and fair. This role for reflection in maintaining these (newly defined) standards of objectivity brings the value of clinical supervision (as discussed above) to the foreground.

As a cautionary note, Lilienfeld et al. (2013) point out the risks of valuing clinical expertise and judgement over research evidence and the value that nomothetically derived data can have in aiding clinical decision making. Similarly, Croskerry et al. (2013b) highlight the value of structuring decision making procedures in overcoming bias. SPJs are a good example of how heuristics (protocols for simplifying complex decision making) enable organisation of large amounts of
information into meaningful chunks. The plea to construe objectivity differently is not advocating a return to unstructured clinical judgement. Rather it highlights the value of balancing knowledge from all three legs of the EBP stool (Dematteo et al., 2010; Gannon & Ward, 2014) when making complex clinical decisions. If assessment were to be seen as an application of an SPJ plus a balanced and detailed consideration of other relevant clinical issues, and the taking account of prisoners’ views, this would arguably go some way towards restoring perceptions of legitimacy.

To summarise, the view of the interview as an emergent intersubjective experience means that current standards of objectivity are misplaced. We should be reflecting on and understanding elements of influence and bias in order to reduce their effect on decision making rather than thinking that influence and bias will be removed as long as we use a structured approach to risk assessment.

**Implication 3: Increase the Legitimacy of Psychological Risk Assessment amongst Prisoners**

The findings reported in Chapters 4 and 5 suggest there is an urgent need to address the credibility and trustworthiness of psychologists and the legitimacy of psychological assessment in the eyes of prisoners. Improving the credibility and legitimacy of psychologists and psychological assessment could have an exponential effect, given the potential for one encounter with a psychologist to have far reaching implications not just for future interactions with psychologists but also future interactions with other criminal justice professionals (see Chapter 3). The experiences and perspectives of prisoners in relation to the legitimacy of risk assessment have become clearer as a result of this research, and, as discussed above, this awareness alone should help to inform psychologists’ practice, potentially enabling them to discuss issues of credibility and trust more openly. It is noted in Chapter 6 that psychologists and prisoners have similar views about what constitutes effective interpersonal approaches to risk assessment. These shared views should make improvement easier to achieve. Additionally, the results reported in Chapter 3 and 4 suggest that to some extent, psychologists and prisoners are able to recognise and empathise with the challenges that each other face. Perhaps bringing this empathy and understanding into
risk assessment, and explicitly naming and exploring some of the challenges, is a step towards resolving them. The value of metacommunication in mending therapeutic ruptures has been noted (Lewis, 2016; Safran & Muran, 2000) and it is equally relevant to addressing long standing problems in psychologist-prisoner relationships. Identifying and talking openly about fears, barriers and suspicions is a step towards resolution. This final section of recommendations draws together the steps that can be taken to improve legitimacy (see Table 8.3 for a summary).

**Address issues of psychologists’ power in risk assessment.** Psychologists are seen by prisoners as having undue power and influence over decisions made by the Parole Board and this negatively influences prisoners’ perspectives of legitimacy. Yet as we have also seen,

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<th>General recommendation</th>
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<td>Address psychologists’ power.</td>
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<td>Address the “trainee dilemma.”</td>
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Address psychologists’ power.

- Empower other professional voices in risk assessment: consider a relational responsibility approach.
- Consider the organisational structures of risk assessment: consideration should be given to making deadlines for all professional groups the same.
- Explore factors that reduce other professionals’ confidence in risk assessment and increase reliance on psychological assessment.
- Greater reflection on power issues in risk assessment; discuss in supervision and with prisoners, if appropriate.

Address the “trainee dilemma.”

- Training, supervision and support focusing on the interpersonal aspect of risk assessment should be a priority for Forensic Psychologists in Training (FPITs).
- Encourage reflection amongst FPITs in relation to the systemic and intersubjective nature of risk assessment.
- Research to understand FPITs experiences of conducting risk assessment, and how competence changes and develops over time.
**Promote the rehabilitative function of risk assessment**

Emphasise the progressive and rehabilitative function of risk assessment to prisoners by explaining how risk assessment can assist with both personal development and progression.

- Conducting risk assessments early and in a formative way: enable change and development by identifying areas of need and areas of strength and addressing them to facilitate timely progression.
- Give equal focus to risk and strengths and protective factors.
- Maintain high standards of professional practice

**Psychological risk assessment must be fair and seen to be fair.**

Use reflective supervision to identify and address influence and bias.

- Consider all options when making recommendations; provide a balanced argument for and against each option.
- Pay greater attention to strengths and protective factors.
- Further research into prisoners’ perceptions of the fairness of psychological assessment and what can be done to improve it.
- Be frank about limitations.

**Pay attention to the relationship between psychologist and prisoner.**

Work on improving the clarity and accessibility of the entire assessment process.

- Assessment should be collaborative and involve willingness to negotiate throughout.
- Psychologists should consider asking for feedback about their assessment practice.
- Take enough time to address issues of consent, answer questions, and have some informal contact with the prisoner.
- Consider making a pre-assessment interview standard practice.
- Risk assessment must be respectful and responsive throughout.

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The Parole Board recognise that they attribute weight to psychological assessment and see this as entirely justified due to its depth and empirically-derived focus. To balance this, there is a view from all three participant groups that other prison-based professional groups tend to fall in line behind psychological opinion and are reluctant to express their own opinions. Therefore,
empowering other professional groups to have their own voice in risk assessment, based on their skills, knowledge, experience and contact with the prisoner might be one way in which power issues might be addressed and risk assessment might be seen as fairer and more balanced by prisoners. This suggests taking a “relational responsibility” approach to risk assessment in Parole Board decision making (Austin et al., 2008) as discussed in Chapter 3. Relational responsibility involves the bringing together of different professionals with different training, experience and priorities in order to provide a range of perspectives on a problem, rather than relying on one professional voice. This approach could facilitate the identification of different strengths and concerns which could result in a more rounded and comprehensive assessment of a prisoner. The pooling of information and sharing of different perspectives could also help to overcome the effects of group or individual biases. Ultimately, a relational responsibility approach could contribute to alleviating the burden on psychologists, improving perceptions of fairness and balance amongst prisoners, as well as providing a better service to the Parole Board and the public. Such an approach would be welcomed by the psychologists in this study.

Additionally, the configuration of some organisational systems and structures within the Prison Service communicates the message that the psychologist’s report is the most important, and encourages other professionals to base their opinion on the psychological assessment. As discussed in Chapters 3 and 5, deadlines for submission of reports to the Parole Board are organised so that the psychologist has to submit their report first – giving other professionals a number of weeks afterwards to prepare and submit their reports. As part of a re-balancing of professional power in risk assessment, consideration could be given to making deadlines equal for all professionals. This was suggested by a Parole Board member in one of the presentations of this research. This could go some way to address issues of power and reassure prisoners that all professional opinions are taken into account by panels of the Parole Board.

However, the reliance on psychological assessment may not be just a consequence of structural and organisational issues. Some participants felt that reliance on psychological
assessment was underpinned by lack of confidence in risk assessment amongst other professional groups. Therefore, in order to empower other professional groups to have a voice in risk assessment, exploring and addressing the issues that prevent them from expressing themselves would contribute to a relational responsibility approach. If necessary, working with other professional groups to increase their confidence in their own areas of expertise (via training, support or supervision) and to understand how their specialist knowledge could contribute meaningfully to the risk assessment process could reduce reliance on psychological risk assessment. This could involve focusing on the value of the unique contribution that each professional group makes to risk assessment. For example, Offender Managers (OMs) have expertise in community resettlement and treatment provision and multi-agency support and monitoring procedures. OMs may well have had contact with partners and family members and can provide crucial information about the nature and extent of non-statutory community support. OMs are also likely to have a much greater local knowledge than prison-based colleagues, so will be able to provide a better informed view on accommodation, employment and resettlement opportunities. Understanding the value these elements can add to a risk management plan over and above psychological risk factors (see de Vogel et al., 2012, for a summary) could support OMs to have more confidence in their opinions about a prisoner’s progression. Being more aware of the importance of well-presented evidence from OMs to Parole Board decision making could also increase confidence amongst this professional group (Padfield et al., 2000). This is a potential avenue for further research, as well as training, support or consultancy.

Increased awareness amongst psychologists of the power they both have and are perceived to have in relation to Parole Board decision making should help psychologists reflect on how this power needs to be managed. The clinical supervision suggested above would be an ideal forum for such reflection. Open discussion of power issues with prisoners during risk assessment interviews (perhaps during the pre-assessment interview) might be one way to address prisoners’ concerns about psychological power (Safran & Muran, 2000). Psychologists could consider
explaining to prisoners what the Parole Board want and expect from psychological assessment and what they will do as a professional to meet standards of fairness, independence, thoroughness, clarity and individualised focus. Consideration could also be given to involving prisoners in evaluating their assessment experience against the standards expected by the Parole Board. A written feedback sheet or a semi-structured evaluation interview could be used to facilitate this, and this could form a useful research project in itself. This would have the advantages of handing some power back to prisoners, as well as communicating a less adversarial approach to risk assessment and a clear commitment to collaboration and hearing prisoners’ voices.

Maintaining professional standards, such as being frank and open about limitations is another way to deal respectfully with power. This means acknowledging personal limitations as well as the limitations of the science of risk assessment (Grisso & Appelbaum, 1992; Vess et al., 2017). This is an example of using power respectfully rather than reinforcing the “appearance of precision” (Campbell, 2004, p. 12) that can easily be attributed to the application of structured risk assessment approaches (both ARAIs and SPJs).

**Address the “trainee dilemma” in risk assessment.** The issue of unqualified psychologists conducting high stakes risk assessments concerned both prisoners and psychologists who participated in this study. The results reported in Chapters 3 and 4 indicate that many prisoners resent being assessed by trainees and this practice undermines their views of the credibility and legitimacy of psychological assessment. Additionally, a number of the (qualified) psychologist participants in this study compared their practice as trainees unfavourably with their current approach (see Chapter 3). Participants described themselves as trainees as more vulnerable to “tick box” approaches, more reliant on SPJs, less flexible and more interpersonally distant and lacking in humanity. These comments suggest that trainees are less adept at elements of successful risk assessment interviewing such as “respecting individuality”, “making a respectful, boundaried yet human connection” and “having a conversation with focus” (Shingler et al., 2017;
and see Chapter 6). This view is consistent with Gannon and Ward's (2014) suggestion that novice therapists lack the expertise to work flexibly with clients and are more susceptible to over-reliance on manuals. Yet psychologists need to become competent in risk assessment and some would argue that training-by-doing is the only way to develop competence in such complex and dynamic tasks (Sookermany, 2012; see Chapters 3 and 4). There are also insufficient qualified psychologists working in prisons to complete all the risk assessments that are required. Finally, PBM's are generally satisfied with assessments conducted by trainee psychologists and judge them as equally credible and fair as those conducted by qualified psychologists (see Chapter 5). Therefore the use of trainees for this high stakes task is likely to persist. The challenge, then, is to support trainees to conduct risk assessment at the same time as promoting perceptions of credibility and legitimacy. Contributions from two prisoner participants provide some clues about how this might be achieved. Two prisoners identified and named the same trainee psychologist as someone who was particularly good at building trust and rapport within risk assessment. When asked to specify this person’s qualities, Shawn identified her willingness to discuss “matters that were nothing to do with the assessment”, having a “friendly conversational style”, and having the opportunity to meet the trainee psychologist a number of times before the assessment. Martin described the trainee psychologist as follows:

She’s quite nice and personable and she will treat you like a human being you know, she’ll have a conversation with you.

These comments suggest that being a trainee psychologist per se is not the sole cause of prisoners’ dissatisfaction. It also suggests that the interpersonal style of the psychologist could well be central to increasing perceptions of legitimacy. Interestingly, Ferry and Ross-Gordon (1998) found that years of experience was not equated with reflective problem solving approaches – rather the tendency towards reflective practice could be present or absent in both novice and experienced professionals. This implies that the key to improving skill amongst trainee psychologists is to promote genuinely reflective approaches to risk assessment (via reflective
supervision described above) as well as prioritising training and mentoring to build competence and confidence in the interpersonal skills needed for effective risk assessment, which are elucidated in detail in Chapter 6, in Shingler et al., (2017) and briefly summarised above. Additionally, understanding the experiences of trainee psychologists in relation to high stakes risk assessment is central to understanding how to support them to develop their skills in this area. This study involved only qualified psychologists, and engaging in a similar research project with trainees would be invaluable.

Increase the rehabilitative function of psychological risk assessment. Providing opportunities for personal growth is a feature of legitimate carceral environments (Brown & Toyoki, 2013), as discussed in Chapter 7. Therefore, one step towards increasing perceptions of legitimacy would be to emphasise the progressive and rehabilitative function of psychological risk assessment. The tendency to separate risk assessment from intervention in prison-based practice has arguably undermined the perception of risk assessment as rehabilitative. The separation of risk assessment from treatment was initiated in order to address concerns about bias when treatment providers also conducted risk assessment, raised in the investigation of a serious further offence (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Probation, 2006; and see Introduction). The separation is also consistent with the correctional drive towards objectivity (see above and Chapters 1 and 7). Separation of the tasks of treatment and risk assessment is both advisable and ethically essential (Greenberg & Shuman, 1997) especially if practitioners are to try to avoid the dual relationship problem (Ward, 2013). Assessing a prisoner with whom you have engaged as a therapist is inadvisable and surely increases the risk of a range of biases. However, this separation is inconsistent with prisoners’ preferences, which are for risk assessments to be conducted by psychologists whom they feel know them as people. From a prisoner’s perspective, knowing a psychologist seems to increase capacity for trust and willingness to be open during assessment, as described above. This presents some advantages to the risk assessment process and to the sense of risk assessment as rehabilitative. As with many elements of risk assessment, there seems to be
A balancing act is in play here: being assessed by complete strangers undermines prisoners’ perceptions of legitimacy. Prisoners being assessed by someone who has also acted as their therapist runs the risk of biased and self-interested assessment (ultimately, it could be argued that one is assessing one’s own capacities as a therapist). The balance could be struck by increased interpersonal familiarity between prisoners and psychologists alongside reflective supervision to identify and address any resulting bias.

Notwithstanding the separation of the tasks of risk assessment and treatment, they are inextricably linked in practice; risk assessment informs treatment in that the identification of dynamic risk factors provides the basis for developing treatment targets (Barnett & Mann, 2011; Miller & Rollnick, 1991). This view also seems to be supported by the recipients of risk assessment: prisoners believe it is important to understand thinking and motivation in order to understand risk (Attrill & Liell, 2007). Similarly, Shingler and Mann (2006) discuss the need for prisoners to be involved in risk assessment in order to internalise the need for and focus of treatment, and engage fully in efforts to reduce and manage risk. This message, that risk assessment is an integral part of treatment and an integral step towards progression, needs to be communicated loudly and clearly. It should be communicated during assessment, by explicating how a detailed and thorough risk assessment can assist with both personal development and progression. It should also be communicated structurally, by facilitating psychologists to engage prisoners in psychological risk assessment early and in a formative way – enabling change and development by identifying areas of need and areas of strength and addressing them in order to facilitate timely progression. It can also be communicated by giving equal focus to risk and strengths and protective factors, as has already been noted (Barnett & Mann, 2011).

Psychological risk assessment must not only be fair, it must be seen to be fair. Steps must be taken to ensure fairness at all stages of the assessment process. As discussed in Chapter 5, fair, even-handed, neutral and unbiased decision making is more likely to be seen as legitimate and more likely to be complied with (Sparks & Bottoms, 1995; Tyler & Huo, 2002). PBMs see
themselves as “arbiters of fairness” but it is incumbent on all participants in the risk assessment process to ensure fairness. Ensuring that risk assessment is fair, balanced and independent is central to meeting the needs of the Parole Board. PBMs explicitly demeaned assessments that they felt had not met their standards of independence. Fair and independent assessment was described as including evidence of balance and open-mindedness. Maintaining standards of excellence and maintaining a fair, balanced and independent approach to psychological risk assessment is surely key to increasing prisoners’ perceptions of legitimacy. Therefore, psychologists should reflect (during clinical supervision – see above) on issues of influence and bias within their own practice - whether this is to do with their personal opinions about a prisoner for example, or to do with media coverage potentially triggering the availability heuristic (see Introduction). Psychologists should be prepared to explore and challenge the influences that have the potential to affect their practice. As noted above, this would help to ensure that risk assessment is driven by good science and clinical expertise and not populist demands. This would also address Parole Board needs for independent and even-handed assessment. Psychologists should also ensure they consider all options when making recommendations in their reports and provide a balanced argument for and against each option. Fairness can also be promoted by a paying greater attention in risk assessment to strengths and protective factors, as discussed above – weighing up evidence for risk with evidence against risk is an important step in providing balanced and unbiased assessment. This would improve the evidence presented to the Parole Board as well as potentially improving prisoners’ views about legitimacy. Further research into prisoners’ perceptions of the fairness of psychological assessment would be invaluable, especially research that identifies prisoners’ views about the characteristics of fair assessment compared with that which is seen as unfair.

**Pay attention to the relationship between psychologist and prisoner in risk assessment.**

As has been described at length above, improving the quality of relationships between psychologists and prisoners is essential if perceptions of legitimacy are to improve (and
relationships are central to perceptions of legitimacy more generally - Bottoms & Rose, 1998, as cited in Liebling et al., 2005; Sparks & Bottoms, 1995). This research has suggested a number of steps psychologists can take to achieve this. These include making the entire assessment process (from the gaining of consent to the production of the report, and into the oral hearing) clearer, more accessible and more collaborative. Psychologists having a willingness to negotiate how elements of the assessment will be conducted and reported, and asking for feedback about their assessment practice would arguably reduce perceptions of psychologists as unjustifiably powerful and increase prisoners’ voice in their assessment. As suggested above, seeking feedback from prisoners about their perceptions of the fairness of the risk assessment process, about the accessibility of reports, about how able they felt to make a contribution and how much they felt their perspective was listened to (via a semi-structured interview or written feedback) could help to improve practice and would make a valuable research study. Risk assessment must be respectful and responsive to the needs of individual prisoners. That involves taking the time a prisoner needs to understand the process and to be able to participate in it with confidence. These suggestions may (at least in the first instance) have an implication for time and resources, in that assessments may take longer. This is an investment, though, not only in the individual prisoner and his assessment, but in the image and credibility of psychologists as professionals.

**Summary of Recommendations for Practice**

The recommendations detailed above are summarised briefly in Tables 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3 above for ease of reference. The aim of the recommendations is to improve the experience of psychological risk assessment for prisoners, at the same time as continuing to meet the needs of the Parole Board and maintaining the integrity of risk assessment.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The recommendations discussed in this chapter highlight some potential avenues for future research. They also draw attention to some of the limitations of this study. However, this study is the first known attempt to understand the experience of psychological risk assessment
Chapter Eight

from the perspectives of psychologists, ISPs and PBM. Therefore it was necessarily an initial exploration of an extremely complex area. It is inevitable that more questions will be raised than the study could possibly aim to answer.

First, this study was relatively narrow in its focus, exploring the perspectives and experiences of only three stakeholder groups. The context of risk assessment is broad, and this study has attended to a small aspect. A greater understanding of the views and experiences of a broader range of stakeholders is needed. Exploring the wider social and political context of risk assessment, by engagement with other agencies, other groups of prison staff, victims or victims’ representatives or members of the public would enable a much deeper understanding of the context in which psychologists work. Additionally, understanding more about how prison culture and climate influences psychologists and their risk assessment practice would be beneficial, and provide a more complete contextual picture. There is also a need to understand more about the perspectives of other professional groups who contribute to risk assessment such as probation officers and prison officers. A lack of confidence amongst other professional groups in risk assessment has been suggested by this study, and understanding more about this would be beneficial. Further research could enable a better understanding of factors that promote reliance on psychological assessment and could provide suggestions about how these could be addressed in order to build confidence and give other professional groups a stronger voice.

Second, the sample sizes were small and were comprised of volunteers. It is not known how representative the views of the participants were or whether a broader range of views would have been obtained from an alternative approach to sampling. It is possible that the volunteer participants had some pre-existing interest in the issues in focus or had an interest in changing risk assessment practice. It is also possible that people with more extreme negative or positive views volunteered. Efforts were made to overcome this by asking all participants about their positive and negative experiences of risk assessment. As this was an exploratory study,
convenience sampling was a reasonable approach to an under-researched area. However, future research could consider ways of engaging with a larger number and a wider range of participants.

Third, my own views and experiences may have influenced the results. As an experienced practitioner, I began this study with some ideas about what constituted effective risk assessment practice. As data were collected via interview, my approach to interviewing and my biases may have influenced participants’ contributions. I took steps to ameliorate and reflect on this. I engaged in detail with participants during the interviews to ensure that I understood their perspectives. As noted above, I explored participants’ negative and positive experiences of risk assessment and strove to understand the meaning of those experiences for each person. I also engaged in reflective supervision during data collection, transcription, analysis and beyond in which my interpretation of the data was challenged and explored. Further research into process issues in risk assessment is needed to establish the validity and generalisability of the results reported here.

Fourth, there were some gaps in the exploration of the experiences of psychologists, ISPs and PBMs. For example, I did not consider the relationships between PBMs and ISPs. I did not ask ISPs what they thought about the Parole Board or the parole process. I did not explore with PBMs how they went about engaging ISPs during oral hearings, and what they thought about the prisoner/PBM interface. Ultimately, the Parole Board hold significant power over ISPs, in that they make decisions about release or progression. There are a number of issues here that require urgent research attention. For example, exploring ISPs’ views of the parole process, including views about the fairness, independence, accessibility and ultimately the legitimacy of this process would be invaluable, and is surely long overdue (although Padfield et al., 2000, touched on issues of fairness in their observational study of oral hearings, they did not examine prisoners’ perceptions of fairness and openness in depth). Understanding more about the relationship between social and political priorities and parole decision making would help to understand the issue of fairness in more depth (again, see Padfield et al., 2000). Similarly, knowing more about
how well ISPs understand the nature of an indeterminate sentence, the process of risk assessment and the process of applying for parole would usefully inform practice, as could identification of common errors and misunderstandings. Exploration of the power relationships between ISPs and PBMs is of interest, including ISPs’ views of the legitimacy of that power, and PBMs approaches to coping with the power they hold over ISPs’ lives. As noted above, involving ISPs in evaluating their experience of psychological risk assessment could both promote legitimacy and reveal useful additional information about how to improve psychological assessment further.

A clear limitation of this study was the limited engagement with ISPs during the member checking phase. This was a result of organisational constraints preventing access to further ISP participants. As time progressed, this also became a factor preventing me from making further efforts to engage with more ISPs. Given that I wanted prisoners to have a voice in this study, I am disappointed that I did not have the chance to discuss my findings more broadly with prisoners. This is something that could be pursued as a further research project in its own right, as an opportunity to refine and develop the results presented here. Additionally, this research only involved ISPs in standard Category B and Category C establishments. It would be useful to repeat this research with ISPs living in Therapeutic Community (TC) or Psychologically Informed Planned Environments (PIPEs) within the prison estate to understand more about how risk assessment is experienced within different prison cultures.

Relatedly, this project has identified some possible challenges experienced by psychologists which would benefit from further exploration. Understanding more about the different roles psychologists fulfil in their prison work would be helpful, especially in relation to how these roles might conflict or complement each other in risk assessment. An example of potential role conflict that was specifically raised by this study was how psychologists navigate boundary issues with prisoners in risk assessment. Understanding how psychologists maintain professional boundaries at the same time as maintaining a human approach would be a useful
avenue for research. As noted above, understanding more about how contingencies operate in psychological risk assessment would also be useful, in terms of understanding features that influence or determine recommendations. More specifically, understanding how the political and social climate and the fear of errors affect psychologists’ risk assessment practice would be beneficial. From a functional perspective, gaining more knowledge about the balance of recommendations within psychological reports would be useful, as well as the likelihood of PBMs following the psychologist’s recommendation. Forde’s (2014) study touched on these issues but with a limited and non-representative sample. Research that further explores the frequency of psychologists’ recommendations for release, progression to open prison conditions, or remaining in closed prison conditions, and the related decision of the Parole Board would improve knowledge of the landscape of psychological risk assessment. This knowledge would also allow for more detailed reflection on issues of bias and influence and what can be done to address them.

In terms of understanding more about the PBMs’ perspectives, understanding more about times when PBMs most value psychological opinion would enable better targeting of psychological resources. Engaging with PBMs to learn more about how psychologists can best inform their decision making would be useful. Learning more about priorities and processes in Parole Board decision making would also be beneficial, and some of this work is currently underway (see Lackenby, 2018). Additionally, there is room for a much greater understanding of decision making in criminal justice settings more generally (Mears & Bacon, 2009), in terms of decision making processes and common decision making errors, and in terms of understanding more about systemic influences on decision making.

Fifth, whilst prisoners and psychologists had a great deal to say about the role of Forensic Psychologists in Training (FPITs) in conducting risk assessment, this study did not explore the perspectives of FPITs. Conducting a similar study with FPITs in order to understand the specific pressures and influences on their practice is recommended. Also, there is a need to understand more about how FPITs develop competence in risk assessment, including how they develop key
interpersonal skills. A qualitative exploration of the professional transition through training would be useful, including understanding how experience changes one's interpersonal approach to risk assessment.

Sixth, whilst this study examined a range of issues relevant to risk assessment with participants, only one primary modality of data collection was used, namely, research interviews. Risk assessment extends far beyond the interview, and involves discussion with colleagues, review of prison files, use of research-based guidelines, and adherence to prison risk assessment policy. Extending this study to gather data from these additional sources would be extremely useful, and would provide further detail about the context of risk assessment. Attention could also be given to considering how these other sources of information influence psychologists and PBM.s. Additionally, exploration of how these other sources of information inform risk assessment, and how file reviews and multi-disciplinary discussions can be best used to inform risk assessment would be useful. Relatedly, research focusing on understanding specific aspects of the risk assessment process would be useful, for example report writing, report disclosure, and giving evidence at oral hearings. Similarly, issues relating to the process of conducting risk assessment with specific client groups (such as women, people who have committed sexual offences, people with intellectual disabilities, people in denial, people from minority ethnic groups, people aged under 21 and people serving determinate sentences) could be better understood. All of these groups arguably have different needs, and may have different views about what is most useful in helping them to engage with the risk assessment experience. Developing a better understanding of the perspectives and experiences of these sub-groups of prisoners provides the foundation for more individually relevant approaches to psychological risk assessment. Recent research, for example, has suggested that women serving indeterminate sentences experience greater pains of imprisonment than men (Crewe, Hulley & Wright, 2017b), and that issues of power, control and trust have different meanings for women prisoners. Understanding the experiences of women prisoners specifically in relation to risk assessment would potentially facilitate a more sensitive
and therefore less painful approach. Also given that prisoners at different stages of long indeterminate sentences seem to experience the pains of imprisonment differently (Crewe et al., 2017a; Hulley et al., 2015), considering the experiences of risk assessment amongst prisoners who are early or late in their sentences, or are pre- and post-tariff might provide useful information about how to support prisoners to cope throughout a period of indeterminate imprisonment.

It is hoped that this current study will pave the way to more detailed explorations of the experiences of key stakeholder groups in relation to various elements of the risk assessment and parole decision making process. It is also hoped that the findings of this study will facilitate improved practice, a more humane approach and a greater legitimacy of psychological risk assessment in prisons.
Appendix A: Ethics Documents
# FORM UPR16

**Research Ethics Review Checklist**

Please include this completed form as an appendix to your thesis (see the Research Degrees Operational Handbook for more information).

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<th>Postgraduate Research Student (PGRS) Information</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PGRS Name:</strong></td>
<td>Jo Shingler</td>
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<td><strong>First Supervisor:</strong></td>
<td>Dr Adrian Needs</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Start Date:</strong></td>
<td>February 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Study Mode and Route:</strong></td>
<td>Part-time [X], MPhil [ ], MD [ ], PhD [X], Professional Doctorate [ ]</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Title of Thesis:</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding the Process of Psychological Risk Assessment: Exploring the Experiences of Psychologists, Indeterminate Sentenced Prisoners and Parole Board Members</td>
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<th><strong>Thesis Word Count:</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>79,968 (excluding ancillary data)</td>
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If you are unsure about any of the following, please contact the local representative or your Faculty Ethics Committee for advice. Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University’s Ethics Policy and any relevant University, academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study.

Although the Ethics Committee may have given your study a favourable opinion, the final responsibility for the ethical conduct of this work lies with the researcher(s).

### UKRIO Finished Research Checklist:

(If you would like to know more about the checklist, please see your Faculty or Departmental Ethics Committee rep or see the online version of the full checklist at: [http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research](http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research))

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a) Have all of your research and findings been reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame?</th>
<th>YES [X], NO [ ]</th>
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<td>b) Have all contributions to knowledge been acknowledged?</td>
<td>YES [X], NO [ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Have you complied with all agreements relating to intellectual property, publication and authorship?</td>
<td>YES [X], NO [ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) Has your research data been retained in a secure and accessible form and will it remain so for the required duration?</td>
<td>YES [X], NO [ ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) Does your research comply with all legal, ethical, and contractual requirements?</td>
<td>YES [X], NO [ ]</td>
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### Candidate Statement:

I have considered the ethical dimensions of the above named research project, and have successfully obtained the necessary ethical approval(s).

Ethical review number(s) from Faculty Ethics Committee (or from NRES/SCREC): No number given but approval letter included as appendix

If you have not submitted your work for ethical review, and/or you have answered “No” to one or more of questions a) to e), please explain below why this is so:

[Blank space]

Signed (PGRS): [Blank space]

Date: 12/04/19

UPR16 – April 2018
FAVOURABLE OPINION

Protocol Title: Exploring Psychological Risk Assessment with Indeterminate Sentence Prisoners

Date Reviewed: July 2014

Dear Jo,

Thank you for resubmitting your protocol for ethical review and for the clarifications provided.

Your responses have been reviewed and I am pleased to inform you that your application has been given a favourable opinion by the Science Faculty Ethics Committee. Please notify us in the future of any substantial amendments that may be required and send us a final study report.

Good luck with the study.

Paul Morris

(Dept) Science Faculty Ethics Committee

CC -

Dr Chris Markham – Chair of SFEC
Dr Jim House – Vice Chair of SFEC
Holly Shawyer – Faculty Administrator
Appendix B: Information Sheets, Consent Forms and Debriefing Sheets
Appendix B1

Psychologists’ Information Sheet, Consent Form and Debriefing Sheet
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
(Psychologists)

Principal Investigator: Jo Shingler
Telephone: 023 9284 6310
Email: joanne.shingler@port.ac.uk

Supervisor/s: Adrian Needs
Telephone: 023 9284 6310
Email: adrian.needs@port.ac.uk

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK ASSESSMENT WITH INDETERMINATE SENTENCED PRISONERS:

I would like to invite you to take part in my research, which is being conducted as part of my PhD studies. I would like to tell you a bit more about why the research is being done and what it will involve for you so you can decide if you would like to participate. Please ask if anything is unclear.

What is the purpose of the study?
The purpose of this study is to understand more about the process of risk assessment from the point of view of psychologist risk assessors.

The overall aims of the study are to learn from the experiences of different groups of stakeholders (psychologist assessors, prisoners and psychology managers and Parole Board members), to identify areas of good practice and build on them more widely, and to identify areas where risk assessment could be improved (from all three perspectives).

Why have you been invited?
You have been invited because you are a Psychologist working in one of the prisons that has been identified for this study. I have been given permission by the relevant psychology managers to ask relevant members of Psychology Teams to participate.

Do you have to take part?
No. Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. It is up to you to decide if you want to volunteer for the study. I will describe the study in this information sheet. If you agree to take part, I will then ask you to sign an informed consent form.

What will happen if you take part?
You will participate in an interview of no longer than 90 minutes. I will ask you about your views and experiences of risk assessment. Whilst I have some ideas about the sorts of things I am interested in asking, I am most interested in your
views, so the interview will be more like a discussion about different aspects of risk assessment. I will record the interview using a digital voice recorder.

**Are there any possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**
I do not think there are any risks or disadvantages to you from taking part in this study.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**
Whilst there are no direct benefits, you might find it interesting or helpful to reflect on past experiences. The greatest benefit is to others, in helping to develop a greater understanding of the risk assessment process. I hope that this will help prisoners and psychologists in the future to build on good practice, and identify areas for improvement.

**Will taking part in the study be confidential?**
Yes. Everything you tell me in the research interview is for research purposes only. I will not disclose your responses in the interview with anyone. The only time I will have to tell someone else about what you have said is if you tell me about anything you, or someone else has done that breaches the staff code.

After the interview is over, I will have a digital voice recording of the interview which I will keep securely. I will allocate you a research number which I will say into the recording. This will identify which group you belong to (psychologists, prisoners, managers, parole board members). I will then transcribe, and anonymise, the interview. If your name, or the name of a third party, appears in the recording, I will replace it with a pseudonym. The only way in which you could be identified is by a record of names and research numbers that I will keep, separate from the transcriptions. When my course of study is over, I will destroy this record (of names and numbers) and the recording of the interview, so your transcript cannot be linked back to you. I will keep the transcriptions for 5 years after my last study is published.

The recordings, which could identify you, will not be passed to anyone outside the study team without your express written permission. The exception to this will be any regulatory authority who may have the legal right to access the information collected during the study for the purposes of conducting an investigation in exceptional cases.

Extracts from the transcripts, when made anonymous, may be presented to others at scientific meetings, or published as a project report, academic dissertation or scientific paper or book. It could also be made available to any sponsor of the research. Transcripts, which do not identify you, may be used in future research studies approved by an Appropriate Research Ethics Committee.

**What will happen if you don’t want to carry on with the study?**
You can stop the interview at any time, you can refuse to answer any question, or you can withdraw from the study **up to two weeks after the date of the interview**, without giving a reason if you do not wish to.
More information about how to withdraw is provided in the Debrief Sheet, which you will receive at the end of the interview if you decide to take part.

**What if there is a problem?**
If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should speak to the Principal Investigator in the first instance if this is appropriate, or the Supervisor (both detailed on page 1).

If you have a complaint, you can contact:

The University Complaints Officer: Samantha Hill
Academic Registry
University House
Winston Churchill Avenue
Portsmouth
Hampshire PO1 2UP

023 9284 3642
complaintsadvice@port.ac.uk

**Who is funding the research?**
This research is being funded by The University of Portsmouth. None of the researchers or study staff will receive any financial reward for conducting this study, other than their normal salary / bursary as an employee / student of the University.

**Who has reviewed the study?**
This study has been scientifically and ethically reviewed, and given favourable ethical opinion by the Science Faculty Ethics Committee. The study has also been approved by the NOMS National Research Committee.

**Thank you**
Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for considering volunteering for this study. If you would like more information, or would like to ask questions, please contact me (Jo Shingler) using the contact details on the first page. If you would like to volunteer for this study, I have attached a consent form as a separate document for you to sign. You will then be given a copy of this information sheet and your signed consent form, for you to keep.
CONSENT FORM
(Psychologists)

Principal Investigator: Jo Shingler:
Telephone: 023 9284 6310
Email: joanne.shingler@port.ac.uk

Supervisor: Adrian Needs
Telephone: 023 9284 6310
Email: adrian.needs@port.ac.uk

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK ASSESSMENT WITH INDETERMINATE SENTENCED PRISONERS:

Please initial each box if content

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the attached information sheet for the above study. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and that these have been answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time prior to or during the interview without giving any reason. Once I have participated, I will have two weeks to withdraw from the study if I wish.

3. I consent for the interviews to be recorded using a digital voice recorder. The recordings be used for anything other than transcribing and analysing.

4. I understand that the results of this study may be published and / or presented at meetings. I give my permission for my anonymous information, which does not identify me, to be disseminated in this way.

5. Information collected during this study could be requested by regulatory authorities. I give my permission to any such regulatory authority with legal authority to review the study to have access to my information, which may identify me.

6. I agree to the information I contribute being retained for any future research that has been approved by a Research Ethics Committee.

7. I agree to take part in this study

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<tr>
<th>Name of Participant:</th>
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<tr>
<th>Name of Person taking Consent:</th>
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DEBRIEFING FORM:
(Psychologists).

Principal Investigator: Jo Shingler
Telephone: 023 9284 6310
Email: joanne.shingler@port.ac.uk

Supervisor/s: Adrian Needs
Telephone: 023 9284 6310
Email: adrian.needs@port.ac.uk

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK ASSESSMENT WITH INDETERMINATE SENTENCED PRISONERS:

Thank you for participating in this research study, your involvement is very much appreciated. This Debriefing Form will give you a bit more detail about the background to the research project.

What is the purpose of the study?
The purpose of this study is to understand more about the process of risk assessment from the point of view of psychologist risk assessors. Whilst the research literature has a lot to say about the science of risk assessment (e.g., Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2009; Mann, Hanson & Thornton, 2010), it has very little to say about the process of conducting risk assessments – we do not know how the various parties approach risk assessment, how their prior experiences affect their behaviour, how their attitudes affect their approach to risk assessment, how the context and high stakes nature of risk assessment affects the process, or what other influences they might be subject to. Additionally, beyond clinical opinion, which is contradictory in places (e.g., Shingler & Mann, 2006; Westwood, Wood & Kemshall, 2011 and Greenberg & Shuman, 1997; Campbell, 2004), very little is known about the most effective interpersonal approach to conducting risk assessment.

Consequently, my first aim in this project is to explore the process of risk assessment from different perspectives, namely psychologists conducting risk assessments, indeterminate sentenced prisoners, psychologists supervising and managing risk assessments, and Parole Board members who use psychological risk assessment as part of their decision making. I hope that, during this stage of the project, I will gain a really good understanding of the perspectives and priorities of these groups of stakeholders, and how they conduct themselves during the process of risk assessment. I hope that this knowledge and understanding of the different perspectives will, in itself, contribute to improving forensic psychological risk assessment practice.
My second aim in this project is to use the knowledge and understanding gained in the first stage to identify areas of good risk assessment practice which can be built on, and areas where risk assessment could be improved. I hope that the end result of this project will be to have a model or template for the most effective approach to risk assessment process, which will help psychologists who are engaged in the challenging and complex task of risk assessment on a daily basis.

As part of achieving this second aim, I may ask to re-interview some participants at a later date, in order to ask their views and opinions about my results so far, and/or to explore with them any other issues arising from the original interviews. I will ask you to sign a separate consent form after this debrief if you are happy for me to contact you again (this is a consent to be contacted again, not a consent to participate in any other study – you do not need to make that decision now).

Can you give feedback about your experience of participating in this research?
I am interested in your experience of participating in this study, and part of the debriefing process is for us to discuss your experience, if you wish. Alternatively, if you would like to reflect on your experience, you can contact me at a later date using the contact details provided above.

What happens if you change your mind about taking part in this research?
If you wish to withdraw, you need to contact me, using the above contact details, using your name or your Research Number, which I gave to you at the start of the interview. You do not need to give your name if you do not wish to do so, just your research number, and state very clearly that you wish to withdraw from the research study. YOU DO NOT NEED TO PROVIDE ANY REASON. Any information I have gathered about you will be destroyed and not analysed as part of the study.

If you do withdraw from the study after the interview, you will be asked if you are happy for the information gathered from the interview to be kept and included in the study. If you prefer, the information collected can be destroyed and not included in the study. After two weeks after the interview date, the interview recording will have been transcribed and the information will start to be analysed, and it will not be possible to identify your information or to withdraw it from the study.

How can you find out about the results of this project?
As I have conducted this project with the permission and assistance of NOMS and HM Prison Service, I will be providing regular updates to them.

I would be glad to send you summaries of my results. If you would be interested in this, please contact me using the details provided above, and I will add your name to the list of people to whom I will send out updates and summaries.

If you have any concerns about this study, or the way in which it was conducted, who should you contact?
In the first instance, you should contact the supervisor of the project using the contact information provided on this form. If your concerns are not dealt with then you can contact the University Complaints Officer:

The University Complaints Officer: Samantha Hill
Academic Registry
University House
Winston Churchill Avenue
Portsmouth
Hampshire PO1 2UP

023 9284 3642,
complaintsadvice@port.ac.uk

Thank you
Thank you for taking time to read this debriefing sheet and for volunteering for this study. Please keep this debriefing sheet to refer to in the future. If you have any questions or concerns about this study at any time in the future, please do not hesitate to contact me using the contact details above.
Appendix B2

Prisoners’ Information Sheet, Consent Form and Debriefing Sheet
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET
(Prisoners)

Principal Investigator:
Jo Shingler

Supervisor:
Adrian Needs

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK ASSESSMENT WITH INDETERMINATE SENTENCED PRISONERS:

I would like to invite you to take part in my research, which is being carried out as part of my PhD studies. I would like to tell you a bit more about why the research is being done and what it will involve for you so you can decide if you would like to take part. Please ask if anything is unclear.

What is the purpose of the study?
The purpose of this study is to understand more about what it is like for prisoners serving indeterminate sentences to have risk assessments completed on them by psychologists.

The overall aims of the study are to learn from the experiences of different groups (psychologist assessors, prisoners, psychology managers and Parole Board members) to identify areas of good practice and build on them more widely, and to identity areas where risk assessment could be improved (from all three points of view).

Why have you been invited?
You have been invited because you are serving an indeterminate prison sentence in one of the prisons that has been identified for this project. I do not know your name – you were sent this letter by the ‘Research Liaison Officer’ in your establishment.

Do you have to take part?
No. Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. It is up to you to decide if you want to volunteer for the study. We will describe the study in this information sheet. If you agree to take part, we will then ask you to sign an informed consent form.

What will happen if you take part?
You will participate in an interview of no more than 90 minutes. I will ask you about your views and experiences of risk assessment. I have some ideas about the sorts of things I am interested in but I am most interested in your views, so the interview will not be formal and structured, more like a discussion about different aspects of risk assessment. I will record the interview using a digital voice recorder.
Are there any possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
I do not think that there are likely to be any risks to you in taking part. If you are paid for attending work in prison, you may lose some wages for the time taken to participate in the interview. You might find it difficult to talk about any previous risk assessments that you have found stressful. If you get upset, you can stop the interview and withdraw from the study if you wish. If you tell me any information that I am unable to keep confidential then that might present you with some difficulties. I have described the sorts of things that I am unable to keep confidential below. I also do not want you to tell me anything that may cause difficulties for you, so I will not ask about these things.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
Whilst there are no direct benefits, some people find it helpful to think about past experiences. The greatest benefit is to others, in helping to understand more about risk assessment. I hope that this will help both prisoners and psychologists in the future. Also, the research interviews are nothing to do with the prison regime, and nothing to do with your personal risk assessments, so there will be no benefits like that.

Will taking part in the study be confidential?
Everything you tell me in the research interview and in any other communication you have with me is for research purposes only. That means that nothing you tell me will be used in any risk assessment or other report that may be written about you in the future.

After the interview is over, I will have a recording of the interview. I will allocate you a research number which I will say into the recording. I will then transcribe the interview (this means write it out word for word). If your name is used at any time during the interview, or the name of the prison, I will replace it with a ‘pseudonym’ (false name) in the transcription. This means it will not be possible to identify you, or the prison you are being held at, from the transcription (written record). The only way in which you could be identified is by a record of names and research numbers that I will keep securely, separate from the transcriptions. This document is confidential and will only be seen by myself and my supervisors at the University.

When my course of study is over, I will destroy the interview recordings and the record of names and research numbers so your transcript cannot be linked back to you. I will keep the transcriptions for 5 years after my last study is published.

The interview recordings, which could identify you, will not be passed to anyone outside the study team without your written permission. The only exception to this will be if there are any serious problems with the research that need to be investigated. This sort of thing is very rare.

Quotes and other information from the transcripts may be presented to others at conferences or meetings, or published as a report, academic dissertation or
scientific paper or book. Transcripts may be used in future research studies approved by an appropriate Research Ethics Committee.

I need you to be aware that there may be some occasions when I am unable to keep your information confidential. These exceptions are:

- If you tell me anything that suggests you pose a current risk to yourself or to another person
- If you tell me about any identifiable offences that have never come to light before.
- If you tell me anything that threatens prison security

I may have to pass on this information like this to prison staff. **I do not want you to tell me things that might cause difficulties for you, and I will not ask you any questions about these things.** If possible, I will warn you if I think you are about to tell me something that I have to report in order to discourage you from doing so. Also, if there are questions you do not want to answer then you can refuse without giving any explanation.

It is possible that you may become upset when talking about past experiences of risk assessment. If this happens, and I do not think you are able to cope with your feelings, I will inform a member of prison staff about how you seem to be feeling, so they can offer you support. I will tell you if I am going to do this.

Finally, it is likely that the Research Liaison Officer in your prison will know that you have volunteered for the study, although they will not know what you have said to me in the interview. You must be sure that you are happy for them to know that you have volunteered before you do so.

**What will happen if you don’t want to carry on with the study?**
You can stop the interview at any time, you can refuse to answer any question, or you can withdraw from the study **up to two weeks after the date of the interview**, without giving a reason if you do not wish to.

More information about how to withdraw is provided in the Debrief Sheet, which you will receive at the end of the interview if you decide to take part.

**What if there is a problem?**
If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should speak to the Principal Investigator in the first instance if this is appropriate, or the Supervisor (both detailed on page 1).

If you have a complaint, you can contact:

The University Complaints Officer: Samantha Hill
Academic Registry
University House
Winston Churchill Avenue
Portsmouth
Hampshire PO1 2UP
Who is funding the research?
This research is being funded by The University of Portsmouth. None of the researchers or study staff will receive any financial reward for conducting this study, other than their normal salary / bursary as an employee / student of the University.

Who has reviewed the study?
This study has been scientifically and ethically reviewed, and given favourable ethical opinion by the Science Faculty Ethics Committee. The study has also been approved by the NOMS National Research Committee.

Thank you
Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for considering volunteering for this study. If you think you would like to volunteer, or you would like more information before you decide, please complete the ‘FIRST STAGE’ form, and return it to ……………… [Research Liaison Officer]. I will then arrange to come and see you to talk about the research. You can change your mind about volunteering at any time, and completing the ‘First Stage’ form does not mean that you are agreeing to participate in the research.

If you would like to volunteer for this study, there is a consent form on the following page for you to sign. You will then be given a copy of this information sheet and your signed consent form, for you to keep. Remember, you can still change your mind even if you sign the consent form.
CONSENT FORM
(Prisoners)

Principal Investigator: Jo Shingler:

Supervisor: Adrian Needs

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK ASSESSMENT WITH INDETERMINATE SENTENCED PRISONERS:

Please initial each box if content

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the attached information sheet for the above study. I confirm that I have had the chance to think about the information, ask questions and that I am happy with the answers.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before or during the interview without giving any reason. Once I have been interviewed, I will have two weeks to withdraw from the study if I wish.

3. I consent for the interviews to be recorded using a digital voice recorder. The recordings will not be used for anything other than transcribing and analysing.

4. I understand that the results of this study may be published and / or presented at meetings. I give my permission for my anonymous information, which does not identify me, to be shared in this way.

5. In the case of allegations of researcher misconduct, or if the research leads to serious injury requiring a formal investigation, information from my involvement in the study will be made available to the necessary regulating bodies.

6. I agree to the information I contribute being retained for any future research that has been approved by a Research Ethics Committee.

7. I agree to take part in this study

Name of Participant: ___________________________ Date: __________ Signature: ____________

Department of Psychology
King Henry Building, King Henry I st.
PORTSMOUTH, PO1 2DY
DEBRIEFING FORM

(Prisoners)

Principal Investigator: Jo Shingler

Supervisor/s: Adrian Needs

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK ASSESSMENT WITH INDETERMINATE SENTENCED PRISONERS:

Thank you for participating in this research study, your involvement is very much appreciated. This Debriefing Form will give you a bit more detail about the background to the research project.

What is the purpose of the study?
In this study I want to understand more about how prisoners serving indeterminate sentences think and feel about risk assessment. I want to know more about the different experiences prisoners have had of risk assessment. I want to know what good and bad experiences they have had, and what made those experiences good and bad. I recognise that risk assessment can cause a lot of stress and anxiety amongst prisoners. I also recognise that risk assessment is important, and that prisoners’ lives and futures depend on what risk assessments say about them. This means that it is really important to gain as much knowledge and understanding about prisoners’ points of view as possible. I hope that this knowledge and understanding could help to make the experience of risk assessment better for prisoners.

As well as talking to prisoners, I will also be talking to psychologists who conduct risk assessments, psychologists who supervise and manage risk assessments, and Parole Board members who use risk assessments to help them make decisions about release or progression. I hope that, by talking to these different groups, I will gain a really good understanding of what each group sees as good and not so good risk assessment, and what they think the most important parts of risk assessments are. I hope that by understanding each other’s points of view, this will in itself help to improve the process of psychological risk assessment.

I also hope to look at all these points of view together, to work out what makes a good risk assessment, and how this can best be achieved. I hope that this will help people who conduct risk assessments, and also help prisoners who are being assessed.

As part of trying to understand what makes a good risk assessment, I may ask some participants if they would be willing to have a second interview. This will be
so I can ask their views and opinions about my results so far, and/or to talk to them about any other things that come up in the original interviews. I will ask you to sign a separate consent form after this debrief if you are happy for me to contact you again (this is a consent to be contacted again, not a consent to participate in any other study – you do not need to make that decision now).

**Can you tell me what it was like to be interviewed for this research?**

I am interested in what it was like for you to be interviewed for this study. Part of the debrief is for us to talk about that, if you wish. If you would prefer to think about your experience, you can write to me via the Research Liaison Officer.

I am also interested in why you volunteered to be interviewed, so it would be good to talk about that too.

If you feel upset about what we talked about in the interview, either straight away or sometime later, then you can get support by talking to your Offender Supervisor.

**What happens if you change your mind about taking part in this research?**

You can withdraw from this study at any time, up to two weeks after the day you were interviewed. If you wish to withdraw, you need to contact Andy Blake, the Research Liaison Officer, using your Research Number, which I gave to you at the start of the interview. You WILL NOT need to give your name to the Research Liaison Officer, just your research number, and state very clearly that you wish to withdraw from the research study. YOU DO NOT NEED TO PROVIDE ANY REASON. Any information I have gathered about you will be destroyed and not analysed as part of the study.

If you do withdraw from the study after the interview, you will be asked if you are happy for the information gathered so far to be kept and included in the study. If you prefer, the information collected can be destroyed and not included in the study. After two weeks after the interview date, the interview recording will have been transcribed and the information will start to be analysed, and it will not be possible to identify your information and withdraw it from the study.

**How can I find out about the results of this project?**

As I have conducted this project with the permission and assistance of NOMS and HM Prison Service, I will be providing regular updates to them.

I would be glad to send you summaries of my results. This means that I will need to keep a record of your name and number so I can ask the Prison Service to locate you when my results are ready (in case you have moved prisons).

**If I have any concerns about this study, or the way in which it was conducted, who should I contact?**

To start with, you should contact the supervisor of the project at the address provided on this form. If your concerns are not dealt with then you can contact the University Complaints Officer by writing to:

The University Complaints Officer: Samantha Hill
Appendices

Academic Registry
University House
Winston Churchill Avenue
Portsmouth
Hampshire PO1 2UP

**Thank you**
Thank you for taking time to read this debriefing sheet and for volunteering for this study. Please keep this debriefing sheet to refer to in the future. If you have any questions or concerns about this study at any time in the future, please do not hesitate to contact me via the Research Liaison Officer.
Appendix B3

Parole Board Members’ Information Sheet, Consent Form and Debriefing Sheet
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET:
(Parole Board members)

Principal Investigator: Jo Shingler
Telephone: 023 92846310
Email: joanne.shingler@port.ac.uk

Supervisor/s: Adrian Needs
Telephone: 023 9284 6310
Email: adrian.needs@port.ac.uk

EXPLORING INTO PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK ASSESSMENT WITH INDETERMINATE SENTENCED PRISONERS:

I would like to invite you to take part in my research, which is being conducted as part of my PhD studies. I would like to tell you a bit more about why the research is being done and what it will involve for you so you can decide if you would like to participate. Please ask if anything is unclear.

What is the purpose of the study?
The purpose of this study is to understand more about the process of risk assessment from the perspectives of psychology managers and Parole Board members.

The overall aims of the study are to learn from the experiences of different groups (psychologist assessors, prisoners, psychology managers and Parole Board members) to identify areas of good practice and build on them more widely, and to identify areas where risk assessment could be improved (from all three perspectives).

Why have you been invited?
You have been invited because you are a current member of the Parole Board of England and Wales. I am interested in the views of all Parole Board members, regardless of their role, professional background or level of experience.

Do you have to take part?
No. Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. It is up to you to decide if you want to volunteer for the study. We will describe the study in this information sheet. If you agree to take part, we will then ask you to sign an informed consent form.

What will happen if you take part?
You will participate in an interview for no longer than 90 minutes. I will ask you about your views and experiences of risk assessment. Whilst I have some ideas about the sorts of things I am interested in asking, I am most interested in your views, so the interview will be more like a discussion about different aspects of risk assessment. I will record the interview using a digital voice recorder.
Are there any possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?
I do not think there are any risks or disadvantages to you from taking part in this study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?
Whilst there are no direct benefits, you might find it interesting or helpful to reflect on past experiences. The greatest benefit is to others, in helping to develop a greater understanding of the risk assessment process. I hope that this will help prisoners and psychologists in the future to build on good practice, and identify areas for improvement.

Will taking part in the study be confidential?
Yes. Everything you tell me in the research interview is for research purposes only. I will not disclose your responses in the interview to anyone. The only time I will have to tell someone else about what you have said is if you tell me about anything you, or someone else has done that breaches the staff code.

After the interview is over, I will have a digital voice recording of the interview which I will keep securely. I will allocate you a research number which I will say into the recording. This will identify which group you belong to (psychologists, prisoners, managers, parole board members). I will then transcribe, and anonymise, the interview. If your name, or the name of a third party, appears in the recording, I will replace it with a pseudonym. The only way in which you could be identified is by a record of names and research numbers that I will keep, separate from the transcriptions. When my course of study is over, I will destroy this record (of names and numbers) and the recording of the interview, so your transcript cannot be linked back to you. I will keep the transcriptions for 5 years after my last study is published.

The recordings, which could identify you, will not be passed to anyone outside the study team without your express written permission. The exception to this will be any regulatory authority who may have the legal right to access the information for the purposes of conducting an investigation in exceptional cases.

Extracts from the transcripts may be presented to others at scientific meetings, or published as a project report, academic dissertation or scientific paper or book. It could also be made available to any sponsor of the research. Transcripts, which do not identify you, may be used in future research studies approved by an Appropriate Research Ethics Committee.

What will happen if you don’t want to carry on with the study?
You can stop the interview at any time, you can refuse to answer any question, or you can withdraw from the study up to two weeks after the date of the interview, without giving a reason if you do not wish to.

More information about how to withdraw is provided in the Debrief Sheet, which you will receive at the end of the interview if you decide to take part.

What if there is a problem?
If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should speak to the Principal Investigator in the first instance if this is appropriate, or the Supervisor (both detailed on page 1).

If you have a complaint, you can contact:

The University Complaints Officer: Samantha Hill  
Academic Registry  
University House  
Winston Churchill Avenue  
Portsmouth  
Hampshire PO1 2UP

023 9284 3642,  
complaintsadvice@port.ac.uk

Who is funding the research?
This research is being funded by The University of Portsmouth. None of the researchers or study staff will receive any financial reward for conducting this study, other than their normal salary / bursary as an employee / student of the University.

Who has reviewed the study?
This study has been scientifically and ethically reviewed, and given favourable ethical opinion by the Science Faculty Ethics Committee. The study has also been approved by the NOMS National Research Committee.

Thank you
Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for considering volunteering for this study. If you would like more information, or would like to ask questions, please contact me (Jo Shingler) using the contact details on the first page. If you would like to volunteer for this study, there is a consent form attached as a separate document for you to sign. You will then be given a copy of this information sheet and your signed consent form, for you to keep.
CONSENT FORM
(Parole Board members)

Jo Shingler:
Telephone: 023 9284 6310
Email: joanne.shingler@port.ac.uk

Supervisor: Adrian Needs
Telephone: 023 9284 6310
Email: adrian.needs@port.ac.uk

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK ASSESSMENT WITH INDETERMINATE SENTENCED PRISONERS:

Please initial each box if content

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the attached information sheet for the above study. I confirm that I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and that these have been answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time prior to or during the interview without giving any reason. Once I have been interviewed, I will have two weeks to withdraw from the study if I wish.

3. I consent for the interviews to be recorded using a digital voice recorder. The recordings will not be used for anything other than transcribing and analysing.

4. I understand that the results of this study may be published and / or presented at meetings. I give my permission for my anonymous information, which does not identify me, to be disseminated in this way.

5. Information collected during this study could be requested by regulatory authorities. I give my permission to any such regulatory authority with legal authority to review the study to have access to my information, which may identify me.

6. I agree to the information I contribute being retained for any future research that has been approved by a Research Ethics Committee.

7. I agree to take part in this study

Name of Participant: ___________________________ Date: _____________ Signature: ________________

Name of Person taking Consent: ___________________________ Date: _____________ Signature: ________________

Note: When completed, one copy to be given to the participant, one copy to be retained in the study file.
DEBRIEFING INFORMATION
(Parole Board members)

Principal Investigator: Jo Shingler
Telephone: 023 9284 6310
Email: joanne.shingler@port.ac.uk

Supervisor/s: Adrian Needs
Telephone: 023 9284 6310
Email: adrian.needs@port.ac.uk

EXPLORING PSYCHOLOGICAL RISK ASSESSMENT WITH INDETERMINATE SENTENCED PRISONERS:

Thank you for participating in this research study, your involvement is very much appreciated. This Debriefing Form will give you a bit more detail about the background to the research project.

What is the purpose of the study?
The purpose of this study is to understand more about the process of risk assessment from the perspectives of key stakeholders. Whilst the research literature has a lot to say about the science of risk assessment (e.g., Hanson & Morton-Bourgion, 2009; Mann, Hanson & Thornton, 2010), it has very little to say about the process of conducting risk assessments – we do not know how the various parties approach risk assessment, how their prior experiences affect their behaviour, how their attitudes affect their approach to risk assessment, how the context and high stakes nature of risk assessment affects the process, or what other influences they might be subject to. Additionally, beyond clinical opinion, which is contradictory in places (e.g., Shingler & Mann, 2006; Westwood, Wood & Kemshall, 2011 and Greenberg & Shuman, 1997; Campbell, 2004), very little is known about the most effective interpersonal approach to conducting risk assessment.

Consequently, my first aim in this project is to explore the process of risk assessment from different perspectives, namely psychologists conducting and supervising risk assessments, indeterminate sentenced prisoners, and Parole Board members who use psychological risk assessment as part of their decision making. I hope that, during this stage of the project, I will gain a really good understanding of the perspectives and priorities of these groups of stakeholders, and how they conduct themselves during the process of risk assessment. I hope that this knowledge and understanding of the different perspectives will, in itself, contribute to improving forensic psychological risk assessment practice.

My second aim in this project is to use the knowledge and understanding gained in the first stage to identify areas of good risk assessment practice which can be built on, and areas where risk assessment could be improved. I hope that the end
result of this project will be to have a model that helps us to understand to risk assessment process, and which can be used to improve the process for all three groups of stakeholders.

As part of achieving this second aim, I may ask to re-interview some participants at a later date, in order to ask their views and opinions about my results so far, and/or to explore with them any other issues arising from the original interviews. If you are happy for me to contact you again, please let me know by email (NB: here, I am asking permission to contact you again, and I am not asking for your consent to any further participation – you do not need to make that decision now).

Can you give feedback about your experience of participating in this research?
I am interested in your experience of participating in this study, and part of the debriefing process is for us to discuss your experience, if you wish. Alternatively, if you would like to reflect on your experience, you can contact me at a later date using the contact details provided above.

What happens if you change your mind about taking part in this research?
If you wish to withdraw, you need to contact me, using the above contact details, using your name or your Research Number, which I gave to you at the start of the interview. You do not need to give your name if you do not wish to do so, just your research number, and state very clearly that you wish to withdraw from the research study. YOU DO NOT NEED TO PROVIDE ANY REASON. Any information I have gathered about you will be destroyed and not analysed as part of the study. You have two weeks from the date of interview to withdraw. After two weeks, the interview recording will have been transcribed and the information will start to be analysed, and it will not be possible to identify your information or to withdraw it from the study.

If you do withdraw from the study after the interview, you will be asked if you are happy for the information gathered from the interview to be kept and included in the study. If you prefer, the information collected can be destroyed and not included in the study.

How can you find out about the results of this project?
As I have conducted this project with the permission and assistance of the Parole Board, I will be providing regular updates to them.

I would be glad to send you summaries of my results. If you would be interested in this, please contact me using the details provided above, and I will add your name to the list of people to whom I will send out updates and summaries.

If you have any concerns about this study, or the way in which it was conducted, who should you contact?
In the first instance, you should contact the supervisor of the project using the contact information provided on this form. If your concerns are not dealt with then you can contact the University Complaints Officer:

The University Complaints Officer: Samantha Hill
Academic Registry
University House
Winston Churchill Avenue
Portsmouth
Hampshire PO1 2UP
023 9284 3642,
complaintsadvice@port.ac.uk

Thank you
Thank you for taking time to read this debriefing sheet and for volunteering for this study. Please keep this debriefing sheet to refer to in the future. If you have any questions or concerns about this study at any time in the future, please do not hesitate to contact me using the contact details above.
Appendix C: Interview Guides
Interview Guide: How do qualified prison psychologists experience and manage the process of psychological risk assessment with indeterminate sentenced prisoners?

Clarify role with regard to risk assessment.

Introduction:
Key Question: What I am most interested in is what it is like for you to conduct risk assessments with indeterminate sentenced prisoners – how you think and feel about it. Can you tell me a bit about your experiences?

Domain 1: The interview
Key questions: I am interested in the actual risk assessment interview, and how you approach each interview and deal or cope with them. So really what I would like to learn more about is your own experience of the interview itself. Can you tell me a bit about this? What are risk assessment interviews like? How would you describe your experience of the actual interview or interview process?
Prompts:
- Ask for examples of interviews that have gone well and not so well, and explore the features and differences.
- How do you think prisoners approach interviews?
- If you look at the interview from the prisoner’s perspective, what are the priorities?
- What are your priorities?
- Do you think there are any particular influences on you as a psychologist (what sorts of things are in the back of your mind)? And if so, how might these play out?

Domain 2: Relationship with the client in psychological risk assessment
Key Questions: I am interested in your views about what constitutes the most effective way to deal with the interpersonal side of risk assessment. Can you tell me a bit about that? How would you define a good working relationship in risk assessment? Why do you think those aspects are particularly important?
Prompts:
- Ask for examples of when a relationship in risk assessment worked well and when it didn’t – explore the differences in the nature of the relationship and what contributed to the creation of the different relationships.
- How do you go about working effectively with prisoners during a risk assessment interview?
- What are the threats/barriers to a good working relationship in risk assessment?
- What are the differences/similarities between assessment and treatment interpersonal style?
- What is your view about the need to ‘get to know someone’ before you can assess their risk?
- What do you think about objectivity in risk assessment?
Domain 3: Context of risk assessment.

Key Questions: *I am interested your views about how the prison context, and how the context of serving a life sentence relates to the risk assessment interview. Can you tell me a bit about this?*  
*I am also interested in the issue of the potential outcomes of risk assessments, and how you deal with the 'high stakes' nature of risk assessment. Can you tell me a bit about this?*

Prompts:

- How do you approach assessing a lifer and how do you approach assessing a determinate sentenced prisoner? Are there any differences in how you approach these tasks and if so, how do you manage them?
- Ask for examples of when participants believe they may have made the wrong recommendation - ask them to reflect on why they made the recommendation, why they now think it was wrong, how that has affected them and their practice.
- What would be the consequences for you if you made a positive recommendation and the client, some months or even years down the line, committed a further serious offence? Has that happened to you? How would you feel? How would you deal with it in your ongoing practice? How much is that in your mind in a risk assessment interview?
- Ask for examples of when the prisoner was angry, upset, etc about the recommendation. Ask for details of how and why that came about, and how it was dealt with.
- How does your role as a psychologist affect the process of risk assessment? Are there any particular demands on you as a psychologist that are not there for other professions? If there are any, how do you manage them?
- Tell me a bit about who you feel responsible to in risk assessment and why. How do you deal with meeting prisoners’ needs and maintaining public safety?
- You know when you begin an assessment that it might result in an oral hearing. Does this have an impact? If so, can you say a bit about that? How much are Parole Board hearings in your mind when you conduct a risk assessment?
- Some research has suggested that psychologists may be less likely than Offender Managers to make positive recommendations for lifers. What's your view about that?

Domain 4: Good practice in risk assessment process

Key Questions: *So to conclude, overall, I am interested in what you think ‘good’ and ‘bad’ risk assessment is, from an interpersonal/process perspective. What are your views about that?*

Prompts:

- How would you define good practice in conducting risk assessment interviews?
- How would you define poor practice in conducting risk assessment interviews?
• How would the risk assessment process look in an ‘ideal world’?

**Demographic Questions:**

*I will include these in a brief questionnaire at the end of the interview in order to reduce impact on the interview process.*

Age.
Gender
Ethnicity
How long have you been working in the field of forensic psychology?
How long have you worked in prisons?
How long have you been a Chartered Psychologist?
How long have you been conducting risk assessments in prison? In other settings?
Do you supervise other psychologists/other staff in conducting risk assessment?
When did you last conduct a risk assessment?
**Interview Guide:** How do prisoners experience the process of having psychological risk assessments completed on them?

**Introduction:**
Key Question: *What I am most interested in is what it has been like for you to have risk assessments completed on you by psychologists. Can you tell me a bit about your experiences?*

**Domain 1: The interview**
Key questions: *I am interested in the actual risk assessment interviews. So what I really would like to learn more about is your own experience of the interview itself. Can you tell me a bit about this? How would you describe your experience of the actual interview process?*

- Ask for examples of interviews that have gone well and not so well, and explore the features and differences.
- What things affect how you behave in a risk assessment interview?

**Domain 2: Relationship with the psychologist in psychological risk assessment**
Key Questions: *I am interested in what you think is the best way for psychologists to relate to prisoners in risk assessment. What have your experiences been like with psychologists doing risk assessments with you? How do you want psychologists to treat you during a risk assessment interview? Why do you think those things are particularly important?*

- Risk assessment interview that went well/went badly?
- Psychologists who have done a good job/not such a good job?
- What do psychologists do that helps you relax, feel safe, and feel like the assessment is fair?
- What do psychologists do that makes you feel anxious, judged and misrepresented?
- How could psychologists make risk assessment worse/more stressful? Better/less stressful?

**Domain 3: Context of risk assessment.**
Key Questions: *What about the importance of the risk assessment to you as a lifer – that it could affect whether or not you get out of prison? How does that affect you? What do you think about that?*

- Has there been a time when you felt a risk assessment had been conducted well, but you were not pleased about the outcome? Can you describe that situation?
Has there been a time when you felt unhappy with how a risk assessment was conducted but then were happy with the recommendation? Can you describe that situation?

Can you tell me a bit about your experiences of psychologists making recommendations about you and your future?

What are the most important things for you in a risk assessment?

How do psychologists manage the worry about lifers reoffending, in your experience?

Domain 5: Good and bad practice in risk assessment process

Key Questions: So lastly, I am interested in what you think ‘good risk assessment’ is and what you think ‘bad’ risk assessment is. Can you tell me a bit about this?

- What could be done to make risk assessment better for lifers?
- In an ideal world, how would risk assessments be conducted?

Background Questions:
I will include these in a brief questionnaire at the end of the interview in order to reduce impact on the interview process.

Age.
How many years have you served of this life sentence?
IPP or life sentence?
Are you pre or post tariff?
Approximately how many times in prison before this sentence?
Name of current conviction?
When did you last have a psychological assessment?
Where are you in the parole process?
Ethnicity?
Interview Guide: What are the views and experienced of Parole Board members in relation to psychological risk assessment with indeterminate sentenced prisoners?

Introduction:
Can you tell me a bit about your experience on the Parole Board?
How long have you been a PB member?
What sort of member are you?
What is your professional background?
What is your experience of risk assessment both within and outside the Parole Board?
Do you have experience of conducting forensic risk assessments to determine risk of future offending?

I am interested in what you think about risk assessments conducted by psychologists. Can you tell me a bit about your experiences?

Domain 1: Weight given to psychological risk assessment
What do you want from psychological risk assessments?
How do you use psychological risk assessment?
What are the benefits of psychological risk assessments to you as a Parole Board member?
What do you get from psychological risk assessments that you don't get from those done by other professionals?
What is your view about structured risk assessments?

Can you describe a really useful and a not so useful psychological assessment?
How much weight do you give to psychological risk assessments? Why?

Domain 2: Interface between psychologists and the Parole Board
I need to understand more about the relationships, and how PB members see psychologists.

How do you see the interface between the Parole Board and psychologists? What are your views on this? How well does this [interface] work?
How do you see the relationship between psychologists and the Parole Board like?
How does the process of directions work?
Sometimes there seems to be a mismatch between what the Parole Board wants to inform their decision making, and what the psychologists provide: Have you had any personal experience of this? If so, can you describe how such a mismatch may arise? Why does it arise? What have you done about it and what were the consequences?

I am also interested in the issue of the potential outcomes of risk assessments, and how you deal with the 'high stakes' nature of risk assessment. Can you tell me a bit about this?
Domain 3: Good and bad practice in risk assessment process
Overall, I am interested in what you think a ‘good psychological risk assessment’ is and what you think a ‘bad’ psychological risk assessment is. Can you tell me a bit about that?

How can psychological risk assessments be the most helpful to you?
Examples of good and poor risk assessments?

Background Questions:
I will include these in a brief questionnaire at the end of the interview in order to reduce impact on the interview process.
Age.
Gender
## Appendix D: Transcription Convention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Markers in transcript</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“because I do a lot of work for the IPPs coming up to ^parole, so I do a lot of parole board work”</td>
<td>^ Upward arrows indicate noticeable rise of intonation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I think in lots of ones I’ve been doing I’ve been seeing both sides (right), I mean I, I did an arson assessment on someone (hm mm) erm”</td>
<td>(italics in brackets) represent the interviewer’s interjections and contributions to the flow of conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I try to be (. ) as (. ) in a lot of ways, as unpsychological as possible (p laughs)”</td>
<td>(non-italics in brackets) represents participant’s non-verbal signals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“but you that don’t get the - and obviously you know”</td>
<td>Hyphens mark an interruption in the general flow of the narrative / train of thought.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“so it does feel that finely balanced, that when somebody comes out with just a little bit more”</td>
<td>Underlining represents strong emphasis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>The first symbol represents a pause that can just be heard, whilst the following two symbols stand for slightly longer pauses (up to 1 sec and over 2 sec respectively).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(..) (…)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[?]</td>
<td>Indicates that text was inaudible.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix E: Illustration of Open Coding

Excerpt from transcript of psychologist participant 1 with initial open codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript: Participant 1</th>
<th>Initial code allocated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) I’ll ask them what their experience with psychologists <em>(OK)</em> in the past, so <em>(.)</em> not just in prison, you know, what do you, you know, has it been good, has it been bad <em>(yeah)</em>, has it been, what sort of context has that been in <em>(yeah)</em>, erm, those sorts of questions,</td>
<td>(a) previous experience of psychological assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) and then, I’ll <em>(.)</em> talk them through the consent form, I’ll often <em>(.)</em> I’ll either give them the consent form or ask them, to erm to go away with it and then come back <em>(yeah)</em>, to sort of think about, you know, what they want to do about that <em>(yeah)</em>, they often – what I find is that they either they’ve been through the process before <em>(yeah)</em> <em>(..)</em> or it’s something that they, er, have requested through their legal representatives <em>(OK)</em></td>
<td>(b) discussing consent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) but also that they <em>(.)</em> erm, that there isn’t an element of choice <em>(yeah)</em> that there’s this kind of erm <em>(.)</em> well you’re going to do it anyway <em>(yeah)</em>, I might as, I need to do the, you know, <em>(yes)</em>, and so I, the,</td>
<td>(c) prisoners have no choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) that part I think is quite a crucial kind of discussion <em>(right)</em> so rather than just signing it, erm, sort of talking through, yes, you know, we do have to do these reports <em>(yeah)</em>, erm, you</td>
<td>(b) discussing consent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
know, for these reasons (yeah),

(d) but the reasons it would be really useful to get your perspective, (yeah), erm, and I suppose really trying to do that collaborative bit as soon as possible, which, I (. ) f-find they (. )

(e) I find - it’s mainly, yeah, the men and women that I’ve worked with, that’s quite difficult, because I think, it is a very us and them (yeah) culture in the prison service (yeah) and

(f) I think maybe their experiences, have been that (yeah), so, erm (. ) yeah, quite suspicious and maybe quite mistrustful understandably.
## Appendix F: Illustration of Selective Coding

_Open codes and quotations grouped under selective code “collaboration”_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quotation</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Open code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>so somehow helping them to feel empowered that they have a part, and important part in that process,</td>
<td>P5, psychologist</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I suppose, if psychologists were going to use files to make an assessment that they actually give the individual a chance to have input</td>
<td>P13, prisoner</td>
<td>Prisoners must have a voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but not actually putting any pressure on them, not saying, well, so therefore you need to do it because ultimately it is their decision whether they want to sit in an interview with you or not</td>
<td>P6, psychologist</td>
<td>Maximising choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think a lot of them just don’t feel heard in the system, don’t feel understood, erm, or, you know, throughout their life, not just in prison. So I think, yeah if you can just be a bit, you know, just listen to ‘em and, and understand where they’re from, where they’re at, I think that’s important</td>
<td>P2, psychologist</td>
<td>Prisoners must feel heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>but to try and let them have - empower them, because I think that’s the collaborative if you try and, I think if if you can lessen that power, you know, erm, of, of, or perception of that power by trying to empower, erm, them but you get much more out of them.</td>
<td>P8, psychologist</td>
<td>Give prisoners ownership and control</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix G: Illustration of Higher Level Selective Coding and Memo Writing

*Higher Level Selective Code “Collaborative Engagement”: Details and definitions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open code(s)</th>
<th>Related Memo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative working (19 quotes)</td>
<td>Involving prisoners, asking them things, seeing their point of view, telling them things, keeping them involved in the whole process. Collaboration breaks down stereotypes and reduces complaints.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consent is meaningfully understood, not a paper exercise (12 quotes)</td>
<td>I have separated this from comments about clarity of process, although it is linked to that (you can’t have understanding and proper choice without clarity about what you are choosing and why). These quotes are about the prisoner making a proper choice with all the available information (so this is how this links to clarity – have the information so you can make a choice). So taking time to involve the prisoner in a discussion about the assessment, giving him the information he needs, taking the time to give him a choice, having a separate session for discussion of consent so the prisoner doesn’t feel rushed or coerced into signing a consent form. So properly involving the prisoner in the consent process and being open to their views.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Trust (7 quotes)</td>
<td>The importance of trust, how it builds slowly. There is a sense of trust being mutual and something that is built together, so I have included it under ‘collaborative engagement’ as it is not something that one person does but a product of the interaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring</td>
<td>This is a way of involving prisoners and engaging them collaboratively in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding (8 quotes)</td>
<td>risk assessment – checking their understanding, ensuring your message is explained and understood. A risk assessment that was ‘done to someone’ would not take any account of whether they understood it or not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving prisoners a voice (18 quotes)</td>
<td>Involving prisoners in the report; getting their opinions and comments; discussing reports and recommendations with prisoners and enabling them to voice their opinion in the reports. Giving prisoners the ‘right to reply’ wrt their reports. More generally, giving prisoners the opportunity to express themselves and say what they want to say.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving prisoners ownership and control (3 quotes)</td>
<td>Empowering prisoners, giving them some sense of control over the process. Involving them and including them, not emphasising your own power and status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving prisoners space to express themselves (2 quotes)</td>
<td>Allowing prisoners to express their feelings about an assessment or about things generally is an element of being collaborative; not making pejorative assumptions, but just normalising their feelings and enabling them to express them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maximising choice (4 quotes)</td>
<td>Giving prisoners as much choice as possible, whilst recognising the constraints. Emphasising their free choice to engage in the assessment, or to discuss particular issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No collaboration (13)/no collaboration causes disengagement (2)/no</td>
<td>Comments about lacking collaboration, both with colleagues and prisoners; from not interviewing the prisoner at all, to prisoners not feeling like they were involved in the process.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Appendices</strong></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>collaboration</th>
<th>Prisoners do not feel involved in risk management (1 quote)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>undermines trust (1)/no collaboration: frustrating (1)</td>
<td>Prisoners don’t feel connected to important professionals like OMs and OSs and consequently don’t feel involved in plans for their future (risk assessment being done to someone?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Prisoners feel misunderstood (4 quotes) | Prisoners can feel that psychologists are so different from them that they can’t understand them, so part of collaboration is to overcome these barriers by the psychologist making proper efforts to understand the prisoner and involve them in the process. |

| Prisoners must feel heard (8 quotes) | Prisoners must feel properly listened to by psychologists. Not feeling listened to results in negative experiences, and as if risk assessment is being ‘done to them’. |

| Prisoners must have a voice (3 quotes) | Slightly different from above but overlapping; less focused on reports, more focused on giving prisoners the chance to express themselves and their views, and for them to be involved in the process. |

<p>| Risk assessment ‘being done to someone’ (including Balancing needs of) | Recognising that there is a task to be done, but just doing it to someone without their involvement is problematic and likely to lead to resentment. They are in the room but we are talking about them; presenting your decision and not involving them in the process. |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<th>the prisoner with</th>
<th>the prisoner with needs of the task) (9 quotes)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seeing prisoners’ perspective (13 quotes)</td>
<td>Really making an effort to understand where a prisoner has come from; what his past experiences have been and how they might affect his behaviour. So seeing their point of view as a way of facilitating understanding of their behaviour. Many of the quotes talked about asking and exploring, ie involving prisoners in developing that understanding. Seeing their point of view is a means by which you involve them in the process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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