

24. Department of Psychology Psychology Assistant at a prison

For my placement year I worked in an all male prison, which is security rated: category B, meaning that escape must be made difficult however maximum security measures need not be used. On average there are 1,200 prisoners with an age range of 18-60. The prison consists of 5 wings (A-E) a healthcare unit, a segregation unit and a drugs detox wing.

I worked within the psychology department where they run accredited offending behaviour management programmes such as ETS (enhanced thinking skills) which is designed to help prisoners understand and better manage their thoughts and feelings that often lead to offending behaviour and CALM (Coping with Anger & Learning to Manage It). The psychology department are also responsible for the more difficult prisoners and have to closely monitor their behaviour, this includes one to one sessions with them under a scheme called the CMP.

My role within the department as a volunteer was to assist in conducting research projects and surveys (e.g. distribution and collection of questionnaires, entering the data onto SPSS, analysing the results and assisting with the write-up). My role also included supporting the ETS treatment manager and resettlement manager with administrative duties such as responding to prisoners queries and maintaining the departments databases and spreadsheets. Daily tasks included collecting the post for the department and putting it into staff trays, at the end of the day I would collect the mail from the department and return it to the mail room for posting. On a daily basis I would also check to see if any prisoners had put in an application to be considered for the ETS course where I would be responsible to doing the first stage of their risk and needs assessment. This included gathering information about them such as family background, offence details, drugs or alcohol mis-use and Education level. I would have to go to other departments within the prison such as probation and custody to gain this information. Also if any prisoners put in a request to talk to someone from the department regarding the ETS course of any of the other services available to them in most cases I would have to go and answer any queries they have.

As my placement developed and I gained more confidence being around the prisoners and was more comfortable talking to them. Over time I was given more responsibility and more jobs to do. I did more work for the ETS programme such as sitting in on interviews with the prisoners, which was the 3rd stage of their risk and need assessment and towards the end of my placement, I began conducting my own interviews. I also began transcribing interviews that my supervisor conducted, which I had to do alone, as the interviews were strictly confidential. I was also able to attend the review sessions with prisoners who completed the ETS programme, here they were able to discuss the different ways the course had helped them, what they had learnt and how they will conduct their lives differently when they are released. I also did work for the CMP such as anonymising prisoner files as these were strictly confidential, prisoners on the protocol became known as numbers and not by their names. I also inputted the daily diaries of each prisoner on the protocol, this was to monitor their progress, when they had gone a sufficient amount of time with excellent behaviour they were released from the protocol. I became responsible for looking at the prisoners behaviour over time which I highlighted to the staff who manage the protocol, showing changes or non-changes in behaviour. I worked on two major research projects the prisoners' survey and the visitors' survey which aimed to gather the opinions of the two sample groups in regards to the prison and the services that are provided. I was involved in all stage of both pieces of research, starting with the distribution of the survey, collection, data analysis and the write up.

I started my placement wanting to follow a career in Clinical Psychology even though my placement was in a forensic setting. Working in the forensic field however has made me more open-minded to pursuing a career within forensic psychology. Also I experienced many one-to-one sessions with the prisoners where I got the chance to talk to them about their families, their drug habits and how they feel about themselves, which was a great experience for me and one which I found very rewarding, I am now interested in pursuing a career in Counselling Psychology. Even though I didn't directly do any counselling work I got a very good idea of it working with the prisoners in addressing their offending behaviour.

I was fortunate to have been offered lots of training during my placement and learn and develop lots of new skills. I was given full ETS training, this was not training to actually facilitate the programme but to run the admin side of the programme. I was also given dyslexia training and taught how to deal with prisoners who have dyslexia as on average 64% of the prison population have dyslexia. This has now been acknowledged as important training and all staff who work directly with the prisoners must do the training. I undertook breakaway training where I was shown various methods of dealing with prisoners during a conflict situation e.g being attacked by a prisoner. After the unfortunate incident of a prisoner killing himself whilst I was working there all staff and volunteers working at the prison were required to participate in violence reduction and suicide prevention training. This focused on prisoners who were self harming and were a suicide risk. The outcome of the training was to help guide the staff and prison officers on what to do if they found a prisoner in any of the two situations. I was also given the first stage of training into the SOTP (Sex Offenders Treatment Programme). As this prison doesn't offer this programme to the prisoners who require it, I was only given training on what the programme is about, what it involves and I also got to hear from prisoners who had been on this programme and their experiences of it. This was in case any prisoner asked me about the programme, so I would have information to offer them on it. I was also trained in doing a fabric check in rooms where the prisoners have been undertaking the ETS course. This involved checking the furniture and walls for any tampering or substance storage. I also became fully competent in Microsoft Excel and PowerPoint, which I used on a regular basis and I received full training for.

I not only developed skills through the training I received, I also developed personal skills during my time working in the prison. My confidence grew immensely during my placement, working with prisoners can be very intimidating and the unpredictable nature of what could happen whilst you are on the wing and around them can be very scary sometimes especially if fights and arguments are going on around you. I overcame this fear and learnt to become composed during tense situations and I learnt to communicate with prisoners if ever I felt their behaviour was intimidating or inappropriate towards me or one of my team members, this in turn provided a great boost to my confidence. I have also become a lot more comfortable with public speaking which was a hard factor for me to overcome but in my placement I had to give feedback a lot of new developments among the prisoners to my team and I also had to speak during every staff meeting and inform everyone of the work I had been doing and what work I had coming up. I feel I have developed a lot more focus during my placement, this is in regards to my work and the career I wish to pursue. It's very inspiring working with a big group of focused people like the ones in my team. A lot of the people in my team were young like myself, university graduates who had gone on to do a masters and many of which were looking to do a chartered career within forensic psychology. They are all very sure of what they want to do with their careers and this was very inspiring for me to be around for a long period of time. It made me more focused on what I was doing and made me seriously think about the future I want for myself.

I gained a lot of valuable experience from my placement year, especially as I was put in the same job role as the psychology assistants' and given the same training. All of the staff in this position were MSc graduates and I was lucky to work alongside these members of the team because they had a lot of experience and advice which they passed on to me. However, there are a few things I wish I had done to make my experience in the prison even more valuable than it already was. This included sitting in on the ETS programme sessions, I did a lot of the administration work for the programme, shadowed and later conducted my own interviews to assess suitability for the programme and I even got to attend the after course reviews and certificate ceremony. Becoming a tutor in this programme is something every forensic psychologist has to do in order to progress within the field and me being able to sit in on a few of the sessions would have allowed me to see intervention work first hand. I tried on many occasions to sit in on group sessions but the course facilitator was very apprehensive because group sessions are very intimate and prisoners like to reveal some of their most inner feelings about their families and their offence and they will only do this in front of people they trust. The facilitator was worried that an "outsider" such as myself sitting in on sessions might affect how much they open up.

I am considering pursuing a career within the counselling psychology field or the clinical psychology field. Working in a forensic setting has given me lots of experience and skills that I know I will be able to use if I was to pursue a career in one of those fields. For example in clinical and counselling psychology, one of the key factors is to promote psychological well-being and this is done through dealing with personal problems such as relationship problems, learning disabilities, anxiety and mental illness. This is the same method used in the forensic field; psychological problems need to be understood and outlined when assessing criminal behaviour and treating the offenders. Also when assessing a client in a clinical setting, methods such as psychometric tests, interviews and direct observation are commonly used, these are the same methods used in a forensic setting, ones which I was lucky enough to conduct whilst I was on placement. One weakness about experiencing all of this in a prison is that everyone there is an offender and that is the ultimate problem they are trying to face, reducing their offending behaviour. Within the counselling and clinical fields the people I would be faced with would in most cases not be offenders and that would be something which is new to me. I plan to build on my strengths further by seeking more experience, working in a hospital or a school and just broadening my knowledge on assessments and interventions in different settings.

If I had studied forensic psychology during the first 2 years of my degree then that would have been very useful for my placement, however I didn't find it too difficult coming into the job with little background knowledge on the field. I had a very supportive team and I picked up a lot of the things I was taught very quickly. Studying statistics and being taught how to use SPSS was very useful to me because after we conducted our research on the prisoners' survey, we used SPSS to analyse the results, this was mainly done by me.

One challenging interpersonal experience that occurred whilst I was on placement was when the prison officers went on strike over pay. 90% of the officers went on strike; my team members and I were some of the only people to go into work that day. It was up to us to inform the prisoners of what was going on, in regards to the strike and to make food packages and supply cigarettes and tobacco to keep them going through out the day. This was very challenging because a lot of the prisoners were very angry at the situation and being locked in their cells all day, when I spoke to them about what was going on, I was faced with a lot of anger and aggression, which I had never experienced in my whole time working there. The strike only lasted 24 hours and by the next day everything returned back to normal again. The

governor of the prison rewarded me for my efforts on that day. It was one of the hardest days of my placement but I was patient, calm and polite yet assertive when dealing with the prisoners and this gave me more confidence to be around them without feeling intimidated, which I struggled with at the beginning of my placement.

Overall I found my placement very rewarding and an invaluable experience I was given first hand insight into the field of forensic psychology and working in a prison. I was lucky to be within a team where my supervisor and the head of psychology wanted to push me to do some things I wasn't initially brave enough to do, such as working one to one with the prisoners. I have new skills and knowledge of forensic psychology that I didn't have before which I can apply to my final year studies.