

**Society for the Study of Addiction
PhD Studentship**

Final Report 2018

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The cycle of relapse and recovery of substance misusing offenders on a community based rehabilitation programme: The impact of childhoods, family, relationships, significant life events and psychological wellbeing

The research sought to explore the cycle of relapse and recovery of Class A drug using ex/current community based offenders who were part of the UK Government, Home Office's Drug Interventions Programme (DIP). A focus group study helped to inform the main study which used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative thematic approach. Seventeen adult men and women who were ex/current DIP clients in England were asked about their experiences of relapse and recovery and first substance use in relation to their significant life events, relationships and their psychological health. The research was informed by developmental psychological theories such as modern attachment theory, self- psychology theory, developmental trauma theory and family systems theory. The overall aim of the research was to help to inform policy and practice.

The findings highlighted participants extremely adverse and abusive childhoods which lead into chaotic teens for most. Substance use was a means to escape these experiences and for some to fit in or belong because many did not feel they belonged at home, school or in wider mainstream society. These experiences continued to exert a damaging impact on them into adulthood, drug use was a means to block out painful emotions and thoughts from their past. They struggled to manage negative emotions felt in childhood and adulthood, such as anger, fear, loneliness, emptiness, rejection, low self-esteem and self-worth, using drugs to cope with these feelings as well as mental health problems. In adulthood they struggled to cope with everyday life as well as trauma/crises points again using drugs to cope with these situations. For many "normal" life was not something they felt they had experienced growing up adding to their feelings of being different to others. Recovery was about managing life in a healthier way, dealing with past trauma and having healthier relationships including with themselves. Recommendations for policy and practice include, understanding the continued impact of early childhood developmental trauma on this groups' drug/substance use and providing adequate support in the form of therapy, support to help manage emotions as well as mental health problems and understanding the value of working in peer support to help build self-esteem and self-worth.

The drug rehabilitation organisation where the recruitment took place was given feedback on the findings at appropriate stages. A presentation of the research is scheduled for September 2018 with Public Health England, who now have policy responsibility for the DIP. I have presented my research at the National Addiction Centre and the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience at King's College London. Four papers are in the process of being written and submitted to various journals, this includes a paper on adapting IPA for use with focus groups; a second paper on ethical, legal and safeguarding considerations involved in research with a drug using community based offender population; a theoretical paper and a fourth paper on defining recovery among this group.

I am currently based at the National Addiction Centre at King's College London working on the ADVANCE programme which involves a programme of work focusing on men in substance use services who perpetrate intimate partner violence. I have been able to transfer many of the skills learnt from my PhD into this role.