

# Autism, Mental Wellbeing and the Prison Rehabilitative Climate

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## Background

- Autism is a lifelong, neurodevelopmental condition characterised by two core traits (APA, 2013):
  - Difficulties with social communication and interaction
  - Restrictive and repetitive patterns of behaviour interest and thought
- Those with autism are no more likely to offend than the rest of the general population (Mouridsen et al., 2008; King & Murphy, 2014)
  - HOWEVER; when they do offend, it tends to be in the context of their autism (Allely & Creaby-Attwood, 2016; Browning & Caulfield, 2011).
    - Sexual offending is one of the more common types of offending committed by autistic individuals.
- Findings from a multi-perspective qualitative study, on working with autistic individuals in prison-based interventions to address sexual offending (Vinter, 2020\*), suggested that the broader prison experience could have a counter-therapeutic effect for autistic individuals with sexual convictions (ISOCs).
  - It was suggested that autistic ISOCs may experience poorer mental wellbeing stemming from the broader prison experience (inc. interactions with other prisoners and prison staff), which could mediate their engagement with interventions.

## Aim

- This study sought to quantitatively confirm whether autistic traits could impact an ISOC's experience of the prison social climate, whether such experiences of the prison social climate could mediate mental wellbeing levels (specifically, anxiety and depression), and ultimately impact readiness to engage with interventions.

## Hypothesis

- It was predicted that ISOCs with higher autistic traits would have poorer experiences of the prison social climate, and that, in turn, these poorer experiences could result in poorer mental wellbeing, and reduce willingness to engage with interventions.

## Method

### Ethics

- This study was approved by the NTU School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee and the HMPPS National Research Committee

### Participants

- 177 adults (174 male, 3 transgender female), aged 22-90 ( $M = 46.53$ ,  $SD = 15.58$ ), residing in two UK prisons that exclusively house individuals with sexual offence convictions.
- A pre-existing autism diagnosis was self-reported by 12% of the sample ( $n = 21$ ), however this was not corroborated by any official file information due to confidentiality restrictions and inconsistencies in location of this information.

### Measures

#### Autism Quotient 50-item

(AQ50; Baron-Cohen et al., 2001)

- This scale was used to measure participant's autistic traits.

#### Essex Climate Evaluation Schema

(EsseCES; Schalast et al., 2008; rev. 2010)

- This scale was used to measure participants' experiences of each prison's social climate.

#### Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale

(HADS; Zigmond & Snaith, 1983)

- This scale was used to measure participants' anxiety and depression levels, and was used as a measure of 'mental wellbeing' in this study.

#### Corrections Victoria Treatment Readiness Scale

(CVTRS; Casey et al., 2007)

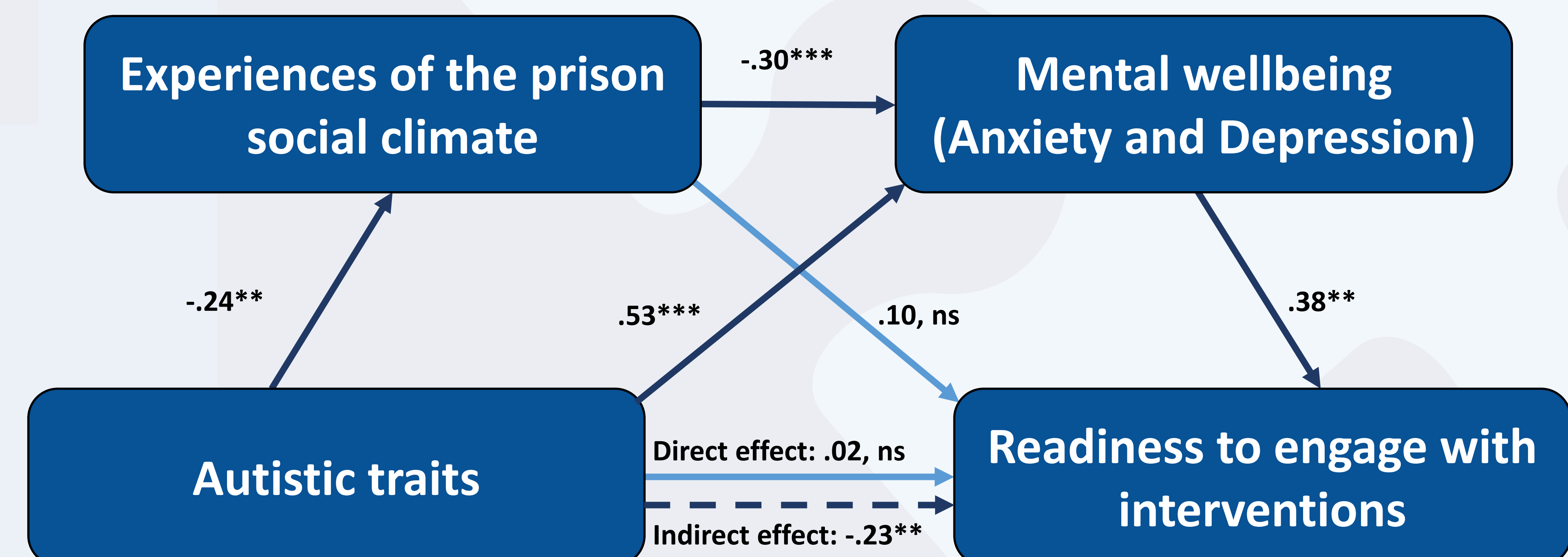
- This scale was used to measure participants' readiness to engage with interventions.

### Data analysis

- The primary analysis used in this study was a double-mediational analysis, to determine how and whether autistic traits could predict readiness to engage in forensic interventions to address offending, and whether these were mediated by experience of a prison social climate and mental wellbeing.

Figure 1.

A double-mediation model testing for direct and indirect effects leading from autistic traits to readiness to engage with forensic interventions via experience of the prison social climate and mental wellbeing (anxiety and depression).



## Results

- Whilst autistic traits alone could not significantly predict readiness to engage with interventions; when mediated by experiences of the prison social climate and mental wellbeing, they could (see Figure 1).
  - As predicted, results suggested that participants with higher autistic traits tended to have a poorer experiences of the prison social climate, which, in turn, predicted higher levels of anxiety and depression, which then made them less willing to engage with forensic interventions.
- An additional finding was a disproportionately high prevalence of individuals who scored above the clinically significant threshold for autistic traits on the AQ50 (23%); of these, only 25% self-reported a pre-existing autism diagnosis.
- While the AQ50 is not a diagnostic tool, Baron-Cohen et al. (2001) suggested that scores of 32 or above did represent clinically significant autistic traits. Therefore, these findings may be further evidence of what has been theorised to be a hidden population of undiagnosed autistic prisoners in custody.

## Conclusions

- Existing prison climate literature has posited that one element of a prison social climate relates to how well the psychological and physical needs of prisoners are understood, accommodated and supported (Tonkin, 2016). Findings from the present study suggested that neurodivergence may be one such psychological need, which needs to be considered and accommodated in the development of a prisons rehabilitative culture.
- The implications of this study are that neurodivergent prisoners have different perceptions of the prison social climate compared to neurotypical prisoners, which ultimately impacts their mental wellbeing and readiness to engage with interventions.
- Therefore, this study provided an evidence base to justify implementation of further social and mental health support provisions for neurodivergent prisoners, to encourage and support their participation in interventions.

## Want to find out more?

Scan the QR code below to access Luke Vinter's PhD Thesis\* via the NTU iRep website (see Chapter 5):



SCAN ME

\*Vinter, L.P. (2020) Working with autistic individuals in prison-based interventions to address sexual offending. (PhD Thesis, Nottingham Trent University).