

The Lived Psychological Experiences of South African Female Offenders Coping in Involuntary Solitary Confinement

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Abstract

Involuntary solitary confinement (ISC) is a restrictive procedure with limitations, implemented as a disciplinary tool in correctional centres. ISC entails removing an offender from the institutional community, like general population incarceration, to a living situation where they are exclusively alone, with little-to-no-contact with other offenders and/or the institution's staff.

These limitations are associated with negative biopsychosocial effects that affect the offenders' psychological wellbeing, particularly female offenders being a marginalised population in the correctional context, impacting their social reintegration into society. The article discusses the lived psychological experiences and coping mechanisms of female offenders in ISC with the aim of developing strategies aimed at supporting female offenders in ISC. A phenomenological research design and purposive and snowball sampling were utilised. Anonymity was ensured using pseudonyms. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data and data was analysed using the thematic data analysis technique.

Keywords: involuntary solitary confinement; coping mechanisms; female offenders; lived psychological experiences; biopsychosocial effects



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Introduction

Incarceration is defined as a process implemented to prevent crime by separating, controlling and monitoring the offenders' contact with significant others and the larger society (Folk *et al.* 2019). This often necessitates adaptation to the new environment and coping with what Sykes (1958, as cited in Haggerty and Bucerius 2020) termed as the "five pains of imprisonment": loss of liberty, deprivation of goods and services, loss of autonomy, loss of security and deprivation of heterosexual relationships. In pursuit of the safe and human rehabilitation of offenders within South African correctional centres, it is imperative to implement procedures that uphold order and ensure the efficient operation of these facilities (Rubin 2019; Department of Government Communication and Information System 2024; Western *et al.* 2022). One of these procedures includes segregation or isolation, formally known as solitary confinement (SC). SC is often used as an umbrella term for any confinement, voluntary or involuntary, where the offender is separated from the general correctional population with limited access to facilities in the correctional centre as stipulated in the Correctional Services Act 111, 1998 (Mears *et al.* 2023; Western *et al.* 2022). For the purpose of this article, ISC was the focus.

ISC can be implemented as a disciplinary tool or as an administrative measure in the correctional centre (Mears *et al.* 2023; Western *et al.* 2022), as the correctional services is tasked with rehabilitating offenders through safe and humane incarceration (Murhula and Singh 2020). It entails removing an offender from the institutional community, such as general population incarceration, to a living situation in which they are exclusively alone in a separate cell block, with little-to-no-contact with other offenders and/or the institution's staff (Haggerty and Bucerius 2020; Western *et al.* 2022). The offender is only permitted one hour out in the courtyard for exercise. During ISC, offenders are placed under restraint when they are removed from their cells. The offenders are continuously confined in cells that are lit all day and all night by artificial lighting, with no control over how brightly their cells are lit and with limited exposure to physical and social stimulation (Mears *et al.* 2023; Western *et al.* 2022). Its derivative nature helps the correctional officials to uphold order after and/or before the transgressions of the offenders.

Although its aim is to regulate the offenders' behaviours, to contribute positively to their overall rehabilitation process, previous studies on the experiences and effects of ISC on the wellbeing of offenders seem to suggest it might be doing the opposite (Aranda-Hughes *et al.* 2021; Mears *et al.* 2023; National Commission on Correctional Health Care (NCCHC) 2016; Western *et al.* 2022). Due to the limited social and physical stimulation, ISC has negative psychological and physiological effects on offenders, particularly if the segregation is for a long time (Mears *et al.* 2023), which according to the NCCHC (2016) is any duration that exceeds fifteen consecutive days. Multiple research findings (James and Vanko 2021; Mears *et al.* 2019; Tayer *et al.* 2021) gathered that ISC often results in physiological deterioration, psychological

disturbances, self-harm and ultimately suicide. Additionally, perceptual changes take place whereby offenders experience hallucinations and delusions; affective disturbances whereby appropriate emotional responses and expressions are compromised; difficulty with concentration is experienced, memory and thought content disturbances occur; as well as problems with impulse control (Mears *et al.* 2019; Tayer *et al.* 2021). Moreover, because of the sensory deprivation, offenders often battle with sleep disturbances, anxiety, panic, rage and paranoia (Tayer *et al.* 2021; Western *et al.* 2022). Nonetheless, it is not all offenders who experience the above-mentioned symptoms during ISC, suggesting that they might be able to cope in such a setting.

Although the offenders in ISC might have access to some coping strategies, it does not negate the findings from previous studies that the majority of the offenders face negative biopsychosocial effects, which might be long term for others, posing a threat to the offenders' rehabilitation process and reintegration into society (James and Vanko 2021; Luke *et al.* 2020; Koons-Witt *et al.* 2024; Mears *et al.* 2019; Mears *et al.* 2023; Tayer *et al.* 2021; Western *et al.* 2022). Considering that the offenders whether males or females, are social beings, the negative effects of ISC result from limited access to stimulation, social interaction and support structures (Aranda-Hughes 2021; Mears *et al.* 2023). Previous literature (Nkosi and Maweni 2020; Sibisi and Olofinbiyi 2021) states that overcrowding, as well as the imbalanced correctional official-to-offender ratio, may be the contributing factors to offenders not being able to have their needs met efficiently while incarcerated. These needs not being met pose a threat to the offenders' inclination towards self-actualisation, as Maslow's Self-Actualisation Theory suggests (Mustafa *et al.* 2023), and subsequently, their rehabilitation process.

Thus, the offenders have to intentionally make use of various coping mechanisms in order to foster resilience (Malpus 2019). Common coping mechanisms are emotion-focused, which involve engaging in conscious activities related to regulating one's emotions, such as journaling, exercising, asking for support, or talking about the stressor, (Graça and Brandão 2024; Hu *et al.* 2022; Malpus 2019; Szczesniak *et al.* 2020).

Female offenders were a subject of interest in this study as they are part of the marginalised or disadvantaged population, compared to male offenders. There are 243 functional correctional centres in South Africa, with only 22 of those correctional centres housing female offenders (George *et al.* 2022). This often leads to the negligence of female offenders when it comes to their rehabilitation process due to the focus and resources being devoted to male correctional facilities, ultimately posing a threat for them efficiently reintegrating into society.

Therefore, the aim of the study was to explore female offenders' lived psychological experiences of ISC, as well as their use of coping mechanisms while confined in such an environment so that strategies to support female offenders in ISC can be developed.

The main research question was “What are the female offenders’ lived psychological experiences and coping mechanisms in ISC?”

Methodology

Study Design

Due to the main research question being exploratory in nature, a qualitative research methodology, with an interpretive phenomenological research design was more appropriate. Qualitative research in psychology entails the power to explore human existence in great detail, as it gives access to lived human experiences (Zarestky 2023), allowing the researcher to describe intimate aspects of the participants’ lifeworlds, which refers to the world as they immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as they conceptualise, categorise, or reflect on it. (Giri 2019).

Phenomenology provides important elements of the constructionist nature of the qualitative research approach, as it deals with the way people make sense of their world and how they construct their everyday life (Giri 2019). A phenomenological research design aimed to describe the participants’ psychological lived experiences and the meaning those experiences hold for the participants (Houston 2022).

Sample Population and Selection of Participants

The inclusion criteria of the sample population comprised six adult South African female offenders between the ages of 31 and 45, who had experienced ISC irrespective of their offence, while incarcerated in a South African correctional centre. The participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling techniques.

Study Setting

Due to the nature of the qualitative approach, as well as the circumstances, with the participants being incarcerated, the research project took place in the participants’ natural setting, which was a South African female correctional centre.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to collect data from each of the participants (Ruslin *et al.* 2022). Data were collected over a period of one month.

Due to the data collection process unfolding during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic; a precautionary measure to prevent contracting the virus, or slowing down its transmission, as well as guarding against interview fatigue, the duration of the interviews was kept to less than one hour (Pal *et al.* 2020). The participants’ rehabilitation programme schedules also contributed to keeping the time spent conducting the interviews as succinct as possible. Additionally, the room and

instruments used during each interaction were disinfected using alcohol-based sanitisers, sitting at least one metre away from one another and wearing surgical masks that were provided.

Data Analysis Method

A thematic data analysis technique which consists of three concurrent processes, namely data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing was utilised (Miles *et al.*, 2019). The processes included selecting, focusing, and simplifying the transcribed data and displaying it in an organised manner to allow for the identification of themes. This helped note regularities, patterns, explanations, possible configurations and causal flows and propositions. Therefore, the data analysis process took place during and after data collection so that an idea of the recurring patterns in experiences, attitudes and emotions was identified progressively (Alem 2020).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of South Africa and the Department of Correctional Services. Signed informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from the participants after sharing the Participants Research Information Sheet.

Ethical standards were considered to limit and/or avoid any ethical issues that could jeopardise the trustworthiness of the study (Mirza *et al.* 2023). It was vital that the participants have a clear understanding of what the conducted research entailed, as well as its purpose to safeguard integrity, quality, respect, confidentiality, anonymity, impartiality, voluntary consent and participant safety (Mirza *et al.* 2023). For example, pseudonyms were given to participants to ensure anonymity. Accordingly, obtaining permission from gatekeepers, adhering to privacy, anonymity and confidentiality, non-maleficence and beneficence ethical standards was essential.

Measures of Trustworthiness

As a precaution to achieve credibility and to eliminate the researcher's bias when analysing and interpreting data, persistent observation, prolonged engagement and member checking were found to be most useful (Ahmed 2024). An attempt to achieve transferability was through using thorough and thick descriptions of the context and data gathered so that the reader may have a clear and vivid picture of the setting in which the study took place so that aspects of the study can be potentially transferable (Stahl and King 2020). In order to guarantee dependability, the researcher clearly stated the steps that were followed in the research process to ensure that the themes were generated from the gathered data, as well as used an inquiry audit (Ahmed 2024). Confirmability was achieved by making use of semi-structured interviews in order to allow the participants to generate and provide thorough experiences and perceptions without being restricted, as well as following guidelines for analysing and reporting on the findings while making reference to available literature (Ahmed 2024; Stahl and King 2020). In addition,

making use of a reflexivity journal to bracket out any preconceived biases, ideas and experiences that could influence the research process was applied (Adler 2022).

Results and Discussion

Results

The aim of the study was to explore the lived psychological experiences of female offenders in ISC, as well as the coping mechanisms they used while detained in such a setting. While exploring the lived psychological experiences, three superordinate themes seemed prominent in meeting the aims of the article, along with their subordinate themes, as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Overview of Superordinate and Subordinate Themes of the Study

Themes	Sub-themes
Experiences	Restrictions
	Inconsistencies in procedures
	Distrust
	ISC as a blessing in disguise
	Health implications
Coping mechanisms	Seeking stimulation
	Seeking social support
	Suppression and escapism
	Belief in supreme being

Theme 1: Experiences

Restrictions

While exploring the lived experiences of the female offenders in ISC, the nature of the confinement seemed to stand out for them. They detailed the nature of the environment to contextualise their lived psychological experience and the coping mechanisms available to them while detain the setting. In their descriptions of their lived psychological experiences in ISC, it was apparent that the participants had a hard time adjusting to being in ISC due to its nature. One of the participants, Sipho, stated, “*Ah, solitary confinement is worse,*” after sharing general incarceration experience. It highlighted that the participants had to get used to the further restrictions that were put in place for them as offenders, as ISC is used as a disciplinary tool and/or administrative measure to uphold order in the correctional centre (Mears *et al.* 2023; Tayer *et al.* 2021; Western *et al.* 2022).

The restrictions put in place included restrictions to the female offenders’ movement, perceptual stimulation, social support and access to correctional facilities, such as educational, recreational, healthcare facilities and personal belongings being kept in their lockers, such as food, radios and blankets.

Inconsistencies in Procedures

Accompanied by the restrictions were the identified inconsistencies in procedures. The participants reported that there was no set structure on how operations in ISC were implemented, which could have been beneficial in helping the correctional centre achieve regulation, consistency and fairness in its daily operations, affording the staff the opportunity to carry out their duties efficiently (Mears *et al.* 2023; Western *et al.* 2022).

The specific flaws that were identified in the operations included time management and the treatment of female offenders in ISC, including human rights violations, as access to the one-hour exercise in the courtyard and access to healthcare services were a challenge, which contradicts what the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998 stipulates about the significance of safe and humane custody of offenders. Ntokozo reported,

I would just sit and wait because they would not be consistent with the times. Sometimes they would open for me at around 8, other times they would open for me at around 12 midday. So, it was up to them, and I never would call out for them, I would just wait ...

The majority of the participants reported that the correctional officials were not consistent with opening for them to go bath, as they would have to wait until an official was available or would be told to use a bucket. In addition, gaining access to healthcare facilities and/or medication, educational facilities and the one-hour exercise that they were entitled to, were also identified as a challenge for the participants. Sphiwe, shared,

The first few days, getting up was horrible, because I am not going to school mos, I'm not even going to the kitchen to fetch my food

Furthermore, there were some inconsistencies with regard to how the correctional officials on duty treated female offenders in ISC, as some would provide them with the social support they needed and give them access to stimulation and other correctional facilities, such as the one-hour exercise, while other correctional officials would not do so. This accentuates the notion that the standardised procedures put in place were not followed when the participants were in ISC, or they might not have been put in place to begin with.

Nkosi and Maweni (2020) postulate that one of the factors that pose a risk to the procedures that make operations in correctional centres to be more effective and humane include overcrowding. The issue of overcrowding in the correctional centre hinders the offenders from having their human rights to nutrition, medical treatment and exercise to be realised, as there would be an imbalanced correctional official-to-offender ratio in the correctional centre, which was identified as a challenge for South African correctional centres (Sibisi and Olofinbiyi 2021).

Distrust

With the female offenders being alone in an environment where the perceptual stimulation is reduced significantly, limited social support and limited meaningful interactions with the correctional officials, as well as the challenge of not demonstrating a standardised procedure being implemented consistently in ISC, feelings of distrust surfaced. These feelings of distrust towards the correctional officials surfaced because of the inconsistencies in how the offenders were treated, suggesting that their sense of security and trust while in ISC may have lessened as they looked to the correctional officials for consistent guidance and protection as their custodians or the authority figures. Kganya stated:

... was very tough because all of them, the members [correctional officials] were against us, so, we didn't have anyone to tell our problems to. We didn't trust them anymore those members [correctional officials] ... we just stayed there.

An issue of negligence was raised by Chantal, claiming that she was completely forgotten about for the first few days while she was in ISC.

I was so quiet; they didn't even know there was someone in isolation. They didn't feed me or nothing for the first few days. They completely forgot about me . . .

Innocentia stated that the officials would make remarks about how they want the experience of ISC to affect her, saying:

They even tell you that you see how curvy you are? I want you to come out holding your pants trying to stop them from falling...eish.

Implying that she ought to be psychologically affected by the experience, leading to severe weight-loss, which according to the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998, section (4), subsection 2(b), does not demonstrate safe custody of offenders. Kganya also alluded to some form of abuse of power, stating they were:

... treated like dogs.

She went on to say:

Some were beaten up.... And they were bruised and they denied them consultation with the sister [nurse]. Some were on medication, they tell them "no, we will bring your medication." They were not allowed to visit the sister [nurse].

As a result, the alleged abuse of power by the correctional officials as authority, resulted in the distrust by the offenders towards the correctional officials.

ISC as a Blessing in disguise

Even though the experience of being in ISC is often described as disheartening due to its restrictive nature, some offenders seem to have positively reframed the experience of being in ISC, acknowledging the positive benefits.

Onkarabile reported:

When I went to isolation, I went to isolation during the time I was still at ..., in a communal cell. So, isolation for me was like “Ah! Finally!” I get to have my own space.

Ntokozo seemed to share the same sentiment, as she said, “*The nice thing about it is that you find time to do your things alone*,” highlighting the pains of being incarcerated (Haggerty and Bucerius 2020). When incarcerated, amongst other things, offenders lose their sense of freedom, autonomy and security, rendering them powerless to their environment. Hence, even though the ISC was being used as a disciplinary tool and/or administrative measure, subsequently detested, the two participants were able to acknowledge that they benefited from having some personal space.

Even so, due to the limited social interaction one is exposed to while in ISC, and lack of emotional or social support as a result, one can feel distressed (Tayer *et al.* 2021). Even though some participants reported that they initially enjoyed the privacy one is privy to in ISC, the enjoyment was temporary due to what the effects of being alone would have on their wellbeing. One of the participants, Onkarabile, shared.

So, isolation for me was like “Ah! Finally!” I get to have my own space. But that only lasts for a day or two. That freedom only lasts for a day or two because you’re kind of happy that you can breathe, you can shower at your own time, you know. But the loneliness that’s coming after a day or two, you know? Then, you started, you start feeling ... you are alone there, you also don’t have anybody else to talk to, but yourself.

As human beings are understood as social beings who thrive in social contexts, the restrictions put in place in ISC, are seen to have more of a negative effect on the offenders’ wellbeing (Aranda-Hughes *et al.* 2021; Mears *et al.* 2023), which was found to be the case for participants of this study.

Health Implications

The effects of being in isolation seemed to be biopsychosocial in nature, as the perceptual and/or social deprivation had an impact on the participants’ psychological wellbeing, as well as their physiological well-being. These effects manifested in the participants as feelings of loneliness, frustration, anger, bitterness, anxiety, and fear. Rebecca stated:

... I stand and I scre... I screaming, then member [correctional officials], when I see them ... there it’s like you’re crazy. It’s not nice there.

In addition, their thought processes seemed to be affected as a pessimistic thinking style would be prominent, leading them to ruminate about negative past experiences and present with suicidal ideations.

... when you are in that environment, you are not thinking positive things about your life. You are thinking negative things; you are not really thinking positively about your past. ...

Sphiwe elaborated. It was a similar experience for Lebo, who stated:

... coming into my mind. Feeling like killing myself.

Other biopsychosocial effects reported by the participants include body aches, lethargy, initial insomnia, weight-loss and pseudo-perceptual disturbances, describing possible auditory hallucinations. Onkarabile describes what sounds like pseudo-hallucinations:

You think you are hearing a sound but there is nothing there.

Moreover, because of the anger they felt towards the correctional officials, some participants would be preoccupied with planning vengeance towards them, which is corroborated by literature (Mears *et al.* 2019; Tayer *et al.* 2021; Wright *et al.* 2023). Offenders experiencing high levels of aggression and anger while in ISC, as well as after ISC, is one of the psychological effects of being detained in such a setting, often raising questions about whether the long-term effects of being detained in ISC do not contribute to recidivism (Haney 2020; Tayer *et al.* 2021). This, raises a concern of whether being detained in ISC does not interfere with the offenders' rehabilitation process, as the negative biopsychosocial effects seem to outweigh the positive biopsychosocial effects. Ntokozo stated:

I was crying, I was remorseful of what I did. I even thought of killing myself because I saw that here in jail, there is nothing that is helping me, they don't like me ... I thought of killing myself, because ... I even hung the sheet there ... so they caught that sheet .
...

Sipho stated:

It's like a dog. You can lock up a dog in its house, without seeing anyone, without seeing... what does it do when you eventually open for it? It becomes worse, right? It is like that. You become bitter. You become angry.

With their sense of security, along with their sense of affiliation and belonging being significantly lessened, it can be assumed that the female offenders' rehabilitation process may be in jeopardy, as Maslow's Self-Actualisation Theory suggests that for one to develop and function at an optimum, gaining qualities that could be beneficial for offenders, such as having values, having better judgement and perceiving reality

accurately, one's basic needs need to be gratified consistently (Mustafa *et al.* 2023). Therefore, if the offenders in ISC are deprived of their physiological, security and affiliation and love need, their inclination towards self-actualisation may be compromised and possibly deter their rehabilitation process, leading to intense feelings of loneliness, frustration and other psychological effects.

Theme 2: Coping Mechanisms

Seeking Stimulation

Interestingly, even though social and/or problem-focused coping mechanisms available for use are limited in such a setting, the findings of the study deduce that the participants were able to foster resilience. This suggests that they must have had access to some form of coping mechanisms that they could use while detained in ISC. Emotion-focused coping strategies seemed to be more prominently used by the participants, as they felt like the stressors that they were presented with were out of their control but had to do something that could help with the emotional distress. The emotion-focused coping strategies involve engaging in conscious activities related to regulating one's emotions (Malpus 2019) such as journaling, exercising, asking for support, or talking about the stressor.

Kganya shared:

Ya, writing made me cope because when you write you have to use your mind, like ... you think out of box. You don't think of right there where you are at the moment. You think of future as well.

Ntokozo stated:

... and singing. It is the only thing that was helping me ... and reading ... and writing some of your songs....

Sphiwe incorporated yoga in her daily routine. However, with access to activities that could help in that regard being limited, this led to a sense of helplessness.

Seeking Social Support

Social support, which is also referred to as emotional support, refers to the provision of care, concern, empathy, love and trust (Hu *et al.* 2022). It provides the recipient with a safe space where they can feel heard, express feelings and voice fear, subsequently reducing feelings of loneliness and distress. From this study, only one participant mentioned using social support as a coping mechanism while in ISC, while others denied having access to any.

Kganya stated that the sources of the social support she got while in ISC were different, especially during her first detainment in ISC. She asserts that she got support from other

female offenders who were also detained in ISC, as they shared the corridor in the building block. She went on to say:

... they [other offenders in ISC] say “what doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger”, so ... hearing someone say “no, don’t worry, it will be better. Tomorrow won’t be the same as today” like, that’s what helped us cope there.

It seems the support and encouragement she got from her fellow offenders in ISC, as they shouted across the cell block, would give her hope to carry on until the next day.

Suppression and Escapism

With limited access to conventional emotion-focused coping strategies, an alternative had to be explored. “We just contained ourselves and remained there ...,” Kganya said.

Accordingly, the participants felt a need to escape from their reality through suppression and escapism. Escapism involves momentarily getting rid of unwanted thoughts and/or feelings, such as powerlessness, by using fanciful scenarios (Melodia et al. 2020; Sopcić and Musil 2020). One way of doing so is suppression. Suppression is a process whereby one tries to cope with distressing feelings, thoughts or experiences by voluntarily making efforts to put them at conscious awareness until there is an opportunity to cope well with the stressors (Costa 2020).

The participants attempted to escape their reality in ISC by using sleep and cleaning as distraction, as well as imagination, subsequently contributing to affective changes, which was evident in their thought patterns, their behaviours, with the participants stating that it helped them sleep and not ruminate about negative things. Lebo shared:

When I am awake, that is when I think too much. I think about a lot of things. So, what I would tell myself. ... I felt like just sleeping, not see anything.

In concert with Lebo’s experience, Onkarabile stated:

... you start thinking ... you know, like, you know when you sleep, you start thinking about ... you imagine being somewhere until you fall asleep.

Belief in Supreme Being

Religion, precisely, the Christian faith, was also used as a coping mechanism, as it is an integral part of many people’s lives and has beneficial effects on their personal adaptation, particularly with regard to emotional wellbeing (Graça and Brandão 2024; Szczesniak *et al.* 2020), which is what the participants yearned for while in isolation. Thus, as Christianity adherents, engaging in Christian religious practices, such as prayer and reading the bible, helped in that regard.

Onkarabile stated:

... another thing, coping in isolation, is just to read the bible. I read the bible, and I prayed a lot, yes. I prayed every morning, I prayed, and I read the bible. And sometimes I would sing to myself. Christian songs, ya. It helped me, a little bit with that.

Sphiwe said:

... but when I wasn't sleeping, to try to stop thinking about all the negative stuff, I would uhm, pray, you know? You get down on your knees, you know? You pray.

Sipho:

Sometimes you just feel like going, just feel like praying to see if God won't answer my prayers regarding my challenges. ...

With the participants yearning to have social support and having their emotional distress alleviated, religion seemed to provide them with these, as they had perceived God to be caring, omnipresent, powerful and loving at the time (Graça and Brandão 2024). Alongside having been Christian prior to ISC and/or all their lives, the participants' understanding of some of the Christian religious beliefs, such as salvation, contributed to their inclination towards using the relationship they had with the Supreme Being as a coping mechanism. Onkarabile reflected:

God will take you out. You came here, you were smoking nyaope, you could've been dead by now, or under the bridge, but God decided to choose you out of all your friends, to bring you here. Because then that means you are a special one. He wants to do something about your life. So, start taking yourself seriously.

Kganya cited:

Ya, here I'm all alone and it's just me and my God. My time with my God and these walls. But these walls can't hear me, my God can hear me. So, it worked wonders 'cause you're talking to God. You're not talking to yourself.

Yoga, a spiritual, mental and physical practice, was also cited as a skill that can help with coping in ISC. Sphiwe stated:

I did a bit of yoga, because uhm ... we would, when I was in Worcester, and in Pollsmoor, we were taught yoga, so I did yoga, just to get me. ...

Discussion

The findings accentuated how one's environment can have an impact on their physiological, psychological and social wellbeing. There seems to be a relationship between the nature of ISC and the negative biopsychosocial effects of being detained in the setting. The depriving nature of ISC negates how human beings typically function in order to thrive in their environments. The offenders are deprived of perceptual

stimulation, support, a sense of autonomy and freedom, access to certain goods and services, including correctional facilities and an opportunity to connect intimately with significant others (Haggerty and Bucerius 2020; May 2021; Tayer *et al.* 2021; Western *et al.* 2022).

According to Maslow's Self-Actualisation Theory (Mustafa *et al.* 2023), for an individual to gravitate towards functioning according to their fullest potential, there are certain needs that need to be met consistently, with the basic needs being imperative. While in ISC, some of the basic needs of the offenders are not met. These include physiological needs, security needs and affiliation and love/belonging needs. The unmet physiological needs speak to the offenders having challenges with their sleep-wake cycle, which impacts their health; while the unmet security needs speak to the offenders' experiencing challenges in having a sense of stability from the lack of consistency in procedures and treatment by the correctional officials, and thus, lack of emotional support. The unmet affiliation and love/belonging needs include the offenders having little-to-no-contact or meaningful interaction with other human beings. This unmet need impacts the offenders' psychosocial wellbeing significantly (Mustafa *et al.* 2023). Feelings of loneliness, frustration, anger, low mood and helplessness surface (Aranda-Hughes *et al.* 2021), as one might feel discarded, ostracised or excluded from the greater correctional community.

Some effects of ungratified basic needs of the offenders, can be short term or long term; particularly the negative psychological effects (Tayer *et al.* 2021). The short-term psychological effects found in the study include high levels of aggression and anger, pessimistic thinking style, feelings of loneliness, frustration, anxiety and bitterness; while the long-term psychological effects include interpersonal challenges during reintegration, bitterness anger and distrust towards the correctional officials, leading to them wanting to avenge themselves. Previous studies have also found similar effects (Aranda-Hughes *et al.* 2021; Tayer *et al.* 2021). These long-term effects bring to light the concern of reoffending and the effectiveness of ISC, as one's judgement, or level of functioning, can be affected, which could have an impact on the offenders' behaviour. The offenders' thought processes are all interconnected and affect both their physical and social wellbeing.

Nonetheless, to some degree, it seems the aim of the ISC to uphold order in the correctional centre is achieved, with offenders reporting that they would not want to find themselves in the setting again; suggesting they would not want to disobey some of the rules and regulations in the correctional centre. In addition, other positives effects were identified, such as one having some personal space from other offenders and cultivating their spirituality. The supreme being was perceived as accepting and always available during a time when they felt isolated and excluded, an experience also reported by previous studies (Ignjatovic 2019). However, these positive effects seem to be short term and outweighed by the negative effects of being in ISC. Hence, the offenders found themselves trying to cope with the negative impact after a day or two of being in ISC.

With limited access to coping mechanisms, distracting self and religion seemed to be most viable. It appears the offenders' rehabilitation process might have been affected significantly by the nature of ISC and its negative biopsychosocial effects.

Conclusion

From the data gathered, it can be deduced that the lived psychological experiences of female offenders in ISC in the correctional centre were unpleasant due to its restrictive nature on the female offenders' movement, access to social support, perceptual stimulation and correctional facilities. Although the goal of ISC is to uphold order as it is used for disciplinary and administrative measures, the impact of being detained in such a setting was more negative than positive. The negative effects were biopsychosocial effects in nature, affecting the offenders' thought processes/patterns, behaviour, physiological wellbeing and sociality, emphasising the interconnectedness and interdependence of the different levels of functioning in human beings.

The depriving nature of ISC, duration of the isolation, treatment from correctional officials and inconsistencies in procedures seemed to pose a challenge in having the offenders have their basic human needs met, which seemed to have negative short-term and/or long-term effects on the offenders' wellbeing and level of functioning. The perceived prolonged negation of the offenders' basic needs further poses a threat to the offenders' inclination towards self-actualisation and thus, rehabilitation process. Accordingly, the unpleasant lived experience of being in ISC seems to be linked to the nature, inconsistencies in procedures, treatment of offenders, and duration of being detained in the environment, and can be deduced to be the main cause of the negative biopsychosocial effects on the offenders. It is indicative that these factors are interconnected in impacting offenders' wellbeing and might have to be adjusted for the betterment of the offenders' wellbeing and combatting the negative biopsychosocial effects of being isolated in ISC.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made to the Department of Correctional Services:

There ought to be standardised procedures for implementing ISC that the correctional officials follow to promote fairness, consistency and regulation in the daily operations of the correctional centre. This could contribute to the offenders' lived psychological experiences of being detained in ISC being consistent and pleasant and ultimately their rehabilitation processes not being jeopardised or deterred.

It was recommended that the correctional officials get training on appropriate treatment of offenders in ISC, as well as training on the effects of their interaction with the offenders might have on the offenders' wellbeing and/or rehabilitation process.

Offenders in ISC must be visited by the correctional officials regularly, as per the recommendations in the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998, Section 30, in trying to ascertain if the offenders are coping in the restrictive environment, and if the duration of one's stay should be prolonged or shortened, possibly combating additional negative biopsychosocial effects of being detained in ISC for a prolonged duration than necessary.

Even though the ISC is used as a disciplinary tool or administrative measure, it is encouraged that the offenders have access to perceptual stimulation and social support and other emotion-focused coping strategies, such as religious books, educational material and/or visitations from spiritual leaders and other professionals, while in their ISC cells so as to combat the negative biopsychosocial effects that are associated with being in ISC.

With yoga having been reported as one learned skill that helped with coping in ISC, it could be beneficial for the South African correctional centres to consider incorporating training in such mindfulness-based activities to help support and combat some of the biopsychosocial effects of being in ISC.

In trying to enhance the South African literature on corrections, future studies focusing on the lived psychological experiences of offenders in the South African context are recommended, particularly being inclusive of other racial groups and genders. This could help generate further recommendations on how ISC can be humane and effective as a disciplinary tool or administrative measure for South African offenders.

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