

**A hermeneutic phenomenological examination of the
lived experience of incarceration for those with
autism**

Claire Newman

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student

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Figure 1: Illustrated model of anxiety experienced by incarcerated persons who have autism

Glossary of acronyms

ADI-R	Autism Diagnostic Interview – Revised
ADOS	Autism Diagnostic Observation Scale
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CSNSW	Correctional Services New South Wales
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual
ICD	International Classification of Diseases
JH&FMHN	Justice Health & Forensic Mental Health Network
MHOAT	Mental Health Outcomes and Assessment Tool
MMR	Measles, Mumps and Rubella Vaccine
PAS	Patient Administration System
PDD-nos	Pervasive Developmental Disorder not otherwise specified
NSW	New South Wales
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States

Abstract

The experiences of incarceration for those with autism are largely unknown. As a result there is paucity in the research literature to inform appropriate service provision for incarcerated persons with autism. This study aimed to examine and interpret the lived experience of adults with autism who were incarcerated in the New South Wales correctional system, Australia. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach, underpinned by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, was utilised in this research. Participants were interviewed with sensitivity to the information processing style of those with autism using modified techniques for using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach with study participants who have autism. Interviews were audio-recorded and recordings transcribed to create a text for interpretative analysis. The lived experience of incarceration for the participants of this study was about being in an unpredictable environment characterised by ever-changing routines, incomprehensible rules and unpredictable complex social situations. Experiencing anxiety was a prominent theme and stemmed from being deprived of their ability to create predictability in their environment, and the confusion and distress experienced by being forced to comply with actions that were in conflict with their logic. The environment further allowed participants to isolate themselves and avoid social interactions as a form of maladaptive coping with the social-related demands of incarceration. From dialoguing the findings with existing literature it was clear that aspects of study participants' experience of incarceration were comparable to what would be experienced by incarcerated persons who do not have autism. However much of the anxiety experienced by participants in the current study related directly to the incompatibility of their autism-related impairments and the prison environment and would therefore be unique to prisoners who have autism or autism-like traits. Recommendations for improvements in service provision for incarcerated persons with autism are made and areas for future research suggested.