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

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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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## Glossary of acronyms

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