Chapter 5 – Discussion

5.0 Progression Model of Behaviour Changes through Sport and Exercise in Female Inmates

The interviews conducted with the nine female prisoners for this study highlighted a pattern of behaviour change. Figure 4 represents a fluid model, taking a journey from initial incarceration through exercise and sport to the final release of a rehabilitated women armed with the tools to cope with society in an acceptable manner. Tables 1 to 5 are a visual summary of the five phenomena derived from the interviews, the outcomes from the phenomena were placed in a continuum and developed into a theory. The grounded theory approach used in this study was effective in that a clear theory, ‘Progression Model of Behaviour Changes through Sport and Exercise in Female Inmates’, was developed as a direct result of the interplay between the researcher and the data (Figure 4). There were no prior assumptions about the outcome of the interviews and through systematic analysis of the findings collected in the empirical world, a theory was developed.

The grounded theory approach was used to build theory rather than to test it, the further research section of this study will highlight the next stage in research of sport and exercise in a female prison. The theory developed here is only the initial step in understanding the advantages of sport and exercise provision in prisons however; it does provide a framework which may be elaborated and investigated. This discussion will be focused around the Progression Model of Behaviour Changes through Sport and Exercise in Female Inmates and will illustrate the various stages of transition observed from the interviews with the nine women who voluntarily participated in this study and who chose to become involved in sport and exercise.
Figure 4 – Progression Model of Behaviour Changes through Sport and Exercise in Female Inmates.
The Progression Model of Behaviour Changes through Sport and Exercise in Female Inmates begins with the criminal behaviour of a female which then leads to a prison sentence. Once a woman becomes a prisoner there are many associated negative mood states. The women in this study were not specifically asked about their feelings upon entering the prison environment, however throughout the interviews these mood states and emotions were openly discussed by the interviewees. Subsequently the researcher identified that this was an important stage in the process of rehabilitation and was essential to gain a full understanding of the transition from law breaker to a woman who is able to be acceptably reintegrated back into society. Thus, the second stage of the aforementioned model encompasses the experiences of the interviewees entering the prison system and the associated feelings. This is supported by other research of prisons and prisoners and illustrates the identity and mood state changes of a woman entering the penal system. The third step in the above model entitled sport and exercise participation is the step that identifies the use of sport and exercise participation as the beginning of change and was the intervention that altered lifestyle and behaviour. The following stages in the model are a consequence of the sport and exercise intervention. It is these latter stages that pertain to the research questions.

5.1 Being a Prisoner

When a woman is taken into the prison system she is entering a world in which she is not familiar, an establishment where the people are unknown and the rules are unclear. The result of this is a loss in confidence, fear, stress and anxiety. Annette clearly illustrated the apprehension she felt on entering the prison system and the focus on getting out;

‘Oh god, why did I come to prison?’ and ‘oh god, I can’t cope with it’ you know and ‘I got five months to do’.

This opinion was consistently echoed by the other participants. The negative mood states highlighted in the subcategory Negative Mood Release collated feelings of stress, anxiety, frustration and aggression all experienced by the women in this study. The category of Psychological Benefits further emphasises the low self confidence and reduced self worth felt by the interviewees both before prison and
upon entering. Silverman & Vega (1990) summarise the prison environment as being characterised by lack of privacy, regimentation, depersonalisation and confinement and added that it is the most unnatural environment in which a human being can be placed. This description aids in the understanding of what it is like to be a prisoner and how the negative feelings described throughout this study are manifested. It is important to fully grasp the experience of being a prisoner as the majority of the general public have never seen the inside of a prison and when they hear of gym facilities the response is often negative as they feel that prisoners should not receive such privileges.

The interviewees spoke of being away from their families, often their own children, and friends. As a result the women were instantly stripped of their previous identity and forced to adapt to the foreign environment and must accept their new role as prisoner. As observed in this study the outcome is stress and frustration. When discussing the feelings experienced from attending activities in the gym, the interviewees continually brought up the stress release effect it gave them and clearly identified that worry about children, release dates and past behaviour led to feelings of stress.

When the interviewees reflected on their initial feelings both before prison and on first arrival they expressed reduced self confidence and low self worth, Mandy admitted being in an abusive relationship and lacking confidence and self esteem. Shell was a drug user and said that drugs had taken away her confidence. Annette, Sam and Shan all mentioned having low confidence, low self esteem or feeling like ‘scum’. The presence of such negative feelings also featured in the Women in Prison study by the HM Inspectorate of prisons (2005) who found that female inmates in particular bring with them a considerable amount of vulnerability. One in ten will have attempted suicide, half say they have experienced domestic violence, and a third sexual assault. This coupled with low physical and mental health (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2005; Plugge et al, 2006) including neurosis, psychosis, alcohol and drug dependency (Singleton et al, 1998) often results in reduced perceptions of self worth and self confidence.
Benner (1984) contended that stressful incidents originate in the psychological, physiological and social realms of the individual and that the stress response will be influenced by the individual’s culture and background. It is these background meanings which will determine their perception of stress. Stress occurs when the individual is placed in a situation where the background meanings do not provide a basis for easy interpretation of the events impinged on them (Brenner, 1984). When a criminal is placed in prison the person’s background meanings do not equip them to cope with the new world and they experience a form of culture shock as depicted in this study (Silverman & Vega, 1990).

When a women enters prison she is conducted out of her former status and old identity, on reception she is stripped of personal belongings, searched by unknown officers and sent through a series of events over which she has no control. The disorientation and confusion is an insight into her future life in prison. This results in the disappearance of previous personal identity and the formation of her new identity as ‘prisoner’ (Eaton, 1993). This is the first stage in a series of steps which will lead to the eventual release of the prisoner. If there are no interventions, education or activities which allow a person to express themselves as an individual the prisoner will be released as she arrived, with low confidence, high levels of stress and lacking the capacity to change previous criminal behaviour. While the negative experience of being locked in a cell may be a deterrent, with no education or interventions the chances of behaviour change are slim.

The image we conjure from the findings in this study is a female who has no belief in themselves, little self confidence and self esteem and lacking the social and educational tools to change previous undesirable criminal behaviour. The interviewees depicted a world that did not allow for change or the chance to focus on the self.

5.2 Sport and Exercise Participation

As the interviewees moved through their sentence they were offered various activities to occupy the time that they were not in work, the choice depended on the individual. It could have been spent watching television, writing letters, going to the library or as is the case here going to the gym to participate in sport or exercise. The
activity choice will be motivated by several factors. In this study weight management, altered body shape or simply passing time was mentioned. The results found that independent of the initial motivating factor the participants reported positive psychological, physical and social outcomes. This began even before entering the gym when the interviewees made a personal choice to take part and were not forced to go by regulations or prison officers. It was rare to be given the opportunity to make a decision which was for their own personal gain, thus permitting the self to be an active agent in decision making and stimulating the cognitive processes involved in making positive choices which could benefit the individual. Deci and Ryan (1991, 1996) maintain that in order to feel self-determined, the decision must be intrinsic and the person feel that the success is truly their own. The prisoners discussed their involvement in the gym as something they did for themselves, it was their ‘own personal time’, what they did in the gym was their choice. This was so important to the participants that they spent as much of their free time as they could at the gym in order to get away from the rest of the prison. Going to the gym was a personal choice and a place where their opinion mattered in an otherwise controlled world.

Once the women in this study entered the gym environment they were presented with a new atmosphere; the gym was an area of the institution where prison officers were called by their first names and inmates worked together with staff as a team. Newcomers were presented with an environment where prisoners were coaches, teachers and leaders. The PEI’s and other gym users provided a healthy, friendly place to spend time and were positive role models for new comers. In addition, the newcomer observed experienced gym participants as successful in their physical and educational goals. Annette and Mica found that by observing other inmates who were gaining qualifications or just attending the gym on a regular basis increased their own perceived ability thus beginning to increase self belief.

As the interviewees participated in various activities they became aware that it was possible to attain goals such as completing a difficult exercise class, running a distance they could not have done previously or simply burning calories. This coupled with positive feedback from other inmates and PEI’s served to enhance self esteem and confidence. This in turn seemed to fuel a further interest in sport and exercise and began the process of behaviour change.
For some of the participants, sport and exercise participation gave them a break from thinking about situations beyond their control that caused stress such as their families or release date. Instead the women were fully focused on the activity they were engaging in. It was stated that this was important to relieve stress. Without a period of time which allowed a rest from negative thinking the inmates found that stress would manifest itself in other ways such as aggression or depression. Others found that while they were exercising they were able to think in a clear manner about a negative situation, enabling them to then re-address the incident in an alternative manner. Both these properties are found in the subcategory Internal Focus. Regardless of the reason for exercising the interviewees seemed to gain new coping strategies which had never been thought of before. They had begun to expand their thinking processes and to understand the mechanisms available to them for handling negative situations.

The interviewees also discussed the social advantages of going to the gym, the interaction between the participant, other inmates and PEI’s in this positive environment assisted in developing new social networks. Shell shared that before participating in the gym her conversational skills were lacking and so she did not have the desire to talk to others. The gym environment slowly helped her to converse with others, make friends and eventually gave her the confidence to begin relationships. A certain amount of ‘respect’ was given to gym goers from other inmates and this fed into constructing a new identity, not of a prisoner but as a ‘gym goer’.

From participating in sport and exercise the inmates were beginning the process of rehabilitation, coping strategies were being learnt, confidence and self belief was increasing, decision making and social skills were developing.

5.3 Physical and Mental State

It was identified that once the interviewees attended the gym for a prolonged period of time other benefits emerged. They formed relationships with the PEI’s and other inmates, thus engaging in social interaction. They observed changes in their physical self, both cardiovascular and muscular and experienced positive psychological mood states from participating in sport and exercise. One of the most evident factors which
motivated the inmates to continue to exercise or participate in sport was the element of enjoyment. They had found something that was interesting to them, was fun and made them feel ‘good’, ‘better’ or ‘less depressed’. Mandy stated clearly that it made her happy, and Bella found that she looked forward to going to the gym everyday, it was the highlight of her day. Annette was glad she had come to prison so she was able to experience the physical and mental benefits of participating. The interviewees reflected on their experience in the gym with energy and enthusiasm, they were keen to share their experiences. Sam and Norma also found that it gave them a tool to control aggression and reduce stress and anxiety. Williams, Walker and Strean (2005) suggest that helping offenders improve their skills to cope with stress is a critical component in effective rehabilitation and preventing reoffending once released.

The inmates noticed changes in their bodies as a result of their participation in gym activities and became aware of how to improve physical fitness, body shape and to control unwanted weight. This then lead to feelings of pride and self control and undoubtedly resulted in improved overall physical health. This coupled with the enjoyment they gained from going to the gym and the confidence they found in achieving goals also assisted to increased mental health. Plugge, Douglas and Fitzpatric (2006) supported the findings here in the qualitative research section from the ‘Health of Women in Prison Study’ and found that prisoners who were undertaking exercise described positive psychological benefits.

The positive mood affect found by the women in this study is nothing new, much research has been undertaken to demonstrate the correlation between exercise and positive mood affect (Scully et al. 1998). Biddle and Mutrie (2001) have conducted a meta-analytic review on the effects of exercise on psychological well-being, including emotion and mood, enjoyment, self-esteem, anxiety and reactivity to stress, non-clinical depression and sleep. The studies were conducted with the general community and not with prisoners; however there is no reason why the same effects would not be found for female inmates.

In addition the interviewees demonstrated feelings of being empowered by the ability to achieve goals and lead others with their knowledge. The feelings of empowerment
began with the personal choice to participate and were then accentuated as the interviewees reached new physical abilities. The women in this study began to realise they could have control over their bodies and could engage in an activity that made them ‘happy’. The inmates also identified their need to relieve stress and to gain relaxation and chose the gym environment as an avenue to achieve this. A similar affect was found in a study conducted with students that have physical and sensory disabilities which found that by modifying beliefs about the self, individuals can begin to feel they have an active role in determining life events (Blinde & Taube, 1999).

By providing leisure activities that have links with increased confidence and assertiveness as well as increased bodily strength, women may be able to exit prison with a sense of empowerment enabling them to tackle the outside world with confidence (Deem & Gilroy, 1998). The improved physical and mental health of the interviewees was evident throughout the investigation and this alone is identified by the government as a priority (Plugge et al, 2006). When a female is incarcerated, society is given the opportunity to provide improve the health and wellbeing of this population.

5.4 Healthy Behaviour Change

As the interviewees continued with their sport and exercise participation and felt the benefits as a result, they developed an interest for other health behaviours. The women discussed how they began to read books, watch television programmes and talk to others about diet and nutrition. Depending on their overall aim, such as weight loss, weight gain or just to have a healthier diet they adapted their eating habits to suit. They also demonstrated their ability to analyse and critique the food on offer at Drake Hall. The knowledge acquired by the participants about diet was wide-ranging and included reducing fat, eating foods high in nutrients, having balanced meals and the importance of eating breakfast. Not only did the women apply this knowledge to their own eating behaviours but communicated it to their families and other inmates. The majority of the women interviewed for this study stated that they had no previous interest in nutrition or diet and that their current interest was purely a result of participating in sport and exercise.
The women interviewed showed that there were significant behaviour changes in their lives from before going to the gym to the time of interviews. They became dedicated to healthy living and took a holistic approach to healthy living including exercise, diet and quitting smoking. They were also keen to share their knowledge to influence behaviour change in others. Although there were no physical measures of increased health amongst the interviewees, they illustrated that they felt healthier both physically and mentally, discussing how they felt happier with their situation.

5.5 Reflections on criminal behaviour and pre-prison identity

Throughout the interviews there were signs of regret and remorse associated with previous criminal behaviour and identity. Some of the interviewees declared that they did not like the person they were before and were even glad they came to prison as it had shown them an alternative, healthier, more acceptable way of living. Some of the inmates demonstrated their desire to give something back to the community, they had realised the damage that their previous behaviour may have caused others and wanted to redeem it. This desire only came after they had begun to feel better in themselves and were leading healthier lives. The supportive environment of the gym gave them access to people who were already rehabilitated and were openly discussing their productive futures. The PEI’s, who had a different role than other prison officers in that they were there to help and teach others rather than to enforce rules and regulations, were often approached by women with a problem, either gym related or personal. They PEI’s were active agents in promoting socially acceptable norms. The gym also provided an opportunity for inmates to help others. Members of the public came into the prison for coaching and exercise and inmates asked for advice from the interviewees. The inmates who aided others through coaching, teaching or instructing found the experience rewarding and fulfilling thus stimulating the inclination to continue.

There was also evidence that the interviewees regretted their past criminal behaviour and were anxious to have the opportunity to live a crime free life. Their participation in sport and exercise was providing them with an avenue to achieve this. The stage at which feelings of regret begins was not identified in this research, it may be useful
to identify where this process of reflexion begins. It may have been as a result of increased physical and mental health or before participation in sport or exercise.

The gym atmosphere contributed to increased awareness of other means to earn a living, through the use of education, experience and planning they too could lead a crime free, rewarding lifestyle.

5.6 Developmental Skills and Qualifications

The previous four stages of imprisonment feed into the final steps towards rehabilitating a prisoner. The inmates had found an identity in being a ‘gym goer’, their confidence had increased and they gained experience of socialising with various groups. They transferred from feeling disempowered to the realisation that they can have control over their own future. They were leading healthier lives and described feeling generally happier. The natural progression from this point seemed to be gaining qualifications and experience for use upon release so the lifestyle change could be transferred from prison to the real world. The inmates were very active and keen to develop their skills through training to gain qualifications. Many had already completed training courses, some were actively seeking ways to improve their skills and others had developed plans to gain qualifications right up until their release date. The women took every opportunity to gain experience of coaching, teaching or instructing exercise classes or sport. They had also developed such transferable skills as leadership, team work, communication and problem solving while in Drake Hall and other prison gyms.

5.7 Future Plans

The interviewees were enthusiastic in setting out structured plans for release including CV writing, letters of application, offering to work voluntarily and making business plans. In Drake Hall they were given lots of opportunity to gain experience and also had the support of staff in the prison.

Some inmates stated that their career choice was not directly related to sport or exercise but the skills they had learnt through participation would be transferable to their chosen path. In two cases the interviewees related that their chosen career paths were initiated in the gym. For instance, Shell had been able to coach Danish
long ball to people with physical and mental impairments and as a result developed an interest in working with this specific population.

All the women in this study related that exercise or sport would play a large role in their recreational time and that they intend to continue their healthy lifestyle upon release. The wider impact of this is that a new found healthier lifestyle will provide the core for future personal development and ultimately reduced risk of criminal behaviour.