

Research Paper

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## **No one will want to be my friend because I'm a murderer**

**An exploration into the experience of change in women convicted of murder and who have participated in the Democratic Therapeutic Community intervention at HM Prison Send**

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### **Executive Summary**

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## Executive Summary

### Background

Prison-based Democratic Therapeutic Communities (DTCs) provide an accredited long-term (18 months – 3 years) psychological offending behaviour programme commissioned by the Offender Personality Disorder Pathway. DTCs 'aim to reduce the risk associated with serious reoffending and improve mental health within a high-risk, high-harm cohort likely to meet the clinical threshold for a diagnosis of personality disorder' (NHS England 2023, p. 3). DTCs derive from a treatment model developed by social psychiatrists in 1939 and widely attributed to Bion in his attempts to rehabilitate psychologically injured servicemen. Bion's idea was to use all relationships and activities to aid the therapeutic task (Trist and Murray 1990, p. 68). Prisoners explore and deconstruct each other's cognition, feelings and behaviours associated with past offending to develop an alternative non-offending lifestyle in a pro-social living and learning environment. Group psychotherapy and the day-to-day experiences of the community are used for all participants' therapeutic benefit (HMIP 2014, p. np). Holman (2018) simplified this complex task, stating, 'the treatment for bad experiences is good experiences' (in Gavin and Vau 2022, p. 22).

There is a substantial body of knowledge about the experiences and effectiveness of DTCs for men with offending histories and personality difficulties (see Richardson and Zini, 2021). The first men's community at HM Prison Grendon opened in 1962 and is now one of the most researched forensic settings in the world. There are four DTCs for men in prison, all of which have received significant empirical attention (Rawlings, 1998). The only known women's prison-based DTC is a specialist unit hosted by HM Prison Send in Surrey. Despite the acknowledgement that women have distinct criminogenic needs compared to men, suggesting that theories and practices applicable to men may not be relevant to women, there is scant research about the DTC at Send. This paper aims to address a gap in the literature by providing insight into the intricate subjective experiences of five women in prison who have been convicted of murder and participated in the DTC intervention.

### **Key Aims and Objectives**

We have completed investigative research using the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology to analyse the data. The research explores the experience of five women convicted of murder and who have participated in the DTC intervention. The study aims to understand their experience of changing their sense of self and identity. A subsidiary aim is to understand the mechanisms that facilitated the reported change by describing the participant's subjective internal process and the objective external constructs.

We are persuaded by Rawlings (1999) and Genders and Player (2020) that focusing only on criminogenic risk offers an incomplete picture and may neglect other positive changes and essential factors such as psychological trauma and victimisation. Furthermore, criminogenic risk tells us little about how women change, which has relevance to policy and practitioners working in the setting.

### **Research Design**

We received ethical approval from the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University and research approval from the National Research Committee (NRC) at His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. The suitability criterion was that all participants were women, confined to prison (at the time of interview), and former participants of the Democratic Therapeutic Community intervention at HM Prison Send. We accessed an existing database of former participants, identifying those who met the eligibility criterion and approached them directly. All participants were known to one or both researchers professionally. We included participants who completed the intervention and left voluntarily and who part-completed the intervention and were removed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in HM Prison Send over two months. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Participants were asked to provide an alias, and their identities were anonymised.

### **Methodology**

We employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) because it explores the participants' experience in detail through interpretation, focusing on the individual's subjective meaning. The focus of the study was to explore the experience and describe the sense and meaning-making of women who have participated in the DTC who have been convicted of murder. Therefore, a

qualitative approach was employed because it places human experience and how meaning is made as central.

### **Analysis**

We read each transcript several times and made initial notes with comments describing thoughts, content, language, and our process. During a second reading, we noted themes. We engaged in iterative discussions about the data, identifying coding discrepancies, disagreements, and differences. Owing to the collaborative nature of the study, we used consensus coding in the initial coding stages. Thus, we both coded identical transcripts and met to compare themes on a one-to-one basis. This procedural step ensured coding consistency and enhanced inter-rater reliability. Finally, we looked across all transcripts, moving from the 'particular to the shared and from the descriptive to the interpretive' (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2012, p. 79) to develop super-ordinate themes conceptualised as an output of the data.

### **Findings**

The participants described some of their profound and transformative experiences. They described their journeys of self-discovery, personal growth, and evolving sense of self, revealing the inner workings of their experiences. Throughout their narratives, the participants navigated the delicate balance of establishing boundaries in interpersonal relationships, reflecting on their actions, seeking honesty, and embracing the concept of mentalization to develop empathy and gain insights into their behaviours. The participants described the intricate dynamics of self-evolution, emphasizing the central role of fostering self-awareness and self-acceptance, focusing on participants' emergence from the process. The narratives provide a glimpse into the evolution of the self of women after they have killed in an environment marked frequently by shared vulnerability, honesty, tolerance, and collaboration.

Four super-ordinate themes emerged from the study:

#### **1. Establishing a basis for reality.**

Establishing reality involved gaining a clear and accurate understanding of their thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and the consequences of their actions. The DTC provided the psychological containment and boundaries that allowed the participants to focus on their internal experience rather than succumbing to external distractions. This inward focus was achieved collectively by staff and participants through honest dialogue and the recognition that the perspective of others had value

rather than continually being perceived as malicious or unreliable. This promoted mentalizing and facilitated participants in make positive changes and take responsibility for their actions.

## **2. Reaching psychological depth.**

Psychotherapeutic depth was pivotal to exposing deep-seated behaviour patterns, compelling participants to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves and motivating them towards personal growth. This depth was achieved by relentless scrutiny and benevolent suspicion by the community and staff. Experiences of profound insight formed the foundation of the participants' progression. The theme emphasizes the participants' descriptions of the futility of their self-defence strategies for coping with unwanted emotions and experiences and the usefulness of confronting problems directly to progress.

## **3. Evolving and dynamic self.**

All participants described a state of utter confusion regarding their sense of self and identity before participating in the DTC, and their strategies for managing this such as instilling fear in others. They identified a progressive redefinition of their self-concept and identity, a process attributed to participating in the DTC. Participants described the concept of identity as a multifaceted and deeply personal aspect of their existence shaped by life experiences, societal influences such as labels and stereotypes, and personal choices, particularly killing someone.

## **4. Coming up for air.**

All participants described applying the self-awareness and skills developed in the DTC intervention in various new contexts, including interactions with staff, peers, family members, and professionals. Some participants could not recognise their progress until they moved to another physical location with new relational contexts. Post-DTC interventions were identified as important for continued self-discovery and personal growth.

Despite all participants describing obstacles, being overwhelmed, and encountering resistance, they all reported benefits they perceived as risk-reducing. However, some participants reported being unable to identify their progress immediately after leaving DTC. Deselected participants reported specific difficulties at the time of deselection, tolerating other perspectives. These perspectives were later understood as non-malicious and reliable. Thinking back to the time of Serenity's deselection, she reported, 'My mind was just crazy then. I couldn't see the wood for the trees'.

### **Process of change described by DTC participants**

A process of change has been interpreted from participants' descriptions of their experience of change and their sense of how that change occurred.

The amalgamation of physical and relational containment coupled with continuous open communication over time facilitated an ability to distinguish between malicious or unreliable feedback and non-malicious or reliable feedback. This increasing discernment increased the participants' value of other people's perspectives and promoted mentalizing.

The facilitating environment and relentless scrutiny enabled moments of profound and unexpected insight. These moments increased participants' commitment through increased engagement, enthusiasm, merit and clarity. Throughout their experience, participants described growing self-esteem and an expanded capacity to see themselves in novel ways by understanding old identities and labels such as 'addict,' 'dangerous', and 'monster'.

After leaving DTC, participants described the advantages of having a dedicated area or therapeutic service for reflection, decompression, and sense-making. This environment allowed them to navigate internal changes and test their progress in an unfamiliar context and with new and significant existing relationships. This post-DTC experience reassured participants of their progression and supported sustaining and maintaining it through internal and external validation in pro-social relationships.

### **Conclusions**

The women's DTC at Send provides an opportunity for a catastrophic story to be told as part of a process of self-discovery. The study aimed to explore and gain a rich and descriptively deep understanding of the intricate subjective experiences of five women who have been convicted of murder and participated in the DTC intervention. The employment of IPA allowed for an in-depth and idiographic inquiry into the participants' lived experiences. The research highlights that the participants who completed and part-completed the intervention reported positive change. However, participants reported feeling overwhelmed during their participation and encountering numerous obstacles. One Black participant suggested a 'racist undertone', which impacted her experience. Finally, participants said that the positive change was not always identifiable to them until after they left the DTC, with one participant leaving the DTC believing she had failed.

## Implications for practice

The study identified the necessity for staff to distinguish between the practical application of permissiveness and inadequate boundary-keeping underpinned by fear. Participants emphasized the significance of honest feedback from staff and group members to evolve their identities. Still, they were also aware of their reactions and actual volatility in the heat of the moment. Additionally, staff concerns about the possibility of physical harm may lead to collusion and a reluctance to uphold adequate boundaries. Given the obstacles presented by the apprehension of potential attack, acknowledging these difficulties underscores the necessity of instilling a culture of openness, courage, and adequate boundary maintenance in the training of DTC staff.

## Further Research

This research has thrown up questions in need of further investigation and remain under-researched about women in prison:

1. **Long-term impact:** Exploring whether the positive changes reported by participants during the intervention persist over an extended period both in custody and beyond.
2. **Comparative studies:** Conduct comparative research to identify the differences in the change experience between women who participated in the DTC intervention and those who did not.
3. **Intervention effectiveness:** Evaluating the efficacy of individual elements in the DTC intervention by examining the distinctions and commonalities in the participants' experiences of change and the prescribed DTC model.
4. **Individual differences:** Exploring how individual differences, such as ethnicity, race, gender, and offence profile, may influence the change experience within the DTC.
5. **Post-release and resettlement:** Exploring the benefits and obstacles women face in settling back into society after participating in the DTC intervention.

ENDS