**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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## Acknowledgements

The voices of women who have been convicted of murder are rarely heard first-hand after conviction.

Our deepest gratitude goes to the participants of this study for offering their experience.

**ANNE, CLAIRE, KAYE, LAVENDER, AND SERENITY**

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## Contents

## Abstract

This research paper explores the experiences of five women convicted of murder who have participated in the Democratic Therapeutic Community (DTC) intervention at HM Prison Send. The study aims to understand the experience of changing sense of self and identity. A subsidiary aim is to understand the mechanisms that facilitated the reported change by paying attention to the participant's subjective experience and the objective external constructs. This study employs the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology. Ethical approval was obtained, and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights into the participants' experiences. In contrast to the conventional focus on men who have undertaken the DTC intervention in prison, this study explores the experience of women, including participants who did not 'successfully complete' the intervention. Through the IPA analysis, four overarching themes emerged: a) establishing a basis for reality, b) reaching psychological depth and resilience, c) evolving and dynamic self, and d) coming up for air. Each theme encapsulates various sub-themes that depict the nature of the participants' experiences. **Conclusion:** Participants who completed or partially completed the intervention reported positive changes relating to their sense of self, identity, and hopes for a crime-free future. However, participants described feeling overwhelmed during their participation and encountering numerous obstacles. Notably, participants reported that the positive change was not always identifiable until after they left the DTC. This study contributes insights into the distinctive contextual factors reflected in the women's experiences.

*Keywords:*

interpretive phenomenological analysis; democratic therapeutic community; women; murder; identity

## Chapter 1: Introduction

> *I was told I was a monster. I didn't know. I thought, 'Am I a monster?' I thought, 'I'll never get out of prison. I've done something that's so, so, so, so violent,' and I had no true understanding of why.*
>
> Kaye – participant

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). DTCs adopt Rappaport's (1960) four 'pillars' of communalism, democratisation, permissiveness and reality confrontation (in Rawlings and Haigh, 2017, p. 343) under the assumption is that the true therapeutic community will inevitably result once added. In a prison setting, DTCs provide a psychologically safer environment, allowing prisoners to confront their offending behaviour by working together respectfully in an environment that emulates community living. The DTC's therapeutic model embraces different treatment modalities, including social learning, psychodynamic and cognitive behavioural approaches. 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.

### 1.1 Women in prison

The number of women in prison is significantly fewer than men. In October 2023, the population and capacity briefing reported 3,621 women and 84,604 men in custody (Ministry of Justice, 2023). Black, Asian and minority ethnic women make up 11.9% of the women's population in England and Wales but account for 18% of the women's prison population (Prison Reform Trust 2017). The number of women in prison may be reduced per the Ministry of Justice's Female Offender Strategy (Ministry of Justice, 2018) commitment to reducing the number of women in prison. However, there will always be some women who commit the most serious crimes and will inevitably be imprisoned and require rehabilitation and recovery. As of June 2022, there were 351 female prisoners serving sentences for homicide offences: murder, manslaughter, infanticide, and causing or allowing the death of a child or vulnerable adult (Ministry of Justice, 2022). These women need robust, longer-term accredited rehabilitation and recovery programmes such as DTC to prepare themselves for a crime-free future or, at least, to reduce the severity and frequency of their offending. Drennan and Alred (2012, p. 15) define recovery as 'coming to terms with having offended, perceiving the need to change one's attitudes and beliefs that gave rise to offending and which support the future risk of re-offending, and accepting the social and personal consequences of having offended'.

Various authors contend that current offending behaviour programmes are insufficiently designed or adapted to meet the specific needs of women (HMIP, 2010; Genders and Player, 2020). Women present with different needs and challenges than men. Only 5% of children remain in their own homes once their mothers are imprisoned (Epstein, 2014), leading to the breakdown of individual families and significantly wider social consequences and economic costs. Women are more likely to have experienced a history of psychological trauma, intimate partner violence, and childhood sexual abuse, which can contribute to their offending behaviour (Gunter, 2012; Alves, Maia, and Teixeira et al. 2016; Baranyi, Cassidy, and Fazel et al., 2018). Additionally, women's pathways to criminality often involve

substance use, and interventions are critical in addressing this (Fazel, Hayes, and Bartellas et al., 2016). These factors emphasise the importance of implementing suitable and effective interventions for women in prison, as the Corston Report (2006) recommended. Understanding how the DTC at Send benefits the women it supports and the public is paramount.

## 1.2 Democratic Therapeutic Community for women at HM Prison Send

The DTC at Send is a residential unit for up to 24 women, hosted within a closed prison accommodating approximately 185 women. The women participating in the intervention live together and are expected to work cooperatively with staff and their peers to understand offending behaviour through group therapy and psychosocial activities such as horticulture. This cooperation promotes a 'culture of enquiry' where all behaviours and attitudes are open to exploration and linked to the index offence. Trained prison officers and clinical staff work with prisoners to deliver the intervention and spend informal and unstructured time together. Where possible, power is equalised by prisoners having a voice in how their community is run. With the DTC at Send approaching its twentieth year of operation and in times of economic austerity, its efficacy and increasing understanding of the mechanisms of change for those who participate are increasingly relevant. Theoretically, the holistic approach of the DTC should provide a psychological treatment environment that is responsive to women. However, little is known about whether this is accurate because the treatment model and theoretical underpinnings were developed for men. No research has evaluated the DTC's effectiveness in reducing recidivism, and outcome measures remain unpublished. We argue that examining the experience and mechanisms of change from the perspective of those who participated in the intervention offers multiple benefits and increases the body of knowledge.

## 1.3 The relevance of self and identity in offender rehabilitation

Given that the DTC aims to increase responsibility for offending behaviour through raising awareness of oneself and one's life, understanding the experience of a sense of self and identity for women who have participated is considered significant (Stevens, 2015). In addition, the desistance literature contends how people see themselves, their lives, and their identity can be used to understand how they move away from offending. This is referred to as 'identity narratives' (Stevens, 2015, p. 182) and 'self-concept' (Rocque, Duwe and Clark, 2023, p. 666). Several authors have discussed the importance of personal

narratives in rehabilitating offenders (Maruna 2001; Ward and Marshal 2007). Petrillo (2019) argues that for women in prison, 'Trauma and abuse, particularly when experienced in relationships, impact on behaviour, self-concept, and connections with others, all of which have been shown to be significant to desistance' (2019, p. 15–16).

### 1.4 The rationale

There is scant literature about the DTC at Send, and frequently, the discussion simply acknowledges its existence. There is an urgent need for basic information about how the DTC fits into the rest of the women's prison estate and criminal justice system, how it operates and how women progress through it. Genders and Player argue:

> 'The DTC at Send exists in a theoretical landscape that lacks an epistemological framework capable of defending the integrity and legitimacy of its practice and purpose, leaving it vulnerable to dominant penal narratives' (2020, p. 17).

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 trauma and victimisation. Furthermore, criminogenic risk tells us little about how women change, which has relevance to policy and practitioners working in the setting.

We begin with a systematic review of the literature to situate our research. We will then set out the research method to establish quality, trustworthiness, and transparency. Next, we will present the themes. We will refer to the literature in our discussion to underpin the findings. Finally, we will endeavour to draw some conclusions. The paper closes with how the study could be extended by suggesting further areas for research.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

The research landscape about women in prison is contested. Baroness Corston reported there are 'few topics that have been so exhaustively researched to such little practical effect as the plight of women in the criminal justice system' (Corston, 2007, p. 16). Furthermore, Genders and Player (2020, p. 1) describe the 'lack of criminological attention paid to women convicted of serious offences and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment'. Welldon (1992, p. 1) presents an opposing viewpint, stating, 'it is not that women have been neglected, rather false assumptions have been made and women as well as men have been ready to accept them'.

## 2.1 Prison-based Democratic Therapeutic Communities

The primary task of prison-based DTCs is to reduce the risk of re-offending in those who participate. However, due to the multifarious nature of the DTC intervention, outcome studies relating to recidivism are notoriously difficult to carry out and have been criticised for their poor quality (Shuker, 2010). Randomised control trials (RCT) are considered the 'gold standard' approach to treatment evaluation in forensic settings (Capone, Schroder, and Clarke et al. 2016). That said, no such studies have been undertaken at Send. Pearce (2022) argues the RCT approach to evaluations does little to help us understand the mechanisms contributing to therapeutic change and how these are sustained over time. Therefore, much of the current literature has looked at other ways of measuring and recording the effectiveness of DTC treatment in prisons, such as behavioural and psychological outcomes. The literature shows that DTCs have the potential to reduce violence and rates of self-harm in prison (Richardson and Zini, 2021). Psychometric data has also shown increased self-esteem corresponding to the length of therapy (Brown, Miller, and Northey et al., 2014). Overall, there is evidence to suggest that prison-based DTCs are an effective form of treatment for people with an offending history and personality difficulties (Richardson and Zini, 2021). These findings help us understand trends on a broader scale but do not provide insight into how these changes occur within the individual. It is also important to ascertain if the mechanisms of change described by participants fit the theoretical models reported in the literature.

The most recent and relevant qualitative study is by Ross and Auty (2017), who looked at the experience of psychological change from the perspective of five men who had 'successfully[1]' completed the DTC at HM Prison Gartree. The authors found that containment in the therapeutic environment and the participant's motivation to change were important foundational elements for engagement with the therapy. Developing supportive relationships, receiving challenges from peers, and internal processes such as removing 'masks' and self-acceptance were essential mechanisms of psychological change reported by participants. Haigh (2013) goes as far as to say that attachment, containment, communication, inclusion, and agency are necessary conditions. Failure to recognise these may cause 'a frankly toxic' environment (Haigh, 2013 p. 6). Miller, Sees, and Brown (2006) studied the change process for men at the DTC in HM Prison Dovegate. Participants viewed therapeutic change as a variable and gradual process characterised by seemingly small insignificant changes and 'blinding flashes of insight' (Miller, Sees, and Brown, 2006, p. 125). The authors also reported that 'residents talked about relying on others to point out whether or not they had changed' (Miller, Sees, and Brown, 2006, p. 123). Participants reported 'buying into' the DTC concepts, and profound realisations about the 'unknown self' were identified as significant events facilitating change.

However, an over-arching critique of the literature is that it is not appropriate to generalise the findings are generalisable to women because of their differing criminogenic needs and factors driving offending. The following section reviews the literature on the women's DTC at HM Prison Send.

## 2.2 The women's DTC at HM Prison Send

Richardson and Zini (2021, p. 6) noted in their recent systematic review that 'the efficacy of the DTC for women is limited with a number of the papers being unpublished'. Parker (2007) discussed accounts of two women who had completed the intervention at Send; the women described the importance of other 'collected inputs' after completing the DTC, which played an important part in their change process (Parker, 2007, p. 245). Hastings' (2012) unpublished study interviewed women who had 'successfully completed' the DTC to understand their experience. She found themes of group cohesion,

[1] The term 'successfully completed' is used in the literature to describe a participant who has completed the minimum time required in small group therapy of 18 months.

therapeutic relationships and changing identity as factors linked to positive change for participants. Furthermore, participants reported gaining insight through the therapeutic process necessary to develop a new identity. This notion is corroborated by Stevens (2012), who suggested delving deep into past experiences and linking this to the offence in a therapy group were key processes fostering self-reflection.

In addition, Stevens (2012) identified that having responsibility within a community, such as rep jobs and community meetings, promotes self-esteem and reduces dependency. However, it is noteworthy that Stevens explored these themes based on extracts from both men and women in DTCs, so her findings should be applied to women with caution. In a separate paper, Stevens (2015) analysed interviews specifically with women at the DTC and found they can either create a new identity that desists from offending or describe embracing a more authentic sense of self to one that was previously lost or denied due to traumatic experiences.

This review emphasises the importance of further exploring how women at the DTC experience identity change and what aspects of the intervention facilitate this. As the literature above is somewhat dated, gaining reflective and relevant insights into today's community is necessary to inform policy and practice. Genders and Player (2020) further support the notion of understanding change from a holistic perspective that encompasses prisoner wellbeing and criminogenic risk; they argue that a narrow focus on criminogenic factors in offender rehabilitation can be problematic for women engaging in rehabilitative interventions in prison.

Finally, the available research is limited because it only considers the perspective of women who have 'successfully completed' the minimum period on the intervention or were DTC participants at the time of the study. Hastings (2012) acknowledges this limitation; as a result, little is known about the extent to which meaningful change is experienced by those who do not complete the minimum period at the DTC. This study aims to mitigate this inefficiency by including the perspectives of those who have been de-selected. Genders and Player (1995, p. 138) found that several changes in men manifested almost immediately but: '…appeared to have been consolidated and reinforced amongst those inmates who had stayed longest…'

## 2.3 The self, identity, and desistance of women in prison

An index offence of murder can shatter one's previous identity and disturb the individual's experience and perception of everyday reality (Adshead, Ferrito and Bose 2015). Imprisonment alone is argued as enough to disrupt a person's identity (Rowe, 2011) as well as adverse life experiences (Petrillo, 2019). Women in prison are often stigmatized, particularly women who have killed, because of their 'unorthodox femininity' or being seen as 'doubly deviant' (Binik and Verde, 2022 p. 1) due to unconforming to societal views about how women should behave (Genders and Player, 2020). The internalisation of the stigma becomes self-stigma and can significantly impact a person's identity and subsequent behaviour (West, Mulay, and DeLuca et al. 2018).

Paternoster and Bushway (2009) describe offender identities incorporating at least three narratives: the 'working' self, the 'future/possible' self and the 'feared' self. Eaton (1993) in Stevens (2015, p. 183) argued that women need 'redirection' 'recognition' and 'reciprocal relationships' or mutuality to desist from offending. Women need to feel that they are people of worth who can change and contribute to society and to have these changes recognised and confirmed in pro-social relationships. In addition, Oshana (2010) argued that how people see themselves affects their status as a responsible agent; a healthy, veridical sense of self grounds responsible agency by enabling people to be aware of what they do and to understand their motives. This is relevant in this research because it serves as a way of understanding how an impaired sense of self and identity can impact how a person interacts with their interpersonal world and their accountability for their actions.

## 2.4 Race and Power

The intersection of race and the criminal justice system has been the subject of rigorous analysis, with disparities and systemic inequalities evident in prison environments. Available evidence confirms that women from ethnic minority groups are disadvantaged compared to white women in the criminal justice system (Prison Reform Trust 2017). Furthermore, there are few specialist organisations for ethnic minority women with personality disorders (Lamph, Mulongo, and Boland et al., 2023). The findings of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons highlighted the experiences of Black adult male prisoners and Black prison staff. Notably, one prisoner in the thematic report expressed concerns about potential differential treatment based on race, raising questions about whether similar incidents would occur if they were of white ethnicity (HMIP, 2022). Ghosh argues that 'we will not address the feelings of

alienation and rejection of our Black patients unless we recognise the deficiency within services' (Ghosh, 2000, p. 132). West, Mulay, and DeLuca et al. (2018) identified that self-concept is multidimensional, but few studies have evaluated how people integrate multiple stigmatized identities such as mental illness, race, and criminality. Reflecting on women who have killed, Binik and Verde (2022) observed that these individuals felt a dual condemnation, both as deviating from conventional femininity and as offenders.

An essential aspect of understanding these dynamics is scrutinising how euro-centric therapeutic approaches intersect with the diverse backgrounds of individuals. Bennett (2013) writes about race and power in prison DTCs. He concluded that therapeutic communities face a daunting task because they import the problems of power and inequality, including the injuries inflicted and privileges bestowed upon different groups and individuals. Despite these challenges, Bennett (2013) suggests that therapeutic communities can leverage strengths such as communalism, democratization, permissiveness, and reality confrontation to foster knowledge, understanding, and skills.

Weare (2013) explores the symbiotic relationship between labelling women who kill and the denial of their agency. The labels of 'mad,' 'bad,' or 'victim' limit recognising intentional acts and the responsibility for their commission (Weare, 2013, p. 338). Weare (2013) contends that the 'criminal justice system needs to end the judgment of women according to their adherence to, or deviance from, social and gender norms, instead focusing only on the crime that they have committed' (Weare, 2013, p. 357). However, despite stereotypes being a cognitive shortcut, they remain simplified and generalized beliefs about a particular group of people. It is vital that treatment remains gender responsive and maintains the emphasis on the distinct pathways for women (Gelsthorpe, Sharpe and Robers, 2007). Binik and Verde (2022, p. 22) reported that despite women being labelled as 'bad,' they were able to build their identity using psychotherapy by rejecting the traditional gender expectations that pervade judicial and media discourses, which 'swamp female prisoners'. Such labels are not exclusively applied to women. One man convicted of murder in Adshead, Ferrito, and Bose's (2015, p. 76) study said, 'I don't want to be in a group with people like me'. The work of the DTC is to deconstruct the labels applied by society, the prison and ultimately, the internalised perceptions among the DTC participants themselves without judgment to promote change.

## 2.5 Group psychotherapeutic interventions for murderers

Within the context of group psychotherapy, the specific application of therapeutic interventions for individuals convicted of murder remains underexplored. Adshead, Bose and Cartwright (2008, p. 10)

noted a 'marked lack' of published material about group work with murderers. The authors attributed this shortage partly because the 'story to be written is essentially an incoherent one of contrasting identities' (Adshead, Bose and Cartwright, 2008 p.11). All murder occurs within the context of a relationship and a community. The complex dynamics of psychotherapy groups for individuals who have killed represent a distinctive and intricate area within the realm of mental health treatment. Stevens (2015) emphasises the importance of the DTC's relational environment in facilitating change for women, whose offending often occurs within a relational context. Several authors have written about the formidable task of creating a therapeutic group for people who have killed. Adshead, Bose and Cartwright (2008, p.15) describe rage, anger and hostility manifesting as symbolically 'killing in the group,' 'killing of the group,' killing by the group', killing the group conductor' using scapegoating and a variety of psychological defence mechanisms to protect themselves (Adshead, Ferrito and Bose, 2015).

Dahle (1997) reports one factor predicting commitment in forensic interventions was the client's trust in the intention of the treatment providers. Another was the therapist's approach, which affects the overall group environment (Yalom, 1985). Ward (2002) also concurs that the therapist's approach is central. Miller and Rollnick (2002) assert that a confrontational approach creates treatment resistance and emphasises the importance of a motivational stance. Cordess and Cox (2000, p. 199) contend that supervision should be the '*sine qua non'* in forensic psychotherapy, and its necessity assumes an 'enhanced gravitas'.

## 2.6 Conclusion:

The literature about women in prison spans diverse topics, exposing the unique challenges and experiences. Women in prison have gender-specific and diverging needs and vulnerabilities when compared to men. Many women in prison have experienced significant psychological trauma in their lives, such as physical or child sexual abuse, which can contribute to their involvement in the criminal justice system. In addition, the intersectionality of race, gender, offence profiles and socioeconomic factors remain understudied. The motivation for gender-responsive approaches is central to advancing more equitable and effective interventions for women in prison.

## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Qualitative research has its roots in anthropology and sociology (Bhattacharya, 2017) and places human experience and how meaning is made as central. This study does not aim to 'predict a trend across a broad sample' (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 18) to make statistical generalisations. Therefore, a qualitative research methodology is appropriate to understand and explore complex human experiences deeply. The study employs Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) because it explores the participants' experience in detail through interpretation, focusing on the individual's subjective meaning (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012).

IPA is appropriate because it is consistent with our research question. The interpretivist epistemology is rooted in phenomenology and hermeneutics, emphasizing exploring lived experiences and individual motivations and beliefs. Ontologically, it assumes an external reality, but this reality is subjective and constructed through the participants' experiences. IPA methodology allows for the complexity and context of each participant's subjective experience within a complex and dynamic prison setting to be understood from the participants' perspectives. The focus of the study is to explore and explain the sense and meaning-making of people who share an experience in a particular context (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012) rather than create a theory or tell our experience. IPA offers an accessible, flexible, and versatile method that allows participants to 'express in its terms' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012, p. 32) their rich and detailed account to enable the essence of the lived phenomena to be understood and captured.

IPA research relies on the ability of participants to convey with language the essence and meaning of their experience, which may not be single or fixed (Bhattacharya, 2017). A criticism is whether participants have the requisite language skills or whether language exists to 'describe rather than tell' their experiences (Tuffour, 2017, p. 4). This critique contradicts the Belmont (1978) principle of justice, which could inadvertently point towards an inequitable distribution of the benefits and burdens of research, mainly because prisoners have much lower literacy levels than the general population (Spielman, 2022). Academic rigour and syntax can be reinforced by extra care to elicit participants' rich, descriptive and exhaustive accounts (Tuffour, 2017). We also believe the prior relationship with the five participants will benefit the study by putting them at ease. From a pragmatic point of view, this methodology feels accessible, flexible, not mysterious, and inductive, lending itself well to our study (Brocki and Wearden, 2006).

## 3.1 Research Method

### 3.1.1 Ethical considerations

We have consulted the British Society of Criminology Code of Ethics for Researchers (2015) and Prison Service Instruction PSI 22/2014 Research Applications (Ministry of Justice, 2018). We have received ethical approval from the Institute of Criminology at Cambridge University. We received approval from the National Research Committee (NRC) at His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) on 13 June 2023 (see Appendix I). We did not begin interviews until permissions were obtained.

The study relies upon participants offering us their experiences. Researcher integrity is essential. We briefed participants on the nature and purpose of the research. This was explained in the participant information letter (see Appendix II). Participants were asked to read and complete the informed consent form once they agreed to participate (see Appendix III). The document states that participants may withdraw from the study within two months of participation. This demonstrated our commitment to avoiding contractual conditions that limit or compromise research integrity (British Society of Criminology, 2015).

Participants were notified within the informed consent form and reminded before the interview that in line with the prison security rules (Prison Rules, 1999), we are under an obligation to report to HMPPS instances where they report an intention to harm themselves or others, declare an intention to break prison security rules or disclose unreported offences. The British Society of Criminology Code of Ethics for Researchers states that 'offers of confidentiality may sometimes be overridden by law: researchers should therefore consider the circumstances in which they might be required to divulge information to legal or other authorities and make such circumstances clear to participants when seeking their informed consent' (British Society of Criminology Code of Ethics for Researchers, 2015 p. 8).

Participants were asked to provide an alias, and their identities were anonymised. The study contains verbatim extracts from all participants. We have taken steps to prevent fellow participants from identifying one another in the finished study.

We considered that participants may experience some distress because of reflecting on past experiences in therapy linked to their offence. We discussed comprehensive means of support with participants following the interviews should the content have caused any distress. Shortly after the interview, we sent each participant a debriefing letter (see Appendix IV). This was followed up by a visit

to determine their welfare. This step aligned with the British Society of Criminology Code of Ethics for Researchers' (2015) principle to minimise personal harm to research participants. Neither the participants nor researchers suffered any undue effect, and all participants engaged with interest and enthusiasm during the interview.

### 3.1.2 Research participants

Once we received ethical and HMPPS permission, we purposively recruited five participants to represent a 'perspective rather than a population' (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012, p. 49). The suitability criteria were 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 included participants who completed the intervention and left voluntarily and who part-completed the intervention and were removed. This variation adds richness, depth, and credibility by confirming or disconfirming themes. We recruited five participants who were known to one or both researchers professionally. This was achieved by accessing an existing database of participants, identifying those who met the eligibility criteria specification and approaching them directly or if confined in another establishment via their Prison Offender Manager. The two prospective participants confined in another establishment declined to take part. As our study was oversubscribed to maintain homeostasis and a reasonably homogenous sample (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2012), we selected five participants who left the intervention within the last five years and were convicted of murder (see Table 1). This inclusion maintains the profile of participants and provides a recent and relevant snapshot.

We allowed one month between inviting participants and conducting the interview to enable the participants to reflect and change their minds. We were satisfied that the participants were willing and did not feel coerced into participating. We believe the prior relationship allowed for data of a higher quality. Etherington (2004) states that a previous relationship can enliven the research.

**Table 1- Participants**

| Participant's name | Index offence | Age | Ethnicity | Time spent on DTC intervention (max. 39 months) | Time elapsed since leaving DTC | Reason for leaving | Mother |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Anne | Murder – victim one year of age or older | 43 | White British / N. Irish | 31 months | 25 months | Planned departure at the end of therapy | Yes |
| Claire | Murder – victim one year of age or older | 36 | White British / N. Irish | 27 months | 27 months | Planned departure at the end of therapy | Yes |
| Serenity | Murder – victim one year of age or older | 34 | White British / N. Irish | 13 months | 12 months | Exclusion initiated by community | Yes |
| Kaye | Murder – victim one year of age or older | 36 | Black / Black British Caribbean | 15 months | 52 months | Exclusion initiated by community | No |
| Lavender | Murder – victim one year of age or older | 60 | White British / N. Irish | 28 months | 34 months | Planned departure at the end of therapy | Yes |

All participants were handed mandatory life sentences, and the Parole Board of England and Wales can consider directing their release after serving the minimum tariff set by the Judge.

### 3.1.3 Data collection

Before commencing interviews, we received signed copies of the informed consent form and stored these securely. Participant interviews were conducted in the establishment the participant was confined to. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

We conducted semi-structured interviews according to the guidelines for IPA (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2012). The questions were designed to 'embed the research's values, world views and direction' (Trede and Higgs, 2009, p. 18) and consisted of eight central questions and other sub-questions. Asking prepared questions allowed for a non-threatening, focused conversation while guided by the participants. Before research interviews, we interviewed a former DTC participant convicted of murder and who was not participating in the study as a pilot interview. This prompted a helpful discussion identifying insights into how the participants interpreted and understood the research questions. Participants were interviewed once, and interviews lasted between 52 and 68 minutes. During interviews, we used probes judiciously, such as clarification questions, to build rapport and elicit more information.

People in custody are vulnerable research participants (Charles, Rid, and Davies et al. 2016) due to an imbalance of power between them and researchers. However, it is acknowledged that the goal of an equal relationship in the qualitative research interview is unrealistic (Oakley, 1981). When interviewing our participants, we were sensitive to the power imbalance as researchers and staff members within the establishment.

### 3.1.4 Analysis

All the interviews were completed over two months. IPA was the approach used to analyse the data. Owing to the collaborative nature of the study, we used consensus coding in the initial coding stages (Richard and Hemphill, 2018). 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. Each interview was analysed in-depth using NVivo software. We both listened to all recordings at least twice, paying close attention to tone, pace, volume, and specialised vocabulary such as prison slang. We read the transcripts 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. We agreed with Braun and Clarke, who argue that human subjectivity prevents themes from 'passively emerging' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Instead, they emphasise that the researcher 'actively generates' them.

We conducted the same process for each transcript. 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. We remained mindful of the potential for data to be distorted or pruned during this process, and we aimed to be virtuous researchers at each stage by attempting to keep our interpretations based on the participants' world. Moran states, as far as possible, 'the 'thing' is to be seen as the participant sees it' (Moran, 2000 p.2). We were also mindful of our unique privilege to interpret and report what the participants meant. Due to time limitations, we could not return to participants to check that we had not misinterpreted the data, as Colaizzi (1978) recommends. As far as possible, we suspended our preconceptions during the analysis.

## Chapter 4: Findings

In this section, we present the results of our IPA research. Each theme is illustrated using verbatim extracts from participants. We have considered themes all participants spoke about. We have considered Smith and Osborn (2008), who suggest themes should not be selected purely on their prevalence within the data but also on the richness of the passages. An essential component of IPA is the double hermeneutic. Therefore, the themes are a subjective interpretation. Verbatim extracts support the objective existence of the theme.

Editorial elision where nonrelevant material has been removed is marked by '…'

**Table 2 - Super-ordinate and sub-themes**

1. **Establishing a basis for reality:**
    - A. Boundaries
    - B. Honesty
    - C. Mentalizing

2. **Reaching psychological depth and resilience:**
    - D. Moments of profound insight
    - E. Turbulence in groups
    - F. Identification of coping and defence mechanisms

3. **Evolving and dynamic self:**
    - G. Who am I?
    - H. Feared or loved?
    - I. Hope on the horizon

4. **Coming up for air:**
    - J. A place to dwell
    - K. Applying and adapting the evolving self to a different context
    - L. Internal and external validation

### 4.1 Establishing a basis for reality

All participants described establishing reality as necessary for self-awareness, accountability, personal growth, emotional development, conflict resolution, and making informed decisions. Reality was a foundational element for their growth processes. Establishing reality involved gaining a clear and accurate understanding of their thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and the consequences of their actions. This facilitated participants to make positive changes and take responsibility for their actions. The DTC is referred to informally by participants as 'TC'.

#### A Boundaries

All participants described an increasing awareness of boundaries in their relationships. Anne described her development of self-awareness and the ability to recognize her limits and become more discerning in her interactions.

> *…I know my boundaries, that's a big thing that I took away from TC. I know when someone's overstepping it…I know now where to stop and think, is, is this situation the right thing for me? Is this person the right person for me to be [with] in my life? So, I have actually had to cut a lot of people out of my life, not in a nasty way… (Anne)*

All participants described the concept of boundaries, their creation and recognition, their impact on relationships, and the necessity of consistently upholding them to maintain a structured and respectful environment.

Lavender offered an alternative perspective about the lack of consistency in upholding boundaries.

> *You can't have TC going, boundaries, boundaries, boundaries, boundaries, and then watching everyone break them. …You can't say, this it's all about boundaries… and then just have the lunatics running the asylum. (Lavender)*

#### B Honesty

All participants described how honesty and open communication played a pivotal role in self-discovery, healing, and evolution of the self within group therapy and community life. All participants described how they were encouraged to face their reality and engage in honest self-reflection.

> *…staff and the prisoners won't let you get away with self-pity…people will give you home truths [if] you like it or not, and then…the world sort of tilts, and you start seeing things slightly different. It's…like someone's cracking the…curtain open a little bit on your whole existence, and you start realising that you don't want to be that person anymore because it doesn't work.… You've got to be willing to put your soul on the table. (Anne)*

Lavender's experience described the significance of honesty, constructive feedback and sincerity within the DTC in being able to acknowledge her behaviour.

> *The people wanting to do it and were honest, even if they was making mistakes, they're honest about what they was doing, then they were worth listening to. Then, and I wasn't offended if they turned around and…said things or whatever because I knew they weren't doing it to be bitchy or nasty or anything. They were doing it because that's the way I was behaving, and that's how they saw it, and that's what I was. (Lavender)*

### C Mentalization[2]

All participants described the concept of mentalization and its impact on their ability to shift their focus from self-centeredness to empathy, engage in perspective-taking, and reflect on their actions and their impact on themselves and others. Anne's perspective described this and her focus shifting from being preoccupied with her difficulties to showing interest in others.

> *…I'm not so self-absorbed… I'm not self-pitying about myself anymore. I am interested in other people and what's happening to them and what could have happened with their side and not mine. (Anne)*

Claire's experience emphasized the importance of the chain analysis[3] process and perspective-taking in fostering mentalization.

> *…the chain analysis…for as much as it's really annoying that you have to go step by step through all your behaviour and, it was only when you got to the bit about asking other people*

[2] Mentalizing is the ability to interpret and understand behaviour (one's own and others) as psychologically motivated in terms of underlying intentions and mental states, such as thoughts, feelings, wishes, and intentions.

3 A behaviour chain analysis is a resource taken from Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) designed to assess the sequence of events leading up to a behaviour and the subsequent consequences.

> *how they felt, and you kind of put yourself in their shoes and think, how would I have felt if…someone did that to me? (Claire)*

All participants described their improved ability to think about the effects of their behaviour on themselves and others. Serenity described reflecting on her actions and their consequences.

> *…it's opened my eyes a lot to be able to do something wrong but then reflect on it and make it right. Where before, if I'd done something I didn't really like, it's done, that's it, finished. (Serenity)*

## 4.2 Reaching psychological depth and resilience

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. 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.

### A Moments of profound insight

Moments of profound insight often served as pivotal turning points, offering 'buy-in' from the participants. Participants described these moments as unearthing deeply ingrained patterns of behaviour, challenging them to confront uncomfortable truths about themselves. Serenity's revelation occurred during an emotionally charged large group community meeting when she recognised her tendency to deflect blame onto others.

> *…it was said to keep everything to an I, always use 'I' statements, and I found that really, really hard. And that's what made me realise that I blame a lot of people, or I'll throw something out there that has nothing to do with…anything else just to take the heat off myself or, that was quite a, like an epiphany for me. (Serenity)*

Anne's insightful experience occurred in her third small group session when she boldly asserted her self-assuredness.

*It was my…third small group after I started talking, and I said this stupid comment to Linda [prison officer] or to the group… "Well, I look in the mirror every day and kiss myself because I'm perfect," bang, straight away, they were like…"Let's look at that", and I was like … "What do you mean? Well, that's true, I do, do that every day." And everyone went, "No, you don't, Anne, if you do, it's because you feel like shit about yourself." I realised that they were right. I didn't do that at all. I was lying…They knew I was lying through my teeth for protection, I guess. And that was the most impactful thing because I never said anything like that again. (Anne)*

### B Turbulence in groups

All participants described the dynamics of community life and group therapy, which could be challenging and transformative. Kaye alluded to racial bias. Within the confines of these groups, participants were compelled to confront their deepest fears, examine and account for their actions, and explore their emotions in the presence of their peers. All participants described unmet expectations and taking personal accountability.

*It was hard living in the community of damaged women who'd committed really fucking violent offences. We hated looking at them, so we tend to look at each other's. Deflect by looking at each other's so intently… And it can be very harsh the way a stranger – a strange, damaged, violent woman is looking at your damaged violence. And they're very, very brutally honest. But it helps you get to the depths of it. (Kaye)*

Kaye alluded to an undercurrent of racial bias within the DTC community, hinting at the differential treatment of ethnic minority women.

*Sometimes, TC can have a slight…racist undertone… Because we saw… a lot of the ethnic minorities – mainly Black women – being subjected to chain analysis or scapegoated a lot more than the…white women. Ethnic minorities can be more vulnerable than all the other prisoners – as in subjected to more punishment or more scrutiny. (Kaye)*

### C Identification of coping and defence mechanisms

All participants described that the process of self-discovery and personal growth often necessitated identifying and grappling with coping and psychological defence mechanisms and the barriers they constructed to protect themselves from unwanted emotions, fears, or adverse experiences. Lavender

described her instinctive recourse to anger as a defence mechanism against more vulnerable emotions such as shame, fear, or guilt.

> *I was always ashamed or frightened or guilty or whatever. I didn't go to those emotions, I went straight to anger because they just wiped those ones out. (Lavender)*

Serenity described her insight into the conscious avoidance and denial of specific thoughts and feelings.

> *I think I've just taught myself not to think… or think about different things rather than thinking about the things I should be thinking about. (Serenity)*

Anne's perspective described missed opportunities in her life due to fear, denial, or apathy.

> *When I think back, there's so many problems I could have sorted out straight away if I wasn't scared or in denial, or just couldn't be bothered with it. (Anne)*

## 4.3 Evolving and dynamic self

All 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. All participants described a state of utter confusion regarding their sense of self and identity.

### A Who am I?

Claire described the impact of addiction on her identity, illustrating how external pressures can lead individuals to adopt personas that mask their true selves.

> *Because of just getting off drugs at the time, I didn't really have much of a self or identity…it's hard to explain, but throughout my drug use was not about getting to know me, it was about acting a certain way to be around other people and fitting in with people that I thought I needed to fit in with. (Claire)*

All participants described grappling with guilt and self-questioning, mainly due to the severity of their crimes. Kaye described this along with the impact of assigned labels in forming her identity.

> *I was told I was a monster. I didn't know. I thought, 'Am I a monster?' I thought, 'I'll never get out of prison. I've done something that's so, so, so, so violent,' and I had no true understanding of why, apart from, on the surface, I thought it was to find out what it felt like to kill someone. (Kaye)*

All participants described their capacity to evolve their identity in the face of overwhelming adversity as children and adults. Serenity described the impact of imprisonment on her identity as a mother.

> *The things that I'd done, the guilt and the shame that I carried around my kids and the, like, my family and stuff. And just, I don't, I, I didn't really know myself to either like myself or hate myself, so it was like a bit confusing. (Serenity)*

### B Feared or loved?

All participants described strategies to protect themselves in a world where trust were lacking and described previous inappropriate or violent self-expression and the discomfort and shame associated with this.

Anne grappled with the paradox of needing to be feared in her life and wanting to be loved.

> *I'm just a criminal, no one will want to be my friend because I'm a murderer. (Anne)*

All participants described defensive and anti-authority attitudes and their consequences. Claire described the implications of adopting defensive and confrontational attitudes.

> *It's exhausting, having people genuinely walk the other way when they see me coming. It's not nice, is it? But I made them like that…I put that attitude across of, I don't fucking care if you walk the other way, but really inside, it's not nice. (Claire)*

All participants described perceived dangerousness and social dynamics. Kaye described the impact of labels.

> *I was struggling to lower my risk, struggling to understand the crime. Being told by . . . the Prison Service that I'm very, very dangerous. (Kaye)*

Younger participants emphasized reputation as a survival strategy and the strategic use of an antisocial reputation to navigate the challenges of life and the prison environment. Serenity described her adaptability in her pursuit of survival.

*…And that reputation, that served me well, that's helped me survive. So, to be in front of the women that have known me for years, that think they know me one way, to show them something different, that's quite frightening. (Serenity)*

### C Hope on the horizon

All participants described an evolved self-perception. Serenity described reconsidering her self-worth and the possibilities for personal growth.

*Like I didn't think more was possible than the life that I was living before I came in and where everyone that's outside still are doing the same thing; they haven't got jobs. It's just kind of like, I thought that it doesn't go further than that. I've had bad things happen to me, and I've made bad choices, but I'm not actually a bad person. (Serenity)*

All participants described overcoming an overwhelmingly adverse and frightening past. Claire described her sadness about her perceived potential and missed opportunities.

*I don't even know why I'm crying. It's like, it's, it's just hard to think about that person, because that person could have been so much better with interventions earlier on, and that's the sad part of it. (Claire)*

Lavender described a change process by seeing herself in the past, present and future.

*First of all, it's coming to terms with what I'd done. Secondly, it's appreciating the things that I have around me and being grateful for them. Thirdly, wanting to have a happy future. (Lavender)*

## 4.3 Coming up for air

All participants described how self-reflection, self-acceptance, and self-awareness lead to transformations, emphasizing the positive changes in their lives during and after participating in the DTC and their ongoing work of continued personal growth. Some participants could not recognise their progress until they moved to another physical location with new relational contexts.

### A A place to dwell

Participants who left DTC to go to a PIPE intervention (Psychological Informed Planned Environment) explicitly described the process of self-discovery and personal growth after they left the DTC intervention. Claire appreciated that her previous work on DTC was recognised by PIPE staff when one stated, 'You can tell you've done TC'.

> *…it's so random, but I never even noticed. Even after coming off TC, I thought I'd failed because all I wanted to do really was build my self-esteem, my self-confidence, and I come off TC, and I thought, "I haven't even done it. I still hate myself, there's still aspects of my personality that I don't like, why am I so stupid?" But it come from being on K wing for a year to actually making a big decision for myself and going on PIPE, somewhere in between that, them thoughts went away. And somewhere along the lines, after leaving TC, I stopped feeling bad, I stopped feeling shit and negative, and I'm not even sure when it happened. (Claire)*

One participant described the benefit of the COVID-19 lockdown to self-reflect and metabolise the experiences she gained over a prolonged time.

> *TC is like a bombardment of information. After TC, and I spent, during lockdown, I did loads of self-reflection. And I had time to digest everything that I learnt on TC. Not the bad bits, but the good bits. Like, because a year and a half, we were locked in, just finding ourselves. (Kaye)*

### B Applying and adapting the evolving self to a different context

All participants described their experiences using the self-awareness and skills they developed during the DTC intervention in different contexts with staff, prisoners, their children, and families.

Anne described her newfound resilience and problem-solving skills when confronted with stress, marking a significant moment of self-realization.

> *…it was a feeling of when I got stressed after I left and I went to K Wing…I got stressed over a situation, but I dealt with it like an adult. I didn't react, I didn't get annoyed, I didn't scream and shout, I didn't stop eating, I didn't stop taking my meds, I just dealt with it, I dealt with the problem face on…and it's kept me going ever since, really. (Anne)*

Serenity described her ability to evolve her relationship with social services, enabling her to be more open about her daughter's well-being and take on a more responsible role in her life.

*Before, I looked at Social Services as like you don't tell them nothing, they don't need to know anything. But now I've got a good relationship with Social Services where I tell them absolutely anything. Because my daughter's my responsibility, and she needs someone to talk for her. (Serenity)*

### C Internal and external validation

All participants described recognising their progress through interactions with new and existing relationships. Participants described feeling calmer. Claire's improved interactions with others were evidenced by the fact that 'people are not so quick to get away from me'. Lavender described:

*I learnt that it doesn't go on forever. I can work with people I don't like. I can sit and listen to things that I think are absolutely twattish rubbish, and not say it. (Lavender)*

Despite not completing DTC, Serenity described an improved relationship with her family, particularly her mother and daughter. She recognised the value of responsibility in her life.

*They haven't told me, but I can just tell, through conversations, through the way my mum talks to me now, …they never used to tell me anything, because I'd either kick-off…it was very much, don't tell Serenity. But now, my mum, she's like, you can't shut her up on the phone, I feel more responsible now. I feel it's a nice feeling. I can be there for her, even though I'm not there, there, and she hasn't got to worry about me anymore about what I'm doing in here or what am I up to. (Serenity)*

Despite not completing DTC, Kaye's calmer and less complicated mind is paralleled by healthier friendships and the attraction of positive energy.

*My mind . . . is . . . calmer. I wouldn't say I've got calm energy – I'm glad that it's not because it keeps me going – but it's calmer and there's less complication. I have better, healthier friendships. I'm not particularly close to anyone in this prison…people are still very good to me. (Kaye)*

Several key themes emerged from the participants' experiences, shedding light on the mechanism of this process. The following discussion analyses the relevance of these themes to the literature.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

This section discusses the main findings actively generated and explores their relationships to existing literature. Our central research objective was to explore the experience of self-reported change in women convicted of murder who have participated in the DTC intervention. Our research utilised semi-structured interviews and IPA to explore the experiences of the five women in-depth. No qualitative studies have explored the experience of women who part completed the intervention or, specifically, women convicted of murder. This study generates insight into these cohorts, which may support staff and women in therapeutic work in this challenging setting.

Participants were asked about their experience of self-perception and identity change following participation in the DTC intervention. Participants showed self-awareness, a capacity to reflect upon their experiences critically, and a desire to learn from these experiences. The participants described their time on DTC as a worthwhile activity and reported four key themes that were useful and relevant to changing their identities.

## 5.1 Establishing a basis for reality

Participants described that the prison establishment provided the containment necessary to prevent them from physically 'running away'. The DTC provided the psychological containment and boundaries that allowed the participants to focus on themselves in the company of 'stronger and/or wiser' (Bowlby, 2012, p. 136) others. These findings corroborate Ross and Auty (2017), who found that containment in the therapeutic environment was an important foundational element for participants to engage with therapy. However, Lavender moved beyond a simplistic viewpoint, cautioning against complacency in maintaining boundaries. She emphasised that consistency and reliability in their implementation were paramount, stating, 'You can't say this is all about boundaries and just have the lunatics running the asylum'. Thus, this supports the assertion that failure to recognise the importance of attachment, containment, communication, inclusion, and agency may cause a 'frankly toxic' environment (Haigh, 2013, p. 6).

The emphasis on containment and boundaries assisted participants in establishing a basis for reality, meaning focusing 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. Ross and Auty (2017, p. 67) underscored these supportive relationships, stating that receiving challenges from peers 'were essential aspects of the change process', a sentiment reinforced by Lavender: 'If they were honest…they were worth listening to'. This process promoted mentalizing, exemplified by Anne's statement, 'I am [now] interested in other people'.

Participants described and emphasised permissiveness and reality confrontation, connecting to Rappaport's (1960) four pillars deemed critical to DTCs (in Rawlings and Haigh, 2017, p. 343). However, participants were tentative in their descriptions of communalism and democratisation as change-facilitating. One explanation is that the participants' minds were preoccupied during interviews with their small therapy group rather than the work of the whole community, where communalism and democratisation may be more describable. However, an alternative hypothesis could be that there are obstacles to implementing democracy and communalism because the DTC is situated in a mainstream prison and suffers from the 'dominant penal narratives' organised around enforcing rules and, to some extent, the confinement of individuals. (Genders and Player 2020, p. 17).

## 5.2 Reaching psychological depth and resilience

Participants described a moment/s of profound insight which often took them by surprise, or 'like an epiphany' (Serenity). These moments revealed a part of themselves to themselves and the DTC community and fell within a tolerable range, motivating the participants and offering them a glimpse of their potential. Such findings support existing DTC research that gaining insight into the self is important in creating new identities (Hastings, 2012) and can occur as 'blinding flashes of insight' (Miller, Sees and Brown, 2006, p. 125).

Group turbulence was described as challenging and sometimes obstructive, supporting Hastings' (2012) claim that group cohesiveness is important for change. The interplay of the participants' defence mechanisms was a by-product of facing confronting realities about who they were and their crimes, which Adshead, Ferrito and Bose (2015) describe as a means of self-protection. Kaye described a defensive strategy, 'We hated looking at [our offences], so we tend to look at each other.' Adshead, Bose and Cartwright (2008, p.15) describe the complex dynamic processes in psychotherapeutic groups for murderers, such as 'killing in the group' or scapegoating, which may explain these findings. However, some participants felt that the complicated group dynamics were necessary on reflection to 'get to the

depths of it' (Kaye). The participants' inability to easily remove themselves or other participants from conflicts caused them to seek and value new problem-solving strategies, such as conversation.

The experience of racial bias in one participant's experience speaks to the existing literature about Black and minority ethnicities' experience of possible differential treatment in prison because of their race (HMIP, 2022). Kaye described observing other Black women being 'subjected to more punishment or more scrutiny' and scapegoating. Ghosh (2000, p. 132) argues that 'we will not address the feelings of alienation and rejection of our Black patients unless we recognise the deficiency within services'. These findings highlight a need to understand better whether specialist organisations for ethnic minority women with personality disorders (Lamph, Mulongo, and Boland et al., 2023) would be beneficial. These findings question whether Bennett's (2013) suggestion that therapeutic communities can leverage strengths such as communalism, democratization, permissiveness, and reality confrontation to understand, interpret, and navigate issues related to race and racism are realisable.

### 5.3 Evolving and dynamic self

In their accounts, the participants described experiencing a progressive redefinition of their self-concept and identity, a process attributed to participating in the DTC. Serenity reported, 'I've had bad things happen to me and made bad choices, but I'm not actually a bad person'. Labels ascribed to participants, such as 'dangerous' (Kaye) or 'murderer' (Anne), were challenged, supporting the notion that women who have killed can evolve these identities using psychotherapy (Binik and Verde, 2022) and create new 'identity narratives' (Stevens, 2015, p. 182). Participants took steps to reject traditional gender expectations that pervade judicial and media discourses (Binik and Verde, 2022). Their narratives conveyed a sense of utter bewilderment regarding their pre-DTC identity, as described by Claire, 'I didn't really have much of a self or identity… it's hard to explain'. The absence of a well-defined sense of self was attributed to factors such as addiction, separation from children, and experiences of relational trauma throughout their lives as victims and perpetrators. This experience corroborates Petrillo's (2019) assertion that these elements, if unaddressed, can significantly impact self-concept and hinder women's ability to desist from criminal behaviour.

Participants described relinquishing strategies previously aimed at keeping people away or instilling fear, enabling the emergence of new pro-social identities or a tender and more authentic sense of self, much like Steven's (2015) findings. The parallels extend to Ross and Auty's (2017) study that removing masks and embracing vulnerability are vital internal factors for initiating change in DTC participants. Serenity

described her dilemma, 'that reputation…served me well'; however, 'to show [other prisoners] something different, that's quite frightening.' The participants linked the evolution of their self-perception and identity to a newfound hope for the future and a perception of worthiness in contributing to society, supporting the creation of a 'future/possible' self (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Stevens (2012) contends that having responsibility within a community promotes self-esteem. Serenity reflected, 'I didn't think more was possible' and 'I feel more responsible now…it's a nice feeling'. These outcomes support existing literature that self-esteem and a stable sense of self can impact a person's status as a responsible agent (Oshana, 2010) and support desistance from offending (Eaton, 1993).

### 5.4 Coming up for air

All participants who left the DTC to go to a PIPE intervention, an addiction service or individual counselling explicitly described the benefit of 'collective inputs' (Parker 2007, p. 245) in continued self-discovery and personal growth. The narratives described by participants underpin the value of continued self-reflection, self-acceptance, and self-awareness during and after engaging in the DTC and the significance of the changes being recognised in pro-social relationships (Eaton, 1993 in Stevens, 2015). All participants described experiencing overwhelm, and Kaye described 'a bombardment of information'. Notably, some participants struggled to recognize their progress until they physically and psychologically relocated to a new environment. Claire reported 'I thought I'd failed because all I wanted to do really was build my self-esteem, my self-confidence, and I come off TC, and I thought, I haven't even done it.' Following some time to dwell, she recognised her dexterity, 'I have better interactions with people, and people are not so quick to get away from me'. Despite descriptions about the value of dwelling, participants could not determine when they became aware of the value.

Miller, Sees, and Brown reported participants relied on others to point out whether they had changed (2006). The COVID-19 lockdown provided one participant, Kaye, a unique opportunity to do 'loads of self-reflection' over a prolonged period despite not completing the intervention. The forced isolation promoted self-reflection and underscored the role of external circumstances in fostering self-discovery because the participant found the lockdown conducive to processing and digesting the experiences from the DTC.

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.

Despite not completing the intervention, Serenity's shift from secrecy to more open communication with social services describes a change in her perspective, emphasizing her developing responsibility towards her daughter and external progress indicators. This progress illuminates the interconnectedness of internal and external validation in her evolving identity and the far-reaching benefit. The findings support Stevens's (2012) and Rocque, Duwe and Clarke's (2023) assertion that how people see themselves and their identity can be used to understand how they move away from offending. No participants discussed the value of rep jobs in the community fostering responsibility and communal values contrary to Steven's (2012) perspective about men. While this absence of discussion may suggest decreased communalism, one interpretation is that men may prize employment more. Participants who are mothers talked about improved relationships and increased responsibility for their children. Women may focus on care and nurturing and re-establishing this responsibility in substitute mother-daughter relationships in the DTC. This anomaly highlights a possible gender-specific finding and reinforces that literature on men must be scrutinised before being applied to women.

## 5.5 Conclusion

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. 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, and 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.

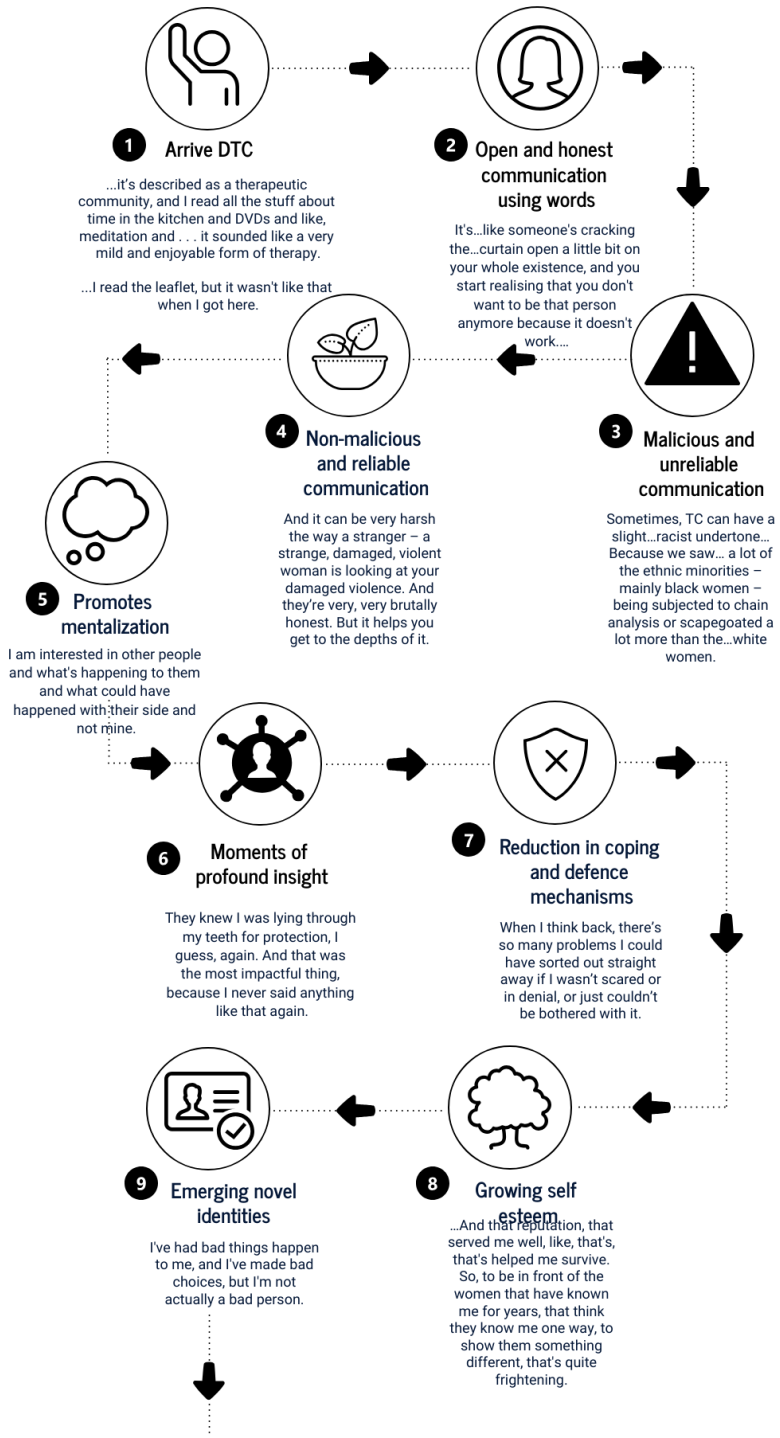
The amalgamation of physical and relational containment coupled with continuous open communication over time facilitated an ability to distinguish between malicious or unreliable feedback and non-malicious or reliable feedback. This increasing discernment increased the participants' value of other people's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

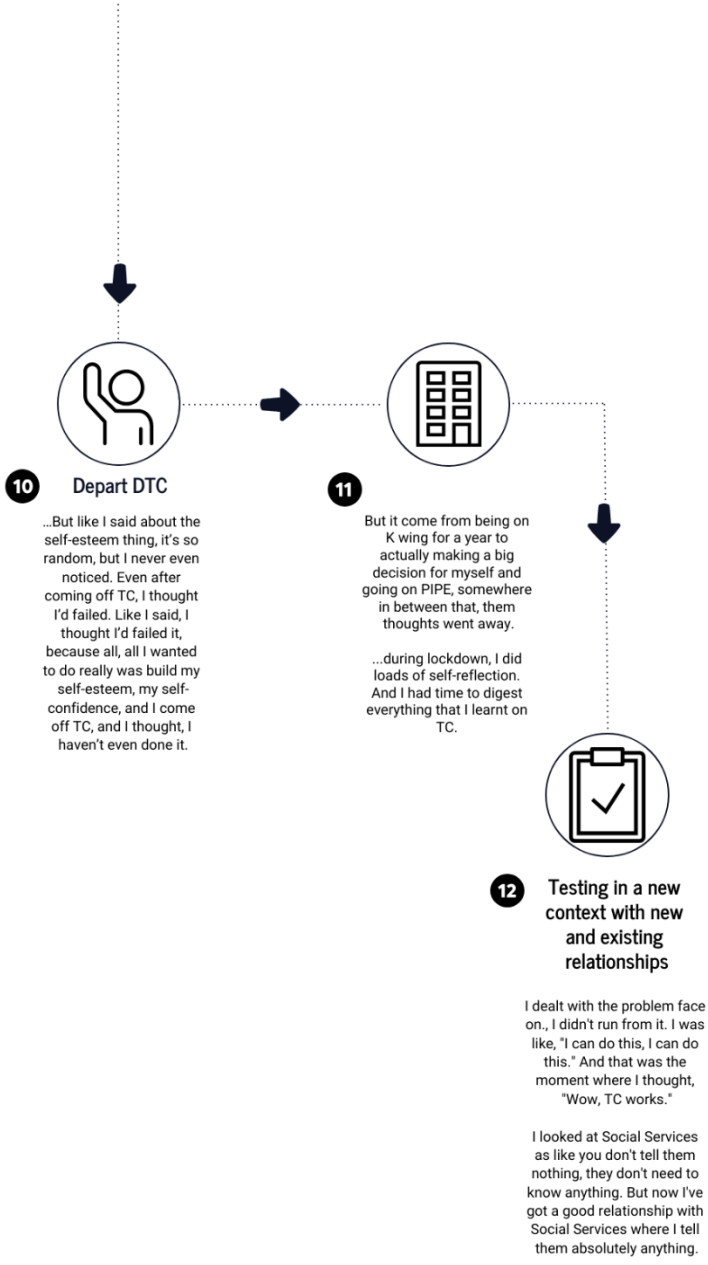
The facilitating environment and relentless scrutiny enabled moments of profound and unexpected insight. These moments increased participants' commitment through increased engagement, enthusiasm, merit and clarity. Throughout their experience, participants described growing self-esteem and an expanded 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.

**Table 3 - Process of change described by participants**

# Process of change described by DTC participants




10
Depart DTC
...But like I said about the self-esteem thing, it's so random, but I never even noticed. Even after coming off TC, I thought I'd failed. Like I said, I thought I'd failed it, because all, all I wanted to do really was build my self-esteem, my self-confidence, and I come off TC, and I thought, I haven't even done it.
11
But it come from being on K wing for a year to actually making a big decision for myself and going on PIPE, somewhere in between that, them thoughts went away.
...during lockdown, I did loads of self-reflection. And I had time to digest everything that I learnt on TC.
12
Testing in a new context with new and existing relationships
I dealt with the problem face on., I didn't run from it. I was like, "I can do this, I can do this." And that was the moment where I thought, "Wow, TC works."
I looked at Social Services as like you don't tell them nothing, they don't need to know anything. But now I've got a good relationship with Social Services where I tell them absolutely anything.

# Chapter 6: Conclusion and Limitations

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.

## 6.1 Evaluation of methodology

The study aimed to explore and add to the body of knowledge about the experiences of women who have been convicted of murder and participated in the DTC intervention and the perspectives they formed. A strength of employing IPA is that it offers a unique opportunity to hear first-hand from women convicted of murder in their process of rehabilitation and recovery. Using a small-scale sample, while suitable in size for the idiographic nature of the study, indicates that the results are not generalisable. We are satisfied with the employment of IPA to further the aim.

## 6.2 Further research

The research carries implications for policy, psychological theory and clinical practice, offering insight applicable to staff working in secure hospitals, non-forensic DTCs, community DTCs and all other situations where changing self and identity and the underpinning mechanism of that change is relevant. Additionally, it may interest people working within a more conventional therapeutic setting to inform their practice.

There are limitations to this research. Firstly, this is a study about the experience of the changing self and identity in women convicted of murder who have participated in the only DTC intervention for women at a particular time and, therefore, cannot be generalised. Secondly, the study provides a

snapshot bound by our perspectives and the limitations of language in conveying a descriptively deep understanding of the self after a grave and heinous crime that elicits a wide range of emotions, both for those directly involved and for society. Thirdly, each DTC functions differently within its unique culture and the culture of the host prison, which may impact participants' experiences.

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

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.

## 6.3 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. This corroborates Adshead, Bose and Cartwright's (2008) observation of rage, anger and hostility manifesting as symbolically killing the group conductor and each other. Welldon and Van Velsen (1998, p. 80) recognise the therapist's concern when working with violent people is 'that if a boundary has been crossed before, it can be

crossed again'. Additionally, staff concerns about the possibility of physical harm may lead to collusion and a reluctance to uphold adequate boundaries (Adshead 2012). Lavender was critical of staff: 'I would have preferred it if the facilitators and the officers had gone in, stepped in straight away, instead of letting things build up and build up until it gets ridiculous because they must see what's going on'. 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. These attributes are essential not only to effectively navigate the complications of DTC community life to maintain an environment conducive to trust and authentic communication but also for the competent management of the risk of violence within the therapeutic milieu.

### 6.4 Reflexivity

It is acknowledged in qualitative research that the beliefs and assumptions of the researchers will influence how the data is collected and analysed (Findlay, 2003). As researchers employed by the DTC understudy, we were immersed in the work of the community and have had prior professional relationships or knowledge of all research participants. This relationship presents ethical challenges and opportunities for more revelatory and nuanced research. We have been vigilant about potential conflicts of interest because these professional connections may incline us to interpret data to align with our pre-existing beliefs or our affinities to participants, leading to interpretation bias and impacting the credibility of the research. We believe that our established relationships have granted us access to experiences and individuals who are mistrusting of people and unknown and physically inaccessible to most researchers. By transparently disclosing the nature of our relationships, obtaining informed consent, and practising reflexivity and rigorous research methods, we found a balance that permitted meaningful and reliable research.

We were mindful that participants were preoccupied with their small therapy groups in interviews. While our interview questions were not focussed in that direction, the participants knew that one researcher was a psychotherapist and another was from a forensic psychology background. This prior awareness might have influenced their perception of the areas of their experience they thought we might find interesting. We also identified a parallel process between ourselves and the participants, the essential value of 'dwell time' to make sense of our sense of the participant's experiences. During this time, we engaged in further iterative conversations, which facilitated moving from the literal to the symbolic and 'the descriptive to the interpretive' (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2012, p. 79).

Finally, we are writing about a setting and a group of women that remains unknown to most people, and their impression may be informed by selective media reporting. We encourage the reader to contemplate their feelings and assessments about women who have killed.

*…a lot of benefits came out of something that was very painful.*

*Kaye – participant.*

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**Appendix 1: National Research Committee**

13 June 2023

Ministry of Justice

HM Prison & Probation Service

**FINAL APPROVAL**

**Ref:** 2023-067

**Title:** The experience of women who are former residents of the Democratic Therapeutic Community at HMP Send

Dear Sophie Crilly,

The National Research Committee (NRC) is pleased to provide final approval for your research project. The terms and conditions below will continue to apply to your research project.

**Following NRC approval, the decision to grant access to prison establishments or Probation Service regions (and the offenders and practitioners within these establishments/regions) ultimately lies with the Governing Governor/Director of the establishment or the Probation Service Regional Probation Director of the region concerned.**

NRC approval covers the following prisons / probation regions:

- Prisons across the women's estate

If establishments/regions are to be approached as part of the research, a copy of this letter must be attached to the request to prove that the NRC has approved the study in principle. The decision to grant access to

existing data lies with the Information Asset Owners (IAOs) for each data source and the researchers should abide by the data sharing conditions stipulated by each IAO.

Please note that a MoJ/HMPPS policy lead may wish to contact you to discuss the findings of your research. If requested, your contact details will be passed on and the policy lead will contact you directly.

Please quote your NRC reference number in all future correspondence.

Yours sincerely,

Anna Kotova

National Research Committee

## Appendix 2: Participant information letter

New Thinking About Women & Criminal Justice | THE GRIFFINS SOCIETY

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE Institute of Criminology

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION LETTER**

Sophie Crilly and Nujoji Calvocoressi are seeking to identify people in custody who have attended the Democratic Therapeutic Community intervention at HMP Send and would be willing to share their experience.

**Title of Research Project:** The experience of women who have attended the Democratic Therapeutic Community intervention at HMP Send.

**Aims of research:**

This research will explore the experience of women's changing identity after attending the DTC programme at HMP Send.

We also want to consider:

- your experience of **how your identity has been impacted** by the therapeutic community.
- the sense you make of the impact.

**Why have we approached you as a potential participant?**

As a **former resident** of the democratic therapeutic community at HMP Send we would be interested to hear about how your **experiences impacted your identity**. This would be by participating in **one recorded interview** with Sophie and Nujoji. The interview will last approximately **60 minutes** and will take place at **your establishment**.

**How will you contribute?**

Your experiences will be **kept anonymous**, and ethics are an important part of research. Your **identity and other people you talk about will be changed**, your identity will only be known by Sophie and Nujoji. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed to a password-protected computer file. Any paper copies will be kept secure in a locked drawer. Once the interviews have been transcribed, the **recording will be destroyed**. Upon completion of the research, the **transcribed interviews will be destroyed**. Should you require a copy of either, this will need to be requested before these points. You may also receive a copy of the final research report if you would like. The Griffins Society will publish the final report. **You may withdraw** from the study up to two months after participation.

As part of the process of participating, we will send you an **Informed Consent Letter**, which sets out the agreement to participate. We would be grateful if you would read, sign, and return this at your earliest opportunity if you are happy to participate.

**HM Prison Service:**

The National Research Committee at His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) has permitted us to conduct this research. **The research is not being undertaken for HMPPS.**

The Institute of Criminology at the University of Cambridge has ethically approved the research.

**Participant Wellbeing:**

Your rights, privacy and dignity will be protected. Living in a prison can be a challenging and upsetting environment at times. While we do not expect the interview process to cause personal harm or distress, this cannot be guaranteed. **We will contact you via your OMU two weeks after the interview to debrief.**

**Publication:**

The value of research is in making it available for others to gain insight and experience within the criminology profession. During any part of the process, you can contact either Sophie and Nujoji or our supervisor via OMU or letter **if you have any questions or difficulties** in being part of the research.

**Names of researcher and contact details:**

Nujoji Calvocoressi & Sophie Crilly
Democratic Therapeutic Community
HMP Send
Ripley Road
GU23 7LJ
01483 471080

**Name of research supervisor and contact details:**

Dr Madeline Petrillo
Senior Lecturer in Criminology
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Greenwich
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## Appendix 3: Informed Consent Form

New Thinking About Women & Criminal Justice | THE GRIFFINS SOCIETY

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE Institute of Criminology

**Informed Consent Form**

*Title of Research Project:* The experience of women who have attended the Democratic Therapeutic Community intervention at HMP Send. An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA).

A research study presented to the Griffins Society in partnership with the University of Cambridge, Institute of Criminology. This research has been approved by The University of Cambridge Ethics Committee and HMPPS National Research Committee.

By signing this Informed Consent form, you are acknowledging that you have read and understood the Participant Information letter for the research and you have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and discuss any concerns you might have with the researchers or our supervisor.

*Aims of research:*

This research hopes to explore the experience of women who have successfully completed the DTC programme at HMP Send. We also hope to explore how you have made sense of this experience and how it has impacted you.

Safeguards will be in place to ensure that ethical considerations are applied at all stages of the research: a) recruitment b) during data collection c) during the process of analysis d) once the project is concluded.

*Consent:*

This study relies upon women such as yourself who have successfully completed the DTC at HMP Send to tell us your experience verbally. It will be our responsibility to ensure that you give full informed consent before commencing research.

We will achieve this by the following:

a) We will fully brief you as to the nature and purpose of the research. This will help you to decide if you want to take part. This information is explained in the Participant Information letter. In the recruitment phase, informed consent can be discussed further, and you do not need to commit immediately to the study.

b) You will be asked to read carefully and complete an Informed Consent form. This form will clearly state that you can withdraw from the study anytime.

c) You are aware that the interview will be recorded and transcribed.

d) You can refuse to answer individual questions.

e) The research is not being undertaken for HMPPS, and you can decide not to participate. There will be no consequences to you.

*Anonymity:*

a) You will be asked to choose a name that you will be called in the research.

b) Your identity will be anonymised; however, the name of the service will be identified.

c) Information identifying you during interview, such as your real name will be erased during transcription.

d) You are notified and will be reminded before interview that in line with the prison security rules (rule 51 of the Prison Rules 1999), we are under an obligation to report to HMPPS instances where you or another person:

- report an intention to harm themselves or others.
- report an intention to break prison security rules.
- disclose unreported offences.

In the event of such an instance, we will discuss this with you, our supervisor and HMPPS.

e) Steps will be taken to prevent fellow participants from identifying each other in the finished study.

f) The study will contain what you say during the interview.

*Data protection:*

a) The researchers will handle all information you offer. Any departure from this will be discussed with our supervisor and you in good time.

b) We will save all research data on a password-protected computer and backup on a separate password-protected device.

c) Any data breach or loss will be discussed immediately with our supervisor.

d) All interview recordings will be destroyed following transcription, and transcripts will be destroyed upon completion.

*Participant wellbeing:*

Your rights, privacy and dignity will be protected. Living in a prison can be a challenging and upsetting environment at times. While we do not expect the interview process to cause you personal harm or distress,

this cannot be guaranteed. We will contact you via your Offender Manager or letter one week after the interview to debrief.

I understand that my participation in this project is voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw up to two months after participating by contacting the researchers and stating that I wish to do so.

- Name of Participant:
- Signature of Participant:
- Date of Signature:

*Name of researcher and contact details:*

Nujoji Calvocoressi & Sophie Crilly
Democratic Therapeutic Community
HMP Send
Ripley Road
GU23 7LJ
01483 471080

*Name of research supervisor and contact details:*

Dr Madeline Petrillo, Senior Lecturer in Criminology
School of Law and Criminology
University of Greenwich
Old Royal Naval College
Queen Mary, Room 211
Park Row
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## Appendix 4: Debriefing letter

**Debriefing Guidelines**

Dear XXXX

*Title of Research Project:* The experience of women who have successfully completed the Democratic Therapeutic Community intervention at HMP Send. An interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA).

|We are writing to thank you again for your time and contribution to our research. Your contribution provided an invaluable source of rich experience.

Living in a prison can be a challenging and stressful environment. We know that talking about your experience in detail can bring up feelings immediately and some time afterwards that may impact your circumstances or your wish to remain a participant.

Should there be something you would like to discuss with us, please feel free to contact either one of us or our supervisor on the below details:

**Name of Researcher and Contact Details:**

Nujoji Calvocoressi & Sophie Crilly
Democratic Therapeutic Community
HMP Send
Ripley Road
GU23 7LJ
01483 471080

**Name of Research Supervisor and Contact Details:**

Dr Madeline Petrillo
Senior Lecturer in Criminology
School of Law and Criminology
University of Greenwich
Old Royal Naval College
Queen Mary, Room 211
Park Row
Greenwich
SE10 9LS
m.r.petrillo@greenwich.ac.uk

We will contact you by telephone and/or letter a week after our interview, where we will have the opportunity to talk more following the interview.

## Appendix 5: Ethics Approval

**Dr Barak Ariel**
*Professor of Experimental Criminology*

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Institute of Criminology

Nujoji Calvocoressi

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06 March 2023

*Dear Sophie and Nujoji,*

*I write to confirm that your research proposal entitled*

> *The experience of women who are former residents of the Democratic Therapeutic Community at HMP Send*

*has been reviewed and formally approved by the Institute of Criminology's Ethics Committee.*

*Yours sincerely,*

Barak ariel

*Dr Barak Ariel*
*Chair, Ethics Committee Institute of Criminology*

ENDS