

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 who have participated in the Democratic Therapeutic Community intervention at HM Prison Send

Sophie Crilly & Nujoji Calvocoressi
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Abstract

This research 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 aimed 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. 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.

Findings

- Participants described establishing reality as necessary for self-awareness, accountability, personal growth, emotional development, conflict resolution, and making informed decisions.
- Participants described an increasing awareness of boundaries in their relationships.
- 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.
- Psychotherapeutic depth was pivotal to exposing deep-seated behaviour patterns.
- Moments of profound insight often served as pivotal turning points, offering 'buy-in' from the participants.
- The process of self-discovery and personal growth often necessitated identifying and grappling with coping and psychological defence mechanisms
- The dynamics of community life and group therapy, can be challenging and transformative
- Some participants could not recognise their progress until they moved to another physical location with new relational contexts.

Recommendations

- Further research should be undertaken to explore whether the positive changes reported by participants during the intervention persist over an extended period both in custody and beyond.
- This should include comparative research to identify the differences in the change experience between women who participated in the DTC intervention and those who did not.
- An evaluation of the efficacy of individual elements in the DTC intervention should be carried out examining the distinctions and commonalities in the participants' experiences of change and the prescribed DTC model.
- Research should be carried out to explore how differences, such as ethnicity, race, gender, and offence profile, may influence the change experience within the DTC.
- The benefits and obstacles women face in settling back into society after participating in the DTC intervention should be considered.
- Training for DTC staff should recognise the complexity of work and the importance of instilling a culture of openness, courage, and adequate boundary maintenance.