

**Research Report: The experience of 'Journey Woman' from the perspective of the participants.**

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**1. Abstract**

The purpose of the study was to explore the experience of the 'Journey Woman' project from the perspective of the women attending the group and how this experience in turn relates to theories and models behind therapeutic interventions. Diaries were used as a way to collect data, over three groups of the 'Journey Woman' project. Not only did this methodology offer a person-centred approach, research has indicated that women are more receptive to diaries as a means of recording their thoughts. The research indicated that the project has potential for increasing women's motivation to change, developing insight and developing skills needed for effectively engaging with others. The development of the skills appears to be underpinned by the collaborative and safe learning environment created by the facilitators of the project. The benefits gained from the project have implications for encouraging motivation for those women who are currently not considering change and as such could be a useful foundation for further risk reduction work.

**2. Literature Review**

Drama-based group work has been used in a number of different contexts, from improving health education to working with offenders. Drama can be described as a way of representing and expressing those emotional events that feel important. Gersie (1996) pointed out that drama gives permission for a person to 'be different' allowing the participant to display different sides of themselves and emotions that have previously been suppressed. Drama group work involves people in a way more traditional approaches do not. It allows individuals to work with a representation of an event or a possible event, enabling clarification of what took place and the ability to look at future possibilities (Liebmann, 1996).

There has been an increase in interest in the effectiveness of drama-based group work coinciding with the attitudinal shift within offender rehabilitation from 'nothing works' to 'what works' (McGuire, 1995). Research suggests that participation in drama-based group work may increase self-confidence, self-esteem, problem solving ability and interest in further learning (Hughes, 2005). However, in terms of the use of drama group work in custodial environments, the majority of evaluations are unstructured, reflecting a lack of clarity about the aims of the arts in this context. Furthermore whilst the provision of theatre and drama in the Criminal Justice System has developed in recent years, there is still little analysis of the part that these activities could play in the prison environment. This review intends to look at drama-based group work in the context of prison, highlighting the theories behind drama-based group work and where drama work could fit within the 'what works' principles of evidence-based practice.

Simplistically, therapy can be defined as a form of intervention aiming to bring about personal change (Jones, 2007). However, in the context of rehabilitation, therapeutic intervention often involves specific objectives for change, which are evaluated to demonstrate the effectiveness against the desired objectives. It is noted that regardless of what an offenders' individual needs may be, offender rehabilitation has primarily come to be viewed largely in terms of reducing re-offending (Chui, 2003).

There are a number of psychological theories guiding traditional approaches of rehabilitation. The main aim of these interventions is to address risk factors associated with offending and develop protective factors. In review of these theories and their association with drama-based work, research has highlighted that cognitive behavioural theory, role theory, social learning theory and narrative therapy are the most prominent theories taken from traditional rehabilitation (Jones, 2007).

Cognitive behavioural therapy is most widely used in offending behaviour interventions, its popularity due to the development of the 'what works'

literature and findings from meta-analytical reviews suggesting that cognitive behavioural approaches are associated with lower reconviction rates in comparison with the reconviction rates of other methods (Burnett and Roberts, 2004). Prison based evaluations have also highlighted their place in reducing re-offending (Friendship et al, 2003). Unsurprisingly, cognitive behavioural therapy is the most prominently used framework in drama-based group work.

The implementation of the 'what works' agenda has brought about the development and delivery of a number of accredited programmes in relation to working with offenders. The accreditation criteria emphasises the importance of the work being evidence-based and outlined a number of key principles (Correctional Services Accreditation Panel). These principles highlight that for interventions to be effective they should relate to risk, need and responsivity whilst maintaining quality and integrity.

The principle of responsivity is increasingly seen as integral to delivering effective interventions. McGuire and Priestley (1995) suggested that for interventions to be effective they are required to be responsive to each offender's learning style, and pointed out that the "*learning styles of most offenders require active, participatory methods of working*" (McGuire and Priestley, 1995).

Thompson (1999), in his manual outlining drama techniques with group of offenders', hints that there is a place for drama-group work within the 'what works' principles of evidence based practice. In support of this, Fordham (2002) highlighted that the active methods used in drama-based group work have a more immediate impact for those involved as the characters and situations are created from the participants' own culture and experiences, and that the use of these drama techniques does not rely on literacy skills, further supporting the responsivity principle.

Cognitive behavioural approaches aim to develop awareness of the relationship between thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Underlying the

cognitive behavioural approach is the principle that in order to change the way people behave it is necessary first to change the way they think. In drama, the use of theatrical metaphors such as 'the mask', which represents the participants' 'inner voice' and thoughts processes, emphasises a participants' thoughts, beliefs and values and the affect this has on their behaviour. It is said that by using drama the participant is placed as close as possible to the real event and as a result is able to access all the attitudes, values and beliefs associated with that experience (Baim, Brookes & Mountford, 2002). Furthermore, the use of tableau work in drama, whereby scenes are paused to allow for discussion, allows further opportunity for situations to be viewed objectively, developing participants' awareness of their thinking and emotions. The consequences of these situations can then be explored by encouraging participants to look at the next scene in terms of the decisions they make and the consequences of these.

Cognitive behavioural programmes also use a range of techniques, including modelling, role-play, reinforcement, cognitive exercises, and dilemma debates. The use of role-play techniques helps participants practice problem solving, social skills and develop the ability to see a situation from other people's perspectives. Similarly, role-plays in drama-work provide opportunities to experience events from different points of view and to practice new skills and behaviours. Jefferies (1991) explained that in drama, by reversing roles with significant others in a prisoner's life, they then can see events as other people see them, not only giving them an improved understanding of the situation, but also helping to adjust their own views on the situation. Clifford and Hermann (1999) agree that drama provides an equal opportunity to address moral dilemmas, to express our feelings, to be creative and to explore new ideas and ways of being.

It appears that many of the principles and techniques utilised in cognitive behavioural programmes coincide with drama group work. One fundamental difference between the two however, is that the structured nature of manualised cognitive behavioural interventions could be said to sometimes leave little room for the flexibility that is allowed for in drama work. A review of

drama group-work studies highlighted the fluidity of the drama process and the role of the participants in guiding the work. However, this in itself creates its own problems, as due to the nature of drama work, the impact of the intervention will differ between participants in terms of the deficits addressed. This makes evaluating the effectiveness of drama-work programmes more difficult, which does not lend itself well to the 'what works' principles and need for evidence-based practice.

Although cognitive behavioural therapy appears to be the guiding theory of most drama group work, the theories of role and social learning theory also play a part. Role theory suggests that learning how to perform and adapt to different roles in life is an important life skill (Landy, 1990). Role theory sees the performance in drama work as an opportunity for role taking and role-playing, whereby participants increase their awareness of the roles available to them and develop their repertoire of roles. In conjunction with this, social learning theory suggests that drama work provides the opportunity to engage in positive forms of social modelling (Bandura, 1977).

Narrative therapy also features in the work of drama. Narrative therapy is based around the idea that our identities are shaped by the account of our lives in our narratives or stories (Ungar & Teram, 2000). In this context, the work of narrative therapy seeks to undo one script and re-write it, practice alternatives and develop potential for positive outcomes. Similarly, drama should offer new scripts to be created whereby old scripts can be undone, rewritten and new alternatives practiced (Liebmann, 1996).

A challenge for arts and drama-based projects within the criminal justice system is to demonstrate their effectiveness to a number of key stakeholders by demonstrating a link between these interventions and a reduction in reconviction rates. As discussed previously, drama-based group work cannot be easily evaluated by the conventional evaluation methods subscribed by the principles of evidence-based practice. This is likely to account for the little research or evaluation methods carried out on drama-based work, with more research predominantly relying on anecdotal evidence of development. The

absence of reliable evaluation is not likely to mean that there was no effect, but it is more likely that as evaluation is a resource-demanding task, many organisations do not have the time or resources to carry this out effectively. There is also considerable debate about whether the use of reconviction rates, which are used to evaluate the more traditional rehabilitation interventions, are an appropriate measure of the success of a drama-based project. It is believed that such is the nature of offending that only interventions that address a range of risk factors can be effective in reducing re-offending (Maddoc Jones, 2005).

From all the studies reviews exploring the impact of drama based therapy, only one study looked at reconviction rates. Hughes (2003) carried out an evaluation of Blagg, a drama-based offending behaviour programme run with young offenders in the community by Theatre in Prisons and Probation (TiPP). This study included reconviction rates, which reported that out of 31 participants, only 30% were reconvicted within one year of participation compared to 39% for a matched control group. This study also gathered qualitative data from staff and participants, which suggested that participants developed their awareness of the impact of offending on themselves and others. However, these statistics must be viewed with caution due to the small sample size and the fact that the reconviction rates for the last group were not a full year after completion of the programme. The findings of this study are also limited by differences in the selection of the groups for each programme, with some groups consisting of single-gender participants, whereas other groups had mixed-gender participants. Furthermore, the authors commented themselves that the reliability of the interview techniques were perhaps questionable, as many of the participants had a vested interest in participating well in the course due to being subject to community orders.

An evaluation of a Geese Theatre programme with young offenders in HMP Maidstone, carried out by prison education staff employed pre-and-post-participation tests looking at attitudes towards offending. This evaluation showed a reduction in prisoners' views of crime being worthwhile, and an improvement in attitudes towards desistance from offending and victim

empathy post-participation. Staff assessment post-course, indicated that young offenders had greater victim awareness, increased confidence and improved ability to work as a team. Young offenders reported greater awareness of victim issues and of the consequences of offending (HMP Maidstone, 2001).

A study of Geese Theatre Company's Violent Illusion Trilogy (Reiss et al, 1998), which explores cycles of behaviour giving participants an insight into their own violence, examined changes in levels of anger in young men before and after the week-long project in a maximum security hospital. Self-report questionnaires constructed from two anger expression inventories devised by Novaco (1975) were administered before and after the week and at a three-month follow-up. The research suggests that significant reductions in anger levels after the week were maintained three months after the project.

Hughes (2005) carried out a critical review of the current evidence and theory base for arts projects in the Criminal Justice System and concluded that the most consistent findings are found in evaluations of institutional effects, where they have stimulated a reduction of tension, disciplinary problems and violence in prisons, whilst developing better relationships between staff and prisoners. Hughes suggests that there is also good evidence these projects are an effective way of delivering basic skills and that these initiatives are likely to reinforce the work of a range of other interventions, which aim to address risk factors and develop protective factors to reduce re-offending.

As discussed, drama group work takes a client-centred approach as the aims and objectives of the programme are guided by the needs of the participants on the programme (Gladstone and McLewin, 1998). Taking a qualitative standpoint in terms of impact, directs the research towards the voice of the individuals taking part. Peaker (1998) stated that quantitative methods appear contrary to the nature of drama work. Kushner (2000) highlighted that measuring a programme against objectives or externally imposed indicators fails to evaluate the personal experiences of those involved in the project.

The Geese Theatre Company is a key stakeholder in this research as they have commissioned the research through the female establishment where they have delivered the 'Journey Woman' project. They have requested an analysis of their programme 'Journey Woman' and an evaluation report to disseminate to other prisons, arts organisations working in a similar field, funding bodies, stakeholders and other interested parties.

The main underlying theory behind the 'Journey Woman' project is the cognitive model, the project involves the use of active exercises, role-plays, and theatrical metaphors. The key themes explored in 'Journey Woman' are goal setting, problem solving, coping strategies, avoiding re-offending and developing self-esteem. The target audience for the project is female offenders currently in custody. The aim of the research was to explore the experience of the Geese Theatre's 'Journey Woman' project from the perspective of the women who attended and how this experience in turn relates to theories and models behind therapeutic intervention.

## **5. Methodology**

Diaries were chosen to provide the opportunity for each individual to describe their own experiences. Using open-ended questions within the diaries provided prompts for introspection and reflection amongst respondents. Research into the use of diaries in prison arts contexts suggests that women may be more receptive to journals as a means to record thoughts about their experience of a creative process, and that care must be put into their design and integration in order for participants to complete them (Miles & Clarke, 2006).

Participants on the project completed a daily diary to describe their experiences, their feelings and what they felt they had gained from being involved in the sessions. Diaries were kept for the full week the programme was run. These diaries were administered over three separate programme groups. A total of 8 participants completed a diary on a daily basis totalling 32



diaries being considered for the research. The diaries were completed by hand when the participants returned to their wings following each day.

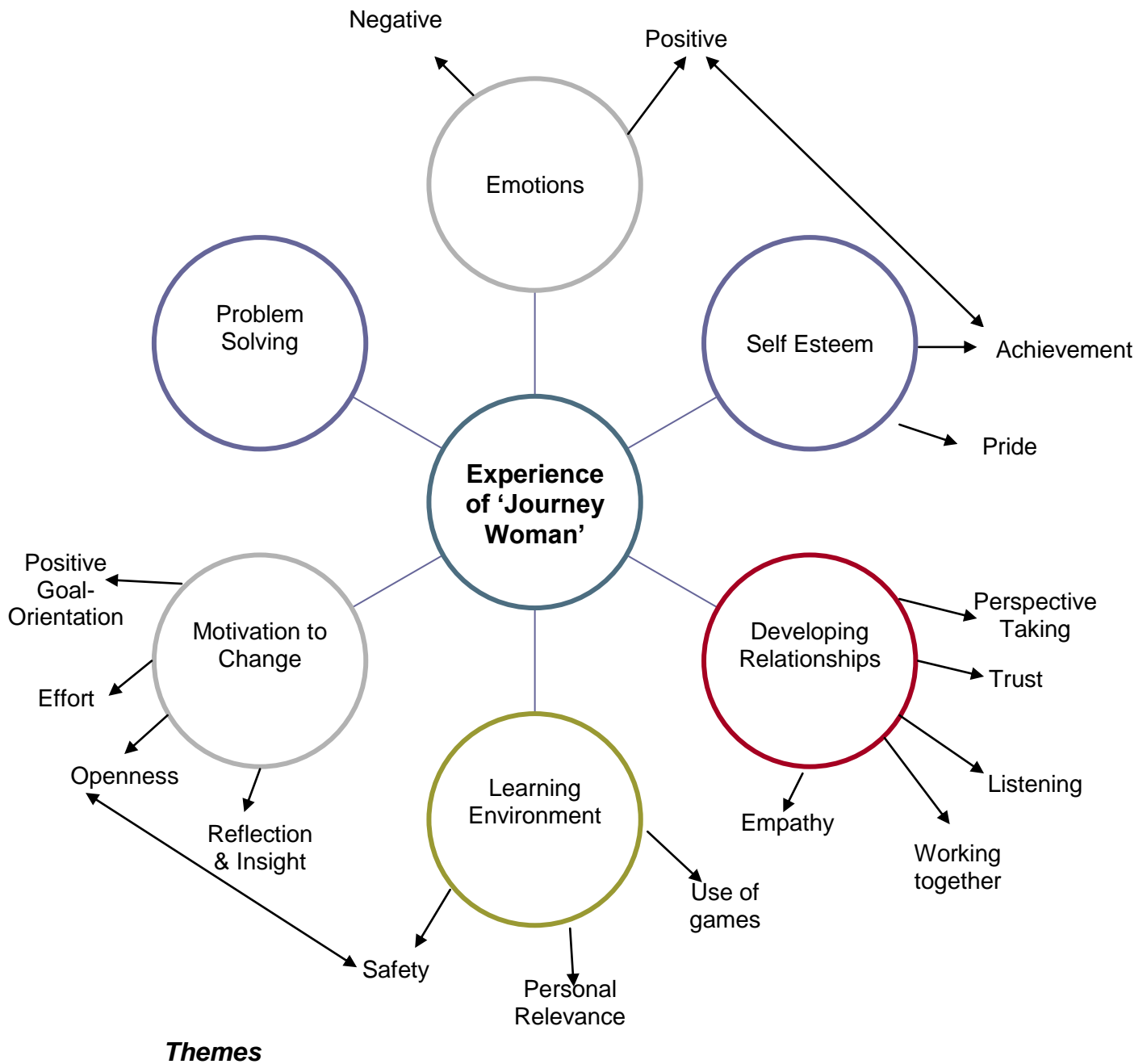
From a phenomenological perspective different people can experience the same environment in different ways. Phenomenological analysis looks to explore the quality and texture of individual experience and looks to interpret the participants' experiences (Willig, 2008). Data collection for phenomenological analysis is based on purposive sampling, whereby participants are selected according to criteria of relevance to the research question. As such the sample group were considered homogeneous as they shared the experience of the event (Willig, 2008). The diaries were analysed in accordance with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The diaries were analysed one by one. Each theme's relation to other themes was explored and integrated across the diaries to identify shared themes.

It was important to inform the participants of the position of the researcher and the ways in which this position might have influenced the findings (Langdrige, 2007). Prior to commencing the research a session was held with the potential participants explaining the research, the process of completing the diaries and gaining informed consent in line with British Psychological Society Guidelines (2006). To this end, it was felt that the participants were aware of how to complete the diaries.

## **5. Findings**

Figure One outlines the main themes identified from the diaries and the corresponding subthemes.

Figure One: Themes generated from diaries.



The initial diary extracts were categorised by feelings of **negative emotions** including; anger, anxiety, nervousness, worry, pain, petrified, and emotional. All women in the study reported feelings of negative emotions at the beginning of the project coinciding with having to share their experiences. Although not uncommon feelings at the beginning of an intervention, the range of emotions described suggested intense feelings about the information they had shared within the group:

*“I felt anxious and I thought it was hard and upsetting”.*

*“I was petrified to start with because it was so intense”.*

*“While sharing my own experiences it was extremely painful and difficult”.*

As the project progressed, increasingly more **positive emotions** were described, which appeared to coincide with a feeling of achievement and pride. It is considered that the environment played an important role in the changing emotional state of the women. The diaries highlighted the importance of feeling safe and sharing their experiences in a **learning environment** which was relaxed, non-judgemental and supportive. The participants discussed being *“encouraged by their peers”* and being *“influenced by others to be open”* and that the approach the facilitators took was *“in a discreet way so it didn’t seem like prying”*.

The most commonly discussed theme was highlighted in terms of **motivation to change**. This included the effort put into gaining from the project, increasing openness, an increase in insight, and developing a positive approach to goal- setting. Throughout the diaries there were descriptions of the effort that they had put into the day, such as *“trying to be myself and be as open as I could”* and *“I think today I took things and myself a lot more seriously”*.

There were evident increases in insight in terms of the respondents’ understanding of their past and the way in which they are perceived. An increase in insight was the mostly commonly discussed theme in the diaries. The following diary extracts outline developments in insight:

*“The main epiphany is seeing my negative inner self as the destructive, cruel and inaccurate voice it is”.*

*“That growing up and what you see whilst growing up can influence you massively, its hard to see the good in life when you’ve not seen it through your life, bad things seem normal to you without you realising that life could be so different and a whole lot better if you want it to”.*

*“I feel it is helping me to understand myself properly and that my pride sometimes gets in the way of me being open with people”.*

*“I have an insight into my actions that brought me into prison. I achieved more about why I acted like I did.”*

*“If I take myself more seriously then more people will also”.*

From the diary extracts it appeared that increases in insight coincided with the participants feeling that the exercises were personally relevant to them and that examples were used that they could relate to their own experiences and situations. An increase in insight was coupled with reflections on what they had achieved from each day and admissions from some participants of areas that they would like to work on following completion of the project:

*“Well I think I’m definitely changing, in the sense I’m becoming more self aware”.*

*“After more reflecting I used the mask with the mouth on the forehead and used it to justify my actions”.*

*“I was much more involved today because even though I probably talked a little less, I thought about what I was saying and was more constructive with my opinion”.*

Developments in individual’s motivation to change were also seen in an increased positive goal orientation towards the end of the week’s diaries. This positive goal orientation was reflected by an understanding that in order to achieve goals individuals need to take responsibility for their decision making,

recognise the mistakes they have made in the past and an awareness of needing to change from these mistakes.

*“My aim is to take responsibility for my future which includes my children too”*

*“Only I prevent myself from achieving my goals”*

*“That you have to work hard in order to get your life on track”*

*“I have got to accept and admit how irresponsible I really am”*

A number of participants listed goals which they wanted to achieve for their future, expressing determination to achieve these. This determination appeared realistic with the respondents demonstrating awareness that changes will take time and considering the skills that would be needed to achieve their goals such as assertiveness, motivation and better relationships with others.

The diaries showed **development of relationships** within the group alongside trust of other participants. Respondents referred to game-like exercises which were used to build trust. The interaction within the group highlighted a number of examples of acknowledging the need to listen to other people views and respect these when they were different. The diaries discussed that other participants had similar experiences which increased feelings of trusts and led to an increased perspective on their own problems.

*“How I messed up my life, I really related to other problems, it reminded me so much about myself its really made me think about my life and how I want to change my life for the better.”*

*“I feel that I am not alone in having fears for my future and this has made me feel better overall and not so isolated from the other women who all seemed so much more confident before”.*

*“Having the chance to recognise things from different aspects was an eye-opener”.*

*“Just made me more aware that other people have problems and deal with it differently”.*

## **6. Conclusion & Recommendations**

One of the main themes from the diaries was development in insight into the participants thought processes and an understanding of how attitudes are created through past experiences. Increasing insight is considered to be psycho-educational as it relates to an increase in knowledge. Insight into women’s risk, thinking and behaviour is considered to be an essential component of successful treatment (Gaston, 1990). A development in insight is underpinned by the Cognitive Behavioural approach and an increase in insight is advocated as a component of risk reduction.

Relational theory highlights relationships as a particularly important risk factor for developing psychological problems which could lead to offending. The theory suggests that risk of offending is higher when relationships lack mutuality, responsiveness, empathy, and are dis-empowering (Covington, 1998). There is research evidence to highlight the importance of relationships with a therapeutic group. Research into treatment facilitator characteristics and reoffending indicated that treatment was most successful when facilitators had good relationship skills (Andrews & Bonta, 2006). Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) suggests that learning of effective relationships can be developed through observing the skills of others. Barnett’s (2008) research also reflected on how relational theory suggests that women need a sense of mutual understanding with other group members. A theme clearly highlighted from the ‘Journey Woman’ diaries.

The participants attending the ‘Journey Woman’ project also described finding the environment conducive to encouraging openness and sharing of experiences. This indicates that there are benefits of the approaches the

facilitators of the 'Journey Woman' project use to promote engagement and encourage openness. This openness appeared to have been supported by a shared sense of wanting to gain from the project identified as a motivation to change. The analysis of the diaries indicates that the Geese Theatre Project has potential for increasing participant's motivation to change.

Motivating offenders to change in therapeutic interventions is an important aspect of effective treatment (McMurrin & Ward, 2004). The Good Lives Model indicates that encouraging consideration of participants' values and goals is an intrinsic part of motivating offenders to change. Encouraging motivation to change has important implications in reducing reoffending, particularly as those who drop-out of treatment are found to have higher rates of reoffending than untreated offenders (Hanson & Bussière, 1998). It is hypothesised that the positive goal orientation highlighted in the diaries represents an opportunity for participants to reshape their past narratives or stories as advocated by the narrative therapy approach (Ungar & Teram, 2000). The popularity of narrative therapy has been seeing in recent development in the Choice, Actions, Relationships and Emotions (CARE) programme designed specifically for women. The benefit of the 'Journey Woman' approach is that new narratives can be acted out in a scene, increasing their accessibility to all abilities.

It is clear that social learning theory played a role in moving participants through the contemplation and preparation stages of change advocated by Prochaska & DiClemente (1982), as the diaries described seeing the efforts of others and this in turn encouraging the diary authors to share their experiences and gain from the project. There are many potential benefits of peer encouragement, advocated in other therapeutic interventions such as substance misuse programmes and the Cognitive Self Change Programme (CSCP, Offending Behaviour Programmes Unit, 2000). The facilitators appear to have achieved a balance of facilitating change rather than teaching it. It is considered that the 'Journey Woman' has the potential for increasing individual's motivation to change.

Blackburn (1993) argued that many offenders demonstrate deficits in their ability to perspective take. As such interventions encouraging perspective taking could be instrumental in achieving overall reduction in reoffending as relational theory suggests losing valued relationships could promote desistance (Barnett, 2008). As supported by Jefferies (1991), the opportunity to view the perspectives of significant others during 'Journey Woman' has increased their understanding of situations and problems they were facing.

Studies indicate that many offenders face difficulty in solving problems effectively (Palmer, 2003). Although the nature and severity of problems faced by female offenders appears to differ from those reported by male offenders, it is highlighted that problem solving is a relevant cognitive deficit similarly for both male and female offenders (Blanchette & Brown, 2006). The diaries indicated an increased awareness of the need to solve problems and it is considered that this work could be strengthened by directing participants to further problem solving intervention.

The benefit of diaries was that it provided data that was temporally ordered, revealing how events unfold prospectively. As such they avoid the problem of retrospective reporting which can easily be affected by the participants' current circumstances (Willig, 2008). A limitation of the data collection method used was ideally semi-structured interviews would have been used to follow up the themes that emerged from the diaries. However due to resources this was not possible. The limitation of using diaries as a data collection method needs to be considered, due to potential limiting factor of participants presenting themselves in a positive light. At times, the participants wrote personal messages in the diaries which suggest that there was an awareness that the diaries were going to be read. Throughout the coding of the data, it was clear however that some diaries had personal disclosures which admitted a behaviour they had carried out which they now considered to be wrong. This indicates that participants were not limiting the content of the diaries to information which would present them in a positive light. As such it is consider that the diaries were a useful tool for data collection.



The diaries provided an interesting insight into the experience of 'Journey Woman' from the perspective of the participants. It is considered that the diaries themselves provided a useful avenue for reflection on the experience of the 'Journey Woman' project. There are clear benefits of encouraging reflection in terms of considering own personal development and relevance (Moon, 1999). As such there are potential benefits of the use of diaries in conjunction with the project as a tool to share and reflect on learning.

It clear that the 'Journey Woman' project generates benefits in terms of increasing motivation to change, developing insight and developing skills needed for effectively engaging with others. The success of the project is underpinned by the development of the learning environment which is considered safe and supportive and the focus on personally relevant examples. Particularly with female offenders there is clear potential of using a more collaborative and therapeutic approach to encourage change and as such the 'Journey Woman' project could be considered as a foundation for those who have difficulties engaging in mainstream interventions.

The benefits gained from the project have implications for encouraging motivation for those women who are currently not considering change before engaging in further risk reduction work. It is recommended that the Geese Theatre continue to use the diaries as a method for recording individual development in insight, and to encourage reflection and consolidation of the learning. The potential of the 'Journey Woman' Project for increasing motivation to change would benefit from further exploration, through a measure of motivation, to record any changes in motivation before and following the programme.

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