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Making sense of the dark: a study on the identity of men who committed homicide

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Abstract

Identities change after major interpersonal events. However, there is comparatively little study of what identity change means after the commission of an act of severe interpersonal violence, such as homicide. Individual in-depth interviews with men who had taken a life were conducted, looking at the experience of living with and making sense of their offence. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and examined using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The findings identified two themes: 'The Reformed Self-Identity' and 'Factors that contribute to a Reformed Self-Identity'. The first theme examines the new reformed identity and the second theme explores the factors that have helped the participants to make sense of the trajectory of their experiences. This study reports on identity work as predominantly an intersubjective process, where the making of the self is influenced by their relations with others. Positive contextual influences (e.g., family support, engagement in therapy) in cultivating reconciliations in identity, meaning, and reflexive connections are vital aspects in informing meaning-based therapeutic interventions and rehabilitative aims (including risk reduction and accountability). The reduction in future risk, which links in with the relationship between social inclusion and self-regulation, reducing the need to compensate for shame and the implications of shifts in identity and meaning was another important point that emerged from this study. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of reflective spaces for perpetrators of homicide to engage with the impact of their index offences, in order to be able to support a new identity and a new life with safe and accountable connections.

Keywords: meaning-making, trauma, homicide, interpretative phenomenological analysis, intersubjectivity

Introduction

There is no question that killing someone affects a person in profound ways, and evidence suggests that the offender will reflect on the significance of what has happened and how this experience affected them (Adshead, 2014). Taking someone's life brings a change in identity that is irrevocable. The lethal

event is often followed by a disconnection with the minds of others, a loss both of mutual trust and of a personal moral and societal anchor. The narrative that orients to the future is frightening and unfamiliar while the past, including the victim, may weigh heavily on the individual's thoughts. The offender will never be quite the same person that they were before they took a life. Some of the consequences might include perpetration-induced traumatic stress (MacNair, 2002, Ferrito, Vetere, Adshead & Moore, 2014) including changes in self-identity, values, and how the perpetrator connects with others (Drennan & Alred, 2011; Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Stevens, 2012).

Re-forming Identity after Homicide. After taking a life, for positive meaning to emerge, identity work needs to be undertaken. Similar to the mentally disordered offender, the homicide perpetrator needs “help to discover a new identity that incorporates the lost self and acknowledges both the disaster that has transformed their lives and its impact on the lives of others... they are also required to accept and engage with their own potential for risk” (Dorkins & Adshead, 2011, p. 182). Identity work for the homicide perpetrator has resonance with offender recovery - a term coined by Drennan and Alred (2011). Offender recovery emphasises the coming to terms with offending behaviour and the responsibility of having offended. Parallel literature in the forensic mental health field (Adshead, Ferrito & Bose, 2015) proposes that coming to terms with offending implies an acknowledgement of the impact of an offence upon identity.

The disruption and complexity of such an event trigger heightened uncertainty and a sense of having lost one's way with no clear way ahead. Among the key challenges that homicide offenders face is to make sense of an identity that has shifted in others' minds. This is because the index offence is an offence against humanity, not just the victim. Mahoney (1996) argues that identity is “inseparable from the interpersonal realm. Identity development and, indeed, all human experience take place within the context of human relationship” (p. 130). Indeed, struggles with painful feelings of social shame, humiliation, and feelings of worthlessness due to awareness of wrong behaviour (Velotti, Alison,

Garofalo, 2014), can result in social connections becoming distant and removed, not least from family members (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004).

The interpersonal element of offending has also been supported by numerous laboratory studies, which have found a causal connection between various forms of social exclusion, aggressive behaviour, and impaired self-regulation (e.g., Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007; Twenge, Zhang, Catanese, Dolan-Pascoe, Lyche, & Baumeister, 2007; Warburton, Williams, & Cairns, 2006). Conversely, relationships that promote a sense of belonging are especially likely to promote meaning (Lambert, Stillman, Hicks, Kamble, Baumeister & Fincham, 2013). Identity, meaning-making, and self-regulation, therefore, emerge in an intersubjective context (Burnell, Coleman & Hunt, 2006; Hunt, 2010).

Intersubjective Processes in Interviewing Homicide Perpetrators. In recounting their stories, the realm of the research interview in itself becomes a place where the participant's identity continues to be constructed in their interaction between the researcher and other perspectives present in the participant's mind (e.g., victim, family, society). Within an intersubjective context, a central aspect of the process of realising a prosocial identity involves connection and recognition of the other, also enabling a renewed connection with themselves. Conditions that facilitate a sense of connectedness may be necessary for openness to change in effective rehabilitation (Needs, 2018) and for the men to consider themselves more than just the sum of their offences.

Research in the field of identity and self has highlighted the significance of the self's perceptions of other's perceptions of the self (Howarth, 2002). The intersubjective encounter between researcher and researched is crucial in making sense of the participants lived experience, and as Finlay (2005) argues the "researcher's task is not simply to listen to another's story: the researcher also needs to be open to being with the participant in a relationship" (p. 277). Power and vulnerability in the social exchanges with the participants play an important role in being highly aware of one's own beliefs, values and

emotional responses. Reflexivity is crucial as a means of maintaining awareness of how the researcher's background impacts on the research process.

The Current Study. The central relevance of narratives and narrative identity to rehabilitation and desistance processes has been suggested in a number of central studies and treatment models (Laws & Ward, 2010; Maruna, 2001; Ward & Marshall, 2007). These followed earlier accounts derived from tape-recorded interviews that offered offenders' views (Soothill & Parker, 1999; Parker, 1994). To date, however, there has been little formal study of identity, sense-making journeys or meaning-making processes of homicide perpetrators following their index offence. There is parallel research by Liem and Richardson's (2014) role of transformation narratives in desistance among released lifers. Of direct relevance is, Ferrito, Needs and Adshead's (2017) summary of the literature in relation to meaning-making processes and what meanings are made for and by the offender in the aftermath of homicide.

The current study explores how men who have killed another human in the context of unplanned killing make sense of the behaviour. IPA was chosen to access the participants' accounts of having taken a life and the consequences of this index offence. The primary research questions are: How does a homicide perpetrator make sense of what happened in order to reconcile past, present and future? With the following sub-research questions: What does it actually mean in the lives of offenders who report experiencing it? and How does a homicide perpetrator come to terms with having offended and what do we mean by this? In view of the underexplored status of related processes, the use of quantitative methodology to describe and understand this phenomenon would be premature. Consistent with phenomenological psychology, this study contributes to theoretical development, as it attempts to unravel complex processes by focusing on idiographic meanings (Smith, 1996).

Method

Sample. This study analysed qualitative data of seven men's life stories post-homicide. Demographic characteristics were obtained prior to the interview (with permission) and are presented in Table 1. On average, participants' index offences took place 17 years ago. The men interviewed in this study were not involved in multiple killings and they had different relationships towards their victim (see Table 1). They were also interviewed towards the end of their sentence.

[Insert Table 1]

Ethics and Procedure. This study was approved by a University ethics committee (2015-048) and by the national research committee of Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS; 2015-289). Following ethical approval to conduct the study, the first author wrote to the Head of Residence at a Category 'D' prison in the South of England, to discuss the study aims and recruitment of the participants. The psychologist accessed the prison database to ascertain the number of men convicted of homicide that were residing at the prison. The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied before invitations were sent out to the potential participants. The criteria for the study were i) an index offence of homicide and ii) a willingness to provide an in-depth account of their life experience. To increase the likelihood of capturing the phenomena under investigation, prisoners were selected according to good prison behaviour and previous Release On Temporary License (ROTL) records; with high cognitive functioning (as deemed by the psychologist) in order for the participants to be able to articulate the phenomenon under investigation or having participated in accredited offending behaviour programmes completed. Exclusion criteria included committing more than one homicide, severe mental illness (e.g. psychotic, suffering from severe anxiety, likely to self-harm) or in the personnel's estimation, likely to be adversely affected by participating in the proposed study. Invitations were sent out with the information sheet to the prisoners that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Seven men consented to take part in the study. Unfortunately no female offenders

were interviewed due to difficulties with obtaining access. The interviewer (first author) met with the participants to discuss the study and shared the information sheet highlighting the nature of the study, that participation was voluntary, and the right to withdraw.

Interview Procedure and Data Generation. The method of data collection chosen for this study was semi-structured interviews. Before starting the interview, participants were briefed on the interview questions. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed in accordance with the guidelines recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), in accordance with the research questions. Smith, *et al.*, (2009) recommended that the interview schedule be used as a guide, allowing the interview to be mainly directed by the participants. The schedule consisted of questions around four themes: meaning-making, questions on their identity, changes they observed in themselves as a result of taking a life, and about their thoughts about their future. On average, the interviews lasted approximately an hour and thirty minutes and were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned and identifiable information was removed. A pilot interview was conducted before the research interviews, and the participant was asked to give feedback on the questions, the content, and any ethical dimensions of the interview. The pilot interview was included as part of the study as there was no significant amendments.

Analytic Procedure. IPA is well-suited to meet this study's aims, as it is a qualitative research approach committed to the investigation of how people make sense following major life experiences (Smith *et al.*, 2009). IPA allows the researcher to engage with the reflections that the participants had about this major event. This method provided a base for the analysis of qualitative data (Smith & Osborn, 2008) and has also been used in underexplored subject areas within the field of forensic psychology such as the mental health recovery of detained patients who had committed homicide (Ferrito, *et al.*, 2014).

IPA is heavily influenced by symbolic interactionism where meanings of experiences are at the forefront of research. Furthermore, these meanings can only be understood through an interpretative process, via the researcher's attempts at making sense of these meanings (Denzin, 1995). The analytic procedure included a series of four stages. The initial encounter with the data consisted of the researcher reading the text and noting down any connections, associations, and preliminary interpretations. The second stage involved identifying themes, and the third stage aimed to cluster the themes across the cases. The final stage consisted of producing a summary table of the themes and quotes. The goal of the procedure was to achieve an interpretative analysis, rather than seeking to elicit any objective or fundamental single description of the phenomenon.

To ensure validity, the third author (an independent reviewer) checked that interpretations were warranted against the data. The contribution of the peer reviewer helped to double-check the analysis and interpretations. Furthermore, the analysis was cross checked repeatedly against the interview transcripts to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected the data (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). In addition, the first author who interviewed the participants and analysed the data kept a reflexive journal during the research procedure.

Results

The focus of this study explores the meaning-making processes of men who have taken a life, via the close exploration of two super-ordinate themes: 'The reformed self-identity' and 'Factors that contribute to a reformed identity' (see Figure 1).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The Reformed Self-Identity.

This theme reflects the old identity in helping to establish a new identity. As Paul put it, because of the nature of the crime, the old identity (not only in relation to their perspective but also in relation to others' minds) will always be carried forward: "tainted... like if you took some milk and put a drop of

oil in it, there's a black spot in it, which cannot be removed". As a new identity emerges, the participants talked about being in control and feeling empowered in their lives as the "real [self]" developed over time. The following quote by Richard illustrates this new identity that all the participants spoke about:

Every day it gets easier, every day. But some days it's like you know, what I go back to, how I know but then slowly the barriers will start coming down, and the real me starts coming back out. Yeah and that's what I need to be showing, the real me, not my masks, my barriers.

Meaning-making: Post-traumatic growth (PTG). Most of the participants reported personal changes and meaning in their life that emerged as a result of the distress they experienced during incarceration and the awareness of the consequences of their crime. Several participants reported new-found qualities, for example, Thomas reported that he has "come out as a stronger person", and is "more open". He also reported changes in his views on what is right and wrong, and reported that he wants "to treat his family right". While talking about his journey, Thomas wept and reflected on how far he has come:

I think to myself yeah now where I've gone through everything now, and I've come out the other side, and I feel a lot better about myself. I don't take myself too seriously, and I can actually sit back and look at myself.

Richard communicated how he is now able to recognise right from wrong and how he is open to learning:

Every day now for me it's a learning curve. I'm always learning something about myself or learning something that I did wrong yeah, so whereas before I wasn't...I didn't want to learn at all. All I was interested in was making money being bad...now yes I am interested in making money, but I want to make money the sensible way. Yeah go to work, have an appreciation that I've gone to work I've earned this money I haven't taken it or got it by ill means.

Matthew, on the other hand, reflected on his journey of self-discovery. He reported that initially when he came into prison, he was “kind of lost and detached” and as he moved forward with the help of therapy, he became “more in tune with [himself]” and connected. He then talked about how now he is much more able to regulate his emotions when confronted with challenging situations:

I just feel a lot more, I feel lot more calmer. I do still get angry with things but I think I’m able to express it more rather than just let it build up and explode or do something stupid. I think I’m able to deal with it in a better way.

Matthew also talked about positive changes he has experienced that are related to a higher appreciation of relationships and life:

I think it’s taught me to appreciate things a lot more. Things that you take for granted like being round your family, being round your friends, being able to go out and do what you want to do, it’s taught me to appreciate things that are more important in life...than the things that I was actually doing which was going out drinking and getting high. It gave me a totally different outlook on all of that. I mean I don’t want to get out and just go back to where I was before and start doing all that again.

Reparative elements: A wish to make amends and “give back”. Linked to PTG in this context, all the participants demonstrated enhanced munificence, i.e., a desire to want to give to others and contribute towards the lives of others, including the victim’s family. Paul reflected on how he would like to help the victim’s family as a way of assuaging the impact of the loss, but also to feel reintegrated within the human race:

I would like to help them or feel in the future if I had something to even try and compensate someway, which could never fulfil the damage that’s done or take it away but could help them in some way. So yeah, cause I never really set out to be a destroyer if you know what I

mean? I wanted to help my community in some ways, try to do that in some ways in different ways but obviously, I got into fighting fire in the wrong way.

The importance of engaging with a healthy identity and distancing the self from a ‘murderer’ label resonated throughout the interviews and the participants reported that one way of somewhat repairing the damage caused is by making contributions to society:

I want to try and move on from that stigma. Alright, it’s always gonna be there, I understand that, you know I can appreciate that, but I want the opportunity now for me when I get released is I took from society, when I get back out I want to give back something. Yeah and if I can do that, I know that I’ve done something right in my life.

Richard reported that he has been contributing to other prisoners’ education by being a teaching assistant. Similarly, Tim said that while he is in prison, he is helping people by being a drug and alcohol mentor. John also talked about how he is making good use of opportunities offered in prison as a way of “giving back”, including by participating in this research study:

I thought anything I could contribute here which can be put to good use in the future, well that again is paying something back, erm and that’s why I had no hesitation in agreeing to do this you know

When talking about making amends, two participants also reported how they would like to make amends not only to the victim’s family but also to their own family. Richard reflected on how he was unable to protect his children because when he was in prison, his children were involved in fatal accidents and they both died. He fervently reported that he would like to apologise to his children when he gets out of prison:

For me, I’ve got a lot of making up to do to my children. Yeah that’s gonna be the biggest challenge for me sitting in front of a headstone and saying sorry. How do I, how do I start that

conversation? Yeah, it's gonna be hard, but I know I've got to do it even if I didn't want to do it, I know deep down I've got to do it

Thomas stated that his desire is to go to the victim's grave and ask for forgiveness:

When I get out but you know one day I can hopefully go to the graveyard you know and ...ask for forgiveness, if that's the right thing to say I know I didn't know her

For the participants, this theme echoes their wish for forgiveness, and 'pleading' to be admitted to the world of moral humanity. Paul who shared a poem on "asking for forgiveness", explains how giving back helps him to feel human:

I think that means to me I'm not without feeling, I still retain some humanity somewhere, you know what I mean?

Morality in this context is a phenomenon of cooperation and a call for connection. Forgiveness is complex for men who committed homicide as the victim is absent, but ever-present in their minds.

Coming to terms with the index offence: Accepting responsibility. For the participants to solidify the process of change, marked shifts in taking responsibility for their crime are necessary, including acceptance of how others may view them.

Living with a life sentence I think I've come to accept it in my head. That's what I've done I can't get away from that fact it's happened. I have to deal with that and live with it, but I have to go out now. When I get out of prison I've got to go and find work, I've got to go and do things and I'm going to do, on that bit on a job where it says have you got a criminal record you've got to tell them you've got a criminal record for murder, how other people are going to look at me after they find out, that's going to be weird.... (Matthew)

John emphasized that the process of taking responsibility takes time, due to feeling “ashamed”, and also to confront the unpleasant truths about himself. He highlighted that the process is necessary to “shed the baggage” and for the “healing process” to take place:

The main thing was that I wasn't taking responsibility and that took a while, that took a while for me to say to myself...well look don't blame everybody else you had options. I could have left like I'd done a thousand times before you chose to stay in that relationship, you did what you did knowingly take responsibility for what you've done but that takes a while. I found that it takes a while to come to that, to come to terms, to come to that stage to reach that stage.

Brian, on the other hand reported that he has struggled to come to terms with his index offence, and stated that he would find the process of restorative justice helpful in this process. However, with sadness, he stated that he had not been offered this opportunity. He said that he “wanted to apologise to the friends and family of the victim” and talked about restorative justice:

I think they have a right to know, rather than the pantomime that was in the court, you know a lot of trials are just pantomime you know it's there to get one result, ...it's coming to terms with it, I don't know, I have not been able to get there as yet, I still have not got to that place as yet.

Thomas reported that it was the process of therapy, and accepting responsibility that has helped him come to terms with his index offence:

Now I do understand why I'm convicted of murder. Yes it may not be for a direct murder but I could have stopped that but I didn't. That's why I've come to terms with it. Yes I could have stopped it, but I didn't and it down to me that person got killed

The theme ‘taking responsibility’ highlights a turning point for the participants. The participants described that as they moved forward with their life, they had to embrace a new way of thinking and feeling about their index offence and how they carried the consequences of this act. A key feature that

resonated with the theme of 'accepting responsibility' involves components of human agency in terms of reflexivity and self-examination, which directed the participants to wilful awareness of keeping oneself and others safe.

Awareness of my 'dangerous mind'. The transformation of core identity requires substantial shifts in self-understanding, and including understanding of their own risk. This theme partly relates to a re-negotiating of interpersonal interactions and the awareness of what 'script' to follow post-release. Richard acknowledged that he understands that there are parts of him that are destructive, and is therefore aware of how he can manage his anger:

For me I know now what I'm capable of whereas before, I wasn't. I knew I had a temper, but I didn't realise the extent of my temper. Now I know yeah if my temper goes then there's going to be trouble. I have to always constantly remind myself of this yeah you can't do this

In line with this, he then acknowledged the changes he needed to make in relation to managing his anger, and also changes in his world view on how to behave when altercations arise:

I know once I start getting worked up I know how to straight away close it down, put that to bed before you go and do something totally stupid. I don't want that I just want walk, if I have an off day if someone's wound me up, all I do now is I just remove myself. I've learnt how to remove myself from certain - I don't know - arguments, altercations whatever whereas before for me they always said it took a bigger man to walk away yeah back then I never see that yeah I didn't understand that kind of philosophy you know yeah you hit me, I hit you back that's how I was

Paul acknowledged that he has to keep his family in mind, and the consequences of his actions in order to keep himself and others safe:

Understanding that I got family outside that I can get back to. Understanding the consequences of my original actions that got me to jail in the first place. You know you got a lot of time to

think behind the door. Then you understand that losing control is, an easy thing to do, with high consequences, and it doesn't make you feel any better, because you feel you lost something, you lost your composure, you lost your centre, and you feel less ordered. You know what I mean, less human

From Paul's point of view, he is aware of what has led him to take a life, and stated that he is now fully aware of not putting himself in positions with similar dynamics:

The awareness would make it almost impossible for me to use the same means to deal with the same problems, I don't think I would even put myself in the protecting role at all cause even in jail I see things going on I go the other way

In the interviews, the participants described how they wouldn't return to the same lifestyle they had as they articulated how this lifestyle can pose risks:

I mean my main priority if when I do get out is to not to come back to prison again and for me to play the gangster or anything like that. Anything stupid like that it's going to lead me to one place back into prison which I don't want. My main priority is not to go back to prison so I won't be doing that you know (Thomas)

Factors that develop a Reformed Self-identity.

The findings indicated that participants try to live an authentic life by creating possibilities for themselves beyond physical confinement. During this change process of regaining control over their lives, the men engaged with coping strategies such as engaging in educational and occupational activities, maintaining ties with family, and finding meaning in therapy and value in growing older.

Identity reforms linked to educational/occupational engagements. Brian, who had completed various courses whilst in prison, reported that it was important for him to “be something other than older when [he] leave[s] prison”. He reflected on how it was a case of “proving to [himself] that he

[could] do it” (referring to educational achievement). Similarly, Thomas reported “feeling confident” and “positive” as a result of completing certain courses:

I found out how easy it was, how good I felt at the end of each course and what it could do for me, and what the prison did for me after, for instance, it gave me a pat on the back and congratulated me and I felt good

He also reflected on how these courses can prepare him for post-release, “I got sort of different array of skills, but in a way, I will use them in one time or another when I’m outside”. Further references to more optimistic futures as a result of educational achievements, were also reflected by Matthew, who reported that, “I’ve done so much work in prison to help me when I get out in terms of education, I’ve got qualifications that will help me get jobs when I get out, help me find a decent career”. As a result of educational achievements, Matthew was able to assume other pro-social roles in prison, which resulted in notable contributions not only for himself but also for the prison:

I came kind of number one in my department, so I was leading and teaching other people. So it gave me something good to do I think, it made me feel better about myself knowing that I could go in there and starting from the bottom really and within a few months I was at the top...

Some of the participants reported that it took them years to realise the benefits of engaging in educational courses and prison activities. They stated that the freedom they had in the community had led them to bad choices and they were unable to “think”, whereas prison provided structure and routine and ample time to reflect. Most participants were also able to relate to various existential issues and found studying as a way of coping. The benefits of occupational and educational opportunities resonated with most participants, as Brian put it:

The benefits of prison education and you know, it can aspire, you know motivate change you know, give someone a clear guidance, pathway sort of thing for the rest of their life despite the length of time that they’ve got sort of thing, you know it provides that structure, the discipline

In this regard, education and work, provided an opportunity to the prisoners to reconstruct the self and helped the prisoners to feel that they had a purpose within and beyond the prison walls.

Identity reforms linked to family support. In sustaining this new identity, another potent theme ran through the narratives of three participants, was the importance of family. The participants talked about feeling rejected by their family initially. Brian reiterated how he wanted to prove to his family how he continues to uphold his non-criminal identity by working hard:

you know they've seen what I've done, they know I'm not messing about, they know, I'm not getting drunk, taking drugs or fights you know, I've actually applied myself

On a similar note, another participant explained how the support he had received from his family, motivated and encouraged him to have a purpose in his life:

When I get out, I want to, I don't want to let my family down maybe some way there is a similar kind of thing, I want to get out and make amends to my family and show them thanks for supporting me (Matthew)

Matthew also explained that he has a 'closer' relationship with his father and brother since he has been in prison, and Richard spoke at length about his family has been present for him through "thick and thin" and he "can't have wished for a better set of parents". At the core of taking a life, is the loss of liberty, followed by a myriad of deprivations, including possible loss of ties with family. Thus, time in prison allowed for reflection and being able to put into perspective what is important for them.

Identity reforms linked to the benefits of therapy. This sub-theme relates to the participants' needs for rationalization and understanding of their life story in the context of their index offence. Thomas provided a particularly poignant example, of how therapy helped him make sense of his index offence "doing courses and you know like Enhanced Thinking Skills, it just made me think, how do I want to put it, it clicked". As a result, he described how he has "come out the other side and [he] feels a lot

better about [himself]. He also stated that he has realised his mistakes and how his thinking was incorrect.

Similarly, Matthew, who spent time in Grendon (a therapeutic community) reported that he has developed an appreciation for the idea that people have different mental states:

I think a lot of people just live their life thinking the way they've lived is normal to them, so they just see that is how life is but when you hear how everyone else lived their life you realise it's not. Everyone's lives are different and it kind of opens your mind up to that a bit more.

As a result of receiving therapy, Matthew also described the following benefits: "I think I got more kind of understanding about self, not just about my offence but about my life in general, the way I am, the way I form relationships with people".

On the other hand, John described how therapy could help with the "healing process" and talked about the index offence as a heavy load he had to carry. He stated that one way of offloading this weight and looking forward to the future was through therapy:

You're telling them how you feel and how sorry you are for what you've done...so again things like that help you to move on. You're just shedding a bit more baggage each time and you can move on and move on and move on and you know the HRP course healthy relationship programme was very intensive, six months and again that was helpful and again it's all part of this healing process.

Therapy helped the participants to be able to reflect upon themselves, thus allowing them to take on responsibility for their own actions, and in turn, act as a vehicle to their recovery.

Identity reforms linked to the role of growing old and views on violence. Participants often adopted a chronological framework when talking about their experiences. Paul talked about identity as an entity that evolves and changes over time with the realisation that violence is harmful:

Nobody really stays the same. You see a strong man today is a weak man tomorrow, do you know what I mean? You see a violent...sometimes they destroy themselves by their own violence, to come to terms about how they've destroyed themselves, they've destroyed other people but sooner or later unless they have the mental disposition I don't know, of such low intelligence that they cannot do, you know what I mean, fathom what they've caused to themselves and others. I think most people come to a change sooner or later.

Paul also described how being angry, once revered, becomes unacceptable when older: "it's not cute for my age to become over-angered". Most of the participants reflected several factors that related to their younger self, such as drugs, violence, and the inability to think which from their view point, led to the index offence. As they reflect on the present, they reported that they are now mature and wiser. Below, we see how Richard described moving to a wiser self:

Whereas before everything in my life was a mess, drugs, violence, you name it, I done it yeah and I suppose I didn't really think back then, I was young I was stupid I didn't really take life serious yeah it was like you know what Jack the Lad, yeah, now I'm older I'm wiser I've grown up in jail yeah

The findings highlight an awareness that life is more fragile and thus care must be taken to cherish it. There is an appreciation of what has been learned and the ability to make wiser choices as a result.

Discussion

The analysis has demonstrated, first and foremost, that the men in this study have a capacity to feel remorse; they expressed a deep wish to restore and repair. Supported by appropriate influences, this had a transformative impact on the men's inner life, as they implored to be admitted to the world of moral humanity and to connect with relational possibilities.

Intersubjective Identity Process. The act of murdering is the total denial and annihilation of the victim's subjectivity within an intersubjective context (i.e., one constructed by the relationship between subjectivities, including intentions, perspectives and emotional states of others). Defence, imposition or dissolution of the sense of self are major precipitants of acts of extreme aggression (Felson & Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill, 1977; Siann, 1985) and a major consequence of homicide can in effect be the 'killing off' of the self in relation to others in a physical, moral and social sense when the context alters. The findings point to a construction of a revised identity that is inherently social (Meichenbaum, 2006, 2014), in that it allows open engagement with the feeling states and perspectives of others rather than being based on a sense of separation (Kyselo, 2014, 2016).

The processes highlighted in this study, starting from educational and occupational engagements to family support and the benefits of therapy, act as safe containers both in terms of engagement with others and psychological development. Intersubjectivity, in this case, enables the participants to "participate in or take the perspectives of others, providing vantage points for reflecting upon and changing personal perspectives or positions" (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, 2018, p. 39). This is a fundamental process in the creation of a coherent identity (Berman, Schwartz, Kurtines & Berman, 2001) and necessary in relation to autonomy and agency (Gillespie, 2012; Gillespie & Cornish, 2010). These processes work in parallel with a secure base that can make the mind receptive to new and different possibilities and perspectives (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). An environment that is attentive to the internal security not only of the prisoners but also of the minds of the staff and the establishment, can support the person as an active agent in their onward journey. This results in developments in the private self within an intersubjective world, both in terms of meaning-making and PTG, but also in relation to reconciliation with a condemned past, optimistic present and hopeful future. It also highlights connectedness to other minds including the absent victim, and calls attention to the reparative actions that, according to De Jaegher, Di Paola and Gallagher (2010), can only be meaningful with others. Taking everything in consideration, relational reflexivity (Donati, 2011)

within the various intersubjective contexts reported has made the participants more aware of their ‘dangerous mind’ and perhaps this is what contributes to a reduction in risk.

Notably, more than half of the participants had perpetrated a homicide against strangers, as opposed to someone they knew. The experience of stigma for perpetrators of homicide cannot be separated from their social context. Interpersonal consequences are much more complex when a family member is killed, as among other costs, it can leave the homicide perpetrator isolated from the family. It may also result in complicated grief (Adshead, Bose & Cartwright, 2008) if for example, you are grieving the loss of your wife that you have murdered. PTG might further be problematic, as research by Harry and Resnick (1986) and Rynearson (1984) described that those who kill a family member were significantly more likely to suffer from offence-related Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); including a higher risk of suicide (Liettu, Mikkola, Saavala, Rasanen, Joukamaa & Hakko, 2010).

A weakness of this study is that the researcher may have been influenced by her own clinical experiences in working in similar settings, which may have prevented her from looking at the data without certain preconceptions, and looking more openly and critically at the data. In the same way that Westen and Weinberger (2005) stated that “truth does not reveal itself without interpretation” in the context of clinical research, the same is true of this research (p. 1269). The processes of verification of themes by a second analyst, and presentation of a reflexive account of data analysis, were important in increasing the rigour of our interpretations. Another limitation of the study is that the findings could be seen as a response to incarceration and having learned to say the right things to progress through the system rather than as a response to the homicide event. In hindsight, it would have been useful to help the participants in the interview to disentangle the two when interviewing. The results should be interpreted with caution as the findings neither generalise nor differentiate between gender differences. However, research focusing on the recovery process of females with mental disorders who have committed homicide is scarce and, therefore, difficult to compare.

Conclusion: Implications for practice, policy and research.

This study is unique in reporting on identity work for men who have taken a life as predominantly an intersubjective process, where the making of the identity is a sense which men make of themselves through their relations with others. This study highlights the importance of positive contextual influences (e.g., family support, engagement in therapy) in pushing forward new reconciliations in identity, meaning, and reflexive connections; these are vital aspects in informing meaning-based therapeutic interventions and rehabilitative aims (including risk reduction and accountability) in aiding the identity-narrative reconstruction.

The central point of this study suggests that offenders who have taken a life can reduce their future risk, which links in with the relationship between social inclusion and self-regulation, reducing the need to compensate for shame and the implications of shifts in identity and meaning. Two other main points of this study included the development of a new relationship with themselves and, therefore, with others. The men in this study went through a process of evolution and transformation as social beings throughout their sentence. The initial phases after they have taken a life was tempered with isolation, sadness, denial, and shock and, as they moved forward a renewed sense of connectedness was established (e.g., feeling and responding to others' pain with remorse) that enabled them to develop relational reflexivity with themselves and others.

This study indicates the importance of reflective spaces for men to engage with the impact of their index offences, in order to be able to support a new identity and a new life with safe and accountable connections. From an attachment theory perspective, violent behaviour can be viewed as a serious relational dysfunction, thus it is crucial to reconfigure the intersubjective mechanisms and the emotional interaction repertoires. Starting from our understanding of infants' relations with their primary caregivers (Beebe & Lachmann, 2005; Trevarthen, 2008), it is perhaps prudent to suggest that comparable healthy attunement within a secure base can instigate and support a new cycle of personal

development. Therapeutic insights from psychodynamic (Hoffman, 1998; Storolow, 1994), cognitive (Dimaggio & Semerari, 2004), humanistic (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995) and narrative (Santos, Gonçalves, Matos, & Salvatore, 2009) approaches highlight the intersubjective dynamic of sense-making aimed at creating new meanings including affect regulation for the development of the self. Within the attachment framework, mentalization-based therapy (Bateman & Fonagy, 2004) also described having ‘mind in mind’ as a crucial aspect of affect and distress regulation (Fonagy 2006; Gergely & Unoka, 2008) and has reportedly been of value in the treatment of Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD; McGauley, Yakeley, Williams & Bateman, 2011; Adshead, Moore, Humphrey, Wilson, & Tapp, 2013). A call for action by the prison service is crucial in facilitating opportunities for making amends, including connections with family and engagement with educational and/or occupational activities.

Because this study is one of the first of its kind, qualitative analysis of their interview material generated further potential foci for research into different kinds of identity change after violent offending. Further qualitative research may offer new hypotheses to be tested by quantitative research. Also, it would be beneficial to use a longitudinal design to capture the unfolding processes over time. On the other hand, it would also be useful to study prisoners who have committed homicide who are unable or unwilling to process this experience, and to mark the factors and dynamics that keep them stuck. Furthermore, a comparative study of women who have taken a life would be an interesting comparison. To conclude, the following paragraph was an extract of poem shared by Paul during the interviews, which highlights some of the themes discussed in this study. The name of the poem is called ‘Heal’:

A fool just pulled the trigger things will never be the same
He lost his kids and his wife doing time now he feels the victim’s pain
He’ll be an old man when he gets released now isn’t that a shame
Maybe restorative justice will help us understand

The ripple effect we cause when we don't give a damn

And the hurts so real we need to feel to heal

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Conflict of Interest

None

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Appendices

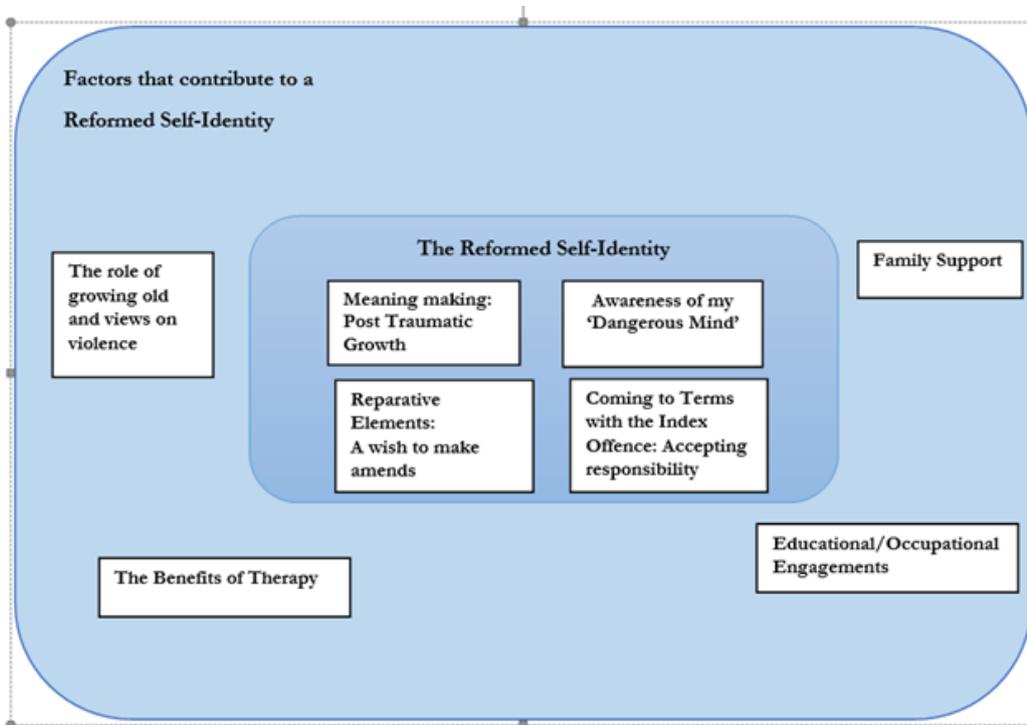


Figure 1 Representation of Super-ordinate and Subthemes Arising via IPA

Pseudonym of Participant	Age (years)	Ethnicity	Victim’s relationship to the perpetrator
1. Matthew (0011)	36	English	Step-son
2. Paul (0012)	48	English Black	Acquaintance
3. John (0013)	58	English	Husband
4. Tim (0014)	66	English	Stranger
5. Richard (0015)	43	English	Stranger
6. Brian (0016)	47	Scottish	Stranger
7. Thomas (0017)	39	Asian	Stranger

Table 1. Participants’ Demographic Information.