UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST of SCOTLAND

*'It's like putting on new glasses – you see the world differently':*

# The Relationship between Yoga, Meditation, Masculinity and Desistance: Insights from Danish Male Offenders

Report of a research study conducted by:

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**Abstract**

This paper reports on research conducted in 2016 which involved the use of life history interviews that explored the experiences, transitions and turning points among a small sample of formerly violent male offenders in Denmark. All of the participants were either currently incarcerated or had had recent experience of imprisonment. In particular, the interviews were focused on exploring the male participants' engagement with Sudarshan Kryia Yoga (SKY) within the context of the *Prison SMART* and *Breathe SMART* programmes in Denmark. They sought to examine the extent to, and ways in which, participation in the programmes had stimulated the interviewees' emotional engagement and personal wellbeing, nurtured masculine identity reconstructions and desistance-related attitudes. Additional insights were gained from the researcher's own participant observation of the yoga and meditation practices within the context of an introductory five-day *Breathe SMART* programme.

Findings suggested that exposure to the SKY practices had enabled the men to begin to open up to and discuss their emotions and feelings, problematize deeply engrained views and responses, steer their innately ethical and moral values in non-criminal directions and perform broader versions of the locally dominated enactment of masculinity. They experienced a range of personal journeys and turning points, punctuated and charaterised by a subtle focus on spirituality, an accumulation and expenditure of emotional capital and a greater ability to manage the negative repercussions of prolonged involvement in violent crime, which included a propensity towards drug dependency, depression and anxiety. The insights from the research are draw upon to make recommendations for policy, practice and research.

**Introduction: Crime, masculinity, desistance and holistic penal engagement**

Around the world, it has long been recognised that crime (and particularly violent crime) is often a gendered phenomenon, most commonly associated with masculinity (Messerschmidt, 1993; Newburn and Stanko, 1994; Honkatukia *et al.,* 2007; Carrington *et al.,* 2010; Deuchar *et al.,* 2016b). For young men who have become marginalised through the strain that may emerge as a result of disadvantaged social backgrounds, negative peer networks and lack of opportunities for employment (Agnew, 2006), crime may provide a means of enacting a hegemonic male identity when other resources and opportunities are unavailable (Muncie, 2009; Holligan and Deuchar, 2015). In contemporary western, working class communities hegemonic masculine characterisics typically prioritise physical strength, competitiveness, assertiveness and overt heterosexual behaviour combined with the rejection of femininity and weakness (Keddie, 2003). The term 'protest masculinity' appropriates the psychoanalytic nature of 'masculine protest': as Tomsen (2008: 95) describes, it refers to 'a gender identity that is characteristic of men in marginal social locations with the masculine claim on power contradicted by economic and social weakness'. Within this general context, frustration and marginalisation can lead to hypermasculine aggressive displays of criminal violence as a means of regaining hegemonic status (Holligan and Deuchar, 2015).

Inspired by the writing of Raewyn Connell (2005), in this paper the author focuses on the conceptualisation of masculinity in the plural sense. The paper seeks to explore how the practicing of meditation and yoga may help male offenders to problematize subcultural constructions of idealized notions of hegemonic or 'hyper' masculinities (Connell 2005). In addition, it focuses on examining the ways in the practices may

enable them to redefine their masculine identities and to respond to the social pressures and strains they may encounter and the personal repercussions of violent lifestyles they may experience in less destructive ways that might help them succeed in their criminal desistance efforts (Densley, 2013: 132; Deuchar *et al*., 2016b).

The study outlined in the paper involved the researcher exploring the life histories, transitions and turning points of previously violent male offenders in Denmark, all of whom were either currently incarcerated or had had recent experience of imprisonment. As the author has argued elsewhere (Deuchar *et al.,* 2016a), penal confinement is often dominated by painful experiences. However, drawing upon an identity theory of desistance (Gadd and Farrall 2004), Maruna *et al.* (2006: 163) highlight that the prison environment, as a 'marginal situation', is one where self-identity is often likely to be questioned and one that can lend itself towards creating a powerful landscape for personal reflection and contemplation among offenders. Regarding the role of prison towards desistance, Parkes and Bilby (2010) argue that the prison service needs to place a firm focus on treating prisoners with humanity and engaging them holistically, thus enhancing their emotional wellbeing in such a way as to facilitate introspection (Birgden, 2015). The value of engaging prisoners in 'purposeful activity' is increasingly being recognised around the world, and some evidence suggests that creative and ascetic-spiritual practices can play a valuable part in realising such engagement and fostering positive identity change (Parkes and Bilby, 2010; Bilderdeck *et al,* 2013; Deuchar *et al.,* 2016a).

**Yoga, meditation and the psychosocial processes relevant to desistance**

Holistic ascetic-spiritual practices rarely feature in criminal justice policy around the

world (Parkes and Bilby, 2010; Deuchar *at al*., 2016a). And yet, the teaching and practicing of yoga and meditation has been cited as a potential means of nurturing a therapeutic process that may support rehabilitation and desistence from crime (Himelstein, 2011).

Yoga has been practiced in India for thousands of years, and over the past 30 years has grown in popularity in the western world (Derezotes, 2000). It includes the use of physical exercises, particular dietrary practices and belief systems and has been shown to support patients in managing and reducing a variety of physical and mental ailments (Derezotes, 2000). Meditation is a 'self-directed method used to help quiet the mind and relax the body' by enabling participants to develop subtle experience of conscious attention and support the development of restful physiological conditions (Derezotes, 2000: 100; Himelstein, 2011). Although originating in India, China and Japan it has also been used by followers of some western religious traditions for many years (Derezotes, 2000).

There are many types of meditative practices, including the use of Transcendental Meditation (TM), popularized in the western world by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (Walsh, 1996). TM has been defined as a 'wakeful condition of altertness' (Himelstein, 2011: 648), where a mantra is recited and participants return to this mantra whenever the mind wanders. Mindfulness meditation has been defined as the 'nonreactive attention to one's ongoing mental processes' (Himelstein, 2011: 648). Mindfulness practice usually comprises participants' enhanced awareness of the breath during sitting meditation, body scanning while lying down and Hatha yoga postures (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), and it has been suggested that the regular practicing of

mindfulness has the capacity to 'enhance cognitive change, self management, relaxation and acceptance' (Himelstein, 2011648). Research has suggested that meditation-based programmes may increase positive psychological states such as hopefulness, optimism and happiness as well as decreasing negative states such as obsessive compulsive behavior, anxiety and stress (for review, see Himelstein, 2011).

Particularly relevant to criminologists is the evidence that suggests that meditative practices have the potential to address psychosocial processes that are clearly related to recidivism. For example, some research has highlighted that some practices have been found to be helpful in the control of anger that can often lead to violence, as well as in the reduction of substance dependency (Hagelin *et al*, 1999; Howells *et al.,* 2010). Wider research conducted in prisons around the world has also found that the combination of yoga and meditation has led to positive outcomes that may be conducive to criminal desistance such as an enhanced ability among inmates to engage in personal reflection and acquire greater coping skills (Pham, 2013); an increased ability to engage in self control (Parkes and Bilby, 2010); and a greater sense of empathy towards and compassion for others (Duncombe, 2004).

Significant to the empirical research outlined in this paper is (a) the evidence that suggests that young men's motivations for group and gang-related violence are often guided by moral and ethical precepts such as a strong commitment towards perceived respect for and loyalty towards brotherhood and a focus on reciprocity within gang environments (Anderson, 1999; De Haan and Loder, 2002; Arsovska and Craig, 2006; Boyle, 2010; Flores, 2013); and (b) that these same young men's prolonged involvement in violent criminality can leave them carrying a range of 'stigmata' into

their futures, including fear of reprisal, prolonged substance dependency and a range of mental health conditions (Densley, 2013: 132). Some research suggests that engagement in holistic practices such as rhythmic breathing, meditation and yogic postures may help to steer offenders' natural proclivity towards moral and ethical precepts and values in positive, non-criminal directions and to manage the negative repercussions of prolonged violent lifestyles (such as drug dependency, anxiety and depression) more effectively (Murthy *et al.,* 1998; Brown and Gerbarg, 2005a, 2005b; Agte and Chiplonkar, 2008). Within this context, the outcomes of clinical trials focused on the use of holistic yoga, breathing and meditative techniques are particularly pertinent.

**Sudarshan Kryia Yoga, its psychological impact and rehabilitative potential**

Sudarshan Kryia Yoga (SKY) has been described as a 'sequence of specific breathing techniques' and an example of 'indigenous Hindu spirituality'. Its use is coordinated by the Art of Living Foundation, a nonprofit service organization founded in 1982 by the spiritual Indian leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar (Brown and Gerbarg, 2005a: 189; Pandya, 2016: 134). It comprises four components, all conducted in a sitting posture: threestage slow Ujjayi pranayama, consisting of slowdeep breathing; Bhastrika pranayama, consisting of forced inhalation and exhalation twenty times; chanting of 'om'; and Sudarshan Kriya, a breathing process consisting of slow, medium and fast cycles of breathing practiced for a total duration of around 30 minutes (Vedamurthachar *et a*l., 2006). Variations of the techniques are used in many traditions including Raja yoga, Hatha yoga, lyengar yoga and Zen (Brown and Gerbarg, 2005a), and extensive demonstration and coaching by trained instructors is required in order to prevent any potential adverse effects such as dizziness or

headaches (Brown and Gerbarg, 2005a, 2005b). Studies conducted in the 1990s by Satyanarayana *et al.* (1992) suggest that the practicing of Kriya within a yoga discipline can lead to increased calmness of mind and spiritual happiness (see also Pandya, 2016).

In clinical trials in India, Murthy *et al.* (1998) found that symptoms of depression among young males improved significantly following participation in SKY over a three month period. Vedamurthachar *et al.* (2006) subsequently tested the effects of SKY therapy on mood symptoms and hormone levels in male participants (age 18-55 years) with alcohol dependence immediately following an acute detoxification period. All participant completed the Beck's Depression Inventory at the end of the first week after admission and two weeks later. The results illustrated that participation in SKY reduced the depressive symptoms in the alcohol dependent subjects, thus suggesting that SKY can be a 'potential yet safe antidepressant therapy' (Vedamurthachar *et al.,* 2006: 251). Further, in randomized controlled trails conducted on a sample of major depressive disorder patients in India, Janakiramaiah *et al*. (2000) also found a high remission state within four weeks.

In Brown and Gerbarg's (2005a) research, they have postulated that the breath rhythms set by SKY can enable participants to activate the limbic system, hippocampus, hypothalamus, amygdala, and stria terminalis which in turn may improve emotional processing, as well as quieting cortical areas involved in executive functions such as anticipation and worry. Further, they claim that the practices help to increase the release of prolactin and oxytocin, thus enhancing feelings of calmness and social bonding. In their empirical work they found that, in an open pilot study of

15 patients with dysthymia and 15 with major depression, there were significant reductions in Beck's Depression Inventory scores after just one week of SKY training and three more weeks of daily practice. Wider clinical studies have also illustrated that programmes that include Ujjayai, yoga postures and meditation can lead to reductions in anxiety and stress (Brown and Gerbarg, 2005b), and some have suggested that the intense spiritual wellbeing inherent within the practices can lead on to a greater sense of eudemonic wellbeing (Pandya, 2016).

Programmes focused on SKY have been modified and delivered for prison inmates in recent years in India, Africa, the United States and several parts of Europe. Although there is currently a paucity of empirical research on the rehabilitative impact of these programmes, Brown and Gerbarg (2005b) report on some existing studies in India and the United States. Qualitative research interviews with staff and officials in maximum security prisons in India suggested that regular practice of SKY significantly reduced violent behaviour among inmates, while a pilot study of juvenile offenders and gang members convicted of violent crimes with deadly weapons in Los Angeles County found that those given SKY training for one week followed by 30 minutes of guided meditation and pranayama three nights per week showed 'significant overall reduction' in anxiety, anger, reactive behaviour and fighting (p. 714). The authors conclude that these reported results suggest that SKY could play an important rehabilitative role, particularly with male offenders who struggle with the pressure to enact the commonly recognized forms of hegemonic and 'hyper' masculinity in western society such as aggression and violence (Holligan and Deuchar, 2015; Deuchar *et al.,* 2016b).

**Context of the study**

The *Breath SMART* programme was founded in Denmark in 2000, with the specific goal of teaching and coaching participants to use SKY as a means of potentially supporting them to deal with challenging life circumstances, including stress and anxiety (*Breath SMART,* 2016). Its partner programme, *Prison SMART*, is focused specifically on supporting prison inmates to address the same issues (*Breath SMART,* 2016). Both programmes draw upon a traditional model of SKY that combines the use of Ujjayi pranayama, Bhastrika pranayama and Sudarshan Kriya as per the teachings of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and promoted globally by the Art of Living Foundation (Brown and Gerbarg, 2005a: Vedamurthachar *et al.,* 2006; Pandya, 2016). The highlight of the programmes is the use of Sudarshan Kryia, which involves participants in cleansing the body from the inside, harmonising the body, mind and emotions through focusing on specific natural rhythms of the breath (Art of Living Foundation, 2016).

In the *Prison SMART* programme, teachers primarily engage in one-to-one coaching with predominantly male inmates, introducing them to the yoga, breathing and meditation techniques across an intensive five day programme and then following this up with top-up sessions while also encouraging inmates to practice on their own. The *Breath SMART* programme, which is delivered in the community, also begins with the intensive five-day programme but tends to involve group participation and the fostering of fellowship with others (Ahlmark, 2015). Although the two programmes were first established in Denmark 2000, the *Prison SMART* programme was actually founded as early as 1992 in the United States and has developed into a globally recognised programme implemented in over 50 countries and has benefited more than

250,000 prisoners and staff. The *Breathe SMART* programme is also implemented in several other parts of the world, including the UK.

To date, only one small Danish exploratory qualitative study on the specific impact of the programmes has been conducted by Ahlmark (2015), which suggested that participants experienced reduced stress and proclivity towards violence as a result of their exposure to the practices as well as a reduction of substance dependency. Accordingly, in light of the paucity of research in this area the current study sought to build on and extend the insights by Ahlmark. It was focused on exploring the main pressures, influences and strains that drove a small group of male offenders' involvement in violent crime as young men, the range of 'stigmata' they experienced as a result, the 'critical moments' that stimulated their decisions to engage with the programmes and the perceived impact of the yoga, breathing and meditation techniques on stimulating emotional engagement, personal wellbeing and masculine identity reconstructions as well as potentially fostering and nurturing desistance-related attitudes.

## Methods and Analyses

### *Methodological approach*

The use of life history methodology has the advantage of capturing social and cultural influences and creating space for respondents to recollect and articulate critical events, turning points and experiences (Atkinson, 1998). It also enables personal emotions, attitudes and beliefs to be foregrounded from the perspective of insiders in the research (Carlsson, 2012). Accordingly, during the summer of 2016 the author conducted life history interviews with 11 Danish men with a history of violent

criminal offending and who had recent experience of participating in the *Prison SMART* and/or *Breathe SMART* programme. The participants were selected via the support of the founder, lead teacher and coach within the Danish programmes, who acted as gatekeeper in the research. The criteria used to select interviewees was as follows: participants had to have had a history of serious and prolonged offending behavior (with a particular focus on violent offending), have had involvement in participating in the *Breathe SMART* and/or *Prison SMART* programme and be willing through a process of informed consent, to talk about their experiences within the context of a 60-90 minute interview. Interviews were conducted either in prison or within the premises of the Danish *Breathe SMART* organization, depending on the personal circumstances of individual participants at the time. For the most part, interviews were conducted in English; however, in a minority of cases where participants' English proficiency was lacking, the support of a Danish translator was drawn upon.

Drawing upon an ethnographic approach (Hammersley, 2006), the researcher also engaged in the focused use of participant observation – specifically drawing upon the 'participant as observer role' (Gold, 1958). During the period of conducting interviews with offenders, he actively participated in a *Breathe SMART* five-day programme, taught to him on a one-to-one basis by one of the lead coaches in the Danish programme. He routinely recorded 'jottings' of his observations and personal 'impressions and feelings' (Emerson *et al*., 1995: 31-32) and later drew upon these jottings to create full fieldnotes. The purpose of this element of the research was for the researcher to gain firsthand experience of the breathing and meditative practices and to personally reflect upon their potential psychological, emotional and physical

impact. By drawing upon 'epistemic reflexivity' the researcher adopted and ensured a constant 'blending of reflection and observation', recognizing that his own subjectivity as a researcher was a central component to the creation of insights via the emerging data (Hancock 2009: 96, and see also Deuchar *et al.,* 2016b).

*Participant details*

Of the 11 men who participated in life history interviews, seven were white ethnic Danes while four were either first or second generation immigrants descending from Macedonia, Lebanon, Uganda and Somalia. While one of the men was in his early twenties, five were in their thirties, four in their forties and one was in his late fifties when the interviews were conducted. Accordingly, all of the participants were able to reflect back across a reasonable lifespan in order to identify the key experiences and strains that led them into crime, the turning points that led them to participate in the programme and the perceived impact that the practices were having on them. Some of the men had been biker or street gang members or leaders, while others had been involved in criminal activity outwith the context of gang membership and their collective convictions included those for drug dealing, armed robbery, drug possession, weapon possession, attempted murder and murder. While three of the participants were inmates in either secure or open prisons at the time that the interviews were conducted, the remainder had been released (albeit in some cases very recently). However, most of the participants had begun to engage with the SKY practices while inmates via the *Prison SMART* programme and, in the case of those who had now been released, had continued to practice on their own or in a group context out in the community. Two of the interviewees had in recent years progressed from being participants on the *Breathe SMART/Prison SMART* programme to now

actively teaching and coaching others in the use of the techniques both in prisons and out in the wider community.

During the interviews, the researcher explored the participants' life experiences, the details of their offending backgrounds, their experiences of participating in the programme and the follow on practices, the perceived impact that the practices had had on them and their thoughts about the future. In addition, an in-depth semi-structured interview was also conducted with the lead coach, mentor and founder of the *Breathe SMART* organisation (who was also the research gatekeeper) to seek his own insights into the nature and perceived impact of the programme.

*Ethics and access*

Access to the prisons was granted through the Danish Prison and Probation Service (DPPS), and ethical approval was additionally gained through the researcher's university and the Danish ethics counsel. Enhanced Criminal Record Bureau checks were required as a condition of prison access, and the research participants were recruited through material describing the study and issued to inmates through the dual coordination of the research's gatekeeper and the DPPS.

*Analytic approach*

Transcription of the interviews was followed by a two-stage data analysis process. Firstly, the researcher engaged in a conventional content analysis phase where he immersed himself in the data and conceptual themes and sub-themes were identified. Thereafter, a directed content analysis phase was conducted where emerging overarching themes were interpreted in light of the existing literature on meditation,

yoga and spirituality as well as masculinity and desistance (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). To preserve the anonymity of the participants in this study, particularly when presenting all verbatim excerpts, pseudonyms are used throughout.

## Findings

### *Social strains, criminal activity, masculine status and turning points*

The participants all described the social and family-related challenges they faced during their formative years. For example, most of the men had grown up in socially deprived communities that were characterized by poverty, lack of opportunities for employment as well as a prevalence of juvenile violence and gang culture. Some had also experienced home lives characterised by divorce, alcoholism, abuse, parental loss or rejection:

> My family was not normal. I think something happened when my mother divorced my real father when I was 3 months old … babies take a lot of senses in … so I think maybe at that age I feel something was not alright ... and then I got this other father ... he was quite loving and all this but my mother she was not there for me as I'd like her to be … like give me love and cuddle me and do things with me because she was working so I missed that. *(Mario)*

> My childhood was quite chaotic, a lot of chaos. My parents were still children, there was a lot of abuse … they were drinking, smoking hash ... I remember the insecurity that was taking part in that family life … they were sometimes also violent to each other … my father was often finding another girl and, you know, when he was out drinking … and my mother, she would also find a man. *(Christoffer)*

> My father died when I was small … I'm from an area of [city name] that was, let's call it a challenged .. it was a poor area, kind of a ghetto … a lot of gang concentration and so on. *(Heins)*

Some of the participants who came from immigrant backgrounds also referred to early experiences of trauma they experienced in their home countries. For example, Jaafi described spending his childhood in war-torn surroundings in Somalia and then creating his 'own war' on the streets as a gang member when he grew up. In addition, Omar spent his early childhood in the Lebanon against the backdrop of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and described the way in which his father was tortured and subsequently became very violent himself at home, regularly hitting Omar if he did not do his homework correctly. Accordingly, the participants had clearly experienced a complicated blend of social strains during their childhood years (Agnew, 2006), as well as what MacDonald *et al.* (2011: 148) describe as 'critical moments': events or experiences that, in the minds of the informants, were remembered as 'highly consequential'. These highly consequential 'critical moments' evidently stimulated negative emotionality; this brought about a tendency towards seeking alternative forms of status from hanging around with older gang members and engaging in violence and crime. This usually began during the participants' teenage years or younger, and led on to serious violent offending (Agnew, 2006; MacDonald *et al.,* 2011):

> On the other side of the street … there was a motorcycle club … these guys driving Harley Davidsons, on the other side of the road. They were little bit older than we were. And a little bit more tough … then we start to go to these guys, then we start to feel welcome over there and we became friend, friends with them. And when you are like 18, 19, 20 years old and some people who are 25 they want to talk to you then, and you are a boy, then you feel something special. *(Søren)*

> When I grew up I used to see all the boys being tough, and I used to watch a lot of the gangster movies … so I was interested in that lifestyle … I made my first crime when I was

> six years old … I stole a bicycle from my neighbour … [later] when I was in the gang I always wore bullet-proof vest and pistol with me all the time … I wanted to make a name for myself … I was 17 [and] I went to prison for young boys. *(Jaafi)*

> As a teenager … when I was 15 years I started to learn the gang environment … when I became 18 I became really violent to other people … and sold hashish, and after I sold amphetamine, and guns. *(Omar)*

> I start dealing hash, cocaine, amphetamine and all that, when I was 15 years or something, and there were some people in the gang who was older than me … they were 16 or 17 years, a lot of the boys together calling us 'brothers' and all that ... we were really wild, I have taped people in bathtubs and knifed through hands and all that kind of shit if people don't pay money for drugs. *(Stefan)*

For most of the participants, their early experiences of participating in violence, gang culture and drug dealing led on to a prolonged period of serious violence and criminal activity during their young and (in some cases) middle-aged adult lives. While some admitted that they were primarily motivated by a fascination for and desire to engage in violence or to earn street-oriented masculine status and respect, others were motivated by the prospect of making money or were driven by persistent issues of addiction:

> I enjoyed when people know who I was and when people have respect for me … I really liked the violence … you don't see the whole, how it is – you only live in your gangster world in your own head. *(Jaafi)*

> It was money, it was not the excitement … it was only the money … just so I could feel secure. *(Christoffer)*

> You look at the big guys and 'I wanna be that guy, you know? … so you build up a name … so people know when they say your name and then they're like, 'woo, this is the guy' you know? And when you first begin to feel that, people get into a room where you know nobody and people know who you are … you get that respect ... it's like a rush … you get like 'wow, look at me, I'm a fucking rock star' but the thing is … when you build things with violence, you have to keep with it … to keep up the violence, because if you don't there comes a new one building his name. *(Heins)*

> When I come out from jail I'm 26 years old this is the first time I try cocaine when I'm 26 … cocaine, ecstasy all this … so I have a big problem with this. *(Omar)*

For some of the men like Heins and Omar, addiction to drugs and repeated exposure to the violent lifestyles associated with drug dealing, armed robbery and territorial gang rivalry led on to a range of stressful situations and increased feelings of anger and anxiety, while others clearly began to suffer from mental health issues that were increasingly difficult to manage:

> There will always come enemies and always people who want to overtake you … but for me the most, it was you know doing the same things and just you know getting tired of that lifestyle … the police always after you and you can't come in any place in my town. *(Bryan)*

> I had lost so much energy that I could not do anything … very much stress, depressive medicine I had been taking for six years. *(Omar)*

> I had a girlfriend and she was pregnant and one day I come home, you know really drunk. Been out for two days doing cocaine and then I came home and I just messed up the whole apartment and I also took my girlfriend by the neck … really, I don't remember anything, when I woke up after that I was just totally depressed for two weeks or something. *(Chrisoffer)*

> I had a lot of anger inside my body … I used to smoke a lot of weed, to calm myself down. *(Jaafi)*

> My depression was so heavy and I felt so much … fear, anxiety. So I was scared to death. *(Søren)*

As alluded to earlier, Densley (2013: 132) highlights that the 'hyper' masculine status that gang membership and street violence initially brings ultimately leads on to 'stigmata' for many members, who often carry with them 'criminal records, violent reputations, tattoos, scars, ongoing vulnerability to reprisals and a residual territorial confinement' into their futures (Densley, 2013: 132). The participants in this study clearly experienced a range of stigmata including stress from the threat of reprisal from enemies, residual feelings of anger, frustration and depression. They often attempted to manage and deal with these issues through the use of illegal or even prescription drugs. For some, there were also key 'turning points' (Carlsson, 2012) that helped them to realize they wanted to try and move away from criminal and violent lifestyles - such as becoming a parent or generally becoming weary of the lifestyle:

> I start thinking I have to make a choice 'cause I have a wife and I have a family. *(Jaafi)*

> I don't want them [my children] to see me in jail no more … I see that I … don't have to use the money, I have what I have, I have my kid, I have my wife and my house. *(Mario)*

> It came when, it was the last party I went to … and then I sat down and started thinking that all the old people ... almost all of them are gone … now there's some new guys, you know younger guys … and I start to say to myself 'nah' … my body could not any more … so from there I just said 'no, I had enough.' *(Isaac)*

Against this backdrop, the men had begun to reach out and engage with the *Prison SMART* and/or *Breathe SMART* rogramme.

***Anger management, emotional release, empathy and spiritual engagement***

Most of the participants had initially become introduced to the SKY yoga and meditation techniques within the context of the *Prison SMART* programme while serving custodial sentences, and some had subsequently engaged with the *Breathe SMART* programme post-release. While some self-referred to the programme because they had heard about it from other prison inmates, others were referred to it by social workers. The men talked about their initial reactions to the yoga movements, forced inhalation and cycled breathing techniques that they experienced on the initial five-day programme, and the progressive impact they felt from practicing the techniques on their own afterwards. While some felt initial frustration with the use of the Sudarshan Kriya mantra or found the physical yoga exercises tough, they also described a feeling of psychological release that in some cases led to a clarity of mind or even intense emotional responses:

> The first time I did this I was so angry that I wanted to like to go up and go out of the room or even smash the ghetto blaster where this guy was saying 'so … hum' … but I was like, something else tell me 'no, you've got to stay, you've got to see what this is because you're scared, there's something you're scared about.' Afterwards, I could feel some release in my brain actually. *(Mario)*

> For me it was really physical, it was physical – tough. I had cramps and I was sweating … the yoga was tough ... but the breathing was just … like something was exploding inside of me … and during those forty days [of self-practice] it was just like something new happened inside of me, you know? A new way of thinking, a new way of seeing things. *(Christoffer)*

> The first day I took the course … it was OK. And the second day it was Ok, and then the day came we had to do the Sudarshan Kriya for the first time, the breathing … and when I get home and I get inside the door, you know, I sat in my kitchen for a while and then just crying … it was really looking into myself for the first time in my life, and see all the fuck-up things I've been doing. *(Stefan)*

> I start to feel something in the meditation that I was relaxing more and more and I could stop my thoughts for longer and longer time. Sometimes I could cry, it was very new for me to cry – I hadn't cried for 25 years. *(Søren)*

Personal experience of participating in the Kryia confirmed for the researcher the way in which it could initially feel strange or frustrating, but in time led to feelings of intense psychological and physical release:

> *Haggi switches on the tape, and I am completely unprepared for what comes next. As I listen, sitting in the chair with my hands on my lap, I am guided by a high pitched, Hindu voice which rasps a mantra over the loud speaker. At first the mantra is slow and the corresponding breaths by nature are deep and relaxed, but after several minutes the pace quickens and the breaths then also speed up – until they are shallow and guided with some urgency. Following this, the mantra slows again and the quick intakes of breathe slow down in pace. At first, my natural inclination is to reject the process – this feels weird, and all sorts of thoughts run through my head that tell me that it is 'wacky' and 'hippyish'. I don't feel in my comfort zone, but I decide to stick with it. As the minutes roll on I continue responding through my breathing to the incessant mantra until I am almost part of it …*

> *… After what feels like about 20 minutes I am completely carried away with the pace and form of the breathing and the mantra until I feel my head becoming light and the knot in my stomach subsiding.* (Researcher's fieldnotes)

The former offenders talked at length about the way in which practicing the yoga, breathing and meditation exercises began to have a profound impact on their ability to control the destructive ways they had previously responded to feelings of anger. For example, Heins had spent many years building a violent reputation for himself in his leadership role within one of the most prominent motorcycle gangs in Denmark. He had served 16 years in prison for violent crimes, admitted that he had been completely driven by his own ego and often felt intense anger if he perceived that anyone was disrespecting him in any way. As his engagement with the SKY practices progressed, he described the way in which the combination of the breathing exercises and the personal reflection and introspection that Thomas (the lead teacher and coach) helped him to engage in supported him in gaining a less self-centred and destructive view of the world:

> I was living in a world that everything was around *me,* my ego. And you're coming here, doing the exercises, and begin to understand different … because Thomas, when we do the exercises we also do some talking … he was asking me questions … he didn't tell me what to say or what to think, or what he think. He never told me. He ask me, 'what … when you are driving around and this guy comes, how did it make you feel? What does it make you think? And what does it do inside you? How do you feel when the anger comes? Where is it in your stomach?' ... he begin to do some exercises along with that and really begin, I begin to make my mind and my body in another balance, and begin to see the world different. I begin to understand the guy in the car is just trying to get home, he's not driving around the town just to fuck with me … I begin to [see] the world is not *me. (Heins)*

Others also talked about the way in which the breathing and meditation exercises provided them with a tool that enabled them manage their anger, and deal with potentially destructive thoughts, feelings and stressful situations more productively:

> I control myself better, you know? I feel that I can do something, you know, to calm myself down or to relieve the situation … before, I didn't say anything, I just hit someone, but now I can control myself more. *(Jaafi)*

> I found out that … if you sit down and close your eyes, you can stop your thoughts and you can also pretty fast stop those bad feelings … I pretty fast found out that most of the things we feel come from our head and that's a very strong tool when you find out that. *(Søren)*

> Something, for me something new happened every time I did it … I deal with a lot of situations better … when … I can see something is going to happen, I just step aback, I step outside and look at myself and say 'hey, breathe, take it easy … leave it alone.' *(Mario)*

In addition to anger and stress management, some of the men talked about the intense feelings of happiness, joy and peace that they began to experience after practicing the SKY techniques for some time:

> Some people cry but I get gladness in me, you know, it's a good feeling. So when I get out of there I'm positive, you know, I'm on like drugs but in a good way and I'm pumped up … I get this, you know, strong energy, yeah a lot of energy. *(Theo)*

> There's happiness, but it's a peaceful thing and ... when you have done this thing, everything else feels and looks different, you know? *(Paul)*

> It's a feeling of love, peace, connectedness … now, it's all I want, that feeling. *(Haggi)*

Indeed, the author's personal experience of the practices led him to experience the type of energy, joy and peace that the men described during interviews, which was reinforced to him through the coaching and mentoring process:

*'You looked so much younger when you got up from the chair,' Haggi says laughing, 'I have never actually seen a transformation quite like that before!' he comments. Suddenly I realise that I cannot stop smiling – I feel a great joy, a peaceful presence that surpasses anything I have experienced before either in meditation or in real-time. Slowly, I am beginning to understand why the transformations that the offenders I have been talking to have been happening. If my stress and anxiety can be relived through this, it is highly likely that their anger frustration and rigidity will also be treated positively by it.* (Researcher's fieldnotes)

In many cases, the men described renewed feelings of emotional awareness and engagement combined with an ability to accept but not necessarily react to thoughts and anxiety. They felt that this had enabled them to begin to empathise with other people's feelings and perspectives for the first time:

When you can feel yourself you can start to feel other people, and you can start to feel other people's feelings *(Poul)*

Of course I can still get angry, but I don't react to it … I had a problem with one person, and then he wrote something very bad to me. And normally I would just go out and I would just totally destroy him. But for the first time I could see how the other one feels, so I wrote it as a message. It was more like 'what's wrong with you? You must feel bad or something, you know?' I start to be able to sit in another person's place. *(Omar)*

My new relationship, it's more open and trusting … much more love and empathy .. it's a place where I can develop and feel secure … I feel like I can manage and find the strength inside of me to feel the feelings and not to *be* the feelings and get carried away with my feelings …and that's actually what I think these exercises, they give me the power, that live power I have inside of me to feel what is happening … I was not even aware of what was going on … when all these thoughts was coming and then I had to do something about it … and now the feelings are coming, but I stay there. *(Christoffer)*

Many of the participants felt that the practices were deeply spiritual. In a minority of cases, the men related this to their religious beliefs; for example, Omar and Jaafi had both been brought up as Muslims, and described the way in which meditation had helped to enable them to become more disciplined and calm enough to pray and had also made their daily prayers feel more profound. In addition, Christoffer had begun to feel an omnipresent awareness of God during his meditations. Erik also believed that the breathing and meditation practices enabled him to become more in touch with his soul which in turn led to calmness and a greater ability to manage stress:

> I get more in contact with my soul, and not the needs that my body has … I just feel everything is in balance .. and you feel calm … I'm more prepared for anything, I feel I can manage everything. *(Erik)*

Although some academic authors (for instance, Hay and Nye, 1998) define spirituality as an awareness of and relationship with God, a more holistic sense of spiritual development has been defined in terms of gaining a 'heightened awareness of oneself and others' (Nurden, 2010: 122). It can be seen as a means of 'getting in touch with the deeper parts of life' and growing in experience, understanding and response (Nurden, 2010: 123). It was this form of spirituality that Erik (above) and the other men most commonly cited as being integral to the SKY practices they engaged with within the *Prison SMART/Breathe SMART* programme, and that enabled them to get more in touch with innate, softer feelings associated with love and kindness for self and others, being less judgmental and more open-minded:

> Something happens when you meditate – it's like you're coming home … you get in touch with some part of yourself which is maybe [from when you are] three, four, five years old and

> when you are three, four, five year old then you don't harm anybody so by practicing every day you become a better person … you start to be more kind to people. *(Søren)*

> For me, it's 100 per cent spiritual. Spirituality is love, and I got a little bit of love for the guys and they got a little bit of love for me. *(Haggi)*

> The spiritual side is just a part of life now 'cause there's more depth to life … when there's more depth you're also thinking in a bigger context … so all the time it's not just about what I see right now and then judge it. It's always to find the truth, and then stay open, you know … not judging things right away. *(Christoffer)*

Four possible spiritual journeys have been identified by Lee (1999), namely *inward* journeys (self), *outward* journeys (others), *downward* journeys (social and cultural environment) and *upward* journeys (God) (see Deuchar, 2013). It was evident that engaging with the practices had taken the men on *inward* and *outward* journeys: they regarded the yoga, breathing and meditation practices as having had a profound impact on their ability to become more aware of and react differently to their own thoughts and feelings, and to become more sensitive to other people's perspectives. Some believed that the practices had strengthened their ability to go on *upwar*d journeys that deepened their awareness and contact with God. However, as we will see in the next section one of the biggest impacts to emerge from the programme was the way in which participants were taken on *downward* journeys, where the wider social and cultural influence of hegemonic forms of 'protest' and 'hyper' masculinity slowly became deconstructed, problematized and re-defined (Connell, 2005; Deuchar *et al.,* 2016b).

***Changing perceptions, confronting emotions and 'doing masculinity'***

In the criminological literature, it has often been asserted that to participate in crime and take illegal drugs is often seen to be synonymous with 'doing masculinity' among disadvantaged young males (Messerschmidt, 1993; Joe-Laidler and Hunt, 2012; Søgaard *et al.,* 2016). Further, in the literature on desistance and masculinity, it has often been noted that a key obstacle to reformation of male offenders is their socially-induced performance of 'hyper' masculinity (Abrams *et al.,* 2008; Holligan and Deuchar, 2015; Deuchar *et al.,* 2016b). However, the insights gathered during interviews with the Danish former offenders suggested that, in contrast to some other forms of meditation that may be seen as 'soft' or 'gentle', the intensely physical yoga exercises and breathing techniques within the SKY programme were seen to be masculine and therefore acceptable for the men to engage with. For example, Mario's obsession with weight-lifting and bodybuilding as a form of hegemonic masculine expression slowly diminished as he became more adept at practicing the challenging yoga and breathing techniques, while Erik began to recognize that the feminized nature of yoga and meditation portrayed in the media was inaccurate and had begun to masculinize the inherent challenges involved in practicing the physical techniques of energetic stretching and breathing:

> I trained a lot before … [in prison] I was in a bad mood because I couldn't do weights … you feel you're falling apart … my masculinity was mainly the training, when you are bigger you feel more masculine but now I find something in this that I feel masculine … in the beginning I missed the weight training … [but now] my mind is not so much in the weight training. *(Mario)*

> Of course I don't wanna be like the 'weak' guy, but I don't feel like weak … you only see

> [meditation] in the *Sex in the City* movie … then it's suddenly just feminine, but actually it's really tough. *(Erik)*

Certainly, the author's own personal experience of the yogic exercises brought it home to him the extent of the physicality involved in the programme:

> *As Haggi gives the instruction, I lie on my front, with my hands in a tight clench tucked in against my waist. Then I slowly try and lift both of my legs at the same time, but feel that it is almost impossible to do. 'It can be done!' Haggi encourages me, and I push again with almighty effort and slowly lift my legs behind me, while keeping my back straight and my stomach pinned to the floor. Now I realise why the guys identify within these practices – not only are the meditations challenging for the mind, but the yoga techniques are physically challenging too.* (Researcher's fieldnotes)

However, the practices also involved the male participants facing up to their own emotions and confronting their dominant feelings. The programme was mostly delivered to them on a one-to-one basis by coaches in prisons, and this created a safe space for the men to open up and express inner feelings and emotional difficulties. As lead coaches within the programme, Thomas and Haggi recognised that this involved the male participants in getting in touch with their 'feminine' sides and confronting deeply held views and attitudes, which could be challenging for those who had become entrenched in the hypermasculine world of gang culture and violence:

> A thing which I see in many of the gang members … is the rigidity of seeing the world as black and white … they can't stand uncertainty, so they're very quick [to say] 'this is the good people, this is the bad people' … and they have all the dangerous tattoos, and they maybe also have a big dog and then they maybe have a weapon … there must be something extremely fearful inside, some kind of impotence in their masculinity, and needing to prove all the time.

> When they start to trust you a little bit … they start to be able to regulate themselves more. *(Thomas)*

> [The hardest issue is] their own emotion, their own opinions about what a man's gotta do and is not gotta do … they have learned that the feminine side is the stronger side … it's feminine strength, and it's stronger. *(Haggi)*

Christoffer, who was a reformed offender but also someone who coached others in the yoga and meditation techniques, believed that the very act of admitting he needed a 'toolbox' to help him deal with his issues of anger and aggression was uncomfortable to begin with and felt like an expression of weakness. However, in time he felt that the meditative practices enabled him to problematize his entrenched views of masculinity and his tendency towards misogyny that had been passed on to him by his own father, and to view women as equals:

> During this period I've taken three education [courses] … it's education that I would never have chosen before, like Rudolph Steiner childhood care … to begin with there were about 31 girls and me … before I would just look at the girls and think 'who can I shag?' … my mindset has changed, you know? … I would never have been able to go in a class with so many girls if I couldn't find my feminine side … because I lived, when I grew up my father was also always really hard towards my mother, you know? He was always talking down – he was the man and she was the woman … I'm learning to undo it … the meditation was the … whole foundation … everyday I had to look at myself ... *(Christoffer)*

Other participants also felt that their entrenched views of masculinity had become challenged as a result of participating in the programme. Prior to involvement in the programme, 'doing masculinity' was about earning money illegally, scanning for danger and being ready for violence. The spiritual journeys that the men experienced

meant that 'doing masculinity' was now seen as being synonymous with peace, harmony and doing the right thing as partners, fathers and family men:

> In a sense, it's spiritual – if you're not open-minded you will not take it in. *(Mario)*

> I'm in a different state of mind … I can tell you, when I go into a room before I'm scanning the room, I watch everybody … I could tell you when I come into the bar, 'those two guys over there' … I could look into their eyes and tell their attitude … I could stand in the room and see who's who in five seconds … I have this animal instinct … [now] my way of going into a room is totally different, even I'm the same eyes … when I go into a room I expect this room to be peaceful, I don't expect to come into any trouble … you get in harmony with yourself, so when you look into my eyes and my face I look peaceful, I don't look mad and evil and violent ... when I come into a place before I never would be sitting with the back to the door … I always have my eyes to see who is coming in and out of the room ... so I was always ready for everybody coming … today I don't care about sitting with my back to the wall because I don't expect nobody to want to do me nothing, do you understand? Because you're living in another mindset … from the understanding of the whole yoga. It's not just exercising, it's a way of life. *(Heins)*

> I want to make a lot of money in a legal way … to be a good man for my wife and a good son for my parents and a good brother for my brothers and sisters, and good friend and … just do the right thing. *(Jaafi)*

As the lead coach on the programme, Thomas recognized that the stress and trauma that many of the male participants had experienced in their lives had led them to cut themselves off from their feelings and engage in destructive behaviour (such as drug taking and violence) to deal with difficult thoughts and feelings and maintain an external 'macho' image. He believed that the programme helped them to begin to rely

more on meditation as a means of dealing with difficult issues and in turn embrace a different way of expressing themselves as men in less destructive ways:

> In my experience 99 per cent of those people who are really criminal … those who really do bad things, they have some traumatization … high levels of stress, and they don't know how to deal with that stress … in order to regulate themselves they use aggression, they use drugs ... in order to feel self-acceptance and very much respect from others … you have cut off feelings ... and then the self image becomes so important … you will … kill if anybody's threatening your image … because your image is the only thing you have … and the more maybe drugs you need or the more high intensity you need to feel you're alive … when we learn people to relax to be in the present moment, to feel the intensity of being connected … suddenly the need to go up there all the time becomes less … sometimes if they have so many thoughts … when you come up there [with drugs] it's like you are released – you are out of control and that's what they're seeking, but the same way when you meditate also you can come out of the more thinking brain … so the more they learn these things the less they need for destructive ways of doing … it's not that they leave totally their masculinity and all, but it becomes more … more connected to an inner strength … the way they maintain it becomes less destructive. *(Heins)*

Accordingly, whereas the men admitted that they had previously viewed doing violence and crime, building muscularity and rejecting femininity as being synonymous with 'doing masculinity' (Messerschmidt, 1993; Chaudhuri, 2012; Keddie 2003; Woodward 2004), participating in the breathing and meditation practices slowly appeared to help them to change their entrenched perceptions. The intensely physical nature of the practices initially enabled them to continue to express the key markers of hegemonic male identity, through demonstrating strength and aggression and avoiding the risk of feeling that they were becoming de-masculinized (Deuchar *et al.,* 2016b). In time, they also began to use the safe therapeutic space

created via one-to-one coaching and mentoring with Thomas and his team to open up conversations about problems, emotions and feelings (Deuchar *et al.,* 2016b). With repeated exposure to the practices, it appeared that the men went on what could be described as *downward* spiritual journeys (Lee, 1999) where they confronted and problematized deeply engrained socially and culturally-influenced attitudes and values. They appeared to become more willing to perform broader versions of the dominated enactment of masculinity that had characterized their previous periods as gang members and offenders (Deuchar *et al.,* 2016b; Søgaard *et al.,* 2016).

***Addiction, drugs, depression and desistance***

The interviewees talked about the way in which yoga and meditation had replaced their tendency to use drugs to deal with their problems. For instance, some described the way in which they stopped smoking cannabis, taking cocaine or using steroids as part of a bodybuilding regime. Some also described the way in which they now felt 'addicted' to the SKY practices instead; for instance, Omar described the way in which his body craved the practices if he missed engaging with them for several days. Some also changed their dietary habits, since Thomas and the other coaches tended to recommend eating more vegetarian food and less junk food as part of the process of cleansing the body and enabling a greater connection to the practices:

> Some food makes restlessness, like coffee and too much caffeine and too much sugar … and meat [can] create more dullness … more fresh and more energetic food, it also supports the process of connecting yourself … we are also cleansing out [the body] when we do these practices … as they start being more connected they also start to feel more, 'what is good for me, what is not good for me …?' *(Thomas)*

For some, the gains and benefits that emerged as a result of the breathing and meditation practices also enabled them to come off of prescribed medication for mental health conditions related to issues from their past. For example Erik was serving a long prison sentence for a gang-related double murder and had often suffered from unsettling flashbacks to the violence he had been involved in. The following extract from an interview with Erik illustrates the way in which he was prescribed antidepressants for symptoms of anxiety and trauma while in prison, but eventually managed to replace this with the daily breathing and meditation practices, which led to increased feelings of happiness and wellbeing:

E: I don't think killing people or making violence makes anybody happy … I got these anxiety pills … it helped me a little bit, I didn't get all the thoughts … then I told the doctor, you know, 'I'm never happy'. So he said, 'Ok, I do this' … in Denmark we call it happy pills, but these pills don't bring you any happiness, they just make you a walking zombie. So I used that for half a year and then I said to my doctor, 'I don't wanna do this anymore'.

[I: And was that at the point you were using meditation more and more as well?]

E: Yeah, I used it every day.

[I: And did you find that you got the happiness and peace that you didn't get from the pills?]

E: Yeah, I got it from healing myself … It's like putting on new glasses … you see the world differently. Before I was aggressive of course, but I've been a pretty calm guy.

Similarly, Omar described the way in which he had been taking anti-depressants for six years in prison as a result of distressing flashbacks to the violence he had been involved in and the fact that he had lost his wife and son while in jail. Like Erik, he also stopped taking the pills when he started the *Prison SMART* programme and felt like he had a new lease of life:

> It was like a miracle … it's like I was dead but I became alive again … I stopped taking depressive medicine after six years … I was so much influenced by the drugs that I was just going round like a zombie … when I started the course, I stopped during the programme. *(Omar)*

Søren also described the way in which engaging with the SKY practices gave him the renewed feelings of energy that helped him to deal with depression:

> When you are breathing in those levels you do in Sudarshan Kriya then you fill up your body and the [blood] cells with energy. And when you do that every day and slowly, slowly the body is like an engine. It gets more and more fuel. And that's, that can be a way to work with depression. *(Søren)*

The men felt that the renewed sense of calmness and peace they felt, combined with their widening views about masculine expression that had emerged during their continued participation in the yoga and meditative practices, had given them a stronger commitment to criminal desistance. Although several were still in prison during the time of the interviews, their comments often indicated that the SKY practices had helped them to feel a sense of remorse but also self-forgiveness. There was a tendency to re-position themselves as 'reformed' or 'reforming' offenders with a sense of moral agency, and a greater commitment to change and take their work-

related and family responsibilities seriously (Søgaard *et al.,* 2016):

> It was really good to look into myself for the first time in my life, you know? And see all the fucked up things I've done … I talked about it a lot because it was so deep … remorse and … inner peace, and I could forgive myself … for the life I've lived and the violence I do to people and all that kind of shit. *(Stefan)*

> I've felt bad for the people I've hurt by violence … I'm not proud of it [but] it's a part of me and I accept it, I cannot change it but I can learn from it … I think I have dealt with all these things … I will just charge forwards on getting this company up and try getting a lot of work and just use the time with the friends that are not doing crime. *(Erik)*

> I always look at my son now and … every time there's something I look at him and I will do the same when I come out … he needs me and that's what's going to keep me outside … I'm not selfish anymore … I feel calmer, happier. *(Mario)*

> I get a lot of opportunities but I say 'no' … now I say to people 100 per cent 'no.' I am very strong now … one million per cent because of this course. *(Omar)*

Thus, it seemed that the qualitative data from this study supported previous insights from clinical trials that suggests that SKY can be a potential yet safe antidepressant therapy, and can help to improve emotional processing, help participants manage stress and anxiety and lead to increased feelings of calmness and eudemonic wellbeing (Janakiramaiah, 2000; Brown and Gerbarg, 2005a, 2005b; Vedamurthachar *et al*., 2006; Pandya, 2016). Through engaging in the practices, many of the men suggested that they were beginning to discard their 'old selves' and adopt new non-criminal identities as a means of 'rebiographing' (Johnson and Larson 2003: 27).

**Concluding Discussion**

This paper has focused on exploring the life histories of a small group of male violent offenders in Denmark. The research examined the strains and pressures that drove them into criminal lifestyles but also the extent to, and ways in which, participation in ascetic-spiritual practices supported their emotional engagement and personal wellbeing and nurtured masculine identity reconstructions conducive to desistance-related attitudes. Throughout the research, the author was mindful of the literature that suggests (a) that violent offending can present marginalised, disadvantaged young men with compensatory means of regaining hegemonic status through hypermasculine performances (Messerschmidt, 1993; Connell, 2005; Tomsen, 2008; Holligan and Deuchar, 2015); (b) the evidence that suggests that many subsequently experience a range of negative repercussions and carry 'stigmata' into their adult lives (Densley, 2013; Deuchar, 2013); and (c) that yoga and meditation has been cited as a potential means of nurturing a therapeutic psycho-social process that may support rehabilitation (Derezotes, 2000; Brown and Gerbarg, 2005a, 2005b; Agte and Chiplonkar, 2008; Howells *et al*., 2010; Himelstein, 2011; Ahlmark, 2015).

Cognisant of the limited but growing evidence from clinical trials on the particular impact of SKY in enacting cognitive change, supporting the reduction of anxiety and depression and increasing positive psychological states, the research sought to explore the particular impact that these techniques had had on the male offenders (Murthy *et al.,* 1998; Janakiramaiah *et al.,* 2000 Vedamurthachar *et al.,* 2006; Pandya, 2016). In so doing, due recognition was given to the extensive literature that suggests that criminal desistance is not just about transformations in offenders' circumstances, but also involves (inter-)subjective processes such as desisters' reconstructions of

personal identities as a result of personal reflection and introspection (Maruna 2001; Gadd and Farrall 2004; Deuchar *et al.,* 2016a, 2016b; Søgaard *et al.* 2016)

Within the limited context of the small-scale research and the researcher's short-term personal contact with the *Breathe SMART* programme, the author also sought to compliment his insights from life history interviews by actively positioning himself within the context of deep immersion within the yoga and meditation practices across a five-day period in order to gain firsthand experience of its initial psychological, emotional and physical impact through participant observation.

The findings from the study firstly confirm wider research evidence that suggests that desistance-related attitudes and commitment often emerge as a result of an interplay between trigger events and turning points, social bonds, accumulation and expenditure of emotional capital and narrative changes in personal and social identity (Barry, 2006; McNeill, 2012). Trigger events and turning points for the male participants included becoming a parent, experiencing intense psychological and mental health issues, becoming weary of the lifestyle and/or simply unable to continue to manage the range of 'stigmata' they experienced through drug dependency. Exposure to the SKY practices evidently enabled the men to continue to express a hegemonic masculine identity, while also encouraging them to begin to problematize deeply engrained attitudes and values, perform broader versions of the locally dominated enactment of masculinity and open up to and discuss their emotions and feelings with coaches on the programme (Deuchar *et al.,* 2016b). They experienced a range of personal journeys and turning points both as participants and (in some cases) later as teachers and coaches on the programmes, punctuated and characterised by a subtle

focus on spirituality whereby they gained a heightened awareness of their own personal feelings and other people's - thus accumulating and expending emotional capital (Barry, 2006).

The insights supported previous insights from clinical trials that suggests that SKY can be a potential yet safe antidepressant therapy, and can help to improve emotional processing, help participants manage stress and anxiety lead to increased feelings of calmness and eudemonic wellbeing (Janakiramaiah *et al*., 2000; Brown and Gerbarg, 2005a, 2005b; Vedamurthachar *et al*., 2006; Pandya, 2016). The participants' self-confessed ability to move away from both prescription and illegal drugs and to use the practices as a means of managing the 'stigmata' (Densley, 2013: 132) that participation in gangs and violence often brings about (including stress, anxiety, psychological flashbacks and depression) have significant implications for offender rehabilitation. Their experiences of replacing the negative and prolonged psychological impact of violence with feelings of calmness, self-forgiveness and healing were enabling some of the men to engage in a process of creating renewed post-prison biographies (Liebling, 2014; Armstrong, 2014; Deuchar *et al*., 2016a). They were literally beginning to discard 'old selves' and to adopt new masculine identities that in many ways were re-directing their innate proclivities towards moral and ethical precepts in positive, non-criminal directions. Thus, within their personal narratives they were beginning to focus on values such as commitment and loyalty through earning an honest living, being a good parent and family man and – most importantly – desisting from crime (Johnston and Larson, 2003; Deuchar *et al*., 2016a).

The findings from this research yield some important implications for policy making in wider Europe, and (given the author's own geographical position) particular lessons that could be drawn upon within the UK. As Bilderbeck *et a*l. (2013: 1443) has highlighted, research and policy surrounding mental health interventions in prisons has thus far largely focused on 'psychological and psychosocial treatments', but these are costly, and often found to be 'inaccessible, stigmatizing and undesirable because of their time-consuming and emotionally demanding nature'. The use of behavioural-oriented, ascetic-spiritual interventions like SKY may offer a more 'socially acceptable' alternative, given the data in this study that participating in the practices simultaneously upheld the participants' sense of masculinity while also leading them to problematize the use of aggression and violence and engage in open emotional expression, empathy and non-criminal identity constructions.

Across Northern and central Europe, there has been an increased recognition of the importance of improving mental capital and wellbeing among prison inmates, and the need to engage offenders and prison inmates in 'purposeful activity' as a means of increasing the focus on rehabilitation and preventing reoffending (Deuchar *et al.,* 2016a). However, in England and Wales a renewed commitment to enacting a revolution in rehabilitation (Grayling, 2012; Ministry of Justice, 2013) has not transferred into reality, with recent evidence suggesting that - in male adult prisons – inmates continue to spend long periods of time locked up in their cells (HMIP, 2015). In Scotland, it has also been found that 'purposeful activity' is often too narrowly focused on education programmes, vocational training and work placements internal and external to prisons (SPS, 2014). Given the high rates of psychological problems, social pressures and reduced wellbeing experienced by prisoners and reforming

offenders and the holistic nature of factors that have been found to contribute to the desistance process, it is possible that the positive insights from the impact of the *Prison SMART/Breathe SMART* programmes outlined in this paper could hold significance in future policy related decisions in the UK and wider Europe within the context of creating prison and post-prison offender support and rehabilitation.

However, we must be cautious about over-generalizing the insights from this small-scale research. As with earlier studies (Bilderbeck *et al*., 2013; Ahlmark, 2015), one particular limitation of the research was its inability to identify the specific elements of the SKY practices (such as yoga postures, rhythmic breathing techniques or meditation) that gave rise to the most salient benefits described by the participants. In addition, it was unclear whether the social support and complimentary use of reflective dialogue and 'talking therapy' during sessions and/or the social effects of practicing SKY as part of a group post-release may also have contributed towards the described impacts in terms of enhanced mood states and cognitive identity reconstructions (see also Bilderbeck *et al.,* 2013). Clearly, additional research with wider samples of participants that involve a fine-grain analysis of these individual factors is required as a means of further enhancing the applicability of the evidence-base.

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