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The Ambivalence of Closed Institutions
Imprisonment from the Perspective of Male Adolescents
Paper presented at the BSC Conference 2005
- first draft -

My talk today will focus on conflicts surrounding biographical autonomy in an specific institutional frame. I am referring to the situation of young men who are incarcerated in three different juvenile detention centers in East and West Germany. We conducted qualitative longitudinal interviews with 30 of a total of 43 study participants.¹ In some cases we followed these young men for more than six years, from „inside prison“ to their outside worlds, and in some cases back into prison again. Their narratives show serious autonomy conflicts. These are clearly linked to conflicts with gender identity in the context of precarious male biographies – that is, in the context of marginalized masculinities.

In the following, I will present some of our central findings regarding these young men’s efforts at coping with prison and their conflicts regarding integration or resocialisation. I will discuss different biographical patterns, defining biographies as life-long, conflict-ridden processes, based on a psychodynamic concept of subjectivity.

Let me start with a quotation. It is taken from an interview with an incarcerated young man who recollects his arrival in prison. He states:

“Oh my God, this is it. You either go mad or you break down or – I don’t know - you fall into a coma.” (Emil Fiedler)

This statement expresses a fear that is created by the loss of autonomy entailed in the experience of incarceration. It illustrates what Gresham Sykes in 1958 called an „attack on the psy-

che.“ Incarceration creates crisis. This is evident in our interviews, even though not all participants express their fears as openly as the young man quoted here.

The institutional intervention feels painful and is humiliating. From the point of view of many adolescents, the justice system constitutes an authoritarian provocation. They feel treated unfairly and are outraged at the every-day patronizing which they cannot escape. Yet, at the same time, our interviews with young men show that their views of prison are not just negative – even after their release from prison. Of course, they all stress the painful limitations they have to adjust to. Nevertheless, they also describe positive learning processes connected with the hope for better integration into society. This contradiction is expressed in the following statement of an adolescent man newly released from prison. He says, „prison is a hole, but it was the best thing that could have happened to me.“ (Dorian Elsner).

In the closed institution, coercion happens – also among the inmates. This is what the narrator alludes to. At the same time, prison constitutes a place where change takes place: quitting the consumption of drugs, finishing school or an apprenticeship and the opportunity to reflect on one’s life – these are central motives, that are repeatedly talked about during incarceration – even after relapses. Despite the many contradictions entailed in work in prison – incarceration often provides these adolescent men with an opportunity to identify positively with the image of the male worker – an ideal that often collapses quickly after their release from prison. This is due on the one hand to the grave marginalisation of this group of young men in the labor market. On the other, the *internal identification* breaks down when the rigid structure of the institution has been left behind. The rigid structural frame of the institution provides orientation and support. It raises the hopes for more internal structure: the young men are being taken by the hand and they thus feel better equipped to take their lives into their own hands.

For many young men this hope turns into disappointment after their release. Their newly found structure is fragile and finally collapses. The increase in their (potential) capabilities remains limited to the closed institution. Without the tight grip of the controlling *and* care-taking institution, it becomes difficult to take life into their own hands. The following quotation provides a glimpse of this conflict:

¹ The study was carried out by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony (KFN) and from 1997 - 2003 financed by the VolkswagenStiftung.

“I liked it better inside ... because I had less (work) to do, I didn’t need to go to the employment office all the time, I went to work and got my money ... somehow it was easier inside.” (Günter Hinze)

Other cases also illustrate that the release from prison constitutes a doorstep over which the young men stumble. The social marginalization of most of the young men intensifies their individual problems with adjusting to the transition: How can they fulfill the socially still dominant ideal of the employed worker? (As mentioned earlier, this ideal is strongly encouraged in the closed institution but can only be put into practice with great difficulty after one’s release). Which alternative ideals of masculinity are available to them? How to balance conflicting wishes for independence, attachment and orientation? These conflicts that besiege the individual after his release, now have to be dealt with in an open frame. In many cases, this frame entails administrative and organizational support – but the experience of the internal loss of structure is seldom addressed. This is illustrated in a description of someone who - looking back on his experience of release from prison - concludes, “inside I’m a different person from outside,” and he adds shortly thereafter, “I had changed, but the others hadn’t changed.” (Clemens Dettmer).

Very often the release is experienced as such a severe disruption. The transition between the two experiential spaces is over taxing. This dynamic is underlined by specific biographical constellations: Very often incarceration intervenes in biographies already abundant with discontinuity. In other words, we see biographical patterns that are characterized by dependency, lack of attachment and a high level of interventions from institutions. The young men’s experiences of changing primary relationships, changing institutions and unstable modalities of relating and caretaking are reflected in orientations that drift between a desire to establish total independence and passive dependence on given structures. These patterns constitute the backdrop for the intervention of the closed institution. The institution seems to promise structure, continuity and support – a hope that hardly ever materializes.

Our biographical, longitudinal interviews show *how* the institutional experience of incarceration and biographical patterns interlock. Different coping responses evolve corresponding to the various conflicts of identity and masculinity. Let me give you a short summary of three

Only rarely do the young men experience their incarceration as an *internal* biographical turning point: this pattern is associated with a biographical concept that aims for autonomy-in-relation. Biographical crises tend to be connected with crises of relationships. Participants provided lively descriptions of their experiences with significant others. Social integration and the many obstacles connected with it are tied to a network of relationships. Autonomy and social bonds are closely intertwined.

More often, incarceration is experienced as an *external* biographical turning point. The narratives focus on formal changes: processes of achieving a qualification and finding a way out of delinquency are viewed as positive results of an inevitable adaptation to societal expectations. Conflicts are avoided and rarely talked about. Attachment to others is couched in material relationships of exchange. The ideal self of the young men is that of a cool, independent, rational winner, both in the legal or in the illegal realm.

The third and most frequent constellation entails incarceration being seen as an *existential cut* into one's biography. The influence of the institution is described as a grave change of one's personality – in the positive or the negative direction (some see it as a “last chance” others as destructive provocation). This pattern is closely tied to the perception of the incarceration as part of a *biographical continuity*. The desire for biographical autonomy is a constant struggle. Autonomy, dependency and conflicts of recognition overlap. Autonomy is mainly imagined as an absence of dependency from authorities and institutions and less as a personal way of being responsible for one's own life. This pattern corresponds with the perception of many of our participants that their incarceration is only a continuation of institutional changes and biographical disruptions. When one of them states after having been rearrested once again, “Had they locked me up earlier, I would be further ahead today” – he adopts the public discourses surrounding juvenile delinquency (missing the “short sharp shock”). In the context of his life story, though, his reproach expresses a sense of deep disappointment with his own failure due to unstable attachment experiences.

The intervention of incarceration fits neatly into such biographical patterns. Prison facilitates a “limited autonomy” while at the same time aggravating existing conflicts of attachment and dependency. These conflicts cannot be solved in the closed frame alone. At the same time they are not adequately addressed after being release from prison. These *conflicts of limited autonomy* correspond with socially predetermined ideals of masculinity which are exacerbated in prison. The biographical narratives of these young male inmates are prime illustrations of how experiences of social marginalisation interlock with different dimensions of dependency and cultural ideals of a fighting, cool, rational masculinity - thus forming a mush of unresolved conflicts surrounding autonomy. For overcoming these autonomy conflicts and supporting young men`s social integration we need institutional frames which allow to attach oneself without getting too dependent - and the other way round: to distance oneself from institutions and authorities without loosing ties. That means to overcome the tempting binding powers of the closed institution and offering young men several opportunities to restructure their relationship ties.

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