



Brief report: Past, present, emergent and future identities of young inmates



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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate how young inmates integrate temporal and contextual elements of identity and what is the role of education in identity integration. Twenty-six young inmates were interviewed. Thematic analysis revealed that inmates integrated the elements of four time identities using different mechanisms to deal with each identity: (a) Past identity (before imprisonment) is defined by cumulative risk factors, where detachment from family, society, and institutions prevails; (b) present identity is characterized by the engagement in prison's educational activities; (c) emergent identity (until their release) is characterized by their requests for a proper education and training and their commitment to acquire qualifications; (d) future identity (after their release) is characterized by the investment on future aims for personal growth, family, education/work and community. Inmates used the non-formal educational program, which was offered in prison, as a vehicle towards positive identity contemplation.

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Identity formation is the main developmental task in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1959). For Erikson (1959), identity formation is a struggle to achieve a personal sense of coherence and continuity by integrating the self contextually and temporally. Recently, Syed and Mitchell (2015) highlighted the significance of temporal identity integration. They explained that the ability of individuals to reconcile and integrate their past experiences, current concerns, and future prospects contributes to a healthy identity. Successful identity formation leads to the virtue of fidelity, the notion of commitment to one's self-pledged values (Erikson, 1968), while unsuccessful identity formation leads to role confusion or even to a *negative identity*, which is an identity that opposes to the one promoted by family and community (Erikson, 1959). Research on temporal identity integration is scarce among populations that might exhibit negative identity, such as delinquents. McLean, Wood, and Breen (2013) pointed out that little is known about this important group. In their study, delinquent adolescents were found to construct their identities in not normative ways and their identity development was rather impeded by personal and societal adversities.

On the other hand, sociological studies shed light on how delinquent inmates contemplate contextual experiences of prison and temporal views of self in constructing both negative and positive identity meanings. Imprisonment, separation from family and society, mixing with other criminals, guardians' power and punishment, shape negative identity meanings, such as reduction of personal status, contamination from criminal peers, institutionalization (Rowe, 2011) and stigmatization

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(Rowe, 2011; Toyoki & Brown, 2014). On the positive end, inmates were able to mobilize 'identity capital' (Giddens, 1991) in order to recover, grow or renew their identities. In Rowe's (2011) study, women inmates actively neutralized painful meanings and experiences of their imprisonment and fostered positive identities. In Toyoki and Brown's (2014) study, male inmates managed their stigmatized identities by giving different meaning to the label prisoner, by endorsing social values, and by representing oneself as a good person.

Positive identity changes among inmates constitute a cornerstone for desistance from offending: the change process that is involved in the rehabilitation of inmates (McNeill, 2006). Education in prison forms another cornerstone for desistance (Maruna, 2001) despite that prison education is overloaded with problems. Prison education takes different forms: formal and accredited, vocational, non-formal, correctional, recreational, etc., the duration varies or interrupted by prisoners' circumstances, and the evidence on the effectiveness of these programs is limited (Hurry, Brazier, Parker, & Wilson, 2006). Additionally, the level of education amongst the prison population tend to be low and their experience with education is poor (Vorhaus, 2014). However, educational programs and occupational trainings in prisons were found to reduce recidivism (Hurry et al., 2006), facilitate reintegration into society (Filella-Guiu & Blanch-Plana, 2002; Hurry et al., 2006) and function as a social bond (Hart & Mueller, 2013; Intravia, Jones, & Piquero, 2012). Taking into account that formal education enables adolescences to explore different social and occupational roles in order to integrate a coherent identity (Erikson, 1959), it is vital to examine the role of education, which is offered in prison, in inmates' identity formation considering the contextual adversities.

In this study we focus on how young inmates form their identities in the framework of prison education. Using qualitative research and thematic analysis we aim: (a) to describe the temporal and contextual integration of inmates' identities, (b) to examine whether education can contribute to the renegotiation of confused or negative identities, and (c) to identify the mechanisms that can lead young inmates to identity renegotiation.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 26 young inmates (24 males), whose age ranged from 16 to 25 years ($M = 21, SD = 2.5$). These were nearly all the inmates in the Cyprus Prison Department under the age of 25 at the time of the study. Those who did not participate were due to be released. The sample of inmates is consisted of 14 Greek Cypriots, three Romanians, two Bulgarians, two Africans, two Syrians, one Lebanese, one Pakistani, and one Armenian. While the inmates were serving their sentences, they could optionally attend an informal educational program, which included basic literacy skills and various topics of interest.

Measure

The structured interview SQYOI (Schedule Questionnaire for Young People in Offender Institutions -see Hurry, Brazier, Wilson, Emslie-Henry, & Snapes, 2010) was used. The interview questions were translated in Greek. Minor adaptations were made to suit young inmates in the Cypriot context and some personal questions were removed after the demand of Cyprus Prison Department authorities. The final interview included 52 closed questions, 33 open-ended questions, and eight demographic questions. The initial questions explored inmates' educational identity profile (e.g., their experience of school, their views and attitudes towards education and training prior and during imprisonment, their future aspirations in terms of education, training and employment). Additional questions asked participants to describe themselves in terms of religion, politics and social roles in family and in society.

Procedure

Consent of the Director of Cyprus Prison Department and a signed statement of consent by each participant were taken. Participants were informed of the purpose and the content of the interview and were assured that their information would remain confidential. Nobody refused participation. Three trained researchers conducted the interviews in a quiet environment (the classrooms of the prison). Each participant was interviewed individually; a prison guard was present, but at a distance that assured both security and confidentiality. As tape-recording was not allowed, the researchers wrote down each answer. The procedure lasted 40 min on average.

Qualitative data analysis

The interview data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) scheme for carrying out a thematic analysis, adjusted for the aims of the present study. First, a detailed reading and coding of the data was carried out on a line-by-line basis to identify different concepts and explicit themes. Second, a profile for each participant was created in a word file, where his/her own raw data were organised in relation to the explicit themes. Third, an excel file was created for each explicit theme, in where concepts were entered in columns and participants in rows. Fourth, for each participant, a review of concepts was carried out and entered in the excel sheet. Any arising concepts were added at this point. Fifth, the concepts from each explicit

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