

Zeitschrift: Tsantsa : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Ethnologischen Gesellschaft
= revue de la Société suisse d'ethnologie = rivista della Società svizzera
d'etnologia

Herausgeber: Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft

Band: 16 (2011)

Artikel: Trapped between in and out : the post-institutional liminality of ex-
prisoners in East Berlin

Autor: Becci, Irene

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007265>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 04.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

TRAPPED BETWEEN IN AND OUT

THE POST-INSTITUTIONAL LIMINALITY OF EX-PRISONERS IN EAST BERLIN

Abstract

Drawing on wide-ranging empirical material collected as a participant observer in East Berlin in 2006 and 2007, the author offers an ethnographic account of ex-prisoners' first weeks and months in a rehabilitation programme. The analysis shows that the social boundaries stemming from their long-term imprisonment and from stigmatisation processes developing in the outside society prevent them from fully reintegrating into society. A prisonised habitus continues to shape ex-inmates' behaviour; the values and views that were dominant during their imprisonment still orient much of their social interactions. Ex-inmates' relation to space, time and to a free environment is built up anew with the more or less successful help of social workers. The author proposes conceptualising their often frustrating experience as liminal, using Victor Turner's perspective of liminality as a subjective state and therefore as a state that can be perpetuated by ex-inmates trapped between the inside and the outside.

Keywords: Prison release · Stigma · Eastern Germany · Half-way house · Liminality

Irene Becci¹

INTRODUCTION

Once a prisoner is released, he or – much less often – she cannot simply reoccupy the place previously held in society. While people are imprisoned, their place in society usually disappears: families often split up when one family member has committed a crime, former employers do not want to be associated with a criminal, friendships and cultural connections come to a halt, economic circumstances and the housing situation often become precarious and in some cases the right to reside in a particular country is revoked. The way out of the total institution of the prison is thus long and full of obstacles. The high rates of recidivism in European countries testify to a failure based on at least three factors: the inability of the prison institution to rehabilitate, the lack of appropriate social, professional and cultural opportunities for ex-prisoners to build a decent life in society and the inability of former prisoners to face existing obstacles (which depends on a variety of factors such as age and gender)².

Moreover, one powerful barrier to integration is the continuing cultural and physical effect of the prison experience on life after prison.

The aim of this article is to focus on this particular aspect by reporting observations from a halfway house³ situated in one of the eastern districts of Berlin. The penal code in Germany now acknowledges that difficulties such as those mentioned above exist and therefore encourages social rehabilitation programmes in the third sector. As Harrison and Schehr (2004: 57) write, follow-up services, programs that offer opportunities for ex-offenders to develop independent living skills are vital to their success. After serving several months or years in a controlled, structured prison the most important transition component is for ex-offenders to be able to support themselves.

The halfway house I observed concentrates on housing and the development of social skills. Opened in 1997, it is located on a noisy thoroughfare only a few minutes to the

¹ I would like to warmly thank my colleagues at the Max Planck Institute in Halle/S. who commented constructively on previous versions of this paper.

² There is a large body of literature, mostly from scholars in the Anglo-Saxon world, on desisting from committing crimes and on recidivism. Recent studies (Giordano et al. 2002) have pointed out the need for approaching this area not only in terms of job stability, marital status or education, but also in terms of social interactions. This also allows for the gender gap in the study of criminality to be taken into consideration.

³ A halfway house is a housing facility that monitors and supports people who are trying to reintegrate into society – usually following their release from prison.

east of Alexanderplatz by inner-city train. Ex-convicts participate on a voluntary basis and are motivated to desist from committing crimes. I followed the activities of this programme as a participant observer (with some restrictions)⁴ for a year starting at the end of summer 2006. In a halfway house former prison inmates start a weary and long-lasting process of resuming daily spatial, physical and social routines. They find themselves in a subjective state of *liminality* (Turner 1995), no longer inside the prison and not yet fully outside it but on the way to the outside. Drawing on one of the three phases that mark rites of passage as observed by Van Gennep (1909), the *liminal* or «threshold» period which involves being between two states, Turner adapted the concept to describe social processes in contemporary Western societies. Most importantly, as Turnbull (1990: 79) suggests, *liminality* is «the process of transformation at work», an experience that is both subjective and objective. In order to illustrate some aspects of the difficulties of leaving the state of *liminality*, this article expands on two basic categories, space and social communication, to which the programme refers. As Erving Goffman (1961) convincingly argued, it is also through the control of these two dimensions of social life that total institutions shape human beings. When a prisoner is released, the institution's control over the individual ceases and re-centres on society and also, to a certain extent, on the ex-convict him/herself. One major obstacle to the re-adjustment of control is cultural in nature: the culture of ex-inmates is often highly *prisonized*, as sociologists put it.

RELEASING PRISONIZED PEOPLE

A classic observation-based prison study is Donald Clemmer's *The prison community* (1940)⁵. As the title of his important book indicates, he observes a *community* in prison. The imprisoned create a cultural life of their own which is not directly determined by the disciplinary setting of the institution but actually stands in opposition to it. One important question that guides the author's curiosity is the high rate of recidivism (40-80% at the time and still today) which he tries to explain not only with social-structural but also with cultural factors. Despite the many distinctions separating prisoners according to social and cultural

backgrounds and despite their position within prison hierarchies and social groups, commonalities develop among them as the result of what Clemmer (1940: 297) calls

«symbiosis by which is meant a living together so that a benefit exists that is mutual for the involved parties. This occurs in spite of the ruggedness of individualism among the inmates and while symbiosis does not rule out impersonalization, the need for a degree of cooperation in coping with an unfriendly environment, keeps individualism from becoming too rampant.»

Clemmer (1940: 299) argues that this symbiosis changes inmates' behaviour; they are «prisonized» which means that they take «on in greater or less degree the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary». Clemmer (1940: 297, 298) describes this culture, the «prisoners' world», as follows:

«It is dominated and it submits. Its own community is without a well-established social structure. Recognized values produce a myriad of conflicting attitudes. There are no definite communal objectives. There is no consensus for a common goal. The inmates' conflict with officialdom and opposition toward society is slightly greater in degree than conflict and opposition among themselves. Trickery and dishonesty overshadow sympathy and cooperation... It is a world of <I,> <me,> and <mine,> rather than <ours,> <theirs,> and <his>. Its people are thwarted, unhappy, yearning, resigned, bitter, hating, revengeful. Its people are improvident, inefficient, and socially illiterate. The prison world is a graceless world. There is filth, stink, and drabness; there is monotony and stupor. There is disinterest in work. There is desire for love and hunger for sex. There is pain in punishment. Except for the few, there is bewilderment. No one knows, the dogmas and codes notwithstanding, exactly what is important.»

After having spent some time in this culture, inmates conform their *habitus* to it, Clemmer contends. The cultural references of *prisonized* persons are likely to clash with those of outside society which is one of the causes of recidivism. Having studied the situation of ex-convicts in more recent years, scholars still take *prisonization* very seriously⁶.

⁴ My participation was limited in the sense that I could only be at the halfway house during the day. For further details on restricted participation, see Dewalt et al. (1998).

⁵ Clemmer's study, like the majority of social studies on prisons, focuses on male prisoners. The situation is different - in terms of social roles, main problems and type of crime - for female prisoners, who represent less than 5% of the prison population in Europe (cf. Walmsley 2006).

⁶ Cf., for instance, Celinska (2000) as well as Bereswill (2004), who takes a biographical approach.

At the halfway house I encountered profiles similar to those portrayed by Clemmer. The ex-inmates were bitter and unfriendly, their attitudes were harsh and strongly gendered—either aggressive and misogynist or flirtatious and sexualized. Most of them were multi-recidivists and (former) drug or alcohol addicts who had experienced long-term imprisonment. Only one person was educated to A-level, while the educational levels of all the others were lower including some cases of illiteracy. With the exception of one person they all were East Germans. It was only after they had stopped associating me with the social workers that they started to trust in me.

ARRIVING AT THE HALFWAY HOUSE: STARTING THE LIMINAL EXPERIENCE

The halfway house where I carried out participant observation is part of a major secular association in Berlin that offers a wide range of rehabilitation programmes to ex-prisoners or people at risk of imprisonment. This association runs large-scale advertisements offering support in housing and job issues, drug rehabilitation and computer skills, language and art classes. In order to participate in the rehabilitation programme in the halfway house where I conducted my study, prisoners have to apply formally. Doris⁷, a woman in her thirties who was responsible for the programme, was the only permanent full-time staff member and three other people worked in the house conducting state-run occupational programmes. These social workers evaluated each application, visited the applicants in prison and came to a decision after examining the individuals' motivations and eligibility. Therefore all ex-inmates entering the halfway house knew what kind of programme it offered: compared to other programmes the one I observed is characterized by secularity, the local post-socialist history and a pragmatic rather than moralistic orientation. Unlike in other programmes, for example, applicants are not required to abstain from alcohol altogether but are expected to refrain from consuming alcohol in the communal areas of the house. The applicants are also aware that their stay in the halfway house is limited and that

they should use it to prepare for social reintegration. Before their arrival the former prisoners, together with the social workers, draw up a plan which generally includes addiction therapy, looking for a job, learning to keep the house, to be tidy and neat, to behave respectably and avoid conflicts. Prisoners knew all too well that entering the programme meant to follow rules and make an effort; and so some used the time between leaving prison and entering the halfway house to run riot. Some ex-offenders arrived at the halfway house only a couple of days after their release and in many cases accompanied by police officers. By that stage, they had spent most of the money they had received when they were released to get drunk and had roamed the streets of Berlin for days. Others had gone shopping and spent all their money on sophisticated technological gadgets, interpreting freedom in a capitalistic way as the freedom to consume and yet unable to make informed choices. To avoid such risks some had asked to be picked up by the housing programme staff and thus arrived safely and quickly at the halfway house. The difficulties of life outside the prison started immediately. When a staff member and I picked up Manfred⁸ after his release from prison, the first thing he wanted to do was to eat a doner kebab. So we drove to a Turkish kebab house to buy one for him. He was very happy but unable to eat even half of the kebab. The taste, he told us was now too strong for him as he had become used to the bland food in prison. For Ulrich⁹, one of the first physical challenges after his release was to cross the street because he was afraid of cars and unable to judge how far they were away and how fast they drove. These examples illustrate the extent to which prison life affects the most basic aspects of the inmates' selves; the control over their bodies.

After the first week which keeps «clients»¹⁰ busy with all kinds of activities as part of settling down (registration at the unemployment office and elsewhere, organization of basic things in the flat, etc.), former prisoners often find themselves confronted with the fact that they are alone and have no commitments. After the endless boredom of prison detention, to figure out how to spend the day is a tough task for many ex-convicts, not at least because only few find a job. The most frequent occupation «clients» engaged

⁷ All names have been changed.

⁸ Manfred was born in the 1980s in Brandenburg; he was one of five children. His father was an alcoholic who was often in prison and violent toward his mother. Manfred spent most of his childhood in children's homes and attended school for nine years. Then he became homeless and was eventually imprisoned for armed robbery, predatory extortion and aggravated assault. He was an alcoholic and displayed an anarchist and punk identity.

⁹ Ulrich was born in the 1960s in Brandenburg; he had six siblings. He was illiterate and an alcoholic. He had been married for 25 years and was the father of three young adults. Before he went to prison, he was homeless. During that time, he was badly beaten by skinheads and still suffered from the injuries.

¹⁰ The word «client» has come to replace the word «user» in social work, with the paradigmatic shift toward more managerial language in social care.

in was games; darts, cards, dice or crosswords – activities in which they were well trained. The few who had a job usually worked in areas which can be described as being at the margins of society. They cleaned up tree leaves in cemeteries, collected items for recycling, helped to clear out abandoned houses or helped to restore the rooms of the rehabilitation programme. Following their own schedule in an independent way was something clients needed to learn again because prison guards had always reminded them of meetings by coming to accompany them. I was surprised to note that clients who had been eager to find a job and managed to be invited to an interview then did not take advantage of it.

Ex-inmates were allowed to stay in the programme for up to two years. They were expelled if they did not keep the house rules or transferred to other programmes if they had specific needs. After two years «clients» often wanted to live near the halfway house and kept close connections with the programme. They continued to come to the free brunches and lunches or requested the assistance of the social workers in financial or juridical matters.

Ex-inmates knew very well that the programme was meant to change them and therefore the concept of *liminality* is a fitting description of their experience¹¹. Imprisonment and release are highly standardized processes in contemporary European societies but they can still be looked at as rites of passage. Rehabilitation programmes for released prisoners like those offered by halfway houses prolong the rite of release as much as they never really achieve the aim of reintegrating their «clients». Besides this explicit aim rites also have collateral functions, i.e. social exclusion, as Bourdieu (1982) clearly argued. Thus, while they are supposed to build bridges for ex-prisoners to re-integrate into society – a mission that such programmes cannot accomplish by themselves – halfway houses actually create the conditions for *liminars* to continue their experience almost indefinitely. The reason why this happens is, I suggest, linked to the enduring stigma of imprisonment. Ironically, while ex-prisoners try to get rid of their past because it is perceived as a stigma, the rehabilitation programme defines them by this very stigma. As they go through the programme, former prisoners are supposed to acquire the skills and to create the conditions that will

allow them to free themselves from stigma, but their *liminal* status contributes to reproducing the stigma. While they are in the halfway house, former prison inmates are no longer prisoners or criminals, but they are not full citizens yet. This ambiguity is one of the major characteristics of *liminality* (Turner 1995: 95).

In the following section I shall not focus on issues which criminologists usually point out as obstacles to reintegration – job-related problems¹², financial difficulties, broken relationships with friends and relatives – but on situations that arise within the programme and reinforce the stigma of being a former prison inmate. In Goffman's (1963: 3) vocabulary stigma is «an attribute that is deeply discrediting»; further, «An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself»¹³. Stigmatized individuals face a dilemma; on one hand they seek to hide their stigma or eliminate it in order to be seen as normal and as part of the larger society and on the other hand they often think that they deserve different treatment from that given to «normal» people because of their stigma. As a result their social interactions are strained by contradictory expectations and attitudes that make for unexpected consequences.

SPACE: THE AREA, THE HOUSE, THE YARD, THE FLAT

After their release many ex-prisoners choose to live in large cities with a high degree of anonymity and mobility. As Goffman writes, this allows a stigmatized person to «limit the amount of continuous experience others have of him. By residing in a region cut off from one he ordinarily frequents he can introduce a disconnectedness in his biography» (Goffman 1963: 99). With one exception none of the ex-inmates in the housing programme in my study came from the area where the halfway house was located. During the period of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) this area had been at the very centre of East Berlin and had thus been well-known and visited for its commercial activities. Today this area is poor and unpopular. The media and public discourse in Berlin portray it as a centre of right-wing extremism¹⁴. Here the houses which origi-

¹¹ Ortiz (2008) also applies the concept of *liminality* to a halfway house but focuses on techniques of control.

¹² Ex-prisoners' difficulties in finding jobs are well documented; cf. among others Harrison and Schehr (2004).

¹³ Cf. also Austin (2004), who focuses on stigmatization processes linked to political disenfranchisement.

¹⁴ For right-wing activities in East Berlin, see Luzar (2006). Various local, German and international media (*Berliner Morgenpost*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Tageszeitung*, *Deutsche Welle*). For the definition of right-wing extremism, see Jaschke (1994: 31).

nally were built for manual workers are outdated and part of the state's comprehensive restoration plan. However, this restoration does not mean the gentrification of the area, as has happened in other parts of East Berlin such as in Prenzlauer Berg (Holm 2006). On the contrary, this area is characterized by marginalization – in economic, cultural and political terms. The majority of the German population residing in the area (over 90%: Gude, Bercléz and Huhs 2007: 84, 85) can be described as socially disadvantaged. The unemployment rate is high and neither tourists nor students are attracted by the area. There are no cinemas or theatres, only shops and offices used by those who live here. Studies of this area conclude that it does not appear to foster any kind of identification (Gude, Bercléz and Huhs 2007: 86). The area also is known as a place for criminal activities. During the 1990s the war between groups engaged in black marketeering was waged here and some of that kind of activity even seems to continue today. Local residents are not surprised to see people being arrested in the streets. One day during my research stay a massive police presence arrived to arrest a number of people right in front of the halfway house. It looked impressive to me but apparently not to those around me.

The reverse side of this situation is that the area is attractive to *liminars* precisely because it offers them the possibility to remain *liminal* and thus neither relapse nor be rehabilitated. The ex-inmates in the programme liked going to the parks in the area or sitting on the benches in front of warehouses but they felt ill at ease when they were outside the area. None of my proposals neither the suggestions made by the staff to visit other areas of Berlin, the zoo or the cinema were taken up. The «clients» preferred to watch a film at home because, as they would say, «at home I have peace». This negative response could be interpreted in Bourdieu's terms as limited curiosity for exploration as a consequence of former inmates' low «cultural capital» but Goffman (1963: 91-92) offers a more interactive understanding of this attachment to the area:

«To the extent that the individual is a discredited person, one looks for the routine cycle of restrictions he faces regarding social acceptance; to the extent that he is discreditable, for the contingencies he faces in managing information about himself. For example, an individual with a facial deformity can expect, as suggested, to cease

gradually to be a shocking surprise to those in his own neighbourhood, and there he can obtain a small measure of acceptance; at the same time, articles of dress worn to conceal part of his deformity will have less effect here than they will in parts of the city where he is unknown and otherwise treated less well.»

Manfred made it very clear why it was so hard for him to be away from his small flat in the first weeks. He found it too crowded:

«All those people around me ... that is strange because in prison I was in a cell for two ... and there weren't many people coming to see me [...] and now here I see, let's say, downstairs for instance there are, let's say, five, six, seven men or so [...] or yesterday when I went to that office, to the job office or job centre or whatever they call it now [...] we were waiting for five hours and there were about 50 people ... that's too much.»

For this reason, for weeks on end, he only left his flat when it was strictly necessary. The reinforcement of stigma was most striking when ex-prisoners met people from outside the area. For instance, I once accompanied Mathias¹⁵ to a meeting with an employee of the agency that owned the flat he wanted to rent. The estate agent was very late and did not apologise for it. Mathias did not complain, on the contrary, he hardly said anything and agreed to everything. The flat we looked at was in bad condition but the estate agent arrogantly gave us to understand that Mathias did not really have a choice.

Currently the rehabilitation programme disposes of two linked houses; one at the front (where the offices of the social workers and the common dining room are) and another one at the side where eight ex-inmates (all men) have fully furnished studio flats and a common living-room on the top floor. Not all the flats in the house at the front were rented out but as soon as «regular tenants» moved out the programme's social workers managed to have one of their former «clients» move in. About seven men and three women connected to the programme lived in the house at the front. The courtyard between the two houses was a very interesting place because the inhabitants spent a lot of time there. It is protected from the outside world. Whenever the weather is nice they would gather in the

¹⁵ Mathias was in his late thirties. He had grown up in Brandenburg with adoptive parents and had never met his biological parents. He had been a multi-recidivist for felonies such as aggravated assault. Since a psychiatrist had diagnosed his attention deficiency disorder, Mathias was exempt from work. He was therefore unable to keep any commitments and could be impulsive and nervous. Wherever he was, people would notice his clumsiness. He had been a punk and had lived for years near the Alexanderplatz.

courtyard and smoke or chat with one another, with some looking down from their windows. An inhabitant who had been homeless for a number of years before he joined the programme gradually became responsible for cleaning up the courtyard, a task he took very seriously. However, he did not apply these standards of cleanliness to his own flat.

Clients who like Ulrich kept their flats clean were rare and usually very proud of this. Ulrich cleaned meticulously and often called me to show me how tidy his flat was. The majority of the inhabitants allowed their flats to become rather filthy. The furniture consisted of second-hand donations similar to the clothes inhabitants wore. It was therefore quite difficult to keep the flats really neat. Neglect led to filthiness within a very short time. The most extreme case I saw was the flat of a former «client» in the house at the front. Although he was officially no longer in the programme, the social workers were still helping him. He fell ill but continued drinking despite the various treatments he received. This led his health to rapidly deteriorate to the point where he had to be taken to the hospital. During his stay there an insufferable smell started to escape his flat and permeate throughout the whole house. It became so strong that the social workers decided to go to the hospital and ask the former «client's» permission to enter the flat and clean it. When we got in, there was an indescribable mess and a lot of dirt. The air was too thick to breathe and it took one of the social workers days to put things right. It was hard to believe that someone could have lived in such conditions. This former client later died in hospital. To be able to reallocate the flat to another ex-inmate the social workers cleaned up the flat and did not tell the landlord about the true state it had been in.

It often took inhabitants months to realise that they were in charge of their flats. Ex-convicts had to get used to having their own keys to open and close their doors – many left them open all the time – and to decide whether to leave the heating on or off, especially if they had experienced long-term imprisonment. During wintertime the windows were often left wide open with the heating on maximum. This sometimes even happened in the summer. In order to check on and coach the inhabitants during this learning process the social workers used different strategies. For instance, they offered to read the gas or electricity meters while the inhabitants were absent so that they could check on the heating, the windows and the overall state of the flats. Nobody was really surprised to find that inhabitants have destroyed things. One day a TV was thrown out of a window and the social workers only inter-

vened because the TV had damaged the path on which it had fallen and the path now had to be repaired. The social workers' low level of intervention was meant to establish responsible relationships between people who were on an equal footing. As the social distance remained at a high level, the lack of intervention encouraged the normalization of deviant behaviour. The social workers accepted that many of the inconsistencies in the inhabitants' lives would never really change but they thought it was important to continue the discourse of change and encouraged «clients» to start therapies, apply for jobs, etc.

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION: FILTERING AND MORALIZING

Carsten, a man in his forties, was part of the staff and showed a great interest in my study. This was the reason why he told me about his life during socialist times, when he had a good job as a driver for the Socialist Unity Party. He knew all the streets of Berlin and loved driving around in his car. One of his main tasks was to accompany «clients» to wherever they needed to go, such as for shopping, hospital visits or to pick them up after they were released. One day I accompanied Carsten to pick up Ulrich and one of the first things Ulrich told us when we arrived was about his worst experience in prison; to be obliged to live in close quarters with horrible criminals while he «had only been driving without a driving license». As I was told later he actually had been driving (often drunk) without a license for more than twenty years, had driven stolen cars and was involved in a number of serious accidents. Carsten was obviously irritated by Ulrich's claims to an extent that I had not observed among social workers before.

Carsten often told me in a confidential manner about his concerns about the way the other social workers treated him. He said they did not trust him. I also noticed that on many occasions he was excluded from meetings or conversations involving the social workers. There were also tense moments when Doris reminded him sternly of his tasks. I did find the way she addressed him stricter than the tone she used when talking to other colleagues but I thought that this was because he was new to the programme. Then, a couple of weeks before the end of my fieldwork, Carsten stopped working for the programme. Doris told me much later that he was actually an ex-inmate and that he had been working in the programme as part of his probation plan. Carsten had been hiding his stigma which is a strategy of managing information in Goffman's vocabulary. Most of all he was trying to integrate socially as a member of the house staff, a goal he was unable to achieve.

The social workers were constantly concerned to find out whether somebody had told them lies and with the question of how to handle «wrong» information. Georg Simmel (1997: 319) pointed out the fundamental role secrets play in social relationships: «the one who has a secret is also aware that he has a certain power to manipulate the relation to others.» This is what staff were most afraid of because they could not control everything going on in the house, such as what happened at night, the time when most troubles started. According to social workers the ex-convicts tended to manipulate others. In order to protect themselves the social workers discussed again and again where they should «set the limits» of being kind and helpful to clients. They always double-checked the information they received from inhabitants. Trust in the relationships was under constant scrutiny from both sides. One strategy the social workers used to achieve some social control was to ritualize house rules. Coffee was served in the morning and everyone was invited to come. According to the official version these rituals served to structure the days and weeks and to instil a sense of community. The occasions also allowed the social workers to find out what had happened during night. Doris stressed the importance of tackling potential conflict before it became explosive. Clients would turn up and complain about noise or about someone having bothered them during the night. Rarely did the different versions of what had occurred during the night correspond. The social workers often asserted that lying and hiding were the characteristics of a «prisoner mentality» and that the inhabitants would continue cheating each other in the outside world just as they used to do as prisoners «because it does not stop when they are released», as Doris told me. If an inhabitant accused another of some misbehaviour the accused would counter by saying that the accuser was incapable of «keeping his mouth shut» and that he collaborated with the social workers. Sometimes, when one inhabitant started to complain, the others would follow him and become louder and louder. The social workers called this «typical prison behaviour» that aimed to cause «a mutiny like in prison». Sometimes they wondered if there was something like a «lag soul»¹⁶. The idea that ex-convicts still thought and behaved as prisoners explained quite contradictory situations; on the one hand, it was typical for ex-convicts not to say what they did not like about others but on the other hand the contrary was also typical for ex-prisoners.

Concealing information or blurring the boundaries between what is legitimate and what is not legitimate is an important tactic ex-convicts use to establish new relationships. This appears to be dubious to those who are dealing with them, as the following example illustrates. Before Philipp had a stroke, he and I had a good relationship¹⁷. Having committed a robbery while drunk he was sentenced to seven years in prison but was released after four years because he agreed to attend detoxification therapy at an evangelical institution in the outskirts of the city. After a couple of days he escaped from the institution and found shelter at the halfway house where I was doing my fieldwork. I was very interested in Philipp's experience at the Christian detoxification centre and wanted to visit it but it turned out to be inaccessible for outsiders. One day, Philipp introduced me to one of his friends who was also a new client and looked like an alcoholic. Philipp told me that I could go to the centre with his friend who was looking for a detoxification programme and pretend I was accompanying him. I explained to Philipp that I appreciated his offer to help but that I could not accept it. I still do not know whether he really understood my point about sound scientific practice or my way of distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate means.

Several days of each week, the inhabitants could help to prepare and eat brunch or lunch in the common living room. I often helped out with the cooking and was impressed by the skill the ex-convicts showed in cooking for a large number of people. After preparing the meal they would never sit down and eat with the others. Everyone usually ate in silence, left as soon as they had finished meal, and leaving the dirty dishes on the table. Eating together was evidently not considered a pleasant thing to do; the inhabitants may have associated it with constraint. The social workers often stressed how important it was to create the conditions that allowed the inhabitants to acquire a sense of what was «nice» (*schön*) in the aesthetic and moral sense of the word. «Nice» flowers were put on the table, for instance, but few inhabitants seemed to notice it. Doris often stressed that the task of the social workers was to set an example of what a «nice life» was. She thought that *prisonized* people needed to regain their aesthetic sense and their ability to take care of their material and relational environment and of themselves. The ex-convicts did not respond very actively to such

¹⁶ «Knacki Seele». This was mostly the case when the social workers were upset. There were also situations in which they supported hiding the stigma of imprisonment, mostly with clients they considered harmless for society.

¹⁷ He was born in the 1960s and raised in the «East», as he put it. He had been a metalworker for 26 years during the German Democratic Republic, but he lost his job at the end of the Socialist period and became an alcoholic.

remarks. They were constantly at risk of relapsing and they knew that their relationships with the social workers were crucial in this respect. The stigma of imprisonment was thus re-asserted in daily relations, even by those who were supposed to work to further former inmates' social re-integration after their release.

To understand this specific situation one needs to bear in mind that social workers do not relate to clients as if they were ignorant of the clients' past. When a prisoner applies to come to the halfway house the social workers can view the file the prison administration keeps on that person. Such files were handled with caution but they undoubtedly had an impact on the way social workers perceived their clients from the moment they had contact with them. Again, Goffman offers some insight on the importance of stigma in the interactions between social workers and former prisoners:

«The role of normal and the role of stigmatized are parts of the same complex, cuts from the same standard cloth... one can assume that the stigmatized and the normal have the same mental make-up, and that this necessarily is the standard one in our society.» (Goffman 1963: 130)

Careful analysis of the social relationships in the housing programme in light of these considerations shows that being normal or not is a question of perspective. If one looks at the social workers – or me as the anthropologist doing fieldwork – from the perspective of the ex-convicts an interesting inversion happens. The inhabitants of the halfway house would in fact not consider the social workers' life as «normal». In their view «normal» people would have better-paid jobs and, most of all, avoid any contact with ex-prisoners.

The oddest rumours circulated among clients about why Doris, the other social workers and I were working and spending time there. The ex-inmates seemed caught in the «trap of low self-esteem». They were no longer used to others showing them respectful consideration and support, and so they suspected such an interest to be instrumental. Another type of inversion that occurred frequently concerned moral standards, particularly when ex-inmates referred to crimes. One day Manfred came to talk about the crime that had put him in prison. His felony was labelled an aggravated robbery because he had used a knife, a qualification he contested.

I actually didn't use that knife (.) I just held it at his throat (.) never really used the knife.

[I] well, but if you put a knife at someone's throat (hm) but I injured him pretty bad, I was wearing shoes with steel toe caps and kicked him violently

[I] aha (5) hmm (4) how did he end up, dead?

well (.) unfortunately he fell against a wall which caused a basal skull fracture and that's how he died.

In the living room I also heard conversations about robberies. One day we were reading an article in a newspaper about a woman who tried to rob a taxi driver and got caught. One of the clients commented that it was not worth robbing a taxi driver because there was never a lot of money. According to Harrison and Schehr (2004: 44), a high level of readiness to use violence also forms part of the prison culture:

«Violent prison subcultures foster coping mechanisms that enhance the likelihood inmates will adopt violent responses to conflictual situations. Moreover, for many inmates prison induces psycho-emotional internalization of basic emotions. This makes transitions to healthy relationships beyond prison at best a challenging intrapersonal adventure.»

CONCLUSION

This article has offered an analysis of the social boundaries that prevent people who have experienced long-term imprisonment from re-entering society as full citizens. The total institution of the prison leaves deep moral and physical marks on the *habitus* of ex-inmates, a *habitus* that does not help prevent stigmatization. The combination of the stigmatization which operates outside the prison and the prisonized *habitus* which ex-inmates bring with them when they leave prison makes it difficult for both ex-inmates and those supporting them to consider the halfway house as more than a *liminal* experience. Eliminating stigma is a *sine qua non* for ex-convicts to leave their *liminal* state. Many seem to find it hard to achieve this, either because they find it impossible to remove the stigma or because their *liminal* state is a prolonged experience that leads to marginality at best. While my findings cannot be said to apply to all released prisoners, they point to the potential – and sadly ironic – unintended consequences of programmes such as halfway houses which cannot achieve their aim if conditions inside prisons do not change.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AUSTIN Regina

2004. «The shame of it all: Stigma and the political disenfranchisement of formerly convicted and incarcerated persons». *Columbian Human Rights Law Review* (36): 173-192.

BERESWILL Mechthild

2004. «Inside-out: Resocialisation from prison as a biographical process. A longitudinal approach to the psychodynamics of imprisonment». *Journal of Social Work Practice* 18(3): 315-336.

BOURDIEU Pierre

1982. «Les rites comme actes d'institution». *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 43(6): 58-63.

CELINSKA Katarzyna.

2000. «Volunteer involvement in ex-offenders' readjustment. Reducing the stigma of imprisonment». *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 30(3-4): 99-116.

CLEMMER Donald.

1940. *The Prison Community*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

DEWALT Kathleen M., DEWALT Billie, WAYLAND Coral B.

1998. «Participant observation», in: Harvey Russel BERNARD (Ed.), *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, p. 259-299. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.

GIORDANO Peggy C., CERNKOVICH Stephen A., RUDOLPH Jennifer L.

2002. «Gender, crime and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation». *American Journal of Sociology* 107(4): 990-1064.

GOFFMAN Erving

1961. *Asylums. Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Garden City: Anchor Books.

1963. *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

GUDE Sigmar, BERGLEZ Regina, HUHS Reiner

2007. «Sozialstruktur und Mietentwicklung im Lichtenberger Sanierungsgebiet Weitlingstrasse 2007». Berlin: TOPOS, Stadtplanung Landschaftsplanung Stadtforschung, Badensche Strasse 29, 10715 Berlin.

HARRISON Byron, SCHEHR Robert Carl

2004. «Offender and post-release jobs: Variables influencing success and failure». *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 39(3): 35-68.

HOLM Andrej

2006. «Urban renewal and the end of social housing: The roll out of neoliberalism in East Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg». *Social Justice* 33(3): 114-128.

JASCHKE Hans-Gerd

1994. *Rechtsextremismus und Fremdenfeindlichkeit. Begriffe – Positionen – Praxisfelder*. Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

LUZAR Claudia

2006. *Rechtsextremismus in der Weitlingstrasse – Mythos oder Realität? Problemaufriss im Berliner Bezirk Lichtenberg*. Berlin: ZDK Gesellschaft Demokratische Kultur.

ORTIZ Jonathan

2008. *Almost Home – Halfway Houses As Liminal Space*. Saarbrücken: Müller.

SIMMEL Georg

1997. «Das Geheimnis. Eine sozialpsychologische Skizze», in: Alessandro CAVALLI, Volkhard KRECH (Eds), *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901- 1908*, p. 317-323. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

TURNBULL Colin

1990. «Liminality: A synthesis of subjective and objective experience», in: Richard SCHECHNER, Willa APPEL (Eds), *By Means of Performance. Intercultural Studies of Theater and Ritual*, p. 50-81. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

TURNER Victor

1995. *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: De Gruyter.

VAN GENNEP Arnold

1909. *Les rites de passage. Etude systématique des rites de la porte et du seuil, de l'hospitalité, de l'adoption, de la grossesse et de l'accouchement, de la naissance, de l'enfance, de la puberté, de l'initiation, de l'ordination, du couronnement des fiançailles et du mariage, des funérailles, des saisons, etc.* Paris: Nourry.

WALMSLEY Roy

2006. *World Female Imprisonment List*. London: International Centre for Prison Studies.

AUTHOR

Irene Becci is currently a lecturer on the theory and methods of empirical qualitative research in the Department of Sociology, University of Bielefeld. She studied sociology and anthropology at the Universities of Lausanne (Switzerland) and Rome (BA and MA) and at the European University Institute in Florence and at New York University (PhD). She was a post-doctoral research fellow at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology from 2006 to 2009. She has also been conducting research for various projects on religious life in Switzerland financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation. In her work, she combines the study of prisons and of marginal urban areas with the sociology of religion. Her regional focus is on Eastern Germany, Switzerland and Italy.

irene.becci@uni-bielefeld.de