



Discursive Chains: How Prison Becomes Real and Chains Identity Movements for a Sex Offender

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Abstract

Detainees enact a “self” that is faced with the prejudices and stereotypes of the crime for which that detainee was convicted. Of all inmates, sex offenders face the greatest risk of receiving social condemnation alongside their prison sentence. This empirical study worked with 32 male sex offenders over 18 years old that were housed in the “protected” unit of the Due Palazzi. The following analysis explores how these men are required to manage their “self,” hetero-narrations, perception of everyday interactions in the protected unit, and conceptions about the rehabilitation path. Moreover, the detainees’ view on the prison’s strategic opportunities for promoting effective change in their condition and identity are also examined.

Discourse analysis applied to an open answer questionnaire showed that, rather than facing the stigma assigned to them, the detainees tend to minimize the importance of storytelling and construct alternative biographies to share with other inmates. Managing narratives allows the sex offenders to distance themselves from the perceived threats of living with other detainees; however, it also prevents the re-signification of their offenses. As such, the rules of “secrecy” must be considered by both qualitative researchers who conduct studies in prisons and prison administrators who plan the housing and treatment of sex offenders.

Keywords

Prison reality; sex offender; self, self-labeling; role construction.

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Introduction

Studies investigating imprisonment for sexual offenders have revealed that the label “sex offender”¹ can have a significant influence on their experience in prison (Blagden et al. 2019; Jewkes, Crewe and Bennett 2016; Ievins and Crewe, 2015). Indeed, convicted sex offenders are not only faced with all the complexities connected with incarceration (Vianello, 2012), prisonization, (Clemmer 1958), deprivation (Sykes 1958), importation (Irwin 1970), and institutionalization (Goffman 1961a), but also with the moral condemnation of the other actors within the prison scene. Sex offenders are the “stigmatized among the stigmatized” (Ricciardelli and Moir 2013: 16)—a group of inmates to be despised and relegated to the lowest level of the prison’s social hierarchies (Priestley 1980). Moreover, the detainees defined as “rapists” are better regarded socially than those categorized as “child abusers” (Waldram, 2012; Ievins and Crewe, 2015).

According to Ievins and Crewe (2015: 484) sex offenders are considered indiscriminately within prison and in the wider society as “less than human and even as monstrous”; consequently, they need to be protected and to continuously reject the pervasive discriminatory stigma to maintain a positive image of themselves. The most common strategy for protecting their self-image is lying and denying the offenses they have committed (Sampson 1994; Hood et al. 2002; Schwaebe 2005; Blagden et al. 2011; Jewkes, Crewe and Bennett 2016). Managing self-presentation in everyday prison life requires paying great attention to the information shared about one’s self, including how this information is worded. During treatment, the intentional construction of a different version of the committed offense allows sex offenders to keep their identity from discourses that categorize them negatively (Maruna and Mann 2006; Digard 2010)—a strategy that is also used daily in the protected unit where they are held (Schwaebe 2005). Paradoxically, the penitentiary’s therapeutic practices and treatments may have the unintended consequence of reducing everything that is said about the detainee to concern the crime that was committed (Digard 2010; Lacombe 2008; Hudson 2013; Waldram 2012). Studies exploring how treatment is perceived by sex offenders have reported contrasting findings (Jewkes, Crewe and Bennett 2016); some inmates consider treatment useful (Wakeling et al. 2005), while others would avoid it if they could (Langevin 2006). McCartan, Harris and Prescott (2019) reported that people convicted of sexual offenses consider rehabilitative treatment as an extension of the supervision that they experienced in prison, rather than a “tool” to use while in custody. This study found that the therapist is perceived as a prison worker, with a role similar to a correction officer (McCartan, Harris and Prescott 2019). Interestingly, Mann et al. (2010) found that participants in their study did not “feel informed about the nature, aims and effectiveness of treatment” (Jewkes, Crewe and Bennett 2016: 260). Other authors believe that, for sex offenders, reporting benefits from treatment in areas such as “taking responsibility for offending” and “victim empathy” could be a strategy for presenting the improvements they believe treatment providers value the most (Jewkes, Crewe and Bennett 2016).

According to a conventional code that obliges inmates to help each other (Iudici and Maiocchi 2014), prisoners who are incarcerated for a sexual crime can only create a supportive community with people convicted of the same offense if they refrain from judging other sex offenders’ behavior and ignore their deviant past (Priestley 1980; Mann 2012; Ievins and Crewe 2016). However, despite this intent, prisoners convicted of a sexual offense are in a precarious position where they must balance solidarity with inmates with protecting themselves. Sex offenders’ relationships are so marked by mistrust and moral judgment that telling the truth or hiding something are seen as interchangeable (Ievins and Crewe 2016). In a previous study at the same institution as the present investigation (the Due Palazzi prison in Padua, Italy), researchers examined the entire prison population and found that detainees manage their relationships with other inmates to maintain a strategic peaceful coexistence (Faccio and Costa 2013). Detainees stated that they exercised prudence to prevent disruptive situations. Circumspection, mistrust of others and limiting storytelling about oneself seemed to be fundamental for preventing fights and

riots. This seems to be true for prisoners in general, as the participants in the previous study belonged to all sections of the institution, except the sex offenders' section. Since the crime committed coincides with the person at an interpersonal level, the only way for the convict to regain power over their self is to "choose" the best possible version of their history. The offender's narrative about their crime may be omitted, limited, strategically edited or revised to provide greater benefits or minimize obstacles in social relationships. The version selected as the best way to present (and enact) the self will significantly influence how the person tells his story, how he experiences prison, his relationships with cellmates, and how he envisions his future. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor of the presentation of self in everyday life describes the "sex offender" as a social actor whose part has been "assigned" by a judge-director. Successful performance of the script hinges on the actor's personal reinterpretation of the part, which also depends on the co-constructed role of other social agents called upon to play specific "role others:" other detainees such as cellmates, "ordinary" prisoners, prison officers, educationalists, psychologists, judges, lawyers, and significant others from outside the prison (Goffman, 1961b).

Interactions with others make it possible to construct the semantic field whereby a person seizes the labels assigned by others and redirects them to himself (Thompson 2014). This "self-labeling" as a deviant may also be triggered without being labeled by others first (Thoits 1985). In an environment perceived as threatening, during a conflict between the person's self-representation and other people's perception of them, or during identity transitions that encourage emotional or identity-related discrepancies (Faccio, Bordin and Cipolletta 2013; Gammino, Faccio and Cipolletta 2016; Norris 2011), a person may accept the narratives that they imagine others use to describe them and apply them to their self (Burke 1991; Burke and Stets 2009; Thoits 1985). Dialogues that the imprisoned person entertains with their self, others and the surrounding context may generate a world-jail that is real to its inhabitant. This reality has pragmatic value in suggesting what actions should be taken and how the individual should evaluate their experience. In this sense, it is important to understand what worlds of meaning the prisoners may access—the internalized voices that shape the course of their life.

Though this would seem to be a promising field of research for social academics, the literature on the experiences of prisoners convicted of sexual offenses is "sporadic and underdeveloped," as Ievins (2014: 6) notes, "there has been almost no exploration of the impact of people's offenses on their identities, or on relationships among sex offenders and VPs (Vulnerable Prisoners' Units)." This study aims to understand how sex offenders perceive themselves within the protected unit, construct relationships with other inmates, and actively socialize by strategically narrating the self.

Italy's Protected Units for Sexual Offenders

A common strategy for maintaining sex offenders' safety in the prison environment is to house them in a separate wing of the institution (e.g., a "vulnerable prisoners" unit" in the UK, a "special housing unit" in the USA, or a "protected unit" in the case study presented here). In the Italian prison system there are three main strategies for this kind of detainee: exclusion (the sex offender is assigned to a particular section of the prison), subordinated inclusion (the offender is encouraged to participate actively in re-educational activities), and inclusion (all detainees have the same opportunities to access activities promoted by the prison staff in all parts of the institution) (Pajardi 2008). In the Due Palazzi prison, the protected unit, which houses sex offenders, is a separate block. All other blocks are identified by number (e.g., Block 1) and their inhabitants are called "common detainees." Assuming that a name not only denotes someone, but also connotes their identity, people convicted of sexual violence have to deal with the hetero-narratives that precede their self-presentation to others: a sex offender is someone who risks being physically assaulted and must be protected because of their offense. Contrary to the protected units in Italy or the special housing units in the USA, England and Wales (Jewkes, Crewe,

and Bennett 2016) allow inmates that are being held for sexual offenses to choose between custody in a Vulnerable Prisoners' Unit with detainees convicted of a similar crime, or in "normal" units with convicts of all kinds; there are also prisons populated only with sex offenders. As Blagden et al. (2017) argue, living in a prison with only sex offenders can increase perceived inmate safety and have positive consequences on detainees' impression of the prison environment. Nevertheless, even specialized prison sites for sex offenders do not change the feeling of living in a "different world" in which it is difficult to understand whether therapists are potential allies or someone who judges them as other people do (Blagden et al. 2017). While discussing these international strategies of imprisonment, it is important to emphasize, once again, that these choices significantly affect the life of a detainee—especially those convicted of a sexual offense.

Further, as sexual offenses are considered among the most serious crimes, the Italian penitentiary system dictates that people currently incarcerated as "sex offenders" are not eligible for benefits (e.g., a suspended sentence) for at least one year, given the threat associated with this kind of detainee. During this time, prison staff monitor sex offenders' behavior through "scientific personality observation." In this report, psychologists and educationalists describe sex offenders' profiles in another narrative context that, according to the prison system, presents the convict's legal history and their behavior in prison to facilitate a psychological description that is used to plan rehabilitation treatment. In this sense, legal, psychological, educational, and normative issues are rhetorically intertwined in the institutionalized version of the prisoner's self, which significantly affects their biography and how they describe their self from that moment—not only as someone who has been convicted of a crime, but also as a "sex offender," a "patient" to be cured, "someone to be re-educated," and a "detainee."

Method

Theoretical Background

This paper draws on an interactionist conceptual framework, viewing the prison as a social world that is constructed from everyday interactions with others that are subjectively re-interpreted by the individual through an internalized social process (Blumer 1969; Salvini 1998; Iudici and Fabbri 2017). From this point of view, the "sex offender's screenplay" is a co-authored text which casts the offender in more than one hetero-ascribed role: to the community that is horrified and disgusted by the crime, the offender is a sick criminal; to the prison sub-culture, they are an inmate to be punished; and to the penitentiary administration, they are a person to protect in a prisoners' unit. Staging this performance requires an actor who constantly redefines prison reality, making sense of it by negotiating their roles and self-representations with the other people who share the stage. Against this backdrop, prison emerges as a social product and as an interesting human laboratory for investigating the co-construction of deviant roles.

Research Questions

The literature review indicated that being imprisoned is a complex experience, especially for a detainee convicted of a sexual offense. "Sex offenders experience imprisonment differently" to detainees who do not have to face the stigma of being incarcerated for a crime regarded both inside and outside the prison as the most socially reprehensible (Jewkes, Crewe, and Bennett 2016: 249). An Italian study reports that the general public regards sex offenders as "socially different," "morally deviant," "psychologically different," "psychologically disturbed," "troubled," or "socially unacceptable" (Salvini 1998). Working from this premise, this study investigates how sex offenders experience prison in the Due Palazzi in northern Italy—how sex offenders experience detention considering other people's opinions of them, whether sex offenders feel able to share their personal story with another sex offender in the same situation, how sex offenders experience custody in a protected unit, the relationships they have with other inmates,

and how they perceive treatment in a social setting that has defined them from the outset as someone to protect and assess psychologically.

Research Aims

This study's theoretical interactionist approach agrees that "reality is created by the continuous interaction between individuals, involved in giving meanings to events using the interpretative filters in the relevant sociocultural context" (Iudici, Boccato, and Faccio 2018: 62). As such, prison is considered a complex context that is socially constructed by all the possible discourses voiced by its inhabitants; sex offender inmates use this context to position themselves on the prison scene. Accordingly, the study explores how inmates convicted of a sexual offense and held in a "protected unit" experience imprisonment, treatment, re-educational activities offered by the prison staff, and relationships with other detainees convicted of the same offense.

Participants

A total of 32 detainees housed in the protected unit of the Due Palazzi prison took part in this study. Participants were all male, over 18 years old and came from various sociocultural backgrounds. By agreement with the prison administration, all personal information such as name, age, nationality, type of crime, and term of imprisonment were omitted. The criteria for participation were detention in the protected unit and having been convicted of a sexual offense, which, pursuant to Article 609 of the Italian Code of Criminal Procedure², entails conduct such as sexual assault through coercion, force or threats; gang rape; and sexual acts with minors. All detainees of the protected unit who had been cooperating witnesses or former police officers and detainees who had not been incarcerated for a sexual offense but were nevertheless housed in the protected unit were excluded from the study. Thus, 42 detainees of the 130 housed in the protected unit were excluded.

All participants chose to participate of their own free will and no incentives were offered by the penitentiary administration—indicating the inmates' considerable interest in the issues that emerged. The purpose and methods of participation were explained to all detainees in the protected unit by one of the researchers (MM), who was introduced by the psycho-pedagogical coordinator as a "researcher from the University of Padua." The psycho-pedagogical coordinator also provided assistance and supervision. Participants were asked to complete an informed consent form immediately after being informed of the study's aims and research methods. The authors' contributions were as follows: the first author (MM) analyzed data and wrote the first draft of the paper, the second author (EF) planned the research design, supervised the project and wrote the finalized version of the paper, and the third author (AI) reviewed the final manuscript.

Contextual Background

This study took place in the protected unit of the Due Palazzi prison in Padua, Italy. The penitentiary consists of seven cell blocks where detainees are grouped into sections based on the crimes they committed. People convicted of sexual assault have a limited range of opportunities, as there is a high risk they will be attacked by the rest of the prison population. For this reason, the penitentiary administration must be alert to sex offenders' movements and any contact they may have with detainees outside the protected unit. This complicated setting had a major influence on the design of this study, which needed to comply with multiple requirements and restrictions to receive approval from the ethics committee of the University of Padua Faculty of Psychology, authorization from the Italian Department of Penitentiary Administration (D.A.P), and permission from the prison decision-makers (i.e., the warden, the psycho-pedagogical coordinator, the psychologist, and the educationalist working in the protected unit). Notably, the previous research project, which investigated perceptions of guilt and responsibility regarding the detainee's criminal offense and served as the basis for the present study, revealed the limitation of the presumed "psychic fragility" in the prison's protected population. Consequently,

the planned interview was replaced with a questionnaire and questions relating to the crime were deleted.

Survey Instrument: Open-question Questionnaire

The questionnaire was constructed based on the research questions (Bourque and Fielder 1995), the defined objectives (McColl et al. 2001) and the prior information that had been given to respondents. Other aspects considered in the construction were the respondents' willingness, the time available and the environmental conditions under which the questionnaire was administered (Meadows 2003). Closed questions were used to acquire general data on the participants (Oppenheim 1992). Open-ended questions were used because they eliminated predetermined answers, allowing the participant to answer in their own words (Peterson 2000; Popping, 2015). This aspect was crucial for capturing the respondent's thoughts and experiences in depth. Participants were asked to respond to a written questionnaire (see Appendix A) consisting of nine open-ended questions on aspects that would assist in exploring what the prison setting means for inmates: prison as a life experience in a protected unit, prison as an opportunity to take advantage of, and prison as relationships with other inmates. Questions about future expectations and considering prison as a matrix of meanings through which detainees interpret their actions and project themselves into the future were also included.

In particular, the thematic sections covered by the questionnaire were:

Prison as a Life Experience in a Protected Unit

The first research question aimed to explore how the individual describes his experience of imprisonment. For example, the questionnaire asked: "How would you describe the experience of imprisonment in the section where you are currently located?"

Prison as Opportunities to Take Advantage of

The Due Palazzi penitentiary offers a range of programs that promote considering imprisonment as an opportunity to reassess deviant actions with the possibility of future social reintegration. The programs offered by the institution work from the assumption that prison should foster a type of re-education that increases inmates' sense of responsibility for their conduct in the past, present and future. At the Due Palazzi, this objective is pursued through work opportunities (e.g., serving meals to the other inmates or the daily cleaning of specific prison areas), recreational activities (e.g., sports or a theater course), and in-prison treatments (e.g., educational or psychological consultation). Questions regarding "prison as opportunities to take advantage of" explored how the activities proposed by the prison administration were perceived by the inmates in the protected unit, whose lower social status in the prison population granted them fewer opportunities than other inmates.

According to the literature (Hood et al. 2002), while inmates convicted of a sexual crime prefer to deny responsibility, the prison's process of re-education do require to accept this as a first step of change. As such, this section of the questionnaire investigates how participants position themselves in this "responsibility and denial" paradox in which accepting responsibility should signify facing that they have committed a stigmatized crime, whereas denying responsibility signifies they are defending their identity and not pursuing change.

Examples of these questions are: "During your imprisonment, have the employment opportunities, recreational and re-educational activities and/or relations with educationalists, volunteers and psychologists led you to reconsider how your deviant conduct was your own responsibility rather than the result of others' blame?", "In the light of your prison experience, what do you consider to be a successful rehabilitation treatment?", and "In your opinion, what should psychologists take into account during a conversation with a sex offender?"

Prison as Relationships with Other Inmates

Questions within this theme explored the role that inmates' relationships play in how they make sense of prison reality. For example, "Would you tell your personal story to your cellmate?" and "Is there any difference for you between telling your story to a person who is assigned to the same section as you, and telling it to someone from another block?"

Future Expectations: Possible and Impossible Changes

These questions explored how sex offenders thought of their future, and whether and how they have changed their understanding of the behavior that violates social rules: "Is imprisonment giving you the opportunity to imagine/construct alternative paths other than those you followed before detention?" and "Could you give some examples of how you think about your future?", and "Can you describe a situation in which deviant action would be justified?"

Authorization and Ethics

As indicated earlier, approval from the following entities was required to conduct the study:

- The Ethics Committee for Psychological Research at the University of Padua, which required that the researcher provide participants with an informed consent form containing detailed information about the study. In view of the presumed "psychological complexity" of the topics to be explored and the fact that the participants lived in a "critical" setting, it was necessary to guarantee the presence of one of the prison's psychologists.
- Prison staff—the study was agreed to and supervised by the warden, the psycho-pedagogical coordinator, the psychologist, and the educationalist working in the protected unit.
- The Italian D.A.P, which required that the researchers comply with the penitentiary instructions concerning contact with the prison population, and stipulated that no reference be made to the detainees' offense. Unlike other studies conducted in the same penitentiary with inmates convicted of "common" crimes (Iudici, Boccato, and Faccio 2018; Faccio and Costa 2013), the D.A.P emphasized that national regulations require dialogue between outside persons and convicts to concern living conditions, the humanity of inmates' treatment, and the respect for the inmates' personal dignity.

Data Analysis and Codification

As befits the purpose of this study and its theoretical framework, discourse analysis was used to unpack the complexity of texts and processes that shape the detainees' world, actions, and events, as well as the meanings assigned to the "mental" life (Potter 2003). This research focused on interpretative repertoires—a theoretical and analytical concept that helps researchers investigate similarities, rather than variations, within and across accounts. The similar accounts gathered were then aggregated into categories. Though language allows for multiple versions of an event and the interactionist perspective does not assume that an individual will represent people and events consistently over time, a study of the variations in language use can reveal how speakers construct their accounts and structure them to appear factual (the epistemological orientation of discourse) and how speakers use accounts to serve rhetorical functions (the action orientation of discourse). Potter and Wetherell (1988: 171) argue that several accounts of the same phenomena will contain the same "relatively internally consistent, bounded language units which we have called interpretative repertoires." Repertoires are building blocks that speakers use for constructing versions of actions, cognitive processes, and other phenomena. Any repertoire is constructed from a restricted range of terms used in a specific stylistic and grammatical fashion. Commonly, these terms are derived from one or more key metaphors and the presence of a repertoire will often be signaled by certain tropes or figures of speech.

In this study, interpretative repertoires were identified by analyzing the participants' use of metaphors and figures of speech, how they spoke, and the rhetorical expressions they used that related to the object of our analysis (e.g., "freedom is a great asset and you don't realize how important it is until the day it's gone" or "I think we [detainees] are in the same boat"). The interactive context of the interview and the wider sociocultural setting of the responses, which provide context for certain stances and ways of describing oneself, were also considered. The principal interpretative repertoires could be framed within an overarching meta-metaphor that encompassed all their specificities and concerned the "constraint on identity."

In line with these premises, the first step in the analysis was to transcribe all texts in a single data corpus for every thematic section in the questionnaire. In the second step, each portion of text was examined line-by-line to identify the common interpretative repertoires that respondents used to position themselves in relation to the theme proposed by the question. The interpretative repertoires that emerged from the texts were then grouped by similarities in the lexicon or by metaphors used by a specific community to interpret their life events.

For example, statements such as "It's not so good, in here. You're mistreated and constantly looked at with distaste by the older guards. At least the younger ones are polite and humane" (Participant 10), and "older guards treat us worse than beasts" (Participant 24) were considered part of shared interpretative repertoires that represents prison as "a place of hostility and abuse by the older agents."

The final analytical procedure identified the most significant interpretative repertoires for each question and their relation to other repertoires.

This procedure was epistemologically adequate and consistent with the study's aims; thus, allowing the examination of the interpretative repertoires used by the participants and, starting from their position in the response context, their possible identity movements.

Results

This section discusses the main interpretative repertoires identified during the analysis of the 32 responses. Some representative excerpts are provided, using a numerical code to guarantee participants' anonymity and confidentiality. The first area of the questionnaire (prison as a "life experience in a protected unit") is discussed below, followed by each of the other three areas considered.

Prison as a Life Experience in a Protected Unit

Prison as "Forced Cohabitation"

Detention is described as "a form of cohabitation" and "not living, just surviving," as an individual is "deprived of his freedom:" "Freedom is the greatest deprivation inflicted on a detainee. A great asset, and you don't realize how important it is until the day it's gone" (Participant 26).

The most important topic to characterize the prison setting was the everyday forced cohabitation with other convicts. Since the protected unit, also known as "the sixth block," is populated by 130 people, cells are always open and the prison becomes a laboratory of social conduct in which detainees have multiple opportunities to interact with others. Cohabiting with other inmates involves spending time together, and dealing with other people's conventions, including eating and cooking habits, personal hygiene, and different preferences for activities (e.g., which television program to watch in the common spaces, which games to play, or even to do nothing at all).

Prison as a "Place of Torture"

The prison is described as a place where an individual is subjected to physical and psychological torture: "Prison life is not easy. Sometimes you see bullying, threats and pressures for those who are weak" (Participant 27); "I'm not able to describe the quality of life in this section of the prison, people who live here undergo both psychological and physical torture" (Participant 6); or "I'm fine but definitely not because of the food or the treatment in the sixth block" (Participant 14).

Prison as "Proof of Adaptation" (Against Personal Reputation)

Participants who reported feeling "good" in the protected unit stated that cohabitation was only possible because they were able to adapt to the situation and respect other detainees: "I'm fine in here because I respect everyone ... I think we are in the same boat. We have to live together as best we can" (Participant 3).

The situation is described as further aggravated by belonging to the protected unit. Notably, most of the respondents had never been imprisoned before and "sex offender" was the first label they had worn in a prison setting: "Imprisonment experience in the "protected" section is a bit abnormal ... if you want to survive you have to adapt and blend into the system" (Participant 9).

Even if the imprisonment situation has improved over the past few years [the number of prisoners in some cells has been reduced from three to two]: it's discriminating to be here. The reputation of this section still persists: to be excluded in an excluded place is depressing. (Participant 19)

Moreover, some respondents remarked that, "It's so difficult to live together with other detainees with different offenses" (Participant 17).

Prison as a "Place of Hostility and Abuse by the Agents"

Many participants reported a hostile relationship with prison guards: "Why aren't those who spend the most time with us during the day and know us better instructed or even better, obliged to participate in training courses about re-education instead of repression?" (Participant 1); "It's not so good, in here. You're mistreated and constantly looked at with distaste by the older guards. At least the younger ones are polite and humane" (Participant 10); "Older guards treat us worse than beasts" (Participant 24); and "I can feel that guards, more or less, always have prejudices when talking with us" (Participant 25).

The emotional and psychological tension associated with managing relationships can be strong enough to justify a loss of control over conduct. In defining the situations in which they could imagine themselves engaging in behavior that breaks the rules, sex offenders referred, once again, to the complicated cohabitation with other inmates and the relationships with prison guards. The respondents judge their actions through a co-constructed lens that considers other detainees' conduct. For example, a violent reaction may be described as the only way to protect oneself from other inmates: "It's automatic to create situations involving behavior that breaks the rules when talking with other inmates or prison guards who show ignorance and rudeness" (Participant 12).

Prison as Opportunities to Take Advantage of

Prison as the Denial of Opportunity

From the analysis of the texts, prison was not seen as a space that generates opportunities: "During these years I've received just bed and board, learning idleness and rudeness. In here, for example, it's routine to throw your trash out the window" (Participant 4).

Prison as an Opportunity for a Job and for Rehabilitation

The highest aspiration for convicts in the protected unit was an employment opportunity—detainees who were able to work described a "job" as a means of achieving economic

independence: “It’s very important to have a steady job because it gives you both the opportunity to interact with other inmates and a certain economic security. That way, time passes more quickly” (Participant 25).

Some detainees considered acquiring a job to be the real rehabilitation project:

In my opinion, re-educating means supporting detainees outside the prison after giving them a job. Once you’re in jail, the world closes the door behind you and when you come out, it shuts the door in your face and all this leads you to re-offend as you did before (Participant 8).

Rehabilitation

Participants perceived rehabilitation in various ways. Some reject it, denying its purpose: “Dealing with rehabilitation staff doesn’t help change my ideas about responsibility, and that’s because I’m not responsible for what I’ve been convicted of” (Participant 18). Conversely, some detainees consider rehabilitation essential, even if they do not give a clear definition of it: “It’s something very useful for a detainee ... It helps you understand how to live as a normal human being and to show respect for other people” (Participant 3). Some interpreted it as a personal path, consisting of conversations with experts: “There would be more conversations with the prison staff on a valid and constant relationship” (Participant 25).

Others saw re-educative treatment as an analysis of their own past in order to construct a future and as a way “to be dominated by the common sense of morality” (Participant 19), framing the relationship between personal and social moral criteria in terms of power and domination. Interestingly, where the value of re-education is acknowledged, it is often associated with the presence of a “mediator” of social thinking (e.g., an educationalist, a volunteer, or a psychologist). Consequently, the absence of sufficient contact with specialists is referred to as a consistent limitation, as they have the power to rehabilitate and resocialize the sex offender: “I’ve never had the chance to have any kind of opportunity in prison, either for work or for re-educational or psychological support even if I think this expert could be very useful in our situation” (Participant 4); and “There are no relationships with educationalists and psychologists. We are here just to suffer under the system” (Participant 9).

In some rare cases, the expert is seen as just another enemy among many: “Educationalists and psychologists are our real enemies because they claim to have the power to decide if you are telling the truth or not” (Participant 28).

The Relationships with Other Inmates

The Sex Offender as “a Liar” or as a “Teller of a Self-Serving Truth”

The sex offenders described a sex offender as someone who repeatedly lies, judges other inmates, and cannot be relied on. Given this framework of mutual distrust, it is difficult to create a social context for human relations without being guided by prejudices. This lack of confidence generated an image of the “protected” inmate as someone who does not respect others and, even if an inmate decides to share their story, the sex offender is represented as an interlocutor who would not want to believe the veracity of the other’s story:

Personally, I’ve found out that what an inmate tells others never matches the sentence. I mean, it is like they keep presenting their history through three kinds of truth: legal, journalistic and a personal one. The “personal truth” is often a self-serving truth told to other inmates and prison staff. Sometimes the self-perception of creating this personal truth can become even pathological ... So, deciding to tell your own story to another inmate can even be counterproductive (Participant 30).

Thus, the sex offender is not used to telling the truth and prefers to present a narrative of convenience.

Self-disclosure as “Embarrassing” “Not Useful” or “Dangerous”

Telling their story to another person who had similar experiences is not recommended for sex offenders and may become a risk. Rather than seeking support from their cellmates by sharing a significant event with someone in the same socially stigmatized position, sex offenders despise one another. Refraining from self-disclosure is justified in several ways: “I think that once you have understood what was wrong about what you did, it brings a sense of embarrassment and talking about that increases this feeling” (Participant 8); “I’m not interested in telling my story to someone: he doesn’t care anyway” (Participant 9); “No, I don’t feel better talking about my story” (Participant 6); “Telling and spending time together is ok but also a little bit uncomfortable because you will never know what they really think about your story and overall you will never know how they are judging you” (Participant 11); “I have to be very careful about who I choose to speak to because it could be dangerous” (Participant 10).

The only people the participants would tell their secrets to are the experts, someone “who has the competence to talk with instead of the other inmates” (Participant 25) and “the best thing to do” (Participant 27).

In spite of this declaration of intents, one’s personal disclosure with psychologists and educationalists is not considered as an option always available due to their perception of “absence” of the specialists from the “protected unit”:

Psychologists would be very important in here listening, explaining, persuading and, most of all, seeing us for at least a couple of times in a month and following us even after the release from prison. Considering this, where are they? (Participant 24).

Even if the possibility of being constantly supported were a reality, the participants in our study would still prefer not talking with anyone without distinction of roles considering that “not talking is a way of forgetting the past” (Participant 4) and that, in the protected section “you can not trust anyone” (Participant 1).

Notably, the rhetoric of prejudice and mutual distrust is not only present as a common narrative plot used to interpret and construct human relations in the protected unit, but is also attributed to other social actors at the prison, from penitentiary guards to prison staff: “More or less everyone has some prejudices against us” (Participant 25); and “I can’t have a meaningful exchange with prison staff because they take sex offenders’ guilt for granted. I don’t accept this reality because reality is outside these walls” (Participant 18).

Future Expectations, Possible and Impossible Changes

Participants did not see prison as a generator of change for constructing life paths that differ from those taken before detention, but as a place that isolates people from the outside world: “The more time passes, the more I lack the enthusiasm needed to rebuild a future for myself” (Participant 31).

Prisoners as “Outsiders,” “Immigrants,” and “Monsters”

Detainees’ difficulties imagining themselves in a future outside prison as a free ex-convict are blamed on a supposed exclusion from society:

There are many former prisoners who are “outside” with no place to go or contacts that would enable them to reboot their lives once they have served their sentences. In this situation, even if one had a vivid imagination, he would come up against a society ready to “keep you out” ... This society has never considered detainees as people it would be worthwhile to invest in. We could compare this phenomenon to those of immigrants: misfits, bad and dangerous. If we associate these characteristics to the considerations connected with this type of crime: the difficulties would increase exponentially. (Participant 2)

Moreover, “Outside these walls, people think you’re just a *monster*. An uncivilized person” (Participant 10).

Change is not described as a process that can be pursued inside the prison, but as a condition to develop after sentences have been served. Further, detainees see employment as the key to their life in the future: “If one could get his job back, he would save himself” (Participant 10).

Discussion

Textual analysis indicated that participants adopted an interpersonal perspective in their responses and the relational aspect emerged as the most influential aspect in detainees’ representations of the prison world. Participants described difficulties in their relationships with inmates, cellmates, and guards. Additionally, participants revealed that they develop strategies to reach and maintain “the right distance” (e.g., a form of self-defense that can also legitimize impulsive reactions). Therefore, violent behavior is seen as a natural consequence of an uneasy cohabitation. This is paradoxical because the most important goal of sex offender treatment is to increase the sense of responsibility for actions involving others—this perspective emphasizes not blaming other convicts and denigrating others. Moreover, the way relationships are created in the protected unit is influenced by the identity attributes inherited from the setting, which offenders use to define each other as liars and frauds, or suspicious and indifferent. This mutual distrust makes prison a hostile environment in which the individual has to deal with the complexities connected with imprisonment, as well as the definitions that assign a specific character to them: “detainee,” “protected,” “sexual abuser,” “sex offender,” “pedophile,” “rapist,” “deviant,” and, as one of the respondents said, “a monster” (Schmid and Jones 1990). During everyday interactions, the individual incorporates the effects of these deviant labels, allowing them to redefine their perception of self. Additionally, our data suggest that sex offenders intentionally learn strategies for interaction, such as suspicion, distrust of others, refusal of self-disclosure, and the tendency to tell a self-serving version of the truth. These strategies are perceived as the best “protection” that the “protected” prisoners can choose for themselves, rather than the result of a lack of social skills. Though prisoners start to turn their story into a psychologically acceptable narrative during their trial and continue to do so throughout their imprisonment (Hall and Rossmanith 2016), this process of manipulation of one’s personal biography is not a desirable option for those who have been convicted of a sexual offense.

In any case, this form of self-protection has a major limitation: it is not possible to “digest” and “elaborate” on a personally invalidating experience by covering it up. In psychotherapy, the objectification of thoughts and experiences through their externalization (Berger and Luckmann 1966) enables individuals to know themselves better and to modify their perspective on memories, significant events, or important trauma. As detainees in the protected unit were extremely hesitant to share information about their “self;” this theme requires broad reconsideration.

Though detainees felt too vulnerable to tell their personal story, an intermediate step for facilitating the exchange between inmates was nevertheless possible. This step could be achieved

by utilizing the only item our respondents indicated as a potential source of personal growth: the social role of a worker. Our textual data showed that respondents were not able to imagine themselves in new life paths by redefining their situation and moving away from the static version of the self that was provided by the context. To project a positive self in accordance with their biographical career, study participants aspired to become workers—a social position that is supposed to guarantee economic independence and raise their public status among respected non-convicted people. A fitting metaphor for the perspective that emerged from the texts was proposed by a respondent who described prison as a “parking lot.” The borders of the space mark a clear separation between those who are “parked” inside and those who are outside—imprisonment and exclusion are represented as part of the same semantic field. Consequently, prison is described as a place where one is obliged to stay without understanding the meaning of this waiting, which fuels belief in society’s presumed exclusion of the sex offender.

In view of the findings regarding the difficulties of dealing with other convicts, the intentional interpersonal distance, and the need for a job, promoting inmate interactions that are no longer based on their mutual “sex offender” role is important. Additionally, whether the detainees’ adaptation of the social role of “sex offender” is reinforced by being housed in a different unit from the rest of the prison population must be examined.

To mitigate the perception that social workers are absent from the protected unit, a group of interested inmates could be formed to act as “information givers” with knowledge on the most common issues that social workers are asked to manage. Rather than absorbing all the possible narratives of the crime and the “offender identity,” the counseling function should be limited to answering technical or logistical questions about prison life. In doing so, inmates could experience the role of “workers,” which could help them to interact with other people in a different way, perceive social workers in a better light and distance themselves from the role of sex offender by moving toward new biographical possibilities.

Moreover, the lack of social workers and psychologists continues to be a major problem for the prison population, particularly sex offenders. Several participants expressed their disappointment at the lack of support through accusations against the prison, as many protected inmates considered their re-educational path to be strictly dependent on “mediation” by a specialist. Crucially, it is not sufficient that professionals be present in prison: they must also be well trained. For professionals who work at a prison site such as the protected unit, it is important to be aware of one’s personal prejudices and beliefs about sex offenders (Bond 2006), to promote an environment of “trust” in the therapeutic relationship, and to ensure that inmates feel safe to communicate openly during psychological and educational conversations (Geiger and Fisher 2018).

There is no doubt that prison is one of the most difficult settings for planning and conducting research (Blagden and Pemberton 2010; Roberts 2011) and for introducing changes. Nevertheless, it is important to provide visibility for these results and promote studies in other penitentiaries throughout the country to gain a better understanding of the experiences of an imprisoned sex offender. Additionally, attention to the prison setting is crucial because, as other studies have shown (Cowburn et al. 2008; Colton et al. 2009; Iudici, Alborghetti, and Ferri 2017), a good perception of the prison by its inmates plays a fundamental role in successful sex offender treatment.

Conclusion

Considering how rarely a voice is given to detainees, especially sex offenders, this study brought new theoretical insights regarding jail as a social reality and may be useful for those who work with convicts.

Exploring the prison world through the universe of sense contemplated by this study means viewing the individual as an “expert” in his own process of constructing reality. Consequently, research in this critical setting acquires value when those who live in this setting can openly express their viewpoint. Educationalists and psychologists who work in prisons should devote considerable attention to language and its power in constructing the detainees’ reality. For example, during sex offender treatment, language could prove fundamental to promoting a transformative dialogue that abandons the act of blaming others (i.e., detainees, the guards, the judge, their victim, etc.) and the detainee’s harmful mindset: “I position myself as all-knowing and all-righteous, and you as a flawed being who is subject to my judgment. You are constructed as an object of scorn, subject to correction, while I remain praiseworthy and powerful” (Gergen, McNamee, and Barrett 2001: 5). Promoting a transformative dialogue would also prevent the communication of relational responsibility, in which one’s role is discussed in every specific situation of controversy.

Accordingly, the description of the prison setting shows a linguistic reification of meanings co-constructed through interactions with other social actors who inhabit the same scene. Not only can the self-conception provided by the other inmates be considered as a permanent story line attached to the individual, but, in the outer world, the individual is also unlikely to be regarded as anything other than an ex-detainee convicted of a sexual offense. This mass of definitions and labels may chain the individual to his typified identity. For example, “recidivism” is the possibility that a person will re-commit a sexual offense, which can be read through the lens of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Watzlawick 1984) because detainees’ perception of the context plays an important role in whether they feel justified in re-offending. Thus, it is fundamental to problematize an isolationist policy toward sex offenders, as the possible outcomes include consolidation of a deviant career or reinforcement of a hierarchy between inmates. It would be advisable to reconceptualize prison as a context in which promoting new and different possibilities for detainees’ biographies, considering them as part of the community instead of merely deviants, and deconstructing the system of meanings whereby a deviant behavior, such as a sexual offense, is considered one of the most desirable choices of action.

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¹ For the sake of readability, the term “sex offender” is used throughout this article to refer to people who have committed sexual violence, rather than as a label that subsumes a person.

² ex art. 609 Criminal Code, as updated and agreed by Royal Decree dated 19 October 1930, n. 1398, (Italy)

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Appendix A. The Questionnaire

- 1) How would you describe the experience of imprisonment in the section where you are currently located?
- 2) During your imprisonment, have the employment opportunities, recreational and re-educational activities and/or relations with educationalists, volunteers and psychologists led you to reconsider how your deviant conduct was your own responsibility, rather than the result of others' blame?
- 3) In light of your prison experience, what do you consider to be a successful rehabilitation treatment?
- 4) In your opinion, what should psychologists take into account during a conversation with a sex offender?
- 5) Would you tell your personal story to your cellmate?
- 6) Is there any difference for you between telling your story to a person who is assigned to the same section as you and telling it to someone from another block?
- 7) Is imprisonment giving you the opportunity to imagine/construct alternative paths other than those you followed before detention?
- 8) Could you give some examples of how you think about your future?
- 9) Can you describe a situation in which deviant action would be justified?