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

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Identity formation is the main developmental task in adolescence and emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1959). For Erikson (1959), identity formation is a struggle to achieve a personal sense of coherence and continuity by integrating the self contextually and temporally. Recently, Syed and Mitchell (2015) highlighted the significance of temporal identity integration. They explained that the ability of individuals to reconcile and integrate their past experiences, current concerns, and future prospects contributes to a healthy identity. Successful identity formation leads to the virtue of fidelity, the notion of commitment to one’s self-pledged values (Erikson, 1968), while unsuccessful identity formation leads to role confusion or even to a negative identity, which is an identity that opposes the one promoted by family and community (Erikson, 1959).

Research on temporal identity integration is scarce among populations that might exhibit negative identity, such as delinquents. McLean, Wood, and Breen (2013) pointed out that little is known about this important group. In their study, delinquent adolescents were found to construct their identities in non-normative ways and their identity development was rather impeded by personal and societal adversities.

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