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

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ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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