

Everyday Interactions among Imprisoned Sex Offenders: A Qualitative Study within the 'Due Palazzi' Prison in Padua

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Abstract : Prison is a social reality constructed by everyday interactions between an inmate, other social actors (cellmates, prison officers, educationalists and psychologists or other detainees) and the external world which participates in this complex construction through the social discourses on prison reality and its problems. Being a detainee means performing a self dealing with processes of stereotypization, attribution of a social role and prejudices assigned by various interlocutors and depending on what kind of crime one has been convicted of. Among all inmates, sex offenders are the ones who risk more to be socially condemned beyond a legal sentence since they have committed one of the most hated and disapproved crime. Regarding this, prison has to be considered as a critical context in which all community expectations and beliefs are converged: for common sense, rapists and child molesters are dangerous people who have to be stigmatized, punished and isolated. Furthermore, other detainees share a code of conduct by which the 'sex offender' is collocated at the lowest level of the social hierarchy of the prison. The penitentiary administration too defines this kind of detainee as a 'vulnerable person to protect' while prison staff considers him as a particular inmate who has to be treated and definitely changed. Considering all the complexities connected with being imprisoned as a sex offender, our research aimed at exploring how people convicted of sex crimes are called upon to manage all these hetero-narrations about their selves. Set this goal, textual data retrieved from this qualitative research show that sex offenders tend to not face the stigma assigned to them. They are rather used to minimize the story telling about their selves and construct alternative biographies to be shared with other inmates. Managing narrations about their selves in this way permits to distance them from all the threats perceived living together with other detainees but it blocks sex offenders' re-signification of their offences during prison treatment. Given these results, prison administration should develop activities in order to create fields of interaction between detainees where experiencing new versions of their selves spendable even in external social situations. Regarding this it's important to re-consider prison as part of the community and the sex offenders as a member of it.

Keywords : interactions, qualitative research, prison reality, sex offender

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