

Cellmates versus family – the sense of belonging among tattooed prisoners

Współwięźniowie kontra rodzina – poczucie przynależności wytatuowanych więźniów

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Abstract

Introduction: The sense of belonging in a group can be a form of adaptation to the conditions of prison isolation. However, excessive group identification could result in negative consequences for the identity of an individual. The sense of support in social relations is a significant personal resource of convicts. The social identity of convicted persons influences their behaviour, and thus the effect of penitentiary interactions. Hence, the aim of the study was to assess the sense of belonging in a group among convicts with body modifications. **Methods:** The research was conducted in penitentiary units at the District Inspectorate of the Prison Service in Gdańsk (Poland). Fifty-eight re-sentenced convicts participated in the study (36.2% did not have body modifications, and 63.8% had tattoo/tattoos). The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 62 years ($M = 35.12$; standard deviation, $SD = 10.98$). The participants completed the Group Identification Scale (Mael and Ashforth, 1992), the Identity Fusion Scale (Gómez et al., 2011) and the measure of identity fusion (Swann et al., 2009). **Results:** The study showed that convicts declare a very weak sense of belonging with their cellmates (55.2%) and a very strong sense of belonging with their family (44.8%). A relationship was observed between younger age and identity fusion; however, it was on the border of a significant statistical trend. **Conclusions:** Interpersonal relationships used as a personal resource in the social rehabilitation process can be extremely important for the probability of recidivism in the future. Especially, non-standard methods may allow convicts to test themselves in a new role. The self-concept should not be formatted through the prism of social stereotypes of prisoners, but with the simultaneous support of the family, which may strengthen socially acceptable behaviours.

Keywords: social identity, prisoners, family, social identification

Streszczenie

Poczucie przynależności do grupy może być formą adaptacji do warunków izolacji więziennej. Jednak nadmierna identyfikacja grupowa może skutkować negatywnymi konsekwencjami dla tożsamości jednostki. Odczuwane wsparcie w relacjach społecznych stanowi znaczący zasób osobisty osób skazanych. Tożsamość społeczna osób skazanych wpływa na ich zachowanie, a tym samym na efekt oddziaływań penitencjarnych. Stąd celem pracy było określenie poczucia przynależności do grupy wśród skazanych, którzy posiadają modyfikacje ciała. **Metoda:** Badania przeprowadzono w jednostkach penitencjarnych na terenie Okręgowego Inspektoratu Służby Więziennej w Gdańsku. W badaniu wzięło udział 58 ponownie skazanych więźniów (36,2% skazanych nie posiadało modyfikacji ciała, a 63,8% miało tatuaż/tatuaże). Wiek osób badanych zawierał się w przedziale 18–62 lata ($M = 35,12$; odchylenie standardowe, *standard deviation*, $SD = 10,98$). Uczestnicy badania wypełnili skalę identyfikacji z grupą (Mael i Ashforth, 1992), skalę fuzji z grupą (Gómez *et al.*, 2011) oraz miarę fuzji tożsamości (Swann *et al.*, 2009). **Wyniki:** Wykazano, że skazani deklarują bardzo słabe poczucie przynależności do współwięźniów (55,2%) oraz bardzo silne poczucie przynależności z rodziną (44,8%). Zaobserwowano – na granicy istotnej tendencji statystycznej – zależność między młodszym wiekiem a wyższymi wynikami na skali fuzji tożsamości. **Wnioski:** Wykorzystanie relacji interpersonalnych jako osobistego zasobu w procesie resocjalizacji może mieć niezwykle znaczenie dla prawdopodobieństwa recydywy w przyszłości. Szczególnie niestandardowe metody mogą pozwolić skazanym na przetestowanie siebie w nowej roli. Formowanie obrazu siebie nie przez pryzmat społecznych stereotypów więźniów przy jednoczesnym wsparciu rodziny może wzmacniać społecznie akceptowane zachowania.

Słowa kluczowe: tożsamość społeczna, więźniowie, rodzina, identyfikacja społeczna

INTRODUCTION

Detection of a committed crime and further actions, such as arrest, trial, sentence and imprisonment, occur in a long-time perspective, and stress becomes a permanent element of the life of suspects or convicts. The specificity of the prison environment forces convicts to adapt to and cope in a new, sometimes very difficult, situation. Under these conditions, an individual may perceive the situation as hostile, threatening and even dangerous. Belonging to a group could be considered as a way of adaptation, which may result in the loss of personal identity in favour of group identity, and body modification as its visual symbol. In its most extreme form, identity diffusion, can be characterised by the lack of a clear distinction between the personal self and social self (Swann and Buhrmester, 2015). The situation of isolation is not only an individual tragedy, but a membership in a socially excluded group reveals common features of the situation, among other things, through dependence on others and the lack of a sense of social usefulness (Bałandynowicz, 2011). A newly convicted person must go through the process of adaptation, which includes a specific “initiation” by convicts to test the reaction of the “freshman” (Kamiński, 2004). Therefore, the prison subculture has a special impact on the formation of self-esteem, not only through the prism of one’s own personal attributes, but also based on the status and position as a group member (Debowska et al., 2017).

In the report on the social bonds of current and former convicts, the significance of personal maladjustment in the sphere of relations with others, and especially with the family, was associated with aggressive and antisocial behaviours (Kalinowski et al., 2010). Among the personal resources of an individual, the importance of emotional support perceived by convicts has been linked to satisfying relationships based on empathy and mutual concern (Niewiadomska, 2007).

Various scientific psychological studies have analysed the sense of social identity of prisoners in relation to cell-mates. Research conducted by Boduszek et al. (2016) suggested that the development of criminal social identity results from the interaction of psychosocial factors, such as identity crisis, exposure to the criminal environment, the need for identification with a criminal group in order to protect self-esteem and personality traits. Identity crisis, as a natural developmental process, is associated with the exploration and contemplation of one’s own role in society, when faced with challenge to the sense of self. Studies have shown that the perception of self through the prism of the committed crime and the sense of belonging to a criminal group is characterized by association with criminal friends (Boduszek et al., 2013). Although achieved identity can contribute to adaptation to new conditions, it may also have negative consequences for the self. Criminal identity of an egodystonic nature affects the prisoner’s level of shame and

embarrassment (Keith and Scheuerman, 2018), as well as reduced self-esteem (Asencio, 2011). However, it is possible that prisoners can simulate identity changes by creating relationships with other prisoners through interpersonal manipulation skills (Sherretts et al., 2016).

The significance of the exploration of social identity consisted in demonstrating that the stronger the identification with the deviant group, the more the rival group members were perceived as threatening, which increased the propensity for revenge (Vasquez et al., 2015). The results of these scientific studies adapted to possible intergroup behaviours in the prison setting may explain the increased number of acts of aggression of prisoners towards convicts perceived as members of a rival prison group/subculture.

Excessive identification with prisoners can be behaviourally expressed by body modifications characteristic for a criminal subculture. The efforts of prison officers to avert such behaviours are aimed at preventing social stigmatisation after serving a sentence. Studies have shown that people who experienced group-based rejection had poorer well-being and an increased sense of identification with a socially rejected group (Kyprianides et al., 2019). This effect will interfere with the possible process of achieving a non-criminal identity after serving a sentence.

Identity crisis, contemplation process, self-exploration, and, ultimately, achieving identity significantly affects behaviour, and thus the process of resocialisation and the probability of recidivism in the future. Hence, the aim of the study was to verify to which group (colleagues-cellmates or family) convicts who modified their body declare a stronger sense of belonging. Efforts were made to determine the intensity of the sense of belonging to the closest group of fellow inmates with whom the participants live on a daily basis, as well as in relation to members of the immediate family with whom they maintain contact during prison isolation. The intention of the research was also to reveal factors that could explain the variance of the obtained results.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The research was conducted in penitentiary units of the District Inspectorate of the Prison Service in Gdańsk (Poland). A total of 58 men were included in the study. The participants were serving a prison sentence during the study. Prison officers selected convicts among penitentiary recidivists to ensure, as much as possible, equal proportions of the study group and the control group. Factors such as cognitive abilities and involvement in pro-social behaviours, such as participation in the study, were also significant in the selection. The analyses did not take into account the length of the imprisonment sentence. The questionnaires were

	Sense of belonging with cellmates		Sense of belonging with family	
	Rates	Percent	Rates	Percent
Very weak	32	55.2%	3	5.2%
Weak	14	24.1%	5	8.6%
Average	6	10.3%	5	8.6%
Strong	3	5.2%	19	32.8%
Very strong	3	5.2%	26	44.8%

Tab. 1. The rates of sense of belonging with 1) cellmates and 2) family

completed by convicts individually in a specially appointed room. The age of the convicts ranged from 18 to 62 years ($M = 35.12$; standard deviation, $SD = 10.98$). As for the place of residence before imprisonment, 14 (24.1%) participants lived in a rural area, 5 (8.6%) in a small town, 24 (41.4%) in a town, 13 (22.4%) in the suburbs and 2 (3.4%) in a city. The respondents were divided based on possession (or not) of body modifications, such as piercing or tattoos, treated as a conscious and social expression of identity. Among convicts, 21 (36.2%) had no body modifications, and 37 (63.8%) had body modifications (tattoos). Informed consent was obtained from each participant included in the study.

Instruments

Group Identification Scale (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Polish version: Jaśkiewicz and Besta, 2014) is a tool used to measure group identification. This 5-item scale was adapted to the context of cellmates. Items included for example: “When someone criticizes my cellmates, I feel personally insulted,” “When I talk about cellmates, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they.’” Items were assessed on a seven-point Likert scale (0 = “I strongly disagree;” 6 = “I definitely agree.” The scale has a high reliability index, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.88.

Identity Fusion Scale (Gómez et al., 2011; Polish version: Besta et al., 2014) measures the overlap between individual and group identity. The scale consists of seven items modified to the context of cellmates, such as: “My cellmates are me,” “I have a deep emotional bond with my cellmates.” Responds were given on a seven-point Likert scale (0 = “I definitely do not agree;” 6 = “I definitely agree”). The scale used in the study has a high reliability index, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.911.

The measure of identity fusion (Swann et al., 2009) was used to assess fusion through perceived “closeness with the group.” The participants were asked to choose a picture which best represented their relationship with 1) cellmates and 2) family. The scale consisted of five symmetrical gradually overlapping circles (0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, and 100%).

Data analysis

Initially, descriptive statistics and frequencies were computed for all variables studied: age, body modification, group identification, identity fusion, and the sense of belonging

Variables	2	3
1. Identity Fusion Scale	0.76*	0.53*
2. Group Identification Scale	–	0.43*
3. Sense of belonging with cellmates	–	–

* $p < 0.001$.

Tab. 2. Spearman’s correlations (r) between identity fusion, group identification and sense of belonging

with 1) family and 2) cellmates. Then, a Shapiro–Wilk test was performed, which confirmed that the distribution of variables did not match the normal distribution. There were no significant relationships between nominal variables using the Chi-square test, and no significant intergroup differences (variable body modifications) were demonstrated by the U Mann–Whitney test and the Kruskal–Wallis test. Finally, rho–Spearman correlation was performed to assess the relationship between variables.

RESULTS

Among respondents, i.e. 58 convicted men (age: $M = 35.12$; $SD = 10.98$), average low scores were observed on the Group Identification Scale ($M = 10.24$; $SD = 9.86$) and Identity Fusion Scale ($M = 9.87$; $SD = 11.29$). The division of participants due to the nominal variable of possession of body modifications showed no significant differences in the results between respondents who had a tattoo/tattoos and those without body modifications.

The frequency of the sense of belonging to the group of 1) inmates and 2) families declared by prisoners is presented in the Tab. 1. A significant number of respondents felt a very weak sense of belonging with inmates (55.2%) and a very strong sense of belonging with their family (44.8%). Also, the distribution of both variables did not significantly differentiate participants who had body modifications from those who did not.

The relationships between the analysed variables were also verified; the results are presented in Tab. 2.

Significant relationships were observed between the Identity Fusion Scale and the following scales: Group Identification Scale, measure of identity fusion (sense of belonging with cellmates). Declarations of a stronger sense of belonging with fellow prisoners were associated with a higher identification with them ($r = 0.43$), as well as a fusion of identity ($r = 0.53$). Body modifications were not associated with the

sense of belonging in a group, social identity or identity diffusion among the study participants. Significance at the statistical trend level was demonstrated between younger age and higher score on Identity Fusion Scale ($r = -0.26$; $p = 0.051$).

DISCUSSION

The obtained results indicate a significantly higher tendency among prisoners to declare a sense of belonging with their family rather than cellmates, to whom they usually feel very weak or weak attachment. The reluctance of convicts to perceive themselves through the prism of criminal identity may promote a more independent social identity. The scientific research on the prison environment focused mainly on the analysis of criminal identity. Especially, the self-concept plays an extremely important role in the likelihood and forms of a change in attitude when serving a sentence (Faine, 1973). The results emphasise the trend of importance of the family for most convicts.

The perceived bonds may form the basis for the rehabilitation process and help convicts achieve identity unrelated to criminal history. Identification with important groups should be treated as resources during rehabilitation (Ostermann and Matejkowski, 2014). In particular, experiments with a variety of activities allow convicts to test themselves in a new role. In the process of social re-adaptation, various methods can be used that enable the presentation of an alternative reality and available opportunities for convicts, with work used as one of the methods (Pstrąg, 2014). For instance, active participation in hospice volunteering (Witkowski, 2018) may complement social rehabilitation interactions in the form of charity work for the local community (Sokołowska, 2015). In addition, participation in a drama project significantly reduced the level of depression and problems with substance use (Mundt et al., 2020). A tendency that younger age may promote identity fusion was found in the study. Juvenile convicts may require the use of working methods suited to the possible threats and requirements. Research indicates that mindfulness and group identification foster self-control (Sroka et al., 2017).

Recognition of the importance of family during social rehabilitation interactions may significantly reduce the risk of recidivism in the future. Social stigmatisation of convicts was related to adaptation disorders by former prisoners after serving a sentence of imprisonment (Olszewska, 2012). Especially with the feeling of loneliness and lack of acceptance, which favours withdrawal from participation in social life and psychological isolation (Iwanowska, 2011; Moore and Tangney, 2017). The psychological and social consequences affect not only the convicts, but also their families. Individuals often struggle with the social stigma associated with the imprisonment of a family member. Efforts are increasingly being made to support convict's families (Bradshaw and Muldoon, 2020). Social work can

be a source of benefits in promotion of correct behaviours, and support convicts and their families to regain respect and dignity (Mazza, 2008).

The limitation of the study was a relatively small group of respondents, which only allows to identify trends in the studied group. In addition, used questionnaires mainly focused on verifying group identification and identity fusion with fellow cellmates rather than family members. In future other personal resources that may differentiate convicts with/without body modifications should be considered. Body modifications did not affect group identification or identity fusion with inmates. Additionally, it would be worth analysing the actual functions of body modification among convicts and whether body modifications are an expression of personal identity or social identity, but possibly in relation to the family.

Briefly, personal resources, such as interpersonal relationships, should be treated as a potential in the rehabilitation process. Support should be provided also to the members of the convict's family. Age may be a risk factor for overidentification with fellow inmates, which should be confirmed in further research. However, formation of the non-criminal identity through nonstandard methods may allow to reformulate the image of themselves, and thus reduce the effects of perceived selves through the prism of the prisoner stereotype, which result from social stigma.

Conflict of interest

Author declared no potential conflict of interest.

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