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## The process of penitentiary rehabilitation in the experiences of former convicts

**Abstract:** The content presented in the study is an excerpt from a broader research conducted by the author on the effectiveness of social rehabilitation impacts of selected prisons in our country. In this study, we used the results related to the external effectiveness of social rehabilitation, in which a lot of space was devoted to reconstructing the experiences of former convicts made with the use of open in-depth interviews. The aim of the analyses was to obtain answers to the following question: What factors in experiencing penitentiary isolation and achieving success in social rehabilitation do former convicts attribute the greatest importance to?

The area of research exploration outlined in this way consisted of two research fields focused on giving meaning to the conditions of imprisonment and the interpersonal relations of the convicts. The research provided rich empirical material showing the multiplicity and sometimes also different meanings associated with experiencing penitentiary isolation. However, the greatest importance was given by the subjects to good relations with the family and other closest people as well as character traits manifested in high resistance to stress and difficult conditions of penitentiary isolation.

Although the research results obtained are limited in terms of sample selection and do not give rise to wider generalizations, they show – contrary to popular beliefs – that penitentiary rehabilitation is not as bad as it is believed to be, but it is also a process that has positive aspects that must certainly be found and, of course, developed.

**Key words:** penitentiary rehabilitation, penitentiary isolation, experiences, convicts, interpersonal relations.

## Introduction

Contemporary penitentiary reality is very often subject to wide criticism. And no wonder, because it is full of many different shortcomings. The most important ones include: overcrowding of prisons, unemployment of convicts, corruptive excess of free time the imprisoned, lack of adequate educational offers, or difficulties in readaptation of convicts after their release.

These shortcomings certainly limit the possibilities of effective rehabilitation activities and, as a result, do not serve to achieve the intended goals, as noted by many authors dealing with this issue (Machel 2003, p. 53; Ambrozik 2007, p. 191; Sztuka 2009, p. 349; Łuczak 2014, p. 26 and others).

Numerous imperfections of the Polish penitentiary system and discrepancies with European standards made it necessary to rebuild the system. For these reasons, as early as in the 1990s, a number of valuable and substantially justified initiatives were taken to improve the penitentiary system, which were continued in later years, but because the basic problem of the Polish penitentiary system was overcrowding, the greatest focus was therefore on increasing the number of places in prisons<sup>1</sup>.

The changes introduced in the Polish penitentiary system were also related to the first reform of the penitentiary system in 50 years, which started in 2012 and included, among others, the implementation of penitentiary wards, strengthening the internal protection of prisons through the use of electronic devices, as well as many initiatives related to the functioning of the education system and employment of prisoners.

Significant changes are also observed in the Polish penitentiary system with regard to the introduction of new models of social rehabilitation impacts using the assumptions of cognitive psychology, which is particularly evident in the application of creative rehabilitation methods, perceived as a great potential for self-development and positive personality transformation of the convicted (Konopczyński 2007, p. 78).

Despite a number of activities aimed at improving the penitentiary system in Poland, the system still differs from the European Prison Rules published by the Council of Europe in 2006, which clearly emphasize the role and importance of the conditions of imprisonment for the final outcome of social rehabilitation.

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<sup>1</sup> Giving such an importance to reducing the overcrowding in prisons was linked to the fact that – despite some changes already made – the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman Treatment or Punishment, during a periodic visit to Poland (on 5–7 June 2013), again recommended a revision of the housing standards so that there should be at least 4 m<sup>2</sup> in multi-person cells and at least 6 m<sup>2</sup> in single-person cells per detainee in all penitentiary units.

These rules also pay great attention to ensuring that inmates have access to educational programs and employment according to their skills and aspirations<sup>2</sup>.

## Research methodology

Scientific research should undoubtedly play a very important role in improving the current penitentiary system, and their results may provide important premises for the modernization of the system. Especially useful is the research that takes into account the time perspective and, at the same time, shows the life fortunes of former prisoners, i.e. their functioning in social, family and professional life after they leave prison.

Research of this type is extremely important (although at the same time very difficult), as from a time perspective it allows for a much more reasonable assessment of the experienced penitentiary reality (Kraszewska, Silecka 2009, p. 152). Their significance increases even more if we take into account the fact that it is only thanks to this research (i.e. tracing the fortunes of former convicts) that we are able to determine the actual effectiveness of the rehabilitation effects of former convicts, as well as the significance of particular factors in the process of penitentiary isolation.

In order to present the phenomenon of experiences related to penitentiary isolation of convicts from a time perspective, this study uses the results of own research conducted on the subject of Effectiveness of social rehabilitation impacts of selected prisons<sup>3</sup>. These studies are carried out according to the strategy of quantitative and qualitative research and the procedure of repeated studies. In this study, partial results of the second stage of research related to the external effectiveness of the rehabilitation impacts were used, in which much space was devoted to the reconstruction of the experiences of former convicts.

The research was carried out using open in-depth interviews and its main objective was to answer the following question:

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<sup>2</sup> Report of the Polish authorities to the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, p. 23; Prison Reform Trust and HM Prison Service/NOMS, Prisoners, Information Book – male prisoners and young offenders, <http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/o/Documents/pibs/PIBmenyo.pdf>, (access: 15.04.2016); W.Hammerschick, Report on e-learning in European prisons -Concepts, organization, pedagogical approaches in prison education [https://ec.europa.eu/epale/files/report\\_on\\_e-learning\\_in\\_european\\_prisons.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/epale/files/report_on_e-learning_in_european_prisons.pdf), [dostęp: 23.02.2019].

<sup>3</sup> The research has been conducted by researchers from the Department of Social Rehabilitation Pedagogy at the University of Olsztyn since 2012. It includes 2 stages of research. The first one refers to the internal effectiveness of the social rehabilitation effects considered according to the strategy of quantitative research among convicts at the final stage of deprivation of liberty. The second one deals with the external effectiveness of penitentiary measures and includes persons who have served a prison sentence in the past. This stage is carried out using in-depth interviews, i.e. the qualitative research strategy.

What factors in experiencing penitentiary isolation and achieving success in social rehabilitation do former convicts attribute the greatest importance to and why?

In analyzing the experiences of former convicts related to imprisonment, I paid great attention to the feelings of the respondents related to recalling past events and to attempts to reconstruct the situations experienced during penitentiary isolation.

The area of empirical exploration outlined in this way consisted of two research fields focused on: giving meaning to the conditions of imprisonment (including the prison discipline) and interpersonal relations (mainly with family, prison staff and fellow prisoners).

The selection of research subjects was purposeful. It was preceded by a written consent of the convicted person (included in the questionnaire of the first stage of research) to establish personal contact after release, then to find the former convicted person at large (which was extremely difficult due to numerous migrations), establish his/her current social and professional situation and obtain consent to participate in further research.

After conducting free interviews with 12 men (previously serving prison sentences), I made the final selection of five subjects. I qualified these people for the proper research on the basis of the so-called selection of key cases (Flick 2010, p. 60), i.e. those in which in the experiences of the subjects there was a high level of transparency and clarity of the reported content.

The key in the selection of individual cases were such variables as: age, the category of the criminal act committed, the type of prison where the convicted person served their prison sentence, the period of imprisonment and the time of social readaptation after release, staying unpunished after the end of penitentiary isolation, the professional and social situation of the examined person.

Taking into account the above criteria, men qualified for the study were in early and middle adulthood (between 25–40 years of age), were first punished, mainly for so-called “common crimes” (thefts, burglaries, robberies, extortion, etc.) and served a prison term (not longer than 3 years) in a semi-open prison. In addition, the men participating in the relevant research were out of prison for at least 2 years, were not in conflict with the law after they were released, were employed (at least temporarily) and a stable family situation.

Regardless of the distinguished criteria of sample selection, indicating – it should be said at the outset – a relatively low degree of demoralization of the examined persons, as well as the effectiveness of social rehabilitation measures (measured by staying unpunished after leaving the prison, establishing an employment relationship and maintaining correct relations with the family, and in one case even starting one’s own family), the life paths of former convicts were presented in a different way. However, the unquestionable fact was that each of the interlocutors during their adolescent years had a destructive factor, which was undoubtedly significant in their entry into the criminal path. This factor was

most often caused by numerous family dysfunctions, compounded by frequent addictions of the parents and the use of violence or even sexual harassment against the examined. In the case of one of the subjects, a very serious trauma in childhood may have been caused by a father attempting suicide in the presence of his son.

## Penitentiary isolation in the perception of former convicts

The research subjects perceive prison isolation in quite a different way, but all attribute a profound sense to it. On the one hand, they believe that it has a destructive effect on the human psyche, but among former prisoners, there are also individuals who claim that separating a person with the wrong social attitude builds order in the surrounding reality. During the interviews, former inmates stressed the fact that during their stay in prison, they appreciated the importance of having unrestricted freedom of movement, thought or speech while outside. Isolation has given men the awareness that freedom is an autotelic value in itself, and taking it away is the greatest punishment for man.

One of the youngest respondents definitely stated that what is most onerous during prison isolation is the alienation from society, on which the whole idea of prison is based. In his opinion, almost minimal contact with family and society is felt by every person going to prison, while everyone wants to know what is going on outside so that they feel they are part of society, and thus it is easier for them to return to it after they are released.

At first I thought I'd suffocate there, I felt like I was about to go crazy, but in time I got used to it, because what else could I do? [1N]

The former prisoner pointed out that what bothered him greatly in prison was the small space he shared with the three other prisoners. "Lack of space just for yourself is the worst thing that can be, almost like in some reality show, where everyone is watched almost 24 hours a day." [1N]

Although all the respondents indicated this type of inconvenience, only three claimed that penitentiary social rehabilitation does not help to rehabilitate the convicted at the same time. In their opinion, daily viewing of the same, often disliked faces is very overwhelming and difficult to bear with the same people, especially in stuffy little cells. One of the former convicts added: "...if I were to spend even a few more months there, I don't know if I could stand it." [3N]

The evocation of these memories of the convicts' stay in penitentiary isolation, and especially those related to their initial contact with the penitentiary unit, was accompanied by great "emotional agitation" manifested in outbursts of anger, irritation and, above all, the uttering of many insulting words addressed at the

prison and prison service. In one case, the level of tension was so high that the research subject even made it clear that he wanted to end the conversation.

The recording of such reactions of the subjects to the situation of detention and settling in a penitentiary institution is not accidental. This is indicated by research carried out by other authors, who stress the fairly common occurrence of “strong emotions” when residents come into contact with a penitentiary institution and acquire competences to adapt to the conditions of that institution. More importantly, these authors stress that the quality of these emotions does not differ based on age or the number of convictions for committing certain crimes (Chomczyński 2014; Szczepanik 2015).

Regardless of the position presented on the subject of penitentiary isolation, two of the research subjects had a different view, because in their opinion – despite such a difficult situation and numerous difficulties in serving a prison sentence – one could see some positives. Both men were of the opinion that being out we do not appreciate how important it is, how much it is worth, because it is not restrained by anything. In their opinion, it is only behind the prison walls – under the influence of so many cumulative obstacles – that we can see that it becomes invaluable.

In such difficult conditions of imprisonment, both interlocutors saw a chance for successful rehabilitation and reintegration into society. These words may be confirmed by the following statements:

If I hadn't been behind bars, I certainly wouldn't have known how much life outside them meant today. That's how I know I'll do anything to never go back there again. I want to live well with others, not to harm anyone, to live peacefully with my family. [2N]

“I will do my best to prevent recidivism” – said the other interlocutor. The research subject revealed in a conversation that, being isolated from the outside world, he understood one thing: how little the money he had earned was worth compared to enjoying life outside bars. And now, when he was out, he swore to himself that: “Even if I were to live in poverty, I'll never resort to cheating to make money easily.” [2N]

The statements made, although they indicate the effectiveness of penitentiary rehabilitation, cannot be entirely satisfactory, especially as they are mainly dictated by the onerous conditions of imprisonment and the total nature of the functioning of the penitentiary institution. Accepting them and seeing them in terms of success would be in contradiction with modern trends in the humanization of prison sentences, according to which every prisoner should be provided with appropriate conditions of detention.

In the analysis of the research subjects' feelings connected with penitentiary isolation and its influence on the effectiveness of rehabilitation, discipline during

imprisonment took an important place. And although in the course of serving their sentences almost all of the convicts attributed a more pejorative meaning to it, because it was associated with absolute rigor, they now look at it from a completely different point of view.

All respondents agreed that prison discipline has an impact on changing the attitudes of convicts and, as a result, on more effective rehabilitation, although each of them has stressed a different aspect of this discipline.

This change in attitudes – according to the research subjects – is mainly carried out in the area of obedience, which is so often a condition for staying at work, and which was not hitherto known to the respondents. One of the former convicts illustrated this as follows: “...I’ve often been more lazy before, but in prison I learned that if there’s anything I have to do, I just can’t say I just don’t want to, I just have to do it.” [4N]

Another man stated that the change of his attitude is contained in a different awareness of the fact that sometimes it is necessary to accept that others govern us, that when taking a job one should obey the discipline set by the employer.

According to the study subjects, prison discipline also teaches humility. You realize that you are no more important than others, that you are not simply the “navel of the world”. You start to understand what he used to find difficult, that more often than not it is us who have to adapt to others rather than others having to adapt to us. According to the study subjects, prison discipline is reflected even in such mundane matters as punctuality.

Another research subject spoke favorably, albeit quite laconically, about prison discipline during the interview. In his opinion, managing prisoners’ lives while they serve their sentences is helpful in later life outside of prison. This allows prisoners who are changing to function more effectively in society, to know their place and role in society, and to adapt to the situation. The study subject also pointed out that the prison also teaches regularity.

...I used to have no idea I had to do certain things during the day at a certain time, and in prison I learned that. Now even my family has noticed that I am more orderly, responsible. [3N]

According to the respondent, this very feature helped him to build his image with his first employer after leaving prison. No wonder, because punctuality is a characteristic that has always been desired by potential employers.

The observed change in the respondents’ attitudes towards penitentiary rehabilitation can be to some extent compared to the so-called “turning points” distinguished by R. Szczepanik in the analysis of the careers of institutional recidivists. Although the author’s research concerns a different population of convicts, it does suggest a certain similarity in relation to the type of events. This similarity is the interest in a former convict of a person significant for them and providing them with great support (Szczepanik 2015, p. 257).

A very significant factor in the survival of penitentiary isolation was also the personality of the convicts. Its importance was recognized by each of the former prisoners, claiming that in order to survive in difficult prison conditions one must have a strong personality. Only thanks to it, in the opinion of former prisoners, were they able to accept the prison reality. One of the respondents during the interview illustrated it as follows:

One must have a strong psyche to survive this state of isolation, social rejection, and to be able to return to functioning in a normal world without feeling like an outcast of society. [5N]

Another man during the interview stated that there is no room for the mentally weak in prison, because they will not rehabilitate themselves but rather become demoralized. "I gave in at first and quickly realized that if I wanted to improve, I couldn't give in to my fellow inmates." [3N]

The above mentioned research subject confessed that in prison he learned to fight for himself and to be an independent individual. This, in turn, helped him to set himself a specific goal, which was conditional release, and to persistently pursue it, although it was not easy at all.

The importance of a strong character in the prison reality is highlighted by yet another research subject, who at the same time says that he himself does not have such a character and is surprised how with such a fragile personality he survived his stay in prison. When describing himself, the man says that he is quiet and calm, unable to oppose or manifest his dissatisfaction with a given situation. For this reason, at the beginning of his stay in prison he experienced numerous harassment and brutal teasing by his fellow prisoners.

The situation changed when one of the "strong character" inmates started to stand up for him. "Thanks to him, I wasn't so afraid and didn't feel alone anymore" – the man confessed shyly. [5N]

The man calls this fact luck, so he thinks that his time in prison was not insignificant: "...for me it was long, but in comparison with other prisoners short enough that negative behavior would not cling to me permanently." [5N]

## **Giving meaning to interpersonal interactions during penitentiary isolation**

Giving meaning to interpersonal interactions was the second meaningful keyword in reconstructing the experiences of former convicts related to penitentiary isolation. Among these meanings, interaction with the family as well as with other people from the immediate environment, so often cited in reports by other authors on the subject (Kozaczuk 2008, p. 270; Kozaczuk 2009, p. 318; Kowalczyk et al. 2015), took a special place.



During the interviews, contact with the family was one of the most frequently mentioned elements of effective rehabilitation. The former convicts emphasized the almost salutary influence of the most frequent contacts with their loved ones. One of the research subjects confessed during the conversation:

The feeling of unconditional family support was invaluable while in prison. Contact with loved ones made me aware that I am not alone in such difficult moments, and that there is someone who always waits and will help me to find myself again in the social environment. [4N]

Another research subject revealed that he would not have survived prison isolation without the possibility of contact with his mother: "...I would not have made it without contact with her. Thanks to them I knew that someone behind that prison wall was still waiting for me and I had a place to go back. Being in prison, cut off from the normal world, one had the impression that the world was no longer for him, as if no one wanted me back. And that was the only thing you dreamed about." [1N]

It is with great regret that the research subject recalls the day when he had an arranged visitation from his mother, which did not happen. The woman was unable to come, due to her poor health. The subject understood this, but felt terribly about it. "...In prison, it's like time goes from one visitation to another. It's a terrible wait for that coveted day when someone from outside the prison walls visits you. It's a way to fill yourself with the joy and hope that prison lacks" – said the former inmate in a hushed voice. [1N]

In the statements of the research subjects, one could clearly see their emotions (visible even externally as their faces blushed, their voices breaking down or becoming more silent), but also their appreciation of how important these meetings were for them and for the whole process of rehabilitation.

Still another research subject, emphasizing the role and importance of contacts with loved ones during the prison isolation, pointed out how much he owed his wife, who was still his girlfriend at the time, who gave him faith that he would be released quickly.

"If she hadn't waited for me, I guess I wouldn't have taken anything out of my stay in prison and would have gone back there soon." – the research subject confessed firmly. "Thanks to my girlfriend and her visitations, I knew that being in prison must teach me something so that I would never have to part with her again. She's partly the one who rehabilitated me..." – the research subject confessed during the interview. [4]

The men surveyed put a great deal of importance to their contacts with the prison staff, although these were rarely correct. Nevertheless, the interviewees strongly emphasized the role of the prison staff, and in particular the educators in social rehabilitation measures in general. In their opinion, it is mainly up to

the educators to determine how much the convicts will still feel as fully-fledged members of society. Prisoners who have the inalienable stigma of a criminal in the eyes of the prison staff feel worse, disrespected, even mistreated.

In their statements, the research subjects mentioned many of the features that a good prison educator should have in their opinion. Among them were those that were associated with high professional and social skills and, above all, a very high level of interest in the situation of prisoners and a friendly attitude towards them, as one of the research subjects stated: "...the educator must be a friend of sorts, not a clerk." [2N]

The empirical evidence obtained suggests that the research subjects did not find too much friendship prison staff, which is best illustrated by the following statements:

The staff only sees the convicts as criminals and treats them as such. I felt it myself, as I was not treated with the respect due to every man. [2N]

It was a person completely incompetent and uninterested in the affairs of prisoners. I don't know what an educator like that was doing there... [1N]

I have very often felt a lack of understanding and been looked down upon, which has plunged me into a sense of social rejection, and yet in order to be able to return to life in society it is necessary to continue to feel part of it, which is not possible if the staff do not let the convicts forget who they are, or rather that they are nothing. [3N]

Only one of the research subjects mentioned the prison educator in a different way, saying: "He always listened, had time for us, we felt he wanted to help us. I liked him. We trusted him, he triggered positive feelings in convicts who felt a lack of understanding and support in unfavorable prison conditions." [3N]

During the interviews, one of the research subjects drew attention to another very important aspect of the convicts' improper relations with prison staff, which seems to be particularly important in the situation of disturbed family ties. The man said without hesitation:

Maybe I didn't need these contacts so much, because I had a family and I haven't been there that long, but I know people who had more time to do, and nobody was practically visiting them. They needed to complain, talk to somebody, and instead of the educators, they confessed to their fellow prisoners, because they did not trust the educators that much. [4N]

This, in turn, did not always have a good effect, "... because the inmates, even if they understood it, could use it against them in another situation. Sometimes they made fun of such a guy, and they made him feel even worse." [4N]

Although it is difficult to establish friendships and sincere relations with fellow prisoners in the penitentiary reality, all the research subjects stressed their importance. This was mainly due to the fact that the subjects spent most of their time in a cell and therefore they thought that the relationship between them should at least be correct.

It was difficult not to admit that such a stance of the research subjects was right, but it turned out that there was an exception to this rule, when one of the respondents quoted an example of a convict with whom he made friends during penitentiary isolation and supported each other in this common misery. The man warmly remembered his fellow prisoner, with whom he had a close relationship.

We just got along, despite the big age difference between us. He told me about his life, and I told him about mine. Thanks to him, time went by nicely and I did not feel so lonely. And although I think making friends in prison is a real rarity, I was lucky. [5N]

This luck, as the research subject calls it, helped to a large extent not only to survive penitentiary isolation, but also to “turn the corner”, because the man quickly underwent social readaptation and soon after he left prison he took up a job and started a family.

## Summary reflections

Every research procedure leads the researcher to a certain ordering of the collected empirical material, to certain reflections. I consider the most significant one to be the one which, in reconstructing the experiences of former convicts connected with penitentiary isolation, made it possible to provide rich empirical material showing the multiplicity and often different meanings of the analyzed contents.

The study also showed that the relationship with the prison staff and with fellow inmates was significant in individual cases, although the family ties and character traits of inmates were the most important factors in the success of social rehabilitation.

Another very important and at the same time surprising reflection from the research carried out was that the men surveyed assigned a large role to the prison discipline when reconstructing the penitentiary experience. This turned out to be all the more surprising as they attributed a decidedly pejorative significance to it during the imprisonment.

The analysis leads to another, unfortunately pessimistic reflection indicating that only individuals with a strong personality who do not break down even when faced with the most difficult adversities of fate have a chance to survive

and succeed in penitentiary rehabilitation, while others are doomed to failure in advance. And although this reflection may not be meaningless, it cannot be used to justify the lack of success in penitentiary work. It should certainly be a challenge to more rational rehabilitation efforts, helping all convicts, regardless of their personality type.

I am aware that the research results shown are of a fragmentary nature and do not entitle to wider generalizations, that at the same time they concern people with a relatively low degree of demoralization, which probably has an impact on the life fate of those sentenced after their release. However, they show a difference in reconstructing the meanings given by former convicts within the same problem, so I think that they can provide some prerequisites not only to explore the knowledge of the penitentiary reality of convicts, but also for more extensive research in this area, which is still too little.

In conclusion, it is worth adding that the analyses presented – despite the limitations mentioned above – also make it clear that, contrary to popular opinions, penitentiary rehabilitation should not be associated only with evil itself, it can also be a process that has positive aspects, which should certainly be found and, of course, developed.

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