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Social Stigmatisation as a Theoretical-empirical Perspective Based on a Case Study of an Ex-convict

Abstract: In the article, attempts were made to describe social stigmatisation as a theoretical and an analytical category based on a case analysis of a former female convict. Stigmatisation emerged as the main analytical category in the presented research, and it was used in the study to present examples and symptoms of biographical learning based on the experiences of an adult woman, affected by the post-incarceration syndrome, and her efforts to cope with shame, humiliation, and stigma. The presented narrative focuses on external and internal risks after incarceration, as well as the subject's efforts to cope with difficulties after being released from prison. Attempts were made to analyse the subject's situation in her struggle for social inclusion, but not her conduct, and the research framework was based on the constructivist and interpretivist paradigm. The main aim of the study was to reconstruct and describe self-management and identity negotiation processes by a former female prisoner convicted of infanticide. The study involved an interpretative phenomenological analysis to gain a better understanding of the subject's experiences and self-perception. The results indicate that the adopted research perspective is weakly represented in scientific discourse. The analysis of the empirical material showed that the respondent's ability to deconstruct and overcome separation, currently blocks the opportunity for socialisation due to the failure to work through the crisis of social stigma and experience.

Key words: social stigmatisation, stigma, social exclusion, biographical learning, risk, homicide.

Introduction

The present study was undertaken to examine self-construction processes in a former female convict in the context of negative and positive associations with the “murderer” label. The stigma carried by criminal offenders was discussed in E. Goffman’s theory of social stigma (2005) which posits that stigma is an attribute that is socially discrediting and causes an individual to be classified as socially undesirable. Stigma is a negative attribute which is triggered at the moment it is recognized by the audience. According to E. Czykwin (2007, p. 10), stigmatized individuals have a “damaged identity,” and they interact with other people by manipulating or hiding the stigma to avoid or minimize the consequences of social loathing. The problem is complex, addressed by diverse theories, and it generates ambivalent reactions. In the present study, the stigmatisation of a former convict was analysed in the context of personal agency, objectification in personal relations, and categorisation, namely the “switching” of personal identity to social identity. Judgements based on knowledge in a given category and the associated stereotypes can lead to the “loss” of personal identity. The above has significant implications for the individual because it generates social narratives and disturbing thoughts about potential risks that can be triggered by imagined and symbolic representations. In this context, the risk that marginalisation will dominate the discourse in its symbolic dimension implies that the individual has been deprived of a sense of agency through wilful intent or manipulation. In turn, social roles during interactions are ranked based on imagined models of these roles and personal beliefs. Unclear interpretations create opportunities for negotiations (Mc Call, Simmons 1978). E. Goffman (2005) argued that negotiations are a powerful element of social interactions which, in addition to social roles, apply to other predictors, such as stigma, which are defined socially and are associated with various axiological interpretations of interactive identity. According to the cited author, the social construction of interactive identity involves two stages: identification of differences based on the attributes and symbols of “otherness,” and devaluation of “otherness.” Therefore, stigma is a tool for establishing and maintaining social hierarchy. The significance of stigma is established in a cultural context. A stigmatized individual is reduced to the specific attributes of the stigma and is excluded socially regardless of his/her other personality traits. Interpretative schemata enable the society to judge the individual based on the specific attributes of the attached stigma, and social interactions are not disturbed because the stigma has been internalized by the individual as an integral part of his or her identity (Krzemiński 2002, p. 158). Social interactions are based on the partners’ mutual expectations and the adopted identities. These interactions proceed smoothly if the expected identity is consistent with the partners’ true identity. Any inconsistencies

between expected and true identity disrupt the individual's social identity and create opportunities for stigmatisation. The individual is discredited and socially excluded (Lejzerowicz 2006, p. 165). An encounter with a stigmatised individual leads to the emergence of self-awareness and other-awareness, which elicits embarrassment during the interaction (Goffman 2005, p. 51). Stigmatisation is yet another discrediting symbol in the social context (Mazur, Kuć 2019, pp. 20–29). Social perceptions of stigmatised individuals are based on negative attributes that are discrediting, constitute the only reference point, and render the individual unworthy of constructive support. According to A. Radziewicz-Winnicki and I. Radziewicz-Winnicki, social marginalisation can be equated with rejection, and it prevents individuals or social groups from participating in social institutions and social life (2005, pp. 11–13). M. Konopczyński (2017, p. 7) argued that society forces stigmatised individuals to adhere to deviant roles. The resulting perceptive and emotional interpersonal distance leads stigmatised individuals (present and former prisoners in institutional correctional facilities) to believe that they are being socially ostracized and excluded from personal relations. The attributes that discredit the stigmatised individual in the eyes of public opinion rule out social acceptance (Heatherton et al. 2007, p. 49). Former convicts realise that social inclusion is illusive (Pospiszyl 2022) and that their true identity must remain hidden. At the same time, they develop their own theories of stigma, which contributes to a sense of inferiority (Żeromska-Charlińska 2010, p. 149). The narrative of the former female prisoner convicted of infanticide is a long and dramatic story of social marginalisation, isolation, and self-exclusion.

Methodology

The conceptual framework of attributes promoting social re-adaptation and reintegration was described based on the main tenets of stigmatisation theory and a reconstruction of the biographical learning process of a former female convict. Stigmatisation lies at the heart of the subject's narrative. The subject's experiences were described, examined, and interpreted in a hermeneutic and phenomenological approach. By applying the hermeneutic approach, the researcher can determine which external sensory experiences have been internalised by the subject. In turn, the phenomenological approach enables the researcher to discover the meaning of these experiences (Ablewicz 1998, pp. 30–40) and to analyse them from a biographical perspective. The present study focused on the biographical perspective, in particular the complex and dynamic constellation of events and situations, the subject's internal perspective, personal experiences, knowledge, and information (Lalak 2012, p. 109). Biographical learning is a life-long process that involves learning through crisis situations and major life changes. Self-construction and self-projection are constructs with a specific social and historical context

(Alheit 2015, p. 24). Personal identity arises from personal experience, and it is a cohesive construct that is presented and communicated to the outside world (cf. Alheit 1995; as cited in Tedder and Biesta 2009, p. 21). In former convicts, the experience of stigma and stigma management and identity-building strategies should be examined by reconstructing the risk of stigmatisation. This approach can deliver therapeutic insights and generate new pedagogical knowledge about experiences of stigma. Narration can be a helpful tool in reconstructing painful experiences. The purpose of narration is not to gather evidence or describe the subject's experiences, but to understand the complex interplay of events, subjective emotions, and personal symbols, to explore the underlying context and present it in a unique biography (Krawczyk-Bocian 2019, p. 54). According to P. Alheit, contemporary humans have to determine who they are and how they became who they are to manifest their identity and social status in an unquestioned manner (Alheit 2015, p. 26). Personal narrative skills can be helpful in providing a logical and rational explanation of degradation. A personal interpretation of subjective experiences enables individuals to understand transformative processes and determine the extent to which the force and direction of identity-building affects lifelong learning. According to P. Alheit, personal interpretation is a skill or a competence that makes a reference to the existing biographical structures and supports the incorporation of new experiences and reflections (Alheit 2015). Changes in biographical structures require self-reflection which, in turn, enables the individual to assign new meanings and generate new knowledge in the process of biographical learning. Biographical narratives and self-reflection also enable individuals to flexibly reconstruct their lives in a new context, and they foster the belief that these contexts can be freely created and modified (cf. Alheit 1994; Bron 2006). These changes apply to both individual and group experiences. The theory of biographical learning is consistent with the demands of late modernity, and it describes learning processes in adults. P. Alheit identified three dimensions of biographical learning: involuntary learning, the social aspect of biographical learning, and the individual character of biographical learning (Alheit 2011).

According to E. Dubas (2007, pp. 61–62), people learn by remembering their biographies, and they build their identities and biographies through learning. P. Dominice (2006, p. 92) observed that adults build their lives from the materials provided through education. Adulthood can be defined as a period during which these materials are processed into individual constructs. The educational biography method enables adults to interpret the events during the never-ending struggle for identity. The difficult process of self-construction involves participation in personal life projects, learning, and reprocessing the values and models acquired in the family, school, and social life. In the present study, the stigma experienced by a former female convict was analysed in the biographical perspective based on the subject's (auto)biographical narrative. A personal narrative is a retrospective process of creating meaning, defining and organizing past experiences (Chase 2009, p. 24),

and determining the axiological dimension of these experiences in the current context (Krawczyk-Bocian 2019, p. 143; Lalak 2012, pp. 86, 87; Teusz 2018, p. 322). Predictors of change in the assigned meanings and symbols were also identified. The subject found it very difficult to cope with the emotions unleashed by her narrative because they pushed her deeper into the abyss of a cruel reality.

The aim of the study was to reconstruct and describe self-management processes in a former female convict who was released from prison after serving a long sentence. An in-depth interview was conducted to obtain the fullest possible account of biographic events and to register the accumulation of life experiences. These events and the underlying mechanisms were identified and described chronologically in a sequential analysis. The purpose of the analysis was to identify and interpret the key (not all) attributes of the gathered data to answer the following research questions: What are the subject's reflections on life after prison and her post-incarceration experiences in the context of biographical learning? Does the "murderer" stigma prevent identity negotiation, stigma management, and overcoming social exclusion? How is the stigma trajectory deconstructed by the subject? Empirical material for the study was obtained by transcribing the autobiographical interview. The subject was selected for the case study due to her ability to clearly define the sense of self after serving her prison sentence. The purpose of the in-depth interview was to describe the stigmatising reality of the subject's life after prison and to conceptualise that reality in the context of social interactions. Based on the recommendations made by the referenced authors of the qualitative methodology, the researcher adopted a critical approach to her knowledge and experiences.

Case Study

The Reality of Life After Prison. The Biographical Learning Perspective of a Former Female Prisoner Convicted of Infanticide

The analysed subject was able to identify a series of events and situations in which her decision-making autonomy was limited by society, structures, procedures, and other inhabiting factors that became particularly apparent in the new reality of life after prison. The subject's stigma, a deeply discrediting attribute (Goffman 2005, p. 33), creates broad prospects for interpreting personal development and risk-taking in the context of objectification and personal agency because the former convict was willing to take risk and change her life by releasing the transformative potential hidden in the experienced lack of meaning and inspiration in axiological and existential space. The "murderer" stigma exposes the woman to complex social systems, problems, and difficulties; she is trying to adapt to a new reality, which harnesses her latent cognitive resources, thus promoting development.

However, at the same time, these efforts and processes elicit defensive and rigid behaviours. Difficult experiences and critical situations play an important role in the development of her cognitive competence. The subject hides her stigma and cuts herself off from the external world. She feels the need to reveal the truth, but she has limited trust in people, and she is afraid of the consequences. “[...] who can I talk to, and what would I say? [...], there is nowhere to run, I have nothing. My mother is barely alive, others are in prison or are gone, I don’t know where. There isn’t a moment of peace, I try to make ends meet, I take every odd job there is. Life in prison was better, at least there were basic hygiene products. This is not the way it was supposed to be, I don’t know how to fight, live, or survive [...].” The experienced tension contributes to a sense of resignation and helplessness. The subject is overwhelmed by the difficulties of life after prison, her inability to adapt, and she feels invisible and “hidden”. “I would like to believe in myself, but you and other people have no absolutely no idea what my life is like; I don’t mean anything to anyone, nobody cares, I don’t exist. It would be better if I didn’t exist, nobody can hear me because I am afraid to live.” The subject recognises the value of social life; she realises that society motivates individuals to act and learn how to tread the difficult path of daily life without breaking social norms. The narrator admits that her punishment was severe enough to compensate for any transgression in the social context. Life in prison, life before prison, and traumatic experiences are sources of intrusive memories (Nowak 2020, p. 72) that are recalled automatically, without conscious volition, and elicit disorganising emotional discomfort. “[...] I am so tired of having to put up with all this [...], I am on the verge of thinking [...]. This chaos haunts me. I have killed, and then it only got worse, time stood still, and I didn’t do the most important thing, I didn’t help myself [...]. There is no me. I leave the house, and there is no one to protect me from the fear, from seeing other people because I am so afraid that they will hurt me and point the finger at me.” The subject’s biographical learning process, the long prison sentence, and her attempts to overcome the crisis, giving meaning to this crisis in the new, free space, to build a new life outside of prison, and to develop an identity-building mechanism potentially create opportunities for change. “I try to put the pieces back together day by day, I have no strength to live this life, to pretend that I am something or someone else, but I try to pick myself back up [...]. On some days, I have enough energy to create a semblance of quality, I go to church, I sit quietly in the corner, I go to confession early in the morning hoping that at least the priest will hear me out [...]. I visit the job centre, I get the odd job, I clean stairwells in a district where nobody knows me.” Despite these efforts, the subject feels that her life has been suspended, and she is unable to make life-changing decisions due to an emotional, social, and intellectual crisis. After serving a long prison sentence, the subject went through a period of denial, rebellion, and utter depression, but she was motivated to put her life back on track. She attended vocational courses

and worked in prison. According to the subject, the professional skills learned in prison “[...] are not stigmatising, because the certificate doesn’t say that I gained these qualifications when doing time [...].” The experienced crises build new meanings, determine the subject’s fate, and her previous life choices prove to be useless. Critical events require significant changes in adaptive mechanisms. The enforced changes in the subject’s existence, her efforts to get an education and develop new skills to overcome the crisis and recognise her hidden potential motivate the woman to analyse her actions in a practical setting, develop new coping strategies, and set new existential goals.

The subject’s narrative implies that her main goal is to achieve a sense of balance. However, this balance can be easily upset by the woman’s dire circumstances. Destructive family members, poor living conditions, emotional problems caused by the internal “murderer” stigma, alcohol abuse, and lack of regular employment can push the subject back onto a path of destructive behaviour. In the light of F. Schütze’s typology of narrative structures, this trajectory of destructive tendencies is intertwined with periods during which the narrator attempts to formulate plans for the future and adapt to social and institutional norms (Schütze 2012, pp. 490–).

These biographical action plans enable the subject to achieve long-term stability and break the mechanisms underlying the spread of social stigma which lead to complex problems. However, the accumulation of risk factors can trigger a new life trajectory that will permanently marginalise the narrator. “[...] All my life failures were only a foretaste of the bitter price I am paying to this day. I want to repay my dues, but to whom? My life is a hall of mirrors, I can’t see the way out, all I can see is the stigma. Maybe if I broke all the mirrors, I could escape to a different world [...].”

The “Murderer” Label as an Obstacle to Negotiating Identity, Managing Stigma, Deconstructing the Stigma Trajectory, and Overcoming Social Exclusion

The condition of contemporary man, in particular persons with a criminal history, indicates that the process of building human identity rests on unstable foundations and is fraught with considerable difficulty. In theory, critical events that have been experienced by the subject and have led to stigmatisation could motivate her to search for new solutions to achieve a sense of stability. In the context of social inclusion and exclusion, the unexpected events and experiences in the narrator’s life are a source of psychosocial stress. “Everyone is pointing a finger to let me know that they haven’t forgotten. Look, it’s her, the woman who killed her own child lives in these windows.” The subject’s attempts to manage the stigma, overcome the stigmatisation crisis, cope with difficulties in adapting to a new life, and rebuild connections with others and the world constitute priorities in the

identity-building process and could create new opportunities for effectively facing the challenges of life after incarceration.

The subject searches for answers to mounting questions about the status and quality of her relationships with others, and other people's reactions. Discriminating attitudes force the woman to avoid social interactions. "[...] I should have organised my life differently after prison. My mom and I should have moved to a place where nobody knew us, and we should have lied to make things like they were before." Stigma management is complex strategy of concealment, omission, and control to avoid the risk of negative connotations. To avoid disclosure, the subject has to calculate her risks, and she is subjugated to a system of strict social norms. Readjustment is a very difficult process for people labelled as murderers, and the subject is unable to develop new mechanisms that would enable her to build a new personal and social identity so as to support and facilitate her emotional struggle with social trauma. Instead, she relies on a set of rigid patterns, and she perceives the identity-building process as a set of tasks. The challenges of life after prison destroy the subject's expectations and deprive her of a sense of personal agency. Her expectations collapse in the face of numerous and complex factors, and she is unable to build a sense of personal value and agency in her personal struggle. Effective personal and social strategies of coping with a crisis increase the likelihood that the implemented changes will promote personal growth and deliver health benefits (Sęk 1997, p. 93). In this context, daily life experiences have educational value, and they enable the subject to overcome stress, social stigma, social and cultural restrictions, and achieve autonomy. The subject chooses controlling, hiding, and omission strategies to micromanage the expectations of "normal" people. The effort invested in processing hidden trauma takes a huge emotional toll. The subject adopts different or even contradictory identities in fear of being discovered as the bearer of a discrediting stigma. The inconsistency between the adopted identity and social norms leads to social exclusion and forces the subject to live on the margins of society (Oliwa-Ciesielska 2004; Kostrzyńska 2022). The narrator's efforts to adapt to a new reality are clearly accentuated in her biography. The subject's identity is burdened by the trajectory of trauma, and she makes active attempts to manage the stigmatising mark of disgrace. Painful experiences and a desire to control the potentially damaging trajectory of life after prison force the narrator to take risks in the hope of achieving the privileged status of "normal" people. The subject makes instinctive attempts to cope with the challenges of life after prison and to protect her identity, which is a symptom of silent learning, a learning process that is unintentional and unconscious. The narrator tries to adopt the role of a good daughter despite the fact that her mother does very little to alleviate the trauma associated with the murder of her six-year-old child. When interacting with her mother, the subject is repeatedly confronted with the trauma and has to redefine that event during each encounter. An analysis of the woman's current

circumstances suggests that the process of deconstructing mechanisms that confine her to a life in a “blind alley” prevent the subject from developing new skills and becoming an active member of the external world. Most of her energy is spent on mitigating the risk of being discovered and labelled as a deviant. The subject distances herself from revealing the truth. Living a double life, and the belief that she will never be fully reintegrated in society, and that the return to her old self will not be spectacular or rational, are energy-draining processes. The subject adopts a manipulative strategy to avoid potentially radical social reactions, and this conservative approach prevents her from changing her life situation. By remaining invisible, the narrator is trapped in the role of a deviant ex-convict who permanently experiences the burden of the carried stigma. She is aware that the projected identity is illusive. The former convict lives in an uncaring society, and she is unable to achieve self-empowerment, in particular in the context of social structures, obstacles, and interactions that reinforce social divisions, expose the former prisoner’s complex microworld, and decrease her chances of assuming control over her life. In her narrative, the subject makes attempts to evaluate her life situation and change her circumstances by avoiding the destructive trajectory of her past life. To achieve these goals, she isolates herself from the external world, which results in apathy and depression. The narrator has inherited the fate of the previous generation, and she experiences her situation as a trajectory of suffering, which accentuates her social role and identity. R. Lister (2007) conceptualised poverty in relational and symbolic terms, including disrespect, humiliation, stigma, helplessness, and denial of rights. The subject’s biographical trajectory becomes reified as she takes risks to build a different identity and a better future. She perceives herself as a victim whose actions cannot be fully rationalised or operationalised. The narrator is ensnared in a trap of meaningful silence, conscience – if only she were willing to listen to herself (Heiddeger 1994, pp. 380–382). The adopted social roles are uncertain and vague, which prevents the subject from breaking the impasse and forces her to adopt manipulative strategies, to pretend, and lie. The woman’s notions about “normal” people compel her to avoid social interactions. “I can’t leave the game because I have nothing [...]. I have to wheel and deal to get by. I thought I had it hard in the can, but the real fight begins here [...].” The emphasised fragments of the narrative point to a thin line between feeling adapted and isolated, and they indicate that the subject has not processed the complex conditions, experienced difficulties, feelings of humiliation, frustration, and worthlessness. The narrator is compelled to adopt avoidant behaviours, she experiences a drift of identity, alienation, and anomie.

The subject switches between schemas that were developed during her life in prison and after incarceration. She conceals the true nature of her crime by transferring and controlling her emotions in social isolation, and she remains “faithful” to the internalised concept of self-objectification. “People think that

if she did it once, she'll do it again. I know that the girls respected me [...]. I'll be stuck in this mess for the rest of my life, nobody can help me because I don't want to come clean [...].” Critical events disorganise one's life. The subject identifies her existence with behaviours that are not consistent with social norms, which bends the trajectory of her fate. The narrator had not been aware that her perceptions of life and normative behaviours were warped for as long as her daily life activities were confined to the socialising space of the prison environment. This deficit prevents reflective learning, and it poses a barrier to happiness. The subject did not cope with the diffusion of personal and social roles; she did not resolve the identity crisis and, in consequence, she did not build stable foundations for developing a mature identity. During her life in prison, the subject was forced to adopt a role she did not identify with, and she ceased to believe in her ability to make the right decisions. This identity drift and its consequences prevented her from forming lasting bonds with other people. These destructive experiences cast serious doubt on the subject's ability to reconstruct the learned roles.

Synthesis of the Results and Future Research Prospects

The conclusions stemming from the analysis of the results confirm the theoretical underpinnings of the multidimensional framework of stigmatising attitudes towards people with a criminal history. The analysed subject experiences social stigma and is trapped in a cycle of harsh self-judgement, which indicates that adaptation to life after a long prison sentence is a difficult process. The narrator has developed illusive strategies for coping with the critical event in her biography. In this dimension, post-incarceration life forces her not only to radically change her habits, but also to learn. In the analysed case, not only the turning points in the woman's life (victimisation trauma, homicide, social stigma), but also her ability to work out coping strategies will constitute her growth potential. The subject's experiences do not determine a narcissistic approach to self-identification, self-realisation, and search for personal freedom. The narrator is clearly aware of the obstacles (Duda 2003, p. 121) that prevent her from reorganising her psyche and coming to terms with reality. She deists at a moment that requires the greatest effort to conquer the space beyond these obstacles and build a new identity (Mindel, Mindel 2005, p. 58). She feels that her punishment has been extended to life after prison. Shame, fear of humiliation, and social stigmatisation deprive her of the resources needed to publicly deconstruct a deviant identity. After serving her sentence, the prisoner returned to her old environment; maybe the irrational environmental impact that manifests itself in the fear of deviant behaviour, and a desire for her sense of shame and suffering, inhibit her self-realisation. Feelings of unworthiness prevent the narrator from protesting against or forming critical opinions about stigmatisation, which contributes to a catatonic attitude towards

social participation. The former convict wages a war with herself. She takes risks to manage her stigma and adapt to the stigma that has become an integral part of her biography, which creates an illusion of social inclusion and deprives her of a sense of personal agency in the process of reorganising her life. Paradoxically, the growing sense of inertia, objectification, and marginalisation which prevent her from actively participating in a dynamically changing society catalyse self-inflicted marginalisation and undermine her efforts to build a new identity and a sense of freedom. The trajectory of chaotic alienation additionally detracts from the organisation of the narrator's biographical experiences. The subject is unable to identify with a social model that is rooted in the imperative for change, individuality, flexibility, and a sense of agency, although she mentally aspires to become a member of that society. Her inability to gain a sense of personal agency causes suffering and a sense of being deprived of social status, being unable to assume new roles and build a new identity. Paradoxically, the trajectory of the subject's biographical experiences is an integral part of an objectifying social model, and to minimise her suffering, the woman is willing to seek professional assistance to regain the ability to build her own life projects despite the fact that social obstacles and her individual trajectory significantly hamper these biographical efforts. Undoubtedly, the difficult path to change begins from identity transformation, namely assuming a different role in the logic of social functioning, which is usually triggered by an external stimulus. The results of the analysis do not justify generalisations, and they merely constitute an inspiration for further research.

The ability to construct a life narrative, interpret and reflect on life events enables humans to analyse new patterns in a rapidly changing world at every stage of building self-awareness and awareness of others (Lalak 2012, p. 5). A better understanding of the inner and outer world can help socially marginalised individuals to regain a sense of personal agency. The learning process enables these individuals to experience internal or external conflict at the micro, meso, or macro level (Illeris 2006). On the one hand, such conflict can lead to cognitive dissonance which forces the individual to reflect on his or her circumstances, but on the other hand, conflict creates opportunities for identifying multiple perspectives, establishing dialogue, finding common ground, and building shared experiences (Boryczko 2014). These observations indicate that community members and former convicts have to participate in the transformation process on equal terms to foster a rehabilitative environment.

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