

Constructing the prisoner-subject through therapeutic practices? A case study of the ‘New Way’ programme for sexual offenders

Liila Holmberg, Tampere University, Finland

liila.holmberg@tuni.fi

Finnish imprisonment is currently undergoing a reformation by which prisons are conceptualized as ‘learning environments for crime-free life’. Instead of emphasizing control and dominance, future Finnish prisons are to active and responsabilize the prisoners by means of ‘soft power’ and different rehabilitative activities. Although possibilities for formal education in prisons are considered important, the interpretation of learning in this context seems to underline individual self-work of the prisoners. The prisoners are expected to work on their selves in order to rework their attitudes and modes of action. In this paper, I examine the rehabilitative programme work of prisons from the viewpoint of therapeutic ethos and subjectivation. The study is intended to be published in a Finnish research anthology on therapeutic power. The article will be a part of Holmberg’s doctoral dissertation about the Finnish prison reformation and prison as an educational institution.

By therapeutic ethos, I refer to the expansion of ‘psy’-discourses and therapeutic practices within different spheres of society and human life. Through these discourses, an increasing number of societal issues – such as unemployment or crime – are articulated in terms of psy-knowledge. We are encouraged to seek for psychological knowledge and to engage in therapeutic exercises, such as mindfulness and meditation, in order to manage the challenges of work life, relationships and so on. (See Madsen 2018; Nehring et al. 2016; Saari 2018.) Above all, therapeutic practices take form in reflective work on the self. Following Foucault (1990), this working on ourselves can be understood in terms of ‘techniques of the self’: practices of observing, describing and altering our own mode of being in order to attain a certain ethical subjectivity.

The rehabilitative programmes are different types of structured courses for e.g. sexual or violent offenders or offenders with substance abuse issues, aimed to reduce the risk of recidivism. The programmes originate in the ‘What Works’ ideology of the 1980s and are based on cognitive-behavioral theory. Central to this approach is emphasis on evidence-based effectiveness of the programmes and risk assessment in the targeting of these interventions. (Bruhn, Lindberg & Nylander 2017.) Recently, the CBT approach has been supplemented with the humanistic/positive psychology framework of the so-called Good Lives Model (GLM). While the fundamental idea of reducing risk

still holds, the cognitive and mental work is intended to be more motivational with a 'positive' outlook and emphasis on strengths instead of weaknesses (see Ward & Marshall 2004).

In this paper, I elaborate on the preliminary findings of the ways of constructing ethical subjectivity through therapeutic practices. Using one programme handbook ('Uusi Suunta' or the 'New Way' for sexual offenders with low risk of recidivism) as a case, I examine the therapeutic practices within rehabilitative programme work. Drawing from Foucault's techniques of the self, I analyze the therapeutic self-work of the prisoners and ask, how they are expected to construct themselves as ethical subjects within the programme framework.

Through the implementation of the Good Lives Model there has been an emergence of a discourse that is grounded in positive psychology. The vocabulary of the New Way programme is centered on motivation, strengths, positive goals and empowerment. Preliminary findings suggest a strict withdrawal from judging or moralizing the criminal actions within the GLM framework. Instead, there is an emphasis on the universality of human needs and the sameness between the prisoner and the counsellor. Criminal actions are perceived as incorrect ways of pursuing universal goods that could be pursued in pro-social means as well.

Subjectivation within this context is executed through different practices. Preliminary findings suggest preferred vocabulary and tone of interaction – using the word "act" instead of "crime", for example. Material objects also take part in the programme work: different forms and charts are used in a specifically instructed way to steer the thought-processes of the prisoners. Furthermore, the self-work is structured as a process. The prisoners are guided to form progressive objectives for their own modes of action, and through them, observe their own progression.

Preliminary findings suggest that psy-knowledge does not merely describe or diagnose the subject but is internalized in the prisoner's reflective work on the self. The ethical self-work of prisoners is shaped through 'psy' discourses. Thus, not "any kind" of self-work will do, but the ethical work is done in a strict framework and through specific vocabulary.

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Intent of Publication