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Navigating Post-prison Life

Social Positioning in Unstable Circumstances

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People that are released from prison experience life outside of prison as unpredictable and insecure. They are faced with stigmatization, poverty, and feelings of alienation from the "world outside", which limit formerly incarcerated men's opportunities for positive participation in social life. Based on research in the field of post-prison life, this paper asks how formerly incarcerated men act and position themselves – the techniques they use to navigate – within and around uncertain sociocultural circumstances that characterize post-prison life. The article argues that formerly incarcerated men are active agents who seek to escape their insecure, marginal social position by deploying techniques of social navigation.

Post-prison: Introduction

David was released from prison on a sunny day in fall 2019. At 10 a.m. he walked through the main gate of the German federal prison in which he had spent the last five years. He had to apply as quickly as possible for unemployment benefits, register his new address at the local town hall, apply for a new ID card, open a bank account, and call his probation officer. A little later he would have an appointment with the social worker at the halfway house where he would spend the next couple of months, sharing an apartment with three other formerly incarcerated men and living in a room with the size of 11 square meters (the same size as his prison cell). But there would be no locks on the doors and no bars on the windows.

The social worker would assist him in filling out forms and making phone calls. But at that moment David preferred to embrace his newly gained freedom in a nearby park. Sitting on a bench, he enjoyed the sun on his face, the sound of the wind blowing through the trees, the refreshing water of the park's little creek. He watched people passing by, chatting, and picnicking. He was "highly attentive to the plethora of sights" – to use a phrase by Munn and Bruckert (2013: 70) – and sensual to perceptions in general. They strongly contrasted with the monotony of sensual impressions he had become used to in prison. He absorbed the world around him in full. At the same time, he felt strangely out of place, frightened and alone. He had lost touch with his family and friends during his five-year prison sentence. Aged 41, David was completely on his own in establishing life after prison. "Can people tell that I just got released from prison?" David asked himself. He was convinced that everybody he passed, met, or talked to would know right away where he had come from. Like many newly released men, he felt like he had "a tattoo on [his] forehead that proclaim[ed] [him] an 'ex-con'" (Zaitzow 2011: 242).

This is the story David told me when I saw him a couple of days after his release. We met in the common area of the halfway house where he still lives at the time of writing, nearly twelve months after having gained his freedom. With the "mark[s] of a criminal record" (Pager 2003), he has found it next to impossible to sign a lease, get employment and to establish social ties. A year after having left prison through its main gates, David still felt like he did not fully belong to the "world outside."

Men like David who had been in the criminal justice system for a long time considered Germany of the 1970s and 1980s to have been more open and friendlier than Germany of today. During recent decades they had experienced greater and greater prejudice, stronger calls for harsher punishments and a tightening of the penal system. In the 1970s, the German penal system underwent a major reform leading to the implementation of new penal laws, replacing retribution with rehabilitation as its major goal (cf. Laubenthal 2019; Wetzell 2014). The reform was inspired and accompanied by

a critical public and legal discourse on punishment and social inequality, which led to falling incarceration rates and the establishment of not only state- but also privately-run support institutions for ex-convicts. Starting at the end of the 1980s, however, German imprisonment rates have been rising, fewer sentences have been suspended on probation and public discourse has focused more and more on issues of security, calling for harsher punishments (Sack 2010). These developments, in line with formerly incarcerated men's stories and experiences, point to what social and cultural scientists call "the punitive society" (Foucault 2015) and the "momentum of punishment" (Fassin 2018), which accompany an increasing climate of fear and insecurity within society (Schwell 2015), a "culture of control" (Garland 2001).

David is one of twenty-five persons I met during my research on post-prison life. In my research, I focus on the sociocultural circumstances faced by formerly incarcerated men during and after their release. I also examine their opportunities to establish everyday life after prison. I spent one and a half years working in this field. My research centered around a prison for adult men in Germany and a privately-run halfway house to which many men turned for support after their release.[1]

Some of the men I met during my research had been convicted for drug-related crimes, some of them had served their sentences on charges of fraud, burglary, or robbery, while some had been charged with violent crimes, murder, rape, or child abuse. Some had spent two or three years behind bars, others more than a decade. I met men in their early twenties as well as men in their sixties representing many nationalities.[2] What the men all had in common was that they had to establish new everyday lives after being released from prison.

I met these men as persons who had committed criminal actions, but I did not reduce them to their crimes – or rather I tried not to. Sometimes, my own prejudices and moral orientations made this quite difficult (cf. Jewkes 2011; Liebling 2014). "We [formerly incarcerated men] are more than our criminal records," David told me with

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[1] To protect my research partners, I have not only anonymized their names, but also withheld information about their criminal actions, life stories and the social and spatial contexts of my research. Nonetheless, I hope to tell a "partial truth" (Clifford 1986) and portray post-prison life as it was experienced and lived by formerly incarcerated men. For an overview of the anthropology of (post-)prison, see Cunha (2014), Rhodes (2001), and Wacquant (2002).

[2] About 47% of incarcerated men in Germany are of foreign nationality, whereas only 26% of the population living in Germany has foreign citizenship. For racial and ethnic discrimination practices within the German criminal justice system, see e.g. Negnal (2016). For the US-American context and prison studies in general, see Fassin (2018) and Wacquant (2001). Nonetheless, most of the men whom I met after their release were German. Many men of foreign nationality lose their residency rights in Germany after their prison sentences and have to return to their home countries after their release. Some incarcerated men of foreign nationality agree to be deported to their countries of origin (mostly after serving two-thirds of their sentence) under the condition that they do not re-enter Germany for a certain number of years.

frustration after receiving another rejection letter from a potential employer. Before his incarceration, he had worked as a carpenter for several years – a profession in high demand on the German job market. But not a single company had invited him for an interview. During my field research, I got to know the men's frustrations and embarrassment whenever they felt themselves to (again) be perceived as "criminals" and "ex-cons," and nothing more. Thus, I refer to the people I met during my research as "men" rather than as "ex-prisoners," "ex-inmates" or "ex-convicts." In describing them as "men" and using pseudonyms, I seek to "restore to [them] a kind of dignity of which prison, the courts, and the police [after their release: society] tend to deprive them" (Fassin 2017: xix).[3]

David's situation serves as a starting point from which to ask how formerly incarcerated persons position themselves within and around confining sociocultural circumstances to escape their marginal social positions (Vigh 2009).

Social Navigation

The concept of *social navigation* was developed to describe how young soldiers in Guinea-Bissau made sense of, positioned themselves in and oriented themselves during unstable times of war (Vigh 2003, 2006, 2009). The term is most often used to describe and understand social action in unstable places, in contexts of insecurity, political change or collapse in African (post-)war societies (cf. Birzle 2012; Bürge 2011; Christiansen, Utas & Vigh 2006a; Utas 2005).

Through the metaphor of navigation (lat. *navigare*, to sail), cultural anthropologist Henrik Vigh (2009: 420) draws analytical attention to the way people "move in a moving environment". The metaphor of the sea is used to depict the sociostructural context: an unstable, fluid and changeable matter on which social actors move and deal with current weather and sea conditions, orient themselves toward destinations on the horizon and have to change routes when storms appear and change the waters.

In times of social change or insecurity, actors do not perceive sociocultural circumstances to be given structures *on* which they act, but rather as unpredictable, constantly moving terrain *within and around* which they navigate. The concept of social navigation draws analytic attention not only to the movement of the actors themselves (their actions), but also to the constant movement of the circumstances in which they act (sociocultural structures).

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[3] I do not, however, agree with cultural anthropologist Didier Fassin (2017: xix), who states that the use of invented names gives ethnographic stories an "anecdotal turn." My use of pseudonyms as first names rather indicates a striving toward a research relationship based on trust and empathy (cf. Sieferle 2021).

Social navigation holds the potential to unpack the instability of the sociocultural order as perceived by agents themselves, not only in (post-)war contexts but also in post-prison worlds in Germany. From the point of view of newly released men, the world outside of the prison offers little guidance for orientation, as the routines and rules of prison life no longer apply in the "world outside." The alienation from the world that men feel after their release makes the social world volatile and opaque. They do not experience their life after prison as "life as usual": their step out through the prison gate is rather a step into an unfamiliar sociocultural order.

Being confronted with and living in a permanent state of movement does not, however, lead formerly incarcerated actors to passively endure their lives – no more than it leads actors in (post-)war societies to passively accept their life circumstances (cf. Vigh 2006: 46). Formerly incarcerated men continually reflect on the sociocultural terrain in which they find themselves and on the sociocultural opportunities of action that the terrain entails. They actively navigate their lives in an advantageous direction and deploy techniques of navigation to escape their (marginal) positions within society. As Vigh (2003: 165) explains:

> [W]e engage the terrain as well as the terrain engages us, without it predetermining our action. We navigate in relation to how we perceive the terrain and interpret its movement, to how we perceive our position and possibilities within it and how we perceive the limitations and possibilities that unfold through the shifts of the terrain and the manner in which its shifts move us.

Here Vigh points to four central dimensions of the concept of social navigation useful to my analysis. These are:

(1) The instability and constant movement of sociocultural terrains and structures.
(2) Social actors' constant evaluation of the social terrain and their own actions within it.
(3) Social actors' imagination of future social terrains, their orientation toward them, especially toward "better" social positions.
(4) Social actors' occupation of certain social positions within the social terrain. Social positions being places within nets of social relationships as well as within social power hierarchies within the social terrain.

What this means is that social actors constantly expect social turmoil and are "aware of how they interpret the social terrain" (Vigh 2003: 166). Everyday life in protractedly uncertain situations is an "ordered disorder" in which "the paradox of having instability

become[s] stable social fact" (Vigh 2003: 157).[4] Society ascribes certain positions which do not necessarily coincide with an actor's desired position, and these positions influence how actors evaluate the social terrain and how they perform and plan their actions within and around this terrain (Vigh 2003: 5).

Life after Prison: Social Positioning on Moving Ground

Alienation from the "World Outside"

When David sat on the park bench observing the world around him, he was tremendously happy to be out of prison. At the same time, he felt like he did not belong to the "world outside." This feeling of alienation is common among men during and after their release: How do I use a computer? Which buttons do I have to press at the ticket machine? How do I get a prescription at the doctor's? What do supermarkets look like nowadays? Will people notice that I was in prison? The men I spoke to reflected constantly on their social actions, their appearance, and the impression they might make. Social interaction was a source of stress. It required the men to speak to non-correctional personnel, to "everyday people," which they might not have done for several years.

Mundane situations and interactions that people without prison experience take for granted are highly problematic for released men. They evoke insecurity and stress (cf. Johns 2018: 157; Munn & Bruckert 2013: 71). Everyday life does not form the silent background of their lives, but rather comes to the forefront of these men's awareness.

The men had become "prisonized" (Clemmer 1940), accustomed to the spatially and socially confined prison world with its daily routines and rules. This process leads to "deculturation" (Goffman 1961: 73), a defamiliarization with the "world outside." Release disrupted the sociocultural order of their everyday lives in prison. Many of the men adapted to life outside after a while, but – as post-prison studies also indicate (cf. Johns 2018; Munn & Bruckert 2013) – their sense of alienation never vanished completely. Many felt different from the rest of society even years and sometimes decades after their release.

Stigmatization

The men's feeling of otherness was closely connected to sociocultural ascriptions of "being different" that they were faced with in everyday life (cf. Harding 2003; Keene, Smoyer & Blankenship 2018; LeBel 2012). Potential landlords, employers, friends,

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4 I would like to emphasize that all sociocultural orders, although often perceived as fixed and stable, are constantly changing through agents' actions. Social actors employ navigation techniques daily, but only in times of rapid social change and insecurity are actors aware of the change and instability in the sociocultural order and perceive it as insecure and unpredictable.

and women on dates labelled them as "dangerous" and "suspicious criminals," and expressed that they could not trust them enough to rent them an apartment, give them a job, or have social relations with them.

The men whom I met during my research told me about frustrating experiences in social interactions, in which they were reduced to their prison sentences, even if they had been released years or decades ago. This occurred whether they were applying for jobs or dating new women. They all made clear to me, as criminologist Joan Petersilia (2003: 19) states for post-prison life in general, that "[a] criminal conviction – no matter how trivial or how long ago it occurred – scars one for life". They carried the stigma of being "ex-cons" and "criminals." Erving Goffman defines stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting," that reduces the stigmatized person "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman 1963: 3). Stigmas are closely connected to negative stereotypes and prejudices (Goffman 1963: 4): "Ex-cons" are believed to be unreliable tenants, lazy employees and untrustworthy friends and partners.

Men who had been in the criminal justice system for decades told me about the changes in people's attitudes they had perceived over the course of time. Along with the greater emphasis on punishment over rehabilitation in Germany since the late 1980s has come more state surveillance and mistrust, and, consequently, more stigmatization and social marginalization of formerly incarcerated men.

Formerly incarcerated men were not only faced with stigmatization on an interactional level. They were also confronted with structural stigmatization based on legal and political measures implemented with the comprehensive penal reform during the 1970s: Most of the men had been released on probation, which tied them to the criminal justice system for another couple of years. They had to comply with special conditions of probation, for example meeting a parole officer every other week, doing random drug-screening tests and/or monthly mandatory psychological counselling. For some of the men, this produced negative outcomes, for example when they were not able to go to a job interview due to a mandatory counselling appointment. Furthermore, landlords and employers in Germany are allowed to request certificates of conduct from their applicants, which decreased the men's chances on the job and housing markets considerably. Due to this fact, formerly incarcerated men face a high risk of homelessness and poverty. The latter is structurally aggravated as the German criminal justice system prevents people from paying into their retirement coffers during imprisonment, although most of them work full-time behind bars as carpenters, tailors, chefs, cleaners, and library staff. It also prevents them from saving up money for release, as incarcerated actors in Germany are excluded from minimum wage laws and work for €1 to €4 an hour in prison.

Poverty

Most men I met during my field research reported experiencing poverty. In 2020, the poverty threshold for singles was € 1,176 (Destatis 2021). They had been unemployed on a long-term basis and had been in the German social welfare system since their release. For many there seemed to be no way out of it. They had to make a decent living with little more than 400 euros a month.[5]

This was true for Reinhard, who was a regular at the halfway house. Reinhard had been released three years ago and unemployed ever since. Before his seven-year sentence, he had worked in the military. Now, in his late fifties, he did not expect to find employment. One day we ran into each other in the street. Reinhard was on his way to the supermarket, and we decided I would accompany him.

Reinhard maneuvered us quickly through the aisles: one onion, one pack of pasta, one can of chopped tomatoes, one bottle of soda, one cup of yoghurt. "It is the end of the month!" Reinhard emphasized. He did not have to explain further. He was short on cash and had to watch every cent. Right in front of the checkout we stopped again. Reinhard added the prices of his goods in his head. The total amount was €3.19. He had chosen the cheapest brands to save money and he knew down to the last cent the price of each product.

A lack of financial resources, of which this experience in the supermarket with Reinhard gave me a clear understanding, permeates all areas of post-prison life. The men living on social welfare struggled to find money to buy new clothes, household furnishings, toiletries, medicine, books, and much more. They did not even dream of going on holiday, to the movies or to a restaurant, of buying meat or organic – that is, expensive – vegetables.

Reinhard's and the other men's stories of poverty experiences are closely connected to their prison sentences. Due to legal regulations, incarcerated men are not able to save up money for release. They often leave prison in debt, owing legal fees and court costs. However, I do not reduce poverty to a lack of money and material possessions. Poverty is much more than a lack of financial and material resources, although it always builds on it (Verne 2007). Poverty comprises a lack of financial-material, social, and cultural resources and leads to an inability to satisfy one's own needs.

Most men had lost contact with their families and friends during their prison sentences. Limited visiting hours (3 hours/month), overpriced telephone costs and

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[5] The long-term unemployment benefits for singles in 2020 was €432 per month plus costs for rent and heating. People on the brink of poverty, as defined by the German government, earn less than 60% of Germany's median national income.

bans on internet and cell phones often lead to social relationships breaking down over the course of incarceration. There was nobody who would assist them financially or help them establish their lives after prison. Furthermore, the men had lost many of their cultural resources during their incarceration. Many had only a basic school education and therefore did not possess the cultural ability to write eloquently or to set up formal CVs – things that could have increased their chances of finding employment.

Social Positioning in Post-prison Life

Taken together, poverty, stigmatization and feelings of alienation made up the unstable social terrain that confronted those I studied after their release from prison. In contrast to Vigh's conceptualization of social terrains as being in a permanent state of movement due to rapid political and legal change and turmoil, the terrain of post-prison life has not changed much since the German comprehensive penal reform of the 1970s. However, from the individual perspective of the men I studied, upon leaving the prison, the post-prison terrain of everyday life was an unfamiliar one, and was perceived by formerly incarcerated men as volatile and opaque. The newness of this social terrain puts the men in danger of not being full members of society, of not fulfilling their dreams and hopes for a "good life."

In (post-)prison studies, there are two dominant ways of conceptualizing the dangers of not being or becoming full members of society: social death and liminality. The concept of social death points to the lack of dignity, structural violence, and social isolation that (formerly) incarcerated men face in their daily lives (cf. Cacho 2012; Dayan 2011; Guenther 2013; Price 2015; Sieferle 2020a). This concept helps to focus analytical attention on processes of structural and interactional stigmatization (cf. Sieferle 2020a), which label formerly incarcerated actors as "ex-cons" and place them in a marginal position within society.

The concept of liminality highlights formerly incarcerated men's "in-between" position directly after their release and their feeling of alienation from the "world outside" (cf. Becci 2011; Healy 2010; Jewkes 2013; Johns 2018; Ortiz 2005; Sieferle 2020b). People released from prison are no longer "prisoners," yet they have not fully arrived in the "world outside" (Becci 2011). Experiences of stigmatization and poverty make this liminal state of release very often a permanent one. Formerly incarcerated actors involuntarily remain in a liminal state of insecurity even months or years after their release (cf. Sieferle 2020b).

Both concepts – social death and liminality – focus on the structural and phenomenological aspects of post-prison life. However, both concepts lack one important point: they do not take into consideration the *agency* of formerly incarcerated

actors. They tend to depict actors as passive victims of structural circumstances, as subjects trapped in a state of social death and liminality. It is true that the marginal social position the men find themselves in after their release prevents them from taking socially desired positions such as employee, tenant, spouse, and breadwinner. Yet while it is a social terrain with great discrepancies between the socially possible and the socially desired (cf. Christiansen, Utas & Vigh 2006b: 12), it does not completely lack possibilities.

The concept of social navigation helps to reveal this important aspect of post-prison life by pointing to actors' (limited) possibilities of action within a constraining social terrain. In the following, I present the techniques of navigation that the men I studied employed to improve their current and future life situations. Four portraits of formerly incarcerated men provide the analytical base for further reflection on how actors navigate post-prison life.

Navigating Post-prison Life

Although Nick was frightened of the "world outside," he also felt excited and full of energy to start a new life. Nick and I had met in the prison visiting area several times before he was released. He was in his forties and had spent three years behind bars. Luckily, he was able to stay with his brother and did not have to worry about finding an apartment. Right after his release from prison he started to look for jobs. In his applications, he included the details of his criminal record as well as his above-average results in his vocational training as a painter, which he had acquired in prison. Before his incarceration he had worked as an unskilled construction worker. After seven months without being invited to a single job interview, Nick changed tactics. He omitted his prison sentence on his applications. Only three weeks later Nick started work at the warehouse of a big industrial company. From then on, he would always hide his past from his co-workers and his boss. This was exhausting – especially during lunch breaks and company parties – as he permanently had to think about what to reveal about himself and what to conceal. Nonetheless, he considered it the right move. He was convinced that he would never have gotten a job otherwise.

Benjamin was a regular at the halfway house. He was 48 years old and released from prison seven years ago. We met only a couple of weeks into my field research. I was sitting in the common area when Benjamin entered and said "Hi, I am Ben, I spent ten years in prison. Homicide and armed robbery. Who are you?" I was startled by this unconventional introduction and did not know how to reply. I pulled myself together and introduced myself as well as my research project. It was only later that day, when I wrote my fieldnotes at home, that I realized that there is no "normal" introduction for a person with a criminal record.

Benjamin's way of dealing with this was certainly extraordinary and I got the impression that he rather enjoyed people's discomfort when he introduced himself. The display of his smartphone showed the Cheshire Cat from "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland" – a cat smiling madly and stating, "I am not crazy, my reality is just different from yours." With his unconventional introduction and with the Cheshire Cat on his phone, Benjamin showed me and society that he was aware of him, the "ex-con," being perceived as "abnormal." In the first couple of years after his release, he had tried to hide his past and only revealed it after establishing a social relationship – be it a friendship or a romantic relationship. Many people turned away from him after hearing what he had done. For the last couple of years and to avoid painful social rejections he had told new acquaintances right away about his prison sentence. Nonetheless, he was not pessimistic. He constantly hoped for a "better life." He hoped to get a girlfriend, with whom he would start a family and live in his own apartment. He hoped to become a delivery driver or do the dishes in a local hotel to earn a decent living.

Fred and I met by coincidence in a local bar. Fred was working as a bartender when I spent an evening with friends at the bar. Fred served beer and entertained us with stories. Many of them were about his time in prison. He was in his forties and had spent most of his twenties behind bars. As I was with friends and did not want to make the evening a fieldtrip, I did not tell Fred about my research project. But another day I went back to the bar, introduced myself and my project and later spent many evenings there, listening to Fred's stories. During my regular visits to the bar, I realized that presenting himself as an "ex-con" was a fundamental part of Fred's work as a bartender. He entertained the patrons with prison stories and made his "criminal character" an essential part of the bar's atmosphere. The bar's regulars consisted of young "hipsters" – mostly students – to whom Fred seemed to exude an "exotic otherness," as well as men who had, like Fred, done time in prison and considered the bar to be a stigma-free place. When Fred started his job as a bartender ten years earlier, he was rather reluctant to tell people about prison. He knew about the prejudices people had toward "ex-cons." But as the years passed, he realized that part of being a bartender is making the bar unique by presenting himself as a memorable character. That is why he started to perform as a strong, fearless, nonetheless funny, and down-to-earth "ex-con," who had survived prison and succeeded in life after prison.

Peter, another regular at the halfway house, had stopped looking for employment a long time ago. He was 45 years old and had been released five years earlier. Now he lived in a social housing apartment and spent most of his days in the common area of the halfway house. He considered the halfway house his "home away from home" and liked it especially for its open atmosphere. He did not, as he once told me, have

to be afraid of "wicked looks and unfair treatment at the halfway house. Everybody has his history and that's okay. Nobody judges you here for what you've done, where you've been." The halfway house was an important social space in his life, in which he was not confronted with stigmatization. It was also a space in which he could address his insecurities and fears of the "world outside" that all men coming to the halfway house had experienced. Over the previous couple of years and together with many other men, Peter had established an informal trading and exchange network at the halfway house. The men exchanged household items, books, and technical equipment. They provided tips about how to save money and where to do shopping at a reasonable price.

Based on the life stories and circumstances of Peter, Nick, Benjamin, and Fred, below I identify five different techniques of navigation used by formerly incarcerated men to respond to the unstable circumstances of post-prison life.

Managing Stigma

Stigma is one of the most researched aspects in post-prison studies. These (mainly quantitative) studies show that the stigma associated with imprisonment has a negative impact on the search for housing and employment, and that formerly incarcerated men are well aware of this uncertain social terrain (cf. LeBel 2012; Moore, Stuewig & Tangney 2013; Pager 2003; Visher, Debus-Sherrill & Yahner 2011; Winnick & Bodkin 2008). The studies make clear that "the mark of incarceration endures beyond the prison sentence" (Keene, Smoyer & Blankenship 2018: 801).

However, most of these studies do not address the question of how actors released from prison cope with the disadvantages they face due to their prison stigma. This is rather surprising, since Erving Goffman (1963), in his classic study on stigma, and the few qualitative studies that address stigmatization in post-prison life (cf. Harding 2003; Harding et al. 2014; Keene, Smoyer & Blankenship 2018; Munn & Bruckert 2013; Sieferle 2020a) draw analytic attention to the diverse "performance tactics" that stigmatized people employ in social interactions: some reveal their stigma fully, some partly, while others conceal it.

Whereas Goffman (1963) uses the term "performance strategies," I prefer to use the term "performance tactics." I hereby refer to Michel de Certeau's (1984) use of the term to point to formerly incarcerated men's adaptation to the sociocultural circumstances they move in and around, and the power relations that are inherent in navigation techniques. Formerly incarcerated men navigate toward desired social positions in "manipulating and acting between and across the rules defined by others" (Vigh 2003: 133).

Nick and Benjamin took different approaches to revealing or concealing their prison stigma. Whereas Nick chose to hide his conviction and ever since has had to be careful not to reveal too much personal information at work, Benjamin decided to do it the other way around. He did not hide his stigma and fully disclosed his prison history when meeting new people. Benjamin's aim in telling people right away was to avoid the pain of social rejection. He lessened the impact of his stigma by "preemptive disclosure" (Harding 2003: 576). By contrast, Nick's priority in concealing his prison sentence was to get employment and earn money. He was well aware of his prison stigma as a "master status" (Becker 1963; Lukas & Phelan 2012: 18) that overrides all other characteristics and attributes in the application process and during job interviews.

Fred the bartender, in turn, employed what sociologist David Harding (2003: 582) calls the "impression management tactic": He used his criminal record in a charismatic and charming way, and built his profession around it. He rewrote his story of incarceration in a positive direction that allowed him to pursue a job and have non-stigmatizing social contacts. He knew how to tell fascinating stories and how to enchant his listeners. In drawing on culturally accepted resources of storytelling and charisma, Fred was able to defy negative expectations created by his stigma and thereby reduce its power (Sieferle 2020a; Harding 2003: 476).

The examples of Nick, Benjamin, and Fred all show that formerly incarcerated men are fully aware of social processes that label them as "ex-cons." They perceived the social terrain within which they are trying to build up their post-prison lives as insecure, and they constantly expected to be confronted with stigmatization. They engaged with this terrain by constantly reflecting on their ascribed marginal social position as "ex-cons" and trying to reconfigure it and find ways around it: they performed stigma management tactics to navigate their lives in a positive direction.

Creating Stigma-free Spaces

Peter, who described the halfway house as his "home away from home," isolated himself socially. Social withdrawal protected Peter from potentially stigmatizing situations by limiting his social contacts to "accepting others" (Harding 2003: 476). The halfway house served as a stigma-free space in which he felt safe, where he knew his way around and did not feel alienated as he so often did in everyday life.[6]

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[6] However, the halfway house was not a hierarchy-free space. It was structured according to prison hierarchies: Men who had served prison sentences for acts of violence against women or children were at the bottom of the hierarchy. They were tolerated among the group of formerly incarcerated men, but they were not accepted. Furthermore, there were sharp categorical distinctions between voluntary workers, social workers and "ex-cons," in which institutional hierarchies were manifested, placing formerly incarcerated men at the bottom.

Studies on stigma management do not address the creation of stigma-free spaces as a means to cope with the socially ascribed label "ex-con." In line with Goffman's theoretical focus on social interactions, these studies focus on stigma performance tactics employed in social interaction. However, during my field research, Peter and other formerly incarcerated men made clear to me that they perceive and use halfway houses as stigma-free spaces that make their everyday lives more bearable.

In conceptualizing halfway houses as stigma-free spaces, I differ from post-prison studies that view them solely as marginal spaces of stigmatization (cf. Becci 2011; Braude 2005; Keene, Smoyer & Blankenship 2018; Ortiz 2005). On a structural level, this holds true as halfway houses are attached to a spatial stigma for potential employers, landlords or other social contacts. On an experiential level, as Peter exemplifies, formerly incarcerated men perceive halfway houses as social enclaves located within a wider society in which all men share a common history and do not have to hide their prison stigma.

The same held true for the bar in which Fred worked as a bartender. This bar served as a social space where formerly incarcerated men could socialize without fear of stigmatization. They did not have to think about how to manage their stigma, but could freely talk about their time in prison.

Both stigma-free spaces illustrate that formerly incarcerated actors evaluate the social terrain of post-prison life: they evaluate the given structures of post-prison rehabilitation and welfare programs as well as other sites of social interaction such as bars. They select, create and use "safe spaces" to be able to experience a non-stigmatizing social life.

Holding a Forum for Exchange

One morning, Benjamin and three other men were sitting in the smoking area of the halfway house and were in the middle of a lively discussion about the role of parole officers in the process of release. Whereas Benjamin considered parole officers to be the long arm of the state that one should not trust, two of the other men considered parole officers to be helpful during the release process in handling bureaucratic formalities. The fourth man in the group, David (mentioned at the beginning of this paper), had been released only two weeks earlier and listened attentively. Of course – Benjamin and the other two men agreed – one has to be careful what to discuss with parole officers. "It would be a rather bad idea," Benjamin said, pointing at David, who was holding a hand-rolled cigarette, "to ask your PO [parole officer] where best to buy weed." He pondered aloud further: "Now, that I think about it, you should ask him! You

may have a good laugh." The men, bursting into laughter, agreed that it was helpful to try to have a good relationship with the parole officer. The conversation continued with tips and tricks on how to handle the probation. During this conversation, David asked many questions and the three other men answered and discussed every topic at length.

I experienced countless such situations at the halfway house (and in Fred's bar). Formerly incarcerated men came together in small groups, discussed the challenges and hardships they faced after their release, and evaluated diverse stigma performance tactics. They discussed law and justice, society in general and their position as "ex-cons" within it. They addressed political developments and their influence on the German criminal justice system, the role of punishment within society and the pros and cons of prison sentences. I consider these discussions to be a forum for the exchange of ideas and experiences.

For newly released men like David, such discussions are of great help for acquiring information about how best to handle the insecurities of everyday life. Newly released men get tips and tricks from men who have been out of prison for a long time. This kind of forum serves as a "safe space" in which they can address their insecurities. With the help of humor, formerly incarcerated actors can negotiate their marginal position within society and better survive within society (cf. Kuipers 2016; Terry 1997).

During these exchanges, I became aware that everyday life is not a taken-for-granted reality for formerly incarcerated men, but rather an uncertain social terrain in which they constantly expect social turmoil. This leads formerly incarcerated actors to what Vigh calls "reflexive routinization" (Vigh 2003: 166): they constantly reflect on and evaluate their current and future life situations, their position within society as well as ways to improve their lives. The forum for exchange of information held by formerly incarcerated men in the halfway house as well as at the local bar was a navigation technique that they used to interpret "the position and possibilities [...] that unfold[ed] through the shifts of the terrain" (Vigh 2003: 65) and how they were affected by these shifts.

Building Informal Trading Networks

Many men I talked to during my research struggled with poverty – financially, socially, culturally – which prevented them from participating fully in society. Peter had developed a wide, informal network that served him in coping with poverty-ridden circumstances. The halfway house served many men as the main network hub for informal trading, bartering and assistance. It was a loose network based on casual

relationships; the men did not consider themselves to be friends, some of them did not even know each other's names. But they formed a successful social network, which proved how strong weak ties can be (cf. Granovetter 1973, 1983). They compensated their lack of social resources after their release by forming informal trading networks.

The exchange of practical help and support helped lessen the daily consequences of these men's lack of financial resources. The men exchanged, traded, or gave away for free second-hand clothes, used cell phones, kitchen equipment, vacuum cleaners, sunglasses and much more. They provided tips about which local non-profit organizations handed out food for free. And there was always someone who knew how to repair a bike, to fix a computer or a tap. The social network at the halfway house was an important form of social capital that men acquired after their release and that proved to be important within their post-prison lifeworlds.

Closely connected to the men's social capital was the cultural capital that they acquired within this network and in regard to poverty. The network equipped them with cultural knowledge of how to survive on little more than €400 a month – as Reinhard showed me while grocery shopping. The men knew and constantly discussed how to shop, how to furnish their apartments, how to save money for Christmas presents and for new trousers, how long to ignore payment reminders without having to fear legal consequences, how best to pay installments. I consider this knowledge to be tactical cultural competence born out of financial poverty.

Hoping for a Better Future

During the one and a half years of my research in the field of post-prison life, Benjamin repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with his current life situation. Since his release seven years earlier, he had been unemployed, living in a shared flat for ex-offenders and had not had a single romantic relationship. At the age of 48, the liminal "in-between" stage of post-prison life had become, as for many other formerly incarcerated men, a permanent one.

However, Benjamin constantly hoped for a "better life." He hoped to get a girlfriend with whom he would start a family, and to live in his own apartment. He hoped to become a delivery driver and spent hours on the internet researching local vegetable farmers who might hire. Other times, he thought of doing the dishes in a local hotel, or he researched jobs at construction sites as an unskilled laborer. He never applied for any of these jobs. Since he had decided a couple of years earlier that he would never again hide his prison stigma, he knew too well that he had almost no chance on the job market, to find an apartment on the open rental market, or to find a girlfriend.

When I first met Benjamin, I was confused that he wanted to do delivery one day and dishes another day. After some time, I realized that Benjamin did not expect his hopes to come true. As cultural anthropologist Morten Pedersen (2012: 141) writes: "Hope is what people do when they have no firm ground [...] on which to build their ideas of the future."

I consider hope to be an important technique of navigation in post-prison life. Hope allows formerly incarcerated men to stay optimistic. With a hopeful outlook on the future, their present situation does not seem to be a permanent state, but rather a liminal one that they would soon escape (cf. Sieferle 2020b).

Even though Benjamin did not expect his hopes to come true, he nonetheless oriented his hopes according to his social position. He did not hope for a 100 square meters apartment, but rather for a small, two-bedroom apartment for him and his (hopefully soon to be found) girlfriend. He did not hope for a well-paid job, but for unskilled employment, since he did not have any work experience or school certificates. His "horizon of expectation" (cf. Koselleck 2004: 255) emerged from his social position. This was what he was able to hope for in the context of his social position within society. Benjamin's state of liminality, which from an analytical perspective could well be a permanent one, was from Benjamin's perspective a temporal one, as his hope allowed him to imagine (cf. Vigh 2009: 425) an alternative, "better" future and an imminent escape from his current insecure life circumstances.

Navigating Post-prison Life: Toward a Conclusion

Using the concept of social navigation as a lens through which to analyze and understand post-prison life, I have examined formerly incarcerated men's struggles to cope with "the actualities of a desperately disturbed everyday life" (Guyer 2007: 410; cf. Vigh 2009: 421). These men navigate through a sociocultural terrain that is characterized by uncertainty and insecurity on a permanent basis. Experiences of alienation toward the "world outside," poverty, and stigmatization make the social terrain of post-prison life volatile and opaque, and limit formerly incarcerated men's opportunities for positive participation in social life.

The concept of social navigation helps the researcher to conceptualize formerly incarcerated men as active agents without over-emphasizing their agency or neglecting sociostructural constraints. It also prevents the researcher from conceptualizing formerly incarcerated persons as subjects who are passively trapped in confining sociocultural structures.

Five social navigation techniques were presented in this article – attempts by formerly incarcerated persons to disentangle themselves from confining sociocultural structures of poverty, stigmatization, and estrangement from the world, and to position themselves "better" socially. The formerly incarcerated men in this study managed their stigma by revealing, concealing, or forming their (professional) identities around it. They created stigma-free spaces within an "ex-con-bar" and a halfway house. The halfway house was not experienced and used by these men as a marginal space of stigmatization as is claimed in much of the previous literature on prison studies, but as a stigma-free place. The men also held a forum for exchange and created informal trading networks to acquire the cultural skills needed to survive times of financial hardship and to cope with their feelings of alienation from the "world outside." By permanently evaluating the present and future social terrain, they imagined and hoped for a better future.

Acknowledgements

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