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Doing Violence, Concepts of Masculinity,  
and Biographical Subjectivity – Three Case Studies

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## Abstract

The paper focuses on the relationship between gender and violence in context of prison interaction. Theoretical it criticises concepts which link masculinity to violence in a general way. These concepts are challenged by a psychosocial concept of gender and a biographical approach. To understand the correspondence between the prison institution, patterns of masculinity reproduced in there, and the biographical meaning violence in prison has from the perspective of young men today, a sensible concept of gender is necessary. A systematic view on the conflicting and context-bounded dimensions of male subjectivity opens the way not only to insights on an individual level. These insights are shown by hermeneutic case-interpretations and by comparing cases. Three case studies, stemming from qualitative interviews with young prisoners in juvenile detention centers in Germany, represent different ways of dealing with violence, connected with different biographical processes and conflicts of adolescence and male autonomy.

## Violence and masculinity – an (un)ambiguous relationship<sup>1</sup>

'All critical accounts agree that violence is a constitutive element of masculinity' (Hollstein 2000: 80). In this programmatic statement, Walter Hollstein gives an unambiguous definition of the relation between violence and gender: A term like 'constitutive' implies that either violence generates masculinity, that masculinity is based on violence, or that violence is a fundamental component of masculinity. Undoubtedly, a direct association of the two phenomena is presumed.

On first glance, the field of research I turn to in this article seems to reinforce such presuppositions. Violent conflicts are daily routine in German youth prisons, which are mostly inhabited by adolescent males. This is confirmed by young prisoners' accounts. In analysing their narratives, the meaning, the inevitability, and the handling of violence as natural become comprehensible.<sup>2</sup> The 'meaning' of violence is consequently more or less defined by defending one's honour and position in the dynamic inmate pecking-order. It is shaped by taking part in the business of the illegal market which is also structured by physical aggression (Bereswill 2001). Many prisoners regard violence as 'inevitable' due to the closed institutional envi-

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1 For translating the first draft of this paper I thank Almut Koesling.

2 My paper refers to selected conclusions of the study 'Prison and the consequences' which has been conducted by the Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony since 1998 and is supported by the VW-foundation. I will only deal with the qualitative part of the study, the concept of which I am responsible for (cp. Bereswill 1999). The qualitative data consist of interviews with a total of 44 young prisoners, who talk about their biographies and prison experiences in semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Details will follow below when I introduce the case examples.

ronment devoid of any possibility to evade. This is a common explanation for the high standing of daily acts of violence and power struggles.<sup>3</sup> Besides emphasising the pressure, this argument also makes clear that the dealing with and referring to violence is established and 'a matter of course' for the young men: Male adolescence, deviance, and violence thus seem to be meaningful dynamics relating to each other. The structural conditions of imprisonment can be viewed as an enforcement of hegemonic struggles between young men. Joe Sim (1994), with reference to Robert Connell, assumes that the connection between violence and masculinity emerges especially in prison, and, even more, among adolescent prisoners.

Most authors who study masculinity stress the tight connection of violence and patterns of masculinity (cp. Kersten 1997; Matt 1999). Michael Meuser (1999:50) speaks of 'doing gender' in the context of masculinity and deviance. He emphasises the 'indisputable presence of inter-male violence' for the construction of gender order, referring to Robert Connell's concept of hegemony (1999) and to James Messerschmidt's approach (1993; 2000). In his theory of structured social action, Messerschmidt's comprehension of violence defines it as a possible resource of defending and re-creating threatened masculinities. At the same time, he refers to the interactionist concept of 'doing gender'. According to this model, gender is interactively negotiated and created. At the same time, gender is a dynamic phenomenon that can only be grasped within the situational context.<sup>4</sup> The social construction of gender is therefore based on collective patterns of interpretation that exhibit various nuances and differences specific to situation and – according to Meuser's reference to Bourdieu (1997) – to social environment.

Combining Connell's power-sensitive model of hegemony, Messerschmidt's theoretical approach of (inter-)action, and Bourdieu's concept of habitus leads to a differentiated approach to the relationship between gender and violence. At least, this is the case for the dimension of cultural interpretations and daily course of interaction. In this context, the youth prison represents a homosocially structured involuntary community and can be viewed as an 'institutional pillar' of hegemonic masculinities (Meuser 1999:56). This is the place where 'doing masculinity' is practised in a 'competitively structured internal space' (ibid). The constitution of

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3 This inevitability is emphasised in old and new theoretical explanations of violence in prison subculture. Added to this is the coping with the loss of autonomy that is provoked by captivity. In this context, being strongly involved into the inmate group might serve to defend one's autonomy against the institution. Such an integration is connected with a strong separation from the staff and with conforming to rules of the inmate group (cp. McCorkle & Korn 1954; Sykes 1958/1974; Goffman 1961; Harbordt 1972; Kersten & von Wolffersdorf-Ehlert 1980; Walter 1993; Sim 1994).

4 This is not the place to deal with the concept of 'doing gender' in detail (for an overview, cp. Althoff et al. 2001).

masculinity by violence Hollstein referred to seems to be confirmed. But: The immediate clamping of violence and gender is only valid as long as young prisoners' collective patterns of interpretation are given priority over their subjective interpretations. The concept of gender in interaction theory as well as in the theory of attitude show the same gap. Both concepts lack a subject-centred theoretical perspective which enables us to focus the biographical acquisition of gender, gender difference and violence. Hence, there is hardly any access to inconsistent actions and ambivalent concepts of the self. Breaks with collective orientations of action and subjective, biographically structured, patterns of interpretation and action might be detected. But they will never become the starting point of systematic theoretical reflection. As Tony Jefferson points out in criticising Messerschmidt's theory of masculinity: '... it never asks a second crucial question, namely, why only particular men from a given class or race background (usually only a minority) come to identify with the crime option, while others identify with other resources to accomplish their masculinity. To answer this requires incorporating a theory of subjectivity' (Jefferson 1996: 341). This general criticism of the simple linking of delinquency and (class-specific) patterns of masculinity can be translated into questioning the relationship between violence and masculinity. The question for young men's different patterns of action can also be directed to the context of imprisonment.

Jefferson (1996; 1994), agreeing with Connell (1994), states that of all theoretical approaches it is psychoanalysis that does justice to the complexity and especially the conflicting characteristics of subjectivity. Like Jefferson (1996:341), Connell emphasises the meaning of conflict in lifelong development. Male subjectivity therefore is an expression of a 'long, necessarily conflict-ridden, process' (Connell 1994:33). Hence, subject-theoretical approaches provide the only theoretical perspective which is inspired by a dynamic concept of the psyche and thereby go beyond interactionism. In doing so, the psychodynamic approach offers a broad perspective on the relationship between violence and gender. Although masculinity and violence are closely related on cultural level, they are, nevertheless, subject to each single individual's differentiated shaping and arrangement. Based on these thoughts, I contradict Hollstein's programmatic statement: Instead of assuming that violence is a 'constitutive element of masculinity', I ask for the subjective and biographical meaning of violent acts in prison. I will explore this meaning on the basis of three case examples. The main point in discovering is the idea that gender and violence do not explain each other, but quite the reverse: that they encode one another.<sup>5</sup>

In order to trace encoded meanings of violence and gender in young men's biographical narratives, I apply a social psychologically inspired perspective: In

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5 This thought is borrowed from Muriel Dimen (1995:247). She assumes that self and gender do not give their mutual explanation, but encode one another – it is this single argument of hers I modify, without any further reference to her concept.

comprehending gender as a 'category of conflict', I refer to the psychoanalytically oriented approach of Regina Becker-Schmidt and Axeli Knapp (1987; 2000).<sup>6</sup> According to this viewpoint, the developing of subjectivity is a complex and conflicting process, in which conscious and sub-conscious identifications overlap and intersect with experiences of acquiring the outward world. Inner and outer realities might agree, but they can also be in conflict with each other. Biographical identity is tied to the acquisition of cultural constructions of gender. It is thus dynamic and in a state of constant conflict. Regarding the study of gender and gender difference, this means not to look for the unambiguous, but rather for breaks, conflicts, and contradictions in interview narratives. This means that the concept of life of each of the young men we are going to look at is a 'creative process of dealing with conflict' (Graf-Deserno and Deserno 1998:3). In a study of processes of gender construction, this concept allows us to focus on the meaning of conscious and unconscious identification and differentiation towards other subjects, social contexts, or past experiences. The construction of gender is not a result of one-way orientation according to father or mother figures and related images of masculinity and femininity. Quite the opposite: Multi-faceted identifications and differentiations are brought up in biographical narratives, when the individual assimilation of the Other is explored on the basis of perceptible differences and common features. These identifications and differentiations result in complex and ambiguous images.

### Violence in prison – a point of crystallisation in the daily struggle for autonomy

I take the aforementioned as a starting-point to show the variety of survival strategies used by imprisoned adolescents in their dealing with violence – be it a tactical or impulsive handling of violent behaviour (cp. Sim 1994:101). At the same time, I assume that violence (in prison) represents a point of crystallisation of hierarchical processes. All inmates have to refer and react to this point: on the level of action as well as on the level of psychosocial self-reference. Therefore on the one hand, I emphasise the biographical obstinacy of violence. On the other hand I underline its action-structuring influence on all actors in the penal institution (cp. Bereswill 2001). As mentioned before, the use of violence is of great importance in prison. In the following examination, I assume that prison itself is established on structures of violence.<sup>7</sup> Based on this assumption, I will look at the inmates' perception of and

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6 For a conflict-theoretical and psychoanalytic conception of gender, cp. also the works of Morgenroth 1996 and 2000; Benjamin 1995 and 1993; Bereswill and Ehlert 1996.

7 Prison as an institution (especially a closed institution) de-individualises its inhabitants, at the same time confronting each person with the psycho-social pain of losing autonomy, of social ostracism, and the separation of social ties and contexts (Sykes 1958/1974; Goffman 1961; Bereswill 2001). Measures like restriction of visits, taking away cash money, rationing clothes,

perspective on violence in the group and trace different meanings and strategies. Structural and physical forms of force have the central function not only to maintain the hierarchical institutional arrangement, but also to keep it in a constant state of movement (Sim 1994:102; Bereswill 2001:272).

There are fluid transitions between anticipating, threatening, and practising force in the inmate group. A direct punch is just one variety of violence in prison. Protection from violence is also important, and often accompanied by relationships of dependency, favouring, and threats. Not least to mention are sexual humiliations, which are rarely talked of in the interviews (cp. Koesling 2001). It is also remarkably significant that the various forms of bullying are tightly connected to motives of gender difference: The 'cunts', 'pussies', 'slaves', or 'Dullis' – as victims of bullying are named in the inmate language – are made to perform all the menial tasks, and that means housework like making coffee, cleaning, doing the washing up, cooking for the whole group. There are also sexualised forms of exposure, for example dancing and singing on the table in front of a group. Showing weakness, being a victim is associated with clichés of femininity: Softness, sensitivity, and submission therefore means loss of masculinity (Sykes 1958/1974; Stanko 1999:123).

The fluid transition between real and dreaded bullying is essential to stabilise the 'symbolic asset of violence' – myths and rumours about dangers lead to continuous vigilance and to bluffing with one's strength, to the repression<sup>8</sup> of fear, anxiety and weakness, making it necessary to cope with constant pressure (Bereswill 2001:278). Violence in prison cannot be reduced to the intentional hurting of another inmate.<sup>9</sup> Instead, it is a complex course of interactive events. A simple victim-aggressor-dichotomy is of little help for the comprehension of these dynamics. Based on these reflections, I will now turn to three interviewees' narratives.

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withholding special items like alcohol or certain dishes, stand next to individual sanctions – like detention or removal of the television set – that follow the breaking of regulations. In reformed penal institutions with a treatment-centred approach, such measures of discipline are combined with socio-therapeutic interventions. Nevertheless, the contradiction between voluntary treatment and force cannot be solved (Galtung 1961; Schulte-Altendorneburg 1989).

<sup>8</sup> In German: 'Unbewusstmachung' oder 'Verdrängung'.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Imbusch (2000:30) generally regards a complex and broad definition of violence as necessary. Concerning the prison context, I definitely agree.

## Prison violence in context of biographical self interpretations – three case studies

The three cases I chose for this article are part of a larger group of forty-four persons, consisting of juvenile and adolescent prisoners from three different institutions in North-West and East Germany (Bereswill 1999:16). The case examples represent three significantly different orientations of action concerning the handling of violence in prison. Additionally, they all show affinities to varying concepts of masculinity.

All three young men were interviewed during their imprisonment, either in 1998 or in 1999. These interviews were centred on their experiences in prison and their individual biographical experience. At the time of the interviews, all of them live in (different) shared group homes of the same West German penal institution. Each prisoner is questioned twice: One interview is theme-centred and focuses on imprisonment, the other is semi-structured and concerned with the interviewee's biography (Bereswill 1999:19-44). The interpretation is based on word-for-word transcriptions of these conversations.<sup>10</sup>

The focus is now on the narrations of Carsten Decker, Benjamin Schreiber, and Clemens Dettmer.<sup>11</sup> In the following, I will analyse and interpret latent meaning in their biographical narratives and interpretations of imprisonment. The hermeneutic access to interview texts<sup>12</sup> results from the theoretical assumption that the recounting of experiences always includes their interpretation (Dausien 2000:102). Self-willed reflexions and constructions would go unnoticed, should the narrators' ac-

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10 The interviews are marked as (I) and (II), (II) signifying the young man's biographical account. The chronological order of the interviews was always the same: The first narrative is centred on prison experiences, the second interview is conducted about one or two weeks later and deals with the life history. The first interviews of the cases I deal with in this article have also been explored by Anke Neuber in her sociological degree dissertation (2001). Cp. Aragon Quintero et al. 2001 for Benjamin Schreiber. More detailed descriptions of Carsten Decker and Benjamin Schreiber can be found in Bereswill 2002.

11 All names are freely invented.

12 Cp. the overview in Flick 1996:218. In the study I am concerned with, a combination of evaluation strategies are employed. These strategies facilitate a regulated access to the meanings of interview narratives (for basic questions of appropriate combinations of methods cp. Ehlert et al. 1991; Hildenbrand 1999; Mey 1999). The cases in this article have been analysed using the mode of sequence-analysis (Oevermann 1983; Hildenbrand 1999; for an overview cp. Wernet 2000) as well as the coding method of Grounded Theory (Strauss 1994) and methods from in-depth hermeneutics (cp. Lorenzer 1988; Morgenroth 1990; Bereswill & Ehlert 1996:81).

counts be taken as authentic stories, as ‘that’s how it really was’.<sup>13</sup> Instead, we deal with texts the origin of which is subject to multiple and contextual dependencies: Interview texts and the meanings that are articulated within are always a product of the concrete interaction during a conversation (Bereswill 2001:255; Pigors 2001:51). At the same time, they are also influenced by earlier experiences and latent meanings which have an impact on the actual communication without being made explicit (Becker-Schmidt et al. 1994). On this basis, an understanding approach (‘Verstehen’) to narrations is characterised by a constant interrelation between reconstructing what is said in the text and the construction of something new, which is added to (or taken from) the text.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the aim of understanding the text is not a complete reconstruction of facts or even causalities. The hermeneutic approach centres on the comprehension of meanings and their contexts, which are inscribed in each person’s orientations of action.

### Carsten Decker: ‘In reality, you were afraid yourself’

Carsten Decker, twenty-one, is convicted of car theft and a case of arson. For him, violence is a legitimate resource of action in prison. But first of all, he has to acquire this strategy to be able to adequately participate in the inmates’ rituals of interaction. He says, ‘you learnt something new by yourself’ (I), and he describes the process during which he learns to bluff as the others do and not to ‘be ripped off’ but to rip off himself:

‘You just sham being big that’s the maxim, but in reality, you were afraid yourself, ‘cause you couldn’t know what he’d do all of a sudden. And could’ve been a complete flop, but most times it turned out well and you had new clobber.’ (I)

Carsten’s unsteady and risky location points to a self-positioning that becomes evident in many of the interview narratives: The strategic handling of force in eve-

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13 There is a tendency towards treating interview texts as an analogy of real life. For example, this is an effect of Fritz Schütze’s methodological concept, although his conception in detail cannot be dealt with in this article. Cp. Koller 1993:36- as an example of criticism of the model. Tacit equation of experience and account can be found in the study of Rössner et al. (cp. 1998, Rössner et al. 1998; Diedrich et al. 1999; Meyer 2001). Any research and examination of deviant behaviour must also critically analyse this kind of approach, because the endeavours to reconstruct ‘true stories’ (Strobl & Böttger 1996) are connected with methodological traps. There is a temptation to construct causalities when comprehension of meaning should have priority. Besides, the possibility to use the constructive and interactive character of qualitative research as a source of insight is being given away, as is the researchers’ own participation in the processes of research.

14 Cp. Flick 2000 on the relationship between reconstruction and construction in processes of ‘Verstehen’.



ryday-life does not take place between clear aggressors and victims, but rather in a dynamic and diffused middle sphere. Superior and inferior positions change quickly (cp. Bereswill et al. 2001). But although Carsten is aware of his unsteady position, he does not really feel at risk, because he has formed an alliance with stronger inmates who instruct and protect him. He speaks of these people he relates to by introducing the image of a family. According to this image, he has found a 'father' and several 'brothers' he feels emotionally tied to. Each of his 'prison family' members – they live together in a socio-therapeutically oriented shared group home – is in prison for manslaughter or murder. Carsten describes his 'father', convicted of murder of two, as being intelligent:

'He's pretty smart, (I: Hmhm) got Abitur<sup>15</sup> and is in jail (laughs) ... whatever he says, it is correct, not once have I seen him proved wrong and he is like, I'd claim that he protects me.<sup>16</sup> (I: Hmhm) So when I have problems or the like, then he comes up to me and he asks immediately, 'cause he notices, yes and he holds his upper hand over me, and the other two, they take care of me, so that nothing happens to me. 'cause myself I am not so assertive, (I: Hmhm) and they want to teach me.' (I)

So the function of the family alliance is to fortify Carsten's position in the inmate community. He views himself as an apprentice, who subordinates to the older and more experienced. This subordination, however, is accompanied by the conviction to be equally important to father and brothers.

'And when they, how can I put this, ah yes, when they come from work or so and something's the matter ... then I can tell. (I: Hmhm) ... When they are in a bad mood, when they have trouble with the foreman or something, 'cause then I don't even have to try to talk to them ... about it, 'cause they just won't. But in the evening, when we are on our own/alone and drink a tea at the kitchen table and such, then it slowly comes forth. You know, then we have a talk with one another and then they feel better too, I feel better and everyone is at peace.' (I)

In this situation, Carsten is the strong opposite, empathically waiting for the right moment to make the others communicate. His account is reminiscent of variations of work in relationships that is traditionally associated with women. When we follow Carsten Decker's description, the young men transform elements of social therapy – empathy and active shaping of relationships – and develop their own (self-) reflective discourse, in a sheltered space and without prison staff. This discourse is also about violence, as is indicated when Carsten speaks about his serious thoughts about the others' violent offences and about his own ambivalent attitude towards violence: 'I have never hit anyone or did anything or physically, but sometimes I really feel the urge to do so' (I). His fear of his own aggressive potentials is accompanied by an uncertainty about how to identify positions of victim and ag-

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15 A-Levels in GB.

16 In German figuratively : 'He holds his protecting hand over me'.

gressor. For Carsten, the uncontrolled aspect of violence is rather characterised by the aggressor's helplessness and impotence than by power or strength. Besides showing an obvious parallel between his experiences of domestic violence – Carsten's drunken father regularly batters the drunken mother –, his ambivalence indicates a deeper structural element in his biographical concept: the latent conflict of biographical activity and passivity. This becomes clear in the following passage, in which Carsten depicts his imprisonment as a biographical turning-point.

'No, I regard it as a trial for my next life. ... But I think, that was my first life before imprisonment (I: Hmhm) and I think that now, now comes the second life. ... That is, first they played with you, according to the maxim, someone up there or I don't know, that's not well put, but [...] first he played with you, pushed you here and shoved you there and with here a little bit and there get you completely canned and so on, right? And "Yeah, let him work if he wants to, and if not (I. laughs) then he'll leave it" (both laugh) or so. Yes, that's how I'd put it. And "let him live his life like he wants to", as a motto. "And now I put him into jail, let him think. Either he takes it or he leaves it." For my part, I took it up, I learnt a lot from it and from now on I'll do this, no more ... going zigzag lines (I: Yes) and I will yes, my straight way. I'll do my job, that is finish my apprenticeship. I will seek myself a woman. I will father children, a whole horde of kids. That is, at least twelve of them. (I: Oh) (both laugh) I love children more than anything. And I will yes arrange my occupational career so that I am known everywhere. I will have a high reputation. ... and I will leave Earth with style and élan.' (I)

Next to a powerful striving for biographical transformation and the creative power of adolescent imagination, there are indications for a biographical process I chose to sum up calling a 'double biographical track'. Aged five, Carsten had already chosen an alternative, informal foster family. He helps on a farm and is treated as a semi-family member, without ever leaving the real parental home. The farmer is his model of learning, strength, and invulnerability. He is a contrasting figure to Carsten's father, who has achieved nothing in his life, but ridicules his son as being 'stupid'. Carsten draws his life on the 'double track' of changing social environments. On the one hand, he emphasises his parents' blurred passivity and hopelessness. This condition is interrupted only by the father's explosions of violence, from which Carsten cannot protect his mother although he wants to. On the other hand, his retrospective biographical view is characterised by the participation in farming activities, which are linked to the experience of learning and the contact to one man, the farmer, and himself in the role of the learning boy. Biographical development and independent action are communicated by physical work and the relationship to animals. First Carsten is a passive marionette, remotely controlled and without aim, then the active, successful patriarch of a large family, still keeping the tension up when he steps out of life. In both 'lanes' of his account, women are vulnerable victims. Again, this indicates multi-layered biographical conflict: activity and passivity. Roles of victim and aggressor intersect in these images of family and gender difference – Carsten himself knows both points of reference. The ambivalence between activity and passivity is inscribed in Carsten's biographical nar-

rative. His life story seems like a quickened competition between successful shaping of life and hopeless failure. This becomes especially clear when he talks about his striving for an apprenticeship on a farm and his parallel involvement in delinquency and addiction.

The family picture Carsten applies to his situation in prison is an unusual metaphor for his positioning in the male hierarchy. The use of this metaphor, however, is more than a one-dimensional orientation towards its rules. It is Carsten's emotional alliance with someone he calls a 'clever and sensitive murderer' in particular that refers to his changeable biography. He constructs a violent criminal who is capable of empathy, thereby alluding to his own contradictory biographical positioning. Carsten's empathy with the violent persons' helplessness and his fear of killing someone himself show connections between Carsten and his real parents. The question of victim and aggressor or culprit leads to confusion. Carsten's conviction to be protected and instructed by his prison family members reminds us of his relationship to the farmer. Incompatible positions like cleverness and violence as well as victim and aggressor become fluid and are transformed to the subject of a relationship of learning. Violence can be perceived as an ambivalent and contextualised phenomenon – thereby losing its status as clear point of reference of male identifications.

Benjamin Schreiber: 'When it cannot be settled with words any more' – violence and honour as resistance of childhood powerlessness and shame

In contrast to Carsten Decker, the use of force in prison is an inevitable and well-known option for eighteen year-old Benjamin Schreiber. The young man, who is convicted of theft and violation of the narcotics law, regards his own violent behaviour as a natural element of his self image. Hitting is a necessary means of self-defence, for example when conflicts arise in the inmate group. He says:

'... so when somebody hits me, I gotta hit back. ... when it cannot be settled with words anymore, that is when I realise he wants to do the first blow, then I have to defend myself.' (I)

Benjamin is convinced that the use of force is a social constraint. This is due to the construct of honour, which is mainly about refusal of respect and forcing respect out of others, as well as rejecting humiliation, not least to protect the self-image (cp. Findeisen & Kersten 1999:142; Neckel 1991:16; Hilgers 1996:10). The importance of honour to Benjamin becomes especially clear when he talks about why he is located in the present institution. During the whole Interview, his mind is occupied with the fact that he has been transferred there from a prison near his hometown. Again and again, he compares the two institutions, he points out the injustice of the measure and complains about the great distance to his family. The transfer was the consequence of a violent crime Benjamin committed in the first prison. From his point of view, it was an episode in which – logically and inevitably – he

had to defend his little brother's honour. His account of the event makes clear that the brother's loss of honour also threatens his own:

'... the guy who was in the section with me told everyone like 'yeah, his brother and so on, and so on he's an idiot, puts up with everything. And my brother is only fifteen years old, and that guy was nineteen or so. Yes and then I grabbed him and made him explain himself and consequently I had a fight with him. It started off too violent, I mean for him. ... He had skull fracture, (I: Oh) a lacerated wound at the ear (I: Hmhm) and here somehow it was the skull, but it was smashed five millimetres or so, could only be operative or something, yes, police came within, 'cause I beat him in the cell, they took articles with them, 'cause they thought I used an object to hit him, but I didn't, and they found that out too, that it was not the object.' (I)

The matter-of-fact, almost medical tone of the description suggests a sporting and technical relation to beating. At the same time, the passage shows Benjamin's attitude towards insults: The ridiculing of weaker ('smaller') persons is dishonourable and has to be paid for. In this sense, his deed to him is a logical revenge – it serves to re-establish the brother's honour, but also to demonstrate his strength and ability to assert himself. Accordingly, Benjamin's perspective on the victim is rather technical and cool.

From Benjamin's point of view, the tight connection of violence and honour guarantees a stable position in the inmate group. He characterises himself as being a loner with many options to act: He talks to, deals and plays games with whoever he chooses. There is no need for him to care for the processes of attribution and power struggles within or between groups.

'Yes, yes I know, well I am no member of a concrete group (I: Hmhm) I mean ... when [there is] a game I want to play or something, then I play with them. (I: Hmhm) And when I [play] it with them, be it a Dulli<sup>17</sup> or not, but I want to play with him. (I: Hmhm) So I don't care.' (I)

There is a conspicuous liberalness in Benjamin's handling of inmate hierarchies and devaluation, especially when his statement is connected with the act of bodily harm he committed in the first institution. Benjamin Schreiber himself wants to decide which attributions are relevant to him – others shall beware of trying to categorise or subordinate him.

This man of honour is a loner, and he is prepared to use force. His powerful and invulnerable position is constantly contrasted by Benjamin's accounts of the painful aspects of imprisonment and by his emphatic criticism of the educationally orientated institution. Right at the beginning of the interview, he depicts a scene that shows feelings of shame towards his own family. When the parents come to see

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17 In this prison, 'Dulli' is a label for young men who are weak or unable to assert themselves or who are perceived as being deviant from prevailing norms among the inmate groups.

Benjamin in prison, they witness the officer slipping on rubber gloves for the body search following the visit.

'Yes and then of course, the situation sufficed to embarrass you anyway, that they should see me there, well there were also some moments when the officers came in with gloves on, had just pulled on the glove and then said 'yeah, you have to go now'. Because then they searched me.' (I)

The institutional practice endangers Benjamin's reputation concerning his own family – the motif of (family) honour corresponds with the feeling of shame and embarrassment. Several dimensions to shame are involved here: Benjamin defends the family honour and tries to prevent being embarrassed by the family. At the same time, he is ashamed because of his family. There might be a connection: Benjamin makes his family ashamed by defending the social reputation of his family by means of (violent) delinquency.

Besides being embarrassed by his unmistakable powerlessness towards the rules of the institution, Benjamin is furious with its enforcers – the prison officers. His helpless rage is especially directed towards the logic of penal practice which is centred on concepts of treatment and social therapy.

'... in here it is like, I don't know, psychological so to say, I mean you always have to do something for whatever you want to get, so I mean they want to teach us that you always to have to do something to get anything.' (I)

The aforementioned constellations of honour, shame, rage, and powerlessness are linked to family relationships and his experience in institutions. These constellations correspond with the experiences of conflict Benjamin mentions in his biographical construction. It is remarkable that he, for whom family has a central meaning, begins his narrative with various hints to school and kindergarten. The first detailed account in the interview is concerned with school, and very soon Benjamin talks about his difficulties in the institution: He had been downgraded and only met the requirements for starting school at the second attempt. Later on, he changes school several times, prompted by thefts, blackmailing, or violent behaviour. School is a conflict-ridden context in a double perspective – as is the prison: On the one hand, there are Benjamin's difficulties with learning and with the teachers, on the other hand he quarrels with his fellow pupils. Just as in his accounts of prison, Benjamin understands these two areas of conflict to be entirely different frames of reference, from which he might emerge the successful winner or the humiliated loser. His acts of revenge towards the school representatives cannot obscure the fact that he has been humiliated by them. So Benjamin succeeds in making his teacher cry in front of the headmaster, but this victory over a person of authority is his revenge for being humiliated by the woman.

'Well that was my revenge, 'cause I thought she doesn't like me. 'Cause I had to be able to this and to do that, but I wasn't. But nevertheless, it was demanded. Yes. (sneezes) And then I made up for it so to say.' (II)

Benjamin is troubled by being an outsider during the lessons. His being prepared for violence and his readiness to take concrete measures can be understood as an attempt to compensate by proving his capability. When asked about the experience of losing a fight, he explains:

‘Well for me it was as if, I dunno, [as if you] put a billion on something and lost. (both laugh) Yes, yes. I mean, you did, I certainly tried to defeat him, right? For me it was the only cause, defeat, defeat. When I tried to defeat and lost instead it was as if I had gambled and lost. So the wounds, when I had a black eye or broken noses or something, that was not important for me.’ (II)

This shows another dimension of violence in Benjamin Schreiber’s life: By his brutality, he satisfies a need for achievement, describing it in terms of the quality of competition and gambling. At this point, there is an inner relation between contrasting figures. There is a little boy who is too ‘playful’ to start school, the child for whom the demands of school are too much and who cannot defend himself against the overpowering institution. And there is the tough guy who frightens his social surroundings and renders them helpless. At the same time, he is being excluded and caught up in a spiral of sanctions.

The decisive moment in Benjamin’s attitude towards violence is the use he makes of his ability to endure and inflict pain. This ability serves as a resource to fight off humiliations and feelings of shame. Again, the motif of family honour comes into play. Benjamin idealises his family, to be precise: his father. In doing so, he draws a picture that differs strikingly from all existing clichés concerning the socialisation of delinquents. Cheerful play with the father, fairy-tale videos, no violence in the family, and a harmonious parental relationship – this is how the family can be depicted – on the one hand. It becomes clear that Benjamin does not list stereotypes when he talks of his childhood. Remembering family outings, he very lively describes his father’s enthusiasm for playing. The family ideal is crumbling: One of Benjamin’s siblings dies, his mother withdraws while the remaining children try to comfort her. Just as it does not become clear what exactly happened, we are also left in the dark about why Benjamin’s parents divorce later. Benjamin does not know – or he might not want to say it to protect the family ideal. Facing this crumbling idyll, it can be said that Benjamin had to struggle through life on his own from an early time on. As we saw, this struggle contains a very concrete and violent dimension of despairing self-assertion.

His brutal strategy of self-defence is highly compatible with clichés of masculinity in prison. Within the US-American role metaphors of 1950s prisoners’ argot, Benjamin Schreiber might well take the place of a ‘ball buster’ – the unpredictable whom nobody should provoke and who is in constant conflict with prison officers and inmates (cp. Sykes 1958/1974:99). In context of Benjamin’s biographical self interpretations, this image, which is also tied to masculine stereotypes, conceals a bundle of biographical conflicts. The bemoaned loss of a carefree childhood points to two tracks accompanying his constant fight for acknowledgement. One of the tracks leads to the discrepancy between family history and family image. He de-

mands social acknowledgement and respectability for the family even after the its breaking up, suggesting how strongly the family is tied to his own self-image. The second track consists of repeated scenarios of overtaking at school which are not to be underestimated concerning their influence on Benjamin's patterns of action. Violence becomes the resource of an angry self-defence against the official institutional norms. Again, Benjamin does not meet the demands of the institution, at the same time depending on institutional acknowledgement. It is part of his biographical pattern of action that he forfeits being acknowledged by falling back on violence – but it is also part of the way he is dealt with by the institution. This dynamic proves to be an interactive trap which is reproduced in the prison context. 'Violence', to Benjamin Schreiber, is a category of identity. This category is compulsively unambiguous and only just covers up childlike fears of failure and loss. The social consequences of Benjamin's orientation towards violence therefore are not less shaping for Benjamin's as well as his adversaries' and victims' perspectives. Masculine solitariness, combined with the self-identification as a victorious fighter, becomes a container for unfulfilled desires. These are revealed in Benjamin's statement: 'Well, actually, I never wanted to grow up.' (II)

Clemens Dettmer: 'Anybody can hit, [but] it is more interesting to discuss matters' – Abstinence of violence between addiction and isolation

In contrast to Carsten Decker and Benjamin Schreiber, Clemens Dettmer emphasises his abstinence of violent behaviour in prison. The twenty-one year-old Clemens is convicted of extortion by means of force. He sums up his attitude towards violence in prison as follows: 'Anybody can hit, it is more interesting to discuss matters'. (I) His rejection of violence is accompanied by a differentiation of fellow inmates, especially those who fall back on 'brute force' to assert oneself against the others. Instead, Clemens relies on his eloquence. This is how he substantiates his superiority to inmates who hit. Even if he is defeated in a conflict – in his view, he still is the stronger one, as the following quotation makes clear:

'He couldn't take the way I talked to him. (I: Hmhm) He probably knew it, too, so he felt stupid in the situation, you know (I: Hmhm) he couldn't keep up with me. So he had to employ brute force again, you know.' (I)

The scene results in Clemens being shown as a superior victim, although he is defeated – he is literally beaten and has to pay a tribute of tobacco. Nevertheless, he perceives himself as being eloquent and clever, while his opponent seems weak and behaves awkwardly. Cleverness is more precious than violence. Abstaining from violent behaviour is not an expression of cowardice or weakness, but a means to consequent distinction: Clemens Dettmer is not like the other prisoners. He refers to a superior difference beyond the usual images of victim and aggressor. Correspondingly, he never mentions any important relationships to fellow inmates, and he has nothing to say about the subcultural prison codex. Clemens

appears to conform to institutional rules and regulations. He articulates his self-concept of being 'different' in the context of interpreting the current imprisonment as his 'very last chance'.

'If I don't make use of it, of this really very last chance ... I've had many chances, residential care and then a project where I stayed abroad and social care again, everything. It is the very last chance in here.' (I)

Imprisonment, accordingly, seems to be the last of various turning points in a long career of deviance or delinquency. This résumé also reminds of the metaphor of the last straw somebody clings to. Emphatically, Clemens tries to conjure up his biographical turning back. The emphasis is connected to his rejection of addiction, because imprisonment at the same time means a withdrawal of illegal drugs like cocaine and heroin. So the 'very last chance' also refers to existential questions of survival in the context of many years of consuming various substances – the 'chance' lies in abstinence. The closeness of abstaining from both violence and drugs is obvious: Due to the effects of withdrawal, Clemens Dettmer is physically weak at the beginning of his imprisonment. Inevitably, he has to look for different strategies of self-assertion. But the fact that he explains his violent crimes and offences against property with his addiction is even more essential for his emphatic rejection of others. By breaking the habits of consumption, it is also necessary for him to change the patterns of action which exist as a result of his addiction.

Thus, violent inmates confront Clemens Dettmer with the concept of life he had for himself before being imprisoned. Clemens' rejection of other inmates also concerns 'the other' inside himself. Following this thought, the next interview passage can be read as a projection of his own inner conflicts onto others.

'Yes, yes. "I am the best" and they probably can't look themselves in the eye outside if they got beat up once in here. (I: Hmhm) Mate from outside might have seen it, right. (I: Yes, hmhm) Probably that's their problem.' (I)

Is it not also Clemens' problem? What about his future reputation (in prison as well as outside)? Does abstinence lead him the way to a utopian self-concept as a man – beyond collective rituals of acknowledgement which are based on brutality? In context of these questions, his strict rejection of violence can be understood as an expression of a despairing attempt to conjure up a new biographical self. In doing so, he falls back on a knowledge of rules which – for the past – shows him to be experienced in fighting within the masculine pecking order. At the same time, he wants to turn his back on those rituals, because they directly correspond to his experience of addiction. Accordingly, Clemens' rejection of violence and drugs signifies to a striving for autonomy. In prison, this ambition is accompanied with a strong adapting to and conforming with official norms.

The latent affinity of addiction and brutality on the one hand and abstinence of drugs and violence on the other refers to a deeper tension: It is the conflict between autonomy and addiction or dependency. In prison, Clemens solves the conflict by moving towards a clearly emphasised autonomy. This is all the more



remarkable as his intense striving for independence and differentiation is expressed in an (institutional) context of extremely limited autonomy. Not surprisingly, Clemens talks very little of institutional restrictions – he is able to clearly classify the institution due to years of experiences in residential care. It is, nevertheless, striking that he conforms and subordinates. Even in situations which offer room to negotiate, Clemens remains passive, ignoring for example the chance to obtain favourite leisure activities. Opposite his vehement rejection of fellow inmates, there is a high acceptance of institutional conditions and restrictions. Clemens Dettmer seems to adapt his self presentation to socially required norms, suited to the expectations of the person he talks to. The result is the image of a young man who forswears his past and wants to conjure up a new life the circumstances and conditions of which he himself can hardly imagine. This becomes clear when he talks about apprenticeship and work: In prison, he attends school with great commitment and graduates second best of the class. His preferred choice of career, however, remains vague and changes quickly.

Clemens' striving for autonomy proves to be neither an exuberant future plan (like the one Carsten Decker articulates) nor does he cling to strategies of violence to assert himself (like Benjamin Schreiber). Clemens rather tries to make his way briskly away from former conditions, but nothing concrete emerges instead. Rejection and differentiation, autonomy, addiction and adaptation or conformity turn out to be a dangerous mixture of biographical discontinuities: parental dependence on alcohol, a cruel foster family, staying in various institutions of social help and control – the only biographical continuity can be found in changing addictions and dependencies instead of enduring relationships or attachments.<sup>18</sup>

Clemens Dettmer wants to belong, and he has a great ability to adapt to bad conditions. This is expressed in his idealising alliance with the drinking mother as well as in his drifting between diverse youth cultures. From nazi-skin head to techno-fan to member of the village drug scene – Clemens drifts through the world. It does not become clear why he leaves a group – is he excluded? Does he look for new and different contexts, or is he too late in discovering the limitations of joint activities, and then ostracised? This seems to be the case concerning his techno friends. In context of raves and parties, he becomes acquainted with illegal drugs. His continuing and increasing drug consumption, however, is disapproved of and regarded as exaggerated by his peers.

The self conception Clemens Dettmer articulates in prison is based on an unresolved conflict. This conflict, again, is centred on a little developed interchanging relationship between autonomy and attaching. His emphasised and at the same time empty reference to autonomy by difference signals a conflict of

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18 There is another case example in the study that illustrates the effects of a high level of biographical discontinuity on basic adolescent conflicts of autonomy – to be found in Bereswill 2000.

belonging: Autonomy, it seems, can only be obtained in absoluteness, and crumbling relationships change into dependency and addiction. Imprisonment, being the 'very last chance', intersects the pattern by forming an outer breaking with drugs and violence. It remains open in what way this outer turning point influences his ability of coping with inner brittleness. The institutional anti-violence discourse is reflected in Clemens' absolute rejection of violence. This absoluteness seems not to be an expression of biographical change. Instead, it points to continuing biographical experiences of conflict. The continuity lies in a biographically necessary capacity to adapt to changing demands of how to act. This ability is connected with Clemens' hope to be able to free himself of former addictions and dependencies. His biographical dynamics are encoded in the ideal of a from now on abstinent and sensible young man, who tries to reject the 'brutal' patterns of masculinity of his former life. His maxim 'discuss instead of hit' refers to a utopian concept of self. This concept is characterised by autonomy and self-control – in contrast to real experiences of addiction, dependency and violence. In this conception, Clemens takes no account of the aspect of attachment and relationships.

#### 4 Masculinity and violence – an obstinate relationship

The comparison of the three case examples reveals different aspects regarding the corresponding patterns of interpretation of violence and the young men's biographical self interpretation. Carsten Decker's attitude towards violence is characterised by a profound ambivalence. At the same time, he is perfectly integrated in the inmate subculture as well as in the socio-therapeutic relationships of the institution. He sees himself as a man who develops within relationships of learning to other men. Biographical autonomy is tied to relationships and belonging. In his accounts of prison, violence on the one hand represents Carsten's self-understood identification with subcultural rules and ideals. On the other hand, violence is an anchorage for biographical conflicts, in which gender differences and positions of victim and aggressor intersect.

Benjamin Schreiber's exuberant and (self) destructive identification with the cliché of the victorious and assertive solitary fighter corresponds to biographical loneliness. In this case, autonomy is a fought over and endangered moment of individual action. It is associated with the defence of status and the repulsion of humiliation. As a last consequence, the striving for biographical independence and acknowledgement becomes less important than Benjamin's desire for a child-like carelessness. The masculine cliché of the hard-boiled and almost invincible solitary fighter thus conceals a strongly contrasting motif. This counter-image is associated with a craving for past family relationships. The concept of the playful and caring father is especially important. Benjamin Schreiber combines two self-conceptual aspects in his identification with this character: His self-image as an

ambitious and victorious fighter secretly links with the father's child-like and enthusiastic play. It is not probable that this biographical subtext will become conscious during imprisonment to frustrate the lonely 'ball buster' cliché.

By rejecting collective masculine ideals, Clemens Dettmer does more than just superficially conform to socially desired attitudes towards violence. His rejection of violent acts also represents his hope to free himself of former addictions. Clemens perceives the young men's patterns of interpretation and action within and outside prison in a very differentiated way. This shows how hard he tries to abandon a part of his own development. Violence, drug addiction, and lack of attachment – these phenomena stand for the experience of continuing biographical discontinuities, which are not least accompanied with a great ability to adapt to new contexts and connections. Clemens Dettmer's utopian concept of himself as a sensible and eloquent young man who abstains from violence turns out to be a masculine ideal of autonomy. Its backside shows unresolved addictions and conflict strategies which are specific for the environment he lives in. His strict contrasting of autonomy versus addiction and dependency reveals a gap: Relationships and belongings remain precarious. On a very general level, Clemens strives for a middle-class ideal of masculinity which associates autonomy with masculinity and links attachment with femininity. But beneath the culturally handed down image of a rational masculine subject lie his experiences with and the fear of addictions and dependencies.

Following a psychodynamically inspired biographical approach leads close to the multi-faceted and complex patterns of subjectivity violence is related to. A conflict-focused interpretation of different cases gives deep insights into the biographical self-contradictions and the struggles for autonomy young men in prison have to cope with. Every case shows how these conflicts are shaped by violence in prison and by cultural stereotypes of gender. Constructions of gender and violence reinforce each other on the level of everyday action. Comparing each biographical process to another we find that violence and gender are not in such a close relationship as it seems to be. Even on the level of context-bound (inter-)action in prison violence shows its subjective dimensions. Reflecting on these dimensions strengthen the argument that gender and violence or violence and masculinity don't explain each other. The narratives of the young men show how they encode each other. The biographical meaning of gender goes beyond that of violence and the other way round.

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## Liste der KFN-Forschungsberichte (Stand Februar 2003)

Die Forschungsberichte werden im Folgenden in der Reihenfolge ihres Erscheinens aufgelistet. In dieser Liste sind hier nur die letzten zehn Forschungsberichte aufgeführt. Eine vollständige Liste kann beim Sekretariat des KFN angefordert werden.

Die Berichte können, nach Rücksprache mit der Institutsbibliothek, im KFN eingesehen werden. Sie können - sofern sie nicht vergriffen sind - auch auf Anfrage (bitte dabei Nr. des Forschungsberichts angeben!) gegen Erstattung des Selbstkostenpreises sowie der anfallenden Portokosten zugesandt werden. Bestellungen sind zu richten an: Kriminologisches Forschungsinstitut Niedersachsen e.V. (KFN), Frau Bergmann, Lützerodestr. 9, 30161 Hannover. Telefonische Anfragen werden unter 0511-348360 beantwortet. E-mail-Anfragen können an folgende Adresse gesandt werden [kfn@kfn.uni-hannover.de](mailto:kfn@kfn.uni-hannover.de). Die Kosten für Kopien (0,05 € pro Seite), falls der Forschungsbericht nicht gebunden ist, trägt ebenfalls der Besteller.

- 76 PFEIFFER, C. & WETZELS, P. (1999). *The structure and development of juvenile violence in Germany: a proposition paper based on current research findings.* (gebunden; 4,09 Euro).
- 77 HOSSER, D. & GREVE, W. (1999). *Gefängnis und die Folgen. Identitätsentwicklung und kriminelles Handeln während und nach Verbüßung einer Jugendstrafe.* JuSt-Bericht Nr. 3. (gebunden; 10,23 Euro)
- 78 BERESWILL, M. (1999). *Gefängnis und Jugendbiographie. Qualitative Zugänge zu Jugend, Männlichkeitsentwürfen und Delinquenz.* JuST-Bericht Nr. 4. (gebunden; 7,67 Euro).
- 79 BERESWILL, M. (1999). *Was ist denn das für'n Kindergarten hier. Die biographische Positionierung eines Jugendlichen in einer geschlossenen Anstalt.* JuST-Bericht Nr. 5 (gebunden; 4,09 Euro)
- 80 PFEIFFER, C. & WETZELS, P./ENZMANN, D. (1999): *Innerfamiliäre Gewalt gegen Kinder und Jugendliche und ihre Auswirkungen.* (gebunden; 6,14 Euro)
- 81 PFEIFFER, C. & WETZELS, P. (2000): *Junge Türken als Täter und Opfer von Gewalt.* (gebunden; 4,09 Euro)
- 82 BERESWILL, M. (Hrsg.) (2001): *Haft (er) leben, Zentrale Überlebensstrategien und biographische Selbstentwürfe männlicher Jugendlicher in Haft.* JuST-Bericht Nr. 6 (gebunden; 6,65 Euro)
- 83 OHLEMACHER, T. u.a. (2001): *Anti-Aggressivitäts-Training und Legalbewährung: Versuch einer Evaluation* (gebunden; 5,11 Euro)
- 84 SUHLING, St. & SCHOTT, T. (2001): *Der Anstieg der Gefangenenzahlen in Deutschland – Folge der Kriminalitätsentwicklung oder wachsender Strafhärte?* (gebunden; 9,20 Euro)
- 85 BERESWILL, M. (2002): *Doing violence, concepts of masculinity, and biographical subjectivity - three case studies* (gebunden; 2,25 €).
- 86 BOSOLD, C., OHLEMACHER, T., KIRCHBERG, W. & LAUTERBACH, O. (2002): *Polizei im Wandel. Das Erhebungsinstrument der standardisierten Befragung der Vollzugsbeamtinnen und -beamten der niedersächsischen Polizei 2001* (gebunden; 7,90 €)
- 87 OHLEMACHER, T. u.a. (2002): *Polizei im Wandel. Abschlussbericht der standardisierten Befragung der Vollzugsbeamtinnen und -beamten der niedersächsischen Polizei 2001 sowie erste Ergebnisse der Gruppendiskussionen 2002* (gebunden; 9,65 €)



PFEIFFER/DELZER/ENZMANN/WETZELS (1998): *„Ausgrenzung, Gewalt und Kriminalität im Leben junger Menschen - Kinder und Jugendliche als Opfer und Täter„*

(enthalten in der Dokumentation „Kinder und Jugendliche als Opfer und Täter, Prävention und Reaktion“, Dokumentation des 24. *Deutschen Jugendgerichtstag 1998, DVJJ Schriftenreihe, Band 30, 35,- €.*

zu bestellen bei der Deutschen Vereinigung für Jugendgerichte und Jugendgerichtshilfen, Lützerodestraße 9, 30161 Hannover, Tel.: 0511/3483640, Fax: 0511/3180660.

**„Zur Struktur und Entwicklung der Jugendgewalt in Deutschland“**

Thesenpapier auf Basis aktueller Forschungsbefunde von Christian Pfeiffer/Peter Wetzels

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