

# Favoring mentalization with drug addicted prisoners: theoretical reflections based on action research

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## Abstract

*Background.* Prisoners suffering from drug addiction are in a special situation: they are permanently oscillating between consciousness of reality and preservation of their illusory dreams. One goal of arts psychotherapy in prison consists in developing their capacity to elaborate their inner tensions on an imaginary and symbolic level and in favouring their meta-cognitive capacities. If there is no restructuring process of this kind, they risk having a relapse as soon as they are released.

*Methods.* We present some results of a cross-sectional study, using data of a semi-structured biographical interview and of Rotter's Sentences Blank, as well as of a prospective longitudinal study, exploring the pictures and literary texts created in the context of arts psychotherapeutic sessions. Original rating scales were created in the phenomenological and structural tradition. They allow passing from qualitative analysis to quantification and the use of non-parametric inferential, correlational and multidimensional statistical procedures.

*Results.* Based on the evolution of the pictorial and literary production, we extract the first indicators of a possible relaunch of the mentalization process.

*Conclusion.* Our discussion stresses the possibilities but also the limits of arts therapies in prison. The extracted indicators can be useful for future research.

**Keywords:** arts psychotherapy, drug addiction, mentalization, prison, therapeutic process

## Die Mentalisierung bei drogensüchtigen Gefängnisinsassen verbessern: theoretische Reflexionen auf der Grundlage praktischer Forschung

### Zusammenfassung

*Hintergrund.* Drogenabhängige Gefängnisinsassen befinden sich in einer Ausnahmesituation: Sie wechseln ständig zwischen dem Bewusstsein der Realität und dem Erhalten ihrer illusorischen Vorstellungen. Kunsttherapie im Gefängnis besteht u.a. darin, die Fähigkeiten der Gefangenen zur besseren Wahrnehmung ihrer inneren Spannungen auf einer imaginären und symbolischen Ebene zu entwickeln sowie ihre metakognitiven Fähigkeiten zu verbessern. Findet kein derartiger restrukturierender Prozess statt, ist das Rückfallrisiko nach der Entlassung hoch.

*Methoden.* Dieser Artikel referiert Ergebnisse einer Querschnittstudie (basierend auf Daten eines halbstrukturierten biographischen Interviews und Rotters Sentences Blank) sowie einer prospektiven Längsschnittstudie, welche Bilder und Texte untersucht, die während der kunsttherapeutischen Sitzungen angefertigt wurden. Die Skalen zur Auswertung wurden in der phänomenologisch-strukturellen Tradition entwickelt. Mithilfe der Skalen ist es möglich, von der qualitativen Analyse zur Anwendung nichtparametrischer schlussfolgernder, korrelationaler und multidimensionaler Prozeduren überzugehen.

*Ergebnisse.* Basierend auf der Weiterentwicklung der bildnerischen und literarischen Qualität wurden die ersten möglichen Indikatoren für die Entwicklung eines Mentalisierungsprozesses identifiziert.

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*Schlussfolgerung.* Die Untersuchung betont die Möglichkeiten, aber auch die Grenzen der Kunsttherapie mit Strafgefangenen. Die genannten Indikatoren können sich als hilfreich für künftige Forschung auf diesem Gebiet erweisen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Kunsttherapie, Drogenabhängigkeit, Mentalisierung, Gefängnis, therapeutischer Prozess

## Introduction

Treatment options for drug addicted prisoners have to consider their background which is often marked by an interaction of traumata, personal violence and shame (Milliken, 2008; Friestad et al., 2014; Marotta, 2017).

Since long, international literature showed that, in order to explain the phenomenon of drug addiction, the complex interaction of factors belonging to different levels has to be taken into account (Charles-Nicolas, 1991; Binder; 2004; Muscat et al., 2007; Spilka et al., 2012). A schema similar to the one presented by Garner and Garfunkel (1980) for eating disorders could be proposed. The author indeed distinguishes between predisposition factors, facilitation factors and chronification factors.

In the case of drug addiction, the predisposition factors concern the personal vulnerability prior to encountering the drug, a vulnerability linked to precocious traumata (Milliken, 2008; Zammit et al., 2010), the facilitation factors are the period of the identity quest of adolescence, the ideologies glorifying drugs, the friends' incitements, the break of the relationship with the parents (Welch & Linehan, 2002), whereas the chronification factors correspond to the neuropsychological effects of the substance itself (Karila et al., 2004; Solowij et al., 2012; Zammit et al., 2012), but also to the dynamics of the social relationships that are established in the drug environment (Miscat et al., 2007) and to the effects of belonging to a marginalised group (Reynaud, 2006; Schiltz et al., 2007).

According to Therrat and Escande (2003), the predisposition factors are often located in impulsiveness or in ancient narcissistic wounds. On the other hand, an insecure or disorganised attachment (Fonagy et al., 2007) can be a risk factor, as it is often associated with a deficiency of emotional control and with an impairment of the mentalization capacities that predispose the adolescent to heightened psychological stress during his day-to-day social interactions (Mc Cusker, 2006; Taylor, 2010).

As to categorical psychopathology, international research papers quote the borderline and narcissistic personalities among the risk factors (Gunderson & Gabbard, 2000; Kernberg et al., 2000; Trull et al., 2002). On the other hand, the relationships between antisocial personality and drug addiction have been

stressed (Fischer et al., 2003; Darke et al., 2004). These persons' heightened vulnerability seems to be linked to their weak tolerance to frustration. Current research explored also the complex interactions between the use of cannabis and schizophrenia (Ametepe, 2003; Castle et al., 2012). The drug can be used for self-medication purposes by those presenting a latent psychosis; however, the effect is two-way. The positive symptoms of schizophrenia (delusion, hallucinations) can be quickened while the negative symptoms (social inhibition, cognitive deficiency, anhedonia) can be improved, according to the patients' appreciation (Potin et al., 2003; Le Poulichet, 2011), but not according to recent controlled research (Zammit et al., 2012).

Drug addicted people end up developing a behaviour of self-sabotage of their potentialities (Chabrol, 2000) and are quickly trapped in a vicious circle, not only because of the reduction of the social relations, but also because of the effects of the drugs on their personality and cognitive functioning. Let us remember that one has to distinguish between short-term effects – hallucinogenous, euphorising, relaxing or anaesthetizing – and long-term effects: increased irritability, instability, dysphoria, motivational deficiency, disturbances of judgment and memory (Reynaud, 2003), hence changes that in turn have a negative effect on the quality of interpersonal relations (Lindsmith, 2008).

The pernicious evolution towards chronic drug addiction leads, for some regular users, to a stay in a penitentiary setting, as chronic drug use can be associated with drug dealing and antisocial behaviours that are liable to prosecution (breaking and entering, armed robbery, violence against people, etc.), even if the causal connection between drugs and crime can be two-way (Brochu, 2006).

One of the major problems that any type of therapeutic measure in prison has to face is the weakness of the personalised feeling of guilt and the major presence of archaic guilt (Patrick, 2007). In his pioneering study on antisocial psychopathy, Flavigny (1977) wrote that these persons felt guilty of their existence but did not feel responsible for the wrongs they really had committed towards other people. A diffuse feeling of unworthiness would push them to sabotage their proper efforts or the ones of people trying to reintegrate them into normal life. One of the persons described by