Between care and punishment.

Ethnographies of secure units for compulsory care in Sweden

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Introduction

Sweden has a long tradition of institutional care of various forms, ranging back to at least the seventeenth century (see Söderlind 1999:15, Bolin 1992:13). The special homes for residential care, or secure units, in Sweden are the institutional form that is the most drastic intervention that can be used in the care of teenagers. These residential homes are aimed at caring for "delinquent youth" with various problems such as criminal or violent behavior, substance abuse, and other behavior that puts them or others at risk. Placing teenagers in a secure unit is a form of imprisonment, yet not formally a punishment. Compulsory care is rather conceptualized as protection for so called "delinquent youth". Teenagers at risk do not get sentenced to a stay in secure units, yet they do not choose to go there since the care is compulsory. Secure units are therefore hybrids of care and punishment, and in my work I describe this hybridization as two logics articulated together: a *logic of care* and a *logic of* punishment (see Glynos & Howarth 2007, Mol 2008). In previous literature on this subject a division between delinquent and dependent youth and children is made (see Söderlind 1999:13). Different types of institutions has targeted either one or the other of these categories, and this is still the case today. But as other scholars have shown, the division between delinquent and dependent is often hard to make, and in reality most institutions have a little of both (Söderlind 1999:13, Andresen et.al. 2011:22). It is also hard to establish what is meant with the concept "delinquency", since it is very context-dependent, and also dependent on such categories as for example class, gender, race and age. In other words; I understand delinquency as a construction being made in the intersections of the above mentioned categories, through everyday practices in institutional settings and through discursive articulations in society at large. But the focus here is on the discussion of dependency and delinquency; of care and punishment, and on how they come together in institutional everyday work.

In this article I shall discuss excerpts from the ethnographic material collected during fieldwork in the secure unit I refer to as Viby. I shall develop on the logics I find most evident in my material and I shall also discuss the role of fantasy in institutional work. Further, I shall discuss methodological issues, of self-reflexivity and research position, relevant to my work.

In the introductory sections I will develop on the concept of logics and the research strategy of articulation and retroduction, to further explain how I understand these concepts. But first something about research questions, that guides the fieldwork and the analysis, and the focus of my research.

Research questions and interests

Compulsory care is a paradoxical concept in itself. How can you care for someone while doing something against his or her will? This simple, and maybe somewhat naïve, question is one of the points of departure in my dissertation project in ethnology, and during fieldwork in a secure unit for "delinquent youth" I tried to focus on the "how" of this enterprise. In other words I focus on the practices and ideas of the staff working in this institution, with special attention given to the ways in which they handle the paradox of working in an environment for both care and punishment.

The focus on staff is intentional and is based on my interest in power relations. Most of the research in this field of study focuses on the youth; on various aspects of their lives such as their life-stories (see Berglund 1998), and on what methods and techniques that works in helping them to change their way of life (see Andreassen 2003). Little attention is directed towards the staff, even though they are a large and important part of the care given in the institutions. My aim is to give new perspectives on staff culture in secure units in Sweden. How do the staff conceptualize their work and the teenagers they work with? How do they find meaning in the work they do? To answer questions like that, I suggest, is also to say something about the situation of the youth that live in institutions. The youth is therefore not invisible in my work, but I intend to illuminate their situation from a different angle compared to most previous research.

In this paper I shall present examples from my ethnographic material and begin to address some of the questions, and intentions, raised above. First I shall give a brief overview of the theoretical framework used in this project. I will also discuss methods

and my own position as a researcher in this field of study. The discussion of theoretical framework, of methodology, and of the empirical material could be seen as three lines in the paper that will eventually lead up to a discussion of reflexivity, and of what the enterprise of reflexive reasoning can add to the analysis.

Theoretical framework

An overarching aim of the thesis is to map out and to analyze the logics that are constructing the institutional work. Another, yet related, aim of the thesis is to investigate power relations in the institutional setting by using a foucauldian concept of power and a discourse theoretical logics approach. Concepts that help me in the analysis of this empirical material are therefore mainly *power*, *logics* and *fantasy*. Taking a step back, one could say that the overarching theoretical framework is poststructural and that the main theoretical influence has been Michel Foucault's theories of power (see Foucault 1987) and Jason Glynos and David Howarths discourse theoretical logics approach (Glynos & Howarth 2007).

I suggest that compulsory care is a very illustrative empirical example of the understanding of power suggested by Foucault. Compulsory care consists of two interrelated practices: *punishment* and *protection* (see table 1 below), as mentioned above. It is not either or, but both at the same time, although sometimes protection is foregrounded and sometimes punishment is, in the institutional practice. Power is understood as something active and productive, and something that is not exclusively good or bad. Power and knowledge is intimately linked together in that power generates knowledge and knowledge generates power (Foucault 1987:296-297). An example of that, related to my research, is the secure units where information is collected when the staff observes the residing youth, observations that are made possible through the social intervention of compulsory care and the power relations in the institution. The concept of power, developed by Foucault, is a very important point of departure in my work. Here, I will not use it explicitly, but rather try to develop on how Foucaults line of reasoning corresponds and can be brought up through the logics approach developed by Glynos and Howarth (2007).

In compulsory care punishment and protection co-exist, but what aspect that is more relevant varies from situation to situation. It is related to practices and ideas situated in the institutional work, and the one thing or the other is made relevant through the

process of *articulation*. Articulation is a practice where meaning is partially fixed through the construction of nodal points (Glynos & Howarth 2007:179, Laclau & Mouffe 1985:113). It is therefore a concept that can be used both in the explanation of empirical phenomena of study, and in the discussion of research strategy and methodology. Just as informants, or research participants, researchers are also putting together elements of meaning into a seemingly coherent whole.

Logics is a unit of explanation that allows me to see what makes the practices of the secure unit of residential care "'work' or 'tick'" (Glynos & Howarth 2007:15). Logics, in Glynos and Howarths understanding of the concept, "refers to the purposes, rules and ontological presuppositions that render a practice or regime possible and intelligible" (Glynos & Howarth 2007:15). To put it differently, logics can be understood as a system of rules that affect what is possible to do or think in a particular context (Lundgren 2012:59-60). Different types of logics speak to different dimensions of social reality: social logics, political logics and fantasmatic logics (Glynos & Howarth 2007:15). Social logics are about characterizing practices in a particular field of study; logics are therefore very context dependent, and explanations using the concept of logic must always take its point of departure in contextualized self-interpretations of the people in the field of study (Glynos & Howarth 2007:30, 49). Political logics is about examining how a particular practice, or regime of practices, were institutionalized and how it is contested (Glynos & Howarth 2007:15), with the purpose of gaining knowledge of how it came to be. One could say that social logics are more concerned with synchronic aspects of social practices, while political logics are more about analyzing practices along a diachronic axis (Glynos & Howarth 2007:141). Fantasmatic logics, or logics of fantasy, "provide the means to understand why specific practices and regimes 'grip' subjects' (Glynos & Howarth 2007:145, 107). In my work, the dimension of fantasy is what I am most focused on. Although I need to map out, and to analyze, social and political logics as well to be able to distinguish the fantasmatic aspects of my empirical material. The role of fantasy in social practice is to reinforce the natural character of that practice and to conceal the radical contingency of social reality (Glynos & Howarth 2007:145, 147). Logics of fantasy have a role in completing "the void in the subject and the structure of social relations by bringing about closure" (Glynos & Howarth 2007:146). I shall develop further on this concept in the discussion of my empirical material below.

Following a view on reality as *radically contingent* (see Glynos & Howarth 2007:15), articulatory practices are what constitutes reality, and is also what can potentially constitute it in radically different ways (Glynos & Howarth 2007:179). According to this perspective there is no essential or given reality. It could, and can, always be constituted in a different way. Applying this line of thought upon the process of explanation in research leads us to the concept of *retroduction*.

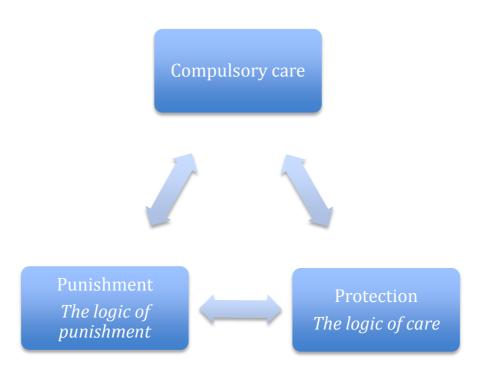


Table: 1

Method: Ethnographic research in closed environments

Retroduction is a research strategy and method that takes its point of departure in the view on reality as radically contingent, as stated above. Jason Glynos and David Howarth uses the concept "retroductive circle" to explain this strategy of to-and-fro reasoning on multiple levels (Glynos & Howarth 2007:40). Retroduction implies that meaning can only be temporarily and partially fixed, as was discussed in the section above, and that conclusions can always be reworked after being scrutinized. One should therefore move to and from the field of investigation, always prepared to ask new questions and pose different models of explanation. This also means that the exposure of ones work, that lets other people read and comment, is also an important

part of the retroductive research method. The retroductive way of conducting research differs from the strategy of approaching the field of study with an already finished hypothesis, for example. There is no such thing as a final result, only temporary and partial results that the researcher should be prepared to re-work if necessary. I view the retroductive working method as a way to be very loyal to the empirical material but at the same time theoretically driven.

The ethnographic methods used, in collecting material, are participatory observations in a special residential home for boys in the ages of 14 to 21¹, and interviews with members of the staff in that same institution. I participated in everyday activities a couple of times every week for approximately four months. Some of the interviews with staff members were carried out before the observations took place, and some after I finished my participation. This allowed me to use the strategy of retroduction in that I posed new questions along the way as new knowledge was gained. The retroductive way of working also allowed me to pose new questions to already collected material after receiving new theoretical insights; from academic conversations and literature studies for example.

Research is above all a practice (see Gray 2003:57), and besides the practices of interviewing and observing, reading and writing is also a part of the research practice. I analyze my material during the writing process and while getting input from what others have written before me. Another important thing that is a part of the research practice is reflecting about oneself in relation to the field of study. The question of self-reflexivity will be further discussed in the next section.

Research position, reflexivity and the production of knowledge in "difficult" fields

My own road to this subject is personal on more than one level. My mother is a

psychologist with long experience of working with "delinquent youth", my husband
works in a secure unit and I have myself a few years of working experience from
institutions such as the one I study. Without my personal experience and relations to
the field I believe that this fieldwork would not have been possible, since it helped me
gain access to this concealed world. That the world of secluded institutions was/is
visible to me, but not to most others, is also one of the main points of my work.

 $^{^1}$ This particular institution accepted boys, or young men, in ages ranging from 14 to 21. During my fieldwork most of the teenagers living in the institution were in the ages 16 to 18.

One of my more personal goals with this study is to show this paradoxical world to other people than the ones that are directly involved in it in one way or the other.

But, more than a confession, the reflexive discussion should be about how ones experience and prior understandings affect the analysis and the knowledge produced. And it should also be about ones reactions and feelings that appear during contacts with the field. When are you as a researcher happy, angry, sad or afraid during fieldwork, and what can those feelings tell us about the field?

In my case, my prior understanding of the field of study sometimes meant that I shared an understanding of something with my research participants. I felt like I was a part of the field in that I already knew how to dress and how to behave in order to be accepted (or not) (see Gray 2003:87). At the same time the common experiences and understandings that I shared with my research participants; that sometimes led to a mutual identification, is not all there is to the story. Even though I might have been one of them, I was not anymore once I entered the field as a researcher. The "resources of the university, a theoretical and intellectual language and conceptual thinking", as Ann Gray puts it, had made me into another person (Gray 2003:50).

I shall now move on to discuss a few empirical examples that highlight the paradox of compulsory care and the intertwinement of punishment and care in the secure unit referred to here as Viby. After that I will return to the questions of reflexivity and research position in a summarizing discussion.

Care versus punishment: paradoxes of treatment and the idea of progress

Secure units are not prisons, nor are they hospitals aimed at treating illness, nor are they schools. Yet, secure units bear traces of all the areas mentioned above. One could say that secure units are places where logics of punishment, care and pedagogy meet and are articulated together. In this section I shall explore on this, often paradoxical, status of the secure units that I have begun to sketch out here. The focus of the discussion is on care and punishment, and I do not develop on the pedagogical aspects here. They are to be discussed further in the forthcoming thesis.

I did fieldwork in the secure unit referred to here as Viby. In the field of secure units the concept of *treatment* plays an important part. Many different practices and ideas are a part of the broad concept of treatment: for example medication, routines and structure in the everyday life of the institutionalized youth, and various forms of techniques for modifying and changing behavior. In most cases the staff are not very

highly educated, but through working experience they learn some methods and techniques that are all sprung out of the cognitive-behavioral understanding of human beings². Most of the time the staff are concerned with changing things that you can measure, behavior that is visible, such as how much a young person is using bad language, how good he is at making his bed, and if he is sleeping or not. So treatment, in the setting of secure units, often equals behavioral treatment.

Treatment also equals *progression* when the staff talks about it, and this in more than one way. For example, Anders who has been working for about fifteen years in institutional work, talks about progress in the way the staff is working now compared to then. He says that a lot of changes have taken place since he first started working in Viby and talks about the past in the following way:

We had more confrontations. I mean in the late nineties. Not more penalization, but it was more like that in those days. If they did something wrong [the teenagers], bang! Solitary for 24 hours [...] Now, as soon as they calm down, we let them come out. Before, if we had said 24 hours, that was what happened. Much, much more confrontation. A lot of people working that where really large. Guys that is. Maybe that reflected back on the mentality of the staff (Anders).

The now and the then are contrasted in the quote of Anders. Time is therefore a central part of his narrative, where he is constructing institutional work. He means that the past of the secure unit was characterized by being keener on confrontation compared to how it is today. He does not want to call it penalization or punishment, but admits that the compulsory measure of solitary or isolation often was used as a form of punishment in the past. It is not the methods that have changed, but the way they are used have changed compared to before. So the use of isolation of teenagers is not in itself to be understood as either care or punishment. It is through articulatory practices that the logic of care or the logic of punishment is highlighted.

Anders also mentions that the staff working back then had large and muscular bodies. This is something that other staff members talked about as well. Anders believes that this may have reflected back on the mentality of the people working in the institution, and connects muscularity, aggression and masculinity in his understanding of what the staff was like in the past. During my fieldwork muscularity,

 $^{^2}$ ART- Aggression replacement training, and MI- Motivational interviewing were two of the techniques used in Viby. ART and MI are both methods based on development psychology and ideas on human cognition and behavior.

aggression and masculinity were all factors that I found to be highly present. I would therefore not agree with Anders that they are things left in the past, even though I do not know anything about the degrees in this. It is of course possible that male aggression and muscularity was even more accentuated in the past compared to the present.

The male, muscular body was one of the most important tools for the staff and was something that they all related to in one way or the other. Male muscularity was believed to uphold security in the secure unit by preventing violence from the youth. When I spent time in the secure unit I sometimes felt uncomfortable with the aggressive atmosphere that I found to be very apparent. The type of masculinity that Anders refers to as something in the past was something I found to be present in institutional work today, and is also something that was a norm for the staff working there. Female staff members were an exception from this norm that had to justify their position in another way than male staff members. For example, the women in the institution talked about that they could do a good job even though they were not as strong as their male fellow workers. Instead they emphasized other qualities in themselves, such as being good listeners or being better at handling emotional problems that the teenagers had.

Returning to the quote from Anders above, progression in his interview is about progress of the institution as a whole. In Anders narrative the logic of punishment was more evident when he referred to the past, and the logic of care was more evident in his descriptions of work today. In his understanding this is a move from something worse to something better, and could therefore be understood as a forward facing process of development or progress.

Progression is also brought up in other ways in my empirical material. The following passage is an excerpt from my field notes where I have been participating in a meeting with staff of the institution, police and lawyers:

After a while I go with Azar to unlock the door for the police and the lawyers. The two policemen are interested in what kind of place Viby is. They ask if it is usually a calm environment, and how many teenagers that live there etc. One of the policemen says: "This is really a form of juvenile prison, isn't it?" He continues his line of reasoning by saying that the doors are just as locked here as in any prison. Azar doesn't argue against him, instead he confirms much of what the policeman is saying. Azar explains that the unit where he works is known as the "emergency ward" and

continues by saying that "some call it a custody, but we are not supposed to use that term". One of the policemen then asks him: "But is it only a custody while you wait for the next allocation?" "Absolutely not!" Azar says, and gives an example from the program activity where they have been discussing criminality and drug addiction in the morning. "You make them turn around", he says. "They might look back and think about what I said today, that is what we can hope for". When we have said our goodbyes to the policemen it is time for lunch (field notes April 2013).

In this passage, Azar refers to "the program activity" which is a method used in Viby to discuss issues deemed as important for the delinquent youth. The topics that were a part of the program activity during my participation was addiction, criminality, family and sexuality. They worked with one topic for one week at the time, and then they started over again. Typically the staff and youth watched a movie together that had something to do with the theme of that week, and after that they discussed some related questions. Other times one of the staff members held a lecture on a particular topic, and then they had a discussion. Before the meeting with police and lawyers, Azar had held a lecture on criminality where he talked about his personal experiences of being on the wrong side of the law. Having experiences like that was also something that was quite common among the members of the staff at Viby, and something that was believed to be an advantage in the work with treatment of delinquent youth.

The looking back that Azar talks about as what is meaningful in his job, is a way of talking about progress. This progress is what he hopes for in the work he does with the teenagers. He explains this to the policemen after one of them has been talking about the institution as a juvenile prison. Azar talks about progress as a way of contrasting the work in Viby to the penalty system, constructing the secure unit Viby as something different than a prison. Progress is what distinct Viby from a prison in the narrative of Azar.

Progress is present in the conceptualization of institutional work, both in the form of the institution as a whole moving forward and changing its methods and attitudes, and progress at the individual level. In western society the idea of development is present in many different contexts (see Hörnfeldt 2009). People and societies are supposed to develop in a continuous movement forward along a linear path. This idea, or discourse, of development is also evident in the institutional work in Swedish

residential homes. Development, or progress, is visible in the logic of care. The logic of care, where treatment is a key concept, aims at changing the individual and improve him or her. Through the right kind of treatment change will come.

The logic of punishment also implies change for the individual, although the means for reaching that change are different, and also the purpose of change differs. While the logic of care takes its point of departure in a wish to help individuals that are at fault in some way, the logic of punishment focuses on retaliation. Retaliation also aims at changing a dysfunctional behavior but does not do that through the emphatic care for others, but more through a moral stand of what is right and what is wrong. As I have suggested before, these two logics, of care and of punishment, is seldom viewable in pure form but rather articulated together. Elements of punishment or retaliation is therefore to be found in practices of care and of treatment in the secure unit Viby. It is important to point out that punishment is not an official purpose of the special residential homes, but it is something that is sometimes foregrounded in the institutional practices and in narratives of the staff.

Fantasmatic logics in an institutional setting- "To plant a seed"

As we have seen, the secure units are paradoxical and/or hybrid contexts where it is possible to articulate various opinions or purposes. The secure unit is not either an institution for care or for punishment: a logic of care and a logic of punishment is rather articulated together in different ways in the institutional setting. I have discussed the articulation of these two logics in relation to the concept of progress in the section above. Here I will develop on the strategies used by the staff in handling the intersections of care and punishment, and further discuss the concept of fantasy or fantasmatic logics in practices of care and punishment.

When the institutional workers talks about their motive force when it comes to work, almost everyone talks about wanting to help others. This can be understood as an articulation of the logic of care, where protection is more foregrounded than punishment. At the same time most of them say that the concrete confirmation of having done a good job is small. In the interviews, the staff often talked about not being able to see the results of ones work. They only worked with the youth a short

period of time³, and often not very much changed during that time in the teenagers' lives and behaviors. Anders expresses this line of thought in the following way:

As I usually say: I plant a seed. That is probably what I...I am not the one who reaps, harvests, like that. It is more like I plant a seed. And that is payment enough for me, to motivate me to keep on working (Anders).

The metaphor of being the one that plant a seed is a narrative figure that is reoccurring in several of the interviews, as in the example of Anders above. This narrative figure can also be understood as a fantasy that gives meaning to the institutional work. The concept of fantasy should not be misunderstood as being an illusion, but rather be understood as a narrative with ideological significance (see Glynos & Howarth 2007:145). Anders is saying that the idea of having planted a seed is enough motivation for him; that it is "payment enough", as he expresses it. The payment is not concrete since he will not get to see the effects of the work he is doing. Some of the other treatment workers are reasoning in the same manner as Anders and are pointing out that the effects of their work is something that will be visible later on. But not all of them use the metaphor of planting a seed.

Michelle is talking about one of the therapeutical methods that is part of the treatment program at Viby, referred to as "the program activity", and express it as follows:

If it is not rewarding right now, at least you have started to talk about it. They have put words on their feelings, they have put words on their thinking and they have opened up to someone other than themselves. That can be rewarding further on. I think that the first step is really important. I *believe* in the program activity and I *believe* that it will be really good when it is working the way it should. Precisely because it is meaningful, because it can provide something for the boys, like I said: if not now, then further on. That it is a beginning of something.

When Michelle talks about the program activity as being the start of something that can be rewarding in the future, it resembles the fantasy of the seed that will grow in the future. Michelle expresses this by saying that she *believes in* the program activity, and she puts emphasis on the word "believe". The treatment work can be viewed as a belief system that motivates the institutional workers by providing an image of the

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 $^{^{3}}$ The average time a young person stayed in a secure unit was approximately five months (statinst.se).

future where the results of treatment can be harvested. The belief in a positive future for the youth under treatment is expressed through the fantasy of *planting* a seed or *beginning* something meaningful. The ideological significance of narratives or fantasies like this is the concealment of other possible futures where things might not end so well for the youth in Viby.

The results of the treatment work in the secure units are rather poor when looking at for example the number of teenagers that return to their previous way of life after the stay at the institution. Claes Levin, a Swedish researcher of secure units, writes that about 80% of the boys and 50% of the girls relapsed into criminal behavior or substance abuse after staying at a secure unit (Levin 1998:263). When the staff in my study talks about the good they are doing they are not relying on empirical facts. It is rather the fantasy of doing well, of helping, which is at play here. This fantasy, often expressed through narratives of planting a seed or beginning something new, helps in legitimating the social practices of institutional work and in preventing the political dimension from reaching the surface (see Glynos & Howarth 2007:147). The fantasy of planting a seed, that will grow and give results in the future, is one that will not resist public official disclosure (see Glynos & Howarth 2007:148), as for example Levins results shows us (1998:263).

Conclusion, and some final words

In this article I have discussed some of the important issues of compulsory care of delinquent youth. I have proposed a model where compulsory care is understood as a twofold concept; equally consisting of both punishment and protection. I understand the two branches of compulsion as respectively a logic of care and a logic of punishment. These two logics are articulated together through institutional practices, and both of them can be either foregrounded or stay in the background depending on context. In the narratives of staff members the logic of care is foregrounded, for example through their ambition to help delinquent youth. The logic of punishment, on the other hand, is often downplayed or marked as something belonging in the past.

The role of fantasy in the context of institutional work is to conceal the ambivalent and problematic aspects of compulsory care. To believe in the work they are doing is something that provides meaning for the staff in the secure units, even if they never see concrete evidence that they are doing something good. The fantasy of planting a seed gives meaning to institutional work. The seed is hidden from view, yet the staff

believes that it is there and that it will be visible in the future. Progression, or development, is present as an aspect of this fantasy as well. The growth of a seed into a flower is a metaphorical narrative of change. Institutional work in secure units is about changing people from bad to good, and to treat delinquency. This fantasy of planting a seed also helps in concealing the aspects of punishment that are present in institutional work, and to highlight aspects of care instead.

The secure units of compulsory care provide interesting, yet challenging fields of research for scholars. In this article I have mentioned the male aggression that was characteristic of Viby, and that often accentuated my position as a woman first and foremost. In the thesis I intend to discuss more thoroughly the emotional aspects of ethnography in relation to my position in the field.

Finally, I would like to conclude by saying that self-reflexivity and other ethical considerations are crucial when studying closed or difficult fields such as prisons or other types of institutions for imprisonment. Especially since the knowledge produced in environments that are closed off from the public eye cannot be controlled by readers in the same way as knowledge from other fields of study. This calls for a thorough, careful and emphatic research process.

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