

# Identity as an older prisoner: findings from a qualitative study in Switzerland

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**Abstract** The increasing numbers of aging prisoners raise the issue of how they maintain their personal identity and self-esteem in light of long-standing detention. This study sought to answer this question since identity and self-esteem could influence mental and physical health. We conducted a secondary analysis of 35 qualitative interviews that were carried out with older inmates aged 51–75 years (mean age: 61 years) living in 12 Swiss prisons. We identified three main themes that characterized their identity: personal characterization of identity, occupational identity, and social identity. These main themes were divided into sub-themes such as familial network, retirement rights or subjective social position. Personal characterization of identity mostly happened through being part of a network of family and/or friends that supported them during imprisonment and where the prisoner could return to after release. Individual activities and behavior also played an important role for prisoners in defining themselves. Occupational identity was drawn from work that had been carried out either before or during imprisonment although in some cases the obligation to work in prison even after reaching retirement age was seen as a constraint. Social identity came from a role of mentor or counselor for younger inmates, and in a few cases older prisoners compared themselves to other inmates and perceived themselves as being in a higher social position. Identity was often expressed as a mix between positive and negative traits. Building on those elements during incarceration can contribute to better mental health of the individual

prisoner which in turn influences the chances for successful rehabilitation.

**Keywords** Identity · Self-esteem · Older prisoners · Incarceration · Mental health

## Introduction

Personal identity, self-concept and self-esteem are closely related concepts (Baumeister 2015), which aid an individual to cope with stress, trauma and misfortune (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Eriksson and Lindström 2007; see Steele 1988 cited in Baumeister 2005). Personal identity—an individual's concept of their self—is often classified using one's belonging to a certain group (Baumeister 2015). Self-concept—the individual's understanding of their self, that is, their interpretation of the self—may evolve with changing goals and ideological beliefs over the span of a person's lifetime. In contrast, self-esteem—the evaluation of the self—is rather stable over time. Ideally, the aging stage succeeds previous successful and fruitful lifecycle milestones such as creation of a family and completion of a career. To ground our study purpose, we briefly highlight different life events that contribute toward formation of identity for older adults in the community and present how incarceration disrupts this expected aging identity.

For Erikson and Erikson (1998), the eighth stage of psychosocial development, that is, the stage of late adulthood (from 65 years on) is identified with holding on to one's sense of wholeness and the belief of having led a significant life (experiencing integrity), as well as not fearing the idea that there might not be enough time to begin a different life course (avoiding despair). Individuals who succeed in both tasks are able to develop wisdom, including acceptance of

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the life lived, pride of past achievements and the fact that death is unavoidable and inescapable. Ideally, the aging stage follows previous successful and fruitful lifecycle milestones such as creation of a family and completion of a career. Graefe (2013) describes aging as a paradox and multidimensional experience, but states that the current ideal of “successful aging” may only be possible for a limited social group who fulfills three criteria: having necessary financial resources to be protected from precarious situations, cherishing autonomy, self-determination and self-regulation, and being in relatively good health until old age. This group may best be represented by urban middle- and upper-middle-class older individuals. In turn, this would mean that “unsuccessful aging” may be the case for individuals belonging to less fortunate social strata. This corresponds to the finding of Westerhof et al. (2011) who note that an individual’s approach to aging partly depends on the welfare system he/she is living in and that it is thus important to also study “the effect of individual perceptions of welfare regimes on the aging process” (p. 59).

Throughout a person’s life, the job(s) or career that a person has occupied plays a key role in the formation of their personal identity (Christiansen 1999; Hendricks 2004). The benefits of lifelong occupation in the form of social security and/or pensions as well as health care benefits at old age contribute toward the formation of a social identity as a retired person. Additional positive events that are associated with identity at old age are becoming a grandparent, and when possible, contributing toward caregiving activities for the grandchildren (Kaufman and Elder 2003). That grandparenting is an important identity for older adults is illustrated in the literature that underlines older adults’ positive attitudes toward grandparenting and taking up this role when needed (Bordone and Arpino 2016; Di Gessa et al. 2016). Whitbourne (1986) highlighted these two milestones when she stated that “it is the self-appraisals in these areas that permeate all other areas of identities” (p. 3).

According to Weiss and Lang (2012), a “dual age identity”—referring to their generation as well as to their age group—allows individuals to identify with a generation (linked to a certain birth cohort) rather than with a specific age group (for example, “60–70 years of age”). The difference between the two is that generational identity usually represents positive concepts of similarity and interdependence between its members, whereas age group identity implies more age-stereotypical characteristics associated with (rather) negative attributes. Studies on age identity also reveal that it does not conform to personal identity (Sherman 1994). Older individuals regularly report that they feel younger than they actually are, and hence their perceived age, imagined age and desired age are younger than their actual age (Kaufman and Elder 2002, 2003). A youthful age identity is an almost universal phenomenon and may even be

associated with older individuals’ positive state of health and subjective well-being, whereas poorer health factors seem to be significant predictors of an older age identity among older adults (Macia et al. 2012). Bowling et al. (2005) state that it may also “be a function of perceived years left to live (or of time of death)”.

Most of the research on identity at old age is carried out with the general population. Thus, the meaning of being an older person and one’s identity has not been captured in the context of imprisonment. Unlike older persons in the community, who can retire once they reach a certain age (e.g., 65 years), older prisoners may have the duty to work indefinitely in prison. This is at least true in the Swiss prisons where a work obligation remains irrespective of age (Meier c. Suisse 2016). Continued work in prison is geared toward preparing prisoners to integrate work life upon release and counteracting negative effects of detention through structured daily life (X vs. Amt für Justizvollzug des Kantons Zürich 2013; Meier c. Suisse 2016). Hence, all prisoners must work during their stay in prison, the only exceptions being illness, injury and lack of available work opportunities. Interestingly, a feature of old age that remains common for older prisoners in Switzerland is their right to receive old age income (similar to the social security benefits in the USA). Every person in Switzerland who has worked in his adult life and has contributed to the social insurance system is entitled to old age income, regardless of incarceration (personal communication with the Swiss Social Insurance Office, 01.05.2016). Brogden and Nijhar (2000) even mention this characteristic of prison under the headline “Prison as haven” and state that according to Wiltz, “(n)ot only does the incarcerated older person maintain a work role, he commands a social security income which places him at an economic advantage in relation to younger inmates” (pp. 142–145).

Incarceration is likely to distance them from their family members and friends. Although an aging individual (both in the community and in prison) cannot escape negative experiences such as loss of friends and family or deteriorating health, older adults in the community possess more opportunities to develop coping strategies in order to maintain a healthy personal identity, self-concept, and self-esteem to improve their overall well-being (Levy et al. 2002; Schafer and Shippee 2010; Westerhof and Barret 2005). New friends or acquaintances can be made and cultivated, while unwanted relations can be avoided. But these opportunities may not be freely available to older prisoners. Carstensen (1992) stated that when the aging process and old age are lived out in an institutionalized setting such as nursing homes, assisted living facilities and even prisons, these older persons often do not have the opportunity to make new relations and maintain old relations and may not be able to find people they wish to socialize with. In the case of prisons,

since most prisoners are younger (Moschetti et al. 2016; Wangmo et al. 2015a), it may be difficult for an older person to relate to and bond with younger prisoners or those from different backgrounds. At the same time, there is a research underlining the role of older persons as mentors for others, mostly younger prisoners (Loeb and Steffensmeier 2011; NC4RSO 2011; Prison Reform Trust 2016; Wangmo et al. 2017).

Incarceration means that older prisoners may have lived in a closed setting for many years and will continue to do so until their release. We imagine that the long time served in prison would have a different impact for these individuals than for those who enter prison at a later life stage, having spent most of their lives outside prison. We also presume that the construction of identity for older prisoners may be different because the concept of “old age” in prison does not have the same implications as it does in the general community.

The number of older individuals in prison is increasing rapidly (Human Rights Watch 2012; Prison Reform Trust 2016; Walmsley 2013), making them an important group to study. In Switzerland, the population of prisoners aged 50 years and older has more than doubled from 295 persons in 2003 to 663 in 2014 (Bundesamt für Statistik 2015); a similar increase is being witnessed by other countries as well, for example, the USA or the UK (Carson 2015; Prison Reform Trust 2016). Schneeberger Georgescu (2006) reported that the increase in the number of older prisoners in Switzerland was mostly due to a rising number of prisoners serving indeterminate sentences and aging in prison, thereby concluding that most prisoners were aging in prison.

Unfortunately, little is known about identity and aging in the prison context. To our knowledge, only a few studies have captured how older prisoners perceive their identity as an older person in the prison (Aday and Farney 2014; Crawley and Sparks 2013). Understanding how older adults conceive their own selves in prison might prove vital for improving their overall conditions and leading to better mental health and well-being. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to highlight how older prisoners in Switzerland conceptualize their old age and identity. We nevertheless note that the topic of identity before and during imprisonment had not been a part of the original research project (Handtke and Wangmo 2014; Handtke et al. 2017; Wangmo et al. 2017); therefore, the question of how identity changes as a consequence of imprisonment cannot be treated in the scope of this paper.

## Design and methods

The goal of the Swiss national project “Agequake in prisons: Reality, policies and practical solutions concerning custody

and health care for ageing prisoners in Switzerland” was to examine the health care of older prisoners in Switzerland. During the course of this project, both qualitative interview data (see Handtke and Wangmo 2014; Bretschneider and Elger 2014; Wangmo et al. 2017) from older prisoners (50 years and older) and quantitative data from the medical records of older and younger prisoners (see Wangmo et al. 2015a, b) were collected. The secondary data analyzed in this study come from the qualitative part of this project, and the analysis was done in light of gaps in research illustrated above and lack of primary data. Secondary analysis in this case is based on primary data that were collected by researchers of the same institution, so the context is well known to the authors. Also, we agree with scholars such as Zieblandt and Hunt (2014) who have stated that for publicly funded research the value of data for the public good in general and particularly for the populations participating in the research should be maximized.

Since studies with prisoners conclude that due to a mix of prison environment and prisoner population-based factors (Elger 2004; Elger et al. 2002; Ritter et al. 2011), they age faster than their counterparts in the community as shown by the fact that they have higher disease burden and poorer health status (Loeb and Abudagga 2006). Thus, prisoners are considered old (at least in the scientific literature) when they reach 50 or 55 years, although some recent research considers this an oversimplification (Spaulding et al. 2011). Older prisoners were defined as those who are 50 years and older for this project and both qualitative interview data (see Handtke and Wangmo 2014; Bretschneider and Elger 2014; Wangmo et al. 2017) from older prisoners (50 years and older) and quantitative data from the medical records of older and younger prisoners were collected (see Wangmo et al. 2015a, b).

## Study sample

Thirty-five older prisoners, with an age range of 51–75 years, participated in this study. Time served in prison until the date of the interview ranged from 0.4 to 23.4 years, with an average of 6.1 years. They were imprisoned in open and closed prisons in the German ( $n = 23$ ) and French ( $n = 12$ ) language regions of the country. Only five of the older prisoner participants were women. Younger prisoners were not interviewed because the national project was designed with a focus on elderly prisoners, defined as those who are 50 years and older (Loeb and Abudagga 2006; Mitka 2004).

## Data collection

The interviews were carried out by two Ph.D. students at the prisons, with discussions held in German or French languages, based on the preference of the participants. The

semi-structured interview guide was designed to explore older prisoner's perceptions of their health and health care, their aging experiences, and the environmental as well as social circumstances in prison. Related to this paper, within the aging experiences and social circumstances in prison, questions related to their family and friends both inside and outside the prisons were posed, their right to retirement, work responsibilities, etc. All interviews took place in person in the prisons and were carried out by two Ph.D. students working on the project. The language of the interviews was either German or French. These interviews were on average 91 min long and were tape recorded. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymized by research assistants. To ensure the quality of transcriptions, they were checked for errors by independent assistants.

### Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out using semantic thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Guest et al. 2011) in light of the secondary nature of this work using already collected data with different study goals. In the process of carrying out analysis of the study for primary study goals (Handtke and Wangmo 2014; Wangmo et al. 2017; Handtke et al. 2017), we realized that interesting information was being raised that could not be put together with into the primary study goals of health and aging concerns of older prisoners. Thus, the authors decided to re-analyze the data to find "how is old age identity described and experienced by older prisoners?" SH and BE read the transcripts of all 35 interviews, as they were fluent in German and French languages. TW read the transcripts of the 23 German interviews. All authors met to discuss the collective findings on what main themes are evident in the interviews that could points toward old age identity in prison. Thereafter, SH re-read the interviews to identify relevant data that responded to the research question. Using semantic thematic analysis, she coded the data related to old age identity into initial categories and subcategories. These categories and subcategories were presented to TW and BE. After discussion, all authors agreed on three main themes which included three different factors at the level of personal, institutional, and social levels allowing participants to characterize themselves as an older person in a meaningful way that underscored their belongingness and value (Table 1). All authors discussed and agreed on the interpretations of these sub-themes during the drafting of the manuscript.

The analysis took place in the language of the transcripts. Exemplary quotes presented in the paper were translated from German or French to English by SH. These translations were edited by TW and BE to ensure that the meaning of the context remained clear. Quotes do not provide identifying information of the participants.

**Table 1** Findings from the thematic analysis

Main theme	Sub-theme_1	Sub-theme_2
Personal characterization of identity	Identity as a family member and a friend	Identity through their actions and behavior
Occupational identity	Work responsibilities before imprisonment	Work obligation in prison
Social identity	The wise mentor	Subjective social position

## Results

### Personal characterization of identity

#### *Identity as a family member and a friend*

Family-based identity formed an important part of the lives of many participants and gave them a sense of belonging. They thus situated themselves as a grandparent, a parent, a child or a sibling. Moreover, they emphasized the support that they received from their families who came to visit them and with whom they continued to maintain their relationships: "I have my children, my two children, I have my two sisters who come [to visit] very often. And I have my nieces and my nephews." (P25, female, 3.2 years in prison)

For some participants, family relations were their most important connection to the world outside the prison and family members, especially their descendants, of whom they were very proud of, defined their identity.

My family, my children, I do not want to live without my family, without my children, definitely not. My family is my children. Yes, I'm so proud of them. Now I'm a grandmother with five grandchildren. (P2, female, 2 years in prison)

However, there were a few prisoners who no longer had a family either because they were dead or because they have been disowned.

Yes, my friends. I don't have a family. In my case, the whole family is murderer and manslaughter. My mother was [X years old] when she had me, and when she was [X years old], the old man shot her. And my brother hung himself. (P17, male, 2.9 years in prison)

Another prisoner stated: "I don't have a family anymore. Since 8 years I [only] have a girlfriend." (P34, male, 0.5 years in prison) In these cases, they seemed to value their relations with friends and colleagues as much as, or even more, than their family.

One participant carefully differentiated between various types of friends, casual and close ones, and underlined his active role in choosing the close friends:

I have friends, very dear friends. I don't have many but I have very dear ones. Those who come to see me, those with whom I have – I am someone quite – I have always chosen my friends. I have had so many friends – those who have stayed are really – faithful ones. (P06, male, 0.5 years in prison)

Most participants who were likely to be released highlighted that they would return back to their family or friends and seek to live a good life with them and never return to prison. This good life was sometimes conveyed in rather ideal expressions. One participant (P07, male, 1.1 years in prison) stated: “I want to end this sentence and then live together with my wife again until – until death do us part.”

Furthermore, this sense of belongingness and having someone to return to was important for their identity in prison which went beyond the current context of incarceration.

My future, that's to go back to my family, my children and my grandchildren as soon as possible, of course. To live with them, um, for many years still, I still have many projects. (P22, male, 0.4 years in prison)

The idea of being needed underlined the importance of one's individual existence and the impossibility to be replaced, and was expressed by one participant in an almost repetitive way:

I think once I have completed this I never want to go to prison again, never. Because now my daughter needs me, my wife needs me, my children need me, right. And as long as I live I really want to devote myself to my family. (P20, male, 2.1 years in prison)

#### *Identity through their actions and behavior*

A few participants described themselves through actions and behavior that can be classified using the personality traits. They characterized themselves as non-conformist when they voiced disagreement with prison rules that were perceived as discriminatory or when their needs were not properly addressed, as one participant stated:

After the smoking ban I went on strike and said, I will boycott my visits because nobody from my side will come here anymore [most are smokers], and I will not put up with discrimination. ... During one and a half years I fought for my rights, and once our new deputy was here, this worked within a week. (P15, male, 5.6 years in prison)

However, the few participants who sought to voice their concerns were not always successful. One participant noted that meek prisoners are preferred by the prison administrators:

I learned that the more you defend yourself in prison against anything, that you demand so-called justice, the more they put you down. And they like those who cry, who take drugs to calm themselves, and not those who hold their head high.” (P32, female, 8.9 years in prison)

Others described how they utilize and plan to use their time in prison to keep up with their creativity. They mentioned working on cookbooks and memoirs; for example, a participant (P10, male, 2.7 years in prison) reported:

I also intend to write a cookbook. (...) And also to write down, let's say, my whole life. Especially about the little guy (when I was a child), those things come to my mind.

Another, (P21, male, 10.5 years in prison), discussed how he was preparing for an art exhibition that would occur once he was released:

I still am in touch with people where I could make art exhibitions with my, with my stuff. (...) And I also want to prepare for an art exhibition as long as I'm still in here. In a year I could go to (name prison unit) for the very compliant ones, the really serious ones. (...) I could even have a room allocated to me. So I could spread my palettes, my paintings a bit, there I could prepare for an art exhibition. (P21, male, 10.5 years in prison)

A small number of participants expressed they sought to isolate themselves from others. After noting she must remain in prison for the duration of her sentence, participant (P01, female, 10.4 years in prison) stated that, “I simply tell you, my friends are my books, my computer and my four walls. (...) This isn't my world.” In the case of one participant, this positive self-isolation was described as quasi-monastic.

I often draw the parallel to a monastery. We have a life a bit like in a monastery. It's roughly the same life: we have daytime activities, afterward we are confined. The week end is confined. So I like this... this monastic life. ... I sit down in my cell, I eat, I do something else... It's an infinite time that I gained also for myself. And this gives me the occasion to have, um, personal activities that make me richer than life outside. (P27, male, 3.4 years in prison)

Some participants talked about the guilt of having committed a crime and therefore suffering a punishment. In doing so, they identified themselves as a person who has repentance and is capable of moral reasoning. For instance, one participant (P02, female, 2 years in prison) said, “I have to suffer until the time I will get out of prison.” Another (P08, male, 1.8 years in prison), strongly believing that it is

right to live the consequences of his actions, noted: “I am not in prison to make friends. I am in prison to serve my sentence.”

Different from those who felt that suffering was justified and accepted that role, there were others who reported that their identity was not respected by prison personnel. They resented that they were treated as worthless individuals, were ignored, and not recognized as humans, as one participant expressed:

Me, I am – sometimes they forget that I am here. They have enclosed me outside of the kitchen, they have forgotten me. Because I am quiet, I am silent, I don't make problems. ... There are many here who get upset because we are not respected. In any case we are humans; we are not treated like humans. (P27, male, 3.4 years in prison)

Another participant experienced purposeful negation and compared this to similar situations in early life, being treated like an object or an immature being:

Well, and the doctors of (hospital in French-speaking Switzerland), you can tell them, and the staff, when we go, we go with guards, and the doctors and them, they speak to the guards, they don't talk to us. It's like we were a child, and then you talk to the mother. Because we are in prison. (P25, male, 3.2 years in prison)

## Occupational identity

### *Work responsibilities before imprisonment*

Many participants defined themselves through the work they had done prior to their incarceration. They held professions such as painters, cooks, journalists, accountants, drivers, businessmen, and translators. Moreover, a few were adept in several languages that they could use in prison as well. Some participants were even able to continue using their skills and knowledge. They discussed how their skills were in demand and that they were able to contribute something positive and remain useful, all of which feeds into feeling good about themselves.

Here, there are other prisoners all the time who come to me ‘listen, couldn't you quickly translate something into Italian?’ and stuff like that (...). I'm always open, and that's why I am constantly overworked, always lots of things. It's really special. (P31, male, 6.2 years in prison)

When I was in prison X, I painted a lot, many persons; I made portraits of their wives, their children, their mom or dad. So, um, I was paid a bit through that. Many people asked me, I had to turn some down

because – because it's a lot of work for me. (P27, male, 3.4 years in prison)

### *Work obligation in prison*

In addition to their prior employment and ability to help other prisoners, several study participants also identified themselves with the allocated work in prison. For example, a participant who also derived professional pride from his work stated:

“I have good relations with everybody who works in the kitchen. I am appreciated through my work, they call me ‘Doc Salad’ [name changed]” (P27, male, 3.4 years in prison).

However, not all participants were working full time in prison, with some reporting working part-time. A few participants felt flexibility is desirable since older persons who tire more easily may not be able to carry out physically demanding work. A participant discussed this flexibility of work obligation for older persons in general.

That's it, that's it, so he can adapt his hours and let's say be a little freer. I'm not talking about outside the prison, but that he [older prisoner] is a little freer concerning the schedules, so that he can rest when he feels tired because it's true, he must be tired. (P23, male, 1.3 years in prison).

A few older prisoners even reported that they requested to be able to work since it was good for them, that is, working allowed them some level of independence and not working could mean being relegated to their cell. A participant (P09, male, 6.7 years in prison) reported, “I really prefer to go to work than to spend the whole day in my cell. Really, weekends are bad for me.” Another (P32, female, 8.9 years in prison) ascribed almost “rescuing” qualities to work in prison:

I was on sick leave because of my illness. And I pleaded with the prison director, let me work, that's my best therapy. And she let me continue, and I probably survived the whole thing probably thanks to that, thanks to work. Because aftercare in a prison is as bad as you can imagine. Because you're left to your own device, there is no pain medication, no band aids, no dressing. Nothing!

Furthermore, work that they were able to carry out in prison allowed them to not only feel useful, but also be free to some extent since during their work time; they could manage themselves instead of being managed:

So when they open that big gate for me and they let me go, because they have made a wooden cupboard

for me especially to store all the gardening material, so I take good care of it. And when I open my cupboard and I leave with my tools and I pass that gate, I have the impression to find myself as if I was in semi-liberty. I feel privileged because I find myself in – maybe it's stupid in your eyes – but I have the impression to be, um, different from the others. (P24, female, 2.6 years in prison)

For their work, they reported receiving some monetary compensation ranging between CHF 250 and 700 per month based on the amount of work as well as which prison they were in. Not all this “salary” was available for personal use, in most cases 2/3 could be used as they wished and was kept in an active account, and 1/3 was kept in a savings account. In any case, having discretionary funds, however, small, means a certain level of independence and decision-making:

Because I also order from the active account. I just have that amount here that I need for the cafeteria, shopping and small things, which we can buy at the vending machine downstairs and phone cards and so on. (P20, male, 2.1 years in prison)

Although most participants appreciated working in prison, very few reported that the work obligation is constraining if they did not wish to work. One participant mentioned the choice between refusing to work and having to suffer disciplinary measures. Although in his case, he was able to reduce his work load.

Hmm-I think that- if I didn't have this access to a reduced schedule, it would be a little harder for me nevertheless, to be obliged. And I think I would have refused, and if I had refused I think they would have put me, in the dungeon [isolation cell used for punishment]. So hmm nevertheless it isn't very pleasant for an elderly person to have to go in the dungeon because we don't agree to go work. That's it. That's quite an important problem. (P22, male, 0.4 years in prison)

A few participants reported receiving their old age pension even though they were in prison. For instance, (P11, male, 13.1 years in prison) stated: “Yes, I get a compensation here [for the work I do], that is just-, the standard. And I also get some money from the AHV [old age pension], a subsidy. So I am financially secure.” Others who reported receiving old age pension noted that it comes to their account outside the prison.

## Social identity in prison

### *The wise mentor*

Identity in prison was also emulated when a considerable number of older prisoners mentioned their role as a mentor

or counselor for younger inmates. One participant (P22, male, 0.4 years in prison) stated:

I have contact with younger persons, and this is very interesting because you can counsel them, you – you can tell them ‘this is what I think of life’ and what they should enjoy of it above all, right. (P22).

They were proud that they could provide advice to younger prisoners, support them with their wisdom and experience, and act as “father” figure. They revealed being very satisfied when identified as such: “There was a younger guy, less than 26 years old, and he told me then that if he could choose again he would choose me as a father, and I should not go [and commit suicide], I am still needed.” (P10, male, 2.7 years in prison).

### *Subjective social position*

A few prisoners were identified with their level of skills or knowledge compared to the rest of the group. They felt that compared to the others, they were in a better social standing because of their higher education, general understanding, nationality, and thus ability to communicate in the local language. This may have served as a way to distinguish themselves through perceived additional attributes and a strategy for themselves to rationalize not fitting in (because of age or different hobbies) and turning it into something positive:

Well, it is quite... incompetent, to say the least, of the three who are there I would say one is competent. (...) Well, sometimes it is tiring to listen to that brainless rap music. (...) If I look around there are around half a dozen persons with whom I can discuss things at the same level. Because I'm not interested in idiot computer games or action movies. (...) There are few people who read. As I said, except a handful, all the others are in the gym, that macho stuff. (P15, male, 5.6 years in prison)

A female participant used a similar strategy and created perceived identity of “solidarity” with another female inmate through nationality and education levels. Her almost apologetic introduction shows that she is conscious of this strategy and that this rationalizing may be taken for arrogance.

Well, I have to explain a bit - the woman who works with me is also Swiss. She has – please don't get me wrong. She also has a higher education. (...) I'm really the only one who has nothing with life and limb or a threat to society (...) compared to the others, I never endangered anybody in any way nor tried to endanger anyone. (P01, female, 10.4 years in prison)

## Discussion

Older prisoners drew their identities mainly from three sources. First, the personal characterization of identity included being a member of his or her family and/or being a friend and receiving support through these ties. Identifying oneself based on relationships such as a father, a mother, and a grandparent is an expected finding in light of the importance of role identity, especially as a grandparent (Bordone and Arpino 2016; Di Gessa et al. 2016; Kaufman and Elder 2003). Although this part of identity formation was hindered for these older prisoners as they were unable to carry out their grandparenting roles due to incarceration (Handtke et al. 2015), they took pride in being part of a family tree and having descendants. We hypothesize that this feeling of belongingness derived from being a member of a close circle of persons may balance out the impression of random and anonymous existence as a prisoner.

Another aspect of personal characterization was viewing their identity through personal actions and behaviors that can be classified as personality traits according to the “Big Five” personality factors (Tupes and Christal 1961). These core factors represent the basic structure behind all personality traits (extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and neuroticism) and were visible in how our participants described themselves. For example, nonconformity to the prison rules can be seen as a dimension of extraversion; creativity was underscored by those who reported it as a dimension of openness to experience, just like those who enjoyed working a lot; introversion and reclusiveness as a dimension of extraversion; and ideas of guilt or suffering a punishment (expressed through repentance or penance) as dimensions of neuroticism, similar to the feeling of being ignored or lacking a human identity.

The difference between having made actual experiences and merely planning to carry out projects in the future seemed important for the personal narrative. Actions that had taken place and were experienced as positive and constructive, like standing up to the smoking ban, were expressed in a more assertive way and seemed to have a more positive consequence for the individual’s identity. Potential actions such as conducting creative projects in the future were expressed in a more conditional and vague way and did not lead to the expression of an artistic identity. Being able to see isolation in a constructive way made it easier to cope with the context of imprisonment and view oneself as a person who is able to use even this experience for the best, for example, by feeling “rich” through personal development.

Identifying oneself as suffering or powerless led to resentment. One participant (P27) reaffirmed the humanness that he felt was denied to him although his way to react to this—remaining silent—differed from the more common reaction

of getting “upset.” However, it is not clear if this resignation is partly rooted in being older or entirely in general personality traits. The coping strategy of a participant (P25) to deal with the perceived infantilization consisted in searching for help from allies who would serve as intercessors, as in this case the interviewer who was perceived as communicating with doctors and prison staff on a more efficient level than the participant.

The association of these personality dimensions with many other behaviors such as work success, mental ability, life satisfaction, social vitality or resiliency, in addition to personality disorders (Widiger and Costa 2002) and mental disorders (Kessler et al. 2005) indicates that these dimensions may be universal (McCrae and Costa 1997). Srivastava et al. (2003) conclude that these personality traits are not static, but can evolve over an individual’s life span. Therefore, it may be possible to put in place interventions in the prison context that addresses the positive dimensions of personality to improve the mental health and life satisfaction of older prisoners.

Second, occupational identity was derived from activities before or during imprisonment. Some prisoners used professional skills that they had acquired prior to imprisonment and could use in prison. Others acquired new skills during incarceration, although it is not clear if this happened in a manner that was formal (like a structured professional training for prisoners) or informal (comparable to training on the job). In both cases, professional pride was derived and with it an identity associated with being needed and appreciated. We nevertheless do not have data to examine if professional skills acquired in prison had a bigger impact on identity if there had been previous periods of unemployment which might be an interesting topic for further research. Furthermore, work in prison even at old age, in most cases, provided some equilibrium to the prison situation through creating a certain daily routines. In the context of Switzerland, where all prisoners must work irrespective of age (cf. Meier c. Suisse, 2016; X gegen Amt für Justizvollzug des Kantons Zürich 2013), being able to work and not having to retire may also contribute to a (social) identity of the self where one is not different from the others. At the same time, work obligations and lack of knowledge about entitlement to old age benefit takes away an important part of old age identity of deservingness through welfare provision (cf. Fealy et al. 2012), that they would have enjoyed if they were not incarcerated. Not being able to cope with the demands of (physical) work can be a visible indicator of increasing age and vulnerability, forcing the individual to rest when tired and suffering more from disciplinary measures than younger prisoners. The physical or mental tiredness that was perceived by some participants and was associated with the aging process was thus expressed in a rather negative way and may lead to associations of vulnerability and frailty

when defining one's identity. We hypothesize that the focus on work and its demands, as well as the constant comparison with younger prisoners, prevents older inmates from reaping the benefits of the subjective perception of feeling younger than they actually are (Bowling et al. 2005; Demakakos et al. 2007).

We can say here that occupational identity means much more for individual participants than just having an occupation that structures the time in prison. Depending on individual character, it can imply a sense of freedom, of reaffirming oneself as someone who can refuse certain work.

Third, social identity as an older prisoner was often associated with being a mentor, which was also evident in previous studies that note the positive position of older prisoners (Wangmo et al. 2017; Yates and Gillespie 2000). However, being a mentor is not necessarily the same as being a leader as the type of bonding and interaction is not the same. In a few cases, having a "parental" role was also mentioned, epitomizing their status as "role models." Interestingly, only male participants talked about a mentoring role. In the literature, mentoring is sometimes described as a role for persons who do not have children of their own (NC4RSO 2011), but we were unable to see if this was also the case in our sample. In some cases, social identity was related to the educational skills and other skills that they possessed, which distinguished them from their peers. Such factors derived from comparison with others, also called "external contingencies" (Vonk and Smit 2011), are in contrast to "intrinsic contingencies" and appear to be negatively correlated to personal well-being. Distinction through social identity created alienation although it is not clear if the resulting self-isolation was the consequence of or the reason for this alienation. The need to feel different from the rest of the population may have given the participants the necessary resilience to endure the time they served, creating a heroic narration of a person who is better than the rest instead of suffering from social isolation without coping strategies. This strategy may be less sustainable for maintaining a positive identity, but it also may be an individual strategy to turn the perceived weakness of social isolation into a strength, in that way preserving self-worth.

It must be noted that only 5 of the 35 participants were female, and that among female prisoners there was heterogeneity, just as between male prisoners. Therefore, it is difficult to derive differences in identity that can reliably be traced back to gender issues instead of interpersonal differences.

All three sources of identity stated above contained "positive" and "negative" characteristics. A "positive" identity stemmed from ties to family or friends, from professional activities before or during prison, from social roles as mentors as well as from positive individual personality traits like creativity and being strong enough to be a non-conformist. Although Aday et al. (2014) conclude that participation in

religious or spiritual activities may provide stability and perspective in later life for older prisoners, the importance of religion for our participants did not rise to the level of a theme and was thus not presented in the results. Similar to the results of other studies (Ardelt 2003; Reker and Chamberlain 2000), for our study participants, frequently mentioned topics related to meaning and purpose in life such as personal relationship was a factor that solidified their identity and thereby the perspective of their later life. It is evident that prison disrupts this relational factor in light of limitations that are placed on those incarcerated. Handtke et al. (2015) state that older female prisoners "were constantly thinking, worrying, and wishing to see and be with their family and friends" and mention the common strategy of elderly female prisoners of keeping "their social relations inside prison superficial and to a minimum, while "exporting" it to the outside and stressing the importance of extra-mural contact" (p. 5).

In contrast, a "negative" identity—that is, the assumption of a persona which is at odds with the accepted values and expectations of society (Mosby 2009)—comprises, for example worthlessness or guilt, isolation, lack of friends or family. Negative personality traits such as feelings of vulnerability were evident in the voices of some of our study participants. Research has shown that life events such as loss of independence or continuity with the past life, feelings of social isolation or loneliness or loss of autonomy contribute significantly to depression as "the daily living in which they could no longer exert control engendered a sense of helplessness and hopelessness and raised existential doubts" (Choi et al. 2008 p. 545). While this may be said for the general population, it is especially important in the context of an institutionalized setting such as hospitals, nursing homes or—as in the context of this article—prisons. Already in 1977, Reker (1977, p. 691f) revealed how the sense of a purpose in life "may be an insulator against the pressures of a structured prison environment and may be predictive of successful rehabilitation." This sense of a purpose was most clearly expressed by participants who had a family or friends to return to after liberation and fulfill a social role; in cases where this perspective was lacking, we deem that the perceived loss of autonomy may weigh heavier. It would have been interesting to examine the existence of a link between "negative" identity coupled with diagnosed depression and social isolation and other negative factors mentioned above, but this was beyond the scope of this project and would be an interesting topic for further research.

Not all interviewed older prisoner participants fit clearly into the "positive" or "negative" categories mentioned above. Many participants expressed different strategies to create or maintain an identity. Several "non-conformists" used writing to document perceived injustices, while for certain "family types," writing was a way to pass on memories

to loved ones. Being a “mentor” was often associated with identity from work either before or during the sentence and a high level of life experience that is symbolized by older age.

Many older prisoner participants also mentioned a mix of both “positive” and “negative” identities, for example, a feeling of being rooted within a network of family and friends while at the same time suffering from feelings of isolation or inadequacy, which in turn may lead to feelings of emotional ambivalence over time. Research has shown that such ambivalence should not be regarded as something entirely negative (Fong 2006). Larsen et al. (2003) found that coactivation of “positive” and “negative” emotions, rather than suppressing “negative” emotions or accentuating “positive” ones, makes it possible to maintain these emotions longer in the working memory and better organize and integrate them into the individual’s personal narrative in order to find meaning and make sense of major life stressors. This can help to transcend traumatic experiences, thus strengthening resilience and healthy coping mechanisms. Hershfield et al. (2010) assessed data from a 10-year longitudinal study and found that increased experiences of mixed emotions were associated with less health decline over time.

Antonovsky’s (1979, 1987) salutogenic model explains differences between the formation of a predominantly “positive” or “negative” identity by the presence or absence of the main factors that determine health and disease (e.g., stressors, generalized resistance resources, sense of coherence). An individual’s sense of coherence reflects meaningfulness, comprehensibility, and manageability of life, which has strong connections to positive outcomes like good physical and mental health (Lindström and Eriksson 2005; Piotrowicz and Cianciara 2011). Consequently, the lack of such factors often lead to formation of “negative identity” and result in a reduced state of physical and mental well-being. Lindström and Eriksson (2005) state that the sense of coherence is not a rigid concept and the capacity to develop it is available throughout the lifespan. Ventegodt et al. (2011), when reviewing the literature on interventions that can induce salutogenesis and improve quality of life, cited treatments and actions such as conversation and body psychotherapy, therapeutic touch, physical therapy or general body work, in contrast to therapy through drugs and biomedicine that appeared to rehabilitate the patient’s “sense of coherence” and promote existential healing which may involve “a complete reorganization of the patient’s personality” (p. 419). The question how far improving quality of life and factors that contribute to positive identity is feasible in an institutionalized context remains open.

### Limitations

Like any other qualitative research, the study is bound with the limitations that plight this type of research methodology:

lack of generalizability and social desirability. The latter may seem critical in light of the context of the study. However, since the topic of identity in old age was not the main theme of the project (which intended to understand the health and aging experiences of older prisoners; see Handtke and Wangmo 2014; Handtke et al. 2015; Wangmo et al. 2017), we are certain that social desirability has not affected this topic. This also means that the results on identity and old age in prison represented here are not expansive. Our findings is exploratory at best and thus more research is needed with the aim to evaluate how identity formation and identity continuation affect prisoners’ overall quality of life and thereby their physical and mental health. This is important since better health status of older prisoners would translate into more efficient management of the prisoner’s health and other needs with the available limited resources. Most of the older prisoner participants (30 out of 35) were older men reflecting the gender variability in prison. This means that the voices of older women in prisons remain unexplored. In light of the very few female participants in this study, we were not able to distinguish gender-related differences in factors that constitute identity at old age. Future studies that carefully examine older female prisoners would be a worthwhile endeavor.

### Conclusions

For reasons related to respect for human dignity and in order to keep health costs as low as possible, it is desirable to help prisoners find positive identities, as predominantly negative identities risk to increase mental health morbidity and put an additional burden on the individual as well as on society as a whole. Positive identities are linked to have a positive role and a sense in one’s live, for example, being a meaningful and respected person in various ways that range from defending the rights of other prisoners or being a reliable part of a social network to seemingly small things like cooking and salad making. These are linked to a “purpose in life” which can serve as a protection against the stressful life under prison conditions and may increase the chances for successful rehabilitation after release. Prison psychologists, nurses, general practitioners, and the prison administration could improve mental health through allowing positive identities by making use of context-dependent factors, situations, and stimuli such as increased creative expression, work that corresponds to the individual’s abilities and needs, possibilities to gain knowledge or engaging in favor of other prisoners. As most studies on age identity at old age are carried out among older adults in the community, further research is needed in the prison context to understand old age identity formation, how it changes due to long-term

incarceration, and how it could be applied to positively affect the well-being of older prisoners.

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