Describe the way in which an agent of socialisation can influence the development of identity in an individual.

This essay will discuss how the agent of socialisation of prison can impact a person's identity. An 'agent of socialisation' is an institution in which people learn the social norms and values of their society (Giddens and Sutton, 2017). The term 'identity' is derived from the word 'idem' in Latin, meaning continuity (Scott, 2015). Jenkins (1996, cited in Haralambos and Holborn, 2008) argues that our social identity is how we understand ourselves and others and the how we perceive the similarities and differences between us and them. This can include what is meaningful to a person, such as their gender identity and sexuality, their social class and their nationality (Giddens and Sutton, 2017). Prison is an institution in which people who have been convicted of a crime are held against their will (Oxford Languages, 2024). As of December 2023, there were 87216 people in prison in England and Wales (Ministry of Justice). People in prison are often held for many months or even years in extremely unnatural conditions and must conform to strict behavioural norms, both due to the statutory demands of the prison system and due to the threat of violence from other inmates (Macionis, 2018). Due to this it is likely that the prisoner's identity will change dramatically during their time incarcerated (Schmid and Jones, 1991). This essay will examine the possible positive and negative impacts prison can have on a person's identity, how incarceration can impact mental health and fatherhood/motherhood, its impact on masculinity and how reflection can aid the process of change.

New inmates may be scared that they will change in prison, so they may try to avoid other inmates and staff and stay away from situations that may necessitate that they defend themselves (Schmid and Jones, 1991). A person may feel their identity has been threatened by not being able to wear their own clothes, use their own grooming articles, having their head shaved and being given a serial number (Macionis, 2018) Even if they are allowed to wear their pre-prison clothes, they may relinquish them in an effort not to stand out and draw attention to themselves (Schmid and Jones, 1991). The prisoner often decides that it is not safe to be himself whilst incarcerated and that he must create an alternative persona to avoid being the target of violence and observes others in prison to construct this new persona (Schmid and Jones, 1991). Scott (2010) and Maier and Ricciardelli (2022) argue that prisoners are consciously aware of the process of reconstructing their identity during their sentence. Prison is likely to have a long-term impact on the convicted person, as they are placed in an unnatural environment for an

extended period of time (Jovanov, nd). Towards the end of their prison sentence, the prisoner may try to revive their identity through self-dialogue around how he has changed, who he is and who he would like to be on the outside world (Schmid and Jones, 1991).

People who are in prison may become accustomed to living under restrictive terms and so may become institutionalised. Institutionalisation is where a person becomes so used to living in restrictive conditions, that they become less able to live independently (Macionis, 2018). They often do not realise that they are becoming institutionalised and the process may be faster for younger inmates (Haney, 2003). Inmates may become dependent on others to make decisions for them and to structure their day (ibid.). In extreme cases, they may become unable to make decisions by themselves and may become so used to others controlling their actions for them, that they may become extremely distressed when given chances to exercise their autonomy and may lose their capacity for independent living (Macionis, 2018). They may also become dependent on the prison structure of punishment and reward, finding that they are unable to regulate their own behaviour (Haney, 2003; Wright, 1991; Macionis, 2018).

Prisoners may be discouraged from displaying actions consistent with fatherhood, such as empathy or affection, as this may incite violence from other inmates, and so when reunited with their children, may find it difficult to naturally show these qualities (Dyer, 2005). Those who are parents may find it difficult to look after their children when they are reunited with them, as prison may have made them hypervigilant, alienated from others, unable to show affection and with low self-esteem (Haney, 2003). Other factors that may damage the father's relationship with their children include uncomfortable visiting spaces, distance from the family home to the prison, illiteracy, being moved prisons, being in prison for a long time and maternal/paternal gatekeeping (where the free parent is unwilling to facilitate the child's relationship with their incarcerated parent) (Dyer, 2005; Hawkins, Christiansen, Sargent, and Hill, 1993). If a person is unable to maintain an aspect of their personality in prison (i.e. fatherhood, spousal identity) they may abandon that aspect of themselves altogether, to avoid experiencing pain and losing their paternal/maternal identity may cause a large amount of distress for the inmate (Dyer, 2005). This can have differing impacts on the prisoner, with some parents feeling more inclined to try desperately to maintain connections and others withdrawing from all contact to try and shield themselves from the pain (ibid.) Losing the relationship with their children may cause the inmates behaviour in prison to deteriorate, as the desire to set a good example for their children and get out of prison quickly is removed (Khan,

2023). Furthermore, this loss of relationships can have a disastrous effect on the parent, both emotionally and on their future, because losing connections is known to be linked to recidivism (Dyer, 2005).

Prison may impact how male inmates view their masculinity, making them more violent, avoidant and resigned (Dyer, 2005) and inmates may struggle to reduce their violent outburst and hypermasculine presentation once released from prison (Haney, 2003). This is likely to be enforced through conditioning, as prisoners will experience rewards and sanctions from other prisoners depending on how their behaviour is perceived (Dyer, 2005; Schmid and Jones, 1991). Prisoners may also avoid high-risk areas and stay in their cells to reduce the chance of victimisation (Haney, 2003). The unnatural demands of the prison environment may cause them to become more emotionally flat and distant from others, which may impact their social relationships post-release and they may become so used to having to constantly monitor their behaviour and the behaviour of others, that they may develop a lack of spontaneity (ibid.). People in prison are often deprived of the agency to make choices for themselves, which may make it harder for them to make meaningful change in their lives (Hoskins and Cobbina, 2020) and due to the degrading conditions they are forced to live under, prisoners may internalise the message that they are not worthy of nice things, and may develop low self-worth (Haney, 2003). The effects may be particularly severe for those kept in solitary confinement, which may make the prisoner more sensitive to stimuli, lead to cognitive dysfunction and negatively impact their mental health (Haney and Lynch, 1997). Prison may also make a person hypervigilant, as they constantly must be on the lookout for threats from others and ready to fight, which may cause them to adopt a tough persona or become hostile to others (Haney, 2003). Finally, incarceration may actually increase criminality, as people who have committed similar crimes are able to share tips on how to execute the crimes more successfully with each other (Jovanov, nd).

Furthermore, being imprisoned can lead to mental health issues including self-harm, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicide, stress, anxiety, despair and reduced willingness to take part in everyday activities (Armour, 2012; Cunha *et. al.*, 2023; Ievins, 2023; Haney, 2003; Wright, 1991; van Ginneken, 2015; Vanhooren, 2017; Adams, 1992) and may worsen pre-existing mental health issues (Cunha *et al*., 2023). Mental health may be likely to be impacted in prison due to loss of family connections, losing agency to make decisions about your time, boredom and victimisation, not being able to work towards aspirations and

witnessing regular violence (Edgemon and Clay-Warner, 2019; Gabrysch et. al., 2020; Wallace and Wang 2020; Cesaroni and Peterson-Badali, 2010). For inmates who experienced abuse in their childhood, being imprisoned may cause them to re-experience the emotional turmoil and mental health issues that this earlier trauma caused, causing them to become retraumatised (Haney, 2003). Prison may impact women's and older people's mental health more severely than men's (Wallace and Wang, 2020; Rubenstein, 1982). Older people are more likely to become institutionalised and to not desire freedom even when their release date comes close, likely because of the increased difficulty for them to find employment and housing (Rubenstein, 1982). Women may have more trouble staying mentally healthy in prison due to the fact that they are traditionally viewed by gender norms as being law abiding and mothers, so have more gender norms broken when imprisoned (Hoskins and Cobbina, 2020; Owen, 1998). The mental health issues developed and exacerbated by the prison environment may make it harder for them to find their place in society once released, to build relationships and may make them more likely to reoffend in the future (Gabrysch et. al., 2020).

On the other hand, prison may have some positive impacts on the inmate. Maier and Ricciardelli (2022) and Vanhooren (2017) argue that some prisoners find that their time incarcerated made them calmer and more patient, more appreciative of their family, encourage them to stop taking drugs and made them re-evaluate their life choices for the better. Additionally, Ievins (2023) found that prisoners experienced a number of positive changes including putting on weight, getting clean from drugs and improving their health by getting long-term health conditions investigated. Zamble (1992) found that over the seven years of their study, prisoners became more involved in their work in the prison and less stressed, emotionally reactive and more compliant. Religion, employment, drug rehabilitation programmes and contact with loved ones may be a key component in prisoners' desire to change their identity for the better (Khan, 2023). This narrative of redemption seems particularly potent in inmates that, before imprisonment, had turbulent lives marked by adverse experiences like substance abuse and domestic violence (van Ginneken, 2015). However, Ievins (2023) found that although some prisoners were able to describe positive changes during their time in prison, many of them ended up being reincarcerated.

Some prisons take part in schemes that may enhance the lives of inmates. For example, Conway (2023) investigated prisoners that had taken part in a university course whilst in prison, and found that it helped increase the prisoners’ self-esteem, as well as their empathy and

compassion for others. Involvements in therapeutic communities during imprisonment may enhance meaning in life and make inmates more tolerant of themselves and others (Miller *et. al*., 2006) Moreover, some prisoners are involved in the Listener scheme, regulated by the Samaritans, where prisoners provide peer support to reduce suicides in prison (Perrin and Blagden, 2014). Perrin and Blagden (2014) found that prisoners in Listener roles felt their lives had more meaning, felt they belonged more and reduced reoffending rates. Similarly, Hoskins and Cobbina (2020) found that providing prisoners with opportunities to volunteer and share their recovery stories with others led to improved wellbeing. An environment that is more caring and less authoritative may also lead to less anxiety from service users and greater self-efficacy to avoid crime in the future (Morash *et. al*., 2015; Gordon, 1999). Similarly to this, Crewe and Ievins (2019) and van Ginneken (2014) argue that prison can offer a space for the person to reinvent themselves. It may also provide space for the prisoner away from difficult situations on the outside such as violent relationships and poverty (Bucerius *et. al*., 2020; Ievins, 2023; Hoskins and Cobbina, 2020). Maruna *et. al. (*2006) and Maier and Ricciardelli (2022) argue that prison may cause a person to realise that the way they are acting is not sustainable or helpful for them, therefore causing them to change their ways. Prison can provide a space for reflection, causing them to consider the way they could change their lives for the better and make the realisation that their criminal behaviours will are no longer serving them (Maier and Ricciardelli, 2022; Khan, 2023). Prisoners were able to reflect on how their crimes had harmed their relationships with their families and the community, and how they would like to change in the future (Khan, 2023). Identity change is important as prisoners are more likely not to recommit if they have a moral rejection to crime rather than just a fear of being caught (ibid.).

To conclude, prison can have a multitude of impacts on a person and their identity. This essay has explored how prison can have positive consequences such as allowing people space from domestic violence and poverty, providing people with medical interventions for long-term conditions and providing inmates with opportunities, such as allowing them to become a Listener. However, there are also many ways prison can negatively impact a person's identity. It can cause them to become hypermasculine, damage their relationships with their children and family, and lead to long-term mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder and psychosis. Although time in prison can have some positive outcomes for the prisoner, more could be done to promote positive identity formation, such as increased support for mental

health issues, extra support for those who are parents and more widespread volunteering opportunities for inmates.

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