

THE STREET WITHIN THE INSTITUTION: LEGITIMACY, POWER AND AGENCY IN RESIDENTIAL CARE

A case study of Marcelo's experience of institutionalisation in SENAME, Chile

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The Chilean Context

This research focuses on SENAME (National Service for Minors), the state institution responsible for youth involved in the justice system in Chile until January 2026.

Research Question

How does Marcelo experience and navigate institutional life, and what does his narrative reveal about the relationship between prior social worlds and institutional power?

Biographical Approach

- 5 young men with experience of SENAME during adolescence.
- Interviews conducted in December 2024.
- Narrative analysis of how youth construct meaning around institution, authority, relationships, and agency.

MARCELO'S ACCOUNT

- **Why Marcelo?** He was the first participant to volunteer, showing high openness and willingness to share his life trajectory.
- **Age & Background:** 21 years old; institutionalized/in custody since age 14 (7 years total in SENAME/system).
- **Self-Perception:** Describes himself as "humble, sincere, and a good person" who values helping others.
- **Key Motivation:** Early offenses were driven by the need to support his family (mother in prison, absent father).
- **Interaction Style:** Calm, pragmatic, and respectful tone; views his life events as "things that simply are as they are."

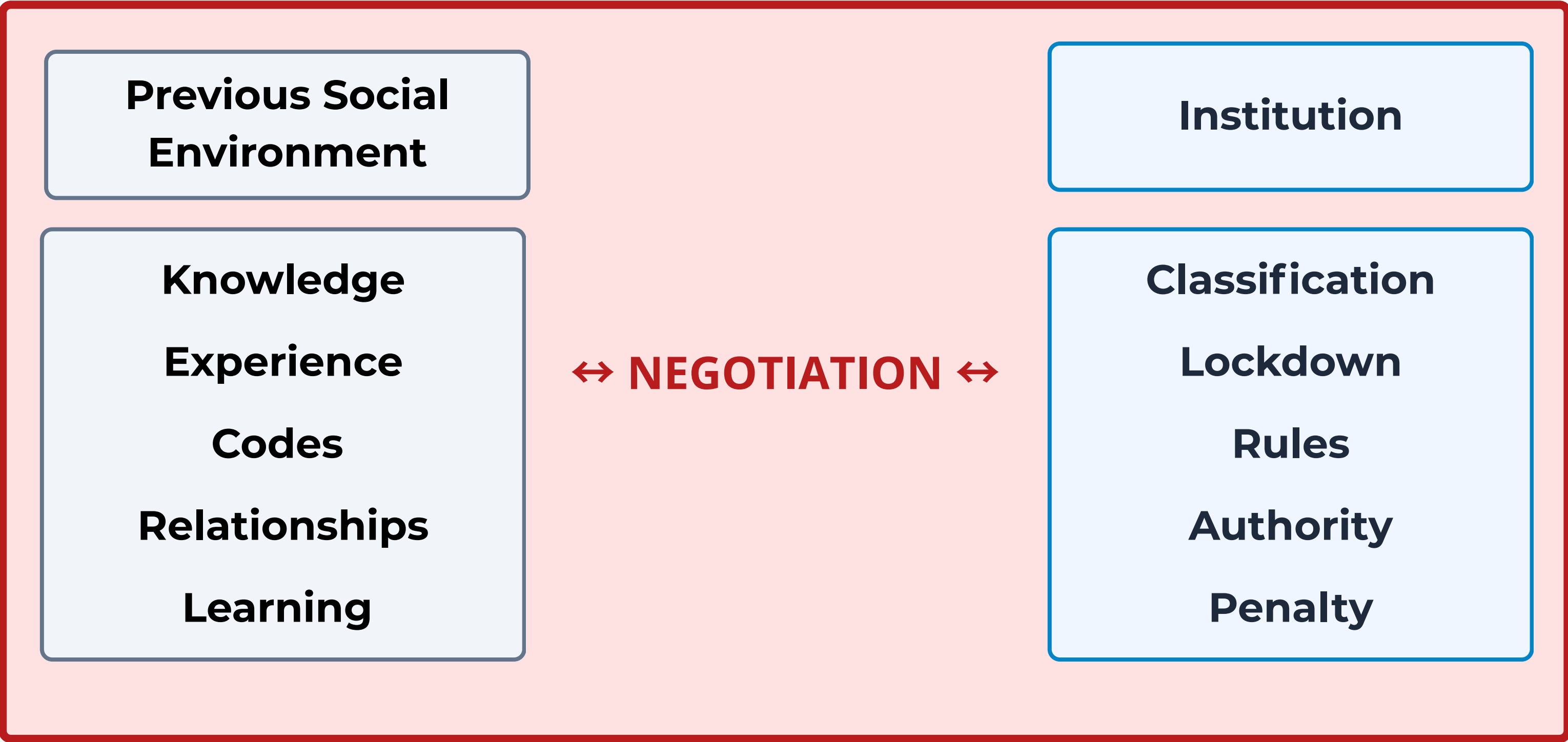
Prior Knowledge

"I felt normal because I already knew what could happen to me, I had a bunch of experience... **I knew how things worked**, I knew how to get there and hang out with the other kids [...]"

Entry Into The Institution

"[...] they started looking at my criminal record and stuff like that and they tell me 'no, **we're sending you to house 6**' [...] I get to house 6 and I bump into [...] my mate who passed away [...] Then we were there, like a day and a half went by and **we started a riot**, [...] **we started setting the houses on fire**, we started locking the doors [...] **they threw us into a punishment cell**, the next day we went back to the house".

Conceptual Framework: Dynamics of Negotiation



PREVIOUS CODES ↔ MARCELO ↔ INSTITUTION

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Institutional Life is not Encountered as Entirely Unfamiliar

- Marcelo arrives with practical knowledge passed on by peers who were previously institutionalised.
- He already knows how to behave, what to expect, and how to manage social relationships upon entry.

Formal Authority Does not Operate Independently From the Social Worlds Young People Bring With Them

- SENAME exercises power through classification, confinement, routines, and punishment.
- Institutional structures and formal authority are interpreted through the pre-existing social codes young people bring with them

Agency is Expressed Within, Rather Than Outside, Institutional Constraint

- Marcelo's narrative alternates between institutional decisions and youth-led actions.
- Events like the riot illustrate collective agency and resistance expressed within highly restrictive conditions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR QUALITY RESIDENTIAL CARE

Marcelo's account suggests that understanding residential care requires attention not only to institutional structures, but also to the social worlds young people bring with them.

Recognising Prior Knowledge

Young people may already have developed ways of understanding authority, relationships and institutional environments before entering residential care.

Understanding Legitimacy

Formal institutional authority does not necessarily translate into recognised authority. Legitimacy is experienced and negotiated relationally.

Understanding Agency Within Constraint

Young people's actions need to be understood in relation to both institutional restrictions and the social codes through which they navigate them.