

The Jailbreaker

Exploring the Role of Social Figures in Pandemic Storytelling

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Introduction

In spring 2020, Mitterteich, a small town of about 7,000 residents in the southern German state of Bavaria, became one of the first German hotspots of the COVID-19 pandemic, just a few weeks after the first COVID case in Germany had been detected.¹ The epidemic situation in Germany was still unclear when the city hosted the local beer festival at the beginning of March 2020, which the organizers advertised as an “oral vaccination against Corona” (Amtmann and Kettenbach 2020). A little later, an increasing number of infections were registered in the Mitterteich district and eventually a state of emergency was declared in Bavaria.² Mitterteich became the focus of nationwide political and media attention. Finally, on the 18th of March, the lives of the town’s inhabitants changed from one day to the next, not primarily due to the infections but rather due to the control measures including hitherto unprecedented acts such as a comprehensive curfew. People were allowed to leave their own house only for a “legitimate reason.”

Additionally, the entire city was “locked up”: guarded roadblocks were set up, the streets were filled with police, firefighters and ambulances, and maps showing the city limits were distributed to citizens. At the same time, numerous journalists made their way to the town, filming its empty streets and interviewing the few people they encountered. While curfews became a commonplace throughout Germany and entered everyday language as “lockdowns” in later stages of the pandemic, the Mitterteich case remained unique regarding the extent of the emergency measures

1 The first infection with Corona virus was reported in Germany on January 27th, 2020 (Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Gesundheit und Pflege 2020).

2 In Germany, infection control is regulated at the level of the federal states. When the numbers of people infected with the Corona virus increased in the state of Bavaria, the Bavarian government decided to declare a state of emergency for this administrative district. <https://www.bayern.de/corona-pandemie-bayern-ruft-den-katastrophenfall-aus-vernstaltungsverbote-und-betriebsuntersagungen/>.

in Germany. Against the backdrop of the beer festival,³ a specific dynamic of dealing with the spread of infectious diseases quickly emerged: the search for culprits and, with it, multiple moral and often (highly) emotional assessments of the situation. The idea that the citizens of Mitterteich were rightly confined to their homes and city emerged as a recurring motif in these discourses. Various media reported, e.g., “the city in Corona custody” (Herda 2020), blamed “Bavaria’s fatal love of beer” (Lill 2020) and, last but not least, Bavarian Prime Minister Markus Söder “threatened” that measures like these could also affect everyone else if they did not behave accordingly (*Die Welt* 2020). The discourse on the pandemic had soon adopted a rhetoric of crime and punishment.

In this chapter, we focus on a specific incident that happened on the very first day of the curfew: the case of a young man who broke the newly established rules by leaving his place of residence without permission in order to attend a party outside of the city’s borders. His escape was noticed by neighbors, reported to the police and widely discussed on social media. To analyze how this case appears as a typical form of pandemic storytelling, we first introduce the sociological concept of *social figure* – *narrative figures*, which are an important part of public discourse and processing of new situations.

After further defining our material (online posts in a local news ticker) and methods (content analysis), we discuss the *social figure* of “the jailbreaker” as a key to understand how the pandemic and healthcare countermeasures were perceived as a manifestation of state violence and incarceration. We explore how narratives of (in)justice emerge in the online discussions about “the jailbreaker” and how this figure became a significant factor in structuring the moral landscapes of the German public discourse at the beginning of the pandemic. In addition, we will discuss how the conceptual metaphor of imprisonment plays a significant role in the creation of this figure and the narratives connected to it. Finally, we discuss the practical consequences of this framing in public communication: working together to combat the spread of the virus often became less a question of acting according to medical findings than of legitimacy and (in)justice.

Theorizing Pandemic Storytelling with Social Figures

“Pandemic” storytelling has already been identified as an important field for understanding how pandemics are socially perceived and processed (cf. Charteris-Black

3 There is a long tradition of annual beer festivals in the town of Mitterteich and the surrounding region. The so-called “Starkbierfest” (“Starkbier” translates to “strong beer”), which is always celebrated at the beginning of March, also took place in March 2020 in a local event hall.

2021; Davis and Lohm 2020; Lee 2014). We learn about an epidemic or pandemic outbreak, Davis and Lohm (2020) note, mostly through stories: news stories, conversations with friends, Facebook, Twitter, emails from employers, etc. – narratives that are widely circulated and modified. Pandemics are therefore also multifaceted narrative phenomena disseminated by a broad variety of media. Especially in the early stages, “pandemic narratives help us to understand contagion, identify its possible ramifications, and take positions and actions, individually and collectively, on the implied threat to life” (ibid., 1). A central element of this negotiation are *social figures* (cf. Moser and Schlechtriemen 2018; 2019; 2020) that carry traces of events and histories. In most cases, these figures are used to delimit and contain the phenomenon and/or articulate how things are supposed to be (or not to be). They are narrative figures that structure the moral worlds of experiences and enable the narrators to position themselves.

The concept of *social figures* has a long history in sociology (cf. le Grand 2019). It has been further developed and elaborated by the German sociologists Sebastian Moser and Tobias Schlechtriemen (2018; 2019; 2020). *Social figures* are, as the authors state, “a suitable means of pursuing the questions that people in present-day society are itching to answer but for which there are no clear or even institutionalized answers so far” (Moser and Schlechtriemen 2019, 5). They do not only function as a sociological form of reflection, but are also produced outside of academia and, thus, form patterns of interpretation that circulate far beyond scholarly debates. This feature makes them connectable, relatable and comprehensible for many people. *Social figures* emerge especially in contexts of crisis or social change whose (potential) effects have not yet been clearly clarified and institutionalized (cf. Moser and Schlechtriemen 2018, 164–165): “They can thus facilitate the explorative investigation of crises-laden social developments” (Moser and Schlechtriemen 2019, 5). The COVID-19 pandemic produced, as Moser and Schlechtriemen (2020) state, a whole firework of *social figures*: in the beginning, there is *the hoarder* leaving the supermarket with significant amounts of toilet paper, ready to isolate for an indefinite period of time. In the course of the pandemic, the German public became acquainted with the names of *virologists* who had been largely unknown before and now became embodiments of the social figure of *scientific experts*. At the same time, names such as those of the Bavarian company Webasto, the Austrian ski resort Ischgl, or the Huanan market in Wuhan gain sad notoriety as the (alleged) places of appearance of the respective *Patient 0* – a figure that is not only sick, but also contagious, and, for that very reason, provokes questions about the right behavior, about guilt and responsibility (Moser and Schlechtriemen 2020). Questions of a similar nature, especially about irresponsibility and antisocial behavior, were personified in the figure of the *mask refuser* (cf. Müller 2020) or later the *anti-vaxxer*.

The concept of *social figures* is suitable for detecting and defining socially relevant problems, such as those that arise from a pandemic, developments of medical

technologies or scientific findings that call central cultural categories and habits into question. On the one hand, they claim to describe social realities, and on the other, they give rise to social self-understanding and ethical-moral positioning (cf. Moser and Schlechtriemen 2018, 168). They can challenge emotional reactions and irritations: one admires them, or one is outraged by them. However, how to deal with them socially has not yet been determined (ibid., 169).

How a *social figure* emerges and solidifies can probably not be traced in all its details. They mark breaking points and describe the fragility of previous interpretations of the world (cf. Moser and Schlechtriemen 2018, 171), but are of only conditional permanence, often appearing temporarily and in the context of specific discourses. This is what Moser and Schlechtriemen refer to as social figures' "special time index," which "sets them apart from theoretical concepts and their claim to universal validity" (ibid., 12). They are "in between time" (ibid.); although they may lose their popularity over time, they can always be reactivated (cf. ibid.). Thus, they are not simply historical persons in the strict sense, but rather part of social processes and public discourses: they enable communication and shared, intersubjective understanding of events or occurrences collectively experienced.

As "embodied" figures (or at least possessing an imaginary and imaginable body), they enable to imagine an individual and "real" persons and things done by or happening to them (such as getting arrested). *Social figures* enable ethical positioning by representing a role model for how one could behave towards a socially virulent problem. They figure ways of dealing with a social problem or challenge and thus sketch the picture of a possible future in which society is populated by that concrete *social figure* and its associated consequences (cf. Moser and Schlechtriemen 2018, 172; Moser and Schlechtriemen 2019, 13). In their capacity as ethical/moral points of reference, they also have a political function and play an important role in cultural negotiations about (a)moral behavior.

In the following section, we will introduce a case of our empirical data that we call *the jailbreaker* for now. Although the news report that we take as a starting point for the analysis initially does mention a real person, the way in which he is reported on and discussed makes him a "case," a *social figure* that is negotiated in an exemplary way and beyond the individual person. The *jailbreaker case* of Mitterteich thus refers to a broader discourse that took place in the pandemic that war-games not only the medical but also the social challenges of the pandemic.

The Jailbreaker Case: Material and Methods

For presenting the *jailbreaker case* we draw on empirical data of the research project *Spring in Mitterteich* (funded by Volkswagen-Stiftung).⁴ Designed as a locally and temporally focused case study the project develops a differentiated understanding of doubt and critique, which are expressed and expressible in the face of political measures during a biomedical emergency. For this article we decided to focus on online discussions⁵ for two reasons: these discussions provide a particular form of material with a special epistemic potential for our case study of Mitterteich in general and of (in)justice in the face of a biomedical emergency in particular. They are – unlike interviews which necessarily have a retrospective character – field material generated “in real time.” The social media posts represent what people wrote, thought and knew in the beginning of the pandemic. They document the process and the making of the discourse in the face of the knowledge available in spring 2020 and make the dynamic patterns of interpretation traceable.

In the following, we present our findings of the analysis of the *Mitterteich jailbreaker case* – one particular thread of these social media groups initiated on 21st March 2020 by a local news feed. Already existing prior to the pandemic, this news ticker has given short (police) reports about events, and transmitted important local news, for instance, about festivities, road closures or accidents. With the advent of SARS-CoV-2 the ticker also functioned as a medium for communicating “health news,” new regulations/rules and general developments regarding the COVID situation in Mitterteich.

Among the first “pandemic posts” is one about the aforementioned young man, who was caught by the police attending a party in a neighboring town. More than 1000 comments from various users were received in a short time as reaction to the report and the discussion soon started to develop its own dynamic. To understand this better, let us briefly look at the unfolding of posts: first, the ticker reports in a comparatively matter-of-fact way that a party had been held in a town close to Mitterteich and that one of the guests was a Mitterteich resident (in the following called

4 The project is funded by Volkswagen Stiftung from Mai 2021 to April 2023a, project number A134525.

5 United by their reference to Mitterteich and their temporal focus on the first curfew, different sorts of data have been collected: (a) We conducted, transcribed and anonymized *narrative, thematically focused interviews* with (so far, as in August 2022) nine inhabitants of Mitterteich, and (b) gathered *official documents* (policy papers, public statements etc. published in the period between March to May 2020) reporting about “a virus,” later “the virus,” “presenting it as biomedical threat and communicating political measures. Further, we collected *publicly available statements* of different actors made via various media. Thus, there are (c) a set of 107 *newspaper articles* about the pandemic in Mitterteich published between March and May 2020 as well as (d) transcripts of *posts in three Mitterteich related social media groups*.

Max). By attending the party, it was said, he had violated the newly installed *Infection Protection Act* (German: *Infektionsschutzgesetz*) and would therefore be prosecuted. The majority of posted reactions to the “party newflash” shared an affirmative position regarding the biomedical policy or a condemnatory and pejorative attitude towards the rule-breaking partygoer.

Thus, subsequent posts questioned the knowledgeability of the wrongdoer and called for “considerable,” “right,” or “just” sanctions. Others struck a more educational tone presuming that only “real” and “true” punishment (e.g., flogging, shooting, denial of medical care etc.) could combat such “foolishness.” The few voices, which raised criticism about the authorities’ sense and logic, e.g., by pointing to the ambivalence of being allowed to go to work but not to private meetings, became targets of derogatory and condemning comments themselves. The respective users were quickly inundated with accusations of stupidity and lacking solidarity. Additionally, their status as informed citizens and their capacity for rationality was questioned.

In the analysis, we present the online reactions to the illicit attendance of a party by Max. For this purpose, we first sighted the discussion in terms of a qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2014). Posts and thematic strands identified as central were then heuristically analyzed, following the documentary method (Bohnsack 2010), discourse (Keller 2005) and metaphor (Schmitt 2005) analysis.

Due to the ambiguous, semi-public status of social media posts (Merunkova and Slerka 2019, 271) and because we could not ask all (of the more than 1000) group members for their consent, we refrain from making direct quotes or naming groups and group members. This is also important in order to protect the users’ anonymity and to avoid their traceability, especially in context of the subsequently presented example, which circles around the misconduct of a concrete person and gave rise to highly emotional debates, violating statements and personal insult.

Analysis: The Narrative Function of *The Jailbreaker*

The ensuing flood of comments on Max’s behavior can be summarized in two main strands: much of the commentary is concerned with his cognitive abilities: he is said to be stupid and obstinate, and uncomprehending. A second tendency concerns his social skills: he is said to be selfish and lacking solidarity.

Regardless of whether stupidity or selfishness is suspected as the driving force behind the man’s behavior, demands are made for punishment to atone for the crime. These demands can be divided into two categories: monetary and physical. On the monetary side it is, e.g., demanded that he should face a maximum penalty rate and should have to pay an amount of money, varying from 5,000 up to 50,000 Euro. One person demands that the penalty should be so high that it still affects

him financially in 5 years. Some participants call for the penalty to be extended to all others involved in the event (e.g., all should pay 10,000 Euro each). Further, although the news ticker post did not mention a name, *the jailbreaker* himself apparently was easily identified. Thus, some particularly resourceful participants found out that Max has a soft spot for cars. Accordingly, they demand that his car and driver's license should be confiscated.

Even more troubling than the demands for monetary reparations are the collective fantasies about corporal punishment. An obvious idea for atoning for a crime seems to be imprisonment. However, some participants are getting even more creative: Max should, e.g., be sent "to [the hotspots in] Italy"⁶ without protective clothing or locked in with infected people. Flogging and shooting are also considered, he (optionally also his family) should be denied medical care, he should be forced to stab asparagus.⁷ Others demand to send him to a labor camp in Siberia (imagining he would pound stones there), he should be used as a test subject for new vaccines, he should be locked inside his house (or "the barn"⁸) and is encouraged to commit suicide. In a more innocuous variation, participants fantasize about locking him up without TV, internet and toilet paper and little food. Some of these penalties are again expanded to the other participants of the party.

The calls for punishment are essentially legitimized by two arguments that clarify the way in which one feels affected by his action as a community. One side understands his action in terms of the virus and its physical effects: He puts everyone on risk to fall ill with coronavirus disease. Another current thinks of the consequences of his actions exclusively in a legal sense, as it would ensure that the curfew is being prolonged for everyone.

Although the short news post does not mention his age or name, *the jailbreaker* is immediately presumed to be a "young" man. By people who apparently know him or his family, his private online profile is tagged several times in the comments. At some point, he takes part in the discussion and frames his action as a political act of resistance. He says he "will not let them imprison me," and if others let this happen to themselves, it is "their problem, not mine." In this mindset, the pandemic seems to be mainly a political measure (less than a threat of contagious lung disease). "Politics," Max stresses, is not an authority that has to dictate to him and participating in parties would be "a personal decision," which is why he announces that he will

6 At the beginning of 2020, reports on the infectious situation in Italy were very present. In discussions about COVID-19 and the measures associated with the pandemic, "Italy" often functions as a counter-figure to "Corona is just the flu."

7 Asparagus staking is widely known as poorly paid very hard, physical labor that is often outsourced to workers from abroad.

8 The small town is located in a rural area.

continue to do so. Even a state executive in the form of the police cannot harm him; “his lawyer” will take care of this.

In the further course of the discussion, the focus shifts from Max as an individual towards a negotiation of the social figure of *the jailbreaker*. It is, as Moser and Schlechtriemen (2019, 11) as well as Eßbach (2014, 19) state, that the discussion itself turns an individual into a social experience.

So, what can we see by considering *the jailbreaker* as a *social figure*? In the following we are going through the case alongside four “features” of social figures described by Moser and Schlechtriemen which are going to shed light on how they help to articulate social experiences, how they are configured in the discourse, their aesthetic and somatic aspects and their role in ethical positioning.

Articulation of Social Experiences: Negotiating New Rules

Beyond the individual case, the underlying topic of the discussion is the reasonableness and the legitimacy of the infection control measures, which at this point are a new experience and challenge for most people. The fact that one single person “escaped” the metaphorical prison of the curfew and disregarded the rules has an emotionalizing effect, as we can see in the extensive and sometimes violent punishment fantasies. Understanding *the jailbreaker* as an “expression of latent societal tendencies on which contemporaries have not (yet) succeeded in finding a clear stance” (Moser and Schlechtriemen 2019, 11), it may also hint to a subversive potential. The *jailbreaker* discussion appears in a moment of transition when Mitterteich gives everyone else a perspective on their near future events: the rules that got implemented there were soon to be applied – in a modified form – to the whole country as the pandemic continued to spread. In that sense, figures like *the jailbreaker* as a kind of anti-figure and antagonist to the political measures have an important function, as they are an essential part of negotiating how to deal with the unknown situation (ibid.).

Moreover, this discussion already reveals what will later become apparent in organized protests all over the country: the role of state and medical institutions, their sovereignty of interpretation and their areas of competence are questioned.

Configuration: Rise and Fall of the Jailbreaker

As indicated above, a social figure like *the jailbreaker* is a highly dynamic affair, a kind of briefly solidified sample:

As soon as a society has succeeded in elaborating new normative behavioral standards to reflect the changing times, the social figure, as well as the pronounced

interest in it, disappears. It becomes unattractive and is forgotten, because there is currently no demand for a figurative focus of self-understanding. The process by which social figures fall into disuse may therefore be termed “defiguration.” The key point for all three [(configuration, refiguration, and defiguration)] is that they describe constant changes [...]. Hence, social figures represent the (provisional) result of a process of figuration that passes through several stages [...]. (Moser and Schlechtriemen 2019, 12)

As a phenomenon of the early stage of the pandemic, *the jailbreaker* will later be replaced by other characters (such as *the anti-vaxxer*). Configured (Moser and Schlechtriemen 2019, 12) by an urge to negotiate a situation when sickness is not considered a private matter anymore and in which the state reacts with unusual power, *the jailbreaker* increasingly lost his discursive function when people became more accustomed to the pandemic and finally all curfews were lifted. As a breaker of rules, he got modified with each rule and could be refigured (ibid.) when needed. The particular time index (ibid.) of this figure is also related to the highly dynamic perceptions of temporality over the course of the pandemic. Numerous contributions to the discussion reveal how, in this initial phase in 2020, measures are assumed to last no more than 14 days. This perception of time is contrasted in a morally judgmental way with a hedonistic need to meet friends or go to parties. A more general need for social contact would be morally upgraded later in the wider public discourse against the backdrop of longer-lasting contact blocks – a development from which Max cannot yet benefit here.

Aesthetic-Somatic Aspects: Embodiment of Norm-Control and Punishment

Following Moser’s and Schlechtriemen’s (2019) take on Elias’ figurational sociology, one can say the body of the jailbreaker plays an important part in this negotiation about individual practices and risk management. “Social figures are concrete precisely because they ‘embody’ norm-controlled role-bearers and are therefore observable” (ibid., 13). However, the body of the figure of the escapee is also relevant in another respect. Not only does he make tangible what breaking rules should look like, but through his embodiment he also enables a fictional discussion about what consequences should be drawn from this. Since in this case it is one individual (and not, e.g., an institution or a building), fictional punishments are carried out on his body, among other things, to illustrate how much his behavior is considered wrong. Also infecting the jailbreaker with the (back then) new disease would apparently appear as “fair” to many posters. His body is not one to worry about; rather it is one to suffer illness and punishment. Instead of following a medical ethos that wishes for as few infections as possible, at least a part of the discussants does not seem too averse to

the idea that those characters, who do not give in to the community, should get intentionally infected. With such a personification of the right or wrong one can easily get into a fictional dialogue and position oneself near or far from that figure. The negotiation of situations on a figure that embodies (as in this case) the transgression of new rules functions here similarly to a fable and conveys moral messages.

Ethical Positioning: Structuring Moral Fields alongside the Jailbreaker

The last and maybe most important aspect concerns the structuring of the moral field, as “[s]ocial figures constitute a figurative suggestion on how one might behave in the face of a virulent problem in society” (Moser and Schlechtriemen 2019, 13). *The jailbreaker’s* way of dealing with the situation makes people imagine a possible future where all citizens behave like him. The perspective of those who criticize his behavior is pessimistic: many people would get infected with SARS-CoV-2 or the disobedience of the few would lead to an extraordinarily extended curfew for everyone. While the escapee sees himself as a kind of freedom fighter, he obviously represents a moral counter-horizon for the majority; favor a different kind of behavior.

“Argumentative exaggeration” (ibid.) such as demanding draconic punishments is a typical rhetorical device of this kind of discussion. What might appear as an emotionally overloaded social media conversation about a local incident, can thus also be understood as a universal ethical debate beyond the individual case of a person breaking the rules: the question of how to deal with the new and exceptional situation as a society is negotiated. An “ongoing change of social conditions” gets cast into a “human figure and thus making it tangible to the senses” (ibid., 13–14). The fact that *the jailbreaker* is a transgressive figure in several senses triggers the participants in this virtual space to make judgments about him and his actions.

Nonetheless, there is more than one (judgmental) perspective on this incident. While Max himself argues from a position of an unjustified prisoner, the number of his advocates remains relatively small in this imaginary online “court room.” Yet there are voices that contest the fierceness of his “verdict” and the intensity of public alertness that “going to a party” receives. The figure we have referred to here as *the jailbreaker* can also be understood as a precursor to a later, broader social discourse. As the pandemic progresses and questions about the appropriateness of political measures are repeatedly raised, other subversive figures emerge. Discursive events around so-called “*Querdenker*” (literally: “lateral thinkers”) and “#Covidiot” will shape the further course of public discourse.

Discussion: Narrating (In)justice through Conceptual Metaphors

In public media, the COVID-19 pandemic has often been described as a “silent catastrophe” whose triggers and effects remained very abstract for most people, especially at the beginning. In contrast to flood disasters, earthquakes or other natural events, direct consequences were neither obvious nor evident in public life.⁹ What, however, quickly became noticeable and visible were measures taken by policymakers. The pandemic reached the population initially and primarily in the form of laws, rules, prohibitions, and restrictions, combined with moral appeals. In this sense, it is hardly surprising that “the pandemic” as a social phenomenon has repeatedly been perceived primarily as a political issue and discussed accordingly in public. As with other political decisions, questions of (in)justice were raised by the public and a formerly “medical problem” has been translated into a language of law, crime and punishment.

Even beyond the *jailbreaker case*, the idea of having been “imprisoned” is found repeatedly in our empirical data and mostly linked to critical evaluations of this type of infection control measure. Be it, when one year later a member of a social media group posted a reminder to the day when “we got locked in” or interviewees describing the first day of curfew in similar words. *Social figures*, as our example shows, are thus also closely linked to the possibilities of translating new and challenging situations into language in the first place and may rise from conceptual metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) emerging from practices that appear in the process.

With regard to questions of (in)justice, the conceptual metaphor of imprisoning seems to be especially significant – for both, the overall structure of the respective narratives and the attributions to social figures. In the case of the *jailbreaker*, we can see how the framing of the figure bases the action of the person on normative and moral premises: the mere idea of “jailbreaking” refers to a moral framework of legality, state power, and justice. Demands for “punishment” and “incarceration” or other physical punishments are consequently raised as consequences. It is precisely this idea of being imprisoned or even punished instead of being protected, that is often found in the mind-set of a later developing protest movement. A metaphorical framing of processes of the pandemic with words like “lockdown,” “closures,” “shutting” etc., coupled with a high public presence of state executives have fueled this. The specificity of this framing becomes even more obvious in comparison to alternative interpretations of the situation. A more protective framing, for example,

9 When the disaster situation was declared in Bavaria in 2020, people only knew this political measure from disasters, which could also be transmitted in clear images (e.g., of destroyed houses). “Corona” as a threat thus seemed rather abstract in comparison and was initially felt primarily through the restrictions on public life.

would have possibly led to the emergence of a different social figure, e.g., *the naïve fool*, taking the warnings not seriously enough.

The *jailbreaker*, thus, resembles other social figures, e.g., Cohen's *folk devil* (le Grand 2019, 416; Cohen 2002) and Tyler's *abject figure* (le Grand 2019, 418; Tyler 2008). "Like the folk devil, the abject figure is a stigmatised scapegoat who emerges during periods of social anxiety and becomes the object of repressive forms of governance and control, although they may also resist such stigmatisation and repression" (le Grand 2019, 418–419). This is an important aspect of the social processing of the pandemic because it does not place the emerging social figures solely in the realm of the fictional. Social figures are not only metaphorical solidifications but are applied to real persons. Along with all attributions and stigmatizations that can have serious repercussions: for example, Max and his family experience hostility in real life. Moreover, our case study points out to the challenges and complexities of translating medical research into social practices and public narratives.

To summarize this, the analysis of the *jailbreaker case* shows how metaphorical concepts that are used to describe the new and frightening situation of the COVID-outbreak reveal what we can call the moral order of the pandemic. Not only in the local newspapers headlined that Mitterteich was seen as "A Town in Corona custody." Instead, the social figure of the jailbreaker was part of a discursive framing of the counter-epidemic measures as a form of "imprisonment" that helped to articulate and negotiate the new social experience of curfew. The characteristics and re-configurations of the jailbreaker shed light not only on the narrative structure of the pandemic but also its normative and moral premises. It reveals lines of conflict, processes of stigmatization and blaming against the backdrop of a biomedical crisis.

Conclusion: What to Learn from the Jailbreaker Case

In this chapter, we analyzed the *Mitterteich jailbreaker case* as an example of pandemic storytelling. For this, we employed the concept of the social figure as a key to reconstruct the structure of a specific narration and its underlying normative and moral premises. In doing so, we found the character of the *jailbreaker* to be a significant component of the overreaching conceptual metaphor of imprisoning – a concept with far-reaching implications to behavior and meaning-making in the pandemic. We further empirically and exemplarily depicted that using social figures as an analytical concept can help to reveal the social dynamics in the wake of COVID-19 and thus the moral economy of the pandemic. In this vein, the social media group members' attention on the reporting on Max's wrongdoing is not only to be interpreted as an interest in local news and the practicability of lockdown regulations. Their various outraged comments mainly convey moral judgments. They document how people at a certain point in time experience the COVID situation and interpret their per-

sonal fate. Our analysis of the Mitterteich case reveals that “in empirical reality” implemented measures are understood less in terms of protection than – against the backdrop of a morally evaluative media discourse – as a punishment. In conclusion, compliance to health policy measures seems in praxis often tied to an estimation of (in)justice, rather than to an idea of medical rationality. This ultimately leads not only to questions of dealing with injustice as a task of society, but also to questions of balanced reporting and successful health communication.

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