Constructing and Performing Sexualities in the Penitentiaries: Attitudes and Behaviors Among Male Prisoners

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Abstract
Prison sex research has primarily focused on overt sexual behaviors, while prisoner attitudes regarding sexuality have received considerably less attention. Moreover, little is known about the implications of such attitudes for prisoner behaviors. Applying a social constructionist framework, the present study explores how sexuality is negotiated and performed during incarceration, and situates these behaviors within the context of dominant attitudes in all-male prison environments. To this end, in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with male parolees from Canadian federal penitentiaries. The results suggest that heteronormativity and homophobia are pervasive in prisoner cultures and are reflected in how sexuality is discursively constructed and acted out by incarcerated men. Implications of the current findings and directions for future research are discussed.

Keywords
prison sex, masculinities, incarceration, homophobia, heteronormativity, social constructionism, prisoner attitudes, situational homosexuality, true homosexuality, heterosexuality

Constructing and Performing Sexuality in Men’s Prisons
Historically, the study of sexuality in male correctional facilities has occupied a marginalized position in the academy. In their review of the literature, Tewksbury and West (2000) noted the overall paucity of prison sex studies undertaken between the late 1980s and early 1990s, indicative of the dominant consensus among prison administrators, the academic community, and the wider public that sexuality in prison was hardly a topic worthy of study (see also Saum, Surratt, Inciardi, &

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Bennett, 1995). Research on same-sex sexual behaviors among incarcerated men was particularly neglected, with the earliest studies emerging over 50 years after the publication of the first study of female prisoners’ same-sex sexual behaviors (Hensley & Tewksbury, 2002). Moreover, this attitude toward sex in male prisons was reflected not only in the dearth but also in the nature of the research. On the topic of female sexuality in prison, the majority of attention was paid to the dynamics of consensual sexual interactions, such as the formation of pseudofamilies, or substitute families (Giallombardo, 1966; Selling, 1931), between prisoners (Hensley & Tewksbury, 2002). In contrast, the bulk of studies on sexual relationships between male prisoners were justified by political objectives, namely to address the issues of sexually transmitted diseases, sexual assault, and rape in prison (Tewksbury & West, 2000). As a result, research efforts were largely directed toward the documentation, classification, and explanation of the coercive sexual behaviors of incarcerated men.

Only recently have corrections scholars begun to explore prisoners’ attitudes toward sex while imprisoned. For example, a number of studies have investigated the extent and predictors of homophobia in male and female prisons (e.g., Hensley, 2000; Hensley, Wright, Koscheski, Castle, & Tewksbury, 2002). Few studies, however, have explored the implications of such attitudes on the lived experiences of prisoners who engage in same-sex sexual behaviors, particularly among incarcerated men. Using a social constructionist framework, the current study investigates how sexualities are constructed and performed within the heteronormative environment of Canadian federal men’s prisons in Ontario. Attention is paid to the ways in which dominant negative attitudes and normative practices regarding homosexuality are both shaped and reinforced by male prisoners’ discursive productions and behaviors toward sexuality.

Social Constructionism and Understandings of Sexuality

A social constructionist perspective approaches social reality as created by individuals in light of their prior socialization, lived experiences, and daily interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Rejecting the notion of universal truths, this theoretical framework highlights how social facts are created and infused with meaning by cultural and historical contexts, and then adopted by individuals striving to understand and enact their own lives (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). One means by which these processes occur is social interactions (Gergen & Gergen, 2004), and therefore, language plays a central role in the production and diffusion of cultural messages that shape individuals’ personal views of the world.

When applied to the study of sexuality, the implications of this approach are significant. In the essentialist tradition, sexual orientation is conceptualized as determined by biological drives or fixed innate “essences,” and classifiable into a simple binary of heterosexual and homosexual that represents universal and valid “truths” about human sexuality (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). Social constructionists reject these assumptions and replace them with a model of sexualities that are contingent on individual and cultural histories (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Weeks, 1985). From this perspective, an understanding of sexuality in diverse spaces and social contexts, such as in the same-sex environment of federal prisons, necessitates an understanding of the dominant attitudes and behaviors toward sexuality.

Essentialism in Early Prison Sex Research

Early prison sexuality scholarship was largely reflective of strong essentialist views, most evident in the widely accepted classification system of distinguishing between “true homosexuality” and “situational homosexuality” (Eigenberg, 1992, 2000). “True homosexuals” are constituted by prisoners who identify as homosexual and prefer same-sex sexual relationships prior to their
incarceration (Clemmer, 1958; Kirkham, 1971; Sagarin, 1976; Sykes, 1958). In accordance with the importation perspective (Irwin & Cressey, 1962), the sexual preferences of these prisoners while incarcerated are taken as extensions of their pre-incarceration socialization experiences. Their individual dispositions are “imported” from the “street” to shape their prison experiences. Said another way, these men were gay before prison, remain gay in prison, and will continue to be gay after prison. Thus, their homosexuality is \textit{true}, attributable to their static sexual preferences, and not contingent on context.

In contrast, “situational homosexuals” refer to prisoners who identify as heterosexual pre, post, and during their incarceration, and yet engage in homosexual behaviors while in prison (Kirkham, 1971; Sykes, 1958). Rather than being credited to individual preferences, the same-sex sexual attitudes and behaviors of these prisoners are attributed to factors within the prison environment (e.g., the absence of female sexual partners, restricted contact with the outside world), an explanation theoretically aligned with deprivation theory (Sykes, 1958). The lack of opportunities for—or being “deprived” of—heterosexual relationships and interactions with the wider community forces otherwise heterosexual men, facing “the intolerable pressure of mounting physical desire” (Sykes, 1958, p. 72), to fulfill their biologically driven sexual needs through sexual acts with other men (Chonco, 1989; Clemmer, 1958; Ibrahim, 1974). Upon release from prison, situational homosexuals are expected to resume forming sexual relationships with members of the opposite sex (e.g., Ward & Kassebaum, 1964).

The validity of categorizing prisoners who engage in same-sex sexual acts during incarceration as either true or situational homosexuals has been questioned at both a theoretical and an empirical level. Eigenberg (1992, 2000) and Kunzel (2002) have argued that the construction of this binary by corrections scholars can be understood as an attempt to avoid the need to revise their own essentialist assumptions in light of empirical observations suggesting that heterosexual men could and did participate in same-sex sexual activities. In other words, the “mid-twentieth-century invention” of situational homosexuality (Kunzel, 2002, p. 265), which used the notion of \textit{sexual deprivation} to account for why and how \textit{normal} heterosexual men turn to \textit{deviant} homosexual behaviors during incarceration (e.g., Ibrahim, 1974; Kirkham, 1971; Sykes, 1958), provided an explanation that did not threaten the notion of static sexual preferences. In doing so, the dynamic, diverse, and contextually contingent nature of sexual orientation—beyond fixed heterosexual and homosexual preferences—was obscured.

These criticisms have been supported by empirical research (e.g., Propper, 1981; Sagarin, 1976; Severance, 2004). For example, follow-up studies of male and female prisoners post-release have found that some so-called situational homosexuals do continue to engage in same-sex relationships even after their access to members of the opposite sex is restored (Propper, 1981; Sagarin, 1976). Hensley, Tewksbury, and Koscheski (2002) investigated predictors of same-sex sexual interactions, using survey data from a sample of prisoners ($N = 245$) in a women’s correctional facility in the United States. Finding limited support for either deprivation or importation theories, they concluded, “As we begin to reject essentialist paradigms of sexuality, we require new paradigms of prison sexuality that do not make bisexuality or ‘situational’ homosexuality a problem to be explained through either the importation or deprivation models” (p. 137). Accordingly, although the distinction between \textit{true} and \textit{situational} homosexuality continues to appear in some recent studies (e.g., Pardue, Arrigo, & Murphy, 2011), there has been a discernible shift in the literature toward a constructionist approach to sexuality.

**Constructing Prison Sexuality**

The acknowledgment of sexual orientation as malleable, dynamic, and contextually contingent has prompted research on the pre-prison and post-release sexual behaviors of prisoners (e.g., Severance,
2004), as well as the attitudes and perceptions of correctional officers (Eigenberg, 1989, 2000) and prisoners toward sexuality (e.g., Gear, 2007; Hensley, 2000; Hensley et al., 2002). Compared to studies of overt sexual behaviors, however, investigations of prisoner attitudes toward homosexuality are relatively sparse. In their review of prison sex research, Hensley, Struckman-Johnson, and Eigenberg (2000, p. 364) noted that “[i]ronically, almost none of the literature has directly examined prisoners’ attitudes towards sexuality and rape in prison.” In addition, the absence of sufficient empirical evidence for purported findings in early studies makes it difficult to distinguish the views of prisoners from those of researchers (Eigenberg, 1992; Hensley et al., 2000). Thus, we turn to a few more recent studies that have revisited this area of inquiry.

Beginning at the turn of the century, Hensley and colleagues (Hensley, 2000; Hensley et al., 2002) examined the predictors of attitudes toward homosexuality among prisoners in all-male and all-female prisons. In both studies, attitudes were assessed using self-report questionnaires that asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with statements about homosexuals (e.g., “Homosexuals are just like everyone else,” “Homosexuals should be separated from heterosexuals,” etc.). Gender, race, length of remaining sentence (Hensley 2000), age (Hensley et al., 2002), and homosexual behavior prior to and during incarceration (Hensley, 2000; Hensley et al., 2002) emerged as significant factors. Specifically, prisoners who were White (compared to non-White), older, and male, who also had a lot of time remaining on their sentence and had never engaged in homosexual acts were more likely to hold more negative attitudes toward homosexuality. Gender differences in attitudes may also be reflected in how women, compared to men, are more likely to report having same-sex sexual experiences in prison (Hensley & Tewksbury, 2002). Findings suggest these experiences, for women, are likely to be motivated by social and emotional needs, while the actions of men are more likely be driven by power and prestige.

Seal and colleagues (2004) investigated substance use and sexual experiences among a sample of 80 incarcerated men from five American state prisons. Their qualitative analysis of data, from open-ended questions revealed a strong presence of homophobia. Despite the majority of respondents reporting that sex between male prisoners did take place, many were reluctant to discuss the topic and were adamant about not having knowledge about or personal experiences with these acts, which they often referred to using derogatory language. Other researchers have reported that gay and bisexual prisoners often describe feeling unsafe and disrespected by other prisoners in the general prison population because of their sexual orientation (e.g., Alarid, 2000; Wooden & Parker, 1982). Together, these findings suggest that negative attitudes toward homosexuality are pervasive in male prison environments.

This may be due to the strong associations between sexuality and masculine identity. Heterosexuality is strongly embedded in hegemonic ideologies of masculinity (Connell, 1989, 1990, 1995; Herek, 1988), with male homosexuality posing a threat to dominant notions of manhood, the hierarchy among men, and, thus, the masculine identity of other men (Connell, 1989, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kite & Whitley, 1996). Characteristics of the prison environment, coupled with those of prisoners, tend to threaten and undermine presentations of masculinity. Traditional markers of manhood (e.g., heterosexual relationships, occupational prestige, and wealth) may not have been attained pre-incarceration, and become inaccessible upon entering prison (Richmond, 1978). Without these avenues to achieve masculinity and garner respect from other men, the label of “homosexual” may be especially feared among incarcerated, compared to nonincarcerated, men.

Although few researchers have examined the implications of these strong homophobic attitudes for prisoners, findings from studies on prisoners’ perceptions of sexual assault suggest that attitudes may be quite influential on their social interactions and experiences. In one study, self-report data from 150 male prisoners incarcerated in a U.S. prison indicated that the fear of sexual coercion among prisoners is disproportionately greater than the actual incidence of sexual assault
Moreover, in-depth interviews with male prisoners ($N = 66$) led Smith and Batiuk (1980, p. 37) to conclude that “inmate behavior can only be adequately understood in the context of the pervasive fear of sexual victimization and the protective performances which emerge from that fear.” In other words, more relevant for understanding prisoner social interactions than the objective rates of sexual assault and rape, is the prisoners’ subjective beliefs about the magnitude of the threat of sexual violence.

Richmond (1978) has provided one of the few studies that have explored how negative attitudes toward homosexuality translate into behaviors behind bars. Using mixed qualitative methodologies (e.g., interviews, prisoner diaries, and prison articles), she found a “considerable degree of anxiety and uncertainty” (p. 52) among male prisoners toward homosexual behavior, which manifested in patterns of ostracism, assertions of heterosexuality, and prison humor. Prisoners who were alleged to or did engage in gay sexual acts were relegated to lower status positions in the prison hierarchy and alienated due to their perceived sexual identity. Some of these prisoners could, however, avoid this fate by successfully asserting and getting others to recognize their heterosexuality (Kirkham, 1971; Richmond, 1978). One strategy to achieve this end was to make jokes about homosexuality that highlighted the physical and denied the emotional aspects of such interactions (Richmond, 1978). For Richmond (1978, p. 52), “in the case of homosexuality in male prisons, it is not the amount of homosexual behavior which prisoners admit to or know about which is the crucial variable for analysis, but the amount of concern demonstrated by prisoners about homosexuality” (italics in original). In this article, over 35 years later, we seek to further investigate the relationship between prisoners’ attitudes toward sexuality and their behaviors, by applying a social constructionist framework.

**Current Study**

Previous research indicates that conditions of imprisonment, by restricting avenues to express one’s masculinity (see Ricciardelli, 2013 for a discussion), may heighten a prisoner’s anxiety level over being perceived as “homosexual,” and contribute to a prisoner culture where homophobic attitudes are pervasive (e.g., Richmond, 1978). Rejecting the notion of sexual orientation as fixed or biological, we investigated how sexualities are constructed by prisoners living in a heteronormative, all-male environment, where same-sex sexual activities also occur. More specifically, we looked at how these constructions are shaped by dominant cultural attitudes and, in turn, function to maintain a stable social order through the regulation of prisoner attitudes and behaviors. In this regard, we examine how prisoners’ understand, negotiate, and present their own sexual identities and desires, and those of others, paying particular attention to the relationship between these discursive productions and the dominant attitudes and norms held by prisoners toward sexualities.

**The Research Setting**

Canadian federal prisons are classified into three security designations—maximum, medium, and minimum—which signify differences in physical design and administrative policies. Maximum security facilities are the most secure and restrictive of the three, featuring lethal perimeters, remotely controlled cells, longer periods of lockup (e.g., up to 23 hr a day), higher staff-to-prisoner ratios and heavy supervision and regulation of prisoners’ activities. There are three maximum security prisons in Ontario of which the former prisoners in the sample had served time. In contrast, minimum security institutions are characterized by lighter (and sometimes no) perimeter security (e.g., no fence), dormitories, shorter periods of mandated in-cell time, high availability of work, school, and recreational opportunities, and minimal monitoring and management of prisoners’ movements and daily routines. There are two minimum security prisons in Ontario and the men interviewed had served time in these facilities. Medium security prisons reflect a balance between...
managing security risks via surveillance and providing opportunities for prisoners to exercise certain freedoms and responsibilities. There are five medium security prisons in Ontario where the former prisoners sampled had served time.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from the community in Toronto, Canada, at an establishment that provides services to assist parolees in their reintegration efforts. Eligible participants were self-identified males who had served at least one federal sentence in a Canadian penitentiary located in Ontario (i.e., men sentenced to a minimum of 2 years) and were released on parole. A total of 56 men agreed to participate and were interviewed for a larger project that examined the relationship between risk and masculinities among incarcerated men. Findings presented in this study are based on the sample of the participants who spoke of sexuality and sexual experiences in prison. The ages of participants ranged from 19 to 58 (\(m = 37\)). Respondents predominantly identified as White (55\%, \(n = 31\)) or as Black (30\%, \(n = 17\)), with the remaining men identifying as Muslim (5\%, \(n = 3\)), Aboriginal (5\%, \(n = 3\)), Aboriginal and Black (2\%, \(n = 1\)), and Latin American (2\%, \(n = 1\); see Table 1). Despite the paucity of readily available demographic data on male prisoners, these figures appear comparable with demographic statistics of prisoners Canadian institutions (Correctional Service of Canada [CSC], 1993).

All prisoners begin their sentence in either the assessment unit (for newly convicted offenders) or the temporary detention unit (for parolees who have breached their parole conditions), both of which are housed in maximum security facilities. With the exception of these stays, 36\% (\(n = 20\)) of the sample had served time in a maximum security penitentiary, 55\% (\(n = 31\)) in a medium security penitentiary, and 84\% (\(n = 45\)) in a minimum security penitentiary (see Table 1). At least 75\% (\(n = 42\)) of the respondents had previous prison experiences in federal, provincial, or juvenile facilities. At the time of their interviews, almost all respondents were still on parole, while the remainder either had recently completed their sentence (\(n = 6\)) or had long-term offender status (\(n = 4\)). Comparable to available statistics on the convictions of prisoners in the general prison population (CSC, 2010, http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/text/pblct/qf/pdf/41-eng.pdf), respondents had diverse criminal histories: 59\% (\(n = 33\)) had convictions for violent crimes (e.g., second degree murder, manslaughter, armed robbery, organized crime, and assault), 25\% (\(n = 14\)) for nonviolent, nonsexual crimes (e.g., drug trafficking, manufacturing, and possession), and 16\% (\(n = 9\)) for sex-related offenses (e.g., sexual assault, child pornography, and pedophilia). One respondent did not disclose the nature of his charges to the interviewer. Sentence lengths ranged from 2 years to life with parole (see Table 1).

Procedures

Participants were informed of the study through word of mouth, rather than the use of advertisements, posters, and e-mails to ensure that no potential participants would be excluded due to illiteracy, lack of basic computer skills, or parole conditions that restricted Internet use. Unfortunately, the use of this recruitment method precludes the possibility of speaking to the response rate and the presence of self-selection bias. Data collection took place between February 2011 and February 2012.

Interviews were conducted in a private room. The consent form was verbally reviewed with each participant, with an emphasis on participant confidentiality. Participants were also informed that, due to procedures in place to safeguard confidentiality, once their interview was transcribed, it could not be removed from the study. Interviewees were assured of their right to refuse to answer any
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*(continued)*
question or withdraw from the study at any point prior to the transcribing. Small monetary honorariums were provided to participants for their time and both verbal and written consent were obtained.

A 35-item interview guide was prepared, covering a variety of topics ranging from general prison experiences, feelings of safety while incarcerated, and how time was passed in prisons. Interviews were semistructured in that the guide functioned mainly as a tool to help ease respondents into the interviews and was often deviated from once a respondent became comfortable sharing his prison experiences. Questions, for example, included, “How would you describe your prison experience in general? Does anything stand out?” “Was this your first time in prison?” “Did you feel you had to present yourself in a certain way when you were in prison?” This technique and question structure provided the respondent with the freedom to follow his own thought processes and explore his prison experiences, with the interviewer probing as needed (e.g., asking “how?” or “why?”). A demographic survey tracking criminal histories and prison residences was also completed, along with field notes. The total length of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 3 hours. All interviews were audio recorded with permission from the participants.

The data were analyzed in accordance with an approach derived from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Beliefs, attitudes, and experiences that were pertinent to the study and common across multiple transcripts were identified and coded as central, emergent themes. For example, if several respondents described prisoners’ attitudes toward same-sex behaviors and desires as negative and intolerant, the pervasiveness of homophobia within prisoner culture would be identified as an emergent theme. The transcripts were reviewed by both authors, and any divergent viewpoints on thematic coding were clarified and resolved. Thus, the themes presented in this article can be said to have the qualitative equivalent of interrater reliability.

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Results

A central theme that consistently appeared across interviews was the existence of heteronormative, homophobic prisoner cultures within Ontario federal penitentiaries. Moreover, it was within the context of these dominant attitudes that the discursive constructions and performances of sexuality in prison must be understood. Here, three additional emergent themes were identified: the construction of homosexuality, the suppression of homosexuality, and the assertion of heterosexuality.

Attitudes Toward Homosexuality

The strong presence of homophobia in Ontario federal prisons was a dominant theme among interviewees. Indeed, negative attitudes toward homosexuality seemed to be harbored by many parolees themselves. This was most evident in the common use of derogatory language, such as “abnormal” and “fag,” as well as in how parolees engaged in discussions about prison sex. Parolees rarely brought up sexuality in prison and, when prompted by the interviewer, were often hesitant to engage with the topic. Many discussions were limited to short responses that amounted to terse affirmations of heterosexuality (e.g., “I’m straight”), and denials of having any knowledge of same-sex sexual activities (e.g., “I never saw it” or “I didn’t hear it”). One notable exception to this trend was when respondents took the opportunity to inform the interviewer that media portrayals of prison sex, including rape, as common occurrences were contrary to reality and misinforming to the public. Overall, however, conversations about sexual acts in prison, and one’s sexual orientation and experiences were characterized by discomfort and reservation on the part of respondents, a finding consistent with Seal and colleagues’ (2004) observations.

All respondents were in agreement that negative attitudes toward homosexuality were pervasive in the prisons where they had served their sentences. Moreover, the label of “homosexual” and its negative connotations appeared to be universally applied to any and all prisoners who did and were alleged to engage in same-sex sexual activities. When asked whether prisoner characteristics (e.g., conviction type or sentence length) or motivations (e.g., sexual deprivation or sexual coercion), or sexual roles affected how sexual behaviors were judged, respondents provided answers such as “[prisoners] tend not to care” (Nicholas) and “[homosexuality] is not acceptable for anybody” (Pete). Only a few respondents expressed that certain circumstances, such as if inmates were serving life sentences or having sex with drag queens, rendered gay sexual acts more tolerable within the prisoner culture. This contrasts previous studies that describe the existence of a rigid sexual hierarchy, where prisoners occupying dominant sexual roles (e.g., “wolves,” who were high-status prisoners who raped “punks” and/or formed relationships with “fags,” or true homosexuals) are able to evade the label of homosexual and the associated ostracism (Hensley, Wright, Tewksbury, & Castle, 2003; Richmond, 1978; Sykes, 1958). For respondents in this study, these roles did not appear to exist; rather, there was agreement that any prisoner who engaged in same-sex sexual behaviors could not avoid being ostracized.

The perceived absence of role and status differentiation in sexual relationships, and the all-encompassing stigma of homosexuality may be indicative of particularly strong homophobic views in the prisons being studied. In fact, parolees who had served sentences in federal prisons in other provinces attested to heightened negative attitudes in prisoner cultures in Ontario specifically. For example, Phillip reported frequently witnessing sexual behaviors between prisoners in Quebec
penitentiaries and contrasted this visibility with the lack of tolerance and the physical segregation of drag queens and other openly gay prisoners in Ontario prisons: “In Quebec, it’s free, it’s different, guys take time outside naked [and] do whatever. In Ontario, you do that shit, guys would freak out.” This sentiment was echoed by Jarrell, who described a prison in Nova Scotia as having “a lot of homosexuality” which was expressed “so open[ly]” by prisoners. To illustrate this, he described an incident where he was invited into a cell by a fellow prisoner who was actively receiving oral sex from another prisoner. While homophobia was reported to be present in these prisons as well, it appears that there are provincial variations, such that levels of tolerance for homosexuality are particularly low in Ontario prisoner cultures.

**Discursive Constructions of Sexualities and Social Interactions**

The presence of homosexuality within these extremely homophobic prison environments gave rise to considerable anxiety among prisoners. Within a social constructionist framework, parolees’ discursive constructions and performances of sexuality can be understood as strategies enacted to manage these concerns. Here, three themes emerge: the construction of homosexuality, the suppression of homosexuality, and the assertion of heterosexuality.

**The Construction of Homosexuality**

Contradictions arose in how homosexuality was constructed by parolees, with homosexuality simultaneously being presented as a phenomenon that (1) did not exist in the prisons where they stayed, (2) was only observed in specific groups of prisoners, or (3) would be enacted only by prisoners who were true homosexuals. In the first instance, both forced and voluntary same-sex sexual behaviors were reported by some parolees to be absent altogether in the prisons where they served their time. These respondents maintained that homosexuality was not part of the typical Canadian prison experience but took place elsewhere, such as in American or all-female correctional facilities:

> In the States, a lot of that happens ... [and] in the women’s system. (Paul)

> I know that in the States, there [are] things like that going down, but as far as I know, [homosexual] behavior in Ontario will just get you ... crushed or stabbed or something. That’s unacceptable. (Frank)

These comments frequently followed questions about their own sexual orientation. For example, when asked whether he was heterosexual, one parolee responded, “Oh yeah, definitely. That gay shit is in the States. No booty-bangers around here” (Luke).

Homosexuality was also associated with specific segments of the prisoner population. Many respondents engaged in the “othering” of certain groups who they suggested were gay, such as prisoners with life sentences (e.g., “Guys that have been there since the eighties, they may be in the closet” [Robert]); prisoners convicted of sex-related offenses (e.g., “I don’t know about P.C. [protective custody] because there you have sexual offenders” [Eric]); and prisoners with physical disabilities. Interestingly, this practice was common among the same parolees who had initially denied that homosexual behaviors were present in Canadian prisons. For example, one parolee who stated that prison sex was only “in America,” later considered:

> I think with lifers, there may be one or two [homosexuals], but they’re among themselves ... So maybe a lifer who has been in there for a while and another lifer who has been in ... (Joel)

Similarly, another respondent (Jeff) amended his initial statement that rape “doesn’t happen at all” in Canada by acknowledging that coercive sexual acts may take place in specific institutions
or ranges within prisons that were known to house a large proportion of prisoners convicted of sex-related offenses. Some parolees also contradicted their claim of lacking knowledge about homosexuality in prison by, later, revealing that they had heard about or even seen sexual encounters between male prisoners:

I didn’t hear nothing. I just . . . the only thing I will hear is in the camps . . . Those were the only rumours, I used to hear, you know? You had gay people getting married there or whatever. And maybe sometimes where I was, there was a suspicion about one guy, but never really, it’s nothing like the States where a gay man could be in the mix with you, you know? (Michael)

In a similar manner, Dan first stated that his knowledge about gay sexual activities in prison was limited to rumors about prisoners in another prison. He later revealed that not only was one of his close friends in prison gay but that some of his fellow prisoners were believed to have boyfriends. Overall, gay sexual acts or relationships were portrayed as not exceptionally common in prison, extremely unlikely among the general population, and largely restricted to particular groups of prisoners.

Finally, homosexuality was also presented as something that only gay prisoners participated in. Few respondents supported the distinction between true homosexuals and situational homosexuals; instead, the majority reported that prisoner–prisoner sexual activities were performed only by those who were “really gay.” For example, Nicholas, commenting on a prisoner he “knew” had engaged in sexual acts with another prisoner, emphasized this man’s long-standing sexual preference: “I think he was really gay, both inside [prison] and would be out [of prison]. [He] preferred men.” Some parolees explicitly rejected the notion of situational homosexuality:

You don’t become institutional gay. In general, it’s because you’re gay. (Phillip)

You hear a lot of people say, “I’m not gay, but I’m [in] an institution for the gay,” and I’m like, “If you’re gay, you’re gay.” There’s no institution for the gay. You can’t just come out and be straight. (Andrew)

For these respondents, there was a one-to-one correspondence between the gender of an individual’s sexual partners and their sexual orientation. Furthermore, sexual preferences were understood as impervious to the influence of situational factors.

It should be noted that a few respondents did support the idea that environmental factors were potential factors motivating prisoner–prisoner sexual acts. Often, their belief in situational homosexuality was garnered directly from prisoners who had engaged in these practices, with whom they had formed interpersonal relationships. For example, Dan recalled a discussion he had with a lifer: “We did talk about [situational homosexuality]. Because if you’re stuck in there for life, it’s kind of hard to meet a girl or see a girl when all you are around is guys.” Another parolee, who openly identified as bisexual, cited sexual deprivation as a factor that led to prisoners—who he described as not gay—privately seeking gay sex with him:

Although I might, on the street, not be attractive to that same guy, in prison, [I’m] all he has. “Okay, here’s James, kind of feminine a bit, nice body, mmm yeah, I guess I can handle him, I’ll settle for him,” kind of thing. And it was the same for me. (James)

Said another way, he accounted for his extensive sexual experiences with nongay prisoners with the notion of sexual deprivation.

Whether these constructions accurately describe homosexuality in prison is less important for this analysis than how they can be contextually situated in a predominantly homophobic, heteronormative,
all-male prisoner culture. The three ways that homosexuality was defined (i.e., as uncommon in Canadian prisons, as restricted to select prisoners, and as a fixed, unchanging sexual identity) may reflect prisoners’ attempts to manage their anxieties by discursively disassociating themselves from homosexuality. Indeed, by displacing homosexuality to other correctional institutions, ranges, or groups of prisoners, prisoners may minimize their own risk of being labeled gay. Tellingly, these constructions often followed respondents’ assertions of their own heterosexuality.

**The Suppression of Homosexuality**

Negative attitudes toward homosexuality were also reflected in prisoners’ attempts to keep their homosexuality, or homosexual encounters, hidden. One way in which this occurred was the suppression of knowledge and discussion of prison homosexuality among prisoners. As described above, many respondents initially claimed to be unaware of any sexual activities taking place between prisoners. Others reported having indirect knowledge only, meaning they had heard about other prisoners engaging in gay sexual acts but had never personally witnessed it. This indirect knowledge often came in the form of “rumors” about “one gay guy” on some other range or in some other prison. One parolee recounted the rumors he heard as follows:

I don’t think I know the guy by face, but I heard there was a guy who preferred men . . . He had an institutional partner. Well, it’s strange. He’s been there for a long time and if he sees someone who comes in, he feels that guy out for his opportunity to have a partner . . . I’ve never seen him. It’s [like] a myth. You don’t know if he exists. You just know he’s on that range and that cell, but no one goes there. He doesn’t come out of his cell too much . . . (Nicholas)

This myth of the homosexual, whose existence was certain but identity remained unknown, emerged in a number of parolees’ accounts. Another common indirect form of knowledge about the presence of homosexuality came from observations of the disappearing condoms. As one parolee remarked,

The thing that was amazing was that we were only men in the prison, right? But when we go into the lobbies and the rooms, they have condoms around, and I say, “Wow, why are there condoms when there are only men around and why do they disappear?” (Adrian)

While a few former prisoners did believe the rumors to be true, the majority expressed doubts and the need to “actually see it for myself” (Robert). Said another way, these men thought the presence of any gay prisoner was unlikely. All respondents who reported having indirect knowledge, however, stressed that they had never personally verified these myths.

Moreover, a trend was evident where many parolees presented as having little interest in knowing anything about gay sexual interactions in prison. The norm of “don’t look, don’t tell, don’t want to know about it” identified by Seal and colleagues (2004) was also pervasive in the prisoner cultures described in this study:

Some guys [that are interested in sex], knowing what the rumor is, will tend to go into [a guy’s] cell and hang out. No one wants to know what goes on behind those doors, so everyone just keeps to themselves. (Nicolas)

One potential deterrent from asking questions or seeming knowledgeable about the rumors was the risk of being viewed by other prisoners as interested in participating in same-sex sexual acts. Indeed, some parolees cited their disinterest to explain their limited knowledge of prison sex. This was summed up succinctly by Joel, who stated, “I guess those who care to know might know, but I don’t care to know so I just leave that alone.” Not surprisingly then, the socially acceptable response
to homosexuality in prison was simply to “look the other way” (Nicholas). Thus, the threat of being given the heavily stigmatized label of homosexual functioned to ensure that talk about prison sex remained rumors and myths unworthy of acknowledgment.

Despite the strong negativity attached to homosexuality, being exposed as gay or being “caught” in homosexual acts was not, according to parolees, regularly met with physical aggression. Parolees, many of whom held negative views toward homosexuality, reported that prisoners who engaged in same-sex sexual acts could do “whatever floats their boat” (Dan) because other prisoners would not “bother a guy for doing what he chooses to do with the person he chooses to do it with” (Nicholas). Conversely, parolees were also clear that homosexuality was not always to be overlooked. One exception that was frequently mentioned was if prisoners engaged in sexual activities openly:

If you want to hook up with his dick . . . I don’t care, right? Just respect the brotherhood enough to know that there is no fucking holding hands and that shit when you’re out front. I don’t care what the fuck he’s doing when that fucking cell door is closed, I don’t care, just don’t flaunt in my face . . . (Hart)

Moreover, according to the parolees’ accounts, homosexuality in prison was largely hidden. One parolee, echoing others, described the situation in this way:

If guys were gay, they’d keep it themselves, and they wouldn’t act gay or speak gay. They wouldn’t admit and come out and say “Hey guys, I’m gay.” So they do it in their secret world and . . . it’s all good. Nobody has to know. (Michael)

Indeed, it seemed as though an informal agreement existed between prisoners whereby those who did not engage in same-sex acts would refrain from violence, as long as those who did kept these activities “low-key” (Nicholas). Pete described the situation as follows:

People know it is happening. It’s just that whoever’s doing it, if they disrespect the people by having it out in the open, that’s going to cause problems for them. If they’re doing their thing quietly, nobody really pays them that much mind.

Thus, any tolerance for prisoner–prisoner sexual interactions was contingent upon prisoners engaging in these behaviors privately, and not in the open or any public area.

The suppression of homosexuality appeared to be an active achievement motivated by the pervasive homophobic attitudes in these prisons. Clearly, it was not by chance alone that knowledge about homosexuality remained construed as a myth. On one hand, participation in discussions of homosexuality was limited by the threat of being labeled as “gay” and stigmatized accordingly. On the other hand, same-sex sexual activities were kept out of view to decrease the risk of victimization. These norms, as well as the consequences of violating them, served to keep homosexuality “low-key” and contributed to the maintenance of a heteronormative social order.

The Assertion of Heterosexuality

The overt and aggressive assertions of heterosexuality that were found in almost all interviews and reported to be the norm among prisoners must also be situated in the context of heteronormative prisoner cultures. It should first be noted that only two respondents self-identified as bisexual, and only one respondent who identified as heterosexual reported having engaged in sexual acts with another prisoner. All other respondents self-identified as heterosexual, some referring to themselves as “obviously straight” (Patrick) or “normal” (Chris). Affirmations of heterosexuality were frequently coupled with denials of homosexuality:
Male-female, yeah. I don’t do other guys. (Don)
[I am] one hundred percent [heterosexual] … No prison love (Paul)
I went in straight, [and I] came out straight. (Andrew)

“Proof,” in the form of past and present relationships with women, also often accompanied declarations of heterosexuality. For example, in response to questions about their sexual orientation, Alex stated, “Yes [I’m heterosexual], I have a girlfriend right now,” and, similarly, Robert said, “Yes [I’m heterosexual], I was married for almost fifteen years.” Many brought up the challenges of maintaining heterosexual relationships during and post-incarceration and the difficulties associated with getting conjugal visits in prison.

Accounts of personal, even sexual, experiences with female staff members during incarceration also served as evidence of heterosexuality. These, too, were openly and voluntarily disclosed to the interviewer:

Well, I picked up a guard when I was in [institution name removed] … I mean, we didn’t have a love affair. We had sex and bonded, but that was about it. (Philip)

There was one guard I liked there. Her name was Kate. She gave me her phone number and everything … She’s a beautiful girl, she’s only 23 … So then one day she goes, “When you get out of jail, you got to phone me up. We can talk.” (Jonathan)

Even flirtatious behavior was worthy of mention for some parolees, including Nicholas, who shared, “Heck, I flirted with a couple guards and they flirted back with me. If I pursued it, there would have been a hug, a kiss, or a touch, maybe, maybe not.” The parolees’ apparent concern with stressing their sexual attraction to the opposite sex may be indicative of the strength of the stigma of homosexuality within prisoner culture, such that a lasting impression was left on these men post-release.

Noteworthy here is the contrast between discussions of homosexuality and of heterosexuality. When talking about the former, parolees appeared overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, detached and uncomfortable. In conversations about the latter, however, respondents presented as relatively engaged and unguarded, often sharing details about intimate and sexual relationships with women without any probing from the interviewer. Just as exhibiting disinterest in same-sex sexual activities may function to minimize the likelihood of being perceived as gay, so too may highlighting mutual sexual attraction with women.

The act of asserting one’s heterosexuality appeared to be a common practice behind prison walls as well. Claims that homosexuality was absent in prison were substantiated with ample suggestive examples of other prisoners’ heterosexual orientations. For example, in discussing whether same-sex activities took place in prison, Joel noted, “Like you hear rumours [and] some people seem a little, you know … But I didn’t see it. People were like, you know, they like girls, they’re talking about girls and calling girls.” Michael responded to the question by pointing out that “People get visits, you know? They get to see their girlfriends and stuff.” Whereas any hint of one’s homosexual preferences was to be concealed in prison, heterosexuality was performed openly.

Moreover, when parolees were probed about having any knowledge of relationships between prisoners and female correctional staff, the majority of participants could speak to the existence of these relationships. Specifically, only two participants reported having no knowledge of them. This can be directly contrasted to parolees’ relative lack of awareness about gay sexual relationships between prisoners. There was a sense that stories about prisoners’ heterosexual sexual conquests circulated widely and were talked about freely in prison, with prisoners openly bragging about their escapades: “Everyone says that they are [hooking up with guards] … People would say, ‘Oh the guards talking to me, she wants to fuck me’” (Jarrell). Other parolees described having actively
engaged in gossip with other prisoners about sexual interactions between female staff and male prisoners. Rather than referring to myths or rumors as parolees did when asked about homosexuality, parolees spoke of incidents when talking about heterosexual acts, making mention of specific people, times, places, and events. For example:

There were a couple incidents since I’ve been in. There was one at [Prison A], there was an inmate and, I think, a teacher. There was one at [Prison B], an inmate and a guard. So you know it happens. There was a recent one . . . early this year at [Prison C] where she helped him escape or she was hiding him. (Pete)

Other stories that were discussed included a female guard smuggling contraband into prison for a prisoner whose employment was eventually terminated; a female guard leaving her husband and marrying an ex-prisoner; and a female nurse who was impregnated by a prisoner and subsequently fired from her position.

It is also worth mentioning that while stories about homosexual prisoners and activities were predominantly discounted as “rumors” and untrue, stories of heterosexual escapades were often believed to be true, even though the people featured in both types were often unknown to the parolees. In fact, the formation of heterosexual prisoner–staff relationships was presented as a relatively common occurrence (Philip) and that would inevitably “happen with time” (Joel). Some parolees put forth the notion of sexual deprivation as a justification for why these stories were believable. For example, Nicholas reasoned that, “It’s human nature. A pretty girl with a convicted criminal that looks good, you know. If the sexes attract then it’s going to happen one way or another; simple favours or simple flirting.” Related to this, parolees often recalled discussions or jesting with other prisoners about how the female correctional officers and nurses became increasingly attractive the longer one was incarcerated. One parolee shared,

It was so funny. I was only there for ten months. And going in there, some guys would be like, man I would totally hit that. And I’d be like, “that’s disgusting bro.” And six months later, they’d be like, “so how’s she looking now?” “Well . . . she’s not like gross, but I don’t know if I would . . . ” Then after 10 months, “Yeah I totally would. I’d even kiss her on the mouth.” (Jarrell)

Again, the contrast is telling. While situational homosexuality was rejected as an explanation for prisoner–prisoner sexual behaviors, the notion of sexual deprivation was invoked in assertions of heterosexuality.

**General Discussion and Conclusion**

To date, much of the research on prison sex has focused on the overt sexual behaviors of prison populations. Far fewer studies have explored prisoner attitudes regarding sexuality in prison, and still fewer have examined the implications of such attitudes for prisoner behaviors. Consistent with a social constructionist framework, the purpose of this study was to explore how sexuality is discursively produced, given meaning, and performed in Canadian federal male correctional facilities, and to situate these within the context of dominant attitudes.

Overall, findings suggest that prisoner culture in Ontario penitentiaries can be characterized as strongly heteronormative and homophobic. Moreover, these attitudes fostered a deep-seated anxiety toward the heavily stigmatized label of “homosexual” which appeared to motivate three kinds of behavior, during and post-incarceration. First, respondents, the majority of whom exhibited this anxiety, distanced themselves from homosexuality by constructing same-sex sexual behaviors as against the norm in Canadian male prisons and by “othering” gay prisoners. Second, knowledge about homosexual activities and gay behaviors themselves were carefully regulated by threats of
ostracism and violence, with the effect of suppressing homosexuality in the prison environment. Third, a heteronormative culture was actively maintained through frequent assertions of heterosexuality and discussions of heterosexual relationships.

Prior to discussing the implications of these findings, some limitations of this study should be noted. First, the sample size coupled with the high proportion of respondents who had served their sentences in Ontario federal prisons means that generalizations to Canadian federal male penitentiaries in other provinces or regions should be made cautiously. Indeed, the parolees in this sample who had experiences of incarceration in federal prisons in Ontario and in other provinces provided anecdotal evidence suggestive of significant regional variations in prisoner cultural attitudes toward homosexuality and gay sexual acts. Future studies are needed to examine these potential institutional differences across provinces. Similar care should be exercised in applying findings in this study to prison populations outside of Canada. The argot labels and sexual hierarchies that have been identified in previous studies conducted on U.S. prison populations (e.g., Hensley et al., 2003; Sykes, 1958) were not found here. Instead, the majority of respondents reported that in the prison sexual hierarchy, no role or status distinctions beyond the heterosexual–homosexual binary were made, and that prisoners who engaged in same-sex sexual behaviors could not escape being stigmatized based on individual or situational characteristics. This significant contrast in how sexual roles are conceptualized may be indicative of very strong attitudes against homosexuality in the prisoner cultures described here and may suggest that generalizing outside of Canadian borders is not advisable.

Second, prison sex research in general carries challenges in data accuracy. Prisoners may be hesitant to disclose their same-sex sexual experiences in prison out of fear of consequences, such as being stigmatized or victimized by others (Hensley & Tewksbury, 2002). On one hand, the use of face-to-face interviews may exacerbate respondents’ reluctance to openly answer questions about their attitudes toward homosexuality and sexual behaviors during incarceration. On the other hand, the use of semistructured, open-ended interviews allows for opportunities to probe respondents for clarification and for limitless answer options; indeed, respondents can amend and reflect on their responses, and provide a more comprehensive picture, as many did here. Still, increasing the diversity of data collection methods (e.g., surveys and interviews), as well as the characteristics of people included in the sample (e.g., including a greater proportion of respondents who are openly bisexual or gay, and who have spent time in correctional facilities in other provinces where the culture is more tolerant), in future studies would certainly be worthwhile.

Nonetheless, a number of important implications emerge from the findings of this present study. First and foremost, at a theoretical level, the utility of social constructionist approaches to research on prison sex is supported in the findings. The most compelling observations in support of this were the parolees’ contradictions in how sexuality was presented. For parolees who reported no involvement in gay sexual behaviors, the idea that sexual desires or behaviors were, even partially, subject to environmental influences may increase the risk of themselves being perceived as having engaged in or being open to gay sexual acts in prison. Thus, they insisted upon a rigid boundary between homosexuality and heterosexuality, embraced true homosexuality as an explanation for prisoner–prisoner sexual behaviors, and constructed sexual orientation as nonmalleable and biological. Conversely, for parolees and prisoners who had engaged in homosexual behaviors, situational homosexuality was a concept that allowed them to distance themselves from true homosexuals, and attribute their own sexual encounters to an external cause (i.e., sexual deprivation). Furthermore, while situational homosexuality was rejected by the majority of respondents, many of these same respondents endorsed the idea of “situational heterosexuality,” whereby limited access to opportunities for heterosexual relationships accounted for prisoners’ attractions to female correctional staff.

While these competing explanations are often problematic within an essentialist framework, from a social constructionist perspective, they can be quite illuminating. Our findings support Richmond’s (1978) observation that the stigma of homosexuality, and prisoners’ anxieties over being so labeled,
informs the behavioral choices of incarcerated men and shapes their constructions of sexuality. The parolees’ divergent views on the merit of situational homosexuality may be best understood as strategically employed discursive constructions that serve to reduce their anxieties by facilitating their self-presentations as heterosexual. This interpretation is in line with Kunzel’s (2002, p. 265) assertion that “situational homosexuality must be understood . . . not as a description of sexual acts produced by the presumably ahistorical forces of circumstance and environment but as a rhetorical manoeuvre” employed by prisoners, as well as researchers, to normalize their sexual behaviors in prison. Moreover, while others have previously noted the socially constructed nature of the divide between situational and true homosexuality (e.g., Eigenberg, 1992; Kunzel, 2002), the findings of the current study suggest that conceptualizations of sexuality more generally may be best taken as discursive strategies and, in consequence, analyzed as such. Future studies seeking to understand same-sex sexual behaviors among prisoners would benefit from taking into consideration the dominant cultural attitudes, beliefs, and norms regarding sexuality within the prisons being studied.

At a practical level, our findings are in line with previous empirical studies that have demonstrated the pervasiveness of homophobic attitudes among male prisoners (e.g., Hensley, 2000; Hensley et al., 2002) and the risk to personal safety that gay prisoners face in the general population because of their sexual orientation (e.g., Alarid, 2000; Wooden & Parker, 1982). It is concerning that prisoners desiring to engage in gay sexual activities must either apply to be segregated from the general population (e.g., Alarid, 2000) or perform these acts in secret. Of course, neither option frees one from the risk of repercussions, such as ostracism and physical victimization. Changes in policy and practice at the institutional level are needed if prisoners who are bisexual or gay are to feel any degree of safety and equality during incarceration. While general prisoner violence is subject to disciplinary sanctions, the implementation of anti-prejudice educational programs may be more effective at reducing hate-related violence than disciplinary punishments alone. In addition, training that increases sensitivity to the interpersonal difficulties that prisoners involved in homosexual activities face should be made available to individuals who work directly with prisoners, including correctional staff and medical personnel. Correctional staff members, in particular, need to be equipped with the capacities to recognize, intervene, and provide adequate responses to incidents of homophobia and their perpetrators, as well as the individuals being stigmatized.

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