

## An Analysis of Inmate Explanations for Lesbian Relationships in Prison

Craig J. Forsyth, Rhonda D. Evans, and D. Burk Foster<sup>1</sup>

*The current study utilizes data from interviews with female inmates at the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women (LCIW). This paper analyzes the discourse of female inmates concerning homosexual relationships within prison. Theoretical explanations for understanding lesbian relationships within prison are discussed. Using a discourse perspective the data gathered from inmates are discussed within the context of recent theoretical developments and institutionalized homophobia.*

The Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women (LCIW) opened its doors at the present location in 1973. The original population consisted of less than 200 female inmates confined in one large dormitory. Over the years new housing units have been constructed and it now houses over 900 inmates. The prison still occupies the same grounds it had in 1973. It has not become bigger, but rather more dense over time (Dixon 1957; Doucet 1971; Mitchell 1978; Morning Advocate 1961; Morris 1968; Pierce 1967; State Times 1972). As in most prisons, inmates still attempt to pass the time as easily as possible while serving their sentence. Many are looking for compassion in the stressful, sterile environment in which they are forced to live.

This research examines the statements of inmates regarding why women form lesbian relationships within the confines of prison. To do this, 24 women were interviewed who have lived at the facility for over twenty years. The authors attempt to frame the discourse surrounding lesbian relationships in prison within the context of recent theoretical developments and institutionalized homophobia. The investigation of these issues lends insight into the interaction between inmates' daily lived experiences within the prison and the stigma and prohibitions associated with lesbian relationships both within and outside the prison (Faderman 1991; Warner 1992). Furthermore, exploration into the lives of groups of marginalized woman offers insight into

---

<sup>1</sup>Craig J. Forsyth, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Rhonda D. Evans, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, D. Burk Foster, University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Please address all correspondence to Dr. Craig J. Forsyth, Head Department of Criminal Justice, P.O. Box 41652, University of Louisiana at Lafayette, Lafayette, Louisiana 70504, E-Mail: cjf5714@louisiana.edu

the lives of all woman within our society. Their experiences tend to reflect broader societal issues concerning gender and sexuality. A brief review of the four theoretical explanations of prison homosexuality will provide the context for this analysis.

### **THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS FOR LESBIAN RELATIONSHIPS IN PRISON**

Homosexual relationships are a significant component of the subculture of women's prisons and show no signs of lessening (Clark 1995; Leger 1987; Propper 1982). It is a given that lesbian activity has become more accepted and open participation has increased in the last 30 years (Faderman 1991; Faith 1993). These figures are reflected in prison also. Research from the 70s and 80s indicates that approximately 25% of incarcerated women reported involvement in a lesbian relationship (Moyer 1978). More recent research, even while acknowledging that their estimates are conservative, contend that 30% to 60% of women are in lesbian relationships in prison (Owen 1998).

Research and the transpiring theoretical perspectives regarding lesbian relationships in prison are generally considered within two contexts: the sexual orientation of women before they enter prison and whether or not they engage in sexual activities with other women while in prison. Some women arrive at prison self-identifying as lesbians and have emotional and physical ties while in prison and others self-identify as lesbian but avoid engaging in homosexual behavior while in prison. Other women engage in lesbian behavior only while incarcerated, while maintaining a heterosexual identity. Others "come out" as lesbians while in prison and maintain that status after their release from prison. And finally, some identify as heterosexual and do not engage in lesbian activities (Diaz-Cotto 1996; Owen 1998).

Although research has concerned itself with the sexual activity of both pre-prison lesbians and heterosexual women, most of this research has been concerned with heterosexual women engaging in homosexual activity and explanations for it (Diaz-Cotto 1996; Faith 1993; Owen 1998; Ward and Kassebaum 1965). Four theoretical explanations have been utilized to explain lesbian relationships of these women in prison. Three of these are interrelated: prison subculture, deprivation, and importation, while the fourth and most recent perspective, a theory of gender fluidity, is unique and offers a more fluid view of gender than the former three. All four seek to explain the nature of homosexual behaviors in penal institutions.

### **Subculture, Deprivation, and Importation**

These three theories attempt to explain why women who are not homosexually oriented turn to this way of life while incarcerated. Homosexuality is seen as part of the adaptation to prison, as a reaction to the harsh realities of prison life or as a transplanting of roles from the outside world to the prison environment. Although the prison subculture, deprivation, and importation models are discussed as being unique theories they are all derived from research on male prisons and/or a heterosexual view of the world (Sykes 1958; Ward and Kassebaum 1965). Many of the studies of female prisons were informed by these perspectives, either singularly or in combination (Genders and Player 1990; Pollock-Byrne 1990; Ward and Kassebaum 1965). Each of these three theories see lesbian activity as an imitation of heterosexuality (Richardson 1996).

The prison subculture is based on the assumption that group values and norms arise from attempts to adjust and cope with the negative aspects of confinement (Hart 1995). This subculture stems from attempts to make doing time easier (Owen 1998). Adaptation to prison life is the key to survival while incarcerated. Prisonization occurs when these women internalize the prison subculture. Pollock-Byrne (1990) defines prisonization as an inmate taking the value system of the prison subculture as her own. Some women reject the prison subculture. Pollock-Byrne (1990) terms such rejection of the prison subculture doing hard time. On the same note when a woman puts aside her civilian life for her newly accepted prison life, this is called doing good time. The response of inmates depends on the institutional characteristics such as the size and physical layout, disciplinary style, or organizational objectives (Kruttschnitt, Gartner, and Miller 2000). Whether lesbianism in prison is considered "doing good time" is in, part, dependent on the characteristics of a particular institution.

It was the research of an anthropologist, Margaret Mead, that brought institutional homosexuality among women to the forefront. Mead declared female homosexuality while in prison to be a temporary substitute for heterosexual relations (Freedman 1996). Implicitly, deprivation theory suggests homosexual behaviors are bolstered by the prison subculture (Pollock-Byrne 1990). In essence, inmates' behaviors and attitudes are viewed as reactions to the deprivations of imprisonment. It argues that inmates respond similarly to incarceration because of its fundamentally coercive character (Kruttschnitt, Gartner, and Miller 2000). The deprivation view of homosexual behavior in female institutions is based on a woman's lack of ties to family and loved ones. Another reason may be that her family and loved ones are just too far away to make the expensive journey for a visit. Sometimes, as is the case with lifers, the longer you are in prison the harder it is to keep in touch with anyone on

the outside. Whatever the case, these women fill this void with lesbian relationships while serving their sentence. Commensurate with this notion; lifers are most likely to be involved in prison homosexuality (Pollock-Byrne 1990).

The importation theory explains how the personal characteristics of the inmates contribute to what happens in prison (Pollock-Byrne 1990). It is a critique of the deprivation and subcultural perspectives which view the prison as a closed system. The importation perspective regards inmate adaptation as being shaped by their pre-prison experiences; they originate in and are maintained by subcultures outside of prison (Kruttschnitt, Gartner, and Miller 2000). Women bring to prison self-conceptions and identities which are significant for how they adapt to prison. The fact that many of these women come from backgrounds of exploitation and abuse; shapes what they want from life and relationships. It may not be based on their own reality as much as it is based on what they would like reality to have been. They adopt roles which are consistent with the roles, real or idyllic, they had in the free world from which they came and will return (Ward and Kassebaum 1965).

### **Gender Fluidity**

The research of Faith (1993) forms the basis of this explanation. Contrary to the previously mentioned theories this perspective is driven by the assumption that there is no essence to gender or the roles that one gender must occupy. In short, Faith's (1993) account of female sexual interactions while incarcerated involves a much more nuanced approach to understand sexuality. The boundaries are fluid and contested, ever changing through ongoing interaction. Imprisoned women do not turn to one another because they feel deprived in the absence of men and use women as substitutes. Rather she finds that,

Whatever their personal preferences and habits on the outside, and depending on the level of institutional controls and disciplinary risks, women in prison not uncommonly learn to give and receive intimacy with one another...Imprisoned women don't turn to one another because they feel deprived in the absence of men and use other women as a substitute, which borrows from theoretical presumptions based on studies of homosexuality in male prisons. Rather, in an atmosphere where women are not competing for male attentions, previously heterosexual women discover that they are attracted to women in their own right (Faith 1993: 214).

Faith (1993) criticizes the other theories by pointing out that women did not think of their close relationships in prison as role playing or a temporary mode of adaptation. She asserts that they have learned to overcome their fears of loving women and although most would return to men in the free world they did not consider their relationships in prison to be vilified by being referred to as merely a reaction to the deprivations of prison life.

Prisons tend to intensify every emotion, and when women fall in love it can become a consuming passion even if the circumstances prevent sexual contact. As is the case with many lesbians in the free world, for women in prison sexual passion is often subordinate to the shared emotional comfort, social camaraderie, spiritual communion and political connectedness that can be achieved in balanced relationships (Faith 1993: 215).

Faith (1993) states that not all women who love one another in prison are lesbians. Some incarcerated women learn to love another women in prison and learn to love themselves in the process. Faith (1993) recounts, through the inmates own words, how these experiences of loving another women were the first times they had someone who knew alot about them, and still love them and how they came to develop more positive self images.

The current study is not concerned with testing these theories, but rather with examining their influence on the discourse of inmates concerning lesbian behavior in the confines of prison. The main question addressed by this study is whether this particular group of female inmates have developed a discourse for discussing homosexual behavior that can subvert hegemonic heterosexual models that inform our understanding of sexuality.

## METHODOLOGY

Primary data were gathered from interviews conducted at LCIW in the Spring of 2000. Twenty-four inmates were interviewed. All the women interviewed had served twenty or more years in prison. Thus, our sample was confined to those women who were most likely to be enmeshed in prison life, as well as, those who have been reported to be most likely to engage in homosexual activities while incarcerated. It was reasoned that if indeed a subculture that promotes homosexual behavior exists within the prison it would most likely be evident in the discourse of these women. These interviews ranged from thirty to forty-five minutes each. The interviews were conducted on four different days. Each session took place on the prison grounds in a staff person's office. Only the researcher and the inmate were present. An interview guide was used to glean responses regarding the general topic of prison life; but focusing on sexual relationships in prison. Questions were framed so as to elicit the personal experiences of the inmate. A tape recorder was used to

document the interviews. A journal was also given to each interviewed inmate to further recount any of her feelings that may be useful to this research. Each inmate was interviewed again for approximately 30 minutes when the journal was picked up. Secondary data were obtained from the State Archives and the State Library.

LCIW houses minimum, medium, and maximum security felons, most of whom fall into the medium security range. The average inmate is black, was unemployed at the time of arrest, has completed some high school, has never been married, has two children, and is 35 to 44 years of age. The rise in average age suggests that women are growing older in prison as a result of longer sentences. Our sample fits this typical description, except that they were older.

This research analyzes the discourse of inmates. Discourse analysis involves dissecting the underlying meanings found in various forms of communication (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). As such it not only examines the comments of women prisoners, but analyzes how the structures may be molding responses. Attention is paid to the role of discourse and its discursive nature and the constraints these place on women. In examining the discourse of the inmate, the prison code is seen as a paramount structure which manages the course of the conversation. The inmate also wants to be seen as a skilled, sensible, and ethical person and thereby is driven by dominant discourse in the broader society. The discourse of the inmate is a substantive account of an organized way of life.

## FINDINGS

In order to understand the discourse in which these women engage in, the structure under which they endure must be understood. The penalty at LCIW for being caught in a "lesbian moment" is 90 days in the maximum security cellblock. Persons in maximum security wear black and white striped uniforms and spend only one hour a day outside. They are completely isolated from the rest of the compound. Women inmates are monitored more closely than they were in the prison's early years, when prisoners wore their own clothes and hand-holding and physical contact between inmates were tolerated. Now prisoners wear color-graded clothing (tied to security levels), physical contact with another inmate is prohibited, and a hug or a kiss will get both inmates 90 days in the "hole". Such punishments are characteristic of many institutions (Faith 1993: 216).

The disadvantage of a homosexual relationship at LCIW is being caught. An inmate's view on the issue is as follows:

I be trying not to say some of the things that are getting ready to come out. For one thing you are disrespecting yourself. If you caught kissing someone, you getting locked up, you're not even supposed to touch each other.

Lesbian relationships are often believed to result from boredom, as just a way to pass the time. However, the following account also indicates the extent which female inmates have internalized institutionalized heterosexuality. These comments suggest the inability to view sexual relations outside of the binary gender stereotypes.

I really feel that it's just because they incarcerated. Because most of them don't come here like that. And then a lot of them leave. They go home straight to men. And then some of them come in pregnant and then start participating. You know, they come in big and pregnant and have the baby and the next thing you know they have a dip in their hip. I mean they want to be a man.

Along the same lines, another inmate describes this phenomenon.

Very few come in here that were already gay. The terminology in here is being "turned out". If they've been turned out, maybe 25% will continue that lifestyle. Maybe another small percentage will swing both ways as the saying goes.

Other reasons were curiosity and passing the time.

Curiosity for one thing. Sexual needs for another. But curiosity plays a big part in it. You know, you've heard about it and read about it, and here's your opportunity. And you're gonna get out and do it.

I find myself in a rut, and have been for the last two-plus decades. Sex is a way to pass the time with some pleasure and emotion.

Abuse also plays a role in a woman's decision to engage in homosexual activities.

They have some that may have been battered by men and so it was easy for them to turn and get into a relationship with a woman.

According to one inmate, the type of woman to get involved in these relationships is a short termer, which is not consistent with the literature.

A short termer...It may be a way of passing time. But most of the time because they really don't care about doing anything positive. And these are the ones you see coming back so often.

The lesbian encounters in this prison are not always about love, sex, companionship, passing the time, or curiosity. Sometimes, the motivation is something totally different. Indeed, in our sample economic support was the most frequently expressed explanation for these relationships. When asked why a woman engages in lesbian activities once incarcerated, two residents answered:

I know a lot of these girls get involved in these relationships because they have no financial support. These relationships provide money for the canteen or maybe giving them something to wear. They don't have no family that come and see about them, so they getting attention. A lot of girls maybe get more love here than they may have gotten on the street.

A lot of these people are not really sincere about being in a homosexual relationship. They are really trying to support themselves. You know, they meet somebody and say, she has money, so I'm going to talk to her. And it might just be a conversation relationship.

When asked what the benefits of this type of relationship were, two interviewees answered as follows:

Financial support, canteen, you know material things. It's more than just sexual. It's more like, you know, having a best friend too...You genuinely care for someone. And you're giving to them material things and emotional support.

In the negative side you have the users who do it, they're an aggressive person, and they do it for money. Like say I'm the



butch and you come in and you are an attractive lady, or you don't even have to be attractive sometimes, but you've got a healthy bank account and your people run for you. Well, I'm going to get everything I can. And I'm going to promise you the moon and the stars and just flatter you and dote on you just to get that. But like I say, that's the negative side.

The preceding accounts suggest that the reasons for engaging in homosexual behavior are multifaceted and the discourse is largely framed within the normative boundaries of heterosexuality. All rationalizations for why they engage in this behavior are consistent with the subcultural, importation and deprivation models. The exception, to these traditional explanations, is the idea of economic motive, which is also consistent with the dominant heterosexual discourse of female dependency, and indeed does not challenge these theories. None are consistent with Faith's (1993) account.

## DISCUSSION

Given the prohibitive structure of prison it is easy to understand why most inmates spoke of lesbian relationships in the third person. Also a largely homophobic society (Faderman 1991; Richardson 1996; Warner 1992) has indeed molded the responses, in that, these women explain the relationship as temporary. By saying that these lesbian relationships are temporary they reduce the stigma of such relationships (Goode 2001). Primary among these temporal explanations was economic motivation. A homophobic society may be more accepting of women only situationally becoming lesbians. This research points out the power of dominant or hegemonic discourse concerning sexuality and its delimiting effect on the extent to which it is legitimate to talk about sexuality. The accounts of these women were framed within the confines of a discourse in which heterosexuality is the social norm. Within this discourse heterosexuality is considered to be the "right" sexuality and homosexuality is marginalized, often seen as a pathological behavior, thus creating a need to justify it in the first place. A particular discourse has arisen which has been based only on research in male prisons and it aims to legitimate homosexual acts in terms of dominant heterosexual discourse. In short, the answers that inmates were willing to give were shaped by the conditions which dictated their behavior. More specifically, the threat of negative sanctions within the confines of the prison affects what they say (Arrigo 1996).

The degree to which the inmate's experiences include homosexual behavior depends on one's experience in prison, competing systems and

identities shaped by commitments to or effects of pre-prison experiences, and the fluidity of one's concept of gender. Thus, women prisoners vary in the extent to which they rely on personalized relationships to survive their sentences (Larsen and Nelson 1984; Owen 1998). Getting these prisoners to freely acknowledge their own sexuality and perhaps what meaning it has for them is the only way to concretely established a theory for these relationships.

This research continues the focus on personalized relationships as a central component of the subculture of women's prisons. With our nation's greater faith in imprisonment as the primary response to female crime, it is necessary to concentrate more research efforts on the life of women in prison. Research should be guided by the notion that gender is neither an unalterable nor an ironclad identity, and that there is considerable variety in women's life experiences both in and out of prison (Belknap 2001; Faith 1993; Kruttschnitt, Gartner, and Miller 2000; Smart 1995).

Lesbian relations have been argued to subvert institutionalized heterosexuality, which has been accused of upholding male dominance in society and perpetuating patriarchy (Jackson 1996; Rich 1996). We should shift our focus away from individual homosexual activities within prisons and toward understanding an institutional structure which has a powerful dialogue because of its power to shape other discourse (Smart 1995). Future research should recognize the political nature of sexuality and sexual identities, generally.

#### REFERENCES

- Arrigo, B. A. (1996). Postmodern Criminology On Race, Class, And Gender. In M. D. Schwartz & D. Milovanovic (Eds.), *Race, Gender, And Class In Criminology: The Intersection*, (pp. 73-89) New York: Garland Publishing Co.
- Belknap, J. (2001). *The Invisible Woman: Gender, Crime, And Justice*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth.
- Clark, J. (1995). The Impact of the Prison Environment on Mothers. *The Prison Journal* 75(3), 306-329.
- Diaz-Cotto, J. (1996). *Gender, Ethnicity, and The State: Latin and Latino Prison Politics*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Dixon. M. (1957). New Angola Women's Unit Resembles School Dorms. *Morning Advocate*, April 21, A6.
- Doucet, C. (1971). Suit by Women Inmates Upheld. *Times Picayune*, October 2, I4.
- Faderman, L. (1991). *Odd Girls And Twilight Lovers: A History Of Lesbian Life In Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Faith, K. (1993). *Unruly Women*. Vancouver, Canada: Press Gang Publishers.
- Freedman, E. (1996). The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual, 1915-1965, *Feminist Studies*, 22(2), 397-415.
- Genders, E., & Player, E. (1990). Women Lifers: Assessing The Experience. *The Prison Journal*, 80, 46-57.
- Goode, E. (2001). *Deviant Behavior*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Gubrium, J. F. & Holstein, J.A. (1997). *The New Language Of Qualitative Method*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hart, C. B. (1995). Gender Differences In Social Support Among Inmates. *Women and Criminal Justice*, 6(2), 67-88.
- Jackson, S. (1996). Heterosexuality, Power and Pleasure. In S. Jackson & S. Scott, *Feminism and Sexuality*, (pp. 175-179). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Kruttschnitt, C., R. Gartner, & A. Miller. (2000). Doing Her Own Time? Women's Responses To Prison In The Context Of The Old And The New Penology. *Criminology*, 38 (3), 681-717.
- Larsen, J. & J. Nelson. (1984). Women, Friendship, And Adaptation To Prison. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 12(5), 601-615.
- Leger, R. (1987). Lesbianism Among Women Prisoners: Participants And Nonparticipants. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 14, 463-479.
- Moyer, I. L. (1978). Differential Social Structures And Homosexuality Among Women In Prison. *Virginia Social Science Journal*, 13, 13-19.
- Mitchell, T. (1978). Small St. Gabriel Is a Modern Prison. *Times Picayune*, December 7, H4.
- Morning Advocate. (1961). Transfer of Women to New St. Gabriel Prison Is Completed. *Morning Advocate*, July 1, A6.
- Morris, J. (1968). St. Gabriel Inmate Tells Visitors Addicts are Disturbed, Need Help. *Morning Advocate*, January 21, A11.
- Owen, B. (1998). *In The Mix: Struggle And Survival In A Women's Prison*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Pierce, A. (1967). New Ideas Boosting Morale at Women's State Prison. *State Times*, November 7, A4
- Pollock-Byrne, J. (1990). *Women, Prison, & Crime*, Pacific Grove, California.: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.
- Propper, A. 1982. Make-believe Families And Homosexuality Among Imprisoned Girls. *Criminology*, 20(1), 127-139.
- Rich, A. (1996). Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experiences. In S. Jackson & S. Scott (Eds.) *Feminism and Sexuality*, (pp.130-143). New York: Columbia University Press.

- Richardson, D. (1996). Constructing Lesbian Sexualities. In S. Jackson & S. Scott (Eds.) *Feminism and Sexuality*, (pp. 276-286). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Smart, C.. (1995). *Law, Crime, and Sexuality: Essays In Feminism*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- State Times. (1972). Women Prisoners Report Made. *State Times*, April 26, A6.
- Sykes, G. (1958). *The Society Of Captives: A Study Of A Maximum Security Prison*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Ward, D. & G. Kassebaum. (1965). *Women's Prison: Sex and Social Structure*. New York: Aldine.
- Warner, M. (1992). From Queer To Eternity: An Army Of Theorists Cannot Fail. *The Village Voice*. The Voice Literary Supplement, June, 18-19.