



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

Sexual Deviance in Prison: Queering Identity and Intimacy in Prison Research

Carr, N., Serisier, T., & McAlister, S. (2020). Sexual Deviance in Prison: Queering Identity and Intimacy in Prison Research. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 20(5), 551-563. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895820937401>

Published in:
Criminology and Criminal Justice

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights

© 2020 The Authors.

This work is made available online in accordance with the publisher's policies. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Open Access

This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: <http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback>

Sexual Deviance in Prison: Queering Identity and Intimacy in Prison Research

Authors: Nicola Carr, Tanya Serisier and Siobhán McAlister.

Abstract

Recent years have seen increased attention in both research and policy towards Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) prisoners as a group with distinct needs. This has been driven by wider political recognition of LGBT rights and research suggesting that LGBT prisoners are particularly 'vulnerable' to bullying and abuse within prison settings. Much of this research, and the policy solutions associated with it, we argue, ignores or side-steps queer perspectives, relying instead on liberal conceptions of identity, vulnerability and, ultimately, assimilation. Just as contemporary campaigns around marriage rights see LGBT communities and individuals as fundamentally the same as the majority, rather than posing a challenge to the heteronormativity of marriage as an institution, much contemporary research and policy on LGBT prisoners sees this group as marked only by potential discrimination. We argue here instead that experiences of LGBT prisoners can be read 'queerly' so as to potentially challenge the rigid gender and heteronormative foundations that underlie systems of incarceration. We draw on a small-scale empirical research project around the experience of LGBT prisoners to revisit contemporary paradoxes of prisons and sexuality and to problematise understandings of identity, intimacy and deviance in the prison context.

Keywords: Queer, Deviance, LGBT, Prisoners.

Final Word Count: 6030

Author Information

Dr Nicola Carr
University of Nottingham, UK
E-mail: nicola.carr@nottingham.ac.uk

Dr Tanya Serisier
Birkbeck University, UK
E-mail: t.seriser@bbk.ac.uk

Dr Siobhán McAlister,
Queen's University Belfast, UK
E-mail: s.mcalister@qub.ac.uk

Dr Nicola Carr is an Associate Professor in Criminology, University of Nottingham, where she is co-director of the Criminal Justice Research Centre. She researches and writes on the sociology of punishment and representations of penalty.

Dr Tanya Serisier is a Senior Lecturer at Birkbeck College, University of London. She is a feminist researcher interested in the regulation of sex and sexuality, and the cultural politics of sexual violence, which she discusses in her recent book, *Speaking Out: Rape, Feminism and Narrative Politics* (2018).

Dr Siobhán McAlister is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Queen's University Belfast. She researches and writes in the areas of youth, inequality, marginalisation and conflict, and has a particular interest in participatory research on sensitive topics.

Sexual Deviance in Prison: Queering Identity and Intimacy in Prison Research

Authors: Nicola Carr, Tanya Serisier and Siobhán McAlister.

Abstract

Recent years have seen increased attention in both research and policy towards Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) prisoners as a group with distinct needs. This has been driven by wider political recognition of LGBT rights and research suggesting that LGBT prisoners are particularly 'vulnerable' to bullying and abuse within prison settings. Much of this research, and the policy solutions associated with it, we argue, ignores or side-steps queer perspectives, relying instead on liberal conceptions of identity, vulnerability and, ultimately, assimilation. Just as contemporary campaigns around marriage rights see LGBT communities and individuals as fundamentally the same as the majority, rather than posing a challenge to the heteronormativity of marriage as an institution, much contemporary research and policy on LGBT prisoners sees this group as marked only by potential discrimination. We argue here instead that experiences of LGBT prisoners can be read 'queerly' so as to potentially challenge the rigid gender and heteronormative foundations that underlie systems of incarceration. We draw on a small-scale empirical research project around the experience of LGBT prisoners to revisit contemporary paradoxes of prisons and sexuality and to problematise understandings of identity, intimacy and deviance in the prison context.

Keywords: Queer, Deviance, LGBT, Prisoners.

INTRODUCTION

Questions of criminal and sexual deviance in prisons have long been intertwined. The problem of 'criminal intimacy' in prison has preoccupied policymakers, reformers and academics from the 'birth of the prison' as the pre-eminent modern form of punishment (Kunzel, 2008; Foucault, 1977). Historically in a highly heteronormative policy framework, sex segregation was imagined to remove sexual and romantic intimacy and associated disciplinary problems (Kunzel, 2008). Paradoxically, however, this design is recognised as promoting same-sex sexual activity, described by some as 'situational homosexuality' (Eigenberg, 1992). Sex-segregated prisons are, therefore, widely recognized as institutions designed to contain criminal 'deviance' which inadvertently encourage sexual 'deviance' (Sykes, 1958).

Recent decades in many Western countries have seen homosexuality move from social sanctioning and criminalisation to civil and relationship rights including marriage, alongside the criminalisation of overt and violent homophobia. As queer critics have noted, the entrenchment of rights has been accompanied by a solidification of notions of 'born this way' innate sexual identities while respectability has seen the adoption of increasingly conservative 'homonormative' politics among LGBT communities and individuals including support for carceral solutions to the problem of homophobia (Cohen, 2019; Lamble, 2013).

Where queers were once unproblematically considered deviant, mainstream LGBT individuals now frequently feature in criminal justice discourse as vulnerable figures of victimisation. This projection of the 'vulnerable deviant' is particularly embodied in the LGBT prisoner (Kunzel, 2008). As prisons, and prisoners, are associated with atavistic homophobia, the LGBT prisoner is increasingly officially recognised as a figure of vulnerability (International Commission of Jurists, 2007). Simultaneously, the presence of same-sex desire within prisons continues to be cast as a threat to order, and sexual contact between prisoners is highly regulated. The figure of the LGBT prisoner thus illuminates both the paradoxical sexual politics of prison and contemporary paradoxes of LGBT identity.

In this article, we explore these paradoxes through a queer reading of LGBT identities and same-sex intimacies in prison. Following recent calls to bring together aspects of queer theory, sociologies of deviance and empirical research to produce new understandings of 'doing' and 'being deviant' we draw on a small-scale project of LGBT prisoners in Ireland (Love 2015). We attempt to queer this research by demonstrating how our data troubles fixed notions of identity and dominant constructions of deviance (eg. Cohen, 2019). In addition, we argue that queer understandings of intimacy offer a more fruitful lens through which to understand both the experience and governance of sex in prison (eg. Kunzel, 2008).

We begin by providing some background to the project and contemporary research in this area, using this to contextualise our interest in what it means to 'be' and 'do' sexual deviance in prison. The subsequent section draws on empirical data to trouble the categorisation of 'LGBT prisoners' as a distinct, vulnerable minority group disrupting notions of in/authentic sexual identity. We then suggest examining what it means to 'do' intimacy and sexuality in prison as a more productive means of understanding the presence of same-sex desire in prison. This focus offers new insights into sex and sexuality in prison, allowing us to challenge dominant framings of deviance, vulnerability and normality in relation to sexual identity and behaviours, and their governance within the prison context.

Researching LGBT Rights and Needs in Prison

In 2015, we undertook the first national study of LGBT prisoners in Ireland in a project commissioned by the Irish Penal Reform Trust (IPRT). The commissioned research was framed as identifying and addressing the needs of a clearly defined and inherently vulnerable minority group. The research was subject to Queens University Belfast and Irish Prison Service (IPS) ethical review, and the IPS facilitated access to several men's and women's prisons with a range of security levels. With thirteen facilities, the adult prison estate in Ireland is comparatively small and the rate of imprisonment is lower than the European average (79.5 per 100,000 compared to 123.7) (Aebi and Tiago, 2019). The research sample included 14 serving prisoners and one former prisoner (7 of whom identified as LGBT), 10 representatives from criminal justice agencies and four representatives from LGBT organisations (n=29). The methods of data collection involved semi-structured and focus group interviews. Informed consent was sought from all participants and specific protocols were developed to ensure confidentiality and prisoner safety. Our main findings and more details on methods are published in Carr et al (2016).

While the research focussed on 'LGBT prisoners', this article focusses specifically on sex and sexuality, rather than gender identity within the prison context.¹

Research on LGBT prisoners, like our project, has predominantly been formulated through the linked framework of rights and vulnerabilities. It has documented the persistence of systematic homophobia and transphobia in prisons and a tendency to treat such prisoners as a source of disorder, calling for LGBT prisoners to be treated as vulnerable rather than risky (e.g. Ratkalkar and Atkin-Plunk, 2017). Yet, it is concerns regarding dangerous (unsafe) or coercive sex among prison inmates, and the desire for practice and policy responses to address this (most prominently within the United States), that has driven much LGBT and sex in prisons research (Tewksbury and West, 2000; Jenness et al., 2014). This contrasts with a more long-standing sociological and criminological tradition of prison research which has echoed heteronormative assumptions, including the 'deprivation' of hetero-sex as one of the 'pains' of imprisonment, while acknowledging the potentially different experiences of 'homosexual' prisoners (Sykes, 1958). Even more recent work on sociality or embodiment in prison has not focussed on practices of physical and sexual intimacy within prison or cast them as relevant only for a small minority (e.g. Crewe, 2009; Chamberlen, 2018). This history suggests that sex and intimacy in prisons remains a 'deviant' or 'subjugated' knowledge (Stevens, 2019).

In this article we combine our empirical data with insights from queer theory to challenge assumed links between sexual practice and identity, and of individual identification as 'queer' with membership of a minority LGBT community (Cohen, 2019). We echo researchers who have similarly challenged the assumptions of a clearly identifiable, if hidden, and uniquely vulnerable LGBT minority community in prison. While some prisoners who identify as LGBT outside of prison may not choose to do so within prison, others may engage in same-sex sex within or outside of prison without identifying with or being recognised as members of an LGBT community (Dunn, 2013; Robinson, 2011). In the prisons that we entered, therefore, identities, desires, deviance and normativity rubbed against each other in various forms of social, romantic, sexual and sexualised intimacies, pleasures and harms.

In short, we contest the idea that 'sexuality' constitutes a coherent 'master identity' with automatic social and cultural meanings within prison. We also challenge the notion that 'sex in prison' captures the range and types of same-sex intimacies and practices in this setting, or that clandestine, short-term sexual encounters are necessarily more challenging to prison norms than other more normative practices and desires, which themselves achieve a level of 'queerness' within the institutional setting of the prison. In what follows we outline some of these complexities by first considering identities and then intimacies, or questions of being and doing (sexual) deviance in prison (Love 2015).

Vulnerable Deviants: Queering Prison Identities

Our research showed that understandings of sexual identities diverge significantly between those who manage the prison and those who live within it. Staff understandings tended to be highly gendered, locating LGBT prisoners in men's and women's prisons as two discreet, identifiable groups. Conversations regarding men's prisons turned quickly to sexual health

¹ We use both LGBT and LGB as relevant throughout.

and condom provision while conversations about women turned to emotional dangers and (un)healthy relationships. For instance, when asked about problems for LGBT prisoners in men's prisons, a representative initial response from staff was, *'if you look at say gay men who are in prison... clearly...there are particular health risks. I know that the prison service has a policy for making condoms available.'*² A comparable response from a staff member in a women's prison was *'it's just that prison...makes people vulnerable, it makes people... form alliances that they wouldn't otherwise form, and that they may regret.'* While in both cases, homosexuality is associated with risk, the differences between them are based on gendered notions of the relationship between sexual identity, vulnerability and deviance.

These understandings were challenged by the lived experience of the prison, as was demonstrated when one men's prison worked with a group of prisoner volunteers to undertake a sexual health survey. One bemused prison official explained to us:

And we asked the question then, do you consider...yourself straight, gay, bisexual, or curious? Curious was very interesting, curious came from [an] individual [prisoner]... and we couldn't get our heads around it. We said what do you mean by curious? And he said -curious is... you would not believe the number of prisoners who approach me and the question they ask me is, does it hurt?

For the prisoners involved, it was logical that *'more people are curious, like someone trysexual'* and within the homosocial environment of the prison, they are more likely to act on it: *'Yeah they are going to try it and all. And there's a lot of people here that have tried it you know.'* The results of the survey were, according to the official, themselves *'quite curious. 'We weren't shocked but we were surprised at the results we got, we were really surprised on the basis that actually within the cohort that answered there was more sexual activity than we had anticipated.'* The survey did not reveal a hidden minority of LGBT prisoners, but rather a range of consensual sexual practices among a significant portion of inmates of varying sexual identities. In short, as one of our participants commented, *'people were involved in sex within prison, but they didn't see themselves as gay, but straight... or don't put a name on it'.*

In fact, as responses to the survey revealed, putting a name on it was arguably more controversial than sex itself. Some prisoners refused to have anything to do with this *'fucking gay stuff'* and at least one prisoner who we were told was engaged in sex in prison refused to participate because, *'he says, "I wouldn't want to be giving stuff out and having people telling me what I am".'* Practices of naming were associated with taint or contagion, with officials telling us that some male inmates demanded to leave the prison:

And they said - I have to fucking look for a transfer out of here because my mott [female partner] won't let me stay here, she'll think we are all having sex ... if that comes out I will have to, you know, I will have to leave here.

² During the research we were told that a national policy on condom provision was being developed, but that currently condoms were only available in some male prisons and this was at the discretion of individual governors. However, even where condoms were available, prisoners expressed concern that in accessing condoms they would be required to disclose that they were sexually active.

The survey might be read as pushing up against the paradox of prison as a space that is built on a presumption of gender and sexual binaries whilst creating conditions within which they are insupportable. We argue that in bringing these sexual acts into discourse the survey became a form of performative or 'excitable' speech, with the act of naming and identifying sex in prison giving that sex a new meaning more closely aligned with homosexual identity (Butler, 1997). It was the speech rather than the sex that threatened heterosexual identities and the presumed heteronormativity of the prison.

In women's prisons there was also an acceptance that a large proportion of prison sexual activity involved prisoners who identified as heterosexual and who might only engage in heterosexual outside of prison walls. However, in contrast to the homosexual contagion associated with naming sex in the men's prison survey, the notion of 'jail gays' came up repeatedly with both staff and prisoners. Frequently, we were told that 'jail gays' were, in fact, heterosexual: *'They're not gay, they're not into girls, they're only with girls when they're in prison'*. There was a sharp demarcation with 'being' gay, which was seen to involve personal transformation or struggle, as in classic coming out narratives (Saxey, 2008), and 'being' jail gays:

But like I said a lot of them are jail gay and they are not ... they are probably not even struggling with the whole being gay thing. And they wouldn't have had that experience before they came into jail. So in here it's a just a case of a little bit of a fling or a love affair.

The category of 'jail gays', as used here, simultaneously unsettles and reifies notions of sexual identity. The term suggests that people contextually adapt their sexual choices but, in the representation of these women as inauthentic, it insists on a core identity that remains unaltered by situationally-motivated sexual choices. In the words of one official, they are *'not at all [gay], they are completely heterosexual'*, despite accepting that prisoners were involved in sexual and romantic relations with other prisoners.

In contrast to these dominant narratives of inauthenticity, one prisoner noted it might be genuinely difficult *'to find out, in a place like this, are you gay or are you jail gay?'* Similarly, another prisoner, who had been exclusively heterosexual prior to prison, narrated what might have been interpreted as a 'jail gay' story, beginning a few months into a long sentence, with both at a *'very, very low point'* in their lives. Three and a half years into her sentence and the relationship, she described it as more authentic and less contingent than her relationships outside of prison:

So it's my first sober relationship I've ever been in in my whole entire life. All the other ones have been drink and drug related ... so I know this one is definitely deep down for real and proper and...it's just really, I don't know, it's like I'm a completely different woman after meeting her.

This story opens up the possibility of thinking about the contextual nature of what Adrienne Rich (1980) famously labelled 'compulsory heterosexuality', the societal pressures and stigma that make sexual identities other than heterosexual unthinkable for many. In contrast, the insistence by others that these relations are inauthentic and unreal reinforces the

inevitability of heterosexuality, especially for women, making homosexuality in prison a situational aberration with no meaning for their 'normal lives'.

The fluid and contextual nature of sexuality within prison, and its discursive containment through silencing or discourses of inauthenticity, has implications for understandings of LGB prisoners as vulnerable or deviant. Prisoners we spoke to were clear that openly gay or bisexual prisoners were treated as sources of disorder by the prison and were vulnerable to isolation, discrimination and abuse. However, the picture they painted of homosexuality as a recognised yet frequently unacknowledged part of prison life, complicates dominant framings in research and policy where LGB prisoners are presented as uniquely vulnerable. As Gilson (2016) argues, this dominant politics of vulnerability reproduces binary logics that ties recognition, the 'privilege' of vulnerability to identities that are viewed as uniquely imperilled. Thinking more queerly about vulnerability, argues Gilson (2016, p. 43), enables 'analysis in excess of identity categories', and, we would argue, complicating identity categories also helps in this reframing of vulnerability.

We also argue that the prisoners we spoke to, like Gilson saw vulnerability as more complicated and intersectional than official accounts recognise. They linked vulnerability in men's prisons to anything that could be perceived as signalling difference or 'weakness' within the strict, and at times violently enforced, masculine hierarchies of the prison, rather than being uniquely associated with homosexuality (Evans and Wallace, 2008). It was also clear to both prisoners and prison officers that LGB identity was not a privileged source of disadvantage. As a male prisoner said, '*nearly everyone who comes in here has issues*', while a prison guard commented that '*by nature of being in prison usually their life has not been good, so that have had lots of issues and they don't identify their sexuality as being one of them by and large.*' Indeed, the stigma of being identified as queer could be mitigated by having a reputation for violence, being able to handle yourself, having respected family connections, access to drugs to trade or a number of other means of asserting oneself in the prison hierarchy. This was articulated to us through the example of John/Joan, who openly enacted a highly feminine identity in prison:

Because he came from [place name] and had a brother who was quite heavy, you know, essentially he was able to sort of camp around the prison, and like this guy was never going to change. He's camp as knickers.

This is not to deny the significance or existence of institutionalised and violent homophobia in prisons. Rather to note, as Robinson (2011) suggests, that to focus on homophobia as a unique category of vulnerability risks eliding the far more generalized harms that masculinities and social hierarchies in men's prisons tend to produce. In this sense, being gay is part of a complex ecosystem of individual and social characteristics that determine safety and security within the prison.

In fact, LGB identity was seen as a resource by several of the prisoners we spoke to, albeit a resource associated with membership in a community they had limited access to rather than inhering innately to sexual acts: '*I never went to gay nightclubs or anything like, I... grew up just having sex with people around my area, so I never really went there and I got locked up when I was young*'. This participant went on to describe his historic sense of himself as

'deviant' rather than 'gay' or 'queer', explaining how hearing other prisoners talk of 'gay bashing' didn't produce feelings of vulnerability for him:

I've never been in a gay club, to understand what goes on ... and .. to be honest with you if I'd seen anything of it, I'd be seeing ... the violence part of it because I'm a violent person meself, back then I was. So.. I didn't see the gay person then, I didn't feel anything for it. I felt for the violent person side of it ...

He spoke further about having lived his life on the 'criminal side' in comparison to friends who had lived on the 'LGBT side':

Like I have a friend that's outside ... she is a lesbian like, and she... said to me for years, hanging around with everyone that I hung around with I was only doing that 'cause ... it was a front. Where if I had been staying with... her and her friends I would have been out there ...you know what I mean. So [I] think... I did fuck it up with me ma and me family's life, and I did fuck up me own life, but I fucked it all up by taking that role, and if I look at that other role now all her friends and all, they're all managers, they have cars, they have houses, like and I don't have anything.

Membership of 'the LGBT community' was equated with social belonging and respectability, as opposed to deviance or vulnerability, mirroring this division between 'respectable' LGBT communities and criminalised populations in contemporary politics (Lamble, 2013).

LGBT identity as a resource for respectability was also drawn on, particularly in women's prisons to differentiate 'real' relationships from prison-based ones involving 'jail gays'. As one participant argued, she and her girlfriend were 'planning' their futures and 'growing' together, and on that basis their relationship should be supported by prison authorities. In reality, however, *'they're making me feel like fucking shite for falling in love with someone.'* Discourses of love, futurity, and growth are all compatible with respectable, homonormative aspirations and identities, which are frequently the target of 'anti-normative' queer critique (eg. Edelman, 2004). As our respondent noted, and as we argue below, however, in prison, pursuit of normativity in the context of intimate relationships is not necessarily valorised, and in fact may itself be seen as a disruptive, deviant enterprise. It also shows how LGBT identity is not sufficient to benefit from homonormative respectability politics. Instead, there remains a significant disjuncture between the homonormativity of mainstream LGBT communities and the marginalized and complex lives of those in prison, problematizing the notion of these communities as a natural home for all who engage in non-heterosexual sex.

Doing Deviance: Sex and Intimacy in Prison

Prisoners, including LGBT prisoners, exist within the complex sociality of the prison, which is not only a site of punishment and regulation but also of life, intimacy and domesticity (Rowe, 2016). In short, the prison is an institution devoted to discipline that is inhabited by unruly bodies living in close proximity to each other (Chamberlen, 2018). LGBT prisoners not only make visible the possibility of sex, but also highlight the existence of other forms of intimacy that exist in what is both a disciplinary and a domestic space for those who live there. In this context, we were told that obvious romantic or sexual intimacy 'makes other people

uncomfortable'. At least one prisoner traced this discomfort to '*a sexual build-up of pressure and frustration, and that leads to violence and ... you know, retaliation against other people who ... are having sex*'. Speaking of jealousy, rather than prejudice or hatred, involves recognising social relations of proximity and intimacy as well as the fact that 'sex in prison' is not solely a concern of a clear minority of LGBT prisoners.

As mentioned above, official discussions of sex and relationships in prison tend to ignore this context. Instead, following a gendered and heteronormative logic where men's desires focus on sex and women's on intimacy, men's prisons primarily concern themselves with sexual health and women's with relationship health. This division was, however, disputed by prisoners who spoke of the emotional intimacies that occurred in men's prisons, particularly among those serving long sentences. In women's prisons, despite frequently telling us that women in relationships primarily craved companionship, prison officials repeatedly referred to the 'noise' of sex, and its audibility to other inmates, as a problem.

In both estates, inmates questioned the ability of the prison to promote 'health' on these terms and discussed their own attempts to do so autonomously. Male prisoners, for instance, spoke of 'DIY' sexual prophylaxis using '*crisp packets and sugar bags*' in order to circumvent governmental limits on condom provision and avoid the risks of publicly outing themselves to the institution and other prisoners. As they were well aware, sexual health in prison must be navigated socially and institutionally. Inmates in women's prisons also directly questioned the ability of prison management to determine the 'health' or otherwise of relationships. As one woman explained:

In healthy I don't know what they mean. We didn't take drugs, we didn't do anything in here, we don't fight, we don't argue... We get up and we do our work every day and we abide by the rules. But at the time I thought I was breaking them because I fell in love with a woman ... I felt very awkward around the staff then. You know, I felt really 'okay then these don't agree with it', and they moved me then, they shoved me off into [Name] Prison for a month.

In contrast, officials saw themselves as engaging in a duty of care around the needs of women who had lived '*chaotic lives before they ever went to prison*' and who were vulnerable to manipulation and abuse. While we do not deny the harms that might occur within relationships within prison, the monitoring of women's intimacy, and indeed their persistent desexualisation, occurs within a wider framework of infantilization and control of women in prisons (see Bosworth, 1999). Ultimately, again, it was clear that romantic and sexual intimacies had a broader social and institutional impact with one official admitting: '*I suppose we are not in favour of the whole thing. Because I guess it would probably get out of hand*'.

Leaving open precisely what getting out of hand might entail, it was clear in our discussion that the question of romantic and sexual intimacy needs to be understood within the tension between the prison as striving for absolute order and being a space inhabited by unruly bodies. A prison is both an official and a domestic space within which prisoners undertake highly private activities, from sleeping to showering, most often imagined to be only shared among the 'intimate' relations of families and romantic partners, alongside other more generally public activities such as work or leisure, and this variety of activities is almost

impossible to fully monitor and control. As one prison official put it, '*some closed prisons could have more nooks and crannies than others*'. Ultimately, we would argue, nooks and crannies are inevitable, and the prison is inevitably a permeable space with a saturation of intimacy and interactions (Rowe, 2016). The presence of LGB prisoners or the evidence (auditory or otherwise) of sex makes obvious the sexual possibilities of the 'homosocial' nature of the prison environment (Sedgwick, 2008).

The word most frequently used by prisoners to describe this situation was 'awkwardness', an awkwardness that might be understood as resulting precisely from embodying and exposing the various forms of potentially queer intimacy that the institutional space of the prison both denies and imposes. This was not a constant experience but highly linked to particularly intimate or domestic spaces such as the cells and the shower. One gay male prisoner noted that others avoided being in these spaces with him in case they were also perceived as gay: '*if you were having a shower, so they'd stay away like, and they wouldn't come into your cell for a chat, they wouldn't ask you for anything*'. A lesbian prisoner talked about how in everyday interactions her sexuality was a topic for '*fun and jokes*' but that '*when they're in their cell and they're on their own, you know, I'm sure like they would feel quite awkward ... I do, I would feel quite awkward a lot of the time, and I'd have to man it up, brave it up, you know what I mean?*' This opens questions about precisely what kind of space prison is, positioning it as a liminal space that is both domestic and non-domestic, intimate and not intimate, and that is imagined to fulfil a variety of purposes. Indeed, a different woman told us that '*there's no place in a prison for a relationship to develop*' because it is too much of an 'awkward' place to allow genuine intimacies or relationships to evolve.

The suppression of sexuality as part of a wider suppression of sociality and intimacy maintains homosexuality as a covert practice of nooks and crannies, limiting the potential for lived relationships in prison to partake in the claim to domestic ordinariness of homonormative politics, and raising questions for queer theory (Cohen, 2019). Martin (1996: 70) suggests that much queer theory is based in an 'enormous fear of ordinariness' which 'results in superficial accounts of the complex imbrication of sexuality with other aspects of social and psychic life, and in far too little attention to the dilemmas of the average people we also are'. This problem may be particularly acute where the ability to be and do normalcy is constrained by the social limits of a repressive institution that leaves only clandestine sex available. Speaking of her frustrations with prison life, a woman told us that she had '*done a lot of stuff like*' sexually with her girlfriend, but that normal, and even normative, habits of intimacy were denied to them:

Like I'd love to have a night with her before I go, just one simple night like, just sleep in the same bed like. We're with each other three and a half year and we haven't slept in the same bed overnight.

The importance of intimacy, as opposed simply to sex, was also emphasized in men's prison, where we were told that if we really wanted to understand homosexuality in prison, we should talk to those serving very long sentences:

You'd need to do interviews down in [Prison Name] Wing where they're all doing twenty plus, because that's where relationships will develop, you know? We're all, you know, we're affectionate human beings, you know what I mean? Like it's very

easy to actually develop a close relationship with somebody and then for it to actually go to that next level.

This is not, we suggest, an aspiration to homonormative respectability. But it is a statement of the significance of intimacy and sociality broadly conceived and a sign of the limits of an understanding of sex not positioned socially or in the broader context of 'ordinary lives', within prison or without.

CONCLUSION

In this article we have tried to push thinking about sex and sexuality in prison beyond the usual frames of identity, vulnerability and deviance and to position sex within a wider framework of intimacy and sociability. Drawing on findings from empirical research originally framed through an identity perspective, we quickly came up against the limits of this lens in relation to understanding sexual experiences, vulnerability and deviance in prison as well as understanding the prison as a site of multiple forms of intimacy. We argue that by using some of the conceptual tools of queer theory, particularly its unsettling of identity and its insistence on locating sex within a social framework, the complexity of prison is more clearly illuminated. Understanding the attempts to govern and regulate sex and intimacy within prisons also illuminates the constitution of regimes of the 'deviant' and the 'normal', or as Love (2015) would have it the 'normalcy of deviance'. The analysis of the different perspectives of prisoners and prison staff on sex and sexuality serve to trouble the founding presumptions of the policy-based project that we undertook, and which are typical of much research in this area. Overall, queer theories offer a way of thinking about intimacy and sex in prison that transcends attempts to manage difference and desire.

Listening instead to the perspectives of those who inhabit the prison, we see a complex landscape of institutional regulation and control and of unruly bodies and desiring subjects navigating relations with the institutions but also informal social hierarchies and controls. We have demonstrated that same-sex desire is not equivalent to LGB identity, and that the identity of prisoner complicates this identity and imagined membership of an 'LGBT community' in significant ways. This is not to say that sexuality does not have a relationship to vulnerability in prison, but, as Gilson (2016) argues, vulnerability itself must be understood as formed from complex and intersectional relations of power. We also note recurrent gendered and heteronormative tropes of formal and informal regulation of sexual behaviour through disavowing the reality of prison intimacy or devaluing it as inauthentic. Along with researchers such as Rowe (2016) we suggest that thinking of prisons as sites of intimacy and the regulation of intimacy offers a useful means of conceptualising prison experiences among those who form romantic or sexual relations in prison, as well as how these relationships are affected by the sociality of prison and its formal regulation. Overall, we demonstrate what a queer approach can add to both prison sociology, which has tended to neglect the issue of intimacy, and LGBT prison research, which has focused primarily on the vulnerabilities of minority identities. Queering notions of fixed and vulnerable LGBT identities, of sex in prison as deviant, and moving from an analysis of sex to one of intimacy and relationships, gives us a more textured understanding of the pains, pleasures and embodied experiences of prison.

REFERENCES

- Aebi, M.F. & Tiago, M.M. (2019) *Prison and Prisoners in Europe 2018: Key findings from the SPACE 1 Report*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Bosworth, M. (1999) *Engendering Resistance: Agency and Power in Women's Prisons*, London: Ashgate.
- Butler, J. (1997) *Excitable Speech*. New York: Routledge.
- Carr, N., McAlister, S. & Serisier, T. (2016) *Out on the Inside. The Rights, Needs and Experiences of LGBT People in Prison*. Dublin: IPRT.
- Chamberlen, A. (2018) *Embodying Punishment – Emotions, Identities and Lived Experiences in Women's Prisons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, C. (2019) 'The Radical Potential of Queer? Twenty Years Later.' *GLQ*, 25,1: 140-144.
- Crewe, B. (2009) *The Prisoner Society. Power, Adaptation, and Social Life in an English Prison*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dunn, P. (2013) 'Slipping off the equalities agenda? Work with LGBT prisoners.' *Prison Service Journal*, 206: 3-10.
- Edelman, L. (2004) *No Future*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Eigenberg, H.M. (1992) 'Homosexuality in male prisons: Demonstrating the need for a social constructionist approach.' *Criminal Justice Review*, 17: 219-234.
- Evans, T. & Wallace, P. (2008) 'A prison within a prison?: The masculinity narratives of male prisoners', *Men and Masculinities* 10 (4):484-507.
- Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Gilson, E. (2016) 'The Perils and Privileges of Vulnerability: Intersectionality, Relationality, and the Injustices of the U.S. Prison Nation', *philoSOPHIA*, 6(1) 43-59
- International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) (2007) *Yogyakarta Principles - Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*. Available at: [http:// www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles_en.pdf](http://www.yogyakartaprinciples.org/principles_en.pdf)
- Jenness, V. (2014) 'Pesticides, Prisoners, and Policy: Complexity and Praxis in Research on Transgender Prisoners and Beyond', *Sociological Perspectives*, 57(1) 6–26.

- Kunzel, R.G. (2008) *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Lamble, S. (2013) 'Queer Necropolitics and the Expanding Carceral State: Interrogating Sexual Investments in Punishment', *Law and Critique*, 24: 229-253.
- Love, H. (2015) 'Doing Being Deviant: Deviance Studies, Description, and the Queer Ordinary.' *Differences*, 26,1: 74-95.
- Martin, B. (1996) *Femininity Played Straight* Routledge: New York.
- Ratkalkar, M. & Atkin-Plunk, C. (2017) 'Can I Ask for Help? The Relationship Among Incarcerated Males' Sexual Orientation, Sexual Abuse History, and Perceptions of Rape in Prison.' *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260517714440>
- Rich, A. (1980) 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs*, 5, 4: 631-660.
- Robinson, R.K. (2011) 'Masculinity as Prison: Sexual Identity, Race, and Incarceration', *California Law Review*, 99,5: 1309-1408.
- Rowe, A. (2016) 'Tactics', Agency and Power in Women's Prisons.' *British Journal of Criminology*, 56:332-349.
- Saxey, E. (2008) *Homoplot. The Coming-Out Story and Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Identity*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Sedgwick, E.K. (2008) *The Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stevens, A. (2019) 'Access denied: Research on sex in prison and the subjugation of 'deviant knowledge'. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895819839740>
- Sykes, G. (1958) *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tewksbury, R. & West, A. (2000) 'Research on Sex in Prison During the Late 1980s and Early 1990s.' *The Prison Journal*, 80,4:368-378.