

## Prison Constructions Comparing Sexual Adaptations of Men and Women while Incarcerated

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**Abstract:** Men and women face several options when they enter prison, including the normative and behavioral expression of sexuality. Four general explanations have developed which empirically test these options. These include four perspectives: prison subculture, deprivation, importation, and the most recent gender fluidity. Most research has been concerned with the sexuality of inmates entering prison and their adaptations while incarcerated. Refining and extending this principal theme, the present project uses interviews conducted by the first author over a thirty-one-year period to specify adaptations by individuals to daily institutional life. Most of these interviews concern sex while others focus on violence. Previous research has mainly focused on men or women while this research involves comparisons between men and women. Inmate adaptations are put into one of the above four explanations using a best fit method. Gender theory and the concept of total institutions will also be discussed. Our purpose is to use the best fit method to determine what explanations are most equipped to understand sexual adaptation among prisoners/inmates. All explanations are supported by the data; finding these adaptations to exist both with men and women inmates. Prison subculture appears to be the primary adaptation for men, while gender fluidity is primary among women.

**Keywords:** adaptations to prison; gender fluidity; prison subculture; deprivation; importation; sexuality; total institutions; gender theory.

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## Introduction

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Regulating sexuality among custodial populations is extremely problematic. Goffman's concept of total institutions and the characteristics of such are always a key to

understanding the behavior of both staff and residents within these 24 hour a day institutions. Although Goffman's (1961) work was on mental institutions it is applicable to other such places like ships, monasteries, and prisons. Societal norms governing any type of individual choice in the everyday community are, in prisons, at best fraught with violence, compromised of and defined in terms of strict social control (Tewsbury & Conner, 2014). At the same time, prison as an abstraction is characterized as a highly erotic usually same sex environment (Mercer, 2004; Ibrahim, 1974; Pardue, Arrigo, & Murphy, 2011). This analysis of 31 years of interviews will extend our understanding of larger structural and cultural influences within which prisoners exist. These micro decisions that men and women make regarding their sex life or other adaptations in prison are molded by structural and cultural contexts deeply embedded in the level of society from which these people were socialized and the total institution in which they serve time. This research has for the most part been concerned with the sexuality of inmates entering prison and their adaptations while incarcerated.

These for explanations have developed over time which empirically test these options: prison subculture, deprivation, importation, and the most recent gender fluidity. Gender fluidity as the term implies is a product of gender theory which necessitates a discussion of the latter. The purpose of this research is to determine what explanations are most equipped to explain and/or are applicable to understanding sexual adaptation among prisoners/inmates.

## Review of Literature

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*Total institution* is the term used to describe places like monasteries, military, ships, mental hospitals, and prisons (Goffman, 1961). These often one-gender environments, separate their inhabitants from the outside, and control much of the daily routine of these individuals. Frequently, as in the case of prisons, the institutional setting is total, and inmates are strictly segregated by gender for prolonged periods. Under such circumstances the potential and pressure for same sex behavior are heightened for some. However, other actors appear to do their time in abstinence.

In prison, the alternative sexual patterns among men and women are reduced to four: Abstinence, masturbation, same sex activity, and heterosexual non-consensual encounters between staff and the incarcerated. [1] The research of Tewksbury and Conner (2014) is a good source for statistical information regarding these patterns, although the data contains many overlapping and contradictory sex roles. The patterns of same sex behavior in men's prisons constitute some clearly defined roles. The roles are better understood on continuum ranging from consensual to coercive sex. Heterosexual sex, although not a common alternative, does take place in prison, and is dependent on the layout of the prison, the status of the inmate, and how well they know the guards (Worley & Cheeseman, 2006). On the other hand, women guards and men inmates form an alternative type heterosexual encounter,

though this often depends on factors, such as, time and opportunity (Worley, Marquart, & Mullings, 2003; Worley & Worley, 2013).

This macro-level variable, total institution, is always/already operating and is deeply under theorized in research on incarcerated populations. It is patently obvious that prison macro forces (i.e., institutional structures of discipline and social control) are environmental factors that define sexuality in prison. However, they are not exclusive to prisons. However, prisons are a conduit of the larger structural and cultural contexts of which they are a part. For example, the difference between men's prisons and those for women can be explained by the violence associated with extreme masculinity (Irwin, 1980; Lutze & Murphy, 2004; Owen, 1998). These forces exist outside of the prison environment but are enhanced and activated differently due to the total institution. The sub-culture of criminals that is impacted by these external forces and develops within the prison is the least understood but the most important context in prison life.

Prison guards are a major factor in the life of prisoners and (Worley & Worley, 2013; Irwin, 1980). Their violence in dealing with prisoners is well-established (Hemmens & Marquart, 2000), though the addition of women guards has mitigated this to some extent. The guard's passive or active role in the sexual adaptations of prisoners is less well understood (Worley & Cheeseman, 2006).

Men and women face several sexual options when they enter prison and these same differences mold the sexual routes they will take. Most of these options constitute hypotheses in four general explanations of custodial life utilized to explain relationships of individuals in prison. Three of these perspectives are interrelated: prison subculture, deprivation, and importation; all represent theoretical presumptions originally based on research on men's prisons and a heteronormative view of the world (Forsyth & Evans, 2003; Forsyth, 2003; Forsyth, Evans & Foster, 2002; Irwin, 1970, 1980; Sykes, 1958; Ward & Kassebaum, 1965). Many of the studies of women's prisons were informed by these perspectives, either singularly or in combination (Genders & Player, 1990; Pollock-Byrne, 1990; Ward & Kassebaum, 1965). These three explanations attempt to understand the sexual behavior and identity of same sex men and women while incarcerated. All relationships are part of the adaptation to prison, as a reaction to the harsh realities of inside life, or as a transplanting of roles from the outside world to the prison environment. Each of these explanations see pseudo-families as an imitation of heterosexuality in women's prisons (Richardson, 1996) and gangs, masculinity, male aggression, and sexuality accounting for an imitation of heterosexuality in men's prisons (Cusack, 2015; Messerschmidt, 1997, 2018). Some researchers see a similarity between the organization and function of gangs in men's prisons and pseudo-families in women's prisons (Forsyth & Evans, 2003; Forsyth, 2003; Forsyth, Evans & Foster, 2002).

A fourth, more recent, perspective, is gender fluidity, offering a more nuanced view of gender than the other three explanations; as part of the contemporary development of gender theory (Lennon & Alsop, 2020; Smith & Riley, 2009), fluidity goes well beyond explanations of biological and sexuality differences, focusing instead on the complex social construction

of gender identities in larger society (Butler, 1999; Abderhalden, 2020; Pardue, Arrigo, & Murphy, 2011; Spicer, 2010; White, Clark, Altice, Reisner, Kershaw, & Pachankis, 2018).

Neither anatomical sexual assignment (male/female) (Smith & Riley, 2009), gender identity (men/women) nor sexual preference (same sex/heterosexual) is binary and necessarily fixed (Diamond, 2008). This perspective is the only one of the four based on research in women's prisons.

The central theoretical developments for both gender theory and fluidity have clustered around the changing interrelations of these latter two binaries, the shifts within and between them (Lennon & Alsop, 2020). Since the 1990s emerging gender theory has staged a thoroughgoing critique of traditional explanations of "sex differences as natural kinds" (Alsop, Fitzsimmons & Foster, 2002, pp. 17-20). Biological, psychological, and psychoanalytical models all were mounted on the perception that binaries are obvious- and assumed-essential, enduring characteristics of bodily, behavioral, and sociocultural differences between men/males and women/females. Maleness and masculinity were linked to rationality, goal-orientation and, fundamentally aggression. Femaleness and femininity were linked to emotion, introspection, and passivity. These enduring differences, were assumed natural, evident across all areas of life and reproduced a patriarchal social order cemented by fundamentalist and even mainstream religious teachings. Thus, the binaries of traditional gender and sexual difference and sexual preference were not only natural, supported by both science and religion, and were assumed unchanging. The main impetus of emergent gender theory has been to unpack this essentialist perspective and argue that gender and sexuality are social constructions that vary across time and space. Likewise, it also critiques the concept of patriarchy (i.e. structural oppression of women through ideological narratives of male dominance and privilege) (Lennon & Alsop, 2020). The concept of patriarchy presents a thorny problem throughout feminist thought, certainly including within gender theory itself. As with the gradual development of the social construction of gender to the related idea of gender fluidity, the concept of patriarchy is argued from a similar core of historical essence, the same "nature versus nurture" argument (Diamond, 2009, pp. 17-18): is men's oppression of women inevitable and trans-historical; or is it dependent on ideology, power, and socialization? If the former, it is another example of natural, unchanging divisions. If the latter, it can be dismantled and banished, along with its discredited ideology of inequality. These possibilities are juxtaposed in earlier Marxist feminist writings (Alsop, Fitzsimmons & Lennon, 2002) and later in the ideas of multiple sources of oppression (Walby, 1990) and patriarchy viewed through the lens of social role theory (Connell, 1987). These attempts, while critical of traditional biological and psychological essentialism and more receptive to the nuances of gender construction, did not displace longstanding binary gendered and sexualized narratives. The former assumes gender is binary and natural, the later that gender is binary and learned.

While not fully discrediting this longstanding sexualized narrative, gender theory has slowly but surely begun its transformation to a more fluid, less determined point of

view. Feminist and evolutionary biologists, post-Freudian psychoanalysts, and even parallel critical race theorists (interrogating matters of intersectionality) have widened as well as deepened the intellectual dialogue of the sexual/gender binaries (Lennon & Alsop, 2020).

Arguably more than any other theorist Judith Butler (1990/ 99), in her work *Gender Trouble*, cogently set the explanatory contours of gender fluidity and gender hierarchy. In the book's tenth anniversary preface she defuses the natural essentialist argument, instead positing, "[i]t is not heterosexual normativity that produces and consolidates gender, but the gender hierarchy that is said to underwrite heterosexual relations" (Butler, 1990/99, p. xii). Finally, Butler (1990/90, p. 173) goes further to conceptualize gender as a narrative performance, in which "acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality." By viewing gender-as-performance, Butler opens gender fluidity to the potentially widest possible stance. Binary biological sex assignment (i.e., male/female); normative definitions of masculine and feminine; and even a gendered stable self-identity is open to change. Gender fluidity includes what Lennon & Alsop (2020, pp. 177-78) call the "trans' umbrella," whereby matters of gender and sex, personality and identity, social category and ideology are negotiated in multiple contexts, by multiple actors and groups, with social consequences and conflicts aplenty.

Karlene Faith (2011) transplants these contested issues of gender theory and fluidity into the field of criminology, specifically regarding "pains of imprisonment" (Sykes, 1958) endured by incarcerated female inmates. Regardless of their sexual preferences on the outside, imprisoned women may learn to give and receive intimacy from one another. This is less because they feel sexually deprived and more because women engage in relationships for their own value, as intimacy on its own terms and not as any kind of substitution. Faith (2011) claims that incarcerated, segregated and previously heterosexual women often find themselves attracted to other women. Seen as an explanation for women's incarceration experience and as related to the importation model, gender fluidity and construction has yet to be theoretically grounded to men. Rather, subcultural/deprivation explanations are used to understand same sex behavior in men's prisons. The present study is a theoretical hybrid of longstanding models of correctional control and inmate organization with the more critical stance of female gender fluidity.

## Methodology

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Primary data were gathered from interviews over a thirty-one-year period conducted at several men's and women's prisons (state, federal, private) and jails. All interviews were taped recorder with notes being written during the interview. Discourse analysis was used and coded along several personal characteristics including sex in prison or information regarding sex in prison. All data were kept in a computer file on each inmate so that future reports could be written

for each person or data could be used for research. The sample used in this study consists of twenty-four women who were interviewed as part of a specific project. These women had all been in prison for at least 20 years. An additional eleven women and over 200 men were interviewed as part of another role of the researcher who has served as a mitigation expert since 1989 (Forsyth, 1996, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2017; Forsyth & Forsyth 2007). The first author has worked as a mitigation expert on over 300 violent crime cases since 1989, most of which were capital murder, but also include second degree murder, manslaughter, armed robbery, rape, habitual offender hearings, and Miller hearings. [2] As a mitigation expert the researcher conducts a full investigation into the social and familial history of the client. The work is to locate, interview, and vet every available witness and document that may provide evidence about the defendant's family life, education, drug and alcohol use patterns, sexual behavior, prison history, foster records, employment, and every other aspect of the client's social history.

The initial information is gathered through interviews and documents. Interviews include key informants and others that those sources lead to, including parents, siblings, ancestors, descendants, wives, other relatives, neighbors, foster parents, friends, probation officer(s), teachers, employers, work supervisors, and fellow employees. Documents include all court cases, medical records, mental health records, prison records and other public and private sources, including those associated with influential people in the client's life. Juvenile and adult records are vital sources of information. Pertaining to the subject of this paper two cases serve as good examples. In one case there were three items/violations in a participant's records. He was: caught wearing women's panties, in possession of the same in his storage locker, and wearing shorts that violated the prison length (the bottom of the buttocks were visible) (Forsyth, 1996). The other case: involved medical records revealing over 70 cases where male prisoners went to the medical doctor for a bleeding rectum and several for being beaten (Forsyth, 2017). These records along with other facts and several interviews allowed the researcher to construct the experiences of sexual activities of these individuals. The issues were addressed in future interviews with these men. Juvenile and adult probation officers are also vital information sources. Once a social history has taken shape, the defense team will consider further expert and testing needs based on indications of potential theories of mitigation. Needless to state, these methods go much beyond typical data gathering. Although these multiple sources of data contributed to both validity and reliability of statements they are not directly used in this specific paper; these sources were indicated so as show the completeness of the research.

As expected, most individuals spoke of what occurs during incarceration generally- not what happens to themselves specifically. Some of these individuals were more willing and open to discussion than others, and time served was quite varied. Some had been sentenced, while others were awaiting trial or sentencing. Most had been incarcerated several times prior to their current crime. These interviews ranged from thirty minutes to four hours. All respondents were interviewed more than once in order to establish a mitigation history than

could be used as testimony for the first author at trials or hearings. After the case was finished thru a plea or verdict the client was not interviewed again unless there was some sort of hearing and the author was involved.

This research analyzes the narrative discourse of inmates. Discourse analysis involves dissecting the underlying meanings found in various forms of communication (Creswell, 2009; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). As such it not only examines the comments of men and women, but analyzes, how the structures may be molding responses. Attention is paid to the role of discourse, its discursive nature, and the constraints placed on these individuals. In examining the discourse of the individual, the prison code is seen as a paramount structure which manages the course of the conversation. The respondent wants to be seen as a skilled, sensible, and ethical person (commonly known as the social desirability bias in survey research) and thereby is driven by dominant discourse in the broader society. The discourse is a substantive account of an organized way of life. The discourse is analyzed for themes or perspectives. In this case, the discourse is placed with already established themes/adaptations. This is a best fit method. These adaptations/themes exist on a continuum which makes each selection the *best fit* (Becker, 1998; Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

## Men

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Prison life for most men, who are generally from a lower-class background and have had few opportunities for status, is an exaggerated form of the free-world; the resulting perspective is generally a contest for masculinity. Masculinity is a fragile concept for many of these men (Copes, Hochstetler, & Forsyth, 2013; Hochstetler, Copes, & Forsyth, 2014). Most are socialized in a subculture of violence, in which masculinity can only be attained through physical domination and intimidation. Weakness is to be preyed upon, so it is to be avoided at all costs (Gilmore, 1990). This subculture in the free world becomes an exaggerated form, extreme masculinity, in prison due to the containment in small spaces and lack of available alternatives for expressing masculinity. Table 1 is a summary of the data for both men and women within each adaptation offering brief comparisons.

## Prison Subculture

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The prison subculture assumes that group values and norms arise from attempts to adjust and cope with the negative aspects of confinement (Sagarin, 1976; Irwin, 1970, 1980; Hart, 1995). This subculture stems from attempts to make doing time easier (Irwin, 1980; Owen, 1998). Adaptation to prison life is the key to survival while incarcerated. Prisonization refers to a person taking the value system of the prison subculture as their own. They participate in the life of the prison and for example, do not become snitches. Some reject prisonization, instead doing *hard time*. But *hard time* requires the ability to defend against the violence of others, who will attempt to force the individual into other roles. Other individuals engage in a practice known as *gleaning* (Irwin, 1980), where they spend time reading, improving

**Table 1: Comparing Men and Women, Summary of Themes within Adaptations**

	<i>Men</i>	<i>Females</i>
Prison Subculture	good time (making a quality life in prison) hard time (conflict) stupefied (meaningless routine work)	Same sex relationships because they are curious; sexual needs; pass the time; for economic support (can be sincere) or (not-use other can be aggressive)
Deprivation	Violent The confine causes changes Fear- join gangs or become becomes someone's punk	Turned out (bisexual, lesbian)
Importation	Recreates his life in the free world (whether gay or straight) Some use power	Abused by men (makes it easier to be with women) Most prefer women who look masculine
Gender Fluidity	Discover love with the same sex voluntary; someone who cares, trust No contact with family	Discover love with the same sex voluntary; someone who cares, trust  No contact with family

themselves, and preparing for their eventual return to the free world. Masturbation is the most common sexual outlet for these men and women in prison (Bernard, McCleary, & Wright, 1999).

When a man puts aside his life in the free world for an acceptance of prison life, this is doing *good time* (Kruttschnitt, Gartner, & Miller, 2000). The response of a person depends on structural characteristics such as the size, physical layout, disciplinary style, and objectives of the prison. This individual will participate in organizations; form friendships with others like himself; and make life as comfortable as he can. He may also form friendships with guards. Research has established that guards are a key part of the subculture of prisons (Worley, Marquart, & Mullings, 2003; Worley & Cheeseman, 2006; Worley & Worley, 2013; Worley, 2016). The following interviews were from or about men who fit into the prison subculture adaptation.

I heard of guys getting sex from female guards. My take on it is that the guards are fat and ugly girls and the guys are nice looking...better than they [female guards] can do on the outside. Once a guy is a trustee he can go just about anywhere. A guy I once knew fucked his attorney in jail. (interview)

Arrested when I was 15...been here 34 years...I am 52...I will get out soon...I take care of the baseball field since I got here... handle and organize the games...offseason I still take care of the field. I keep to myself. I have four brothers come through here... one is about to die...I never saw him since I been here...one just got out... the other two still here...never been in trouble, I work alone on the field. No friends...I get along with all the guards. (interview)



The above individual has been stupefied (Irwin, 1980). He has been pressed into a low paced rigid position; cut-off from outside contacts which blunt feelings. He was a living example of the total, final, devastating effect of imprisonment on a human being.

Some guys come in the joint and just adapt, they accept the deal, defends himself, he gets a good rep, goes to church, does all the routine shit...has a few friends...does his time (interview)

### *Importation*

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The importation theory explains how an individual's personal characteristics and experiences contribute to what happens in prison (Irwin & Cressey, 1962. Irwin, 1970, 1980; Pollock-Byrne, 1990). It is a critique of the deprivation and subcultural perspectives, which view the prison as a closed system. The importation theory views these behaviors in prison as being transplanted from the outside into the prison (Bernard, McCleary, & Wright, 1999; Kruttschnitt, Gartner, & Miller, 2000). These experiences help to shape what these men want from life and relationships. They adopt roles which are consistent with their free world lives, from which they came and will return (Sagarin, 1976; Ward & Kassebaum, 1965). For example, what is referred to as "Fags or Queens" by inmates are those that come into the prison as gay and unless put in protective custody continue practicing that role in prison. Gay men report that some are totally or somewhat open about their sexuality, yet also discreet about their sexual relationships and activities while in prison. They usually have sex in the cells of one of the participants. If they share a cell, they have sex at night. Most said they have sex with many other gay inmates, although estimates vary greatly from 6-35. Men whose masculinity is not tied to aggression and/or sexuality adjust to prison life, but not through same sex behavior. These inmates have achieved status in the free world that carries over to prison. They do not feel the need to dominate another man, and they were able to defend themselves against aggressors (Sagarin, 1976). The following three interviews were from or about men who in various ways *imported* their way of living into prison, did their time and left the same.

...was a gay boy when he got to prison. He was a petty thief...always getting busted over minor shit. But never getting any time. He was living with this straight guy...I heard that guy was selling his stolen shit...Finally got hit with some big shit he could not get out of... In prison, he was a hustler and acted like the fag he was...he knew the system and how to get stuff...he becomes someone's bitch...if you want a bitch in jail he is the fag you want...he can get you anything you need...(interview)

...is a bad dude, you don't want to fuck with...keeps to himself...runs his business from inside, always reading...fucking with the computer...his wife comes to see him all the time...she takes care of his shit...you can talk to him but he never says anything much... guards don't fuck with him...he is one of those guys who can go have a visit with his wife out by one of the ponds or where they keep the horses...(interview)

You know I always gay...gay on the street gay in the joint...but you can see I ain't no nelly motherfucker...I can hurt people...I will get together with another gay inmate...people know my rep and my family on the outside...I don't fuck with people and people don't fuck with me, redneck, niggas, bikers gangs...you try and do some shit to me and your people outside going to pay...(interview)

### *Deprivation*

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Deprivation theory maintains that inmates respond similarly to incarceration because of its fundamentally coercive character (Bernard, McCleary, & Wright, 1999; Kruttschnitt, Gartner, & Miller, 2000; Sykes 1958). The deprivation theory of behavior in men's institutions is based on a view of men that sees them as changing into whatever form the prison molds them. Whatever the case, these men fill this void with gang membership and homosexuality (Fleisher & Krienert 2009).

Wolves /jockers are aggressive older men who practice masculinity in prison; their sexual behavior is a transitory substitute for heterosexual activity in the free-world, an extension of their violent masculine identity on the outside, and a reassertion of that role in prison. They will dominate through force either implied or actual. Thus, others, called punks, are turned out by other prisoners or the prison experience; they are forced into same sex behavior or same sex relationships because of their lack of aggression. Generally, they were perceived as weak and are preyed upon by dominant inmates (Sykes, 1958). The code of the street becomes exaggerated, with men fighting for masculinity as they did in the free world but with fewer options. Being in an enclosed space eliminates escape from violence. Some of these men are forced into sex; others do it for protection, opting to have sex with their protector rather than be the victim of continuous violent assaults (Clemmer, 1940; Irwin, 1970, 1980). The role carries with it the low status and stigmatization accorded its association with feminine weakness (Sagarin, 1976). The three men below were all molded by the deprivation of prison life, albeit in different ways. Interviews were either from or about these inmates. For example:

Larry was raped by some guy as soon as he got into prison. He was a little skinny, young guy and good-looking. He became this guy's punk and he stayed that way until that guy left and he gave him to someone else. Larry was gay when he got back on the street. (interview)

Before I got sentenced I was worried about coming to prison I did not know anybody... my buddy got in touch with some skinheads gang because he said the spics would fuck me up...when I got here I got in a cell block with them.. I felt safe...but always had to be on the watch for the Mexicans around me...that saved me man...I was not a racist on the street but became one in here. This place is fucked up...gangs run this mother fucker...my buddy saved me. (interview)

Guys come in here and are on the straight and narrow. Never thought about having sex with another man. But then they start to see things differently. I guess jerking -off gets

old. Suddenly, they are having sex with some pretty kid that must remind them of their old lady... As soon as they get out...they back with women again...like it never happen in here. (interview)

### *Gender Fluidity*

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Gender fluidity is the only adaptation that was grounded by data on women. As such the theory will be discussed solely in analyzing women's responses. Suffice to say, the margins of behavior are plastic; contested through ongoing interaction (Butler, 1999; Diamond, 2008). A young man was given a life sentence after killing both his parents when he was 16. He was a young, smart, and described as a very handsome kid of 19 when he got to the penitentiary. Some people from the community and the author suggested to the judge to recommend he be put into protective custody. He was put into one of the camps with old sick guys, those who were dying, and anyone deemed needing protection from the population. Some prisons are so large they are divided into camps or smaller prisons on the same campus usually based on the characteristics/classification of inmates. These camps are far apart, indeed, in most cases not visible to each other. This prison is situated on 5,000 acres of an 18,000-acre campus. He was interviewed about three years after his arrival at the penitentiary because the first author would be the mitigation expert at his Miller hearing. Before then he sent the first author several letters. In one of the letters he said he thought he may be gay. This was a departure from his previous 'outside' behavior.

...I made friends with another inmate...who came into protective custody...we sleep together when we can...we love each other, we share things, we are close in age, talk a lot, its different, I trust him...he is the first person I ever trusted. We both will get out within five years because of the Miller thing...we will both be in our late forties...plan to make a life together. (interview)

During the interview he indicated the first author was his first outside visitor. It was important that he be listened to and was seeking acceptance and validation about his revelation. He had already done years. He had made a life in prison which would extend into the free world.

### *Women*

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Same sex relationships are a significant component of the subculture of women's prisons (Clark, 1995; Leger, 1987; Propper, 1982). It is well established that, for women, lesbian relationships have become more accepted and open participation has increased in the last 30 years (Faderman, 1991; Faith, 2011). These figures are reflected in prison also. Research from the 1970s and 1980s 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 (Forsyth, & Evans, 2003; Forsyth, 2003; Forsyth, Evans & Foster, 2002; Owen, 1998). In order to understand the discourse in which women engage in, the structure under which they endure must be understood. There are penalties for being caught in a “lesbian moment”. Women inmates are monitored more closely than they were in early years, when prisoners wore their own clothes and hand-holding and physical contact between inmates were tolerated (Faith, 2011). 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 in trouble. Such punishments are characteristic of many institutions (Faith, 2011, p. 216). An inmate’s view on the issue is as follows:

If you caught kissing someone, you are getting locked up, you’re not even supposed to touch each other. (interview).

Women’s prisons are also total institutions, but the dynamics play out in a much less violent way than in men’s facilities. 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 they engage in sexual activities with other women while in prison. These axes of sexual identity and behavior reveals multiple groups. 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 same sex behavior while in prison. A third group engages in same sex behavior only during incarceration, while maintaining a heterosexual identity (Faith, 2011; Forsyth, & Evans, 2003; Forsyth, 2003; Forsyth, Evans & Foster, 2002). Some women *come out* as lesbians while in prison and maintain that status after their release. And finally, some identify as heterosexual and do not engage in same sex activities (Diaz-Cotto, 1996; Owen, 1998). There are also rapes in women’s prisons, by both guards and inmates but these are so underreported that any estimate would be a fiction. What happens to these individuals cannot be determined.

Research has concerned itself with the sexual activity of both pre-prison lesbians and heterosexual women, the majority has been concerned with heterosexual women engaging in same sex activity and explanations for it (Diaz-Cotto, 1996; Faith, 2011; Owen, 1998; Ward & Kassebaum, 1965). As discussed in earlier sections of this paper regarding men, the same four theoretical perspectives have been utilized to explain same sex relationships of women in prison: prison subculture, deprivation, importation, and the more recent one of gender fluidity. Indeed, gender fluidity is also an explanation for sexual relationships in the free world. As such it could soon be seen as part of the importation model All four views seek to explain the nature of same sex behaviors or other adaptations in penal institutions.

### *Prison Subculture*

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For women, prison subculture assumes that group values and norms arise from attempts to adjust and cope with the negative aspects of confinement (Hart, 1995). The purpose of women inmates' adaptation to the prison subculture is like that of men: attempts to make doing time easier (Owen, 1998). Adjustment to incarceration is the key to surviving it. As in the case of men, prisonization occurs when 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, & Miller, 2000). Some inmates also claimed to be curious or were merely passing the time. For example:

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

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

Passing the time. (interview)

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

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. (interview)

The same sex encounters are not always about love, sex, companionship, passing the time, or curiosity. Sometimes, the motivation is totally different. Indeed, in four interviews economic support was the most frequently expressed explanation for these relationships. Below are excerpts from the four respondent interviews:

These relationships provide money for the canteen or maybe giving them something to wear. (interview)

A lot of these girls get involved in these relationships because they have no financial support. (interview)

Some are not sincere about being in a homosexual relationship. They are really trying to support themselves...they meet somebody and say, she has money, so I'm going to talk to her...it might be what we call a conversation relationship. (interview)

...you have the users who do it...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...I'm going to get everything I can...going to promise you the moon and the stars and just flatter you and dote on you just to get that. That's the negative side (interview)

These last four quotes are financial explanations, but because of social desirability, inmates, in general, prefer to give another explanation for a relationship that could be considered sexual, that is, unless they have accepted/acknowledged an alternative identity. But as previously explained, all these descriptions are about a generalized other.

## Deprivation

Deprivation theory maintains that inmates respond similarly to incarceration because of its fundamentally coercive character (Kruttschnitt, Gartner, & Miller, 2000; Pollock-Byrne, 1990). The deprivation view of behavior in women's institutions is based on a woman's lack of ties to significant others. Regardless of her specific family dynamics upon incarceration (e.g., marital status, parental, sibling, or caretaker roles), her family and loved ones may be too far away to make the expensive journey for a visit. Such is especially possible in those states with only a single women's prison (Clark, 1995). Additionally, families of these women are often poor and lack reliable transportation. Finally, as is particularly the case with lifers, the longer an inmate is in prison the harder it is for her to keep in touch with anyone on the outside (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001). Whatever the case, incarcerated women fill this void with lesbian or familial relationships while serving their sentence. Lifers are most likely to be involved in pseudo-families, as they gradually lose touch with their outside primary groups with the passage of time. (Hairston, 1991; Pollock-Byrne, 1990; Sharp, 2003).

Lesbian relationships are often believed to result from boredom, as just a way to pass the time. In this context the deprivation model overlaps significantly with the prison subculture theory. This can be understood only recognizing that both perspectives originally were developed to explain the "pains of imprisonment" (Sykes, 1958) from a segregated, male point of view. However, the following account indicates the extent to which women 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 big and pregnant and have the baby and the next thing you know they want to be a man. (interview)

Along the same lines, another inmate describes this phenomenon.

Very few women come in here that were already gay. The terminology in here is being "turned out". If they've been turned out, some will continue that lifestyle. Maybe another small percentage will remain bi-sexual (interview)

### *Importation*

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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, both organizationally as a total institution (Goffman, 1961) and dynamically in terms of gender segregation. The importation theory views behaviors in prison as being transplanted from the outside world into the prison environment (Kruttschnitt, Gartner, & Miller, 2000). These experiences help to shape what these women 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 idyllic roles, the objective of love and affection, they had in the free world from which they came and will return (Ward & Kassebaum, 1965).

Women bring to prison self-conceptions and identities which are significant for how they adapt to prison. Most heterosexual women who come to prison have been abused by men, and/or they were introduced to drugs by men. These life experiences are imported into prison and form the basis for the decisions of the women below.

Abuse by men also plays a role in a woman's decision to engage in homosexual activities. (interview)

Many have been battered by men and so it was easy to get into a relationship with a woman. (interview)

Being abused by a man. (interview)

Most of these women are here because of men one way or another. (interview)

Some women are not lesbians, they just go with girls who look like men...they are accustomed to being with a man, so they will be with one in prison. (interview)

Abuse also plays a role in a woman's decision to become a lesbian. Finally, someone treating you decent. (interview)

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. (Interview)

Of the three traditional perspectives on adjustment to prison life, the importation model, emphasizing prior socialization, life experience, and personality development, is the most fertile theoretical ground for gender-based differences to sexual expression. In short, importation may serve as a bridge between prison subculture and deprivation on the one hand and the newer, more supple idea of gender fluidity on the other.

### *Gender Fluidity*

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The research of Faith (2011) forms the basis of the gender fluidity theoretical perspective as applied to women's correctional experience. Contrary to the previously mentioned

explanations, this perspective is driven by the assumption that there is no essence to gender or the roles that one gender must occupy. The boundaries are fluid and contested, ever-changing through ongoing interaction (Butler, 1999; Diamond, 2008). Lennon and Alsop (2020, p. 2) articulate gender construction-and its inevitable fluidity- as ‘sexed difference’ (i.e., being positioned in relation to the categories ‘man’ or ‘woman’, a process of which we are attempting to make sense.”

Thus contextualized, socially constructed gender is uncoupled from traditional biological, oppositional categories; rather fluidity posits that “imprisoned women don’t turn to one another because they feel deprived in the absence of men and therefore use other women as a substitute.” Moreover, they do not think of their close relationships in prison as role-playing or a temporary mode of adaptation (i.e., as posited in subcultural/deprivation models based on studies of homosexuality in male prisons) (Faith 2011, p. 214). Furthermore, women consider their relationships in prison to be denigrated by being referred to as merely a reaction to the deprivations of prison life. In this re-imagined scenario, gender theory energizes the study of women’s imprisonment, “giving name to lies about women who have been historically denied a forum for speaking in their own voices” (Faith, 2011, p. 9).

More complexly, Faith, (2011, p. 214) reasons,

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. Rather, in an atmosphere where women are not competing for male attentions, previously heterosexual women discover that they are attracted to women.

She asserts that they have learned to overcome their fears of loving other women. 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, 2011, p.215).

Faith (2011) states that not all women who love one another in prison identify as lesbians. Some incarcerated women learn to love another woman in prison and learn to love themselves in the process. Faith (2011) recounts, through the inmate’s own words, how these experiences of loving a woman were for some, the first time they had someone who knew a lot about them, and still loved them. For these women, this unconditional love was how they came to develop more positive self-images. Some of the interviews conducted with women revealed similar findings. For example:

Women come to prison after being abused by men...you know what you want in a relationship and your life...you will be loving this person in prison...you are nice to her just like you were nice to your man in the free world at first. Sometimes you...in love and you know it for real. (interview)



They don't have no family that come and see about them, so they get no attention. Their families are poor. Have been beat-up by men who just use them...girls get more love here than they may have gotten on the street. When these girls get out, they will look for the same thing. (interview)

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 financial support, canteen, and emotional support. (interview)

The preceding accounts suggest that the reasons for engaging in same sex behavior are multifaceted and the discourse is largely framed within the normative boundaries of heterosexuality, including the idea of economic motive, which is also consistent with women's dependency.

## Discussion and Conclusion

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The prohibitive structure of prison makes it easy to understand why most inmates speak of same sex relationships in the third person. When they say these relationships are temporary, they reduce the stigma of such relationships (Goode, 2001; Faderman, 1991; Richardson, 1996; Warner, 1992). To exercise at least limited life control, another temporal explanation is economic motivation and/or safety.

The degree to which the inmate's experiences include same sex 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. Women are more likely to rely on personalized relationships to survive their sentences (Larsen & Nelson, 1984; Owen, 1998). In this regard, pseudo-families and same sex activities are distinct personalized relationships (Bowker, 1981; Owen, 1998; Forsyth, & Evans, 2003; Forsyth, 2003; Forsyth, Evans & Foster, 2002). Research should be guided by the notion that gender is neither an unalterable nor an ironclad identity, and that there is considerable variety in men and women's life experiences both in and out of prison (Belknap, 2001; Faith, 2011; Kruttschnitt, Gartner, & Miller, 2000; Smart, 1995; Jackson, 1996; Rich, 1996). All relationships have utilitarian value; at least temporarily fulfilling emotional needs, or in the cases of relationships which could be termed exploitative, provide utility for at least one of the parties involved.

Men adapt to prison by isolating themselves. While more cooperative, family-like relationships exist and are valued among women, peer relationships in men's prisons are likely to be seen as negative (Belknap, 2001; Bowker, 1981; Jackson & Stearns, 1995). Women are socialized to value relationships with others more than men, so it should not be surprising that incarcerated women form closer, more intimate bonds than do their male counterparts. Indeed, only one man among those interviewed formed an intimate bond.

Women report higher levels of social support than men, and in women's institutions, there is a positive relationship between social support and psychological well-being (Arrigo, 1996). Social support refers to the interpersonal ties that are rewarding to

and protective of an individual (Hart, 1995). A consistent finding is that imprisoned women are kinder to each other than institutionalized men (Belknap, 2001; Bowker, 1981). Pseudo-families are structures of social relationships formed among women in prison, which resemble family structures in the broader society, consisting of parent, sibling, grandparent, and even aunt or uncle roles. These familial relationships usually provide a sense of comfort for the women who participate in them. Further research should continue (Forsyth, & Evans, 2003) to investigate the similarities between these organizations and gangs in men's prisons.

Conversely, men have gangs which are protective relationships and a means of gathering scarce resources. The men's prison is a colony of extreme masculinity. Some prisoners walk in the prison having had masculinity conferred on them by society and are accepted as masculine upon entrance to the prison. These men generally keep to themselves and do their time quietly. But for most inmates, status is neither traditionally achieved nor ascribed. It is granted through socially constructed means in the prison social setting (Messerschmidt, 1997, 2018; Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). As such, masculinity is an image beyond mere maleness. It is an image that men aspire to and that their subculture of violence demands of them as a qualification of membership (Gilmore, 1990; Gibson, 1994). Encounters which involve bullying, however slight, represent a threat to one's manliness. There is no option of not responding to continued threat; that option is not available. To walk away in this culture is to surrender your masculinity and be characterized as weak-becoming prey (Forsyth, 2014). Thus, the demonstrated willingness and capacity to fight becomes a measure of reputation and hence self-worth (Copes, Hochstetler, & Forsyth, 2013; Hochstetler, Copes, & Forsyth, 2014).

Masculinity is also impacted by class. Whereas upper class men are able to exercise dominance and control through economic power, there is a greater propensity among lower-class men for violence that is tied directly to a culture in which affronts to perceived manhood are met with violent retribution (Connell, 1991; McWhiney, 1988; Cohen et al., 1996; Nisbett, 1993; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). The status of manhood has considerable cultural worth in prison (Gilmore, 1990) and defined as something that must be earned. Men will continue to seek avenues by which to validate their status as men; even if it means forcing another man to have sex with them. The prison behavior of men can be guided or oriented to one of three types of subcultures: convict; criminal, or legitimate (Irwin & Cressey, 1962). In prison, men with no status in mainstream society seek out bizarre avenues for status/power which whether in prison or outside of prison have no clear boundaries or reference groups except within these subcultures. On the other hand, experience of incarcerated women clearly indicates less propensity to violence as well greater receptivity to variety in both gender fluidity and identity.

This study has attempted a very difficult, though not an impossible task: it combines two areas—gender studies and the classical theoretical perspectives used to study sexual experiences of incarcerated inmates—traditionally considered to contain little common

ground. Gender theory, emerging from decades of feminist scholarship, shows how larger cultural beliefs, interactional displays, and internalized gender ideology helps make sense of the variety of sexual behaviors and identifications of women prisoners. Prison subculture theory is the primary explanation for men's sexual behavior. The pervasive impacts of deprivation, within the context of the prison as a total institution, mitigates each gendered experience. Future studies would profit from expanding the subcultural-importation-fluidity dynamic, especially if gender equality continues in the wider society, including the expansion of the "trans umbrella" (Lennon and Alsop, 2020, pp. 177-78) both inside and outside the prison. In fact, as a future context for both identity and behavioral alternatives, gender fluidity will likely only increase in importance.

## Notes

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1. Heterosexual non-consensual relationships/encounters exist between staff and people incarcerated. Although possibly consensual; these relations are always deemed non-consensual.
2. Miller hearings were conducted for youth prisoners who had been given a life sentence without a mitigation hearing. Most got 30 years with credit for time served. Over forty percent of these youth were in two states Pennsylvania and Louisiana. See (Stinneford, 2013).

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