

Narratives and Constructions of Sexuality in American Women's Prisons

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores lesbianism in American prisons, identifying the impact dominant homophobic narratives have on incarcerated women with diverse sexualities. Drawing from academic research, the paper discusses historical, theoretical perspectives and media construction of lesbians in prison. Both theoretical and media portrayals of incarcerated lesbian women work together to alter public opinion. This paper investigates how portrayals of lesbianism are harmful due to their tendency to stereotype and misrepresent. The paper will also investigate how correctional perspectives continue to be affected by dominant narratives, which directly impact the lives of incarcerated women through corrective measures. Finally, the paper highlights the perspectives of incarcerated women, as they are the experts of their own experiences. The term lesbian is used throughout the paper as an umbrella term describing women who engage in sexual relationships with other women. This is for the sake of simplicity due to the limited scope of the paper's length and the available research on the subject. It is not intended to dismiss or oversimplify the diversity of sexual identities and labels.

KEYWORDS: Incarceration, Women, Lesbianism, Sexuality, Prisons, Media Narratives, Stereotypes

Women's personal experiences of incarceration are underrepresented within academic literature. This is especially true when discussing incarcerated women who engage in romantic and sexual relationships with other women. Theoretical explanations of homosexuality in women's prisons historically delegitimize the sexual experiences of incarcerated women through dismissal and fear-based stereotyping. As a result, incarcerated women's voices are rarely given the space they need to be heard. How do common and interacting perceptions and discussions of female sexuality in the carceral setting work to uphold and exacerbate outside-world sexual stereotypes? In turn, how do outside-world sexual stereotypes uniquely affect women serving prison terms? Common narratives and explanations of female sexuality within the prison context highlight and exacerbate existing historical heteronormative discourses that prevail outside the carceral setting. This paper will explore a) historical perspectives, b) media representations, c) correctional realities, and d) incarcerated women's own experiences to reveal continuing patterns of heteronormativity and homophobia. The paper will focus on incarcerated lesbian and bisexual women in the context of the United States carceral system. The term "lesbian" will sometimes be used as an umbrella term to describe women who engage in sexual relationships with other women. While not to dismiss that there are multitudes of complex and diverse terms for unique identities, the general use of the term "lesbian" is done for the sake of simplicity due to the limited scope of a paper of this length.

Historical Theoretical Perspectives

Historical academic and theoretical explorations of sexuality in prison are tailored to reflect homophobia and heteronormativity. The exploration of women-centred research in criminology is lacking; the same goes for initial discussions of female sexuality within prisons. Women's experiences have historically been invisible in terms of academic research and theoretical perspectives (Balfour & Comack, 2014). While homosexuality was harshly punished in male prisons, early 20th century American women's prison officials largely ignored or denied the existence of female homosexuality (Freedman, 1996). Exceptional to this was the racist, stereotypical construction of Black women as aggressive lesbians who preyed upon White, feminine women while

incarcerated (Freedman, 1996). Margaret Otis was the author of one of the first criminological studies of prison homosexual relationships (Freedman, 1996). She asserted that Black women pursued White women, taking on a traditionally "male" role (Freedman, 1996, p. 400). Upon release, the White women returned to heterosexuality and ceded contact with their in-prison partners (Freedman, 1996). These initial criminological theories exemplify how homophobia intersects with racism and sexist depictions of what constitutes valid femininity. Early studies also emphasize another prevalent theory of lesbianism in prison, which positions homosexuality as temporary.

As lesbianism in prisons became more widely recognized, fear began to ramp up over the potential threat female sexuality could have on societal structures. Margaret Mead was the first to suggest that lesbianism is not as threatening as male homosexuality because female prisoners would likely revert to heterosexuality upon their release from prison (Freedman, 1996). She posited that lesbianism in prison was simply a response to the deprivation of heterosexual relationships (Freedman, 1996). Deprivation theory is one of the most common historical, theoretical perspectives used to explain homosexuality in women's prisons. There is an ongoing debate over whether women engage in temporary female relationships situationally in prison or whether prison acts as a catalyst for pre-existing diverse sexual identities (Severance, 2004). More current research posits that jail serves as a site for tuning into diverse sexualities already present within a woman's identity, as will be discussed later. The historical view was that women became afflicted or corrupted by homosexual pathology as a direct result of their incarceration or their predisposition to criminal behaviour. Eventually, fear of incarcerated lesbians threatening the status quo of patriarchal power became mainstream among criminologists and academics.

Criminal lesbians symbolized patriarchal rejection that had to be controlled and mitigated. Female prisoner lesbianism was a social problem to be "contained" due to mounting fears of undercover enemies during the Cold War (Freedman, 1996, p. 405). The racialized image of Black women as predatory lesbians subsided somewhat, and researchers now thought that any woman had the potential to be a threatening, promiscuous, and dangerous lesbian (Freedman, 1996).

The idea that even White, middle-class women could be a sexual threat stirred a frenzy among academics and the public (Freedman, 1996). No one was safe any longer, as the public perceived the enemy as more challenging to identify. Prison, while acting as a site of containment for lesbians, was also considered a breeding ground for sexual deviancy and corruption of working-class women. Homosexuality became harshly punished in women's prisons (Freedman, 1996). This is still reflected in correctional practices today, as will be discussed later in the paper. Historical perspectives of the 20th century reveal "deep-seated cultural anxieties about the instability of White heterosexuality" (Freedman, 1996, p. 408). Incarcerated lesbians, in their rejection of heterosexual relationships along with their criminal behaviour, are the absolute manifestation of this cultural anxiety. Eventually, historical perspectives and narratives of prison lesbianism gained public popularity and continued shaping the stories about diverse sexualities in media.

Media Construction and Public Opinion

As a historically taboo subject, prison lesbianism easily captures audiences' attention. As a result of media portrayals, the public perceives women in prisons who partake in same-sex relationships in a highly sensational and distorted light. Familiar fictional narratives of female relationships in prison work to reinforce heterosexuality and to quell fears of the cultural instability that come with the idea of homosexual women. Fictional portrayals of lesbianism in prison typically go two ways. They reinforce heterosexuality by either portraying lesbians as aggressive and dangerous predators or as hyperfeminine victims of corruption who temporarily engage in relationships with other women (Ciasullo, 2008).

Beginning with the latter, media representations of passive prison lesbians frame their relationships as temporary and due to isolation from men outside. This is a continuation of the historical deprivation perspectives previously discussed. In fictional media, many women portrayed in a carceral setting revert to heterosexuality upon completing their sentences (Ciasullo, 2008). In *Girls in Prison*, a film from 1956, Anne Carson is the innocent and feminine protagonist in prison, afraid of the "contagious" lesbianism of the other

women whom she separates herself from (Ciasullo, 2008, p. 204). The message is that the public should not take prison lesbianism seriously as it is depicted as temporary. The more feminine and classically beautiful the onscreen lesbian prisoners are, the less of a concern they are. Their conformity to heteronormative values in other ways, regardless of their engagement in homosexual relationships, allows a certain degree of protection. They are more easily controlled when constructed as passive.

On the other end of the spectrum, incarcerated lesbians who present as more masculine are stereotyped as predatory, man-hating, and threatening to the status quo (Ciasullo, 2008). This stereotype assumes "that women who live independently of men are anti-men" (Farr, 2000, p.54). Essentially, more masculine-presenting lesbian women represent an ultimate rejection of patriarchy for the public (Ciasullo, 2008). This is because they are depicted as avoiding relationships with men and actively working to corrupt heterosexual women (Ciasullo, 2008). Again, in *Girls in Prison* the character Melanee is exemplary of this stereotype, greeting Anne Carson aggressively in prison by touching her hair and immediately demonstrating sexual desire (Ciasullo, 2008). These women are punished on screen for what they represent to reassert mainstream heterosexual values. They are typically left behind when their more feminine counterpart eventually leaves the prison setting and returns to dating men (Ciasullo, 2008). According to popular narratives, the more masculine and threatening women belong in prison, while the feminine victims deserve to be saved.

These portrayals extend beyond fictional accounts and have real-world effects on how women are discussed in news media and the courtroom. Constructed media narratives of lesbians can act as aggravating sentencing factors, contributing to their likelihood of being sentenced to death (Farr, 2000). Lesbians whom the news portrays as more masculine and who threaten men through violence tend to be overrepresented on death row (Farr, 2000). The idea that these women reject men through their sexuality while also lashing out violently against men is exceptionally threatening to male authority. Further, the view that more traditionally feminine lesbians are less threatening than more masculine presenting lesbians indicates a reward for heteronormative

conformity. The lesbian prisoners who present as more heterosexual are forgivable. In turn, the women who are more threateningly lesbian are more deserving of harsh punishment (Farr, 2000). This unfortunate reality directly reflects the fictional examples in media. Women sentenced to death are defeminized and dehumanized by the media and by prosecutions appealing to juries (Farr, 2000). The fact that this distinction is based on who is more sexually accessible and non-threatening to men denotes consistency with patriarchal expectations and control of women.

There are examples of fictional lesbian portrayals in recent years that attempt to subvert old trends and depict lesbians in more realistic and dynamic lights. For example, the popular and recent television show *Orange is the New Black* subverts the tropes of the feminine and temporary lesbians. The lead character, Piper Chapman, is initially portrayed as the ultimate stereotypical image of femininity (Weiss, 2014). She is White, blonde, feminine, passive, and engaged to a man when she begins her prison term (Weiss, 2014). Correctional staff and her fiancé seek to preserve her femininity and protect her from the other inmates (Weiss, 2014). By the end of the first season, however, Piper defines her sexuality as valid in its fluidity when she reunites with her ex-partner, a woman also serving a prison sentence with her (Weiss, 2014). She breaks down stereotypes by behaving violently and aggressively on her own accord toward the end of the season, contrary to her initial portrayal as passive and classically feminine. Piper demonstrates that women are dynamic and complicated and have agency over their identities. Modern portrayals such as the characters in *Orange is the New Black* suggest that public perspectives of incarcerated lesbian women are shifting towards a more nuanced and understanding lens.

Still, *Orange is the New Black's* modern representation of imprisoned women is imperfect. The show is primarily told through the lens of a White woman, despite its attempted focus on the stories of women of colour (Caputi, 2015). The show also presents its characters in highly sexualized and sensational situations, where Black women are often the primary instigators of lesbian relationships (Caputi, 2015). This is problematic given the stereotypical historical representations of criminalized Black women as predominantly sexually aggressive. Modern portrayals of

incarcerated lesbian women are far from perfect and have important implications due to the beliefs they present to the public. While perhaps misunderstood by public perception, women's experiences within the prison system are most directly affected by disciplinary perspectives. The dangers of general misunderstandings and stereotypes come to fruition when correctional authorities allow these constructed narratives to shape the treatment of incarcerated women.

Correctional Realities

Histories of trauma and violence colour incarcerated women's experiences. Female incarcerated populations are "young, poor, unemployed, undereducated" and suffer from addictions or gendered abuse (Fields, 2016, p. 31). Further, Black women are overrepresented in American prison systems, especially Black women lacking stable and affordable residence (Fields, 2016). The American criminal justice system is a "funnel" for the country's most marginalized groups (Hereth & Bouris, 2020, p. 359). Prisons are built to separate disadvantaged groups from the larger society, correct their behaviour, and contain and separate them. This includes lesbian and bisexual women as well. As a result, representations of queer-identifying Americans in prison are disproportionate (Hereth & Bouris, 2020). The overrepresentation of sexual minorities in prison is not a result of the corruption of women by a few inherently evil lesbians, as historical theorists have posited. Rather, prisons work as intended by the state to contain and separate groups that already experience disadvantage and marginalization outside the prison walls. It is here that authorities can optimally monitor and correct marginalized groups.

The abuse endured by incarcerated women outside the carceral setting is mirrored within the prison walls. Correctional figures often continue cycles of violence or control over their female wards through the exertion of their institutional power (Fields, 2016). Further, corrective perspectives on women's sexuality reflect a heteronormative valorization of authoritative control over women, especially women who are thought to be more sexually deviant. Overall, the control and treatment of women of diverse sexual orientations tend to be harsher, such as being sent to isolation units for physical contact (Forsyth et al., 2002). Physical contact between inmates is generally off-limits in most prisons, but it is punished considerably more when thought to be

of a sexual or romantic nature (Forsyth et al., 2002). As previously discussed, more masculine-presenting women are especially threatening in the public's eye. This is true for correctional key players as well, who more harshly punish and supervise lesbians that present themselves in less traditionally feminine ways (Smoyer et al., 2021). A more feminine presentation indicates increased conformity with structural heteronormative values.

Inmate relationships are often the subject of conversation between correctional officers, a source of entertainment, and a target for disciplinary action (Maeve, 1999). This points to a sensational and voyeuristic narrative of incarcerated women who identify as sexually diverse, similar to general public perceptions. What differs, however, is the level of control correctional officers can exert over incarcerated women (Maeve, 1999). Correctional behaviours have the most room for direct harm against imprisoned women in this sense. Officers need to take more nuanced stances on women's sexuality in prison. However, adherence to protocol and dominant narratives of female relationships as something to control prevents nuance and understanding in the prison setting.

The Perspectives of Incarcerated Lesbians

While external narratives of lesbians in prison are essential to critique prevailing heteronormative discourses, ample time and thought should be devoted to women's perceptions of their own sexuality. After all, incarcerated women are experts on their own experiences. Imprisoned women, unsurprisingly, view their sexuality as more legitimate and less sensational than external perspectives do. Rather than perceiving their sexuality as temporary, many women explain how their sexual identities do change because of prison sentences yet remain changed upon release (Maeve, 1999). As such, it may be true that prison does provide a venue for first lesbian or bisexual experiences for some women who previously identified as heterosexual, but this realization is not temporary. Rather, incarceration may be a venue that incites exploration and shifts in identity. There is, after all, a heavy push for women to look inwards while serving prison sentences and closely examine their identities, which could include sexual components of their identities. Women outside of the carceral setting



are more likely to identify as bisexual than men, and bisexuality makes up the most significant proportion of sexual identities among women (Cipriano et al., 2022). This identity shift tends to occur later in life for women, so it follows that incarcerated women would also show similar patterns of late identity discovery (Cipriano et al., 2022). Internalized heteronormativity accounts for the delay or disinterest in identity exploration related to sexuality, which is perhaps triggered by the prison setting where men are largely removed from the equation.

That being said, it is crucial not to delegitimize the relationships women form in prison by denoting them as simply a substitution for heterosexual relationships. Many women also list reasons for their carceral relationships that extend beyond the sexual and romantic. Simply needing comfort and closeness in a time of isolation is a primary reason given for romantic relationships (Maeve, 1999). Some women also mention security and safety as other significant benefits of finding a partner. This includes financial and physical security, a practical facet of partnership during incarceration (Maeve, 1999). Finding newfound comfort and security in relationships with women can also result from abuse by men. One incarcerated woman said

“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” (Forsyth et al., 2002, p. 73).

Inmate perspectives like this suggest a degree of agency in choosing to engage primarily in relationships with women because of social conditions, despite experiencing sexual desire for both genders. This defies the stereotypical historical perspective that women are corrupted into homosexuality at the hands of other women. Instead, men’s violence and abuse against women, in some cases, catalyze women’s exploration of relationships with other women.

Unfortunately, a common theme in research about women’s perceptions of their own sexuality while incarcerated points to the internalization of heteronormativity and misogyny. Lesbians who present as more masculine in a carceral setting tend to discuss feminine inmates’ apparent advantages with correctional officers. They perceive the more feminine inmates as having an advantage due to their ability to flirt with officers or use their sexuality to gain favour or avoid punishment (Smoyer et al., 2021). Such perceptions reflect the patriarchal idea that the objectification

of women is beneficial rather than oppressive or subordinating. Some women also express their belief that prison homosexuality of certain women is temporary and that bisexual identities discovered while incarcerated are less legitimate than those who entered the prison identifying as lesbians (Smoyer et al., 2021). Such perspectives ignore the complexity and fluidity of sexual identities and reflect resentment due to internalized heteronormativity. When living in a setting that actively perpetuates homosexual stereotypes and paints diverse sexual identities as something to be corrected or punished, it is easy to understand why internalized heteronormative values continue to prevail. Women presenting as more masculine in their sexuality are punished more harshly by correctional authorities after all (Smoyer et al., 2021). Internalized heteronormative values demonstrate the pervasive nature of stereotypical and historical portrayals of lesbian women. Subconscious beliefs about women of diverse sexual orientations prevail today and are perpetuated by incarcerated women themselves.

Conclusion

Harmful narratives and stereotypes of lesbians in prison are ongoing, despite their roots in dated historical theory. Stemming from fears that prevailing White heterosexual structures are in danger, homophobic narratives of incarcerated women with diverse sexual orientations function to contain and control deviant desire. Prisons act as a site to hold marginalized Americans who threaten the status quo with their very existence. It is through an exploration of intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality that dominant narratives are deconstructed, and their discriminatory intentions are exposed. Women with diverse sexualities are overrepresented in the prison system, and prevailing stereotypes reduce the legitimacy of their identities and unjustly punish them. Only by acknowledging the diversity, complexity, and reality of women’s experiences while incarcerated can narratives begin to reflect the truth. Centring women in their own experiences is the most effective way to find truth and ensure women have an active role in shaping their narratives. Researchers, media, and venues where correctional policy is made should centre the voices of incarcerated women. While this paper focused primarily on bisexual and lesbian-identifying women, more attention should be given to the diverse ways that incarcerated women present their sexual identities so that change in corrections can come from a place of understanding at the societal level.

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