

THE EVOLVING NATURE OF PRISON ARGOT AND SEXUAL HIERARCHIES

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Prison argot and sexual hierarchies have consistently been found to be present in U.S. correctional facilities. However, recent years have seen very few studies that focus specifically on argot labels and sexual hierarchies that exist in prisons. Using data collected from 174 face-to-face structured interviews with male inmates in multisecurity-level correctional facilities in Oklahoma, we found many similarities and differences with previous research on the issues of argot labels and the sexual hierarchy. For example, inmates who engage in same-sex sexual activity continue to be labeled based on the sexual role they portray in the institution. However, the findings of the present study suggest that the nature of these sexual relationships is changing.

Keywords: *prison argot; prison sexual hierarchies; prison sex*

The rapid and continued growth of U.S. prison populations in the last 2 decades has brought with it increasing attention and concern about whether and how U.S. society can afford (financially, politically, and culturally) to maintain the correctional industry. However, although a great deal of attention has been directed toward these macrolevel issues, attention to microlevel issues, such as programmatic operations and inmate culture, have been largely neglected. This is clearly a shortcoming of the penological literature.

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Without a thorough understanding of how institutions operate on a day-to-day basis, it may not be possible to fully and adequately address larger scale issues, such as finances and the place of prisons in the political and social structure of society.

Understandings of the microlevel operations of correctional institutions are the world of the prison inmate. Inmates, obviously, live lives very different from their counterparts in free society; prison inmates live in a "total institution" (Goffman, 1961). Total institutions are closed, single-sex societies separated from society socially and physically. Inhabitants of total institutions have essentially all decisions about the structure and content of their daily lives made for them, and they share all aspects of their daily lives within these types of institutions. However, one area in which occupants of total institutions do retain some degree of control is in their individual and collective abilities to develop unique values, norms, and means for exercising social control over such. Central to this cultural construction is the delineation of specific social roles, which are accompanied by rigidly proscribed behavioral expectations. These distinct values and behavioral roles are referred to as the prison subculture.

Newly arriving inmates in a correctional facility who seek to ease their social transition must learn the values, attitudes, and behavioral expectations that structure the operations of the institution. According to Einat and Einat (2000), "The norms and values of the inmate code form the core of an inmate subculture, providing its members with informal means to gain power and status and, thereby, a way to mitigate their sense of social rejection and compensate for their loss of autonomy and security" (p. 309). When the new inmates have accepted the prison lifestyle and criminal values, they have been "prisonized." Any inmate whose behavior violates the values, behavioral codes, and traditions faces the likelihood of sanctions from other inmates, staff, or both. Official sanctions imposed by staff range from verbal chastisement to time in solitary confinement and loss of earned good time. However, for most inmates, the more serious forms of sanctions are those that come from other inmates. Peer-imposed sanctions range from ostracism to physical and sexual assault and occasionally death. The inmate code is one of the most important aspects of their new culture that inmates are expected to adopt, and which can indicate acceptance of institutional values as well as the ability to avoid accidental affronts to others (via incorrect use of language).

Prison researchers who have studied male prison life have found that inmates use a special type of language or slang within the prison subculture that reflects the "distorted norms, values, and mores of the offenders" (Dumond, 1992, p. 138). As such, the vocabulary and speech patterns of

prison inmates—what is known as prison argot—are largely distinct from those of noninmates. Language, as is well known, provides the parameters of understandings—and possibilities—for constructing a social and cultural milieu. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in correctional institutions, where inmates live, think, and function within the framework defined by the argot (Bondesson, 1989). Thus, the argot is centered on the functions that it serves for inmates. Einat and Einat (2000) document six functions of argot roles:

- the need to be different and unique
- alleviation of feelings or rejection and refusal
- facilitation of social interactions and relationships
- declaration of belonging to a subculture or social status
- a tool of social identification leading to a sense of belonging to a group
- secrecy (pp. 310-311)

One critical component of correctional institution culture, building on argot roles, is the prison sexual hierarchy. Sexual behavior among inmates does occur, although the sexual activities of individual inmates and with whom one engages in sex is governed by a hierarchical system of roles and relationships. Within this structure the roles, activities, and actors involved in sexual activities are assigned unique, institutionally specific labels. According to Dumond (1992), “While the terms may have changed somewhat over the decades, prison slang defines sexual habits and inmates’ status simultaneously, using homosexuality as a means of placing individuals within the inmate caste system” (p. 138). These sexual scripts define an inmate’s position within the prison society. Dumond (1992) also found that argot roles “help to define the treatment which an inmate is likely to receive from other inmates and corrections officers” (p. 138). Labels, then, are central elements in the structuring of social interactions.

Previous research has attempted to describe the inmate subculture, including sexual argot roles and the prison sex hierarchy. However, inmates in prison today face a myriad of new challenges, many of which are at least indirectly related to sexuality issues. Overcrowding, fears of contracting HIV, and widespread influence of gangs are just some of the issues inmates confront as they enter and become integrated into the prison subculture. Understanding the prison subculture is not only important but also necessary to inmates’ survival while incarcerated. Recent years, however, have seen very few studies focusing specifically on argot labels and the sexual hierarchy that exists in prisons. The purpose of this study is to describe the sexual roles and

hierarchy that exist in prison, with special emphasis on sexual argot, at the start of the 21st century and to assess how these factors have transformed prison subcultures (see also Hensley, 2002).

LITERATURE REVIEW

In 1934, Joseph Fishman, a former inspector for federal prisons, conducted one of the first ethnographies on sex in male prisons. Fishman found that homosexuality was an offense in many communities, and men were arrested and sent to prison for this offense. The Penitentiary at Welfare Island in New York was a prison where men were commonly sent for offenses such as attempting to corrupt a minor, indecent exposure, and soliciting members of the same sex for money. Men convicted of these offenses who came into prison were often passive and known by other inmates as “punks,” “girls,” “fags,” “pansies,” or “fairies.” These inmates had feminine characteristics and often wore makeup. Other inmates, known as “top men” or “wolves,” took advantage of these homosexuals. These sexual argot roles marked the passive prisoners as appropriate targets for sexual assault.

Research in the last 40 years, built on the foundation laid by Fishman, has expanded, yet largely reiterated the basic finding of victimized and victimizing inmates in prisons. Donaldson (1993), Sagarin (1976), Kirkham (1971), and Sykes (1958) studied social roles in male prisons and found that inmates engaging in homosexual activity were divided into three categories. The first category consisted of those inmates who played an active, aggressive (i.e., masculine) role in same-sex sexual relations. Inmates referred to these men as wolves, “voluntary aggressors,” or “daddies.” Inmates in the second and third categories played a more passive and/or submissive (i.e., feminine) role and were referred to as punks and fags.

In large part, adoption of a wolf role may be attributed to the strong emphasis in correctional institution culture on the maintenance of masculinity. To prove their masculinity to themselves and others—and therefore avoid being sexually victimized—some men may opt to be (sexually) aggressive. In essence, to avoid being a sexual victim it may be necessary to sexually victimize others. Wolves assumed an aggressive role and often preyed on other inmates, relying on either violence or coercion as their methods of sexually displaying their masculinity. Even though wolves engaged in same-sex sexual behavior with fags (often via force), the goal for wolves in these encounters was nothing more than physical release and enhancement of a social reputation. Raping punks reinforced the wolves’ masculine identity, thereby solidifying the wolves’ high position in the institutional status hierarchy.

Through this aggressive behavior, wolves managed to escape the stigma of being labeled a homosexual, although they were engaged in sexual activities with other men (Donaldson, 1993; Kirkham, 1971; Sagarin, 1976; Sykes, 1958).

Fags adopted the same role in prison as they are assumed to have adopted in the free community. The fag fulfilled the stereotype of the homosexual and was viewed by other inmates as playing a natural role. Fags engaged in sex with men because they were born that way. The fag was known by his exaggerated feminine mannerisms, often wearing makeup and dressing in women's clothing. They were considered gender nonconformists and posed little threat to the masculinity of other inmates. In fact, fags provided the feminine counterpart against which wolves could construct their masculinity. Fags were defined as having "pussies," not "assholes," and wore "blouses," not "shirts" (Donaldson, 1993). Although fags, "effeminate," or "queens" were accorded significantly less respect than wolves (because of their femininity), the fact that these inmates were fulfilling their "natural role" did accord them some degree of respect. Fags occupied a status below wolves, but above that of the most despised, the punks (Donaldson, 1993; Kirkham, 1971; Sagarin, 1976; Sykes, 1958).

The label of punk or "jailhouse turnout" was assigned to those inmates who engaged in sexual activities with another inmate (almost always a wolf) because of coercion, force, or rape. Punks were viewed as cowards who were morally weak and unable to defend themselves in prison. In short, a punk was a male who did not fulfill his role as a man. Unlike the fags, punks did not display feminine characteristics. However, because of their displays of weakness (physical) punks were often targets of sexual attacks. Donaldson (1993) found that punks had some common characteristics. These included being younger in age, inexperienced first-time offenders, middle class, White, and physically smaller in size. Punks were viewed as having forfeited their masculinity as a result of submitting to a more aggressive inmate. Punks were considered slaves, and wolves used them as commodities for protection or goods and services. Kirkham (1971) expanded on this idea, identifying inmates who declined to adopt a feminine role yet traded sexual activities for goods and services (i.e., prostitutes) "canteen punks." Universally, researchers have reported that punks occupied the lowest rungs on the institutional cultural hierarchy.

The idea that there is an important distinction between true homosexuals and those who engaged in sexual activity due to situational forces (situational homosexuality) has been a common theme throughout 20th-century prison sex research. Buffman (1972) focused on this distinction, further identifying

two categories of inmates who engaged in situational homosexuality: victims and rapists. Victims were referred to as made homosexuals and were stigmatized as effeminate men. Rapists were referred to as "jockers." Jockers remained consistent with their masculine role; thus they were seen as maintaining their masculinity and therefore escaped stigmatization in prison.

Another variation on the approach to argot sexual roles emerged with Wooden and Parker's (1982) suggestion that argot roles were adopted based on the simple distinction between sexually engaged inmates based on one's role as an insertor or insertee. The group that took the role of insertee was the homosexuals and vulnerable heterosexual "kids." These inmates were perceived and defined as feminine and encouraged (or forced) to present themselves with (often exaggerated) feminine characteristics. These inmates were commonly referred to as "broads," "bitches," "queens," and "sissies." The homosexuals usually conformed to this role and adopted feminine names. However, when this role was imposed on those who were not true homosexuals, these inmates were labeled as having been "turned out."

The dominant partner (the insertor) who maintained his masculine identity was known as the jocker, "stud," or "straight who uses." The jocker's sexual behavior with another male was viewed as situational, and therefore acceptable. The jocker exploited the vulnerable homosexual or heterosexual inmate in prison and treated his sexual partner as a surrogate female. In this way, jockers were attempting to replicate normal sexual roles outside of prison.

Wooden and Parker (1982) also added to the literature arguing that inmates tolerated sissies because they maintained their natural role. Heterosexual kids were tolerated as long as they did not attempt to change the role specification and accepted the scripts of the inmate subculture. However, submissive men were not respected or seen as real men. They were strictly commodities that jockers often used to satisfy a need, whether sexual or economic.

Most recently, Fleisher (1989) reported that a wide range of terms were used to designate effeminate homosexuals at the U.S. Penitentiary at Lompoc, California, including: "skull-buster," punk, queen, fag, "homo," bitch, "faggot," "fruiter," broad, kid, and "ol' lady." However, four dominant categories and associated argot roles were found at the prison. These included fags, "fuck-boys," "straights," and turn-outs.

Fags and fuck-boys were the female sex-role players in the institution. Both groups claimed homosexuality and were described as homosexual by other inmates; however, some differences were evident between the two. Fags were effeminate homosexuals who were often distinguishable by their

gait, dress, hair, and speech. Fuck-boys, on the other hand, were not distinguishable by these traits.

Straights and turn-outs were the male sex-role players in the institution. They did not consider themselves homosexual, nor did the other inmates define them as homosexual. Straights used fags for sexual gratification, although some straights developed long-term sexual relationships with other straights. When these relationships did develop they were very carefully guarded and remained very private. On the other hand, turn-outs took a passive strategy by seducing inmates with commissary privileges or other items.

What stands as a major gap in the research on prison culture is that during the last decade there have been essentially no studies on the role of argot and the prison sex hierarchy in male correctional facilities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to shed new light on an integral part of the prison subculture, argot roles and the prison sex hierarchy.

METHODOLOGY

The data for the present study were gathered between August 1998 and May 1999. A total of 300 inmates (100 inmates from a minimum, medium, and maximum security facility in Oklahoma) were randomly selected and invited to participate in the study. However, only 58% ($n = 174$) of invited inmates elected to participate. Data were gathered during face-to-face, structured interviews with inmates from all three security-level institutions (minimum = 52, medium = 61, and maximum = 61).

Inmates who agreed to participate were informed that a voluntary interview would be administered. They were informed that the nature of the research was sensitive and they might experience some emotional discomfort during the interview process. Furthermore, inmates were told not to provide their name or any identifiers during the interview to maintain confidentiality. Institutional authorities, however, did impose two important restrictions on the research process. Interviews were limited to a maximum of 30 minutes each, and audio recording of interviews was prohibited. This meant that analysis was restricted, and direct quotes from inmates were unable to be included. The purpose of these interviews was to collect data on all aspects of prison sexuality, including prison argot and sexual hierarchies.

A comparison of the general population of the prisons and the research sample reflected some differences. For example, White inmates (38.5%) were underrepresented in the sample of minimum security inmates compared to the general population of the institution (52.4%). Native Americans (19.2%) were overrepresented in the sample of minimum security inmates

compared to the general population of the facility (7.7%). White inmates (47.5%) were underrepresented in the sample of medium security inmates compared to the general population (53.9%). In addition, White inmates (45.9%) were underrepresented in the sample of maximum security inmates compared to general population (55.3%). The mean age of the sample was 39 years for minimum, 36 years for medium, and 33 years for maximum security institution. These very closely approximate the mean age for each institution (37, 36, and 33 respectively). Fully one half of the sample had never been married, with only 22.4% of the sample currently married. More than 27% of the sample was legally divorced or widowed.

RESULTS

Interviews revealed that the three traditional sexual roles outlined by previous research (i.e., wolves, fags, and punks) were still present in the prison subculture in all three security-level institutions. However, results also show some important differences from previous research, especially in the structure of the institutional sexual hierarchy and in additional refinement of the traditional roles.

One of the primary differences uncovered in this study is the identification of two subcategories within the wolf and fag roles. Whereas previous research has presented these roles as rather unified, inmates in the present study detailed two distinct subcategories of the wolf category: the "aggressive wolf" and the "nonaggressive wolf." Aggressive wolves were depicted as inmates of African American descent who were considered physically and verbally tough. These inmates entered prison with a heterosexual orientation and maintained their masculinity by sexually assaulting younger, weaker inmates (punks). Masculine identification is also reinforced by restricting sexual involvement to only active roles (i.e., receiving oral sex from punks and inserting during anal sex). However, inmates also make clear that aggressive sexual interactions—such as raping punks—although providing a sexual release, had more to do with status and power than sex. When asked about their current sexual orientation, all of the self-described aggressive wolves maintained their heterosexual identity.

Nonaggressive wolves (or "teddy bears"), on the other hand, typically did not report sexually assaulting their sex partners. Rather, these inmates sought other inmates ("fish" or "closeted gays") who were predisposed and willing to voluntarily participate in sexual activities with another male while in prison. Nonaggressive wolves more often than not were Caucasian men who entered prison with a heterosexual identity. These inmates, similar to their

aggressive counterparts, were also able to maintain their masculine role by participating in active roles during sex. However, when asked about their current sexual orientation, more than one half of the nonaggressive wolves indicated that they now identified as bisexual. Thus, many of these inmates—because of the lack of heterosexual sexual opportunities in prison—had modified their self-concepts regarding their sexual orientation.

Just as the traditional category of the wolf has been refined into two more specific categories, so too has the category of the prison fag been more closely distinguished. Fags, in the present study, have been distinguished as either fish or closet gays. Fish (a term previously reserved to refer to newly arriving inmates) is now a label for referring to (typically African American) inmates who present themselves with a feminine appearance and enacting a stereotypically feminine role. Although violating institutional rules and regulations, these inmates wore makeup, displayed female mannerisms, and took on female nicknames. Fish entered into prison life with a homosexual identity and maintained this identity by assuming a passive role during sexual activity (i.e., performing oral sex and playing the insertee role during anal sex). Some fish also sold themselves for canteen goods and cigarettes, while others sought out relationships with nonaggressive wolves.

A closet gay is an inmate, typically Caucasian, who is believed to enter prison with a hidden homosexuality identity. Closet gays are perceived as having the ability to take on either an active or passive role during sexual activity. Such inmates, however, strive to maintain masculine appearances and mannerisms. They typically sought other closet gays in hopes of forming a “true love” relationship.

As evidenced in previous studies, there is a clearly defined prison sexual hierarchy with wolves on top, fags in the middle, and punks on the bottom. However, this study suggests that this ranking system may be being replaced with a newly defined hierarchy. Inmates in the present study reported that the status of fags had progressed upward to now be relatively equal to that of the wolves. Fish and aggressive wolves were the most respected and feared groups within the prison sexual hierarchy. Many inmates feared fish because they were known for their aggressive, albeit in nonsexual ways, behavior. For example, two incidents of fish killing other inmates because the other inmates had referred to them as punks were reported by the inmates in the maximum security facility. In addition, fish were also known for their jealousy; consequently, a number of inmates reported that they were scared to engage in sexual activities with the fishes' sex partners.

Closet gays and nonaggressive wolves typically occupied positions of relatively equal status. However, both of these groups of inmates were slightly lower in the institutional ranking system than the fish and aggressive wolves.

Punks, however, remain at the bottom of the prison sexual hierarchy. All other inmates continued to view punks as cowards who were physically and morally weak. Punks often sold themselves for protection. Therefore, inmates saw them as inferior to other inmates within the correctional facility.

DISCUSSION

Inmates in correctional institutions develop an institutional subculture, with a code of conduct, roles, behavioral expectations, and an institution-specific language at the core. The code of conduct consists of norms and values that, in turn, structure the informal patterns of life among inmates. According to Einat and Einat (2000), "[This] code is directly linked to the process of socialization and adaptation to prison life" (p. 309). In other words, the inmate code has universal elements that cut across all correctional facilities because the normative society, its attributes, and its delegates are inherent opponents of prisoners. The language (argot) that characterizes institutional subcultures is one of the principal elements of prisonization, as well as the development and perpetuation of the inmate code.

Similarities between the early research regarding sexual argot roles and the present study are clear. Inmates who engage in same-sex sexual activity are labeled based on the sexual role they portray in the interaction. The findings of the present study on sexual argot roles and the prison sexual hierarchy in male facilities suggest that the nature of these sexual relationships is changing. In male facilities, wolves originally held the highest status in the prison sexual hierarchy. However, this study indicates that the status of fish is now gaining equality with the status of aggressive wolves. Nonaggressive wolves and closet gays maintain statuses of relative equality with each other, falling in the middle of the sexual hierarchy. The punks continue to remain on the bottom of the sexual hierarchy. Although the prison subculture is changing, punks continue to be the most despised inmates in the prison.

In conclusion, sexual argot roles in prison reflect and reinforce the organization, language, and status hierarchy of the prison subculture. To survive in prison, inmates must learn to reject the norms of free society and adopt the new normative order. It is also important for correctional administrators and staff to understand the organization of the prison subculture. Learning the language and normative codes help staff maximize the efficiency of the prison, as well as the safety of staff and inmates. According to Dumond (1992), "Such information may be particularly helpful in assisting prison administration . . . in defining and managing the prison ecosystem/environment" (p. 138).

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