

MANAGING SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS IN A FEMALE PRISON

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*Paper presented at the Women in Corrections: Staff and Clients Conference
convened by the Australian Institute of Criminology
in conjunction with the Department for Correctional Services SA
and held in Adelaide, 31 October – 1 November 2000*

In women's prisons, homosexual relationships have historically been tolerated and/or ignored. The level of involvement by women prisoners in 'inside' relationships is significant. While homosexual relationships do occur in our male prisons, the incidents are largely more discreet than the behaviour displayed by the women. From my experiences as a manager of women in prison, I consider that homosexual relationships that develop behind bars can pose a number of significant issues for management. That is, the health issues, predatory behaviour, jealousy, co-dependancy and sexual activities that occur.

It is not the homosexual relationships in themselves that are the issue for administrators but the behavioural problems that these often cause and the complexity of managing such behaviour. Even more of a dilemma for management is the many different ways in which staff respond to overt demonstrations of intimacy arising from these relationships. A Canadian colleague wrote;

"...our prison managers find this a difficult issue to deal with operationally as it seems front-line staff all take different approaches depending on their comfort level with expressions of intimacy. It seems that some intervene if women are hugging or holding hands, while others don't."

This paper will examine the complex issues arising from homosexual relationships in women's prisons and the management responses, or lack of, to the behaviour the women participants. The paper will largely focus on the Western Australian experience. In discussions with my national and international colleagues, it would appear to be similar in most women's prisons. However, in seeking information on this subject it was evident that there was an absence of any academic papers or research material.

Female Prisoner Accommodation in Western Australia

Bandyup Women's Prison is Western Australia's only maximum security facility for women. The facility was opened in 1971 and is situated in the outer metropolitan area at the foothills of our capital city, Perth. The design capacity, although only 83 beds, consistently accommodates 140 to 150 women. In December 1998, Nyandi Prison was opened to provide a temporary minimum security facility that accommodates 50 women. Additionally, limited numbers of women are accommodated in four of the regional male prisons, which are situated in the northern and eastern country areas of our large state. These integrated facilities allow women from the remote communities to serve their incarceration periods nearer to their families. The integrated facilities accommodate only approximately 10 –12 medium and/or minimum security rated women at each site.

Bandyup Women's Prison is currently undertaking a \$14.8 million redevelopment program, over a two year period, to provide additional accommodation and support services for women prisoners. Upon completion of the redevelopment program, the design capacity of the prison will then be 167 beds. New education, recreation and industry facilities will provide women prisoner's greater access to participate in these programs. The long-term women's accommodation plan for Western Australia is to identify a green-field site for a new purpose built women's facility.

The incidents of homosexual activity and relationships appear to be occurring at an increasing rate at Bandyup Prison. The staff and prisoners who I interviewed supported this observation. Specifically, two prisoners serving life sentences and having already served some fifteen

years, endorsed my observation but expanded on the attitudinal change by the women towards this issue. They stated that *“everything was private in our early days here, but now its everyone’s business and is so public.”* I conducted a simple ‘snap shot’ of the number of prisoners that were currently involved in a relationship at the prison. The outcome revealed that the women living in the Self-Care accommodation were less likely to be engaged in a relationship than those women accommodated in the general living area. It should be noted however, that a large number of the women in Self-Care are serving life sentences or lengthy terms and are generally from the ‘older’ age group. In the general accommodation area, in excess of 100 prisoners reside in a quadrangle design facility with only 63 cells. Over crowding in the prison, creating the need for most of the women to share a cell, may contribute to the higher number of women, in this type of accommodation, to be engaged in a relationship.

As a manager, I consider that a range of management strategies need to be considered in an effort to effectively manage the behaviour and implications of homosexual relationships, between prisoners, in our female prisons. The effects of these relationships can be varied. Consideration of these effects on the good order of a prison environment, on an individual prisoner, on fellow prisoners, on staff and the responsibility of management all require a level of analysis when considering management strategies, guidelines, directives and/or protocols. The implications of implementing management strategies pose a number of additional questions that also need to be considered in the context of good order of the prison, duty of care, equity, community standards and ensuring that realistic outcomes can be achieved.

Lesbianism In Prison

A number of research articles have been written on ‘why’ and ‘who’ become involved in lesbianism relationships within the prison environment (Leger 1987 and Propper 1978, 1981 & 1982). Despite studies having been undertaken on these and similar related topics, I have been unable to access information on ‘how’ prison authorities manage the varied behavioural responses to homosexual relationships in the prison environment. I have contacted a number of institutions both nationally and internationally, to discuss with them the management strategies that they might have in place. Although my colleagues acknowledged that such relationships occurred at their institutions, they didn’t have any specific rules, regulations, policies, guidelines, protocols or any other management strategies that guided staff in their management of this issue.

In view of the absence or inability to identify relevant information pertaining to any research or studies being available in regards to the management of homosexual behaviour in a female prison, I have written from my personal experiences and observations. Additionally, I gained much information and opinions of individuals by conducting interviews with staff and prisoners at Bandyup Prison and managers from within Western Australia as well as nationally and internationally.

It has been acknowledged that women, whilst in prison, experience a need to seek companionship, primarily due to loneliness and isolation from their loved ones – children, spouses, parents, siblings and significant others. *“Women are more tactile. Women get involved in lesbian activities because they need the tactile contact. They can’t have it with their partner or their children so they do it with other women.”* (Devlin, A. 1998) This ‘need’ can be met by the formation of a relationship with other prisoners, comprising of ‘prison families’, friendships and even romances. The former type of relationships pose minimal

problems for management and can even be viewed as being of assistance in the management of prisoners in view of the level of support that is provided to each other. It must be recognised that all relationships do not necessarily involve a sexual relationship.

There are two types of prisoners who become involved in lesbian relationships whilst in prison, 'gays' and 'gate gays'. 'Gate gays' is the terminology used by our prisoners to describe those who choose a heterosexual relationship lifestyle when in the community but become involved in a 'gay' relationship whilst in prison. Explanation for this type of behaviour may be attributed to the 'need' of women whilst isolated and held in an artificial environment and their need for companionship for emotional support. Similarly, as prisoners described to me at interview, being in a relationship in prison is considered to be "trendy, cool and part of the modern prison culture." Prisoners may engage in homosexual relationships with their peers because of the 'faddish' aspect and may believe that since sexual behaviour is popular among their peers, then it is socially acceptable for them to engage in this type of behaviour.

The prisoners openly display their feelings and commitment to their partner in their daily activities and don't appear to be intimidated in displaying their affections in clear view of staff or management. This could be interpreted as a normal response to a behaviour that is not seen to be unacceptable by the authorities, especially when there is a general level of tolerance. Relationships are openly discussed between staff and prisoners, 'who is with who' and 'what is happening in who's relationship'. Prisoners frequently request 'double-ups' with their partners with no attempt to withhold their relationship commitments from staff or other prisoners. In view of the over crowding issues experienced at the prison and therefore the requirement to share the accommodation, staff appear to be obliging in meeting prisoners requests to be placed with their partner. With consideration given to the intrusion of people's privacy in sharing a cell with another prisoner, who may be a stranger, agreement to these placements is often made. Cells at Bandyup Prison are essentially built to accommodate single occupants and therefore it may be considered advantageous for management purposes that those sharing a cell should be compatible and exist in a harmonious environment whilst secured in the cell for a minimum period of twelve hours per night. This is then viewed as endorsement by the prison of the homosexual relationship and activity.

Health Issues

The prison population, due to their life styles within the community and the health effects of those life styles, generally suffers poor and/or neglected health that requires intervention when imprisoned. Abuse of drugs and the issue of 'sex for drugs' are two impacting issues effecting those life styles. In considering the offences of a high number of incarcerated women, drug use and/or abuse is prevalent. Sex-for drug exchange and prostitution contributes to a serious health issue for these women. Exposure to Hepatitis and sexually transmitted diseases are therefore prevalent. Prisoners generally agreed that those in relationships gave little consideration to either the general contagious diseases or sexually transmitted diseases. Whilst the prison offers a comprehensive health education program that provides access to health staff and written information on a wide range of health issues, it can be assumed that the implications have limited application to sexual relationships that are formed in the prison.

Following the introduction of the availability of condoms for the male prisoners in 1998 a request was made in 1999 for women to be provided with the same access to Dental Dams and/or condoms. It wasn't until some fourteen months later that Dental Dams and condoms were made available for the women at Bandyup Prison.

Predatory Behaviour

Predatory sexual behaviour is a difficult issue to identify and clearly distinguish from the consenting relationships. Prisoners may fear the sexual predator and be intimidated to report such incidents for fear of further reprisals. Whilst staff are usually aware of the sexual predator and their behaviour, management of the issue can be complex in view of determining the level of 'cooperation' between the prisoners. It must be noted that there are prisoners, whilst subjected to varying approaches by the predator, are able to withstand those pressures in accordance with their choices.

I separately interviewed two 'straight' prisoners to seek from them how they had dealt with sexual predatory behaviour. Their responses were near identical. Although they had numerous approaches from 'the heavies' to become their partners upon reception into the system, they were able to maintain their personal choices. The demands that these prisoners were subjected to continued for an extended period of time, but they were both able to withstand the pressures that was being applied. They both claimed that individuals did, after a period of time, respect their choice and retreated. One of the prisoners' interviewed, an attractive woman who is always well presented, claimed that the level of harassment was at times unbearable. The prisoner, who is serving her first term of imprisonment, considered that the continual request from others to become 'their girlfriend' as being a challenge to the most well known predators, even a 'prized conquest'. She withstood that pressure but endured physical violence as a response. She claimed that whilst she made 'friends' with another prisoner, the friendship was quickly interpreted as an automatic right for a sexual relationship. While the 'straight' prisoner dealt with this aspect of her friendship, the rejected prisoner threatened self-harm and even resorted to a level of physical aggression against her. However, they worked through these issues and their friendship continues. Both prisoners interviewed present as confident and assertive persons and these attributes most certainly have contributed to their 'survival'. In other cases, where the prisoner who has no previous 'gay' relationship behaviour but whose character is less confident and assertive and intimidated by such advances may be unable to withstand the same demands and therefore fall prey to the predator.

Self Harming Behaviour

When relationships end, the prisoner who has been rejected often becomes depressed and may even contemplate suicide. The victim tends to get everybody else involved, since she feels it is too much for her to cope or resolve the issues on her own. Peers tend to blame the one who initiated the termination of the relationship, by rejecting the person, or by influencing the person to reconcile the relationship. The number of incidents of self-harm, as a result of broken relationships, is one of the major concerns to staff and management. Whilst counselling is readily available within the prison, the added stress on a prisoner to 'work through' her emotional needs in the same environment as the other prisoner that was involved in the relationship, is difficult. Suicide threats and acts of self-harm are a common reaction for prisoners to take when a relationship is failing or has been terminated. This is also true of course when a prisoner's relationship with a loved one in the community fails. However, managing the issues when it is a relationship with another prisoner becomes much more complex. This is because there are two sides to deal with which often can't be separated, staff feel more responsible for resolving the problems and other prisoners often 'take sides'. There are few options to relieve the tension within the prison environment in these circumstances.

Further complications arise when partners from a previous incarceration, having been separated by the release of one, returns to find their partner has now established a relationship with a new partner. Numerous complications arise from this scenario with varying effects, jealousy, self-harm and violence. Recently, a prisoner who had been in a long-term relationship with another prisoner who is serving a very long sentence, claims to have deliberately returned to prison to save her initial relationship with her long standing partner. She said she had discovered that in her absence her partner had established a new partnership. Upon her return, there were a number of incidents as a result of this conflict. Violence resulted between the two prisoners and other prisoners 'took sides'.

A young prisoner incarcerated since the age of fifteen, continually becomes involved in relationships but generally has difficulty in coping with the emotions involved especially when such relationships terminate. The prisoner's response to these difficult situations is generally expressed with serious acts of self-mutilation. Staff are then consistently exposed to blood borne diseases and the associated traumas whilst dealing with such incidents. Although the prisoner receives an ongoing level of intensive counselling and support from staff and other prisoners, such incidents are regular.

Conflict and Aggressive Behaviour

Conflict and aggression is often a serious consequent of lesbian behaviour in a prison. Robert G Leger writes in his book, *Lesbianism Among Women*;

"...gays appear to be more aggressive than straights." "...it has been established that gays are more likely to receive write-ups than 'straights' due to staff attempts at discouraging homosexual behaviour." "Participants in homosexual behaviour also report frequent arguments with staff and also frequent arguments with other inmates."

Whilst speaking with staff at Bandyup Women's Prison, a particular staff member drew my attention to the fact of the number of serious incidents that are related to relationship issues. Such incidents have occurred when prisoners in a homosexual relationship were not accepting of a management decision, which could impact on the relationship and as a result, reacted with aggression towards staff. In recent times, a serious incident occurred when management directed two prisoners, who were in a relationship, to take up alternative accommodation arrangements in view of their ongoing general poor conduct. Their objection to this directive was obvious when they attacked the manager, with weapons, which resulted in the prisoners being charged by the police with Unlawful Wounding and Threatening to Kill.

On a more recent occasion, a Senior Officer was attacked whilst supervising the evening meal in the dining room. Thankfully, no serious injuries resulted from this attack. The Senior Officer had denied a request for the two prisoners in a relationship to 'bunk up together' for the night. One of the prisoners had demonstrated a lengthy period of poor behaviour and rightfully the Senior Officer had rejected their request. Incidents like these are a serious threat for all staff and can be intimidating and effect decision making processes.

Equality in the Treatment of Female Prisoners

In considering strategies for the management of lesbian behaviour in our women's prisons, the equity issue for the heterosexual persons, accommodated in integrated prisons in Western Australia, must be examined. Again, there are no rules, regulations, guide-lines, policies or

protocols pertaining to heterosexual relationships in our integrated prisons. However, it would appear that management applies a 'zero tolerance' strategy for heterosexual relationships and/or behaviour. On most occasions, when prisoners are found to be engaging in this type of behaviour, the female is transferred to Bandyup Prison with a file notation of "*not suitable for placement at an integrated prison.*" In acknowledging the fact that there are important issues that need to be measured when examining the question of heterosexual behaviour in prisons, the implications of equity for prisoners must also be considered if we are to tolerate homosexual relationships.

Management Responses

Currently, staff are required to manage all aspects of homosexual relationships as described above and other issues that might not have been examined, without the assistance of an agreed policy, directive, guidelines or protocols. Management instructions would assist staff in establishing a consistent level of decision making. Staff discussed with me their frustration in managing the effects of relationships without clear guidelines. Similarly, prisoners expressed the same desire to have consistent response from staff. In my experience as a manager, I have identified a number of 'groups' of staff that display various forms of management responses, in regards to the behavioural pattern of women in homosexual relationships.

The 'typical' male officer response is generally one of total oblivion, which could be interpreted as denial or it may be that this behaviour is non-offensive to them. As a manager, I seldom received an Incident Report, which documented inappropriate and/or unacceptable behaviour as a result of homosexual relationship behaviours. I ask myself 'why'? I spoke with a male Senior Officer with extensive prison experience. His interpretation was one of "*if it doesn't affect me, then it doesn't matter*" and "*what they do in that regard is not a concern to me as long as it is discreet.*" Prisoners who were interviewed claimed that they rarely felt intimidated by any management ramifications from the male officers. Can this response from the male officers be interpreted as, not knowing how to manage the issue, too sensitive of an issue to confront, or it doesn't bother them? Most officers did not deny or disagree with my opinion although it was my observation that the majority of them didn't appear comfortable in discussing this issue.

The extreme response from a staff member is from the homophobic person who as a response to their personal opinion has a total intolerance of homosexual relationships. Such responses can be a 'nightmare' for prisoners, other staff and management. Whilst most staff are tolerant of simple acts of friendship, this group 'seek-out' incidents of such behaviour and apply varying unrealistic management options as a consequence. Such acts can refer to holding hands, walking arm in arm, sitting on a bed in close proximity or cuddling. Staff who generally fit into this group are the mature aged, long serving female staff members. The majority of Incident Reports in relation to any level of unacceptable behaviour, in relation to this issue, are usually from this group and they are persistent in their requests for extreme disciplinary outcomes.

The current staffing complement at the prison includes a number of officers who choose, in their private lives, to engage in a homosexual relationship. It has always intrigued me in my observation of this group of staff that they appear generally to be less tolerant than others of the behaviour displayed by prisoners in these relationships. This group of staff demonstrate what seems as an extremely high standard of supervision and at times may be considered to be unreasonable in their management of this issue. My interview with a staff member

representing this group of staff, endorsed my observation and explained that it was their 'safe guard' against other staff members making accusations against them or perceiving that their personal choice of sexuality interferes with their judgement in the workplace. More importantly, that their level of interaction with prisoners is not viewed by other staff or prisoners as being personal.

How Are We Managing

As discussed in this paper, there are numerous and serious effects of ignoring the fact that homosexual relationships exist in the prison environment. In conjunction with the difficulty that staff may experience in identifying 'acceptable' standards of such behaviour, they are not provided with a clear or defined standard, guidelines, policies, protocols, rules or regulations to assist them in their judgement.

Whilst prisons are seen as institutions that are governed by rules, regulations, policies, guide lines and protocols, no such strategies are evident for staff or management on the issue of managing sexual behaviour in prisons.

I ask myself the following questions in examining why the prison system fails to provide a standard for an effective management strategy for this behaviour and the associated responses. Can it be that;

- The subject of female homosexuality in prison is too sensitive or difficult for a management strategy to be considered?
- It is just all too difficult and therefore let's not try?
- If we don't talk about it, will it go away and we just stumble along without a policy?
- It has never been considered necessary by past managers or policy makers to implement such direction?
- It is a 'new issue' due to overcrowding in women's prisons or is it a sign of women's independence?

Is the establishment of a management strategy even realistically achievable?

Conclusion

In writing this paper, it has become evident to me that both staff and prisoners alike, would endorse the development of a clear and articulated policy so as to provide everyone with appropriate support and understanding of their response to homosexual behaviours within the prison environment.

With the exception of the Canadian strategy to specifically target the management of homosexual behaviour through training, there are limited examples of other attempts to manage this type of behaviour.

To consider any strategy for the specific purpose of managing the behavioural responses arising from homosexual relationships within prisons an extensive evaluation must be undertaken to ensure that an effective and achievable outcome can be reached. Given that some sections of the community are still struggling with homosexuality then it is not surprising that the prison system is also unclear on the standards it expects.

References

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