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Weak and vulnerable?
A case study about
formerly incarcerated
women's encounters with
Spice while in prison.

Nki White, PhD Student (Criminology)

Supervisors: Dr Giulia Zampini and Dr Madeline Petrillo

The concept of 'vulnerable women' as it is applied to women in prison

- **'Vulnerability'**: The cultural interpretation of the term often equates to weakness, passivity and lack of agency (e.g. Brown, 2011; Gilson, 2016)
 - **In policies**: The word 'vulnerable' is very commonly employed when discussing women in prison, e.g. the Female Offender Strategy (Ministry of Justice, 2018)
 - **The prison setting**: A place in which women are vulnerable to a variety of harms (e.g. Chamberlen, 2016; Crewe et al, 2017)
 - **Discourses about criminalised women**: Marked by a dualistic conception in which women in prison are defined either by their vulnerabilities or their deviance, usually somewhere in between (e.g. Henriksen, 2017)
- A wider narrative of imprisoned women as non-agentic beings.

Contextualising key terms within the presentation and its aims

- **Spice:** A synthetic cannabinoid; the most commonly found drug in prisons in England and Wales today. Spice has been attributed to rising levels of instability, vulnerability and harm across the entire prison population (e.g. HMIP, 2015; Black 2020)
- **Agentic capacities:** A way of enquiry attentive to women's self-reported experiences of agency in spice encounters ≠ 'responsibilisation' (e.g. Bacchi 2016, Du Rose 2015)
- **Vulnerabilities to harm:** Encounters with spice as experiences of harm, because of what women said about secondary smoke inhalation, direct proximity to harmful behaviours and general sense of threat linked to spice in prison environment.

→ *Aim to highlight women's often active, usually unprompted, and sometimes risky roles in situations in which they encountered spice. This paper is about these encounters.*

Study participants' vulnerability experiences

Participants	Violet	Daisy	Rose	Heather	Hazel
Vulnerability experiences in women's lives	Learning disabilities Loss of children due to custody Past addiction Experiences of being bullied Mental health struggles Mental health breakdown Self harming history Past abuse by family members Broken family links Suicide of a close friend Suicide in prison Witnessing harmful behaviours 'Been traumatised' Imprisonment				

Study participants agency in spice encounters

Participants	Violet	Daisy	Rose	Heather	Hazel
Agency experiences in Spice encounters	<p>'I helped her out [...] she was oblivious to the fact that her underwear's around her ankles.'</p> <p>'I kind of pulled her up of the chair and as she walked out of my cell, I locked my door.'</p>	<p>'I shouted the name of the guard, but I walked in there [...] grabbed them [towels] and we wrapped her arms up'</p>	<p>'I just held her and locked her in her room'</p>	<p>'I couldn't help them, cause I tried to help them but I couldn't, they didn't want to hear, they didn't want to know.'</p>	<p>'She couldn't walk [...] breathe [...] So we set her up'</p>

Example of agency: Daisy's encounter with a woman who had taken spice in prison

Context: Daisy was on remand in a privately run prison for three months in 2016; prisoners were usually locked inside their cells for 21 hours; time outside of cell to shower, collect medication, socialise, time in fresh air. She doesn't remember what time of day it was, but she remembers returning from collecting her medication as she walks past another woman's cell door. She recalls...



Trigger warning: discusses self-harm and mental health struggles. Please feel free to leave the room at any point.

Daisy's encounter with spice and what *she did* in a moment of vulnerability

- 1) Daisy **makes a decision** to inconvenience herself by seeking to help another woman. She could have pretended not to have seen her. Instead she calls for help and instructs the woman to sit down (which is also harm reduction advise)
- 2) Daisy **calls for help repeatedly** to get staff attention, who seem slow or reluctant to come to the scene.
- 3) Daisy **is aware of the prison protocol** and that the woman should not have had access to a razor blade due to her history of self harming/ mental health struggles.
- 4) Daisy **gives and reinforces the officer's instructions** to the woman, she identifies with the woman's mental health struggles.
- 5) Daisy **gets actively involved**, grabbing towels to wrap up the woman's bleeding arms, delivering first aid as she sees that the officers are struggling to get the situation under control.
- 6) Daisy **is aware of her own emotions** and of how she feels about the woman's blood on her own hands.
- 7) Daisy notices how she **becomes increasingly agitated** and irritated with the woman and how this affects her interaction with the woman negatively. She follows instructions by the guards to **take herself out of the situation**.

Reflection: Weak and vulnerable?

- This presentation has offered a way of enquiry that considers vulnerability to harm in encounters with spice in conjunction with women's agentic capacity.
 - This way of enquiry is an *epistemological decision* and a *theoretical lens* that offers an insight into processes within encounters of lived vulnerability.
 - As expressed in women's narratives, Daisy and the other women 'were vulnerable', but they also described how they *acted and felt* in specific moments that contributed to their vulnerability in the moment as well as in general.
 - The active role women played in spice encounters and how they reflected on them, points to their strength and courage within or despite their vulnerability.
- I suggest that *reflexive vulnerability* as a concept is epistemologically helpful: It offers a way to engage with and reflect on the narratives of 'vulnerable women' by considering moments in which women concretely experience vulnerability to harm, what they do in these moments of vulnerability and how they relate their actions to their wider experiences of vulnerability.

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Slide 1: Flower Painting Canvas Art, Barokah Studio, Canva. Available at: <https://www.canva.com/templates/EAFCAO9Uplc-flower-painting-canvas-art/>