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The Gendered Stigma-Vulnerability Nexus and Women Who Use Drugs Such as Spice in Prison. A Feminist Critical Realist Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of discourses around gender, stigma and vulnerability in the context of Spice use in English women's prisons. Using Feminist Critical Realist Discourse Analysis, the study analyzes 15 semi-structured interviews. Two themes of gendered stigma-vulnerability are explored. First, embodied and social othering and second, gender norm non-conformity. The findings highlight how vulnerability and stigma are deeply entwined with gendered expectations and power dynamics in institutional settings. While criminalized women and drug users may share such experiences, the paper highlights the distinct nexus of gendered stigma-vulnerability discourses increasing marginalization for women who use Spice in prison.

Keywords

social constructions of female Deviance, vulnerability and stigma, critical realist discourse analysis, Spice and other (new) psychoactive substances, care and control of criminalized women

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This paper explores the gendered stigma-vulnerability nexus as a conceptual tool to reflect on socio-political and cultural discourses and representations about women drug users and about Spice, as they transmit to localized perceptions about women who use Spice in prison. Alexandrescu and Spicer define the stigma-vulnerability nexus as a tool to observe 'stigmatising formations that result from the separation of groups that are seen to be different in their ways of being and experiencing harm' (Alexandrescu & Spicer, 2023, p. 10). In this paper, these knowledges and perceptions are interrogated through a gender-sensitive lens.

Socio-political and cultural representations are bound up with individual and institutional knowledges and perceptions (Sims Schouten et al., 2007). The paper maps local perceptions about women Spice users against wider discourses and representations about women who use drugs and Spice users. Previous research has examined how socio-political and cultural representations about broad phenomena resonate with local- and individual perceptions. For example, Kolind and Duke discuss how local prisons are frequently influenced by the 'general thrust of wider national drugs and criminal justice policy' (Kolind & Duke, 2016, p. 91). Societal macro-structural conditions reproduce systemic gender expectations and structural inequalities. As Pollack argues, women's prisons integrate macro-level discourses of empowerment and treatment with local practices of punishment and control, and incarcerated women experience these both structurally and systemically, as well as through lived experience (Pollack, 2009). Media reporting around Spice use has directly impacted the cultural imagination and shapes discourses about Spice users within socio-political and cultural contexts (Alexandrescu, 2020; Hutton, 2022).

The paper starts by drawing together two broad streams of literature. The first stream examines the socio-political and cultural representations of Spice and Spice users in society (Alexandrescu, 2020; Duke, 2020; Hutton, 2022). The second stream observes the experiences, mechanisms and practices relating to women drug users within penal contexts (Bowles et al., 2024; Brown & Wincup, 2020; Henriksen, 2017). The conceptual and analytical tool of the gendered stigma-vulnerability nexus is then operationalized. The methodological approach is a Feminist Critical Realist Discourse Analysis (FCRDA). Information about the research design, including sample, data collection and analysis process is discussed. The proceeding part presents the findings, which are organized in two themes. The first theme explores gendered stigma-vulnerability as an embodied and social othering of women Spice users and the second theme describes gendered stigma-vulnerability in the context of feminine gender norms.

Vulnerability and stigma are deeply entwined with gendered expectations and power dynamics in institutional settings (McKim, 2014; Rowe, 2016). The harmful effects of stigma-vulnerability discourses as marginalizing processes have been previously traced in socio-cultural analyses (Alexandrescu & Spicer, 2023; Brown et al., 2017). The paper asserts that while penal contexts may increase the likelihood of such processes more generally, the application of the gendered stigma-vulnerability nexus in this study

highlights the distinct discursive processes of marginalization and isolation affecting women who use Spice in prison.

Literature Review

Male Spice Users in Prison: Socio-Political and Cultural Othering

Spice is the colloquial name for synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists (SCRAs). While first-generation synthetic cannabinoids were initially sold as legal alternatives to cannabis, later variants have increased in potency and shown similar levels of harm to heroin (Bilgrei, 2016), including severe or fatal toxicity and dependence, particularly among marginalized populations (Duke et al., 2023; Marandure et al., 2023). Potency may vary significantly from batch to batch depending on manufacturing and application techniques, such as soaking substances, which increase risk of accidental overdose (Norman et al., 2020; Peacock et al., 2019).

According to recent evidence, Spice remains the most found drug in prisons in England and Wales. A recent cross-sectional study conducted in an English male prison found that 46.7 % of participants reported using synthetic cannabinoids (Craft et al., 2023). Motivations for use in prison include to cope with boredom and stress, to help sleep and manage mental health problems (Ralphs et al., 2017; User Voice, 2016). Spice is associated with vulnerability and stigma in men's prisons. Vulnerable prisoners, such as those who are in debt, may be forced by other prisoners to test the strength of new batches and may be given deliberate overdoses for the entertainment of others (Duke, 2020; Grace et al., 2020).

Clips from inside men's prisons routinely circulate the web. The terms 'prison AND Spice' typed into the YouTube search bar will produce clips, showing vulnerable men forced to trial a batch of Spice in front of their peers. These clips tend to culminate in someone dangerously fitting on the floor, eliciting screams of excitement by an unsupervised crowd of prisoners. Media outlets have published scenes reminiscent of the prison riots in Strangeways in 1990. One such broadcast entitled 'A look inside Wandsworth' by the BBC went viral, suggesting chaos and violence reigned at Wandsworth prison and this was all due to Spice (BBC, 2016). Men who are intoxicated with Spice are perceived as more physically violent and impulsive than other prisoners (Brown et al., 2022; Kinman & Clements, 2021; Mason et al., 2022). Spice has been blamed for prisons loss of control and operational disruptions (HMCIP, 2017), which contributed to stigma for Spice users and the justification of harsher punishment (Duke & Kolind, 2020; User Voice, 2016). Societal representations of Spice use in men's prisons have invoked images of physical disorder and violence.

'[P]rocesses of stigmatization' in societal and cultural imaginations are fluid and contextual (Alexandrescu & Spicer, 2023, p. 3). This can be observed in the shifting symbolic constructions of synthetic cannabinoid users in public narratives. Notably, more affluent communities of Spice users have been portrayed as experimental, careful and responsible (Bujalski et al., 2021; Campos et al., 2019). Marginalized Spice users

on the other hand have been tied to coalescent and harmful discourses of risk, disgust, disorder, vulnerability and irresponsible intoxication (Duke, 2020; Wincup & Stevens, 2021). Spice users have been constructed as ‘abject and disorderly’ (Hutton, 2022, p. 216) and ‘dangerous and risky’ (ibid. p. 421), and have been likened to ‘zombies’ and the ‘living dead’ (Alexandrescu, 2020; Hutton, 2022).

Despite a clear link between Spice use and socio-economic and contextual vulnerability, Spice use has been pathologized and individualized in societal- and cultural representations. This has limited examination of the wider drivers that perpetuate structural vulnerabilities linked to Spice use, including in men’s prisons, where Spice use is common (Alexandrescu & Spicer, 2023; Ralphs et al., 2017). In the meantime, little research has examined the intersection between women Spice users, stigma and vulnerability as a socio-political and cultural phenomenon (Grace et al., 2020; Ralphs & Gray, 2018). There is a lack of research exploring the gendered elements of stigma and vulnerability and how these are discursively constructed in relation to women Spice users.

Women’s Drug Use: Experiences of Gendered Vulnerability and Stigma

In the community, men are more likely to present at substance misuse services compared to women (Fazel et al., 2017). Women in the community may not seek support due to perceived societal stigma (Shirley-Beavan et al., 2020). The stigma women face when they use drugs is compounded when they belong to other stigmatized groups, for example by belonging to an ethnic minority, being homeless, a sex worker or being criminalized. In particular, being a mother or pregnant is associated with greater stigma (Lloyd, 2013). Stigma thus becomes a barrier for women to seek treatment perpetuated by harmful gender roles, such as the ‘good mother ideal’ (Nichols et al., 2021). In addition, research highlights that women experience stigma once they access harm reduction, treatment and recovery services (Boyd et al., 2020; Perrin et al., 2021). Boyd and colleagues’ publication highlights that women’s support needs in drug treatment are shaped by socio-structural factors and norms, which ‘gender-neutral’ services fail to address. In order to understand and respond to women’s vulnerability and stigma the gendered nature of these factors needs to be acknowledged in the support that is provided for women who use drugs (Boyd et al., 2020).

Women who struggle with substance misuse are more likely to be vulnerable due to the range of serious harms they have incurred prior to their criminalization, including trauma, violence and poor mental health. Women who present to drug services have disproportionately experienced abuse and male partner violence (Covington, 2008). Many services still lack gender sensitive provision that takes these vulnerabilities into account and this means that women’s needs are not always addressed. Women who use Spice in the community are less likely to engage with treatment services compared to men (Ralphs & Gray, 2018). This may be due to a lack of gender-sensitive considerations in services for Spice users (Gray et al., 2021).

Substance misuse is a gendered phenomenon bound up with experiences of stigma and vulnerability. Drug offences are the most common reason for women's offending and re-offending (Bloom et al., 2005; Van Roeyen et al., 2017). Research has highlighted that women may misuse drugs as a way of coping with 'physical and emotional pain caused by abuse or trauma' (Grace, 2017, p. 664). In an attempt to cope with trauma, self-medicating may become a way for many women into criminality (Covington, 1998). These gendered vulnerabilities have implications for the kind of support women may need from substance misuse services in criminal justice settings (Jewkes et al., 2019). Once women are criminalized, they are more likely than men to access support for their substance misuse. However, there are ongoing concerns that prisons are designed for men, thus failing to understand the specific needs of women who use drugs in prison and the stigma and vulnerability they face (Covington, 2008; Pinkham et al., 2012).

Criminalized Women Discourses: Vulnerability and Stigma

Discourses about women's distinct needs and vulnerabilities in criminal justice settings have become well established in policy and practice (Corston, 2007; Ministry of Justice, 2023). In recent years vulnerability discourses have been deployed across a range of policy fields, frequently describing women in prison as a vulnerable group (HMIP, 2022; Ministry of Justice, 2018, 2021, 2023). However, these discourses may also carry harmful consequences. Specifically, as critics of the 'vulnerability zeitgeist' have pointed out, by constructing women as individually vulnerable, and even 'needy' (Brown et al., 2017, p. 497; Martin & Aston, 2014), the structural reasons for criminalized women's vulnerabilities in criminal justice settings can get overlooked (Crewe et al., 2017). While it is important to acknowledge and address individual vulnerabilities, these are inescapably linked to structural vulnerability factors. Vulnerability factors can be contextual, such as institutional prison practices and structural gender inequalities, but vulnerability is also an inevitable part of the human experience (Fineman, 2008). As Brown and Wincup suggest, when these structural factors are sidelined, the recognition of individual vulnerability can generate more harm, if this involves simply the 'repackaging' of pathologizing and stigmatizing language into a more palatable political narrative and actionable practice with regards to marginalized groups (Brown et al., 2017; Brown & Wincup, 2020, p. 5). The construction of certain groups as vulnerable can act as a protective factor from some expectations, by initiating welfarist care practices and potentially reducing the stigma of criminalization. However, the infantilization of criminal justice involved women is marked by 'individualizing and pathologizing' processes (Pollack, 2005, p. 83). Through these processes and through individualized vulnerability discourses, women can then be treated as both childish and child-like (Bosworth, 1999; Rowe, 2011). Through these processes, women's individual vulnerability may be used to justify their infantilization within wider disciplinary practices (Crewe et al., 2023).

Criminalized women are also vulnerable to stigmatizing discourses. For example mothers may be held solely responsible for the health and wellbeing of their children (Du Rose, 2015). Turnbull and Hannah-Moffat (2009) illustrate how criminal justice institutions frame criminalized women in ways that reflect the ideological orientation of these institutions, which mirror 'neoliberal regulatory strategies and racialized and classed discourses' (Turnbull & Hannah-Moffat, 2009, p. 536). These discourses are characterised by ideologies that impose expectations of self-management and responsibility on those they aim to regulate in accordance with the wider neoliberal agenda, which constructs the ideal citizen as self-reliant and responsible (Garland, 2019; Rose, 2000).

According to Carlen, the criminal justice system seeks not only to infantilize and pathologize, but also to feminize and responsabilize criminalized women through gendered discourses and practices of control (Carlen, 1985). This observation has been extended and tested by several scholars since. Specifically, these works have argued that discourses carry gender specific protective-punitive practices that are aimed at controlling marginalised groups, and in particular women in criminal justice settings (Hannah-Moffat, 2000, 2010; Henriksen, 2018; McKim, 2008; Pollack, 2009). Rehabilitative expectations are seen to be achieved by means of responsabilization. For example, as McKim finds, substance misuse treatment settings may offer a 'feminized version of neoliberal governance', focused on fostering individuals who embrace entrepreneurial self-development. Women in these contexts may be encouraged to take personal responsibility for their own well-being through 'feminized personal grooming' in order to raise self-esteem and a 'self-help culture' instead of addressing structural change (McKim, 2008, 2014, pp. 435 and 438). Contemporary prison policies demonstrate that individual responsibility is ultimately prioritized over structural change. For example, the Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan articulates a commitment to 'providing appropriate support and environments', but it leaves the rehabilitative burden on women within these environments, by stating that prisons 'will enable women to address the root causes of their offending behaviour so that they pay their debt to society, are rehabilitated and will not re-offend upon their release' (Ministry of Justice, 2023, p. 6).

The gendered vulnerability and stigma associated with the criminal justice experience can be compounded by societal, cultural and political expectations linked to gendered notions of what it means to be or to become a 'good woman' (Rutter & Barr, 2021). Ultimately, gendered socio-political and cultural discourses about criminalized women are frequently articulated through a lens of moral failure and individual responsibility (Du Rose, 2015).

The Gendered Stigma-Vulnerability Nexus

The stigma-vulnerability nexus was initially theorized specifically to draw attention to the governance of vulnerable groups and their marginalization within macro-contexts (Alexandrescu & Spicer, 2023). To understand how vulnerability and stigma are co-

produced and re-produced in local contexts, ‘theoretical primacy’ needs to be given to ‘existing socio-economic arrangements’ (Alexandrescu & Spicer, 2023).

Penal governance engenders discursively distinct feminizing processes of gendered stigma and vulnerability, as discussed above. This paper considers gendered stigma-vulnerability as a macro-level theoretical perspective to enable the identification and interrogation of socio-political and cultural representations within individual and institutional knowledges and perceptions about women Spice users in localized contexts. In taking the stigma-vulnerability nexus further, this paper offers a gendered lens and an application of this nexus within a localized context. Nested within a feminist theoretical perspective, this paper provides a gendered lens for empirically informed analysis of stigma-vulnerability. The analysis points to how ‘power at a micro-level’ reflects the myriad of ways in which power operates at a macro-level’ (Foucault, 1982; Garland, 1997; Macleod & Durrheim, 2002, p. 43). To rephrase, the paper explores the ideological, material and discursive underpinnings of local understandings, by considering them as a reflection of macro-level discourses. In order to effectively trace macro-level discourses within participants narratives, this paper draws on the academic literature that has interrogated socio-political and cultural representations about Spice and criminalized women who use drugs. The theoretical and methodological approach will be discussed next.

Methodological Approach: Feminist Critical Realist Discourse Analysis

Discourses can be defined as intuitive and taken for granted ways of framing the world. Or to put it slightly differently, discourses may reflect an ‘established and obvious narrative of a phenomenon’ (Kivle & Espedal, 2022, p. 171). The task of analyzing discourses is to draw attention to the ‘sensed yet not directly accessible structures of power and knowledge within specific talk and texts’ (Kivle & Espedal, 2022, p. 173). Discourses are understood to produce and reproduce themselves through language about how people view themselves and others in society. The author analysed how participants spoke about women who use Spice as ideological and discursive expressions. The author compared these depictions with wider gendered discourses around criminalised women and substance use. This provided a deeper understanding of participants’ interpretation of their individual ‘materialities, institutional and embodied experiences, and discursive resources’ that shaped their experiences with Spice harms in women’s prisons as a phenomenon (Sims-Schouten & Riley, 2019, p. 1017).

A critical realist discourse analysis specifically can unveil how participants talk about their perceptions of women’s Spice use, drawing attention to the mechanisms that interactively configure perceptions with practices (Stevens, 2020). The focus on localized discursive and material perceptions takes an analytical angle in line with Sims Schouten, Riley & Willig’s work (2007). Specifically, the author analyzed how participants spoke about women who use Spice. This was compared with wider gendered discourses around criminalized women and substance use more generally. The analysis

focused on identifying discursive ‘repertoires-reoccurring tropes or common-sense claims’ in the descriptions of participants about their experience of women who use Spice (Sims-Schouten & Riley, 2019, p. 1019). In the analytical process, codes were assigned to shared patterns of sense-making, such as when participants discussed gendered expectations around responsibility to refrain from use and what a woman should look like or do.

Furthermore, by taking a critical realist perspective, the impact of material practices (such as embodied experiences of drug use or drug exposure) on discursive practices (how this is discursively relayed by participants) can be identified. As Sims-Schouten and Riley (2019) argue, such an analytical angle therefore does not only map the ways in which participants use discourse in order to construct particular experiences (such as those of participants with women who use Spice), but it also positions participants reflections within material reality and how this intersects with personal experience. It provided a deeper understanding of participants’ interpretation of their individual ‘materialities, institutional and embodied experiences, and discursive resources’ that shape sense making about Spice in women’s prisons as a phenomenon (Sims-Schouten & Riley, 2019, p. 1017).

Overall, the theoretical approach taken enables an analysis of why participants may draw upon certain discourses rather than others, by highlighting ‘the role of the extra-discursive’ in participants perceptions (Sims Schouten et al., 2007, p. 108). By drawing out extra-discursive elements in local understandings of specific phenomena, the aim is to analyze the socio-political and cultural conditions that enable the constructions upon which people draw individually, from a pool of wider discursive resources and discursive practices. To rephrase, the gendered stigma-vulnerability nexus describes how localized representations of women Spice users, can be mapped against established socio-political and cultural discourses and representations about criminalized women drug users and about Spice respectively. It is argued that the wider socio-political, cultural- and institutional context provides an environment that enables certain localized discourses and practices over others. The theoretical approach sits within a feminist paradigm that explores and challenges persistent and harmful gender representations and constructions and advocates for change. A feminist analysis justifies a political perspective concerned with demystifying the interrelationships of gender, power, and ideology in discourse (Rowe, 2016).

The author wants to stress at this point how much they valued participants’ generosity, sharing their time, insight, knowledge and openness. They want to unmistakably acknowledge their own blind spots and biases in their own talk and are committed to seek out dialogue and feedback on their thought processes. When they quote and then discursively interpret what participants shared through a feminist discursive lens, this is by no means a reflection of their regard for individual participants. Rather, the intention is to draw attention to the penetrating impact of modern discourses of governmentality onto daily local practices that shape the reality we all live in. This analysis shows that gendered stigma-vulnerability discourses accompany and shape the day-to-day practices of individuals (Brown, 2011; Nichols et al., 2021). The

paper adds an analytical layer to articulations of gendered stigma-vulnerability in women's prisons by giving examples of production and reproduction of wider socio-political and cultural discourses that perpetuate harmful representations of specific groups.

Research Design

The research draws on 15 semi-structured interviews, conducted remotely due to COVID-19 measures in March 2021 and between July 2021 – February 2022. The research project gained research approval by the University of Greenwich Ethics Committee and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) National Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved. Five interviews were held with formerly incarcerated women. Four interviews were conducted via mobile phone and one interview via MS Teams and lasted between 37 min and 1 hr and 31 min. Participants had been incarcerated from three months to six years between 2014 and 2021. Their respective periods of incarceration overlapped with records for when Spice was first found in women's prisons in England according to HM Inspectorate of Prisons (HMCIP, 2015). The women had combined experiences with Spice across three different women's prisons in Southeast England. All five formerly incarcerated women had spent time with women who used Spice while in prison.

Ten interviews were conducted with prison- or community-based professionals working in or alongside HMPPS. Interviews lasted between 31 min and 1 hr and 25 min. Inclusion criteria stipulated that participants had to work with women who (had) used Spice while in prison. The sample also included an external advisor on drug trends due to their extensive knowledge about Spice use trends across England and Wales. This professional provided useful background knowledge, even though they did not have direct contact with women who use Spice. Practitioners had a wide range of roles and perspectives from a substance misuse angle, both, in community and prison contexts. Within the group varying levels of seniority were represented, such as substance misuse officers, a specialist officer and a prison governor. Seven practitioners were female and three were male.

None of the participants across the overall sample said to have taken Spice themselves. The purpose of interviewing participants who had not used Spice themselves was to better understand the wider phenomenon of Spice use in women's prisons since little is known about its expressions and to understand participants' perceptions about Spice use in these contexts (HMCIP, 2016; White, 2025). Participant recruitment followed convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques, including recruitment of both, practitioners and formerly incarcerated women via social media and social networks (Liamputtong, 2009; Robinson, 2014). This sampling strategy was employed due to COVID-19 measures in place at the time of fieldwork, which brought significant access limitations to research populations, especially in criminal justice contexts (Ministry of Justice & HMPPS, 2021). While the sampling

strategies employed, carry inherent risk of bias, and limitations to generalizability and replicability compared to randomized techniques, the sample represented a diversity of social locations and experiences, as discussed (Layder, 2013). A random and more comprehensive sample in future work would complement this exploratory study, in particular the inclusion of perspectives from women who have used Spice themselves while in prison and women who are currently incarcerated.

Interview guides were developed considering the intersection between events, their location and the embodied experience of a particular phenomenon. For example, the author asked each participant the same question 'Can you recall a moment in which you encountered Spice and can you tell me what happened?'. This question enabled participants to share a rich description of their embodied, spatial and temporal experience in relation to a specific Spice encounter. It was common for participants to return to the narrative question from the beginning of the interview in answering the questions that followed about views on motivations, challenges and harms associated with Spice that the author asked participants about, which suggests that the question provided an emotional and organisational reference point in participants' recollection of Spice related events (Brogaard, 1999). Questions about specific events were combined with questions that focused on practices, norms, and processes. Within-method triangulation is a qualitative research practice by which a topic is explored by 'means of invitations to narrate, focusing on experiences in concrete situations' (Flick, 2004, p. 179). In it, methodological approaches of semi-structured interviewing and narrative are systematically joined with the intention to explore the research issue through situational perspectives. This approach helped to understand how participants understood the phenomenon of Spice for themselves, in relation to women who used Spice and the wider context in which Spice use occurs. Interviews were transcribed in a two-step process, first by a professional transcription service and then by the author. The data analysis process followed feminist critical realist discourse researchers' analytical and methodological appreciation (Clegg, 2016; Sims-Schouten & Riley, 2019).

Findings

Theme 1: Gendered Stigma-Vulnerability and Embodied and Social Othering

This theme explores the gendered embodied and social othering of women who use Spice in prison. The research provides insight into how women who use Spice were described through language of embodied 'othering'. The descriptions reflect socio-political and cultural discourses about Spice users traced in the literature review, but these descriptions were gendered (Alexandrescu, 2020; Hutton, 2022). The following excerpt impactfully joins discourses expressing the stigma-vulnerability nexus as an embodied othering of women Spice users, with the gendered expectations of responsible, criminalized women (Alexandrescu & Spicer, 2023; Hannah-Moffat, 2010).

One participant described an incident that he overheard while a woman was intoxicated with Spice:

‘The best way I could describe it was an animal roaring. I said to everybody what was going on? And they mentioned this girl’s name, and I was in disbelief, thinking “hang on this girl was absolutely delightful.” She was a qualified nurse and [...] now this girl was like an animal and she was threatening to bite them. She was on all fours’ (Slate, HM Prison Substance Misuse Practitioner).

This woman was known to the practitioner as an incarcerated woman with a substance misuse history. The participant’s perception of her had been that she was a respectable, delightful woman. In analyzing this comment, attention is given to the language used to describe the woman as ‘roaring’, ‘like an animal’, ‘threatening to bite them’ and ‘on all fours’. The mostly visual depiction is noteworthy, since the participant had not personally witnessed the event described, but overheard it from a room nearby. Animalism was set in contrast with this woman’s usual demeanor as ‘absolutely delightful’. So was the mention of her feminine, respectable profession as ‘qualified nurse’.

Women under the influence of Spice were described to be found naked. In one of these instances a woman was described as strong and physically threatening, similar perhaps to how men who use Spice in prison have been depicted (Mason et al., 2022; Wheatley et al., 2015). Rose reflects: ‘after taking Spice, she got so much strength. She had stripped herself naked. They had locked her in a room and literally - just her trainers on her feet - she kicked off that bloody door’ (Rose, formerly incarcerated). Rose’s depiction of a woman’s nakedness can be contrasted with another example, where a woman was described as being naked. The other woman’s naked body was not described as a display of strength, but rather of shame, vulnerability and helplessness. Violet recalls: ‘Her pants were down her ankles and everything so rude naked on display. She was oblivious to the fact that her underwear was around her ankles, and everybody could see everything’ (Violet, formerly incarcerated).

The depiction of women’s bodies was associated with affective language, suggesting a range of associated emotions, including some degree of discomfort. The discomfort participants expressed when seeing women’s bodies in vulnerable situations is resonant of Martha Nussbaum’s observation of what the self-realization of ‘having an animal body’ means to those who discover it (Nussbaum, 2004, p. 74). It also resonates with Henriksen’s study in which participants depicted ‘female body displays, functions and failures’ (Henriksen, 2018, p. 439). These affective discourses suggest that female bodies of Spice users are constructed as deviant, offensive and in need of care and control. The need for intervention in these instances was justified based on attributes and behaviors of women who had taken Spice and who were described as ‘animal like’, ‘kicking doors’, possessing ‘superhuman strength’, ‘fully naked’ or ‘rude naked’. The discourses about women who use Spice were marked by an embodied ‘othering’ focusing on women’s outward behaviors or physical attributes (Fraser et al., 2017).

Perceptions about women who use Spice mirror cultural and socio-political imaginations that have framed Spice users through dehumanizing language. In the literature the embodied 'othering' has occurred through discursive constructions of Spice users as zombies, or the living dead (Alexandrescu, 2020; Hutton, 2022). This analysis demonstrates a distinctly gendered embodied othering that carries distinct stigma and expresses the vulnerability of women Spice users in these situations.

Along with embodied gendered stigma-vulnerability, there was social stigma-vulnerability in discourses about women Spice users. Specifically, women who use Spice were seen as socially different from the wider community of women within the prison. This was due to varying reasons. For example, Heather noticed that friends who used Spice were particularly sad. 'It was very sad for me to see people destroying themselves over Spice. It is a sad drug you know' (Heather, formerly incarcerated). And a practitioner explains: 'Spice users are by and large the lowest of the low, it is a status free drug, you're not threatening to other people. You are partly dehumanized by media narratives around Spice, so you end up being everyone else's victim' (Flint, External Consultant on Drug Trends).

There was a perception among participants, that one had to distinguish oneself from Spice users. Previously criminalized women might already have to navigate the label of being 'doubly damned', therefore they may express some hesitance to associate with women who used Spice while in prison (Lloyd, 1995). This is likely increased because Spice use is attached to distinct stigma (Blackman & Bradley, 2017). A practitioner explained that 'especially women in addition of other things do not want to be tarred with the same brush, because they see it as such a different kind of behavior to be involved with', because 'they are seen as quite desperate, and bottom of the pile' (Rochelle, HM Prisons Substance Misuse Team Leader). Spice stigma in women's prisons therefore reflects the hierarchy of drugs, whereby Spice is seen as more degrading compared to other drugs (Alexandrescu & Spicer, 2023; Bilgrei, 2016). The action of distancing oneself from social stigma can be seen as a way of claiming self-worth in response to the stigmatizing factors that have overshadowed many incarcerated women's lives. Discourses of distancing could be understood as a way of claiming personal desistance, by disassociating with the stigma attached to women who use Spice (Fraser et al., 2017). In an environment where women are required to overcome the stigmatizing processes linked to imprisonment, women who use Spice could be seen as particularly marginalized from opportunities to be redeemed through self-regulation and responsabilization.

Theme II: Gendered Stigma-Vulnerability and Gender Norm Conformity

Gender norm conformity is the extent to which an individual adheres to, or is seen to adhere to the roles and expectations linked to their gender. Women who commit to a sexualized appearance and demonstrate care of others, especially children, might be considered as conforming to feminine gender norms (Esteban-Gonzalo et al., 2020; Kellie et al., 2019). Criminalized women in the social sphere have often been

sexualized (Burke, 2009; Schemenauer, 2012). For instance, in contexts of drugs research, women have been objectified through typologies such as ‘junkie-whores’ (Belknap, 2010; Du Rose, 2015, p. 29). Other times, drug using women’s drug practices are scrutinized and held to a much higher standard compared to other groups of drug users (Moore et al., 2015). Women’s physical appearance when they had taken Spice was frequently framed as an expression of their non-conformity to gender norms. What this usually meant was that women were seen to stop objectifying their bodies. As this practitioner explains:

‘It is quite noticeable. Typically, the women take quite good care of their appearance and doing a face of make-up every day, hair washed and room tidy and things like that. When the Spice use becomes regular, that goes away. And they have kind of lost control of the basics’ (Rochelle, HM Prisons Substance Misuse Team Leader).

Women who used Spice stood out for not performing in gender-stereotypical ways. Physical attractiveness often serves as a marker of social status, categorizing individuals according to their adherence to dominant beauty standards. The institutional context of prisons often reinforces gendered expectations around physical appearance (Gorga, 2017). As observed by McKim, women’s drug treatment services may encourage feminized personal grooming to raise self-esteem (McKim, 2014). Women’s self-grooming practices were also discussed among participants in this study. Women who use Spice were seen to stop wearing makeup. Rochelle explains that during assessments with women who did not use Spice, ‘they often make comments about [women who use Spice]: “Oh, they look awful, they are crazy”’ (Rochelle, HM Prisons Substance Misuse Team Leader).

Women who used Spice were also less likely to be perceived as care givers, but rather in need of care. Gendered stigma-vulnerability was bound up with a narrative of infantilization, which was particularly prevalent among formerly incarcerated women. Specifically, women who had used Spice were described either as child-like or childish (Fraser, 2017; Taylor et al., 2016). Daisy described a woman on Spice in a way that implies disobedience: ‘She was not having any of it. She was, she was just behaving like a child. She was thrashing about, she was kicking, she was screaming ... And obviously she is the type that acts like a child’ (Daisy, formerly incarcerated). Daisy elaborated: ‘She was just throwing herself about ... she was behaving like a child, like she was actually drawing on the wall with her arms’ (Daisy, formerly incarcerated). This indicates that Daisy visualized a child on a tantrum, while situating it in a distressing moment in which the woman was drawing on the wall not with pencils, but with her own blood after self-harming while on Spice. Daisy described the woman as vulnerable in the midst of the chaos and disorder around her: ‘I noticed her eyes were very glazed over and she stared a lot. But she was very much childlike’ (Daisy, formerly incarcerated). It is unclear from this comment, if Daisy observed an internal contradiction in the woman between disobedience (‘behaving like a child’) and innocence (‘childlike’) or whether this was an unintentional choice

of emphasis, but the wider conversation suggests she was expressing a sense of confusion over this contradiction.

Violet described a woman she encountered on Spice as 'naughty'. However, contrary to Daisy, who seemed to suggest a lack of discipline from the prison, Violet sensed that the prison should not be punishing 'naughty' behavior.

'I don't understand why they allowed the problem [with Spice] to happen and then punish you for it rather than trying to prevent it ... and then punishing them for doing it, you know what I mean? You want to reward the child when the child is doing something good before they do something naughty' (Violet, formerly incarcerated).

Contrary to Violet, Daisy used the child analogy to describe a perceived failure of self-responsibilisation which is in line with the penal welfare model that individualizes recidivism and views punishment as the appropriate means for achieving rehabilitation (Fraser, 2017; Taylor et al., 2016). Violet located the responsibility in the prison's failure to adequately protect women from the negative impact of Spice and she refuted the idea that punishment is a justified means of achieving compliance. As a side note, it is also interesting that Heather called interventions offered to women who used Spice as 'extremely childish,' while her wider reflection makes clear she perceived the approach from the prison as insufficient in terms of lacking appropriate support:

'But a lot of the [interventions] just sounded extremely childish. [They say] 'If you did this, what do you think the outcome would be?' It sounded...I'm looking for the word – condescending' (Heather, formerly incarcerated).

Furthermore, Heather felt that practitioners were not specially trained to offer adequate support that would lead to abstinence: 'How can someone go to those lessons and within 20 min be in the bathroom smoking Spice? Clearly, it's not having a big impact on them' (Heather, formerly incarcerated). Heather's account demonstrates a wider perception of prison institutions' inadequacy to provide the level of support needed.

Discourses about mothers who used Spice were also bound up with gendered stigma-vulnerability. These discourses allowed for mothers to be described as being torn up over their separation from children, while simultaneously being experienced as indifferent to their children's needs: 'Without wanting to sound sexist, these women cannot wait to get back to their children... I hate it when [Spice users] will put Spice above their children...and the caring goes' (Slate, HM Prison Substance Misuse Practitioner). These seemingly incongruent ideas about women and their children demonstrate how discourses of 'good mothering' or 'hegemonic motherhood' can inform, and at times even overshadow professional care and perceptions about Spice using mothers (Nichols et al., 2021).

Discourses about mothers were embedded in prison officers' perceptions of substance involved mothers as undeserving, even while they were in hospital care after

suffering a Spice overdose, demonstrating the relentlessness of care expectations placed on mothers. Rose recalled a conversation she overheard from officers talking about a woman who had just been taken to hospital: ‘These officers were chatting “At the end of the day she caused it on herself. Look, she is a mum, no wonder why her four kids got taken into care” and stuff like that’ (Rose, formerly incarcerated). The conversation that Rose overheard, reflects that the provision of care by institutional representatives did not always extend to mothers, who were deemed unworthy of compassion. [Brown et al. \(2017\)](#) point out, depending on how the cultural trope of vulnerability is instrumentalized, varying degrees of deservedness are credited to those deemed too vulnerable. In the case of women who use Spice in prison, it seems that mothers were framed as undeserving, due to the stigma of not being perceived as a ‘good mother’, despite their vulnerability.

Conclusion: Beyond Gendered Stigma-Vulnerability

As Wincup and Stevens observe ‘drugs and people who use them have become objects on which to project blame and fear’, and Spice users are particularly vulnerable to such constructions due to socio-political and cultural narratives ([Wincup & Stevens, 2021](#), p. 1). Nested within a wider body of feminist and critical realist discourse analyses around drugs and imprisonment, this paper set out to explore ideological and discursive underpinnings of the gendered stigma-vulnerability nexus by analyzing how women who use Spice were perceived by participants in local contexts. The gendered lens generated greater understanding of how vulnerability and stigma as ‘concepts are politically deployed’ ([Alexandrescu & Spicer, 2023](#), p. 8). This served to scrutinize their conceptual ‘intersections and interactions’ in local contexts of practice, where they were inadvertently mobilized (*ibid*).

Two themes of gendered stigma-vulnerability were developed. The first theme focused on embodied othering of women Spice users, highlighting the language used to describe Spice encounters and the relational othering of women who use Spice in penal contexts. The second theme explored gender norm non-conformity looking at objectification and infantilization in particular to explore notions of deservedness and the tension between care and control. The discourses articulated by participants sit within much wider discussions around participants’ experiences with women who use Spice. These were overwhelmingly kind, compassionate, and relational. Alongside compassionate and personal discussions about women who use Spice and Spice harm, participants (practitioners and formerly incarcerated women alike) also drew upon socio-political and cultural discourses of gendered stigma-vulnerability.

To better understand why harmful discourses may have surfaced alongside compassion and advocacy, it is crucial to consider that criminal justice practitioners and formerly incarcerated women respectively navigate self-perceptions and experiences of societal stigma and vulnerability themselves. As with certain occupations, criminal justice practitioners must manage impression management and the stigma linked to ‘dirty work’ ([Charman, 2020](#); [Davis, 1984](#)). The concept of dirty work is now widely

applied to signify how those involved in occupations which might be perceived by society as degrading or undesirable due to the association with stigmatized people groups or practices. Practitioners might therefore navigate and distance themselves from the perceived or experienced moral, social or physical taint associated with what they do. These occupations are also linked with vulnerabilities and exposure to emotional and physical harm (Leese & Bell, 2021; Rudolfsson & Sinani, 2021).

Equally, criminology research has examined criminalized women's efforts to navigate their experiences of stigma and how this is managed by adopting a new desistance identity (Barr, 2019; Stone, 2016). Women in prison likely share experiences of vulnerability and stigma irrespective of drug use and these experiences will shape how the prison environment is experienced (Crewe et al., 2017). The practice of distancing oneself from stigma and vulnerability could be explored through a social identity perspective. However, this paper was interested in interrogating from a feminist critical realist discourse analytical perspective, how macro-level discourses of gendered stigma-vulnerability framed the sense-making and understanding of participants (Sims-Schouten & Riley, 2019).

Rather than remain at the analytical level of individual talk about and by people with individual and structural vulnerabilities, this research shows the power-knowledge of macro-level discourses, rooted in penal policy values and discourses (Garland, 2021; Pratt, 2007). Gendered stigma-vulnerability discourses need to be addressed foremost on the societal level where cultural and socio-political representations about criminalized women and people who use drugs are produced (Duke & Kolind, 2020). Ultimately, in order for society to move beyond gendered stigma-vulnerability discourses, an alternative set of discourses is needed, reflecting a different set of cultural and socio-political morals and values. While this proposal cannot be further explored within this paper, the evidence of the gendered stigma-vulnerability nexus demonstrates how views about women who use Spice in prison can be firmly anchored in prominent and long-running social policy debates and narratives about 'deserving' and 'undeserving' citizens (Brown, 2017).

Perceptions about women who use Spice in this study have mirrored cultural and socio-political imaginations that have framed male Spice users in dehumanizing ways (Alexandrescu, 2020; Hutton, 2022). However, the embodied and social othering of women Spice users is distinctly gendered. This is reflected in the physical- and social characterization of women Spice users which can be compared to cultural gender expectations about women's bodies and responsibilities in society. This analysis thus demonstrates distinctly gendered stigma-vulnerability discourses that are associated with women's Spice use in prison.

Women's prisons are a focal site of cohesion and contestation between welfarist provision (care) and punitive control (Brown, 2011; Garland, 2019; Ministry of Justice, 2018). Cultural- and socio-political discourses about criminalized women and people who use Spice can be harmful, as they may (inadvertently) perpetuate stigma and vulnerability in local contexts as this paper has shown. While criminalized women and drug users may share experiences of vulnerability and stigma, this paper highlights a

distinct nexus of gendered stigma-vulnerability in relation to Spice. This nexus is deeply entwined with gendered cultural expectations and power dynamics in institutional settings (McKim, 2014; Rowe, 2016). While penal contexts may increase the likelihood of such processes more generally, the application of the gendered stigma-vulnerability nexus has highlighted the distinct discursive processes of marginalization and isolation affecting women who use Spice in prison.

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Data Availability Statement

Requests for making data available should be directed at the author directly who will use their discretion to share anonymised versions of interview transcripts.

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Author Biography

Niki White qualitative research focusses on experiences of (gendered) vulnerabilities to harms as they intersect with imprisonment, drugs, and trauma. Niki is also interested in how vulnerability is constructed and operationalised in policy and practice contexts.