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Surviving the Landings: An Autoethnographic Account of Being a Gay Female Prison Officer (in an Adult Male Prison in England)

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ABSTRACT

Female correctional staff face multiple challenges when working in a male prison environment. Perceptions of competence and gendered divisions of labor are prevalent in the negotiated order of a prison. Sexuality is a dynamic that is irrelevant to the demands of a correctional officer yet a significant identity to be managed and negotiated in interactions with both colleagues and prisoners. This study adopts an auto ethnographic approach to highlight discrimination in prison officer occupational culture. Drawing upon personal narratives whilst working in an adult male prison in England, lived experiences of homophobia and sexism are presented to identify the challenges faced as a gay female prison officer. Themes of sexual objectification, homophobia and workplace incivility identify failings within the English prison service in supporting workplace diversity and inclusivity.

KEYWORDS

Gender; prison
officers; sexuality

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the intersectionality between gender and sexuality in the role of prison officer and provides illustrative examples from the author's personal experience of working in a closed adult male prison in England. The aim is to contribute to the understanding of how gay¹ female prison officers experience gender, sexuality and sexual objectification during interactions with colleagues and prisoners. Themes of homophobia, heteronormativity, chivalry, benevolent sexism, sexual objectification, microaggressions, perceived levels of competence and workplace incivility are explored. This article considers the utility of autoethnography in offering an "Insider perspective" on discrimination in the workplace and through use of personal narratives, highlights distinct inadequacies that exist within the prison service around diversity and inclusion.

Whilst there has been research conducted on female prison officers (see Zimmer, 1986; Britton, 2003; Wood, 2015; Bruhn, 2013; Burdett et al., 2018) there is a gap in knowledge around the intersectionality of gender and sexuality in gay female prison officers. Female homosexuality has been researched in the police force (Burke, 1994; Couto, 2014), the military (Sinclair, 2009) and

¹ The terms gay, lesbian and LGBTQ+ are used interchangeably during this paper depending upon the focus given within research. LGB and LBGT precede LGBTQ+ depending upon when research was conducted. The author of this paper identifies as a gay female.

firefighters (Wright, 2008) but there is no research around LGBTQ+² prison officers. Therefore, this paper contributes to understanding the tensions encountered and the resilience strategies adopted to working in a male prison environment. Sexuality and gender are both highly relevant to the lived experience of performing the role of prison officer, but also irrelevant to the completion of tasks that need to be done to meet prison service objectives.

The author worked at a category “B” male adult prison³ between 2003 and 2009. The methodological approach taken in this paper is a retrospective autoethnography, by presenting an account of the lived experience of being a gay female prison officer and drawing upon insider positioning and emotional recall through reengagement with data (Gariglio, 2018). Whilst acknowledging existing research around prison officer culture and gender, autoethnography and its component of emotional recall serves as intellectual resources to help to do prison research differently (Jewkes, 2012). Personal experience methods are said to offer a new and unique vantage point from which to contribute to social science by considering macro and micro linkages between structure and agency and their intersection with each other (Laslett, 1999, p. 392 in Wall, 2016, p. 1). The distinctions and similarities between analytic and evocative autoethnography will be expanded up and this paper argues that there can be a synthesis between both branches of autoethnography. This is done through simultaneously “maintaining a strong focus upon the researcher’s biographic and emotive self” (Wakeman, 2014, p. 705) and offering a more scholarly focus upon how the self is connected to a particular ethnographic context rather than merely the focus of it (Wall, 2016). This paper will engage with analytic issues rather than just telling stories (Gariglio, 2018). This synthesis allows for what Donovan (2011) identifies as the production of academically and artistically rigorous texts. This paper draws heavily upon the work of Zempi (2017), who adopted the Muslim veil to covertly explore the lived experience of discrimination from an autoethnographic perspective. The next section will present existing research around gender, sexuality and workplace culture.

SEXUALITY/IDENTITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Burke (1994, p. 189) found that heterosexuality was dominant in the police force and LBG police officers represented a “serious kind of contamination and a threat to the integrity of the British Police Service.” People with an open non-heterosexual orientation at work reported discrimination and prejudice from across the police force, including derogatory discourse, professional humiliation, physical violence and a refusal from other officers to work in close proximity to LGB officers (Burke, 1994). Influential work by Scarman (1981) and Macpherson (1999) (cited in Jones & Williams, 2015) collectively highlighted the failings of the police as an institution, in accommodating and reflecting social differences as a result of their monolithic and antiquated practices.

Burke (1994) identified the double life strategies adopted by LGB officers, through an intentional disguising of sexual orientation and a strict, premeditated performance of heterosexuality throughout their careers. However, the emergence of organizations to support LGBTQ+ prison

² LGBTQ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning. These terms are used to describe a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity (www.gaycenter.org).

³ Category ‘B’ prisons are either local or training prisons. Local prisons house prisoners that are taken directly from court in the local area (sentenced or on remand), and training prisons hold long-term and high-security prisoners. (from <https://prisonjobs.blog.gov.uk/your-a-d-guide-on-prison-categories/>).

officers in England and Wales, for example, GALIPS⁴ (Gays and Lesbians In the Prison Service, in England and Wales) and Pride in Prison and probation (PIPS)⁵ highlight an orientation toward workplace inclusivity and diversity.

Rengers et al. (2019) explored the lived experiences of gay and lesbian humanitarian aid workers providing aid for Medicine Sans Frontier. They found that disclosure of sexual identity is context dependent and has a front stage and back stage element to it. Their research participants were “out of the closet” in the office but when they entered the field of providing humanitarian aid, they hid their sexuality. Rengers et al. (2019) attribute this to different country contexts, which leads to different decisions concerning self-disclosure, which demonstrates the importance of careful sexual identity management. Crawley’s (2004) research around the public and private lives of prison officers also illustrate front and back stage display of self, where identity is constantly managing and negotiated.

COMING OUT AT WORK

Denissen and Saguy (2014) state that lesbians in the building trade engage in complex risk assessments before coming out at work to their colleagues. Perceptions of organizational culture affect gay and lesbian workers’ confidence around being open about their sexuality (Colgan et al., 2006 in Wright, 2013). Wood (2015) found that lesbian officers perceived that they were overlooked for promotion because of their sexuality. However, Frank (2001 in Wright, 2013) argues that many lesbian workers in male-dominated occupations find greater inclusivity than heterosexual women and may find greater levels of acceptance and comfort with male colleagues, once the possibility of a sexual relationship has been removed. Indeed, Wright (2008) argues that lesbians are often accepted into masculine cultures as “one of the lads.” This aligns with Burke (1994) who argues that lesbian sexual orientations offer a waiver from social pressures to enact femininity.

Whilst this paper focuses upon female homosexuality and therefore a discussion of male sexuality is beyond the scope provided, it is important to identify how unprogressive the prison service can actually be in relation to respecting and celebrating diversity, despite the implementation of groups to support officers. In 2017, a male officer disclosed his bisexuality to colleagues at HMP Woodhill (In England) and endured 2 years of bullying around his disclosure, resulting in an employment tribunal. At the time of writing) the ex-officer was due to receive a landmark settlement from the Ministry of Justice, due to PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) from being bullied in the workplace (Taylor, 2019). Di Marco et al. (2018) identify that through coming out, employees can experience workplace incivility through ostracism, which is an omission of actions to involve members when it is considered appropriate according to social norm. This is evidenced through the incident at HMP Woodhill. This incident far exceeded workplace incivility and is an example of blatant homophobic bullying around sexual orientation.

⁴ GALIPS (Gays and Lesbians in the Prison Service) (more information can be found here <https://www.prisonofficers.org.uk/viewtopic.php?t=208>).

⁵ PIPS (Pride in Prison and Probation) More information can be found here: <https://prisonjobs.blog.gov.uk/2019/07/08/openlylgbti-in-the-prison-service-celebrating-pride/>.

GENDER, PERCEIVED COMPETENCE AND PRISON ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

This section highlights the role of chivalrous attitudes toward female prison officers from both male colleagues and male prisoners. Crawley (2004) suggested that male officers look to sexualize and protect female prison officers, suggesting that they are perceived to be less naturally capable than men of performing the prison officer role. However, female officers bring unique qualities to the role of prison officer and can diffuse tension between aggressive male officers and prisoners, which is supported in policing also (Lonsway, 2000). Female officers employ verbal de-escalation skills during heightened violent and aggressive incidents, which can have a calming effect on the prisoner being dealt with (Zimmer, 1986). Zimmer (1986) concludes that the macho imperatives which characterize male-male relationships are absent with female officers and compliance is often achieved without resorting to physical force. Female officers however are afforded fewer opportunities than male colleagues to build skills or gain confidence when controlling violent prisoners in threatening situations (Zimmer, 1986). Indeed, Lawrence and Mahan (1998) identified male officers with the longest tenure of experience as being the most prone to hold negative views and opinions of the appropriateness of female officers working in male institutions. Burdett et al. (2018) found that sexism, hostility, paternalism and social alienation are maintained and reinforced in a prison environment. They state that female officers need to adopt coping strategies to build resilience in a highly gendered, masculine defined culture (Burdett et al., 2018).

Crewe (2006) identified that female prison officers are seen by male prisoners as sexual objects and deemed to be lesser attractive women who have chosen this role because they enjoy being desired. However, prisoners do demonstrate protective attitudes toward the “weaker sex” (Crewe, 2006). Crewe (2006) also found that older and married prisoners were most likely to regard female officers as worthy of respect in a way not extended to male officers. Sabo et al. (2001, p. 7) argue that prison culture “breathes masculine toughness and insensitivity and it impugns softness, caring and femininity.” Prisoners are not averse to taking matters into their own hands if they feel a female officer has been treated harshly (Zimmer, 1986). Crewe (2006) states that for a large number of prisoners, assessments of female officers were not pre-determined by essentialist assumptions about femininity or sexuality. Interpersonal treatment and interest in them were deemed more important, and more often provided by female officers than male officers. Procedural legitimacy is identified as an important contributor to the social order of a prison and prisoners who feel they are treated with respect, neutrality and consistency are more likely to comply with the prison regime (Jackson et al., 2010). Zimmer (1986) argued that female officers have social worker orientations compared to male colleagues, placing value on listening to prisoner’s personal problems, which Tait (2011) supports in her work around gendered approaches to caring for prisoners. This is a precarious position however because to care too much for prisoners is as detrimental as caring *too little*. In contrast, Murphy et al. (2007), who have all served time themselves as prisoners, found that during their custodial sentences, female officers adopted hyper masculine and aggressive personas, rather than nurturing and caring ones.

Female officers serve to soften the harsh prison environment and produce a normalizing experience for male prisoners in a hyper masculine-dominated environment (Newbold, 2005). Conversely, this can serve to remind male prisoners of “what they are missing,” as they are deprived of heterosexual

relationships (Sykes, 1958) and indeed many men are in prison for crimes against women, which might serve to antagonize them further. Often the presence of female authority figures had a provocative impact upon the sexual and emotional state of some prisoners (Zimmer, 1986; Richards et al., 2002). However, Crewe (2006) states that prisoners who are submissive to female officers on the basis of sexual desire or chivalry are perceived as weak or corrupted, having abandoned good judgment and are not following what it means to be a prisoner.

It is important to note that in the current penal climate, female prison officers are just as likely as male officers to be assaulted by male prisoners, as the inmate code of conduct (Sykes, 1958) around chivalry is changing. Former chief executive of HMPPS⁶ Michael Spurr stated that gender equality is the reason why more female officers are assaulted by male prisoners, identifying the disappearance of long-standing traditions, norms and values amongst prisoners. The impact of austerity on staffing levels and staff competence have impacted the increasing number of assaults on female officers (see Ismail, 2019; Hymas, 2018).

INTERSECTIONALITY OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

Couto (2014) argues that the intersectionality of gender and sexual orientation for LGBTQ female police officers exposes them to challenges regarding both their gender and sexual orientation, for example, workplace harassment and conformity to masculine norms. Couto's work highlights the challenges which LGBTQ female officers face in finding inclusivity and support in the pursuit of finding their authentic self, legitimacy and respect as officers.

Intersectionality of gender and sexuality has been researched on females working in the construction industry (see Dennisen & Saguy, 2014; Wright, 2013). Findings suggest that male colleagues aim to establish women's sexual availability, with a readiness to label them as "dykes" if they appear to be unavailable (Paap, 2006). Paap's (2006) research explores the strategies that women adopt in presenting selves in relation to conceptions of masculinity and femininity and raises questions around the extent to which lesbians may avoid unwanted sexual attention once their sexuality is known. However, labeling women as lesbian (regardless of their actual sexual orientation) makes them less of a threat to ideologies of masculinity (Paap, 2006). Interestingly, Wright (2013) explores how women express gender and sexuality through appearances at work and how conceptions of masculinity and femininity are entwined with questions of sexuality. In the prison service appearance is homogenized through wearing a uniform, but other aspects of appearance, for example, hair style/length and jewelry can influence perceptions of sexuality and levels of femininity. Lesbians adopt a variety of gender presentations (Moore, 2006). Some are closely related to femininity, others are more closely related to masculinity and some combine elements of both. Appearance is key to treatment in the workplace and assumptions are made around body shape and appearance. Dennisen and Saguy (2014) identify the resilience strategies developed by tradeswomen, which are influenced by the intersection of sexual identity, gender presentation and body size. Androgyny and muscular appearance are synonymous with labelling of lesbians in the prison service, regardless of actual sexual orientation.

⁶ Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service is an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice responsible for the correctional services in England and Wales.

The next section will present an overview of and justification for the method used in this research, which is retrospective autoethnography. Combining analytic and evocative approaches, this paper supports synthesis between two often mutually hostile approaches (Donovan, 2011). The various theoretical and conceptual resources that have been used to make the data analytic are presented. Autoethnographic data is presented in the form of extracts from the journal kept by the author when serving as a prison officer. Extracts have been purposively selected to illustrate key themes around sexuality, gender and workplace discrimination.

METHODOLOGY

This section will outline autoethnography (AE) and discuss the utility of synthesizing evocative and analytic AE to explore the lived experience of gender and sexuality based discrimination within a prison setting. This section will detail the process of data collection and analysis, reflecting upon both the strengths and limitations of using AE as a method of critically analyzing personal experiences.

Autoethnography (AE)

According to Wall (2006), AE is a qualitative research method allowing the author to write in a highly personalized style, drawing upon their own particular experiences to extend understanding about a societal phenomenon. AE places the self as researcher and/or narrator within a social context exploring the relationship between the researcher's embodied experience, culture and cultural practices (Gariglio, 2018), with a view to offering a deeper understanding of it. AE is the critical analysis of lived experience (Ellis et al., 2011a), reflecting upon the self and the actions and reactions undergone during situated lives. Spry (2001, p. 710) defines AE as "a self-narrative that critiques the situatedness of self with others" and Ellis et al. (2011b, p. 274) state that AE "accommodates subjectivity, emotionality and the researcher's influence on research" rather than hiding from these matters or assuming that they do not exist.

AE is predominantly conceptualized as either evocative or analytic. However, these two strands of AE can be fused together to promote a greater understanding of a particular phenomenon. "Evocative" AE is a form of "writing lives and telling stories" (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) and I have drawn up on this aspect of AE to enhance understanding of my vulnerability through personal stories that demonstrate the oppressions that take place within a prison. This methodological approach allows for embodied experiences of homophobia and sexism from an informed subject position as a gay female prison officer. "Analytic" AE, grounded in Symbolic Interactionist epistemological assumptions (Gariglio, 2018), is where self and society are interconnected. This lens enhances the rigor and credibility of the account presented. Anderson's analytic AE (2006) allows for a convergence between personal experience and a commitment to theoretical analysis, allowing for analysis of data created by the self. Chang (2008, p. 51) supports Anderson's analytic AE by asserting that "mere self-exposure without profound cultural analysis and interpretation leaves... writing at the level of descriptive autobiography or memoir." Boylorn and Orbe (2014, p. 13) identify the connection between autoethnography and intersectionality, where cultural and social phenomena are used to write about personal experience from a racial, classed, gendered and sexed positionality,

to identify the distinctions between the world viewed by the researcher and the world viewed by others. The value of this approach is therefore important for illuminating phenomena that is hard to reach through traditional qualitative research methods.

As Nowakowski (2016, p. 1617) argues, retrospective AE offers a “critical reflection on lived experience rather than planned research activity,” which aligns with the approach taken here. The focus was upon multiple dimensions of personal biography, and use of a reflective journal kept as a prison officer allowed for critical reflection of other prison officer research, to either consolidate or challenge the personal experiences of the author. AE questions the dominant scientific paradigm and allows for other ways of knowing through sharing unique, subjective and evocative stories of experience that contribute to our understanding of the social world (Wall, 2006 in Zempi, 2017). Contreras (2013 in Wakeman, 2014) identifies what he calls a “standpoint crisis,” which is the conflict between the desire to present a solid and rigorous academic contribution and the need to be honest in how biography influences research and theory. This tension is important to highlight when presenting retrospective accounts which are highly evocative and also claim to be analytic, which is the method used within this research (see also Zempi, 2017).

Using AE in Criminological Research: Insider Positioning

I am a gay female ex-prison officer with 6 years’ experience in an adult male prison (in England), which positions me as having “insider” knowledge about the occupational culture of prisons. Hayfield and Huxley (2015 in Zempi, 2017) state that outsiders cannot understand or represent accurately the experiences of their participants, which is important if research is conducted around oppression, marginalization or “other” communities. However, it is important to note several things. There are several points to make here. Firstly, according to Wakeman (2014) “experience” does not directly equal “expertise.” Whilst there is a lack of ex-prison officer research around occupational culture, gender and sexuality, the author does not claim ultimate authority; rather an opportunity to present an analytic account of data about self in relation to working within a prison. Much criminological research presents prison analysis in the form of inhuman data according to Bosworth et al. (2005), so the opportunity to present the lived experience of a gay female prison officer through a first-hand reflexive account of the self contributes to existing literature on gender and sexuality in a prison environment. Zempi (2017) uses AE to explore victimization through the wearing of a Muslim veil in public as part of her research. The author concludes that AE studies on victimization are extremely novel in criminological research and this paper aligns with her methodological approach in providing an insight into discrimination faced within a prison context. Wakeman (2014) suggests that prior involvement in the various processes of criminal justice provides an enhanced heuristic perspective that criminologists should take heed of. Analytic autoethnography is not an exercise in narcissistic self-absorbed reflection and the intention of this paper is to convey the dynamics at play surrounding gender and sexuality in a masculine culture, through engaging with current prison sociological literature to contextualize personal experiences.

Secondly, the researcher left the prison service in 2009 so “insider positioning” is partially relevant to today’s prison climate. Accounts presented by the author are subjective and relevant to a particular time, space and context and not representative of all gay female prison officer’s experiences. Whilst the reflections in this account present valid analytic observations at the time of capture, working practices have changed in the prison service. I left the service in 2009 and the

Equality Act 2010⁷ (for example) was introduced post departure, so the experiences presented in this paper may not have unfolded in the way that they did, given recent legislation supporting discrimination in the workplace.

Jewkes (2012) identifies how prison research can be done differently through drawing upon autoethnography and emotion as intellectual resources. However, as Wakeman (2014) articulates, both Sparks) and Jewkes (in Wakeman, 2014) experienced a gap of multiple years between the autobiographical events unfolding and presentation as research, because of a trepidation around accusations of self-absorption. There is also a gap of multiple years for me in experiencing these events and then writing about them from an auto ethnographic perspective, but not for the reasons outlined above. Simply put, the opportunity did not arise until I was established within an academic environment. Accomplishment of social sciences provided me with both the confidence and critical insights to make sense of my experiences for an academic audience.

Researcher subjectivities and positionalities can enrich ethnographic accounts of the prison, as demonstrated by Phillips and Earle (2010). The authors present a reflexive interrogation of their prisoner identities, in which their own biographies, identities and memories framed their study retrospectively (in Jewkes, 2012). However, Newbold et al. (2014) argue that subjective interpretation and an over-reliance on personal anecdote can endanger the credibility of research. Newbold et al. (2014) further argue that convict criminologists (a movement of ex-prisoners who have progressed into academia) have to put aside their prejudices, bitterness and resentments so that it does not contaminate the credibility of their research. This paper however argues in opposition to this, as the methodological orientation adopted allows for a deep exploration of the impact of negative emotions experienced as a result of discrimination. These emotions remain with the author 10 years after leaving the service. The author is aware that these experiences are located in a specific time, space and place (between 2003 and 2009 at a category “B” male adult prison in England and Wales) and are therefore not representative of all gay female prison officer experiences. They are not meant to be. The current academic literature to date on prison officers has largely been written by “outsider” academics, not former officers, so this paper seeks to offer an original contribution through autoethnography.

It is important to note the inclusion of obscene language (swearing) in the narratives, which is an accurate representation of methods of communicating in a prison environment. According to Baruch et al. (2017) swearing can lead to positive outcomes at the individual, interpersonal and group levels, provide stress-relief, enrich communication and socialization, as well as being a confrontational method of communication. This paper demonstrates both aspects of this mode of communication and swearing is an integral component of the narratives provided. Wakefield (2014 in Zempi, 2017) states that AE can provide a sound epistemic platform upon which meaningful challenges to prevailing theories of criminological subjects can be built, and a synthesis between evocative, analytic and retrospective AE seeks to contribute new knowledge around the complexities of the prison officer role.

⁷ The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society. It replaced previous anti-discrimination laws with a single Act, making the law easier to understand and strengthening protection in some situations (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>).

DATA

During 6 years of employment a detailed journal was kept, documenting key events, observations and conversations that were pertinent around gender, sexuality, violence, humor and prison officer occupational culture more broadly. This gave a series of reflections to work from, although as stated already, I was unaware that at the time of recording my interactions they would be reproduced through academic writing. The original intention was to write an autobiographical account of being a female prison officer for a “lay audience,” aligning with several publications to date written by prison officers. There are a range of popular nonacademic autobiographical accounts written by (mostly male) ex-prison officers (see Thompson, 2008; Samworth, 2018 for example), so a gay female perspective is a hidden narrative even within popular culture. Prison officer biographies are accessible to masses in the popular culture genre and expose the dramatic, exciting and largely violent aspects of the hidden prison world. It was upon reading one such book “Screwed” (Thompson, 2008) that I realized there was an opportunity to present my story, to compliment the array of highly masculinized views of the prison officer role. Making sense of discrimination and writing about these experiences was therapeutic and helped to cope with the stress of the job. This reflective journal serves as the data set for autoethnographic writing on prison officers. As stated already, I was not a researcher at the time of writing. However, transitioning into academia I realized that there are niche opportunities as a “pracademic” (ex-practitioner academic) to use these personal narratives in academic writing and criminology teaching. The original data was revisited using the methodological approach of retrospective autoethnography, drawing upon both evocative and analytic principles. Knowledge of penological and sociological literature on prisons and prison officer culture allowed for depth to be added to these experiences to make the data ready for analysis. Whilst the positive paradigm refutes methodologies such as AE, this account is valid, reliable and trustworthy through application of AE as a lens through which to make sense of the lived experiences around gender and sexuality. Ellis (2009 in Jewkes, 2012) asks why does social science have to be written in a way that makes detailed lived experience secondary to abstraction and statistical data. Zempi’s (2017) work is of relevance here in defending criticism from more traditional methodologies on the basis that these do not allow for first-hand accounts of experiencing victimization and oppression.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data set was a collection of interactions and memories recorded in journal format from 6 years served as a prison officer (between 2003 and 2009). Often ethnographers write about epiphanies and place special emphasis on memories and emotions long after the given event has transpired (Ellis et al., 2011 in Worley, 2016). It was necessary to develop an analytical framework to code sections and generate themes that addressed the particular research focus whilst discarding other memories/stories that did not align with this focus. Whilst use of memory recall is not without criticism, each individual experience deemed relevant in the journal was relived, recalling the specifics of each interaction in terms of context, interpersonal dynamics and emotions. The reflective journal was updated to make these experiences more robust for analysis. I am a criminology lecturer and narratives/memories included in this AE piece are embedded into lecture content that I deliver to undergraduate and postgraduate students studying prison, punishment, rehabilitation and also wider criminological modules. In his memoirs of a guard research, Worley

(2016) identifies the tensions around proximity, objectivity and immersion in the culture as both a prison officer and researcher. His autoethnography looks both inwardly at his own personal experiences as relevant, as well as focusing upon the wider prison culture (Worley, 2016), which has helped to synthesize the dimensions of this autoethnography.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a “theme” captures something important in the data in relation to the research focus, which in this paper relates to how sexuality and gender are experienced as a gay female prison officer. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model was used as a systematic approach to ensure academic rigor during analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) identify familiarity with a data set as the initial step in thematic analysis (TA). However, an intimate familiarity with the data was already held and as I regularly draw upon these personal experiences in my academic teaching. Using the stages of the model, gender and sexuality were the initial overarching themes. Deductive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify themes that I expected to find within the data to support the research focus. Symbolic interactionism largely guided the framing of key themes, as all personal experiences are grounded in interaction with prisoners, prison officers and senior management. Broader sociological constructions including Goffman’s (1959) “presentation of self” and “impression management,” heteronormative prison officer occupational culture, institutional homophobia, microaggression, workplace incivility and chivalry were used to code and organize narratives into meaningful sections. In addition, Syke’s (1958) pains of imprisonment, particularly deprivation of heterosexual relationships is drawn upon to theorize sexual objectification from prisoners. The themes were shaped by extant literature on these topics and helped me to explore the relationships of the sub-themes in the context of gender and sexuality in the prison as a workplace. The findings, therefore, offer critical insight into discrimination and identity in a broader social context.

ETHICS

At the time of journal recordings, I did not identify as a researcher. I was a prison officer who sought to record and diarize my experiences. Reflections were recorded covertly, in the sense that they were for my own personal use. Nobody in the prison service knew about my journal. It was therefore not relevant at the time to establish boundaries around informed consent. As a result, I have been sensitive in maintaining the anonymity of all person’s involvement in the writing of this paper. The interactions outlined in this paper would have happened organically anyway through my daily work interactions. Through placing myself 10 years later as the subject of inquiry, I do not feel that any ethical boundaries have been transversed. However, I am sensitive to the ethical boundaries relating to covert observations. Data collection and data analysis were conducted 10 years apart and whilst I keep in touch with many former colleagues, none of the people featured in this paper fit into this category. This makes the subject of relational ethics justifiable as ties were severed with these people when I left the service.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Sexual Objectification From Staff and Prisoners

It is evident from this following experience that prisoners like to force their masculinity upon female prison officers, asserting a level of masculinity that is intentionally threatening (Crewe, 2006). Prison deprives of heterosexual relationships (Sykes, 1958) and male prisoners use opportunities with female staff to express their virility and masculinity. In reality, unless they are engaging in sexual relations with other prisoners, prisoners are in a state of involuntary celibacy. The prisoner is "rejected, impoverished, and figuratively castrated" (Sykes & Messinger, 1960), which may pose profound threats to their personality or sense of personal worth (Sykes, 1958).

The first time I worked on visits I experienced intense humiliation from the prisoners. We collect the prisoners from the wing and escort them to the visits hall. At the back of the hall, we have to rub down search them to make sure they are not carrying any contraband. It was a small space and there were 20 prisoners and me, and I had to take each prisoner in turn, search their upper body, then the waist band of their trousers and then their legs and arses. I learnt from day one that some prisoners enjoy being touched by a female officer and they like showing off to their mates, making inappropriate comments. On my first day, as I was crouched in front of one prisoner, searching him, he made the sexual reference of "while you're down there love". I had 20 pairs of eyes on me and I felt really intimidated. Straight out of training college, I didn't really know what to say. I could feel my face going red and knew that I was letting the cons know that I was intimidated. Same encounter, one of the cons said "miss, is it true that you like women?" Again, I didn't know how to reply. He said to his mates "I'll turn her straight lads". This was a massive reality check for me and over time I knew that I would harden up to comments like these, but it was going to be a steep learning curve and I felt really vulnerable.

In this instance, male (heterosexual) identity is threatened by the realization that a female officer may be in a same-sex relationship (and therefore engaging in sexual activity with a female, of which they are deprived). This prisoner attempted to compensate through hypermasculine behavior in front of peers, as proof of manhood. Men assert masculinity using the "coinage of women" (Cockburn, 1983) to impress others, and women become a "proving ground" for men to demonstrate their masculinity (Paap, 2006). This is certainly what my experience depicts. Crewe (2006, p. 403) found that female staff become "an outlet for fantasies of sexual contact and conquest." Close proximity to prisoners has been identified as a source of stress for prison officers (Bezerra et al., 2016) but this is something that gets routinized over time, pushed to the subconscious with a level of detachment. Officers may soon become desensitized to the impact of sexual innuendo, (I certainly did) but it is a daunting experience as a new officer, with little armory to protect self from humiliation.

The next experience identifies gender, power relations, prison officer humor and rank status in a male prison environment

Today I was on visits and I was the only female officer working here. A prisoner had been sent some filthy (explicit) pictures of his partner and we needed to hand them back to her. I came back from lunch to find the officers having a 'very close look' at the pictures, making inappropriate sexual comments about this woman. I was drawn into this conversation when I didn't really want to be, and the officers held up the graphic images and asked me if I would "do her". This made me feel awkward

and I didn't really know what to say. On the one hand they appeared to be comfortable with my sexuality, but one took it too far and said that he would love to watch. What the fuck! I could feel myself going red and getting really embarrassed. These weren't young good-looking guys, some of them would be of a similar age to my dad. I was told by the senior officer to return the photos to the woman on table X. As I walked over to her I could feel all eyes on me. They were clearly enjoying my discomfort. As a junior screw I had no choice but to follow orders. In my naivete, I actually had this conversation with her. I showed her the pictures and asked her "is this you", to which she looked embarrassed and said it was. Using humour to cope with awkwardness, I actually said "oh, I nearly didn't recognise you with your clothes on". "She saw the funny side, as did my colleagues, who were pissing themselves laughing at the front desk. But it made me feel awkward".

Sexual objectification is an integral part of masculine prison culture (Crewe, 2006). Regardless of the explicit nature of the photographs, they were only meant for the eyes of the prisoner. To have four male prison officers explicitly scrutinizing the level of sexualisation made for an uneasy encounter. Whilst somebody had to hand the photographs back, as the only female officer on duty in visits I felt there was an element of humiliation and power in making me take responsibility for this. Conversely, there was a collusive element as my colleagues treated me as "one of the lads" (see Burdett et al., 2018), which suggested a level of acceptance around sexuality. Inclusion as a lesbian prompts subjection to the rough and demeaning talk that characterizes many male interactions (Denissen, 2010), and inclusion in a misogynistic work culture (Denissen & Saguy, 2014) which is evident here. Humor is important in prisons and is an institutionalized part of prison life (Nielsen, 2011) However, it can foster both collaboration and inclusion, yet collusion and exclusion alongside friendliness and antagonism (Nielsen, 2011). Inclusive humor impacts less upon self-identity than humor that places self as the source of the joke. The context around this incident is confusing because to be the object of humor, yet to be included in a sexualized conversation, placed me in a very liminal position (Van Gennep, 1960).

The next extract illustrates hyper masculine aggressive behavior and sexual objectification. Prisoners have all day to think of ways to wind the staff up and make their lives difficult, through "playing mind games" (McDermott & King, 1988). One of the popular ways to do this is through intimidation, for example, invasion of personal space, looking female officers "up and down" and making inappropriate and sexualized remarks about their appearance. One of the most poignant experiences to illustrate this is as follows:

I'd been in the job about 6 months and there was this con on my landing who made it a daily objective to get right in my personal space and try to intimidate me. He always said I looked sexy in my uniform. Male fantasy. He did this in a way that was actually more charismatic and less aggressive, but the subtle undertones were there. He saw me as bait. I used to call him 'Mr Curriculum Vitae' (which went right over his head) because every time I said 'hello' to him, he used to say "do you know how many banks I've robbed? Do you know how many guns I own?" to which I replied "I only asked you how you were, and to be honest, I'm not really that fucking interested!" This went on for a period of months and I refused to rise to it, although it was very stressful to have to keep my wits about me every day. One day, he was stood outside of his cell, sulking. I went up and asked him what was wrong. I actually did care about the welfare of the prisoners on my landing. He said "it's just not working, this me trying to wind you up Miss Nixon. Can you just let me in my cell please?" I even got manners! Result! He knew his place and I had stood my ground. A few weeks later, his cell mate put the bell on and I went to answer. Mr CV had taken his top off and was dominating the conversation,

taking attention away from his cell mate who wanted to ask me something. Mr CV was heavily tattooed, strong body and he was flaunting it at me behind his cell door. I looked at his tattoos and said “thanks for reminding me, I need to get my nieces a new colouring book for their birthday!”. His cell mate thought this was hilarious, as did I. To be fair, Mr CV saw the funny side and with no malice or aggression, he just said “fuck off you cunt”. I didn’t take it as malice. We were all laughing. In fact, keeping him at arm’s length always, he became someone who looked out for me on the landings.

Denissen and Saguy (2013) argue that those who refuse to be sexually objectified may find themselves the target of open hostility. I agree with this to an extent during prisoner interactions. This prisoner constantly tried to undermine my authority through inappropriate behavior and used sexual language toward me, but we can see the change in his approach when he saw that it was having no impact. Worley (2016) highlights how staff prisoner interactions become normalized and can escalate toward boundary violations, which he refers to as “crossing over.” Some offenders are extremely adept at breaking down the power differentials and establishing inappropriate relationships with staff (Worley, 2016). The above example demonstrates the vigilance required to keep relationships with prisoners professional and within acceptable boundaries, even if the above incident exhibits profanity toward me. Language and swearing is part of prison culture and generates shared meanings between prisoners and staff, providing that it does not cross a threshold of unacceptability. The language used by the prisoner (the “C” word) did not cross any lines for me as I had withheld a professional distance during his attempts at intimidation and accepted this was the way he communicated with others. Interestingly, once prison officers stand up to prisoners and assert their authority in a way that is perceived as appropriate (in my experience anyway), prisoners who were previously troublesome can be the best allies for officers (see Crewe et al., 2014 for an overview of staff prisoner relationships). However, when interacting with colleagues there was rarely any overt hostility but rather more subtler forms of banter and inappropriateness.

“Playing It Straight on the Landings”—Presentation of Self and Dual Identity

Sabharwal et al., (2018) research found that LGBT employees expressed a desire to hide their identity to avoid the stigma of being labeled LGBT. However, this was not an issue for me when working with colleagues, only the prisoners. Drawing upon the work of Rengers et al. (2019), having a dual sexual identity and having to constantly renegotiate sexual identity with different audiences proved to be stressful. Denial of self and adopting a false sexual identity consumed significant periods of time as I defended myself against aggressive homophobic remarks. “Presentation of self” and “impression management” (Goffman, 1959) on the landings became a survival strategy to cope in this environment and a heterosexual identity was preferred as a tool to cope with being in a hypersexualised environment.

It occurred to me straight away that prisoners have a natural curiosity for the private lives of prison officers, and sexuality/sexual conduct is one of the popular topics of conversation aimed at new staff who are learning to be assertive and stand their ground. It’s a way of intimidating and trying to break them down. I was labelled a ‘lesbian’ on day one, but rather than standing my ground and confirming this to the prisoners, I denied it. Why? Because I felt that in a masculine and heterosexist place like a prison, I would get an easier ride from the cons. I knew from day one though that I had a battle on my hands, for several reasons. I lived close to the jail, walked home with my girlfriend and was seen about town with her, holding hands. I even had one of them (ex-con) living on my road. Prisoners who are in and out of the nick all the time would bring with them a new level of knowledge about my

sexual identity. It was a difficult time for me, as insults were bandied around about my sexual identity, every time I used the word “no”, which was quite a lot. Over time, when the cons got to know me and knew my work ethic, my sexuality became less relevant as they learnt to trust me. One prisoner even said that to me, which was nice, although slightly patronising. One day a con called me a “fucking dyke”. I snapped and replied “Yeah, so what, does it change the way that I open and close a cell door, or hand out a toilet roll, which is what I spent most of my fucking day doing!” To my amazement, he started laughing, shrugged his shoulders and said “guess not!”

Denissen and Saguy (2014, p. 385) identify perceived risk toward coming out, falling on a continuum from “playing it straight,” in which sexual orientation is hidden, to fully “coming out.” It is interesting how different interactions yielded different points on the continuum in my role as prison officer. Crewe (2006) suggests that the insinuation around lesbian prison officers is that they dislike men. To keep the prisoners on side makes for an easier time as an officer on the landings and this influenced the decision to conceal my sexual identity at first; over time it became less important to most of the prisoners as they learnt to trust my integrity and my commitment to procedural legitimacy. However, I was placed in a “no-win situation” and either display of sexual identity resulted in sexual objectification from the prisoners. In a prison environment, institutional heterosexism and heteronormative culture prevail. In agreement with Reimann (2001 in Denissen & Saguy, 2014) many lesbians adopted a hybrid strategy through selective revelation of sexual orientation in specific contexts.

WORKPLACE INCIVILITY AND STEREOTYPING

Zurbrugg and Miner (2016) identify workplace incivility as covert and subtle forms of workplace discrimination toward members of oppressed social groups. Incivility theory is defined as a low intensity deviant workplace behavior with an ambiguous intent to harm (Anderson & Pearson, 1999). The following extract depicts how sexual identity as a gay female officer was used to categorize and stereotype, rather than the occupational identity I held as a prison officer

I was going about my landing officer duties when I heard one of the female governors shout “Nicky, Nicky” (names changed) and I thought that was strange because I hadn’t seen Nicky today. Nicky was also a gay female officer and we were mates from the gay scene. So, I carried on, ignoring the governor’s shouts, but she got closer and continued to shout. She caught up with me and tapped me on the shoulder. “Nicky, I need to talk to you”. I knew where this was going. I said “governor, I’m not Nicky, I’m Sarah”, to which she replied, “oh, you are the other one!”. I looked at her with amusement and said “the other one what, governor?” She instantly realised what she had said and went bright red. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry”. To see a governor squirm though made the insult worth it.

Drawing upon incivility theory, Anderson and Pearson (1999) suggest that addressing a coworker inappropriately is an example of low-level workplace discrimination. To be addressed by the governor as “*the other one*” suggests a level of ignorance and a lack of consideration for individuality and preoccupation of identification through social group membership (Cortina, 2008) as a gay woman. Workplace incivility is not an objective phenomenon, but rather a reflection of people’s interpretations of how their actions made them feel (Porath & Pearson, 2012). Multiple interpretations generate a sense of ambiguity as to the motivations behind the behavior; in this instance, it was not perceived to be threatening, just grossly inconsiderate, a poor choice of language (Di Marco et al., 2018) and arguably homophobic.

MICROAGGRESSIONS

According to Sue (2010), microaggressions are everyday slights, indignities, put downs and insults toward those who are marginalized. They are different from blatant homophobia, racism and sexism because they are outside the level of consciousness from the perpetrator and typically do not have any negative intent and hostility behind them (Sue, 2010). The following incident reflects a subtle microaggression, where intention toward harm was difficult to establish

I had a forced absence at the weekend, to take my cat to the vets as she had been hit by a car. My job for this particular morning was to supervise the sex offenders cleaning the visits hall so I was just sat watching them, when the detail (job allocation) senior officer came in to discuss my absence. He demanded to know why I had been off at the weekend. I asked him if he thought that it was an appropriate time and place to have this conversation, in front of prisoners, which was ignored. I told him why I had been off and in ear shot of prisoners, he asked why couldn't my girlfriend have taken the cat to the vets, to which I replied that it was none of his business. It was obvious that the prisoners had heard this conversation and I felt humiliated that I had been 'outed', whether intentionally or not, through reference to my partner as female. I asked him if he would have had the same conversation with a male officer, to which he dismissed my question and walked off.

Assumptions were made around domestic arrangements and division of labor in a same sex relationship (Khor, 2007) and the incivility in the conduct of the senior officer indicates low level discrimination. Being "outed" in front of prisoners by a colleague is an example of a microaggression (rather than blatant homophobia), through a careless application of gender prefix to discuss my partner, which challenged the presentation of self and identity work that I did on the landings. A grievance was raised but intention could not be proved and the allegation was dropped. Mennicke et al. (2018) research identified instances where anti-harassment policies were in place but were not enforced for LGBT criminal justice workers in the US, and the example presented here suggests that policies to protect LGBTQ+ status in the prison service are ineffective.

In contrast to Charles and Rouse-Arndt, who argue that, "the presence of homophobic microaggressions without institutional support to address the hostile environment significantly hampered job satisfaction and willingness to risk being out at work," this was a risk that I took. As part of a diversity training session in the first month of my employment, I told a large group of prison officers that I was gay, but this was not something I anticipated being shared with prisoners. Coult states that sexual orientation is a private matter and her research participants did not "wave a flag" to colleagues. I neither "waved a flag" to draw attention to my sexuality nor deceived colleagues of my sexuality, so the above situation was a violation of trust based around a very subtle and brave disclosure of sexuality at the start of my career.

Homophobia and Aggression

In contrast to low level incivility and microaggressions in the workplace, there are instances where there is a shift toward intentional and aggressive homophobia. The following extract evoked a range of emotions and highlighted a liminal status for me in the prison environment

I was on night shift and it was my turn to do the suicide checks. I went to a particular cell where a prisoner was on an ACCT document⁸ and I opened the observation flap. I saw the 2 prisoners having sex, which caught me off guard. I didn't hang around too long, but I was confident that it was consensual and not rape. I went down to the wing office to tell my senior officer, mainly because I knew it would wind him up. He was everything "ophobic", but I wasn't prepared for the homophobic tirade he was about to give and his response made me really angry. He said "I hope that you are going to nick them for that⁹, the dirty fucking bent bastards". He was very aggressive and clearly had an issue with homosexuality and/or male homosexual acts. I wasn't about to back down. "Who the fuck do you think you are talking to. I find that really disrespectful. I am gay, as you know". I waited for an apology, which never came. Instead, he grabbed my hand and marched me down to the segregation area to look at the prison rules. He was adamant that I should place them on report. It amused me however as I watched him struggle to fit my observations into infringements of prison rules. There is no direct rule about prisoners having sex. His lack of respect for my own sexuality really hurt though. I don't think it was intentional towards me, but this officer was "old school" and part of the homophobic culture in the prison service.

This illustrates blatant Institutional homophobia in the behavior and reaction toward male homosexual acts. Ironically, this same officer had met my partner and was openly warm to her. LaMar and Kite (1998) found attitudes toward gay men were more negative than attitudes toward lesbians, in terms of tolerance, morality and conduct, which is supported through the punitive and aggressive reaction from the senior officer. He expressed anger and a clear disgust at the idea of male homosexuality (see Tomsen, 2013). I experienced his conduct as indirect homophobia though, not intentionally directed at me but more at the physical act of two men having sex. The next example however involves an aggressive altercation with a prisoner who was explicitly contemptuous of the fact that I was perceived to be gay and also a female officer, which supports the double prejudice around gender and sexuality, as argued by Couto (2014)

I was working on the sex offenders landing (R45)¹⁰ and there were 2 prisoners who were shouting offensive remarks aimed at me, calling me a "fucking dyke", a "chick with a dick" and "a fucking lesbo". I was getting really wound up, so I squared up to the prisoner nearest to me and asked him what his fucking problem was. He got right in my face, puffed his chest out and threatened to knock me out if he ever saw me 'on road!' (outside of the prison). He said he didn't care that I was a woman, he would smash my face in. I called for assistance and another officer came over. I was shaking with anger at this point. He was escorted away to the office. I followed him into the office and told him I was going to nick him for threatening and abusive language and behaviour. He was angry, possibly on drugs. He changed tack and started saying that I didn't care about him and that he had had a shit life. I told him "you are damn right, I don't give a shit about you". Next time I worked on that landing he approached me. He had 2 black eyes and tried to offer me an apology. I refused his apology and told him to go away. One of the cleaners informed me that a few of the lads took exception to the way that he had spoken to me and they had battered him in the showers.

The prisoners had an audience on the landing and were showing off to it by behaving disrespectfully toward me. Prisoners look out for staff they trust and respect, which is supported by chivalry

⁸ Using the Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) case management system prisoners are placed on a document to monitor their mood, behaviour and interactions with others.

⁹ Place the prisoner on report and instigate an adjudication in front of a governor.

¹⁰ R45 allows governors to isolate prisoners, either for their own protection or to ensure

research between female staff and male prisoners (see Crewe, 2006). Whilst prison officers must never condone vigilante prisoner on prisoner violence, there are dynamics at play that make prisoners defend staff they trust and respect, and the boundaries become blurred in staff prisoner relationships (see Worley, 2016). Arguably, there were boundary violations from me in not reporting this violence, but I felt justified that all parties had learnt something from these interactions. Liebling (2011) identifies staff vulnerabilities working in dangerous conditions, through being isolated with violent and aggressive prisoners. I experienced a mix of complex emotions during the above incident, ranging from fear and anger to warmth toward the prisoners who believed in me as an officer.

Gender and Perceived Levels of Competence

When females are judged negatively around their perceived ability to perform the role of prison officer, either by colleagues (see Zimmer, 1986; Wood, 2015) or prisoners (see Crewe, 2006), it impacts upon individual morale and creates tensions between the different groups. This is particularly noticeable when high levels of competence are needed to perform the more physical aspects of the prison officer role and female officers are questioned by (senior) members of staff

One incident angered the fuck out of me and made me question my future in the prison service. Fortunately for me, a trusted colleague tipped me off for what was about to happen, which allowed me to manage my emotions. He told me that I was being redeployed to another part of the prison, because there was intelligence to suggest that there was going to be a fight on association¹¹. Forewarned is forearmed. I attended the briefing and there were 14 officers on evening duty, a Principal officer and a female governor. This is what was said. "Officer Nixon, no disrespect to you because you are a woman, but we are expecting trouble on association and we need a male presence up there. So, I'm putting you on landing association¹² with officers x and x (both female). This was a poor decision all round because female officers can't patrol the shower/recess areas for reasons of decency. Because I knew this was coming I was able to manage my emotions more effectively than if I had heard it for the first time, but I was fucking fuming inside. I just wanted to throw my keys down and fuck off for the evening. As it happened, I had a right laugh with 2 of my female colleagues. It was the new number one female governors' first day and when she came up to ask us if everything was ok, she got it from me. I told her how this had made me feel. The Principal officer shouted up to ask us if we were ok, and I shouted back "no, you had better send a man up". This angered him, which pleased me because I wasn't done yet. I went to see him at the end of my shift, barged into his office and demanded to know what he was playing at. I asked "so, if there is a spontaneous incident on the landing, what am I supposed to do, wait for a male officer?" How dare he question my competence? I was always one of the first to jump in and react to prisoner violence. He said that he was trying to protect me. I called him a 'chauvinistic prick' and we met in the middle over a grievance procedure, which again was dismissed because of lack of proof around intent.

The implications here were around perceived competence and physical abilities of female officers and this served as a reminder of perceptions of female fragility (Burdett et al., 2018). This incident reinforces a chivalrous and overly protective attitude toward female officers, which links to benevolent sexism. Female officers spend long periods of time in places where assaults are likely, so this incident smacked of poor judgment. Gendered divisions of labor are common place in a

¹¹ A room where prisoners go to shower, make phone calls, play games and interact with other prisoners.

¹² This is where prisoners associate directly outside their cell doors on the same landing that they reside upon.

masculine environment like a prison and female officers are often redeployed to “safe areas.” Autoethnography allows for reflections around existential crises and/or transformational experiences and one of the major reasons that I left the prison service was because of the assault on my gender and perceived levels of competence.

The final extract illustrates a lack of tolerance from male prison officers toward female officers in the prison, with negative perceptions of our ability to complete physical tasks effectively. This serves to reinforce a highly gendered division of labor in a prison (Bruhn, 2013)

We had a fight situation on evening duty and management were calling for staff to get ‘kitted up’ (Tornado team)¹³ and go in and deal with this. I had never done this before, but was quite excited at the prospect of putting into practice what I had learnt at training college. I was laughed at, pushed out of the way by a muscular male officer and told to “go make the tea little girl”. I felt dismissed and judged on the basis of my gender and perceived competence. Then I thought to myself “actually, we are all paid similar amounts of money. You go fight dickheads, I’ll put the kettle on.

This particular incident highlights the hypermasculine culture of the prison environment and the perceived fragility of female officers (Burdett et al., 2018); nobody who witnessed this exchange challenged the officer who addressed me in a derogatory way. Working in a three officer team and using approved prison service control and restrain techniques (C and R),¹⁴ prison officers outnumber the prisoner 3:1 in planned removals. The fact that I was not invited to participate as part of a team once again highlights the gendered assumption that a female officer should stay out of harm’s way and let male officers control the situation. Crawley (2004) identifies that sexist language and a lack of perceived physical strength prevail in an environment that stresses male machismo (references of “split arses” was a very common insult toward female officers in the prison where I worked) Male prison officers thrive on the experience and performance of getting “kitted up” and using force and aggression toward prisoners. This aligns with Jester (2021), who identified a link between risk-taking masculinity and boys and toys masculinity, which are both congruent with hegemonic masculinity. This is not to say that female officers do not also behave in this way however. The gender dynamics may vary at different establishments, particularly female prisons, which reinforces the earlier point made that this paper is context specific, located in a particular time space and place. Having no direct experience working with female offenders, it is assumed that experiences of a gay female officer in the female estate might be very different to the ones outlined here in a male adult category “B” prison (see Wood, 2015 for an excellent overview of female prison officers in a female prison).

CONCLUSION

This paper draws upon autoethnography as a methodological approach to explore gender and sexuality in a male adult prison. There are several contributions that this approach has to offer the study of gay female experiences in the workplace. Combining evocative and analytic AE rather than

¹³ Kitted up’ is prison jargon for when officers are required to change into protective uniform and go into a prison cell in a team of multiple officers, with shields to restrain and/or remove a prisoner.

¹⁴ Control and restraint—where prison officers used approved prison service techniques to restrain and remove prisoners around the prison.

seeing them as distinct polar opposites allows for personal stories to be merged with existing theoretical insights to make the data analytic. AE is useful in researching the lived experience of homophobia, sexism and workplace discrimination, adding depth, authenticity and credibility to recorded personal observations and experiences. Insider positioning offers a novel insight into prison officer culture and an embodied account of gender and sexuality. Moreover, the value of this approach enables sensitive and perhaps unresearchable topics to be illuminated. This paper will complement existing literature on prison officer culture, written largely from “outsider” or “partial insider” perspectives. Transitioning from prison officer to active researcher or “pracademic,” personal narratives recorded a over a decade ago have been relived and reformulated, using an interactionist lens to interpret the significance of such experiences, in terms of what they can reveal about prison officer culture, from somebody who has first-hand experience of working in this environment.

Key findings from the paper include suggest that both prisoners and staff hold homophobic and sexist attitudes toward female prison officers. Gendered divisions of labor and perceived levels of competence based on gender are evident, and prisoners are not averse to behaving chivalrously around female officers, which can be both reassuring and patronizing. Presentation of self as a prison officer is integral to surviving in this environment and sexuality, whilst irrelevant to the task of prison officer, has to be managed during interactions with both staff and prisoners. However, during 6 years of service “procedural legitimacy” (Sparks & Bottoms, 1995) became more important to prisoners than sexuality and gender, as professional working relationships were established. Alarmingly, however, austerity has impacted upon and eroded the traditional “convict code” of chivalry toward female officers, meaning that female officers are just as likely to be assaulted by male prisoners in 2020 (Ismail, 2019). Shifting social and political practices are evident in my account of the prison as well as gender and sexuality. In extending this research I would recommend further focus on discrimination post austerity and the Equality Act 2010, to ascertain current experiences of homophobia and sexism within prison staff. An exploration around staff who hold discriminatory attitudes would prove insightful in further understanding the occupational culture within prisons.

This paper shines a light on the inadequacies of the prison service in tackling workplace discrimination, despite changes to legislation supporting protected characteristics of staff, for example, the Equality Act in the UK (2010). Professionalization aims to drive up standards of working practices and most public services have increased their involvement with the university sector, seeking higher standards of professional and intellectual excellence (see Green & Gates, 2014). As one of the few public services left to be professionalized, an overhaul of the prison service needs to be taken to bring the service in line with other public services around equality and diversity. The Woodhill incident (Taylor, 2019) demonstrates an urgent rethink of policy and practice to support and protect LGBTQ+ staff working within the prison service. The culture of the prison service has changed immensely because of VEDS (Voluntary Early Departure scheme), however, deep-rooted discriminatory attitudes and practices still exist. Based on my analysis, the landscape of the prison demands a neater and more visible framework for addressing and eradicating discrimination. Whilst equality and diversity legislation is visible and forms part of new officer training, embodied accounts like the one presented here may help prison officers to thrive rather than merely “survive” the landings in prisons.

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