

# The Prison Journal

<http://tpj.sagepub.com/>

---

## **The Social Construction of Sexuality in Prison**

Lauren E. Gibson and Christopher Hensley

*The Prison Journal* 2013 93: 355 originally published online 18 June 2013

DOI: 10.1177/0032885513490503

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://tpj.sagepub.com/content/93/3/355>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:

Pennsylvania Prison Society

**Additional services and information for *The Prison Journal* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://tpj.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://tpj.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>


**Citations:** <http://tpj.sagepub.com/content/93/3/355.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Aug 1, 2013

[OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Jun 18, 2013

[What is This?](#)

# The Social Construction of Sexuality in Prison

The Prison Journal  
93(3) 355–370  
© 2013 SAGE Publications  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0032885513490503  
tpj.sagepub.com  


Lauren E. Gibson<sup>1</sup> and Christopher Hensley<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Prison sex research has generally followed an essentialist theoretical approach. Only Alarid used a social constructionist approach to understand sexuality behind bars. Using data collected from 142 male inmates in a Southern maximum-security correctional facility, the purpose of the present study was to examine whether engaging in sexual behavior affects a change in the sexual orientation of male prison inmates. Applying a social constructionist theoretical approach, the influence of several sociodemographic and situational variables on the change in sexual orientation was also examined. The only statistically significant variable associated with a change in sexual orientation was engaging in homosexual behavior. Inmates were more than 52 times more likely to change their sexual orientation if they engaged in homosexual activity while incarcerated, supporting the social constructionist approach.

## Keywords

prison sex, homosexual orientation, social constructionist approach

In the United States, prison administrators have dealt with the issue of prison sex for as long as prisons have existed. Only in the past century have researchers conducted studies on prison sex and its many nuances. The empirical and theoretical understanding of what is collectively known as prison sex has been

---

<sup>1</sup>University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Chattanooga, TN, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Christopher Hensley, Department of Criminal Justice, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Dept. 3203, 615 McCallie Avenue, Chattanooga, TN 37403, USA.  
Email: Christopher-Hensley@utc.edu

studied in male inmates since the 1930s. Researchers have formulated three theoretical models to explain and understand the concept of prison sex: the importation model, the deprivation model, and the social constructionist model. The importation and deprivation models, known collectively as the essentialist approach, are older models that have long been applied to prison sexuality. Clemmer (1940) introduced the deprivation model first, theorizing that prison sex occurred because inmates were deprived of a heteronormative sexual identity. Sykes (1958) continued this theoretical model by examining various deprivations, including a lack of heterosexual outlets, that caused inmates to create their own subculture within prison to cope with this deprivation. Later, Irwin and Cressey (1962) presented the importation model, which holds that inmates import social values from outside of prison to construct the prison subculture. Through a combination of research from other disciplines and work by “fringe movements” of criminal justice, the social constructionist approach developed alongside the essentialist approach, only recently gaining influence in the essentialist versus social constructionist debate (Eigenberg, 1992; Stein, 1992). Social constructionism, instead, defines sexuality and other concepts, such as gender and class, as “cultural entities,” which have been constructed by social situations and values (Stein, 1992, p. 5).

Historically, researchers have defined sexuality primarily through sexual orientation, arguing that there is only heterosexuality and homosexuality in humans (Paul, 1985; Stein, 1992). This definition of sexuality is part of the “essentialist” approach to research, which holds that sexual orientation forms independently of cultural influences (Stein, 1992, p. 4). This remains true for research on prison sex, which usually defines men as heterosexual or homosexual. When compared to normal society, an entirely different social construct exists in prison. Within this unique subculture exists the possibility for alternative sexualities constructed from social values completely different from those in regular society. This study will attempt to illustrate the shifting, fluid concept of sexuality in a prison sample using a social constructionist method. Specifically, this study will examine whether engaging in sexual behavior affects how male inmates self-identify a change in their sexual orientation. In addition, the study will examine the influence of several sociodemographic (i.e., age, race, religion, education) and situational (i.e., amount of time served) variables on a change in sexual orientation.

## Literature Review

Sexuality in prison populations remains one of the least understood issues in the criminal justice system. Though sexual relationships between inmates have been addressed in research as far back as the 1930s, most of the research falls

into certain categories. Some research focuses on the characteristics of victims and offenders of sexual assault (Chonco, 1989; Groth, 1979; Hensley, 2001; Hensley, Koscheski, & Tewksbury, 2005; Hensley, Tewksbury, & Castle, 2003; Nacci & Kane, 1983, 1984a, 1984b; Saum, Surratt, Inciardi, & Bennett, 1995; Scacco, 1975; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Bumby, & Donaldson, 1996; Warren, Jackson, Booker, Loper, & Burnette, 2010), while other research addresses circumstances surrounding sex between inmates, again with a primary focus on sexual assault (Hensley, 2001; Hensley et al., 2003; Hensley, Tewksbury, & Wright, 2001; Jenness, Maxson, Sumner, & Matsuda, 2007; Nacci & Kane, 1983, 1984a, 1984b; Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000; Wolff, Blitz, Shi, Bachman, & Siegel, 2006). Still more research focuses on perceptions of and attitudes toward inmate sex, homosexuality, and sexual assault by inmates, correctional officers, and administrators (Alarid, 2000; Eigenberg, 2000; Fowler, Blackburn, Marquart, & Mullings, 2010; Hensley, 2000; Hensley & Tewksbury, 2005; Nacci & Kane, 1983, 1984a, 1984b; Saum et al., 1995; Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996). Some studies address consensual sex in prison, though much of this literature has occurred largely within the last three decades (Alarid, 2000; Chonco, 1989; Eigenberg, 1992, 2000; Hensley, 2001, 2002; Hensley et al., 2001, 2003, 2005; Hensley, Struckman-Johnson, & Eigenberg, 2000). While each piece of research adds to the growing body of literature on prison sex, not much theory has been applied to prison sex and why it occurs.

Early studies on prison sex were more likely to view homosexual behavior in a prison setting with a negative bias; thus most of the research from the 1930s to the 1970s was limited in its scope and focused primarily on prison sex as an instrument of victimization (Clemmer, 1940; Groth, 1979; Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Scacco, 1975; Sykes, 1958). Clemmer (1940), Sykes (1958), and Irwin and Cressey (1962) emphasized this view, arguing that without the natural norms of society, inmates create their own subsociety within the prison structure. Clemmer (1940), in his landmark book on prison cultures, examined how different subcultures of the prison population interacted. He was the first to purport that prison subcultures form on their own and lead to the creation of a new identity for an incoming inmate, having been deprived of a regular social identity. Later, Sykes' (1958) deprivation model established five deprivations that caused an inmate pain: liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and personal security. To cope with these deprivations, Sykes argued that inmates turn toward escapist paths, creating a new society within the prison structure with its own norms that will alleviate the pains of deprivation. In addition, Sykes defined different types of homosexual identities, going so far as to say that predators of violent

behavior in prisons were situational homosexuals, which ties into a shifting sexuality (Sykes, 1958).

Irwin and Cressey (1962) attempted to shift the paradigm on prison literature with their importation model, which argues that a prison society is formed when inmates import their values from the community and their personal histories into the prison setting. They further argued that certain behaviors were more accepted among inmates because they were already exposed to and accepting of those behaviors in the subculture where they lived before they entered prison.

The influence of the essentialist models continued through the 1970s. Akers, Hayner, and Gruninger (1974), for example, tested the deprivation and importation models on the in-prison behaviors of drug use and homosexual acts. The authors found that neither model could be successfully applied in explaining why these behaviors occurred, instead concluding that a better method for approaching the question of which model works better would be one that addresses the process by which an inmate is exposed to the prison environment. Their conclusions show the waning influence of these earlier theoretical models on prison research as well as hint at the changing paradigm at the time. By implying that the prison environment, or the social forces of the prison, have an influence on how a prisoner behaves within that environment, the authors seem to be approaching a social constructionist method of understanding inmates' behavior, though their research was still too early to be considered an example of social constructionism.

Similarly, Scacco (1975) attempted to apply the deprivation model to sexual assault in prison, but his methodology and language contained hints of a social constructionist approach. Scacco examined the different aspects of sexual assault in prison, with a focus on characteristics of victims and perpetrators as most research does. Keeping with the deprivation model, he viewed sexual violence in prison as a result of deprivation of familiar social settings. Scacco (1975) upheld Sykes' argument with his viewpoint that sexual deprivation of heterosexual relationships causes "homosexual phenomena" as well as "heterosexual aggression" to occur (p. 35).

The essentialist models began to lose power in the 1980s after Bowker (1980) and Lockwood (1980) released their landmark studies on prison sexuality and behavior. Even before Bowker's and Lockwood's studies, an informative and illuminating book by Groth (1979) highlighted the different characteristics of offenders of sexual assault. Groth may have been one of the first proponents of a socially constructed sexuality in prison hierarchies. In interviewing 22 inmates, Groth (1979) examined their sexual orientation and sexual lifestyle at the time of their offenses, instead of asking about lifetime sexuality. He stated that,

[t]o define the sexual lifestyle of these offenders as heterosexual or homosexual is not actually an accurate description of their sexual orientation[.] . . . Instead, they tended to possess a rather ambiguous and underdefined sexuality that was more self-centered than interpersonal. Their relationships to others, both sexual and nonsexual, were based more on exploitation than sharing (p. 125).

Groth's explanation of these inmates' sexualities hints at something more than a static sexuality; more closely, he implies that sexuality is not only an inherent part of a person but also may be a construct of that person's society. As such, Groth could be considered one of the few early researchers to examine inmate sexuality from a social constructionist view.

Likewise, Lockwood (1980) and Bowker (1980) added to a shift in the prison sex paradigm when they introduced their individual research during a time when literature on homosexuality in prison was waning (Eigenberg, 1992). Lockwood (1980) focused on sexual aggression in prison, while Bowker (1980) addressed violence and victimization at large in prison populations. Their studies were published independently and without corroboration. Yet both authors found a high prevalence of victimization in prison (Bowker, 1980; Lockwood, 1980). In addition, both authors concluded independently that violence in prison occurred not because of inmates' desires to commit violence, but out of either a desire to obtain some reward with the prison society or to join power groups and climb the prison hierarchy. Thus, prison violence, including male sexual assault, occurred as part of the social construct of the prison society, performing acts that would exist outside of their normal lifestyles. From a social constructionist view, these inmates may define themselves in a certain way outside of the prison society, but they redefine their outward identities in an attempt to fit into the prison society without becoming victimized themselves. They create and define their identities within prison as a social construct, to fit the social forces within prison.

This changing paradigm continued after Lockwood's and Bowker's publications, with Nacci and Kane's (1983, 1984a, 1984b) two-part study on sexual aggression in federal prisons. Though highly biased, possibly homophobic, and heavily critical of consensual sexual activity between inmates, Nacci and Kane added to the shifting paradigm by upholding Lockwood's and Bowker's previous approach to violence in prison. The authors examined sexuality of inmates as a social construct, rather than using the older theoretical models, by asking participants for their own definition of their sexuality and focusing on sexual relationships, whether consensual or nonconsensual, as a product of power relationships, called attempts at "credibility" with other inmates (Nacci & Kane, 1984b, p. 48).

By the 1990s, research had shifted to a focus on male sexual assault as a problem similar in structure and effects to female sexual assault in

the community. Researchers focused on the characteristics of victims and offenders, the circumstances surrounding acts of sexual violence between inmates, the attitudes toward homosexuality and prison sex, and the perceptions of sexual assault and prison sex (Chonco, 1989; Eigenberg, 1992, 2000; Fowler et al., 2010; Gaes & Goldberg, 2004; Hensley, 2000, 2001, 2002; Hensley et al., 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005; Hensley & Tewksbury, 2005; Jenness et al., 2007; Saum et al., 1995; Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000; Warren et al., 2010; Wolff et al., 2006).

Few researchers have addressed consensual same-sex activity in prison populations (Alarid, 2000; Chonco, 1989; Eigenberg, 1992, 2000; Hensley, 2001, 2002; Hensley et al., 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005), and no single study has directly addressed sexuality in male prisons as defined and explored through a social constructionist approach. Only a few studies have examined sexual assault and homosexual behavior in male prison populations with a social constructionist approach. In the only article that explicitly uses the social constructionist approach as outlined by Eigenberg (1992), Alarid (2000) examined the two different approaches to research, the essentialist method and the social constructionist method, and demonstrated the social constructionist method with a study on perspectives of sexual orientation by incarcerated men of a nonheterosexual orientation. After taking survey items from a previous study by Wooden and Parker (1982), Alarid (2000) adapted the measuring tool to suit bisexual and homosexual men in incarceration, with inclusion of men who voluntarily defined themselves as homosexual or bisexual. In this way, Alarid went one step further than simply applying the social constructionist theory to a normative study, instead examining an urban county jail and a nonstandard population. In keeping with the social constructionist approach, she questioned participants about their sexuality during a certain time frame (i.e., during incarceration) instead of assuming that the participants' sexualities were the same as any other time in their lives.

After dividing the participants into three groups—bisexuals who leaned toward heterosexuality, bisexuals who leaned toward homosexuality, and homosexuals—Alarid (2000) found the homosexual participants were the least likely of the three groups to change how they acted while they were in jail. Reversely, bisexual men were more likely to alter their behaviors according to the situation, a vivid application of the social constructionist theory. In addition, nearly all of the bisexual and homosexual men entered a consensual sexual partnership with another man, who usually identified as heterosexual. Most of these respondents viewed their heterosexual partners as “in denial” of their homosexuality (Alarid, 2000, p. 89). Bisexual men were more likely to be the dominant partner in these relationships.

One study published by Hensley et al. (2001) addressed consensual same-sex activity within prison structures in an attempt to apply the deprivation and importation models. In this exploratory study, the authors interviewed 142 inmates in a Southern correctional facility, gathered demographic data, including age, race, and religion, and asked questions about inmates' sexual habits concerning masturbation and consensual same-sex activities, as well as their sexual orientation. In particular, this study examined both preincarceration sexual orientation and sexual orientation during incarceration, with differing rates in their results. Before incarceration, 79% identified as heterosexual, 15% as bisexual, and 6% as homosexual, while during incarceration, 69% identified as heterosexual, 23% as bisexual, and 7% as homosexual (Hensley et al., 2001).

These facts point toward both the deprivation model, where Sykes (1958) argued that homosexuality in prison was mostly situational, and the social constructionist model. In addition, the construction of the measuring tool shows some thought to a social constructionist method, as the level of detail in the questions reflects the type of questions that a social constructionist method would use (Eigenberg, 1992). Despite finding some support for the deprivation and importation models, Hensley et al. (2001) concluded that the support for these models was weak and admitted that there were several unknown factors that could influence an inmate's decision to engage in homosexual behaviors in prison.

Incidentally, two of these authors replicated this study with a social constructionist approach, using the same data set from the previous study. With the same results toward sexual orientation mentioned above, Hensley et al. (2005) found that the results supported the idea of a changing, fluid sexuality as outlined by the social constructionist theory. Sexual orientation was one of the most important risk factors for sexual victimization in prison. Of the inmates, 50% identified as bisexual or homosexual before incarceration, and 57% identified as such during incarceration. Their sexual orientation affected how they viewed themselves and how inmates viewed them. With any sexual orientation other than heterosexual being perceived as a "vulnerability" by other inmates, it is unsurprising that bisexual and homosexual men were victimized more than heterosexual men (Hensley et al., 2005, p. 675). That "vulnerability" created a higher likelihood of victimization, and that "vulnerability" came from social constructs. If the prison subculture had not previously defined nonheterosexual men as possibly prey for sexual coercion, would they have been victimized? The findings are from limited data, but the tone of the study is clear: research on prison sex benefits from addressing the topic with a social constructionist approach.



Penologists must incorporate the concept of a free and changing sexuality into their understanding of sexuality in prison populations. If sexuality changes outside of prison, then logically sexuality may also change within prison. There is no construct of prison that restricts sexuality from changing, as sexuality changes based on social forces, of which prison has a good supply. This shift in definition leads to a shift in the paradigm surrounding prison sex literature. By focusing on the possibility of a changing sexuality, researchers can begin to pose questions with a social constructionist approach to prison sex theory. The current study addresses two important research questions from such an approach. First, does engaging in sexual behavior in prison affect whether or not inmates self-identify a change in their own sexual orientation? Second, do any other sociodemographic and situational variables impact a change in inmates' sexual identity?

## **Method**

### *Participants*

In March 2000, all inmates housed in one maximum-security Southern correctional facility were requested to participate in a study of sexual behaviors. Inmates were assembled in the main area of their respective units by correctional staff, in order that the researchers could explain the contents of the surveys and the rights of the inmates. Correctional staff then distributed self-administered questionnaires to inmates for later completion. Inmates were asked to return the completed questionnaires in a stamped, self-addressed envelope within 2 weeks of distribution. Inmates were advised that the survey would take approximately 30 min and would involve 46 questions. The questionnaire was constructed using various research questions and scales from previous research (Saum et al., 1995; Struckman-Johnson et al., 1996; Tewksbury, 1989). Of 800 inmates incarcerated at the time, a total of 142 agreed to participate in the study, yielding a response rate of 18%.

### *Measures*

The primary goal of the current study was to examine the influence of sexual behaviors on a change in inmates' sexual orientation. Therefore, inmates were asked two questions: "Before you were incarcerated, how would you categorize your sexual orientation?" and "How would you characterize your sexual orientation today?" The questions were coded so that 0 = straight, 1 = bisexual, and 2 = gay. An examination of the questions revealed that several of the inmates had changed their sexual orientation. A new variable was created,

which reflected this change with 0 = indicating no change in sexual orientation and 1 = indicating a change in sexual orientation. This item served as the dependent variable for the logistic regression analysis. Several questions about inmates' sexual behavior, sociodemographic information, and a situational factor were then used as independent variables. Specifically, inmates were asked a series of questions about their sexual behavior during prison. These questions included "Have you ever kissed a man in a sexual manner since being incarcerated?"; "Have you ever touched the penis of a man or allowed a man to touch your penis since being incarcerated?"; "Have you ever received a blowjob from a man since being incarcerated?"; "Have you ever given a man a blowjob since being incarcerated?"; "Have you ever screwed a man since being incarcerated?"; and "Have you ever been screwed by a man since being incarcerated?" Each of these variables were coded so that 0 = no and 1 = yes. All six sexual behavior questions were recoded into one variable that determined whether or not inmates had engaged in sexual behavior while incarcerated. This variable was coded so that 0 = no and 1 = yes.

Sociodemographic information was also collected from the respondents. Inmates were asked, "In what year were you born?" This was coded in a continuous variable that reflected their age at the time of the survey. Respondents were also asked, "How do you describe yourself?" The question was coded so that 0 = African American/Black, 1 = White, 2 = American Indian, 3 = Mexican American/Latino, 4 = Asian or Asian American, and 5 = other. This variable was recoded so that 0 = Non-White and 1 = White. Respondents were also asked, "What is your religion?" This was an open-ended question that was later recoded so that 0 = Protestant and 1 = Non-Protestant. Inmates were also asked, "What is the highest level of schooling you have completed?" This variable was coded so that 0 = Eighth grade or less, 1 = Some high school, 2 = Completed high school, 3 = Some college, 4 = Completed college, and 5 = Graduate or professional school after college.

Finally, as part of the situational variable, inmates were asked, "What was your total sentence length for the offense you are currently serving?" and "How much time do you have left on your sentence?" Both questions were open-ended. The time for the second question was then subtracted from the first question, allowing for a single variable, "Amount of time served." This variable was coded so that 0 = Less than 5 years, 1 = 5 to 10 years, 2 = 10 to 25 years, and 3 = More than 25 years.

## *Data Analysis*

To achieve the goals of the study, the first step was to examine the frequencies and percentages of inmates' sexual orientations prior to and during

**Table 1.** Change in Sexual Orientation ( $n = 24$ ).

	Sexual orientation before		Sexual orientation today	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Heterosexual	18	75.0	4	16.7
Bisexual	4	16.7	19	79.1
Homosexual	2	8.3	1	4.2

incarceration. Second, the descriptive nature of each independent variable was assessed. Finally, because the dependent variable was dichotomous, logistic regression analysis was performed to test if the predictor variables had an effect on the dependent variable.

## Results

Out of the 142 respondents, 16.9% of the participants showed a change in their sexual orientation prior to and during incarceration. Of the 24 inmates in the subsample, 75% changed from straight to bisexual, 12.5% changed from bisexual to straight, and 4.2% changed from bisexual to gay, gay to straight, and gay to bisexual, respectively. Table 1 reveals these changes in sexual orientation for this subsample.

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the entire sample for each independent variable. Of the total sample, 40.1% had engaged in homosexual behavior. The average age of inmates in the sample was approximately 33 years with a range of 20 to 58 years. Almost 68% of the sample was White and the remaining 32% were non-White inmates. More than half (54%) of the sample identified as Protestant and 46% as non-Protestant. For inmates' education level, 9.4% had attended eighth grade or less, 43.5% had attended some high school, 18.8% had completed high school, 21.7% had attended some college, 4.3% had completed college, and 2.2% had completed some graduate or professional school. For amount of time served, 11.5% had served less than 5 years, 20% had served between 5 and 10 years, 34.6% had served between 10 and 25 years, and 33.8% had served more than 25 years.

According to Table 3, only one statistically salient independent variable was found in the logistic regression model. Inmates who engaged in homosexual behavior while they were incarcerated were more than 52 times more likely to have a change in their sexual orientation. All other sociodemographic and situational variables had no significant effect on the dependent variable. The independent variables accounted for 26% of the total variance in the model.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics of Independent Variables.

	Mean	SD	Total	Total (%)
Did you engage in homosexual behavior?				
No			85	59.9%
Yes			57	40.1%
Age	33.28	9.15		
Race				
Non-White			46	32.4%
White			96	67.6%
Religion				
Protestant			67	54.0%
Non-Protestant			57	46.0%
Education				
Eighth grade or less			13	9.4%
Some high school			60	43.5%
Completed high school			26	18.8%
Some college			30	21.7%
Completed college			6	4.3%
Graduate/professional school			3	2.2%
Amount of time served				
0-4 years 364 days			15	11.5%
5 years-9 years 364 days			26	20.0%
10 years-24 years 364 days			45	34.6%
More than 25 years			44	33.8%

**Table 3.** Summary of Logistic Regression Beta Weights ( $n = 142$ ).

	B	SE	Odds ratio
Homosexual behavior	3.96	1.09	52.62 <sup>a</sup>
Age	-.37	.04	.96
Race	-.15	.74	.86
Religion	-.39	.60	.67
Education	-.11	.28	.89
Time served	.264	.30	1.30
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>		.26	

<sup>a</sup>Denotes statistical significance at the .05 level.

## Discussion

Prison sex studies have explored factors that affect how and why male inmates decide to engage in homosexual activity though few have examined this issue through changes in sexuality and sexual orientation. Research that specifically examines sexual orientation within a correctional setting has seldom been conducted (Alarid, 2000; Hensley et al., 2001). As previously discussed, the limited research that used theoretical models to explore prison sexuality did so by using the importation and deprivation models. For example, a study on consensual sexual activity by Hensley and his colleagues (2001) found limited support for the essentialist approach, which shows that even in the last decade, researchers are struggling to find support for theoretical models that are almost half a century old.

To approach sexuality in a correctional setting, researchers must examine sexual orientation through another theoretical model, the social constructionist approach. Only one researcher has specifically used the social constructionist approach in an empirical study. Alarid (2000) examined the sexual activity and sexual orientation of jail inmates using a social constructionist approach, setting a new example for future research. In the present study, a social constructionist approach was used for understanding sexual orientation in a maximum-security prison.

The present study found that engaging in homosexual behavior had a significant effect on a change in sexual orientation. A logistic regression model showed that inmates who engaged in homosexual behavior were more than 52 times more likely to change their sexual orientation. It is possible that while in prison inmates are introduced to a variety of behaviors and attitudes that are acceptable in the prison subculture, which may not be accepted in the culture they left. These behaviors would include the social construct of homosexuality, which inmates may not actively identify as homosexuality but which other authors have called situational homosexuality (Sykes, 1958). Whether or not an inmate accepts that this social role is homosexual in nature, perhaps believing that they are still heterosexual while engaging in same-sex behavior, same-sex sexual activity is still homosexual activity. Adopting this social construct, in turn, may cause inmates to be more likely to change their sexual orientation, providing support for the social constructionist model.

The data are, however, limited in several important ways. First, the response rate was 18%. Although this response rate appears low, most prison studies dealing with sensitive issues attract 25% or fewer respondents (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000). Second, the subsample of those who had changed their sexual orientation was even more limited as only 24 had changed their sexual orientation while incarcerated. Third, the data were limited in that they were collected through convenience sampling, as the prison

was chosen because of availability and ease of access. Fourth, the questionnaire was limited in understanding the larger subculture of prison because it excluded attitudes toward homosexuality and the prison sex hierarchy, which is needed for a fuller understanding of how sexuality may change in prison. Finally, the variables were coded and recoded in a way that limited the full potential of understanding how different sexual behaviors and sociodemographic factors such as race, religion, or education might have an effect on how sexual orientation changes. With a larger data set collected through probability sampling, particularly with a larger number of inmates that show a change in sexual orientation, future research on this topic can find a better understanding of how homosexual behaviors, sociodemographic, and situational variables have an effect on sexual orientation.

The social roles in prison have been studied by other researchers and will continue to be studied. Policy affecting sexuality needs to address the prison subculture, not simply sexual conduct. It is unknown whether allowing consensual sexual activity would have a positive or negative impact on prison sex. Hensley and his colleagues (2001) have argued that allowing conjugal visits, autoerotic behavior, and consensual sexual activity between inmates would increase the health and safety of inmates. Penologists and prison officials should not simply attempt to control and prevent sexual activity through reaction, but should be proactive in understanding why sexual activity occurs. Sykes (1958) was the first to argue that being deprived of one's social identity caused the creation of a new identity according to prison subculture. In the importation model by Irwin and Cressey (1962), an inmate's identity is created by importing social values that act as a reflection of larger society. Social constructionism argues that the prison subculture itself and the values therein create the identity. Instead of the essentialist approach attempting to account for an inmate's identity and subsequent behaviors, perhaps the importation and deprivation models can be combined with the social constructionist approach to understand the prison subculture.

Scacco (1975) argued that "to stop . . . prohibiting every form of sexual expression" would alleviate some of the violence that sexual deprivation causes (p. 108). Tewksbury and West (2000) likewise argued that

refusal or reluctance to acknowledge that sex in prison exists is one thing, but refusal or reluctance even to devote research attention to the issue is detrimental to the study of corrections, to the discipline, and to society as a whole. (p. 377)

It is clear from the present study that engaging in homosexual behavior has a significant effect on an inmate's sexuality. Penologists should take this knowledge and go another step forward to understanding the construct of sexuality within a prison setting.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## References

- Akers, R., Hayner, N., & Gruninger, W. (1974). Homosexual and drug behavior in prison: A test of the functional and importation models of the inmate system. *Social Problems, 21*, 410-422.
- Alarid, L. (2000). Sexual orientation perspectives of incarcerated bisexual and gay men: The county jail protective custody experience. *The Prison Journal, 80*(1), 80-95.
- Bowker, L. (1980). *Prison victimization*. New York, NY: Elsevier Press.
- Chonco, R. (1989). Sexual assaults among male inmates: A descriptive study. *The Prison Journal, 69*(1), 72-82.
- Clemmer, D. (1940). *The prison community*. New York, NY: Rinehart.
- Eigenberg, H. (1992). Homosexuality in male prisons: Demonstrating the need for a social constructionist approach. *Criminal Justice Review, 17*, 219-234.
- Eigenberg, H. (2000). Correctional officers and their perceptions of homosexuality, rape, and prostitution in male prisoners. *The Prison Journal, 80*, 415-433.
- Fowler, S., Blackburn, A., Marquart, J., & Mullings, J. (2010). Would they officially report an in-prison sexual assault? An examination of inmate perceptions. *The Prison Journal, 90*, 220-243.
- Gaes, G., & Goldberg, A. (2004). *Prison rape: A critical review of the literature*. Retrieved from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/App/Publications/abstract.aspx?ID=234861>
- Groth, A. (1979). *Men who rape: The psychology of the offender*. New York, NY: Plenum.
- Hensley, C. (2000). Attitudes toward homosexuality in a male and female prison: An exploratory study. *The Prison Journal, 80*, 434-441.
- Hensley, C. (2001). Consensual homosexual activity in male prisons. *Corrections Compendium, 26*(1), 1-4.
- Hensley, C. (Ed.). (2002). *Prison sex: Practice and policy*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Street.
- Hensley, C., Koscheski, M., & Tewksbury, R. (2005). Examining the characteristics of male sexual assault targets in a Southern maximum-security prison. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 20*, 667-679.
- Hensley, C., Struckman-Johnson, C., & Eigenberg, H. (2000). Introduction: The history of prison sex research. *The Prison Journal, 80*, 360-367.
- Hensley, C., & Tewksbury, R. (2005). Wardens' perceptions of inmate fear of sexual assault: A research note. *The Prison Journal, 85*, 198-203.

- Hensley, C., Tewksbury, R., & Castle, T. (2003). Characteristics of prison sexual assault targets in male Oklahoma correctional facilities. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 18*, 595-606.
- Hensley, C., Tewksbury, R., & Wright, J. (2001). Exploring the dynamics of masturbation and consensual same-sex activity within a male maximum security prison. *Journal of Men's Studies, 10*(1), 59-71.
- Irwin, J., & Cressey, D. (1962). Thieves, convicts and the inmate culture. *Social Problems, 10*, 142-155.
- Jeness, V., Maxson, C., Sumner, J., & Matsuda, K. (2007). Violence in California correctional facilities: An empirical examination of sexual assault. *Bulletin of the Center for Evidence-Based Corrections, 2*(2). Retrieved from <http://ucicorrections.seweb.uci.edu/pubs#bulletins>
- Lockwood, D. (1980). *Prison sexual violence*. New York, NY: Elsevier Press.
- Nacci, P., & Kane, T. (1983). The incidence of sex and sexual aggression in federal prisons. *Federal Probation, 7*, 31-36.
- Nacci, P., & Kane, T. (1984a). Inmate sexual aggression: Some evolving propositions and empirical findings, and mitigating counter-forces. *Journal of Offender Counseling, Services, and Rehabilitation, 9*, 1-20.
- Nacci, P., & Kane, T. (1984b). Sex and sexual aggression in federal prisons: Inmate involvement and employee impact. *Federal Probation, 8*, 46-53.
- Paul, J. (1985). Bisexuality: Reassessing our paradigms of sexuality. *Journal of Homosexuality, 11*(1/2), 21-34.
- Saum, C., Surratt, H., Inciardi, J., & Bennet, R. (1995). Sex in prison: Exploring the myths and realities. *The Prison Journal, 75*, 413-430.
- Scacco, A. (1975). *Rape in prison*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thompson.
- Stein, E. (1992). *Forms of desire: Sexual orientation and the social constructionist controversy*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Struckman-Johnson, C., & Struckman-Johnson, D. (2000). Sexual coercion rates in seven Midwestern prison facilities for men. *The Prison Journal, 80*, 379-390.
- Struckman-Johnson, C., Struckman-Johnson, D., Rucker, L., Bumby, K., & Donaldson, S. (1996). Sexual coercion reported by men and women in prison. *Journal of Sex Research, 33*(1), 67-76.
- Sykes, G. (1958). *The society of captives*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Tewksbury, R. (1989). Fear of sexual assault in prison inmates. *The Prison Journal, 69*(1), 62-71.
- Tewksbury, R., & West, A. (2000). Research on sex in prison during the late 1980s and early 1990s. *The Prison Journal, 80*, 336-378.
- Tourangeau, R., Rips, L., & Rasinski, K. (2000). *The psychology of survey response*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Warren, J., Jackson, S., Booker, A., Loper, M., & Burnette, M. (2010). *Risk markers for sexual predation and victimization in prison*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice.
- Wolff, N., Blitz, C., Shi, J., Bachman, R., & Siegel, J. (2006). Sexual violence inside prisons: Rates of victimization. *Journal of Urban Health, 83*, 835-848.



Wooden, W., & Parker, J. (1982). *Men behind bars: Sexual exploitation in prison*. New York, NY: Plenum.

### Author Biographies

**Lauren E. Gibson** is a recent master's degree recipient in criminal justice from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Her research interests include prison sexuality, attitudes toward sexual assault, and LGBT prison subcultures.

**Christopher Hensley** is an associate professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. His most recent publications appear in the *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology* and the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. His research interests include the link between childhood animal cruelty and later violence toward humans, prison sexuality, and attitudes toward correctional issues.