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Author/s:

Symkovych, A

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Sex in Prisoner Power Relations: Attitudes and Practices in a Ukrainian Correctional Colony for Men

ANTON SYMKOVYCH

*Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Department of Sociology, University of
Johannesburg, South Africa*

Abstract: Most research on prison sex has originated in the global West, often employing quantitative methodology. Building on a semi-ethnographic study of a Ukrainian prison, this article explores how prisoners and officers perceive prisoner sex. Rape was not reported in this prison, despite the relatively young prisoner population. I argue that the informal prisoner power structure of the prison underworld diminishes sexual abuse. Thus, contrary to much of the literature, masculinity, homophobia, and informal prisoner hierarchies can equally instigate and restrain prison violence and sexual victimisation.

Keywords: prison sex; masculinity; sexual violence; prison culture; homophobia; inmate code; Ukraine

Sex¹ among male prisoners (henceforth prison sex) is often coercive and expresses the domination of some prisoners by others (Dumond 2000; Tewksbury and West 2000; Trammell 2011). Much of what we know about prison sex stems from research in the United States (US) and United Kingdom (Banbury 2004; Hensley, Struckman-Johnson and Eigenberg 2000; O'Donnell 2004; Tewksbury and West 2000), with a few notable exceptions (Booyens and Bezuidenhout 2014; Egelund 2014; Einat 2012, 2014; Gear 2005; Schifter 1999). Furthermore, because of restricted access, a great deal of research on prison sex utilises secondary, aggregated, or retrospective data. Using ethnographic data from a Ukrainian medium-security prison for men, I argue that, contrary to much of the literature, masculinity, homophobia, and informal prisoner hierarchies can both restrain and instigate violence and sexual exploitation. I demonstrate how power relations in prison incorporate human sexuality and mimic the social gender division, and how prisoner sociality reconciles virulent homophobia with sex among men.

I begin by reviewing sex's role in men's prisons (hereafter prisons) as a substitute for heterosexual liaisons, a means of inter-prisoner

subjugation and control, an expression of fluid sexuality, and a continuation of pre-incarceration sexual practices. Next, I explain this case study's methodology. I then outline the organisation and normative code of the Ukrainian underworld, followed by a discussion of how this informal prisoner sociality, whilst virulently homophobic and misogynistic, restrains sexual violence and exploitation. Finally, I present officers' views on inter-prisoner sex and locate prisoners' attitudes to sex among prisoners in their constructions of masculinity. I conclude by arguing that the masculinity-centred, misogynistic informal prisoner structure, whilst discriminating against prisoners deemed 'unmanly', limits sexual violence. Whereas scholars often associate violence and abuse in prison with masculinity, I demonstrate that its role in prison can be more nuanced, simultaneously justifying discrimination and curbing violence.

Prison Sex as Background and Foreground of Power and Masculinity

Deprivation of heterosexual relations and incessant threats to personal safety constitute the classical 'pains of imprisonment' (Sykes (1958); see also Ricciardelli, Maier and Hannah-Moffat (2015) on prisoners' apprehensions). Sex between men in prison can alleviate or exacerbate these pains (Kupers 2010; Schifter 1999; Trammell 2011). Prison sex can be consensual (Levan 2014; Robinson 2011; Schifter 1999), but it frequently represents exploitation or rape (Gear 2005; 2007; Kupers 2010; Trammell 2011). Some who seem to consent may simply be engaging in what has been called survival sex (Booyens and Bezuidenhout 2014; Egelund 2014; Eigenberg 2000; Jones and Pratt 2008; Levan 2014). Of course, male prisoners (hereafter prisoners) may have sex with prison staff, mostly female, and with visitors, predominantly wives (D'Alessio, Flexon and Stolzenberg 2013; Levan 2014; Schifter 1999). However, these relations are not the focus of the present study.

Researchers seeking to explain prison sex generally use one of three models: deprivation, importation, and power. The deprivation model is heteronormative and historically dominant. It posits that prisoners seek sexual gratification through masturbation, consensual sex, and rape ('coercive sex') due to a lack, or more often a total absence, of heterosexual relationships. According to this model, one of the parties to sex is 'natural' or 'dispositionally' homosexual, an 'insertee', and the other is 'situational', an 'insertor' (Hensley, Struckman-Johnson and Eigenberg 2000; Levan 2014; Tewksbury and West 2000; classical examples are Clemmer 1940; Sykes 1958). The importation model regards prison sex as an extension of men's sexuality on the 'outside'. Men either continue having sex with men once incarcerated, or prison provides an opportunity to explore their sexuality and challenge gender and heteronormative norms (Gear 2005; Robinson 2011; on women's prisons, see Einat and Chen 2012). Sex with men in prison is not a substitute for sex with women but the evolution and diversification of their sexuality, which constructionists, unlike essentialists, regard as dynamic (Blackburn, Fowler and Mullings 2014; Eigenberg 1992; Gibson and Hensley 2013; Schifter 1999). Finally, building on a feminist

view of rape, the power perspective explains rape as a means of domination, with sexual gratification merely a by-product of a quest to alleviate personal disempowerment by humiliating and harming others (Booyens and Bezuidenhout 2014; D'Alessio, Flexon and Stolzenberg 2013; Hsu 2005; O'Donnell 2004; Zaitsow 2014). Whilst many commentators prefer one of the perspectives, some research, often more recent and qualitative in its methodology, provides empirical support for all three (Gear 2005; Schifter 1999).

Attitudes to Prison Sex

Prisoners' and officers' attitudes to prison sex are diverse and nuanced. Some research finds general non-acceptance of sexual activity between men in prison (Einat 2012; Hsu 2005). Other studies demonstrate that whilst homophobia and misogyny often define prison cultures, prisoner societies around the globe legitimise and regiment sex between men. In this legitimisation, one of the parties assumes, or is forced into, a woman's role, becoming passive and submissive, the 'insertee' who is sexually penetrated (Gear 2005, 2007; Kupers 2010; Reed 2003; Trammell 2011). By re-imagining one of the male partners as a woman, prisoners can reconcile sex between men with prison's staple homophobia (Egelund 2014; Gear 2007; O'Donnell 2004; Richmond 1978; Schifter 1999).

That said, the sexually dominant prisoners, 'inserters', must also follow a strict protocol. Generally, they present sex as a release of 'tension' and alleviation of men's 'needs' (legitimised though the deprivation model). The 'inserters' refrain from being anally or orally penetrated and usually do not display emotional attachment to, or equality with, the other parties to sex, the 'insertees' (Eigenberg 2000; Schifter 1999). In some prison cultures or for individual men, such safeguards to masculinity are insufficient and men resort to force when penetrating another prisoner; equating weakness and subjugation with femininity, they grant the violent perpetrator masculine status (Levan 2014; Reed 2003; Sykes 1958; Trammell 2011).

The situation is seldom as clear-cut as the above argumentation suggests. Despite the strict rules, prisoners' sexual conduct may still violate the established informal norms, or prisoners may challenge the hegemonic sexual discourse of prison (Gear 2005; Schifter 1999). Furthermore, some researchers have identified an 'attitude-conduct' conflict whereby prisoners may disapprove in principle of same-sex sex between prisoners whilst personally engaging in it (Einat and Chen 2012, p.499).

Prevalence of Prison Sex: Methodological Challenges Persist

The prevalence of prison sexual activity, its legal status, and prison sex cultures, vary greatly across jurisdictions, institutions, and even parts of institutions housing specific populations. Due to methodological differences and the sensitivity of the issue, estimates differ enormously, and 'analyses of sexual activity in prisons have been inconsistent and inconclusive' (Saum *et al.* 1995, p.417; see also Dumond 2000; Gibson and Hensley 2013; Jones

and Pratt 2008; Marcum 2014; O'Donnell 2004). Prison cultures, whilst typically homophobic, differ in their acceptance of men-on-men sex: some accommodate it, albeit with a host of caveats (for example, US, Costa Rica, and South Africa), and others abhor it (for example, Israel and Taiwan) (Booyens and Bezuidenhout 2014; Einat 2012; Gear 2005; Hsu 2005; Schifter 1999; Trammell 2011).

Because of restricted access and sensitivity of the issue, researchers seldom have the opportunity to establish adequate trust with research participants (Cochran 2012; D'Alessio, Flexon and Stolzenberg 2013; Eigenberg 2000; Morash *et al.* 2012; Saum *et al.* 1995; for a notable exception, see Schifter 1999). Although these studies offer valuable insights, such issues as how prisoners explain the nature and frequency of sex in prison, how they reconcile societal and prison-specific homophobia with the prison sex culture, and how they perceive their own sexuality and that of others, as well as the role of deprivation, require qualitative analysis (Eigenberg 1992; Saum *et al.* 1995). This article's methodology allows me to begin to address these issues.

Semi-ethnographic Case Study of a Ukrainian Medium-security Correctional Colony

My semi-ethnographic study comprised almost daily visits to a men's medium-security prison in the Kyiv region, Ukraine, over five months. Initially meeting suspicion, I eventually established my presence and gained the acceptance of the prison population. My sustained presence, genuine interest, independence and authenticity as a person and researcher cultivated trust between me and the men in the prison – staff and prisoners alike. Both invited me to their informal gatherings and shared their food and drink. I spent time, talked with, and observed, prisoners of all ages, with different incarceration histories, and with different standings in the informal hierarchy. Similarly, whilst emphasising my neutrality, I had discussions with officers from all prison departments, men with different experiences and reputations.

Over the five months, I spoke with about a third of the prisoners and with all officers and managers. Because my major interest comprised power relations, this inevitably led to discussions of the prison sex culture, *sub rosa* economy, drug use, argot, humour, prison labour, 'Europeanisation' and regime liberalisation, and many other issues. Neither prisoners, officers, nor I, shied away from sensitive issues. In fact, I was amazed by my research participants' openness and directness; many wholeheartedly self-appointed as my guides into the hidden world of a Ukrainian prison. Once clear that no topic constituted a taboo, my questions became direct and detailed, as did the responses. Although not everyone was eager to talk about sex at length, some did. Despite having conducted fieldwork in other penal institutions before, sometimes I could not conceal my emotions even when I wanted to, as this episode illustrates:

Fieldnote. The prisoners told a joke which I didn't get. They patiently explain that if a prisoner discloses that he had performed oral sex on a woman, he could be

ostracised. The misogynistic explanation follows: 'If he licks a woman, there is no reason he should not suck a dick'. Probably the astonishment and confusion is too vivid on my face. Prisoners wink at each other and say, 'It's good Anton is not a prisoner as it looks like we would have to [ostracise] him'.

After several months of informal, often prolonged, conversations, I identified 21 staff and 20 prisoners whom I found most helpful for advancing my research questions through semi-structured interviews, which lasted two to six hours, usually over several sessions. The interviewees included two 'operational' and one 'non-operational' Outcasts, as well as prisoners from other 'castes' (discussed in following sections), and officers from all grades, including the medical officer and Prison Commander.

We held our discussions and interviews mostly in private in various offices, prison workshops, the kitchen, and the segregation unit; one occurred on the prison parade ground whilst we paced back and forth for about two hours at 1 am during one of my overnight stays in the prison.² The busy prison life meant that other prisoners and officers at times interrupted conversations and interviews by walking in. Sometimes we paused; at other times, the interviewees drew the newcomers into our interviews. Occasionally, such co-optations took on the flavour of focus groups, with my research participants challenging each other's claims. This, in turn, gave me licence to challenge their accounts when incompatible with the behaviour I had observed, or when our values clashed (see Springwood and King (2001, p.409) on 'colliding voices'). Most interviewees consented to be voice-recorded.

Given the nature of the data, the analysis was thematic. Although content analysis of the observation and post-conversation notes, as well as interview transcriptions, notes, and recordings, produced myriad themes, this article limits itself to power, sex, and sexuality. As a case study of a single institution, without an ambition to generalise, this 'near data' research (Christie 1997, p.21) sheds light on how masculine prison culture may curb sexual violence.

The Case Study Prison

As it was a medium-security institution, the prison housed about 800 repeat or first-time serious offenders, mostly from the capital region. The majority were convicted of theft or burglary, often associated with drug abuse, although prisoners and officers concurred in their claims about the scarcity of drugs inside. Those convicted of murder, rape, or similar violent crimes constituted about a quarter of the population. Prisoners were mostly young: on one representative day, six were 20 years old or younger, 340 were aged 20–30 years, 341 were aged 30–40 years, 140 were aged 40–55 years, 11 were aged 55–60 years, and eight were older than 60 years. The average sentence length was five years, although several prisoners were serving 10–15 years. Most prisoners came from poor socio-economic backgrounds, many exhibited a low educational level, and most had never held any legitimate employment. About a dozen prisoners attended

Sunday mass in a prison Eastern Orthodox church; another 10–20 participated in weekly Protestant services.

Family connections varied: some men received regular visits, whilst others had none. A sentenced adult was permitted a long visit quarterly with legally-recognised close family members, such as (grand)parents, spouses, (grand)children, and siblings, for 24–72 hours (at the prison Commander's discretion) in an isolated hotel section of the prison (Ukraine, Criminal-Executive Code (CECU) 2003, Article 143).³ Unlike other jurisdictions, Ukraine has no policy on sex in prison, even though the Ukraine, Prison Byelaws (2003) provide much detail on other aspects of incarceration.

The prison assigned prisoners to squads, each comprising about 50 men. Squad members normally shared a dormitory and worked in the same workshop. This 'carceral collectivism' (Piacentini and Slade 2015) helped ensure mutual prisoner surveillance. Unlike in other jurisdictions, apart from the legally guaranteed eight hours of uninterrupted sleep, two hours of free time, and weekly days off, unless they are sick or over the age of retirement, Ukrainian prisoners actually have little idle time (Ukraine, Criminal-Executive Code (CECU) 2003, Articles 118, 119, 129; Ukraine, Prison Byelaws (2003), Rule 31; cf. Gear 2005, 2007; Reed 2003; Schifter 1999).

Like other Ukrainian prisons, the case study prison was grossly understaffed, with virtually no electronic surveillance. On an average day, 25 or fewer officers covered a vast industrial zone with various workshops, a segregation unit, a medical ward, and an extensive residential zone subdivided into local zones, each housing two to four squads. In this context, the prison's smooth operation depended on the self-regulated prisoner sociality.

Ukrainian Response to Sykes: Prisoner Hierarchy

All inter-prisoner relations, including sexual ones, were embedded in an informal hierarchical power structure, the prison underworld. Most interviewed prisoners believed this inescapable, stratified fixture offered the only viable option to ensure peaceful coexistence. It operated by regimenting minute details of prison life and severely punishing transgressions of its inmate code and its concomitantly misogynistic and homophobic understanding of masculinity (Cowburn 1998; Flood 2008; Jewkes 2005).

Prisoner Stratification

Like prisons in the West and beyond, in Ukraine a prisoner's place in the prisoner hierarchy depends, first, on how his manliness corresponds with a reductionist, hegemonic, working-class conception of masculinity (Clemmer 1940; Crewe 2009; Phillips 2012) and, second, on his attitudes toward prison authorities. During initial incarceration, established prisoners observe, test, and interview, often cunningly through seemingly innocuous, friendly conversations, each newcomer to determine his status, based on his conduct, qualities, and past, including his sexual history. Whereas the informal hierarchy in this prison, as elsewhere in Ukraine, comprised

four main strata, Criminal Elites, Blokes, Collaborators, and Outcasts, for the current discussion it suffices to note that prisoners fell into either the 'men' (the former three strata) or 'non-men' (Outcasts) categories. The latter comprised 64 out of 800 prisoners.

As in other prisoner societies around the globe, Ukrainian prisoners symbolically degraded to the status of women those who did not embody the popular understanding of a man (Booyens and Bezuidenhout 2014; Gear 2005; Schifter 1999; Trammell 2011). These 'failed and fallen' men (Kupers 2010, p.114) became the Outcasts. Masculine 'failures' included having committed crimes which prisoners universally consider unmanly: sexual offences and crimes against children, as well as having ever been anally or orally penetrated (consensual sex or rape) (Bandyopadhyay 2006; Crewe 2009; Einat 2012; Hsu 2005). Other transgressions 'below the dignity of a man' could include stealing from other prisoners, failing to repay a debt, being an informant, or arbitrarily using force that had led to grave consequences. As in other homosocial environments, prisoners coerced some men to join the Outcasts because of their lack of 'masculine' stoicism in coping with the travails of imprisonment and even for not being appropriately social (Flood 2008; Jewkes 2005; Schifter 1999). Lack of prison acumen could also lead to ostracism; for example, prisoners might manipulate a newcomer in a card game by not explaining that his 'arse' was at stake in the game (Dumond 2000; Gear 2005). Generally, the Outcasts corresponded to 'punks' and 'fags' in US prisons (Sykes 1958; Trammell 2011). However, unlike in some prisoner societies, Ukrainian 'non-men' prisoners could not reclaim their masculine status, not even through violence (cf. Egelund 2014; Gear 2005).

The expulsion from the group was both symbolical and physical: Outcasts' beds in dormitories and their tables in the prison cafeteria stood apart from the rest. Maintaining its jurisdiction over Outcasts, the underworld barred them from touching the food, cutlery, mugs or plates of other prisoners. Informal rules outlawed shaking hands with Outcasts: in traditional Ukrainian society, a handshake denotes recognition of an individual's masculinity.

Power and Legitimacy of the Underworld

Whilst discriminating against 'failed men', the prisoner stratified power structure assuaged such pains of imprisonment as insecurity, given that resolution of all disputes had to follow an established informal protocol. In fact, whereas previous research often associates violence and sexual exploitation in prison with masculinity and power hierarchies, my data show that despite its harsh norms and sanctions, the Ukrainian underworld prisoner sociality curtailed violence (cf. Gear 2005, 2007; Morash *et al.* 2012; Ricciardelli 2014; Schifter 1999; Trammell 2011). For example, in response to my Freedom of Information request, the Ukrainian Penitentiary Service (UkrPS) reported two murders and seven cases of bodily assault in its 148 establishments holding 66,000 prisoners, including 10,300 convicted of premeditated murder and 4,700 convicted of grave bodily assault

(Ukraine, Penitentiary Service 2016). Notwithstanding the required scepticism about the official statistics, the level of violence could have been substantially higher, given the number of prisoners and minimal supervision. The relative peace emanated from one of the main tenets of the prisoner normative system: prohibition of arbitrary violence, *bespredyél*:

You are accountable (*otvecháyeshy*) for your every word, every step. If you say something, you must prove it. You cannot just come and hit somebody, even an Outcast, just because you don't like their face. Any conflict you've got, you bring it to [the Criminal-Elite]. If he finds that another con acted in violation of *ponyátiya* [informal rules], only then would that prisoner be punished. (Prisoner-Collaborator)

Whereas normative commitment to the underworld varied, the power of the underworld stemmed from its expediency and from its inescapability. When inter-prisoner conflicts, often arising from illicit activities, such as gambling, *a priori* could not be resolved through official means, the deeply institutionalised office of Criminal-Elite adjudicated such situation: 'There is no way to live [in prison] without *ponyátiya*. Take this situation: two cons [cannot come to an agreement] over drugs. What shall they do? Go and ask the Master [*Khazyáyn*, Prison Commander] to resolve the disagreement? [laughs] Do you think it would be better if they took out knives and dealt with it this way?' (Prisoner-Criminal-Elite). The UkrPS officially considers that 'criminal traditions', that is, the set of unofficial but universal norms and values guiding prisoner sociality, undermine prisoner 'rehabilitation' and 'correction' and threaten order. However, in this prison, maintaining the peace strongly depended on maintaining the inmate code – and the officers knew this.

The success of the underworld stemmed from its perceived legitimacy and utility, combined with the certainty of its enforcement, including through violence or by the downgrading of status, or both. The certainty of punishment was a product of the prison's 'carceral collectivism' and pervasive mutual surveillance (privacy was virtually unattainable). In addition, a failure to report others' transgressions entailed severe sanctions. Therefore, unlike many formal rules, the informal ones were consistently, and harshly, enforced. One prisoner recalled: 'You know, [on the outside] I used to steal for four years before I was caught. I always got away with it. However, here, I stole once and I was black and blue. They [prisoners] beat shit out of me. I know here if I steal I'll be punished for sure, and punished severely' (Prisoner-Outcast).

Despite its origins in the Soviet Gulag and conservatism, the Ukrainian prison underworld is dynamic. One of the major changes following the restoration of Ukraine's independence was the highest cadre of the national Criminal-Elite (*shhódka voróv*, meeting of the 'thieves') prohibiting inter-prisoner rape by the mid-1990s. Formerly, ostracising a prisoner into Outcasts constituted a ritualistic rape, similar to 'emasculat[i]on' practices in other prisoner societies (Gear 2005; Reed 2003; Schifter 1999; Trammell 2011). Since then, the expulsion has been symbolised by a verbal declaration, pouring a mug of urine on a prisoner, or a prisoner 'voluntarily' taking his bedding and moving to the *petushátnya* ('rooster-cot', also known

as the harem), a section of the dormitory where Outcasts sleep. Some of my interviewees associated this ‘humanisation’ of the prison culture with the fear of AIDS, something supported by other studies (Eigenberg 2000; Einat 2012, 2014; Schifter 1999). Others explained the ‘punishment with a dick’ (rape) was outlawed by the Criminal-Elite because of the group’s concern for its diminishing hegemony – the number of Outcasts was increasing, along with associated prisoner resentment, and the law-enforcement officials (*musorá*) actively exploited the latter. Concurrently, de-communisation meant the state was becoming more humane, curtailing state violence and relaxing prison regimes. These transformations have been eroding the basis for prisoner allegiance to the underworld, as such allegiance partially constituted a response to the state’s treatment of prisoners as subhuman and harsh prison conditions. Regardless of the reason for the ruling, it meant prisoners could no longer rape other prisoners with impunity.

Notwithstanding their rhetorical condemnation, officers on the ground depended on the underworld to maximise peace in prison. Their awareness of this dependence meant that they accommodated certain informal regulations of the underworld. For example, officers tolerated physical segregation of the Outcasts; they did not venture to assign them to the kitchen or the Criminal-Elite to clean toilets (‘a task below a man’s dignity’), knowing the prisoners would respond with a hunger strike or self-mutilation.⁴ The officer in charge of the allocation unit told me he ‘encouraged’ new prisoners to join Outcasts if they met the criteria, so as to avoid conflicts later when such information became known. Many officers embraced the prison culture, including homophobic and misogynistic prejudices; some even seemed reluctant to search (touch) Outcasts.

A few officers lamented the ‘demise’ of the prisoner underworld, perceiving a new ‘softness’ and a tendency to waver from old customs (see Jewkes (2005, p.51) on ‘degenerated’ prisons). For example, several officers (and prisoners) expressed indignation that a Collaborator serving a sentence for gravely assaulting a baby ‘walked around the camp [prison] shaking hands with Blokes’ instead of being ostracised. What they meant by ‘demise,’ however, was a softening of the informal norms, not necessarily their erosion or disappearance.

Regimentation of Sex

On the one hand, the official policies neglected prisoner sex; on the other hand, the informal law strictly regimented it. As in most other prisoner societies, in Ukraine sex between men in prison must mimic the patriarchal gender division of the larger society for the prisoner sociality to deem it legitimate (Egelund 2014; Gear 2005, 2007; Kupers 2010; Schifter 1999; Trammell 2011). Hence, prisoners had to obey the ‘inserter’-‘insertee’ rules; only Outcasts could be ‘insertees’, as the prisoner sociality had stripped them of manhood. Those who had retained masculine status could anally or orally penetrate only an Outcast, but not touch his penis, caress or kiss him, or be penetrated.

Although symbolically relegated to being women, unlike elsewhere, Ukrainian Outcasts did not imitate women in their appearance, mannerisms or names (cf. Blackburn, Fowler and Mullings 2014; Levan 2014; Marcum 2014; Reed 2003). Some, in the words of one Prisoner-Blake, were ‘ugly like a nuclear war’. Furthermore, Ukrainian prisoner culture did not tolerate any sustained sexual or domestic pairing of male prisoners, either voluntary or coerced. The informal prohibition of rape and arbitrary violence meant that so-called ‘protective pairing’, in other words, sexual exploitation typical of some prison cultures, was unacceptable in Ukraine (cf. Booyens and Bezuidenhout 2014; Egelund 2014; Gear 2005, 2007; Reed 2003; Schifter 1999; Trammell 2011).

Like their counterparts in other countries, these Ukrainian Outcasts engaged in ‘unmanly jobs’, such as doing laundry, cleaning toilets, standing lookout and fetching things (Egelund 2014; Schifter 1999; Trammell 2011). Given the prohibition of rape, Outcasts comprised two subgroups: ‘operational’ (*rabóchiye petukht*) and ‘non-operational’. The former provided sex services as a part of a *sub rosa* prison economy. However, according to the informal rules of the underworld, prisoners could not force Outcasts to provide services, including sex, and payment was mandatory, as one prisoner explained:

Although I’m an Outcast, I’m not a slave and cons pay me. There was one *khitrozópy* [smart-arse] prisoner, a young one, so he was telling me ‘tomorrow’ or ‘next week’ [that is, was deferring a payment]. So I went to [the Criminal-Elite] and told him this. He called in this con and told him, ‘If you don’t pay by the evening roll call, tomorrow you’ll be *dráity paráshy* [scrubbing close-stools] [that is, will be ostracised]. In 30 minutes he came back with five packs of [cigarettes] [that is, paid his debt]. (Prisoner-Outcast)

Prisoners tended to approach Outcasts, but one Outcast actively initiated ‘business’. As he explained, he could gauge by a prisoner’s ‘look’ if the prisoner was ready to pay for sex favours: ‘I come up and say, “Hey, let’s go and relax!” The prisoner either tells [me] to fuck off or hesitates – and then it’s a matter of the agreed payment. But I won’t approach somebody I don’t know’. The ‘operational’ Outcasts also said they avoided clients under the influence of alcohol or drugs for two reasons: (i) the clients might have no recollection of the received services and thus deny payment; and (ii) sex in their condition could be too time-consuming as the contract implied their ejaculation.

All prisoners rejected the suggestion that Outcasts could be coerced into sex. Outcasts’ monopoly in providing not only sex services, but also cleaning, made them valuable. As a Prisoner-Collaborator explained: ‘Everyone tries to leave Outcasts in peace as if they don’t like it they can move the squad. And then who would clean the dorm [of that squad]? I will be the first to move to the [segregation unit for “inadequate sanitary condition” of the premises]’.

The reasons my interviewees offered for their ‘operational’ work varied. Most claimed heterosexuality (Saum *et al.* 1995) and explained their sex work in terms of a desire to earn extra money, since they lacked

support from the outside (see Einat and Chen (2012) on ‘canteen whores’). As one sex-provider explained: ‘I need to get cigarettes and tea from somewhere. My family has disowned me. I think I’ve degraded. I no longer care’. This self-perception was corroborated by others who, like prisoners in other hypermasculine cultures, believed that prisoners became Outcasts because of ‘physical and moral weakness’; that is, they were ‘lesser men’ or in Reed’s (2003) study in Papua New Guinea, ‘half women’ (p.117; see also Booyens and Bezuidenhout 2014; Egelund 2014; Einat 2012; Schifter 1999). One Outcast self-identified as gay and had a male partner before incarceration. Another described himself as bisexual, stating that in prison, unlike on the outside where he had a woman partner and a daughter, he was sexually attracted to men. Despite prostituting himself commercially in the prison, sometimes he offered free sex services to prisoners whom he fancied. He admitted that many refused such offers, but attributed such refusals to prisoners’ ‘shyness’, implying their unwillingness to publicise their same-sex sexual liaisons.

‘It’s Your Own Business (but I Probably Disapprove)’: Attitudes to Sex

Although the underworld discourse portrayed Outcasts as women and legitimised consensual sex with them to alleviate the deprivation of heterosexual sex, many prisoners still viewed it as sex with men and for ideological, and sometimes aesthetic, reasons did not seek it. Furthermore, they questioned the sexuality, and by extension, the masculinity of those prisoners who had sex with Outcasts. As one prisoner stated: ‘Those who fuck the Outcasts say they . . . just need to release, and there are no women [in prison]. But I think they like it. I wouldn’t be able to get a hard-on’ (Prisoner-Blake). Some expressed qualms directly, but teasing prisoners known to have had sex with Outcasts was more common (see Richmond (1978) on gaol humour). Corroborating Einat’s (2012) findings in an Israeli prison, in my study only a few cited deprivation as a sufficient reason for sex with Outcasts (see Eigenberg 1992).

Even though prisoners might have questioned the heterosexuality of those engaging in sex with Outcasts, they, nonetheless, respected privacy. Thus, placing a piece of toilet paper or a chair on the handle of the door leading to the communal toilet insured that a prisoner would have privacy. Prisoners generally used such brief periods of privacy for masturbation or for an Outcast to perform oral sex on another prisoner. Some interviewees mentioned that occasionally prisoners engaged in an illicit telephone conversation with their girlfriends while an Outcast was performing fellatio (which typically cost a pack of cigarettes and a tablespoon of tealeaves, the major informal currency). Additionally, some prisoners used a (heterosexual) pornographic magazine during intercourse. These practices emphasised the ‘heterosexuality’ of non-Outcasts as they presented sex with other men as a means to release sexual ‘tension’ and as a substitute for sex with women (see Eigenberg 2000).

Similar to prisoners in the global South, many Ukrainian prisoners revealed a number of sex-related myths (Reed 2003; Schifter 1999).

Although not believing that sex ‘depleted’ their semen (Reed 2003, p.134), some were confident that sex with men, regardless of ‘insertor’-‘insertee’ roles, caused irreversible sexual and moral damage. One of the jokes prisoners shared depicted a released prisoner seeking sex with his son and daughter because of ‘insertor’ sex in prison. The popular consensus was that masturbation should suffice for sexual release. Although some mocked ‘persistent masturbators’, such jokes were condescending rather than vitriolic, and prisoners attributed ‘frequent’ masturbation to youth (‘hormones at play’).

Although the majority of prisoners rarely, if ever, invoked God or religion, many alluded to the biblical and cultural abhorrence of same-sex sexual liaisons (Einat 2012).⁵ Similarly, some officers, especially those with an anti-Western (pro-Russian) political stance, cited the Bible in support of their homophobia. They also called on conspiracy theories, portraying the government-backed push towards greater toleration as a Western plot to, in the words of one officer, ‘ruin [Ukrainian] moral values, families, and our society’ (see also Egelund 2014). Other officers appeared condescending rather than disapproving, often invoking the concept of ‘situational homosexuality’ (promulgated by Soviet and post-Soviet psychiatry and penology). Still others expressed liberal views about the normality of consensual sex between adults. Although the First Deputy argued that prison sex was illegal because Ukrainian law prohibits sex in public (and nudity, for that matter),⁶ none of the research participants mentioned a single case of authorities prosecuting prisoners for their sexual behaviour.

Regardless of the diversity of attitudes towards same-sex sex, only one prisoner self-identified as gay and none of the non-Outcast prisoners disclosed sexual liaisons with non-Outcasts or admitted a pre-existing or newly-developed sexual attraction to men, apart from the two aforementioned Outcasts (Blackburn, Fowler and Mullings 2014; Egelund 2014; Richmond 1978). Whilst it was impossible to ascertain whether such men and liaisons existed, this suggests an entrenched homophobia. In accord with previous research, these prisoners derived and constructed their manhood according to a patriarchal, working-class (or rather underclass) conception of masculinity, which censures equality in sexual relations and sex between men.

As in all masculine societies, prisoners closely monitored each other’s conduct, simultaneously aware that they were equally scrutinised (Flood 2008; Jewkes 2005; Robinson 2011). This mutual surveillance meant that prisoners were ‘caught up in a power situation of which they [were] themselves the bearers’ (Foucault 1991, p.201). As mentioned, a failure to report a transgression constituted a serious violation of the inmate code, as the following incident highlights:

When I entered the [industrial] shop, at first, I couldn’t believe it! [Prisoner A] and [Prisoner B] were sleeping naked on the floor, with B’s arm on A. OK, [Prisoner A] is young and so on. But [Prisoner B]! He is an old con, a *muzhjk* [Bloke, a man]!! We all have drunk tea with him.⁷ So I was really confused. But I was with another prisoner. So if I didn’t tell this to the others, they would beat the shit out of me

when this became known. So I ran to get [another prisoner] with a mobile, we took pictures and sent them to [Head of the Security Department at that time] and around the camp [prison]. (Prisoner-Collaborator)

As this comment demonstrates, the underworld survived via pervasive surveillance, exacerbated by the lack of privacy and the certainty of enforcement of informal norms. This incident also suggests that, contrary to the deprivation model, both new and seasoned prisoners, young and old, could seek intimacy, if not sex.

Some prisoners, in accord with Schifter's (1999) findings in Costa Rica, violated the informal sex regimentation, albeit at their peril. Outcasts stated that whilst most prisoners followed the prescribed sex protocol, some of their clients contravened it, with all parties being mindful of transgressing. One told me: 'Some of them will grab my dick and wank me off – they do like it. But they threaten me that if I tell anyone they will get me . . . Some can't cum without a finger in their arse' (Prisoner-Outcast). Prisoners mentioned both innocuous transgressions and rape. Although I did not hear of any rapes in this prison, because either they did not occur, or the rapport we had established was not sufficient, one prisoner mentioned an incident when two drunken prisoners raped their cellmate in Kyiv remand prison. In response to my Freedom of Information request, and despite universal scepticism about the official recording of sex and rape in prison (Eigenberg 2000; Jones and Pratt 2008; Saum *et al.* 1995; Zaitsow 2014), the UkrPS reported it had officially registered two rape cases in 2011 and one in 2013. Such cases demonstrate that the underworld's tight hold does not entirely preclude sexual victimisation.

Unlike prisoners in Costa Rica, South Africa, or the US, these Ukrainian prisoners did not construct their masculinity in terms of their sexual prowess or having sex slaves (cf. Egelund 2014; Gear 2005, 2007; Schifter 1999; Trammell 2011). Furthermore, whereas other studies report 'mounting physical desire' (Sykes 1958, p.72) and sex as common among prisoners, my research participants generally claimed that a minority of prisoners were having sex in the prison (cf. Reed 2003; Schifter 1999). Some disclosed a diminished libido and ascribed it to the authorities adding bromide to prisoner food, although the latter dismissed this as a conspiracy theory. Others explained a diminished sex drive by pointing to the uninspiring environment, busy timetable, and poor nutrition. One of the prisoners told me to look around for the reason: 'Would you get horny in these conditions? Depressed – yes, horny – no' (Prisoner-Collaborator). Others said they 'sublimated' by doing sports, reading, working, and generally keeping busy, and masturbating when needed.

Whereas officers in their jokes and stories occasionally alluded to sex, prisoners generally toned down such references. Apart from occasional jests and banter, mostly related to masturbation, prisoners did not recount their sexual achievements or boast about their sex appeal, a behaviour typical of homosocial communities (Crewe 2009; Flood 2008; Phillips 2012; Reed 2003). Even prisoners receiving conjugal visits, the minority, tended not to accentuate it; some attributed this discretion to respect (and

compassion) for those less fortunate. However, prisoners generally praised those who managed to establish relationships through online dating sites and social media (using illicit phones) and to eventually get married. The praise was chiefly misogynistic, since both prisoners and officers believed, and readily shared anecdotes to support their views, that prisoners exploited prison wives, *zaóchnitsy*, to receive food parcels and conjugal visits and abandoned them after release (see Blackburn, Fowler and Mullings (2014) on women prisoners exploiting ‘sugar daddies’). Witnessing one such prison wedding, I heard only cynical comments from the officers present; the bride overheard and rebutted them fiercely, denigrating the officers’ manhood by pointing to their low social status and potential marital problems.

Although in the Ukrainian prison, unlike reported elsewhere, sex hardly constituted a taboo (cf. Saum *et al.* 1995), many prisoners were uncomfortable admitting that they had a sexual liaison with an Outcast, as the following incident makes clear:

Fieldnote. I am interviewing a prisoner in a squad supervisor’s office. At some point, another prisoner joined us when he entered the office looking for his friend. Later, the squad supervisor entered the office to get paperwork and was engaged by my interviewees to support their statements. So now all three were participating in the interview. Somehow, the prisoners mentioned the role of Outcasts. One of the prisoners stated that these ‘were not men’ and that he did not understand how a ‘normal’ man would have sex with them. The squad supervisor challenged the prisoner by reminding him how he saw him engaged in oral sex with one of the Outcasts under the staircase in the sewing shop some time ago. All laughed but it was evident that the prisoner was embarrassed, both because of the information revealed and the fact that he was being dishonest. Afterwards, his responses sounded more honest He seemed to reconcile his actual experience with his values and convictions and admitted that at times they diverge.

Exactly how prevalent sex was in this prison is difficult to determine. The above story indicates the reluctance of many prisoners to talk about their own experiences, suggesting the precariousness of masculinity in prison and the engrained homophobia of the prison culture. Nonetheless, all research participants agreed it was impossible to hide anything in the prison for too long, and offered a host of anecdotes in support of this claim. Whereas few non-Outcasts admitted to having sex with Outcasts, eight ‘operational’ Outcasts claimed to have regular clients (four were offering only oral sex), although the estimates of the number of clients ranged from several prisoners to claims by one ‘operational’ Outcast that a third of prisoners had used his services. Whereas most ‘operational’ Outcasts cited heterosexuality and unwillingness to face publicity as prisoners’ reason not to engage in sex with Outcasts, one Outcast attributed it to financial constraints. He stated that during holiday seasons, with a concomitant influx of parcels from relatives, he could have dozens of clients a day, ‘with barely a break for a cigarette’. Yet most prisoners estimated that no more than a tenth of prisoners used sex services by Outcasts, even during the festive season.

Summary and Conclusion

Although researchers and the media commonly report rampant sexual abuse in prisons (Jones and Pratt 2008; Marcum 2014; Saum *et al.* 1995; Zaitsov 2014), this study, the first of its kind in Ukraine, suggests coercive sexual activity in this particular Ukrainian men's prison is limited. This can largely be attributed to the prison underworld. Ukrainian prison authorities may portray this informal organisation as a threat to prisoners' 'correction' and 'rehabilitation', but, in fact, it works to curtail violence and sexual victimisation by regimenting the minute details of inter-prisoner relations, including sexual activity, levying severe punishments on transgressors and guaranteeing a degree of protection and co-existence to all. This is not a defence of the organisation, however, as my findings also suggest it can instigate prison violence.

Being limited to a single institution, and given the sensitivity of the issue at hand, this study cannot provide a holistic picture of sexual and power relations in the Ukraine's vast penal system, nor can it measure accurately the prevalence of sex in an individual institution. Instead, the 'near data research' (Christie 1997, p.21) notes the place of human sexuality in prisoner power relations in one prison. It traces the infusion and extension of homophobia and misogyny from the wider society into the prisoner sociality. A hegemonic conception of masculinity is translated into the stratification of prisoner sociality, with some assigned the status of women and relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy. In this way, the prisoner sociality reconciles virulent homophobia with sex among men. However, whilst importing homophobia and misogyny and mimicking the patriarchal gender division of the outside society by legitimising sex with 'non-men' prisoners, the Ukrainian prisoner sociality erodes the structural base for sexual exploitation ('protective pairing') by outlawing and punishing the arbitrary use of violence. Thus, unlike in many other prison societies, these Ukrainian 'non-men' prisoners have a choice whether to engage in sex with other prisoners – and most elect to not do so because they self-identify as heterosexual men and express homophobic beliefs equal to those of other prisoners or officers. To sustain peace and bolster its legitimacy, the underworld organisation allows the Outcasts this choice. However, whether the Outcasts would have the same choice were they to live in a prison with greater popular demand for sex and fewer willing sex-providers is unclear.

Furthermore, despite the informal discourse equating 'emasculated' prisoners with women and legitimising sex with them, the majority of the prisoners see the Outcasts as men, albeit not sufficiently manly men, and due to, foremost, homophobic attitudes, abstain from, and disapprove, sex and relationships with these 'fallen men'. Many prisoners and officers were obviously uncomfortable about men having sex with men. A few invoked cultural (even political) and religious reasons for their discomfort, despite generally appearing to be not very religious; some alluded to aesthetics and hygiene. Thus, shifts in acceptance of same-sex relationships in Ukrainian society-at-large may eventually affect sex cultures in the country's prisons.

Finally, prisoners in this study did not construct their masculinities in terms of their sexual exploits with either men or women, countering the findings of previous research. Only further research can ascertain whether the downplaying of sexual power is a reason for, or the result of, relatively limited sexual liaisons in the prison.⁸

Notes

- 1 Notwithstanding the diversity of sexual practices, hereafter 'sex' refers to a sexual activity involving at least two individuals (as opposed, for example, to masturbation or sex with inanimate objects or animals).
- 2 Prisoners acquire this conversational habit in remand prisons to gain some privacy.
- 3 The law in Ukraine does not recognise same-sex families. The policy allows long visits with unmarried partners of a different sex if the couple has common underage children (Ukraine, Criminal-Executive Code (CECU) 2003, Article 110). For short visits of up to four hours in the presence of prison staff the law places no restrictions on visitors.
- 4 Prisoners told me about nine Criminal-Elites who slashed their veins in response to the authorities assigning them to cleaning toilets. Anticipating refusal, the authorities had assigned this task knowing they would ultimately be able to place the prisoners in segregation.
- 5 Homophobic beliefs do not necessarily prevent prisoners from engaging in same-sex sex (Einat and Chen 2012).
- 6 A similar legal challenge occurred, albeit briefly, in British prisons when parliament outlawed smoking in public spaces in England and Wales. The prison service solved the problem by declaring landings to be public spaces and allowing prisoners to smoke in their cells.
- 7 Drinking tea from the same mug and passing it around the circle constituted a traditional homosocial ritual, symbolising fraternity – thus excluding Outcasts.
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