



Manhood, Violence and Coercive Sexualities in Men's Prisons: Dynamics and Consequences Behind Bars and Beyond

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My talk draws on a mix of qualitative and quantitative research that I've been doing over the last few years at the CSVr in Johannesburg on sexual violence in men's prisons. I'm going to start with one of the things that has been striking and that initially was something of a jolt to my assumptions - this is the relative readiness of perpetrators of male same-sex rape in prison to report this violence to us as compared to the bashfulness of victims.

It's the context of this situation - where perpetrators seem more willing to talk about their violence than victims - that I'm going to be looking at and hopefully show how this situation is well explained by the social place that sexual violence occupies in prison - the meanings and understandings ascribed to it. Specifically it has a lot to show us about particular notions of gender and sexuality and how these are related to violence - issues that have pertinence far beyond prison walls as well.

The ways in which sexual violence in men's prisons is understood and lived is largely framed by dominant inmate culture - the behaviours and understandings considered 'normal' in that context and which are upheld by those wielding most power.

Sexual violence in prison is interwoven in the hierarchies and rituals of dominant inmate culture, which in SA, is strongly influenced by prison gangsterism. So for example, sexual violence is structured into gang hierarchies and the classification of new members into these hierarchies. But while sexual violence is so embedded in this culture - the many ways in which the culture normalizes the violence simultaneously make the violence invisible.

One way in which this happens is that parties in the violence are conceptually made invisible. Male victims of prison sexual violence are no longer even acknowledged as men, but are commonly believed to have been turned into 'women' . In the words of one of our respondents,

"If ... sex [is done to you], ... you are now a woman ... There is nothing we can do ... and we don't care ... When [you] walk past people want to touch [you] or threaten to rape [you]."

Another aspect of this making invisible is how sexual violence is normalized through forced partnerings which are often referred to as prison "marriages" . The majority of rape victims end up being taken as wives or "wyfies" in forced marriages relationships by the perpetrators who the dominant inmate culture views as 'men' .

A central facet of these forced marriages is that wyfies (who have had the feminized identity imposed on them) are seen as the means to the 'men's' sexual gratification and, in the vast majority of cases, marriages become the place of ongoing sexual abuse for the wyfies.

While these marriages are rather abruptly and brutally brought about through rape, in more than a few ways - they also mimic the dominant heterosexual marriages that we're all familiar with outside. And this resemblance is regularly drawn on to justify and legitimize them - with inmate saying things like "but prison wives are treated just like women outside" . Ultimately 'marriages' also smooth over the anxiety-provoking issue of violence by disappearing its protagonists: they turn victims into 'wives' and perpetrators into 'men' .

In contrast, other powerful and prevalent discourses bring very specific unwanted attention on the victim, blaming him for what has happened to him and building the perception that rape is the victim's fault and the perpetrator has done nothing wrong. While in these ways, sexual violence is minimized and obscured at the same time that there's a profound stigmatization of victims, there are other forms of violence that

are seen as central to establishing identities that are desirable and validated in inmate culture.

Here I'm talking about the meanings attached to manhood in prison where a capacity to both use and withstand violence is considered necessary. (This is along with qualities like manipulation skills and self-sufficiency.) Violence is SO wrapped up with "manhood" that if someone who has been made into a "woman" wants to escape the abuse and be promoted to "manhood" he'll have to commit violence to prove his worthiness.

In making sense of all this, I've found the work of Antony Whitehead's (2005) particularly useful. Whitehead looks at the ways in which different forms of violence fulfill different functions in men's relations with each other, particularly in contexts of what he refers to as "masculinity anxiety" where men have fear about their identity as men and feel particularly compelled to prove their 'manhood' to their peers. Prisons - where there are few positive opportunities to build esteem - are certainly one of these environments.

The fear of losing one's manhood, Whitehead argues, comes from the romanticized ideal that manhood is mainly about transcendental courage (fearlessness). In reality however such courage can not be consistently achieved, but violence is one of the ways that may be used to assert it.

Whitehead goes on to identify two different categories of violence used to assert masculinity amongst men: There's "Violence which includes victims in the category 'man' as a worthy rival" - so it's seen as men fighting against each other. And then there's violence which functions to exclude victims from the category 'man' - saying that he's unworthy of the status " (Whitehead, 2005, p411) Instead, this violence is seen as making the victim into a 'non-man'.

Male rape in prison can clearly be seen as an example of this second type of violence: it's understood to turn the victim into a non-man ("woman"), while confirming the masculinity of the perpetrator. Indeed, a key thing about the notion of prison 'womanhood' is that it's seen to represent a loss of man-ness which in turn is about a fundamental loss of respect and identity amongst peers.

The notion that 'real men' cannot be raped - and that if they were real men they would have managed to fight off attackers is widespread in society generally. So

there's very minimal if any room in prevalent understandings of masculinity for experiences of victimization amongst men.

There's not much time to go into how the Department of Correctional Services treats sexual violence. But the important point here is that like in the dominant inmate culture, the official practices make prison rape invisible. Quite literally, rape is disappeared in the prison records of violence. There's no category for rape / sexual assault. So if someone is raped, this is captured under the general category of 'assault'. The policies also do not state just what it is and what is not allowed regarding sex and sexual violence. This leads to much confusion and ultimately assists in keeping sexual violence hidden for not naming it for what it is. (- also contributing to homophobia.) The lack of services and capacity in prisons to deal with sexual violence mirror this absence. The official systems then, like the inmate culture provide no space for male rape victims.

In addition, it's pertinent to consider an emerging discourse which tries to oppose these dominant currents. It's employed by some activists who attempt to address the situation and to get victims of prison rape recognised. What they've highlighted is the potential for male rape victims to themselves become violent in the future. So in its bluntest form, a regularly stated argument is that unless we pay victims the attention they deserve, they will become rapists on the outside in attempt to "regain their manhood".

But it's certainly not a given that aggression and violence follow sexual victimization - And in terms of how prison rape may generate future violence, it seems noteworthy that in these well-intentioned discourses, the victims are singled out as potential perpetrators while those doing the raping and coercing (the prison 'men') are ignored (- that's not to say that they're not sometimes the same people).

There is certainly strategic mileage in this approach where it draws much-needed attention to male rape victims, but this argument can itself be damaging. By foregrounding victims as future rapists on the outside, activists risk stigmatizing them further. So they get seen not as victims or survivors but as dangerous potential perpetrators.

The implication is that we're saying that that we' better pay victims of prison rape attention because otherwise they're probably going to rape and violate other people - and not because they're worthy of our attention simply because they've been harmed and violated. Ironically and unintentionally, this leaves male victims as few options as

they are offered by the brutal notions of 'masculinity' which have such a hold on the inmate culture.

These notions make recognition and respect conditional on a capacity for violence - and the activist discourse ends up doing the same thing by saying the reason we need to pay them attention is the danger that they'll become violent. The vulnerability of men is apparently one area that society refuses to acknowledge unless we feel threatened by what our ongoing disregard may bring.

Therefore, in attempts to start addressing male vulnerability, the way in which this has often happened also ends up uncritically assuming links between men and violence - and this situation runs the risk of endorsing the very beliefs we seek to debunk.

Finally, in a survey we did in a juvenile prison (Gear 2007). We asked the youth about different kinds of processes that they'd been through that they felt had turned them from boys into men. The emphasis was on their feelings, and they were told to include formal and informal processes, as well socially acceptable and frowned-upon processes where relevant. We found that as they'd spent longer in prison, processes of manhood that had taken place while they'd been Inside prison became more and more of a feature.

We're not however talking about exceptionally long periods of imprisonment here - For example, amongst those who'd served 2 - 3 years of their sentences, 52 % had participated in processes INSIDE prison which they felt had turned them from a boy into a man. At the same time, manhood processes taking place Inside prison were having an impact even soon after inmates' arrivals - so they didn't have to be there long to have these formative experiences. Similarly, we found that they'd gotten much of what they knew about sex from their in-prison experiences .

This is just to underscore the importance of prison experiences for inmates' sense of themselves and the critical role that prison plays in their approaches to sexuality and gender. These are approaches on which they will likely base their future relationships when they return to society.

Deeply destructive notions of what it means to be a "man" are entrenched in prison and include ones that see victims of prison sexual violence going unrecognized or receiving only stigmatized and humiliating attention while perpetrators go unchallenged and even garner respect as a result.

But while these harmful ideas about manhood may be particularly exaggerated in prison, the discourses that support them are powerful outside prison as well. Solutions to our extreme levels of violence in South African society are only going to come about with the celebration of alternative ideas of manhood that do not link respect with violence, but fundamentally, that also acknowledge male vulnerability. These are two sides of the same masculinity coin.

References

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