

**An autoethnography
of being a gay
female prison officer
in an adult male
prison: England**

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*Proud/Loud/Heard... ?
Exploring LGBT+ identity, being and experiences
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Summary

In this paper I present lived experiences of being a gay female prison officer working in an adult male prison in England. I served between 2003 and 2009 and whilst in post I kept a reflective journal of interactions between myself, staff, and prisoners. Transitioning into academia I have used data from the journal to present insights into the complexities of being a prison officer and how we survive the social world of a prison with a marginalised identity. Autoethnography (AE) is a methodological approach and suitable lens in which to present lived experiences, to uncover the hidden depths of insider positionality around LGBTQ+ as a prison officer. Sexual identity is irrelevant to the fundamental requirements of being a prison officer, yet it was a major source of conflict and confrontation whilst I was learning *how* to be a prison officer. Themes covered range on a continuum from subtle microaggressions and workplace incivility, to blatant homophobia. There are still challenges to supporting LGBTQ+ staff in terms of inclusivity, equality, and diversity. I therefore aim in this paper to bring light to some of the dynamics around sexual identity and how it plays out in the role of prison officer.

Introduction

HMPPS (His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service) statement of purpose is a clear indication of the irrelevance of sexual identity to performing the role of prison officer. The prison service statement of purpose is defined as

“Her (now His) Majesty's Prison Service serves the public by keeping in custody those committed by the courts. Our duty is to look after them with humanity and help them lead law-abiding and useful lives in custody and after release”)

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-prison-service/about>)

Therefore, we might assume that the sexual identity of prison officers has no bearing or relevance upon ability to provide humane treatment of prisoners, dedication to reintegration, resettlement, rehabilitation, and desistance. Sexual identity should indeed have no bearing upon how well prison staff work together to provide a safe custodial environment, maintain security, manage risk, and provide a purposeful regime. However, sexual identity *does matter* and can be a contested identity among both prisoners and prison staff. For HMPPS staff with marginalised identities, policies are in place to protect inclusivity, equality and diversity underpinned by the Equality Act 2010. As such, robust disciplinary policies challenge breaches of equality, diversity and inclusivity within HMPPS (previously the Prison Service), to help staff who identify as LGBTQ+ to integrate and perform their roles in prisons effectively and without discrimination. At this point, it is important to note that I left the prison service in 2009 prior to the 2010 legislation, so my LGBTQ+ identity was not protected in the same way. This paper will demonstrate some of

the key issues of working within a male prison environment as a gay female officer. This is an under reported area and therefore this paper draws upon autoethnography (AE) to offer a lived experience perspective on how a gay female prison officer '*survived the landings*'.

I worked as a prison officer at a category 'B' local prison in the Midlands England (between 2003 and 2009). Because the research around LGBTQ+ prison officers is sparse, I draw upon research from other front-line service/occupations to highlight key issues within the workplace around LGBTQ+ identities. Sexual objectification, workplace incivility, microaggressions, 'playing it straight on the landings', homophobia, and finally acceptance of LGBTQ+ status from prisoners were key themes identified within my AE research. These are presented as narratives from a journal kept when in post as an officer. The methodology section will outline the utility of autoethnography to add depth and weight to understanding the dimensions of discrimination and 'othering'. I will then present extracts from my journal to support the above themes and present a critical analysis to unpick and underpin the significance of being a marginalised identity within a male prison environment. Concluding thoughts will highlight the need for greater attention towards policies that enhance inclusivity for LGBTQ+ prison officers, and whilst I recognise that my experiences are not representative of all LGBTQ+ prison officers, they have relevance for understanding prison officer occupational culture within an adult male prison in England.

Support for LGBTQ+ staff

Whilst there has been research conducted on female prison officers (see Zimmer, 1986; Britton, 2003; Wood, 2015; Bruhn, 2013; Burdett et al, 2018), there is very little around LGBTQ+ prison officers thus providing a suitable rationale for this paper. The emergence of organisations to support LGBTQ+ identities, for example GALIPS (Gay and Lesbians In The Prison Service) and Pride in Prison and Probation (PIPS) highlight a progressive orientations towards inclusivity and diversity. The role of prison officer is stressful yet equally rewarding. Through tone, demeanour, efficiency and fairness when responding to prisoners and a willingness to show respect, prison officers can make a difference and enhance their job satisfaction (Halsey and Deegan 2017). These characteristics and actions are not linked to sexuality, and therefore this is deemed irrelevant to completing the tasks required of a prison officer.

Sexuality/sexual identity within the workplace:

Drawing upon research from other occupations around LGBTQ+, Burke (1994:189) found that heterosexuality was a dominant factor within the police force and LBG police officers represented a "serious kind of contamination and a threat to the integrity of the British Police Service." Key indicators of discrimination include professional humiliation, physical violence, and a refusal to work alongside, and in close proximity to LGB colleagues (Burke 1994). Furthermore, Scarman (1981) and Macpherson (1999 cited in Jones and Williams 2015) identify the collective failings of the police, highlighting antiquated and monolithic practices which do not support LGB identities. As such, people who identify as LGBTQ+ have to negotiate boundaries, occupational cultures and navigate their occupational landscapes. Subsequently, Burke (1994) found that LGB employees adopt a double life strategy, through

the intentional disguise of sexual orientation and a premeditated performance of heterosexuality throughout their careers.

Coming out at work:

Identifying as LGBTQ+ in the workplace means placing self at risk of victimisation. Dennisen and Saguy (2014) identify the strategies considered by females in the building trade regarding the decisions to come out at work. There is little research about lesbian identity and organisational culture however, Colgan et al (2016) found that denial of promotion was experienced alongside confidence about reception of LGBTQ+ identities. In addition, there was a bi-sexual prison officer in England 2017 who disclosed to colleagues about his sexual identity and he experienced trauma and abuse for being bisexual, which led to the Ministry of Justice settling a landmark agreement to support his victimisation within the workplace (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/jun/19/bullied-bisexual-prison-officer-ben-plaistow-unlikely-work-again-tribunal>).

Frank 2001 (in Wright 2013) argues that females who identify as LGBTQ+ find a greater level of acceptance and inclusivity than many of their heterosexual counterparts when working alongside males, suggesting that females identifying as LGBTQ+ are accepted into masculine cultures as *“one of the lads”*. Yet, bullying in the workplace exists around LGBTQ+ identities (see Taylor 2019) and experiences range from workplace incivility through to cultures of intolerance towards marginalised identities. As a gay female officer, male prisoners tolerated my identity adopting what Crawley (2004) referred to as a chivalrous approach towards preserving my safety on the landings, which will be explored more in the findings section of this paper.

Methodology

Autoethnography

Using Autoethnography (AE), the focus of my research is to explore the lived experience of being a gay female prison officer in an adult male prison in England. This paper presents the methodological decisions to use autoethnography as a lens through which to capture the emotional and physical dynamics of interacting with both prisoners and staff as LGBTQ+. AE is a qualitative research method which allows for writing about unique positionality to extend understanding about particular societal phenomenon (Wall 2006). AE assumes a subjective and emotive dimension which challenges more traditional methods of social inquiry and allows for self to adopt the stance of both researcher and researched. It has been conceptualised as either evocative or analytic. Evocative AE (Bochner and Ellis 2016) involves writing lives and telling stories, yet Chang (2008) argues that mere self-exposure without profound cultural analysis and interpretation leaves the style of writing simply at the level of memoir or descriptive autobiography. Analytic AE (Anderson 2006), allows for deeper theoretical analysis to unpick data created by the self through critical lenses. I, therefore, decided to synthesise the two strands together to produce a more robust understanding of being a gay female prison officer. The evocative dimension is presented through a series of lived experiences of discrimination I experienced presented as memoir

whilst the analytical dimension is adopted through application of theoretical perspectives and academic research to add academic rigour. In addition, because I left the prison service in 2009 the memories have faded over the last 14 years, and whilst kept alive through criminology teaching and the reflective journal, a degree of Retrospective AE was also needed. Combining these three strands allows methodological flexibility in presenting my lived experiences. Nowakowski (2016) suggests that retrospective AE permits a critical reflection upon our lived experiences rather than planned research activity, which is of relevance here; all the 'data' presented as personal lived experiences would have happened organically in the context of my role as prison officer. I did not set out to research; I was just doing my job as a prison officer but saw opportunity to capture my experiences. I did not know in 2009 that I would go on to do a PhD and become a criminology lecture, but that I might write about my experiences in some context, probably the evocative realm where many ex-prison officers produce autobiographies (Neil Samworthy; Ronnie Thompson for example).

Insider positionality

I am a gay female ex-prison officer having served 6 years at HMP Leicester in the Midlands England. My positionality as a pracademic (practitioner academic) means that I have insider knowledge about the occupational cultures that exist within prisons. Insiders have greater understanding of oppression, marginalisation, discrimination, and othering, offering an alternative dimension to research. Much criminological research presents prison analysis in the form of inhuman data (see Bosworth et al 2005) so AE has given me a platform upon which to build and write from a highly subjective positionality and challenge existing positivist assumptions. AE offers space within criminological research to combine existing research with reflexive accounts to add new depth and understanding of emotive topics like victimisation (see Zempi 2017, who wore a hijab/ niqab to explore discrimination). It is important to state however that I do not have ultimate authority as an insider in attempting to understand prison officer culture and its relationship to sexual orientation. There are many credible accounts of prison officer culture conducted by outsiders (Crawley 2004) or partial insiders (Arnold 2006 who completed prison officer training as part of her PhD).

Jewkes's (2012) work on how autoethnography and emotion can be used as intellectual resources within prison research alongside Wakeman (2014), have been instrumental in giving me a viable methodology upon which to present 'data' from my journal, collected between 2003 and 2009. There is overlap with the Convict Criminology movement, where ex-convicts have transitioned into academia and write from a highly subjective positionality to overcome the dominance of traditional prison research where prisoners are objectified. Reflexive interrogation of prisoner identities framed retrospectively (Phillips and Earle 2010) is another dimension that has helped to shape my own autoethnographic writing. However, Newbold et al (2014) identified the pitfalls of an overreliance on subjective interpretation and personal anecdote in respect of the potential impact it has upon the credibility of research. Therefore, the decision to synthesise evocative, analytic and retrospective AE was taken to try and balance subjectivity with objectivity.

Data and data analysis

Using Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) I identified several key themes from my journal which will be briefly presented in turn to demonstrate the lived experience of being a gay female prison officer. The original paper (Nixon 2022) explored intersectionality of gender and LGBTQ+ identities; however, this paper focus solely upon where my sexuality clashed with the heteronormative dimensions of prison officer and prisoner culture and caused conflict with my own LGBTQ+ identity.

Sexual objectification from prisoners

During my first week as a prison officer, I had to go to take a group of prisoners (approximately 20) to the visits hall to meet their visitors. At the back of visits there is a space where prisoners need to be 'rub down searched' to make sure they have got nothing concealed on them. This is an intimate task and involves touching male prisoners on both their top and bottom half. There is a set procedure for doing this, something we had practiced in training. What training did not prepare me for was the comments from prisoners. As trainees we were all compliant as we mastered the mechanics of the task. In real life, and on my first time at doing this, I had comments of "while you are down there, love" as I crouched to check the inside of their legs and their buttocks area. One of the prisoners asked me "Miss, is it true that you like women?" Another prisoner joined in "I'll turn her straight". I felt humiliated and way out of my depth with 20 men in a confined space, straight out of prison officer training college with no defence to stand my ground. I felt myself going red with embarrassment.

Male prisoners are deprived of heterosexual relationships (Sykes 1958) and opportunities are seized during interactions with female staff to assert masculinity and virility in threatening ways (Crewe 2006). Male prisoners are 'figuratively castrated' (Sykes and Messenger 1960) forcing them into a position of involuntary celibacy which threatens their masculinity. Essentially, they were mocking me in the assumed knowledge that I am getting something that they are not, and their defence was to humiliate me. I learnt over time to fight back when prisoners told me they would turn me straight and I would reply "how's that going for you?" and "good luck with that". However, it is clear to see that female staff are an object of gaze for male prisoners and objects/outlets of fantasises for sexual conquest Crewe (2006) regardless of sexual identity.

"Playing it straight" on the landings

The first two years of my career as a prison officer were interesting as I learnt how to deal with situations and handle myself as a gay female. Prisoners have a natural curiosity for the private lives of prison officers, and they find ways to try and break new officers through mental and physical intimidation. I was labelled a "fucking dyke" on day one but rather than stand my ground and assert my sexual identity, I denied it. I understood straight away the heteronormative and homophobic culture within the prison, and I felt that it would be easier if I played it straight on the landings. I am not sure why I did this with the prisoners. In a training session on diversity, I 'outed' myself to the prison officers in attendance, so I had

a dual identity between staff and prisoners. I thought I would get an easier ride with the prisoners if I was 'straight' Wrong! Damned if you do, damned if you don't and the sexual objectification was present regardless. The problem I had was that I lived close to the prison, walked to work, met my girlfriend at lunchtime and was seen around town holding hands clearly in a female relationship. The problem with working in a Category 'B' local (remand prison for the courts) was that prisoners are in/out and when they return, they bring a new level of situated knowledge with them about staff. I even had them living on my road. Knowledge is power and this dynamic had to be managed to protect my safety. One day a prisoner called me "a fucking dyke" and I just snapped and said "Yeah, so what! Does it change the way I open and close doors and hand out toilet rolls, which is what I spend most of my fucking day doing!" He started laughing, shrugged his shoulders and said "I guess not!"

There are perceived risks towards coming out in the workplace, ranging between hiding sexuality, and playing it straight to fully 'coming out' (Denissen and Saguy 2014). In contrast to Crewe (2006) who suggests that it is insinuated that lesbian prison officers dislike men, I got on well with many male prisoners during different levels of interaction. Once the prisoners learnt to trust me, and my commitment to procedural legitimacy, fairness and other core values was established, my life became easier as a gay female prison officer. I did find it hard at the start as I was placed in a no-win situation and regardless of speculation, sexual objectification prevailed. Reimann (2001) cited in Denissen and Saguy 2014) identified that many lesbians adopt a hybrid strategy through selectively revealing their sexual orientation in specific contexts. My sexuality was revealed initially to staff from the outset and then over time. After a couple of years most prisoners were indifferent. I say MOST!

Microaggressions (unintentional homophobia)

There was an incident at work that outed me in front of prisoners. I do not think that it was intentional, rather just careless and disrespectful. I had to take a forced absence from a weekend shift to take my cat to the vets. The senior officer responsible for staff detail came and found me on Monday morning to discuss my absence. I was supervising a party of sex offenders to clean the visits room. In front of these prisoners the senior officer asked to discuss my absence. I asked him if he thought that it was an appropriate time and place, to which I was ignored. Once he found out the reason for my absence, he asked "could your partner not have taken the cat?" "Could SHE not have taken the cat to the vets" thus revealing my sexuality. I asked him if he would talk to a male colleague like this, to which he just walked off.

A microaggression is low level discrimination within workplaces. Assumptions were made by a senior officer around the domestic arrangements and division of labour within my same sex relationship and household (Khor 2007), and the use of a gendered prefix in front of prisoners 'outed me', which conflicted with the persona I presented on the landings. I raised a grievance towards the member of staff, but intention was not proven, and the allegation was dropped as there was deemed to be insufficient evidence to indicate discrimination along LGBTQ+ grounds.

Workplace incivility

Workplace incivility is identified as covert and subtle forms of workplace discrimination towards members of oppressed social groups (Zurbrugg and Miner 2016). The intent to harm is ambiguous and deviant workplace behaviour is low intensity (Anderson and Pearson 1999). However, I experienced lots of this type of behaviour during interaction with prison officers and other prison staff during my career. The following example illustrates an interaction with a member of the senior management team who categorised and stereotyped me for my sexual identity as a gay female officer, rather than the occupational identity held as prison officer

A female governor who I got on well with shouted up at me from another landing “Nicky, Nicky”. To which I didn’t respond because I’m Sarah not Nicky. I carried on with my duties. She got closer and still shouted “Nicky, Nicky”. I thought this strange as I hadn’t actually seen Nicky. She got up close and tapped me on the shoulder and said “Nicky....”. I said “governor, I’m not Nicky I’m Sarah”. She said “Oh, you’re the **other one!**”. I said “the other one **what** governor” Nicky was the other gay female at my prison. She had the decency to look embarrassed and she apologised. I liked her and it was careless and discriminatory, but to see a governor squirm and look awkward made it worth it! She failed to address me correctly which suggests a lack of consideration for individuality as a gay woman and it was inconsiderate and a poor choice of language (Di Marco et al 2018).

Blatant homophobia

In contrast to microaggressions and workplace incivility, I experienced many instances of direct homophobia from both staff and prisoners. If I had a pound for every time somebody called me a “fucking dyke” (from both sides) I would have accumulated a fair few pounds during 6 years of working in prison.

Working on a night shift I was designated to go round and do the suicide checks to make sure prisoners were still alive. We had to observe movements and record them in a document in case they took their own life, and we ended up in a coroner’s court. It was for accountability of our actions as prison staff. I went to a particular cell and opened the observational flap. The 2 prisoners in this cell were having sex which I was obviously not expecting. I didn’t hang around for too long, but I was fairly sure that it was consensual. That was my only concern, that it was not an act of rape. I went down to the tearoom to speak to the staff, and I knew that the senior officer on duty was homophobic (towards men) so I thought I would wind him up. I told him what had happened, and he went mad, saying “I hope that you are going to nick them the dirty bent fucking bastards”. I got angry, saying “who the fuck do you think you are talking to, I’m gay, as you know”. I waited for my apology which never came. Instead, he dragged me down to the segregation area where they do prison adjudications and, on the wall, there is a list of prison rules and hence violations against prison rules. There is no rule against prisoners having sex. He was livid, which amused me in the end. He had met my female partner, so his homophobia was directed solely towards men and very much part of the masculine heteronormative prison culture.

There is a culture of discrimination towards acts or identities that challenge heteronormativity within prisons. The senior officer expressed anger and clear disgust at the idea of male homosexuality (Tomsen 2013) which I interpreted as such, and I felt insulted by his lack of sensitivity to the fact that as LGBTQ+ I have gay male friends so his language offended and angered me.

Acceptance from prisoners

Acceptance for LGBTQ+ status as a prison officer took approximately 2 years, to build up trust, respect, rapport and other core values that matter more to prisoners than sexual identity. An example of when prisoners respect you for who you are stands out amongst many others, which is presented below,

I was working on the sex offenders landing (R45) and two prisoners were shouting across to each other. I was oblivious at first until I heard the comments they were shouting. "Chick with a dick" and "Fucking lesbo" were amongst the politer ones exchanged between them. I left what I was doing and confronted the nearest one to me, squared up to him and said "what's your fucking problem" he said "you, you fucking dyke" I asked him what the matter was, and he threatened me. By this point many prisoners on the landing had started to notice this altercation. He got close to me and said "if I ever see you on road... (Slang for outside prison). I said, "what will you do big man, hit me?" I told him I was going to nick him (place him on report) for threatening and abusive behaviour. He stormed off into the office and I followed him. He changed approach in the office, saying "I've had a shit life, you don't care about me" I said, "damn right, I don't give a fuck about you". I did all the paperwork and then went home. I was day off the next day so upon my return on the landing, he approached me to apologise, which I declined and told him to "fuck off". He had two black eyes. One of the landing cleaners winked at me and said they had a 'chat' in the showers! They took exception to the abuse he had given me. I don't welcome violence, but prisoners sort their own hierarchies out and this was taken care of.

This prisoner had an audience on the landing and was showing off through his disrespectful behaviour towards me. However, prisoners are not averse to taking matters into their own hands if they feel a female officer has been treated harshly (Zimmer, 1986). In addition, Crewe (2006) states that prisoners look out for staff they trust and respect, and adopt a chivalrous approach towards protecting them. This incident was a complex interaction as prison staff must never condone violence between prisoners, however sometimes the boundaries become blurred during staff/ prisoner relationships (Worley 2016) and discretion is applied. I should have reported this incident, but I did not. Working in an environment like a prison is complex and staff are vulnerable working alongside violent and aggressive prisoners (Liebling 2011) and to have prisoners onside who accept me **for me** as an LGBTQ+ prison officer was an indication I had acquired my jailcraft.

In addition, a prisoner approached me once to discuss something. I had a good relationship with this prisoner and his well-intentioned comment made me laugh. He said "Miss Nixon, I have heard the rumours that you like women and have a girlfriend. I just want you to know that I don't care because you are a good officer, we know where we stand with you". I said

“thank you very much! That means a lot to me!” The irony was lost on him, but it was another indication of acceptance as an LGBTQ+ prison officer.

Conclusion

This paper has presented lived experience of discrimination within a prison environment as an LGBTQ+ officer. Through combining evocative and analytic AE (autoethnography) alongside retrospective dimensions of reliving personal and traumatic experiences, the aim was to offer a new depth of knowledge and understanding of how LGBTQ+ identities are received in a prison environment. Themes covered include subtle microaggressions and workplace incivility in which it is complicated to prove or disprove intention. Blatant homophobia exists within HMPPS from both staff and prisoners, and I hope that the authenticity comes across for readers to understand how LGBTQ+ prison officers struggle to navigate sexual identities. AE is a useful methodological approach to understand discrimination, and on transitioning into academia I have found an approach that offers authenticity and credibility to understanding lived experiences. This paper seeks therefore to contribute to excellent research conducted by outsiders or partial insiders writing on prison officer culture. Presentation of self as a prison officer is key to surviving the landings and yet sexuality has no relevance upon the mechanical tasks of the role of prison officer. During the 6 years I served as a prison officer, procedural legitimacy (Sparks and Bottoms 1995) was deemed to be more important to the prisoners than anything else; trust, fairness and humanity were key dimensions to my approach which in no way relates to my sexual identity. I was never physically assaulted in my career, and I worked hard to build professional working relationships with prisoners. In the current penal climate female officers are just as likely to get assaulted (Ismail 2019). Introduction of the Equality Act 2010 has helped to support and protect marginalised identities, but I left the service in 2009 before inception of this key legislative act. Prison officer culture is a complex phenomenon and high turnover of staff members currently renders integration a complex challenge for building and sustaining a culture that supports inclusivity and diversity. Professionalisation of the service is a much-needed directive and the incident at HMP Woodhill (Taylor 2019) demonstrates the need for HMPPS to rethink policy and practice to support LGBTQ+ staff. This needs to be more robustly integrated into prison officer training to set boundaries from the start for new recruits into His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service

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