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MASTURBATION UNCOVERED: AUTOEROTICISM IN A FEMALE PRISON

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The topic of male and female masturbation both in free society and in prison has received very little academic attention. In fact, no study has been conducted on female masturbatory practices in correctional facilities. The present study examined the amount and frequency of masturbation in a Southern female prison. In addition, the authors uncovered predictor variables associated with female masturbation in prison. The most salient variable associated with female inmate masturbation was homosexual behavior (partnering with another female inmate) while incarcerated. Factors such as age and religious affiliation (which have consistently been found to have a significant relationship with masturbation in free society studies) did not have an effect on female masturbation in prison.

Throughout history, the subject of sexually transmitted diseases has been of great concern. From the past epidemics of gonorrhea and syphilis to the present-day HIV crisis, methods of prevention have been of concern to both medical and correctional professionals. Some media and selected religious and sex education classes have taught that abstinence was the preferred mode for the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. For others in free society and behind prison walls, other outlets of sexual expression had to be explored. With correctional policies levying severe ramifications and penalties for persons involved in sexual activities (both coerced and consensual), the obvious yet misinterpreted and understudied alternative is masturbation.

Only a few pioneer researchers have ignored the stigma of prison sex research and delved into this forbidden topic. Tewksbury and West (2000)

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noted that most sex research conducted in prisons has had obvious political overtones. Only when evidence was needed to provide support for an advocated or proposed social policy would researchers be allowed to enter a prison. Under the guise of studying sexual activities, the only arenas studied were those specified by prison officials. Even today, prison sex research continues to be discouraged not only by general society but by academic researchers and prison administrators. Tewksbury and Mustaine (2001 [this issue]) reported that only 0.1% of all articles published during the 1990s in the five leading corrections journals were concerned with the issue of sex in prison. In addition, only one of the five journals contained any information about sex in prison during the 1990s.

When the topic has been studied, penologists have typically documented the extent, the dynamics, and the roles of prison sex (Tewksbury & West, 2000). For example, males have been stereotyped as being more sexual and in constant need of a sexual outlet. Due to this mindset, the scant research available has focused primarily on the sexual behaviors of male inmates and on sexual assaults and presumed coerced sexual behaviors. Consensual sex, including autoeroticism, has only rarely been studied in male prisons (see Tewksbury, 1989; Wooden & Parker, 1982).

The small number of sex researchers who have studied incarcerated females has, in contrast to the work on male inmates, focused their research on consensual same-sex sexual behavior and the establishment of pseudo-families within the prison subculture. During Ward and Kassebaum's (1965) landmark study of female sexuality in prison, Iverne R. Carter, superintendent of the California Institute for Women in Frontera, California, pointed out that "women's prisons had not been the subject of research" (p. vii). For example, the study of masturbation in female prisons is nonexistent. However, masturbation studies in society have existed for several decades.

One of the first researchers to study masturbation in society was Alfred Kinsey. His groundbreaking studies on both males and females in the late 1940s enlightened the public about attitudes and behaviors regarding sexuality. It was not only an avenue for those involved in the study to discuss and answer questions about different aspects of their sexuality, but it was also an opportunity for members of society to realize that their ideas, beliefs, and activities were shared by others. Kinsey brought to light the influence of age, education, rural-urban background, and religion on masturbation. Kinsey and his associates found that 62% of the 5,940 females studied had masturbated at some point in their lives (Kinsey, Martin, Pomeroy, & Gebhard, 1953). The study also revealed that more mature females (ages 35 to 45) masturbated at a 38% higher rate than younger females (ages 5 to 30).

It was 24 years later before another major study of sexuality was conducted. *The Hite Report* (Hite, 1976) dealt only with the subject of female sexuality. The data revealed that out of the 1,844 women surveyed, approximately 82% masturbated. The results of the next significant sexual research project, *The Janus Report on Sexual Behavior* (Janus & Janus, 1993), revealed that of the 1,384 female respondents, 38% were frequent masturbators, and 67% viewed masturbation as a natural part of life. An age comparison of females who masturbated at least once a month revealed that masturbation was most common for women in their late 20s, 30s, and 40s. Specifically, the reported percentages of women who masturbated were 27% between the ages of 18 and 26, 47% between the ages of 27 to 38, 47% between the ages of 39 to 50, 36% between the ages of 51 and 64, and 27% for those aged 65 and older. This was similar to Kinsey et al.'s (1953) findings.

In 1994, Davidson and Moore conducted a study of 647 never-married female undergraduate students in a midwestern residential state university. The study revealed that 16.3% of respondents had engaged in masturbation. Also in 1994, Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, and Kolata wrote *Sex in America*. This study, conducted through the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, drew on a random sampling of more than 3,400 respondents to assess a wide range of sexual information including sexual histories and beliefs. Several assumptions about masturbation were explored in this study (Michael et al., 1994). First, the researchers found that masturbation among females is not rare. Forty percent of the females in the survey were found to have masturbated at least once in the past year. Adding the age differential, the data revealed that among females, fewer than 4 out of 10 aged 18 to 24 had masturbated, fewer than 3 out of 10 older than the age of 54 had masturbated, but nearly half the women in their 30s had masturbated (Michael et al., 1994). Again, these results were consistent with previous findings.

The explanation for variations across age categories is usually linked with explanations about sexual development and partner availability. More specifically, "the rates of masturbation rise and fall with the availability of sex partners, suggesting that each individual has a given level of sex drive that needs to be expressed in one way or another" (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994, p. 80). The assumption that masturbation is more common when one has a partnered sexual outlet was clearly advocated by these authors. Nearly 45% of the women who were living with a sexual partner reported that they had masturbated within the past year. The study concluded that White, college-educated women who were living with a partner and sexually experimental had higher rates of masturbation. Young women who did not masturbate typically were sexually inexperienced and often virgins. Afri-

can Americans, both men and women, tended to be more conservative and conventional about sexual behavior and were less likely to masturbate. The researchers observed "that the practice is so strongly influenced by social attitudes that it becomes more a reflection of a person's religion and social class than a hidden outlet for sexual tensions" (Michael et al., 1994, p. 168).

As previously mentioned, studies on masturbation—the misunderstood stepchild of sex research—are rare both in free society and correctional facilities. In addition, research on female sexuality in prison is both marginal and centered primarily on consensual homosexual activity and pseudo-families. By combining these two arenas, the present study joins two subjects that are frequently overlooked by both penologists and sex researchers.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The two competing theoretical foundations applied to explain masturbation in correctional facilities are the deprivation and importation models. The deprivation model contends that the inmate culture is a collective response to the deprivations imposed by prison life (Sykes, 1958). When correctional administrators deny inmates heterosexual outlets, they often turn to alternative outlets such as homosexuality and masturbation.

Boredom, forced association, and lack of privacy are additional pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958). Intimate relationships with both family and loved ones are often diminished. These pains of imprisonment felt by women tend to differ from those felt by men. Because sex and companionship are needs of all human beings, women cite their absence as among the most painful aspects of incarceration. Often, women respond to this deprivation (lack of companionship) by forming ties within the prison to substitute for the former familial bonds (Pollock, 1997). Thus, the conception of the pseudo-family and myths of rampant homosexuality were created.

In contrast, the importation model explains that the characteristics and actions of individuals that predate confinement are critical factors in determining modes of inmate adjustment. This model argues that inmate conduct is an extension of the cultural and structural differences in individuals beyond the prison walls. Men and women behave differently in society and have different value systems. These socialized gender differences are brought into the prison system (Irwin & Cressey, 1962). In simple terms, sex roles, expectations, and needs from the outside affect one's behavior on the inside.

Women who are still dependent on family roles (wife, mother, daughter, etc.) as a part of their self-identity are those most likely to become involved in

pseudo-families. Talking and worrying about children and/or family on the outside can be shared and understood with the inside family. The female inmate can function in basically the same capacity that she did in free society (conveying previous family values, ideas, and norms). This does not displace or curtail sexual urges but rather is theorized to provide acceptable and familiar types of outlets for sexual needs.

In addition, the emotional and physical sexual needs that females import into prison may differ greatly across individuals. Those who have previously adopted a homosexual lifestyle on the outside can be expected to continue this behavior once incarcerated. Many women, however, resort to homosexuality to sustain the needs and emotions that remain with them after being imprisoned. What about the women who do not participate in these activities as outlets for sexual release? For some women, remaining faithful to an outside partner is a decisive priority. Many women in prison choose celibacy as an alternative sexual lifestyle. Is masturbation their answer? This study was conducted to address this issue.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

In March 2000, all inmates housed in a Southern correctional facility for women were requested to participate in the current study. Inmates were assembled in the main area of their respective units by correctional staff members so that the researchers could explain the contents of the surveys. The lead researcher and a graduate assistant then distributed self-administered questionnaires to each inmate. Inmates were told it would take approximately 30 minutes to complete the 46-item questionnaire. In addition, they were informed of their anonymity and confidentiality while participating in the project. No incentives were given for completion of the survey. Inmates were asked to return their completed questionnaires in a stamped self-addressed envelope within 2 weeks of distribution. Of the 643 inmates incarcerated at that time, a total of 245 agreed to participate in the study, yielding a response rate of 38%.

Table 1 displays the characteristics of the prison population and the sample. A comparison of the prison population and the study group reveals some slight differences. For example, Blacks and inmates in medium security are underrepresented in the sample. Inmates describing their race as other and maximum-security inmates were overrepresented in the sample.

TABLE 1: Population and Sample Characteristics

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Prison Population</i>		<i>Sample</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Race				
White	394	61.3	150	61.2
Black	247	38.4	82	33.5
Other	2	0.3	11	4.4
Security level				
Minimum	241	37.5	92	40.2
Medium	393	61.1	121	52.8
Maximum	9	1.4	16	7.0
Average age	35 years		34.4 years	

MEASURES

Inmates were asked two questions concerning their masturbatory behavior while incarcerated. First, inmates were asked, "Have you masturbated since being incarcerated?" Response categories were dichotomized so that a response of no was coded as 0, and an affirmative response received a score of 1. They were then asked, "How often do you masturbate?" Originally, eight response categories existed. These categories were recoded so that infrequent masturbators (less than once a month) were coded as 0 and frequent masturbators (more than once a month) received a score of 1. Both items served as dependent variables.

Demographic characteristics (age and race) were recorded for the study group. Data were also collected on religion (Protestant vs. non-Protestant), time served (less than 1 year, 1 to 5 years, 5 to 10 years, and more than 10 years), security level, type of offense committed, engaging in homosexual behavior while incarcerated (touching the genitals of another female inmate while incarcerated), and education (high school or less vs. some college or more).

RESULTS

Of the 245 female inmates who responded to the questionnaire, 66.5% had masturbated while incarcerated. Of the 161 who reported masturbating, 7% had not masturbated during the past year. More than 22% of the respondents masturbated once or a few times in the past year, and 7% masturbated every other month. Approximately 13% masturbated once a month or two to three times a month, whereas 10% of the respondents masturbated once a week. An additional 18.6% masturbated two to three times per week. Only

TABLE 2: Zero-Order Correlations Between Independent and Dependent Variables

	<i>Masturbation Since Incarceration</i>	<i>Frequency of Masturbation</i>
Age	-.04	-.04
Race	.05	.17*
Religion	.17*	.06
Education	.06	.12
Amount of time served	.26*	.10
Security level	.11	.40*
Type of offense	-.13*	-.20*
Homosexual behavior	.29*	.33*

NOTE: Coding is as follows: age (0 = younger than 34, 1 = 34 or older), race (0 = non-White, 1 = White), religion (0 = Protestant, 1 = non-Protestant), education (0 = high school or less, 1 = some college or more), amount of time served (0 = less than 1 year, 1 = 1 to 5 years, 2 = 5 to 10 years, 3 = more than 10 years), security level (0 = minimum, 1 = medium, 2 = maximum), type of offense (0 = personal crime, 1 = other crime), and homosexual behavior (0 = no, 1 = yes).

*Denotes statistical significance at the .05 level.

3.6% of the female inmates reported masturbating once a day. Finally, 2.9% reported masturbating more than once a day.

To examine relationships between the independent and dependent variables, correlational analysis was conducted. Table 2 presents the zero-order relationships between the independent and dependent variables. The most salient variable is whether the inmate engaged in homosexual behavior while incarcerated. Inmates who engaged in homosexual behavior while incarcerated were more likely to report masturbating while in prison. In addition, they were more frequent masturbators than those who did not engage in homosexual behavior while incarcerated. Inmates who committed a personal crime were also more likely to masturbate (and be frequent masturbators) than those who had committed a property or drug offense. Inmates who had served longer sentence times were also more likely to masturbate than inmates who had served shorter sentence times. Protestants were less likely to masturbate than non-Protestants. White inmates were more likely to be frequent masturbators compared to non-Whites. In addition, inmates in higher security levels were more likely to be frequent masturbators than inmates in lower security levels.

Intercorrelations between the independent variables are not presented here to save space. The strongest correlation existed between amount of time served and personal offense ($r = .46$). No multicollinearity was found between the independent variables.

TABLE 3: Summary of Logistic Regression Beta Weights ($n = 190$ and 130 , respectively)

	<i>Masturbation Since Incarceration</i>	<i>Frequency of Masturbation</i>
Age	0.50	-0.64
Race	0.52	1.11*
Religion	0.54	0.47
Education	0.06	0.51
Amount of time served	0.44	-0.52
Security level	0.28	1.84*
Type of offense	0.19	-0.42
Homosexual behavior	1.46*	1.40*
Pseudo R^2	0.19	0.40

*Denotes statistical significance at the .05 level.

Because both dependent variables are dichotomous, a series of logistic regression analyses was performed to test if the predictor variables had an effect on the dependent variables. The most salient variable in both models was homosexual behavior in prison. Table 3 indicates that inmates who engage in homosexual behavior while incarcerated are more likely to masturbate (and be frequent masturbators) than inmates who do not engage in homosexual behavior in prison. In other words, inmates who were sexually active while incarcerated were more likely to masturbate while in prison. White inmates and inmates in higher security levels were also more likely to report engaging in frequent masturbation. Interestingly, race and security-level variables were not found to have an effect on whether the inmate has masturbated while in prison. Based on previous literature, we expected that age, education, and time served would have an effect on female masturbation in prison. However, these variables were not significant predictors of either dependent variable.

DISCUSSION

Research on human sexuality both in free society and in prisons has typically focused on the sexual behaviors of males. Notably, prison sex research has emphasized the topics of coerced and consensual sex among male inmates. Free society sex research is more common, yet some topics are clearly marginalized. Perhaps the most obvious of these topics is masturbation. In prison-based sex research, this marginalization is even clearer.

Previous studies on masturbation in free society have consistently found a significant relationship between age and masturbation. However, the present

study did not find such a relationship. Although prisons have been defined as microcosms of society, prison culture is remarkably different from free society. Clearly, this includes differences in sexual activities of citizens and inmates. For example, female inmates are deprived of certain sexual outlets while incarcerated. Thus, it appears many turn to masturbation for sexual release. Previous literature has reported that women in their late 20s to 40s have the highest rates of masturbation; the women in this study have a mean age of 34 and do report high rates of masturbation. And, age does not appear to be a significant predictor of masturbatory activities or frequency among these female inmates. Most interesting, however, is the proportion of females reporting that they do masturbate is nearly twice the proportion of free society women so reporting in previous research. This should not be surprising, however, given the unique cultural contexts and deprivations of prison life.

The results of this investigation also suggest that religious affiliation is not a predictor of female inmates' masturbatory practices. Again, this contradicts the research on female masturbation in free society. In fact, as Michael et al. (1994) argued, in free society, religion may be the most significant predictor of masturbation. However, among this incarcerated sample of women, religion has no statistically significant effect. Again, it appears that the institutional culture outweighs other factors.

Where this research does agree with the existing literature on female masturbation is in terms of the effects of having a sexual partner. Whereas in free society the literature typically presumes that a woman's partner is from a heterosexual relationship, in prison this becomes a same-sex partner. Women who had homosexual experiences while incarcerated were more likely to masturbate than women who did not engage in homosexual activity while in prison. In addition, these same women were more likely to be frequent masturbators. Thus, it may be that there are no differences in the motivation or nature of masturbation for incarcerated and nonincarcerated women but only differences regarding on whom motivation has an effect. As suggested by previous literature, individuals who are sexually active with partners are more likely to masturbate; this also holds true for incarcerated women but cuts across age and religious categories.

As previously stated, masturbation in prison is almost always a rule infraction. However, it provides inmates an alternative outlet to release pent-up frustrations and stresses. It may also possibly reduce the amount of consensual and coerced homosexual behavior behind bars. We must recommend to prison administrators that masturbation is a natural part of life. In addition, masturbation in prison, unlike consensual and coerced sex, prevents the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS for both male and female inmates. Therefore, it is important for correctional administrators and

policy makers to reconsider the definition of masturbation as a violation of institutional rules. Most important, the justification and rationale for instructing inmates that autoerotic activities are wrong need to be revisited and reconsidered. To do so, however, it is important that policy makers first understand the motivations, dynamics, frequencies, and characteristics of practitioners of masturbation in prison. It is our intent to provide the first important steps toward this understanding.

Research of this nature is not only important for correctional administrators but also sex researchers in general. Sex researchers must continue to explore these forbidden topics. We must continue to open the eyes of correctional administrators and staff members. According to Tewksbury and West (2000),

Refusal or reluctance to acknowledge that sex in prison [including masturbation] 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)

Finally, we must strive to make changes in correctional policies that have the potential to make our prisons safer.

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