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Sexual Behavior in Prison Populations Understood Through the Framework of Rational Choice and Exchange Theory

By April N. Terry
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Abstract

Rational choice and exchange theories have been used to explain many phenomena in the field of sociological research. Although some literature has used such theories to explain sexual offenses, no research has attempted to make the connection between rational choice and exchange theory as a way of explaining sexual behavior of inmates. The following paper attempts to use such theories to further understand explanations for sexual behavior of inmates. Although standards such as the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) seek to restrict sexual behavior amongst the incarcerated population, while providing a framework for policy at the administrative level, research still supports the idea that sexual behaviors occur within prison walls. Possible explanations for such behavior are further explored.

According to Gibson and Hensley (2013), researchers have formulated three models in attempting to explain the concept of prison sex: the important model, the deprivation model, and the social constructionist model. Around 1940, Clemmer introduced the deprivation model while theorizing that inmates were deprived of their normal heterosexual sexual identity. Sykes (1958) then furthered this theory by examining the different forms of deprivation; one such deprivation was heterosexual sexual activity. Sykes suggested that inmates would then create their own subculture to deal with the different deprivations.

Around 1962, Irwin and Cressey suggested the importation model in which inmates would import their own social values from the community into the prison subculture. The social constructionist theory defined sexuality as "cultural entities" which are constructed by social situations and values (Gibson & Hensley, 2013). However, few, if any, studies have examined the construction of the rational choice and exchange theories in their relevance to explaining inmate sexual behavior. Rational choice theories regard both individual values as well as structural elements when looking at the determinants of outcomes.

Inmates appear to weigh the costs and benefits associated with engaging in sexual relations with the primary motivations being increased access to commissary and/or other tangible goods in addition to companionship.

Such theory accounts for both social outcomes on the individual level of action as well as the social context (Hechter & Kanazawa, 1997). Many exchange theorists would suggest that social behavior is guided by one's, "rational calculation of an exchange of rewards and costs" in their social interactions (Appelrouth & Edles, 2001, p. 121). This decision-making process is when/where one decides to enter or terminate a relationship with another person. Thus, individuals are strategic actors who use their resources to optimize their rewards. The weighing of the rewards is relevant in a variety of situations (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011). However, there is little to suggest whether such said theory is able to explain the sexual behavior, "consensual" and "non-consensual" of inmates.

Stemming back to the early 1900s, criminologists have been interested in the sexual behaviors of inmates. The research in this area ranges from coerced sexual behavior to consensual; juveniles to adults; and males as well as females. According to Erving Goffman (1969), inmates may have to adjust their sexual practices while incarcerated by engaging in illegal methods (tricks) in order to obtain certain forms of satisfaction (as cited by Merotte, 2012). Additionally, there is an increased risk for violent conduct because of homosexual behaviors in prisons as many are led by, or lead to, economic and/or sexual exploitation (Pardue, Arrigo, & Murphy, 2011).

Fleisher and Krienert (2006) introduce the idea of a sexual behavior continuum ranging from voluntary sexual encounters to coercive sexual encounters. Warren, Jackson, Booker Loper, and Burnette (2010) then expanded on this work by creating different types of sexual encounters to include such types as: frequent consensual encounters, the less frequent bartered encounters, and the rare coercive encounters (e.g. primarily rape) (Fleisher & Krienert, 2006).

Although some sexual behaviors are self-reported as consensual, Congress passed the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) to address issues of sexual behavior within prisons. Part of this stemmed from gained awareness of the administration and media attention about the violent nature of sex behind bars (Tewksbury & Conner, 2014). The Prison Rape Elimination Act included nine original members, eight of whom then worked independently from the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ). In June of 2009, they presented a final report for proposed standards regarding sexual violence in prisons. The report was given to the President, Congress, the Attorney General, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and other state and federal officials.

As a result, one year later the standards for detection, prevention, reduction, and punishment for sexual abuse were set forth (Barth, 2012). This also meant there was a “zero-tolerance” policy which called for thorough research and information gathering on the prevalence of sexual assault in prisons. DOJ made it a top priority to have the Bureau of Justice Statistics create an annual report disclosing information on the prison rape within the U.S. prison system. Although this data is collected (based on reported incidents), there are likely many unreported occurrences of sexual assault within prisons (National PREA). With that said, research also supports the idea that consensual sexual relations also occur in prisons.

Sexual Relations Among Adult Female Inmates

Both current and past research supports the idea that female inmates participate in dyads known as pseudofamilies which generally consist of same-sex couple relationships (Alarid, 2000; Einat & Chen, 2012). A study conducted by Giallombardo (1966) estimated that approximately 86% of the women interviewed had a homosexual experience during a period of incarceration. Findings are consistent with Einat and Chen’s (2012) suggestion that 85% of interviewees (female inmates) admitted to participating in same-sex sexual relationships at least one time while incarcerated. Giallombardo revealed that the reasons given for such participation included a need for friendship, confidence, and interdependence.

Although there is no direct literature to support the idea within prison walls, Blau (1964) makes an argument that when individuals share basic values, bonds and group solidarity arise. This form of solidarity occurs amongst individuals who have not even met, yet, unite based on the common values. Although inmates likely enter prisons with pre-established values, values likely shift during a stint of incarceration. As such, Blau’s argument fits with the idea that inmates bond together in group solidarity. One could make the argument that in opposition to the pains of imprisonment, inmates bond together to carry on sexual relationships as they would within the community (Blau, 1964); making sex in prisons an institutional reality (Tewksbury & Conner, 2014).

Inmates also reported participation in prison sexual behavior due to having access to institutional goods and services which would not been available otherwise (Giallombardo, 1966). Greer (2000) also found that the reported reasons for homosexual involvement in prison were due to game playing, economic manipulation, loneliness, and a need for affection. Although Coleman explains the concept of social capital through stories of families, the significance of social capital can apply to inmate behavior as well (Coleman, 1988), especially when referencing Greer’s (2000) work on the motivation being driven by companionship. Trust is not a word that one may use to describe relationships among inmates or prison in general. However, inmates do rely on

social capital and a sense of trust when building relationships. As noted previously, the role of relationships may take on different forms when controlling for gender (e.g. females and pseudofamilies). Regardless of the form, inmates still rely on social capital even if the interaction(s) is based solely on gaining access to resources which could not otherwise be obtained (Coleman, 1988).

Although not all sexual behaviors within prisons are coerced/forced, in 1995, approximately 359,000 males and 5,000 female inmates were victims of sexual assault within the U.S. prison system (Alarid, 2005). According to Owen (1998), female inmates were involved in exploitative relationships with an underlying economic and/or emotional motive (Owen, 1998). Alarid (2000) found that the vast majority (75-80%) of females in jails and prisons have admitted to having engaged in homosexual behavior to include sexual favors. Alarid believes that women prisoners underreport sexual assault for a variety of reasons to include being desensitized to what coerced sex means; having a history of sexual assault or other demeaning relationships, or simply not recognizing or overlooking the fact that they were a victim of sexual assault. It is suggested that passive women may also submit to sexual behaviors not out of true desire but rather to fulfill the void of lacking interpersonal relationships.

However, the forced and/or coerced sexual relationships also exist which results in female inmates engaging in sexual relations with others (Alarid, 2005). Most studies report that same-sex sexual activities between female inmates are largely due to its larger functional role it serves in response to the conditions of incarceration. For example, these relationships supply inmates with emotional stability, attachment to others, and someone to confide in while incarceration. Since the creation of pseudofamilies does not appear to be present in the literature of male inmates, it seems likely that there are different motivations for male homosexual behavior during incarceration (Hensley & Tewksbury, 2002).

Sexual Relations Among Adult Male Inmates

The majority of research in the area of prison sex has dealt with sexual violence; little is known about “consensual” sexual activity between male inmates. With that said, prison sexual behavior is not supposed to be a tolerated prison behavior; engaging in said behaviors would violate prison policy and possibly result in a form of reprimand (e.g. disciplinary report). In a 1989 study, Tewksbury found that between 25% and 40% of male inmates had engaged in consensual sex while in prison. The inmates in the study considered themselves to be of heterosexual orientation.

It is interesting to note, Nacci and Kane (1983) found that inmates in higher-security prisons engaged in same sex sexual activity more than those males housed in lower-security prisons. In larger scale study completed by the national Institute of Justice, they found that of the 288 male inmates in the sample, nearly six percent had indicated that they participated in consensual sex while incarcerated. Some of the predictors for such behavior were some form of childhood abuse, violent behavior while incarcerated, gang membership, and overall impulsivity (Tewksbury & Conner, 2014).

Research does not support the idea that male inmates engage in pseudofamilies; however, the research does support the idea that prisons have sexual hierarchies. According to Dumond (1992), the hierarchical system creates structures of roles and activities of the actors involved in the sexual behaviors. Generally, the sexual acts engaged in by the male inmates then define their label, or role, within the hierarchy. In discussing exchange theory, Blau focused more on the roles of power and inequality and their role in social interaction (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011). Blau (1964) pulled part of his theoretical arguments from the work of Simmel as both explored the notion that exchange relations were present in all human interactions and were therefore, seen as the building blocks of social interaction.

As already noted, Blau focused on the role of power in social interaction. He wrote that if one individual were unable to receive a benefit from another source, *and* they were unable to offer a benefit to another individual, then they became dependent on the individual. A similar line of thinking applies to inmate relations and the role of sexual behavior. Furthermore, Blau would agree that the legitimate authority produces obedience in others

which is less based on individual rationality and more focused on cultural norms and values (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011).

The prison subculture operates on a similar track with forms of “authority.” Some inmates enter the prison with a higher level of authority than others while some earn this placement within the prison hierarchy. This hierarchy must be obeyed as should the inmate code. The inmate code is a theoretical viewpoint of prison sociology. Most describe the inmate code as being a set of values and norms which are publicly displayed by inmates as a way to guide “appropriate” conduct, as idealized by the inmates. Broadly speaking, the inmate code states that inmate should not interfere with the interest of other inmates, they should never report another inmate, they should just focus on doing their time, they should not exploit or steal from other inmates, they should look tough rather than weak, and lastly, they should never side with prison officials (Crewe, 2007).

Wooden and Parker (1982) reported that those deemed to be submissive were not respected by others and therefore, they were used as commodities in order to satisfy one’s need whether that be sexual or economic. In order for inmates to survive prison, some speculate that they must reject the free society’s norms and instead, adopt the new set of norms within prison walls, even if that be sexual in nature (Hensley, Wright, Tewksbury, & Castle, 2003).

Homans (1958) wrote about conformers and deviants and how each type of member behaves according to norms. He described norms as the description of a behavior which is deemed to be valuable by an individual and then the individual conforms to it (in prison language, the inmate code). Prisons are known for having their own prison subculture which does differ from mainstream culture. Thus, norms and assigned values differ from community standards and prison standards. Just as in the community, in prison, if inmates or “deviants” choose not to conform, they lose social approval of the other inmates (Homans, 1958).

According to Man and Cronan (2001), the prison subculture is much like Goffman describes in his work on the *Presentation of Self* (1956). They suggest that specific roles exist both within the “free world” as well as behind prison walls which suggest masculinity and aggression. They believe that this is not random but rather resembles that of a scripted play in which all actors know their role and many play sexual roles. Based on this idea, inmates with certain personality characteristics, primarily those deemed weak, are then more vulnerable to the aggression (Man & Cronan, 2001; Tewksbury & West, 2000).

Wooden and Parker (1982), collected data on 56 incarcerated men who were housed in a unit within an urban county jail. They found that nearly one fourth (23.8%) of the entire sample engaged in sex for a profit while in protective custody. Profit referred to such things as commissary and favors. Additionally, they found that many bisexual/heterosexual inmates (25%) used sex as a form of protection from another inmate (Wooden & Parker, 1982). Barth (2012) asked male inmates about their self-identified sexual orientation prior to incarceration. He found that those who identified as homosexual and/or bisexual were the only ones who reported seeking other inmates for intimacy. However, the sample consisted of only eight inmates. When the inmates were asked to list reasons for seeking the homosexual contact, they reported, boredom, provocation, and a need to look for something new in life (Barth, 2012). Again, inmates act out a variety of roles as do members of the general public. However, there are differences between free members within the community and incarcerated inmates. While comparing within inmate populations, differences are noted to exist when looking at sexual behavior of juveniles.

Exchange Theory & Rational Choice

When explaining the relationship between exchange theories and rational choice theories, the following will be used as the working definition, “social behavior is guided by the *rational* calculation of an *exchange* of rewards and costs” (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011, p. 121). Such theories discuss how one would opt to remain in a relationship with others when there are some perceived or real disadvantages in doing so. The rational choice and exchange theories would suggest that the benefits still outweigh the costs (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011). It appears that many inmates may consider sex something similar to a commodity and as such, are less willing to surrender such an activity (Tewksbury & Conner, 2014).

As cited in Sit and Ricciardelli's (2013) work on male inmates, attitudes towards prison sexuality takes the social constructionist perspective on social reality as being, "created by individuals in light of their prior socialization, lived experiences, and daily interactions" (p. 336). Additionally, this approach suggests that a historical context and culture influence an individual's understanding of how they should act. This theory rejects the idea that homosexual behavior within prisons is due to biological drives or an innate force and instead focuses on the individual and cultural histories (Sit & Ricciardelli, 2013; Trammell, 2011). According to Festinger, Schachter, and Back (as cited in Homans, 1958), the more cohesive a group, the more likely they are to influence the behavior of others.

As applied to inmates, when powerful inmates encourage sexual behaviors with other inmates, such coercion may then transform previous deviants into conformers. Although Homans' (1958) intent was not to write his theoretical perspectives to fit with inmate sexual behavior, one passage in *Social Behavior as Exchange* (1958) seems to capture how the mainstream behavior relates to the prison subculture. "Persons that give much to others try to get much from them, and persons that get much from others are under pressure to give much to them" (Homans, 1958, p.606).

In 2011, Trammell reviewed the idea of protective pairing as provided by Donaldson (2001). The notion of protective pairing refers to the exchange of protection for sexual behavior. Accordingly, sex is only a part of the arrangement between inmates. Trammell (2011) points out that generally the "stronger" male becomes the husband in the relationship while the perceived "weaker" male becomes the wife. This form of relationship then leads to other aspects of the arrangement to include other stereotypical feminine roles (e.g. cleaning). Generally those deemed to be the weaker inmates are described as either physically and/or mentally inept to other inmates (Trammell, 2011). Others have argued that this use of power takes the form of symbolic violence which creates dominance over others. This behavior is legitimated as they are integrated cultural norms; meaning, inequality of males and females is socially constructed and perceived by most to be the "norm" (Bourdieu, 2001).

According to Blau (1964), one mainstream norm may be that most individuals derive pleasure from providing favors to others. Generally, people are grateful of such favors and in turn, repay their social debt. Blau would argue that most individuals act according to their social debt yet likely still act in selfish ways; there is an awareness of the indebtedness produced between individuals. This concept applies to those in and out of prison walls. Although there may be a separate subculture within the prison, inmates are generally aware of the "favors" performed by others and their current "outstanding debt."

Similarly, Blau suggests that on the surface, some individuals may not make a decision based on a result with the highest tangible exchange. Rather, individuals may actually make decisions that, on the surface, appear to be poor decisions. However, in this situation, the individual has to assess the longevity of their goal, or objective, and engage in exchanges accordingly. Additionally, those deemed to be in control of the power may use this in future situations at their disposal as others are obligated to him/her. However, as Trammell (2011) found in her prison interviews, inmates still referred to such relationships as being based on a "voluntary" exchange. One such inmate stated the following,

If a guy gets hit, let's say he runs up a drug debt or something, then the guys come after him for payment. If he gets hit hard enough then having someone to take care of you looks pretty good. I knew of a guy who was straight, he got cut pretty badly. From then on out, he gave head for protection. He wasn't gay, I talked to the guy, this wasn't about that. He just knew that he had to be someone's girlfriend from then on. (p. 315)

Trammell (2011) further discussed such relationships as a division of labor in which each inmate serves different roles in the arrangement. She also speculated that such arrangements resulted in a hierarchy within the division of labor in which the stronger man achieved higher status. She provided further testimony from inmates indicating that although many feel that prison rape is rampant, most inmates knowingly, and willingly, engage in sexual behaviors with one another and that violence is not a central concern. Some men in the study described such relationships as beneficial to all involved (Trammell, 2011).

According to Sprecher (1998), most social exchange theories share several basic assumptions, "(a) social behavior is a series of exchanges; (b) individuals attempt to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs;

and (c) when individuals receive rewards from others, they feel obligated to reciprocate” (p. 32). Sprecher then proposed that sexual relationships are built on the idea of equity. She proposed that socially desirable people (those with physical attractiveness and intellectual appeal) are more likely to be desired by others for sexual relationships and/or dating/marriage.

Although Sprecher’s work was not in relation to inmates, the premise can still be applied. Sprecher points out that once a relationship has been established, equity theory then explains why two individuals continue engaging in the relationship. Those noted as being more equitable are more likely to last. Additionally, Sprecher points out that in the typical relationship, couples may disagree on when to engage in sexual relations. If one is resistant and then agrees, she believes that although not explicitly stated, an exchange, or trade, has occurred. Gifts or special favors may also come from the individual who is pushing for more sexual activity; this action is viewed as a form of reciprocation. Just as many speculate that sexual activity among inmates is due to a form of bartering, so too are relationships outside of prisons (Sprecher, 1998). Posner (1992) discussed several aspects of sexual behavior to include its benefits. He divided the benefits of sex into three categories: procreative, hedonistic, and sociable. He further states that one considers the costs and benefits of engaging in sex and other sexual behaviors which vary over societies and time (Posner, 1992).

Furthermore, equity theory suggests that individuals look for maximum levels of rewards with the lowest level of costs. As such, this theory suggests that individuals tend to end up in relationships where the distribution of costs/benefits is equal for both partners (Vanypere & Buunk, 1990). Also, Blau uses the example of attraction in outlining reciprocal relationships. He points out that one individual may give more initial effort to entice the interest of the other. The two then come together but not really on equal terms; the reciprocity for the first individual requires much more effort than that of the second individual. A similar notion is observed in prisons when one inmate goes above their regular level of effort in an attempt to secure another in the social relationship (Blau, 1964).

Rational choice theory is a theoretical framework which has been used to investigate many areas of sociological research to include the decision making of all offenders (Beauregard & Leclerc, 2007). Additionally, Cornish and Clark (1986) report that such decision making is a weighing of the rewards with the costs associated with a specific action. At times, offenders may be constrained (e.g. time, ability, availability) which is also taken into account when deciding to, or not to, act (Cornish & Clark, 1986). Although the consensual sexual relations of inmates take on a form other than coercion, the same method is applied in decision making. One, or both, inmates involved choose to act based on the situational context and the environment (Beauregard & Leclerc, 2007).

Perceiving risk is part of this planning process which is similar to the routine activity theory. However, why some inmates still engage in sexual behaviors even when the costs are high is outside of the scope of this paper. With that said, a likely explanation may be due to personality, lack of self-control, or a combination of other factors (Cornish & Clark, 1986). It is also possible that in a previous situation deemed high risk that some part of the structure is reevaluated to be of lower risk (Cornish & Clark, 1986).

Homans’ (1958) work may also be of use in understanding the rationality behind decision-making as he suggests five behaviorist propositions associated with individual conduct. Proposition one would suggest that inmates engage in sexual relations based on previous similar situations. If the agreement within such a relationship has produced a positive outcome in the past, both inmates are more likely to engage in such behavior again. Propositions two and three relate to the gained reward/benefit received by both inmates. In the case of sexual behavior, one inmate may gain sexual gratification while the other inmate may receive additional commissary, protection, companionship, etc.

If the frequency of such reward(s) decreases for one or both inmates, the nature of the relationship is likely to eventually terminate. Proposition four would suggest that as time progresses, one or both of the inmates would have their fill of the gained benefits. Inmate one may lose interest in the sexual gratification previously received while inmate two may no longer need the extra resources, protection, or companionship. If either is to occur, the frequency of their relationship again diminishes. Proposition five is likely a regular occurrence in such prison

dynamics. If either inmate perceives their reward to be of lesser value than that to which they give, they are likely to feel frustrated about the relationship.

Homans referred to this problem as distributive justice. If either inmate feels they are giving more than they are receiving, anger will likely pursue as will a termination of the agreed upon relationship. Inmate one may feel as though the sexual benefits do not outweigh the tangible cost of such benefits (or whatever the exchange may be) while inmate two may feel as though engaging in such sexual relations does not produce enough of a benefit to continue. Much of this decision, according to Homans, revolves around one's history and previous exposure to similar situations (1958).

A large body of research suggests that the engagement of sex-same sexual relationships amongst inmates is likely a function of "imprisonment pains." Thus, inmates engage in sexual behaviors as a form of dealing with some level of psychological discomfort (Einat & Chen, 2012). According to Johnson (1971), homosexuality in prisons was not something to be viewed as an epidemic, but rather, as an adoption to the prison culture. Kassebaum (1972) pointed out that such sexual relationships could be viewed as either coercive, commercial, or romantic. Einat and Chen (2012) found that as much as 67% of a female inmate population speculated that the main factor for engaging in same-sex sexual activities was due to economic factors. Interviewees stated that unequal access to such things as money and material items would lead to such relationships; "poor" inmates would be willing to engage in sexual relations in order to obtain items from canteen.

Another interviewee admitted that such engagement was "disgusting" but that inmates continue to engage in sexual relations in order to obtain goods (Einat & Chen, 2012). Just as Coleman (1988) points out, the role of social capital varies based on trustworthiness and environment. Within the prison subculture, actors, or inmates, vary in their level of social capital. Some inmates just passively complete their time while others may engage more within the subculture which may result in more of the outstanding "credit slips" (Coleman, 1988). In Greer's study, it was found that such inmates may be known as "canteen whores" (Greer, 2000). Kirkham (1971) viewed the same idea with male inmates referring to these inmates as "canteen punks." Similar relationships of power can also be observed within the regular community at large. Such financial differences contribute to power differentials.

Groth (1979) implied that sexuality was not an inherent part of a person but rather a construct of that person's society. Such an idea suggests that one's decision(s) to engage in sexual behavior is more a product of their environment and something that is dynamic in nature. In the prison setting, this is likely socially constructed as a way to form hierarchies within the prison walls (Groth, 1979). Such hierarchies may contribute to why some inmates choose not to report nonconsensual sexual encounters. Hensley & Tweksbury (2002) speculate reasons as to why inmates do not report sexual assault. Such reasons include fear of remaining in protective custody, fear from other inmates due to reporting, and a way to remain silent to protect one's reputation (Hensley & Tweksbury, 2002).

Although some research suggests that same-sex sexual activity within prisons is due to deprivation and sexual desire, an alternative explanation is more about power and control and less about obtaining sexual gratification. The prison culture itself creates an environment in which some inmates feel they must reinforce their own self-worth via controlling others through sexual victimization. Since inmates are not able to act out their frustrations with their situation, they instead channel their frustration towards inmates (Hassine, 1999). Sexual bartering has been seen as a common underground economy within prisons which is reflected through sexual encounters of inmates (Pardue, Arrigo, & Murphy, 2011).

According to Pardue, Arrigo, and Murphy (2011), sex in prisons, "is a quid pro quo relationship in which sexual favors are exchanged for good (e.g., drugs, cigarettes) and/or services (e.g., special work detail or cell assignment) built on unequal or differential power among prisoners or between incarcerates and correctional employees" (p. 290). They go on to report that female inmates will participate in such relationships even if it is based on a *perceived* standing or influence. Although there are many reasons for such engagement, some speculate that sexual acting out while incarcerated is a form of expressing one's freedom as it may be one of the few things like that the inmate can control (Pardue, Arrigo, & Murphy, 2011).

According to Marelich, Lundquist, Painter & Mechanic (2008), there are times that sex is viewed as a cost with the reward being some sort of resource related to the relationship. Further, others have agreed that some sexual acts are performed for various reasons such as impressing others, gaining approval, and other external rewards. They also suggest that some individuals (not sampled on a prison population) may engage in sex as a way of avoiding confrontation or some other negative circumstance (Marelich et al., 2008).

Most literature on prison inmates suggests that they engage in behaviors as a form of trade; according to the view of Marelich et al. (2008), inmates may engage in sexual relations as a way to avoid some form of confrontation. Policy implication for the rationale behind sexual involvement of inmates is important when looking at consensual and non-consensual behaviors. There is a body of literature that suggests that sexual victimization changes the social culture of the inmate and may actually lead to more violence (Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Bumby, & Donaldson, 1996).

Conclusion

Researchers have formulated many models in attempting to explain the concept of prison sex; however, none have looked into the possible connection of rational choice and exchange theories in explaining inmate sexual behavior. Although standards such as the Prison Rape Elimination Act serves to prevent and respond to sexual assault(s) of the incarcerated population, research still suggests that such behavior occurs both consensually and non-consensually.

Inmates appear to weigh the costs and benefits associated with engaging in sexual relations with the primary motivations being increased access to commissary and/or other tangible goods in addition to companionship (Wooden & Parker, 1982; Greer, 2000). Additionally, some inmates agree to sexual actions as a form of protection (Trammell, 2011) and group solidarity. The literature suggests that regardless of the combination of motives, inmates engage in rational decision making when weighing the pros and cons for exchanges involving sexual behaviors.

Since many believe that sex between inmates leads to issues such as institutional violence, health concerns, and other financial costs associated with the behavior, identifying the motivations for such behavior is crucial in preventing and intervening in the sexual behavior of inmates. For example, Tewksbury and Conner (2014) suggest that those who violated the rules of the institution in general, were also the ones more likely to defy the prohibitions of sexual activity.

Thus, correctional administration should seek to seriously address and monitor all inmates. With that said, correctional administration need to remain focused on running a safe and secure facility focused on providing basic needs and rehabilitative programs. Thus, according to rational choice and exchange theory, correctional administrators should focus on ensuring that all inmates have access to the items which seem to entice many inmates to act out sexually (e.g. commissary) (Tewksbury & Conner, 2014).

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