

Playing the Part: Pseudo-Families, Wives, and the Politics of Relationships in Women's Prisons in California

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Abigail Kolb¹ and **Ted Palys²**

Abstract

At present, little is known regarding the experience and activities of gang-affiliated women in prison. This article is based on interviews with 15 formerly incarcerated women who offered insights into their experiences. Rather than continue the territorially based street divisions they defended, the women tended, instead, to create interpersonal units in the form of families and/or sexual dyads, reconstructing hetero-normative relational patterns during the course of their incarceration. The article offers an alternative lens through which to understand human agency among incarcerated women.

Keywords

prison pseudo-families, gang-affiliated women offenders, agency

Introduction

Researchers have long noted that women have unique pathways to offending and that their patterns of offenses tend to differ from those of their male counterparts (e.g., see Covington, 2007; Salisbury & Van Voorhis, 2009). Accordingly,

¹Clayton State University, Morrow, GA, USA

²Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

Corresponding Author:

Abigail Kolb, Department of Social Sciences, Clayton State University, 2000 Clayton State Blvd., Morrow, GA 30260, USA.

Email: abigailkolb@clayton.edu

academics and practitioners alike have begun to show increased interest in the experiences of this population, seeking to understand their unique social statuses and attempting to make sense of how these positions impact their relationships during incarceration.

Research studies have shown consistently that men and women differ in their responses to incarceration (Bosworth, 1999; Giallombardo, 1966; Greer, 2000; Maeve, 1999; Severance, 2005a, 2005b; Sykes, 1958; Ward & Kassebaum, 1965); women tend to be more relational than their male counterparts (DeBell, 2001; Harner, 2004). But do these relationships simply mirror those in the broader society? Diaz-Cotto (1996) argues that the research has certainly left that impression, adding, further, that the literature presented incarcerated women as apolitical and lacking agency and that “the politicizing capability of such groups has generally been denied or ignored by social scientists” (p. 302). Linker, Bergeron, and Lempert (2005) reaffirm this view, arguing that authoritarian power dynamics within the carceral setting make it difficult for incarcerated women to confront prison authority, with racial and ethnic minorities having even greater challenges due to their marginalized positions within both society and the carceral setting (see also Diaz-Cotto, 2006; Kruttschnitt, 1983).

However, it would be fallacious to assume that these women’s identities are entirely constrained by their incarceration. Another strand of literature argues the incarcerative experience is not quite so monolithic. In a comparison of incarcerated individuals across five countries, Skarbek (2016) develops a self-governance theory of prison social order. He explains the importance of extralegal self-governance within the carceral setting and how decentralized, homogeneous groups of inmates are responsible for informal social control when the institution’s formal social control mechanisms do not meet inmates’ needs. Importantly, he notes that inmates form self-governing groups to meet three specific needs—protection, allocation of necessary resources, and “prison commerce”—to import and sell desired but prohibited goods within the prison. He explains how “inmates can develop. . . solutions to the problem of order, and these solutions take diverse forms depending on official’s choices and the demographics of the community” (Skarbek, 2016, p. 48). Self-governance, then, can be seen as a form of agency within the carceral setting, as it allows for inmates’ needs and wants to be met.

Operating within the constraints of incarceration, women learn to adapt to an environment and conditions to which they otherwise might not have been exposed (e.g., being in close confines with women of different cultural backgrounds; having to abide by rules that regulate how they can conduct themselves; being told when to eat, sleep, and work; etc.). Consistent with this view, more recent research has focused on the ways in which incarcerated

women can and do engage in agentic behavior through their relationships (Bosworth, 1999; DeBell, 2001; Diaz-Cotto, 1996, 2006; Greer, 2000; Maeve, 1999; Severance, 2005a, 2005b). These studies conclude that involvement in pseudo-families is actually a means for coping with the stress of incarceration and separation from families (Harner, 2004; Kruttschnitt, Gartner, & Miller, 2000; Propper, 1982; Severance, 2004). In addition, many incarcerated women engage in sexual relationships for love and emotional support (Giallombardo, 1966; Harner, 2004; Jones, 1993; Severance, 2005a), social support (Severance, 2005b), and economic benefit (Greer, 2000). While some investigations propose that incarcerated women engage in these relationships because they are deprived of heterosexual relationships in prison (see Gagnon & Simon, 1968; Watterson, 1996), Jones (1993) argues that sex and expression of sexuality are less important than the love and support functions these relationships offer. In combination, these studies suggest that women adapt and adjust to their new environment to create a livable experience in which to form relationships and negotiate power.

The potential downside of these relationships is noted by Huggins, Capeheart, and Newman (2006), who report that while pseudo-families may have a positive impact on female inmates as they provide emotional support, affection, and love, membership also “increases the likelihood that one will be involved in an adverse event” (p. 125). Similarly, Trammell, Wulf-Ludden, and Mowder (2015) discuss the role of prison fights as a social event. They argue that because many incarcerated women already suffer from histories of dysfunctional relationships, their interpersonal (familial and sexual) relationships in prison tend to mirror those on the outside.

Feminist literature has sought to identify when gendered behavior is performed out of habit and when it is performed consciously (see, for example, Butler, 1990; Risman, 2009). Risman (2009) questions whether individuals can refuse to “do gender” according to traditional expectations or whether “rebellion is simply doing gender differently, forging alternative masculinities and femininities” (p. 433). In other words, does performing gendered or sexualized behavior that reaches beyond traditional or identifiable practices constitute a complete subversion of the gendered and sexualized structures that constrain us?

Queer theorists further this line of questioning and cite the importance of temporality and spatiality in the (re)construction of identity. Halberstam (1998), for example, discusses how androgynous women perform their gender one way in public but must embrace a different, more feminine identity when they cross the threshold of a women’s bathroom to avoid ridicule for being in the wrong bathroom. While actively engaging in this identity shift when crossing spatial boundaries may act as a protective factor, it suggests

that individuals are capable of performing, and indeed often do perform, gender to adapt to their surroundings. Yet, they remain constrained by gendered expectations placed upon them by the larger social environment. Incarcerated women perform their gendered and sexual roles within the confines of what is socially understood as being possible: masculinity and femininity; however, they also engage in unique practices within these confines.

In sum, researchers examining women's carceral relationships have focused on pseudo-families and sexual dyads as reconstructions of traditional gender roles (Giallombardo, 1966), a means for adaptation and coping (Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Propper, 1982; Severance, 2004), and as challenging traditional gendered and sexual roles (Diaz-Cotto, 2006). We sought to contribute to this developing literature by drawing upon feminist and queer literature on gender construction and performativity to guide our interviews with 15 formerly incarcerated, formerly gang-affiliated women residing in Los Angeles. This study also allowed us to address Diaz-Cotto's (1996) observation on the dearth of research focusing on the experiences of incarcerated Latinas. Our primary focus was on how these women understand their gendered and sexualized positions upon entry to prison and how their relationships with other inmates were implicated in their identity (re)construction during incarceration. In addition, we examined how these women engage in agentic practices through micro-level politics—"politicking"—that take place within prison and are subsequently responsible for co-constructing prison identities.

Method

The current study arose as part of a larger qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with 24 formerly gang-affiliated Chicana participants who were involved with a prominent gang intervention organization located in East Los Angeles. We approached this organization because of the large, diverse clientele they serve. Clients are either self-referred or referred through the criminal justice system.

Our sample was a purposive criterion sample: participants had to be (a) female, (b) Chicana, (c) a former gang member, and (d) at least 18 years of age. The first five participants were referred to us by permanent staff at the organization, and the sample snowballed from there. Interviews were conducted with everyone in the organization who met the research criteria and who wanted to participate. As such, data saturation was reached once we had interviewed all eligible women. At the request of the organization and because interview time detracted from the women's ability to engage in paid work, participants were compensated for their time with a US\$40 gift card.

One of the themes that emerged unexpectedly during the interviews was participants' experiences in prison. This was an important finding because it not only added a dimension to understanding a critical time in their lives, but it also enhanced the understanding of the fluidity of identity performance. The current analysis is based on 15 interviews and includes every woman involved in the organization who met the sampling criteria, admitted to incarceration of any length within a California correctional facility, and wished to participate. The volunteers within this subsample ranged in age from 18 to 56, and all identified as second or third generation Chicanas (Mexican American). Interviews ranged from 1 to 3½ hr, with an average of 2 hr, occurring during one or more of three different visits to the Los Angeles area between June 2013 and February 2014 (this also allowed re-interviews with those who continued in the program).

The research required approval from both the organization and our institution's institutional review board (IRB). These approvals were granted in December and March 2013, respectively. Our main research questions at the outset were related to the (re)construction of identity throughout critical periods of participants' lives. Because many of the women discussed prison as a critical point in their lives, we focused on understanding the role of incarceration in their lives and how this was implicated in their gendered identities. Participants were asked to explain and reflect on perceptions of their environments major events in their lives, social interactions, and themselves in relation to these experiences, based on their social positioning at various points in their lives. All interviews were minimally structured to facilitate a conversational-type interview process. Consistent with critical race, feminist, and queer epistemologies, this process allowed participants to talk about whatever they felt comfortable sharing; follow-up questions were asked to encourage elaboration.

All interviews were conducted by the first author, recorded with participant permission and transcribed verbatim. Interviewees were guaranteed confidentiality and chose pseudonyms to anonymize the data. Once the transcriptions were completed, they were uploaded into qualitative analysis software (NVivo), which allowed for systematic yet flexible data organization, coding, and analysis processes. Line-by-line coding was used because it allows the researcher to examine each sentence and assign descriptive labels (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978). In coding all transcripts, patterns began to emerge from the data. After the initial coding process, transcripts and categories were reviewed for accuracy and to determine how categories related to one another. This resulted in more analytic coding, whereby certain categories were clustered together based on theoretical constructs. The themes that emerged regarding life in prison were related to participants' gendered and

sexualized performances within their newly formed relationships with other inmates.

While a qualitative approach was appropriate for this research, as our aim was to better understand the perceptions and experiences of this unique population, there were limitations related to our sample and the method of choice. First, our sample was limited to women who participated in programming within the organization and thus might be characteristic of individuals who are motivated to reflect upon and share their past. In addition, researchers frequently cite limitations related to the interview method due to the challenges of accurately recalling historical information (Diaz-Cotto, 1996) and to participant tendency to exaggerate or glorify their experiences (Hagedorn, 1996).

Results and Discussion

Preliminary Racial and Geographic Ordering

Unlike their “streets experiences,” participants reported that upon entering prison, their worlds were thrown into chaos as they no longer resided within the geographical confines of their neighborhood and hence were unable to interact with their familiar “homies.” In other words, they were forced to interact with women from various gangs, neighborhoods, and regions of the state. When the women first entered jail or prison, the first division they reported was racial (i.e., Latinas gravitated toward one another). Destiny, who referred to this as “politicking,” stated, “[W]hen you go to prison it’s just like black sticks together, brown sticks together, white sticks together. It’s all about color; it’s not even about the gangs no more. Now that’s called ‘politicking.’”

While the first ordering is thus “racial,” a second ordering is a geographical one, arising from the fact that women from other parts of the state are incarcerated in the same prison: Latina inmates from Northern California (Norteñas) are expected to stay together, while those from Southern California (Sureñas) also stick with one another. Finally, participants reported further ordering based on family units and dyadic relationships.

Performing Family

Although fear of the unknown and of the potential for victimization were often the first noted response to incarceration, the second was loneliness. Accordingly, some women found solace by becoming a member of a play family for protection and as a distraction from being separated from their

own families. Consistent with previous literature, the respondents' understanding of play family membership varied from "fun," and "protection," to "being part of something." As Maria described, "well, it's usually the older person; it's the mom. . . And if she has a girlfriend, her girlfriend is my play dad. And if she has any other kids, then they're my sisters. You know, that's just how it works."

While play moms tended to be more feminine in appearance and took on the role of nurturer, women who assumed the male role in a dyad (i.e., play dad) were often more masculine in appearance (e.g., short or no hair, binding of breasts, or, in some cases, had facial hair) and affect (i.e., they engage in more traditionally masculine behaviors).¹

Prison Family as Source of Belonging and Emotional Support

One of the most difficult aspects of incarceration for these women was the inability to interact regularly with their family and friends. Some women were not close with their families and thus did not have family members who visited them in prison. Others had family members who were heavily entrenched in gang life or other criminal endeavors and could not visit due to risk of arrest. In addition, most interviewees stated that few of their homies visited them once they were arrested. Homies' loyalty and support was conditional and limited to the streets. Arlene stated, "When you get busted nobody does shit for you. It's like they forget about you, like you don't even exist, and you get tired of that." Because many of the women found themselves isolated from their families and the people with whom they were accustomed to interact, they forged new relationships to meet their emotional needs in prison.

Like traditional families, play families often provided material and emotional support for their members. However, many of the women stated that they came from broken or dysfunctional families where they did not receive the love and support that one might consider part of typical family dynamics. Michelle suggested that she found these qualities in her play family: "You give a lot of loyalty and love still, you know, and you find yourself doing anything for them. So it's not too many differences. . . You're going to get treated like your real family."

Although Joanna denied participation in a play family, she did offer insight into their dynamics. She stated that many incarcerated women, like her, had limited family connections. The loneliness they felt had an impact on the types of relationships they eventually formed. Like the rest of the participants, Joanna joined a gang because she wanted to feel a sense of belonging and to be a part of something. Once these women enter prison, they are torn

away from the only family they know and often experience the same feelings of loneliness, isolation, and fear they felt prior to their affiliation with the gang. Prison families, she suggested, help fill this void by providing these young women with the love, acceptance, and support they believed they received from the gang.

Families Offer Protection

In addition to emotional support, play families also served to provide the women with protection in the face of aggressive or dangerous inmates. Some of the women indicated that asserting strength by fighting with other families and inmates led families to gain power and status within the prison. By all accounts, fighting in prison, similar to the streets, is commonplace because women, once again, have to prove themselves and show that they are not “punks.” Natalie described why fighting is an important aspect of prison life: “You don’t let nobody punk you when you’re locked up. You can’t let nobody punk you. You’re gonna have to fight. . . It don’t matter if you get put in the hole or not.” If one or more inmates provoked another woman by insulting her or physically assaulting her, the victim of the attack was expected to fight back to show that she was not weak. Play families played an important role in protecting each other so that members were not deemed punks. As Marissa explained,

I would [make money and] bring stuff in, and they would help me fucking contribute. It was, like, I looked out for them, and they looked out for me. I looked out for them the [same] way with stealing, so it became a good thing because we became bigger. I got more power. We felt like we could punk people, and nobody was gonna fuck with us. I felt more comfortable.

Belonging to a family not only afforded Marissa protection from the frequent violence that ensues within prison, but it also boosted her status among other inmates. Use of physical force to defeat rivals and assert control gave Marissa and her family power within various spaces in the prison. As Destiny stated, “When I say power, it’s like respect. Fear means respect. Respect means fear. Power is respect. Control.” Similar to life on the streets, it is difficult for one individual to command absolute control, but working together as an organized group allows people to take command of territory, exploit its benefits, and instill fear in others. For example, inmates who take control of the kitchen are in a position to steal food and contraband and sell it to other inmates for material and economic profit. While these women stated that when they arrived in prison they felt weak and fearful of the unknown and

other inmates, they found that they were able to gain power and assert control through engagement with their play families.

Play Families as a Source of Conflict

Although play families provide emotional support and protection and boost inmate status by commanding control of certain spaces within the prison, they also create conflict (Foster, 1975; Watterson, 1996). Destiny stated that there were three things women should avoid when they enter prison: (a) drugs, (b) debts, and (c) relationships. She said that getting involved with drugs, owing a debt, or engaging in familial or sexual relationships with other women meant that women were engaging in politics and placed them at risk for “drama.”

They're called your play mom, play dad, play sister, your play kid. So for me, I really didn't like to do that 'cuz when you get play moms and play dads and play kids and all that you get caught up in more shit because. . . You ride or die for your blood, right? When it's your real family, you ride or die—you're with them all the way. . . So when you're taking on that role in there, in prison, then that means whatever they come with 'n their packages you're gonna carry too. . . Anytime they got into something, I'd be right there behind them, 'cuz I was like, “That's my dad so I gotta be behind her helping her.”

It is interesting that Destiny equated her behavior in the play family to the behavior she would engage in if members of her biological family were under attack. Marissa and Natalie stated that there was reciprocity when it came to fighting in prison. Play family members protected them from violence, and they, in turn, were required to protect their family members. Natalie was willing to be placed in the Special Housing Unit (SHU, or solitary confinement) and discussed serving three SHU terms for defending her play mom's honor on the yard:

I went to the SHU because of [my prison mom]. Well, I didn't go to the SHU because of her, but. . . because there was somebody on the yard that was snitching on her case, and so I took it into my hands to fuck her up. So I [got] put into SHU. . . My first one was 65 days; my second one was another 60 days; and then my third one was for 30 days.

Some participants indicated that prison politics dictated that family members had to defend and protect one another, particularly the matriarch and patriarch, when one member of the family was attacked by another inmate. Families, then, became important in the physical well-being of each inmate because they supported one another during ritual prison conflict.

And yet, there were recognized limits to these allegiances. Destiny stated that it was difficult to trust other women because even family members were quick to turn on one another. Destiny's lack of trust for her play family reflected the experiences of some of the others and was consistent with previous studies that found women in prison had difficulty establishing trust and knowing whom they can trust (Bosworth, 1999; Greer, 2000; Severance, 2005b). Throughout the interviews, all respondents made it clear that they "couldn't trust nobody." Participants traced this mistrust of others in prison to mistrust of their homies who deserted them when they went to prison. One woman said of her play family, ". . . [T]o me it's like these are supposed to be your play families and stuff but trust me, in a heartbeat they'll turn around 'n backstab you. They will." Consistent with Severance (2005b), the women in this study suggested there is a contradiction among women when they go to prison: while women do not trust one another, they are inclined to forge relationships—even if they are seen as being unhealthy, or unfulfilling—to meet their basic needs.

When they enter prison, women are forced to exchange the comfort of their neighborhoods and the familiarity of their relationships with friends and family for relationships with strangers and, possibly, women they considered to be rivals on the streets. Often, these women embraced relationships with others within the prison environment as a means of coping with emotional and economic deprivation and protection as opposed to a desire to create long-lasting relationships which help foster trust in others. Despite their skepticism about trusting one another and knowledge that being part of a play family often invited a certain type of conflict, the women in this study reported that they (and others) sought a connection with other inmates to make their prison or jail time more bearable.

While this investigation echoed the findings of previous research that suggested that play families invite conflict and might increase the likelihood of behavioral infractions within the prison, it also supports findings which implied that kinship networks also are a means of comfort, support, and interpersonal connection that these women might not otherwise have experienced during the course of their incarceration and, indeed, might not have ever received in their lives. More importantly, these women explained the innovative and dynamic nature of the group and, specifically, personal identity (re) construction within prison. A number of women stated that women engaged in prison politics through their interpersonal relationships. Thus, we came to understand four ways in which women engaged in play family politics:

1. Construction of, and engagement in, the play family itself was a means of survival, a coping mechanism, as well as a means of asserting agency.

These women actively constructed kinship networks that mirror the nuclear family and traditional conceptions of what a family “should” look like. Women who engaged in play families bought into traditional notions of femininity through family engagement, but they executed agency based on whom they allowed to join the family and how they chose to construct it (i.e., number of members and whether or not the network contained non-nuclear or extended members).

2. These groups are often rooted in similar racial and cultural identities, which suggests that social groupings and power dynamics in this setting are linked to one’s racialized identity. While this can be interpreted as an unconscious mirroring of social and racial structures, it also reflects a conscious effort to maintain one’s safety and racial identity.
3. The use and maintenance of power and control was central to the well-being of the family. Families commanded respect from other kinship networks and thus exerted their power based on the number of members within the family.
4. The more power a play family gains through size and use of force, the more sway they had in terms of control over beneficial spaces within the prison. Similar to the street politics involved in the control of certain territories, women in prison fought for and commanded control over spaces within the prison that offered exploitable benefits.

Becoming a member of a play family within the isolating environment of prison simultaneously constrains and facilitates the construction of a new identity for incarcerated women. Within these networks, members engage in a process of identity (re)construction by assuming and performing certain roles that are relevant within the specific context. Establishment of a family unit reinforces a sense of identity not only through an individual’s performance of a socially relevant role within the family but also through the exclusion of others who are not part of the family. In other words, each play family has the ability to dictate rules, norms, and expectations for the unit as a whole.

Prison Dyads

In addition to forming play families, many incarcerated women became intimately involved with one another. Our interviewees suggested having a prison girlfriend is a common practice among women during their incarceration, though some scholars disagree (see Huggins et al., 2006). Whether or not they had a prison girlfriend, participants identified the various gendered titles and roles assumed by women involved in prison dyads. As was the

case with prison families, we found that hetero-normative relational patterns were often reproduced within the confines of the prison in sexual relationships as well.

Gendered Roles/Categories

The social construction of sexuality is replicated within women's prisons. Often, there is a tendency to assign gendered labels to individuals whose sexuality falls outside of the heterosexual "norm." These labels are often ascribed based on appearance: "butch" to describe a lesbian with more masculine features, and "femme" to describe women with a feminine appearance. Ironically, engaging in the practice of ascribing gendered and sexualized labels to better understand "what kind of lesbian" another woman is works to confine women who identify as "lesbian," to a space that may or may not be applicable to or representative of them, thereby essentializing their identities and attempting to understand individuals who do not engage in heterosexual relationships according to heterosexual standards and roles.

Incarcerated women engage in these practices as well, ascribing gendered and sexualized labels to women involved in lesbian relationships. Women involved in these relationships are then held responsible for acting out and thereby reinforcing these labels. However, some scholars argue that identity performance is an iterative process that is in a constant state of (re)constitution as a result of linguistic practices (see Butler, 1990, 2004), that is, corporeal practices exist because of and are reproduced by the language used to describe them. However, discourse surrounding gender and sexuality is in a constant state of change as a result of corporeal performance. The way in which individuals constitute and reconstitute themselves, then, is intricately linked with gendered discourse describing and defining corporeal performance and making these two concepts mutually constitutive.

Participants described the different "types" of women involved in intimate relationships in prison. All agreed that there were at least three types of lesbians: (a) women who are defined as masculine in both appearance and behavior (and are often referred to as "he") and are known as "stud-butches" or simply "studs"; (b) women who appear to have some feminine physical characteristics such as long hair, but engage in more masculine behavior, who are known as "aggressive femmes"; and finally (c) women who are seen as feminine in appearance and behavior and referred to as "lipstick lesbians" or "femmes." The one exception to this tripartite classification system is the introduction of the title, "stem," by Marissa:

We call those [masculine women] “studs.” And then we got the “stems,” and those are the girls that are tomboyish, but they’re like, girly, too. They could be girly, but they carry themselves more aggressive than girly girls. You know how girls are like, “Oh no” [flicks wrist and talks in high pitched voice]? There is a certain type of girl that doesn’t act manly at all where there will be girls that are real pretty but very aggressive.

Marissa enacted the differences in the various gendered roles performed by women in prison by changing the tone and pitch of her voice and through her corporal expressions (such as flicking of her wrist). In addition, she used the terms “boy” and “girl” as reference points to help explain the gendered nature of these differences, thereby demonstrating the gendered confines of the larger social world that are mirrored within prison. Likewise, Destiny’s description of the different types of lesbians suggested that women were responsible for simultaneously constructing and enacting gendered labels:

Like I said, they have all these different rules. . . So like one of the rules would be if you’re involved in a relationship, you have a girl that’s a femme and a girl that’s a dyke . . . But aggressive femmes are bisexual. So what ends up happening is a dyke can’t be talking to a femme. That would be a rule. Like a dyke is in a relationship over here [points to the side], tries to talk to a femme in a relationship over here [points to the other side] and automatically you’re violating code of conduct . . . a dyke’s not gonna be with a dyke . . . ‘cuz that’s both trying to be the man.

Interestingly, both women described how the various roles of women involved in prison relationships are discursively and corporeally constructed and, indeed, mutually constitutive. That is, the way in which one woman’s identity was performed, interpreted, and understood was imperative in terms of her continued performance of that role and, subsequently, the performance of her partner’s role. Each person’s role gave meaning not only to themselves but to the other person(s) involved in the relationship. In prison, women were then responsible for constructing and reconstructing their gendered and sexualized identities through performance and a series of interplays with their partner which subsequently led to defining and redefining rules for engaging in these relationships.

Meeting Needs, Passing Time

Construction and performance of these identities for the purpose of engaging in lesbian relationships is important to understand for two reasons. First, a number of women also stated that while many women in prison engage in

lesbian relationships, they do not necessarily consider themselves lesbians on the streets. Second, construction and performance of these identities allows these women agency, which helps them to adapt and meet their needs. Consistent with previous literature, engaging in lesbian relationships is a way in which women adapt to the loneliness, experience and express love and sexuality in an isolating environment, and access necessities from commissary. As Natalie explained,

I've met people who were straight as fuck on the outs, and when they get locked up, they end up getting into a relationship. It's all just to pass time. . . If you have a relationship in prison, then you got somebody to talk to; you got somebody to fuck . . . The majority of the time when you get on the outs that shit ain't gonna last. The majority of the time . . . you'll lose connections [when you] get outside because then life hits. Because in prison, that's our life. Our life is being inside these walls. Our life is not out there anymore. Our life is in here, so we gonna make best with what we've got in here.

The idea that prison becomes these women's home suggests the uniqueness of the prison environment. These women leave the familiarity of the streets and must create a new home and lifestyle within the walls of the prison. While Severance (2004) argue that the women in her study were confused by their relationships in prison and that they would have a long-lasting impact on their sexuality, even post-release, data in the current study suggest women are more likely to engage in these sexual relationships as a means for companionship, entertainment, and support while in prison. The identity they construct, then, is an agentic response that is relationally, temporally, and spatially relevant to their circumstances.

Unwritten Rules, Politicking, and Drama

While being involved in prison relationships helps women pass the time and provides them with a sense of emotional support, these relationships exist with certain rules. While some participants denied the involvement of politics in women's prison and their relationships in prison, others reported that the presence of politics dictated how women were supposed to behave in relationships. Destiny offered the most insight into the "politicking" involved in sexual relationships in a women's prison:

Most aggressive femmes have braids in their hair—long ponytails. . . One of the rules would be, I guess, nobody can braid your girlfriend's hair but you. If somebody's braiding your girlfriend's hair, then be prepared to fight 'cuz that means she's 'try na take your woman. And your girlfriend really shouldn't be

buying anybody else anything from canteen or trying to take care of anybody else. That's just the way it is. It's real confusing. . . You don't really want to be caught in anybody else's room. . . if you're in a relationship with somebody. That's one of the rules as well. If you step into somebody else's "house" that means this or that. You can't really be hanging around with other women either.

While research has explained how institutional control over space and movement within the carceral setting has limited female inmates' self-determination and ability to express their identities (see Arkles, 2012), Cusack (2016) cites the social significance of hair style, human agency, and the myriad ways in which individuals may contest gendered norms and expectations through hair style. The women in this study reported that Latinas typically wore their hair in specific styles to indicate their gendered identities within prison. In addition to their gendered features, these women were expected to engage in specific roles that reaffirmed their gendered status and, subsequently, the gendered status of their partner. For example, Arlene described expectations involved in a relationship between a guy (butch-stud) and a girl (femme) in prison:

It's kind of like being out here [in the community]. If you're like a stud or whatever—if you're pretty much the guy in the relationship—you get anything you want like from all the girls that are in there. In there they cater to you. They do some way-out shit in there.

As these women describe, lesbian relationships in prison meet women's emotional, physical, and financial needs, and also largely mirror the gendered nature of relationships in the larger social environment. The traditional binary classification system that distinguishes "men" from "women" also exists within the prison. Men and women are expected to perform certain gendered roles that complement one another, roles that are mutually constitutive. In other words, the female/feminine cannot be performed without the existence of male/masculine performance. While these women do engage in politics to meet their own needs and are, thus, active agents within prison, they simultaneously perform their identities within the confines of highly gendered and sexualized systems which operate within the larger social environment and the prison itself.

Gay for the Stay; Straight at the Gate

Not all women were labeled and defined upon their entry into prison; some women were responsible for (re)constructing their gendered identity when they entered prison. As Delilah explained, women who identified as heterosexual on

the streets might engage in lesbian relationships in prison to get their needs met:

They're either already gay, or some just become gay. We have this thing we say . . . "Gay for the stay and straight at the gates." . . . A lot of them do do that. Like, they have that thing like they need to be with somebody to take care of them, and. . . the manly looking [women] go for the little skinny ones and. . . start turning them out . . . liking girls.

Similarly, Charlie described how women actively transform their identities when they leave their street lives for prison:

Charlie: Some girls think they're men. Some of them could be prostitutes out here [on the street] but in there they're not. There are just a bunch of characters in there.

Interviewer: So people can change their identities from street to prison?

Charlie: Yeah, yeah, I've seen that. I seen girls who go in there and are prostitutes in the streets and in there they're gay. In there they are stud-broads. In the streets they are prostituting and stuff like that. They're all feminine. But when they get in there they're all stud-broads, they're all manly.

Here, Charlie provided an example of the significance of temporality and spatiality in identity performance, an idea widely discussed in feminist and queer theory (see Butler, 1990, 2004; Halberstam, 1998; Hale, 1997). The notion that being one person on the streets and reconstituting that identity once a spatial threshold is crossed speaks to the fluidity of identity. Thus, discussing identity markers such as race, class, gender, and sexuality as occurring along a continuum as opposed to being performed in socially, spatially, and temporally relevant spheres negates the possibility that these identities can and do intersect (Butler, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991).

Conceptualized this way, we can begin to understand incarcerated women as active agents who are responsible, at least in part, for negotiating their identities and relationships. As Charlie's example suggests, some women radically transform their identities when they walk through the prison gates. Performing gender and sexuality in a specific way on the streets is functional and allows these women to meet certain needs. While prison confines them and immerses them in the politics that come with being incarcerated, once they enter through the gates, these women transform themselves—perhaps to meet their needs in a different way which has the potential to be empowering.

Conclusion

The qualitative methods used in this research allowed us to obtain rich descriptions of the meaning and dynamics of these Chicana women's experiences in prison. Although based on 15 women, the results are consistent with the extant literature to the extent there is overlap, while offering new insights that can be examined by others in future research. Our findings regarding the importance and role of relationships among incarcerated Chicanas are consistent with Severance's (2005b) research which included a sample of incarcerated African American and White women. While this study echoed the findings of previous research that reflected the importance of racial divisions and their political implications within prison (Kruttschnitt, 1983), and that play families may invite conflict and might increase the likelihood of behavioral infractions within the prison (Huggins et al., 2006), it also supports findings which suggested that kinship networks provide a means of comfort, support, and interpersonal connection (Harner, 2004; Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Propper, 1982; Severance, 2004) that these women might not otherwise have experienced during the course of their incarceration and, indeed, might not have ever received in their lives. More importantly, these women explained the innovative and dynamic nature of the group and, specifically, personal identity (re)construction within prison.

Becoming a member of a play family within the isolating environment of prison simultaneously constrains and facilitates the construction of a new identity for incarcerated women (see, for example, Bosworth, 1999). While it would be a mistake to suggest that play families are akin to street gangs, they do serve a similar purpose and have similar characteristics to gangs. Both quasi-institutions command loyalty from members and, in exchange, allow women, who find themselves marginalized and/or excluded by the larger social environment, a place to fit in and provide them with support and protection. Within these networks, members engage in a process of identity (re)construction by assuming and performing certain roles that are relevant within the specific context. Establishment of a family unit reinforces a sense of identity not only through an individual's performance of socially relevant role within the family but also through the exclusion of others who are not part of the family. In other words, each play family has the ability to dictate rules, norms, and expectations for the unit as a whole. Those who do not meet one family's criteria for membership (i.e., because of race or certain behaviors) are relegated to the status of "other," thus suggesting the exclusive nature of memberships and the reinforcing nature of the constitution of identity.

Although the data were obtained for the purpose of a larger study regarding identity (re)construction and performance among gang-affiliated Chicanas in the Los Angeles area, a majority of the women interviewed discussed their experiences in prison and the role these experiences played in their lives. A number of participants suggested that engaging in relationships in prison, whether familial or dyadic, served a specific purpose for them. Interestingly, they cited similar reasons for participating in these prison relationships and in their gang-related relationships on the streets (i.e., loneliness, needing a sense of belonging and having material needs met). Women in prison were responsible for (re)constructing their own identities while simultaneously playing a role in the (re)construction of one another's identity through their interactions with one another. Similar patterns were found in their lives on the streets.

The examples presented illustrate how gendered identity (and, though not explicitly discussed here, race and class) is inextricably linked to performance of sexuality and vice versa. The performance of gender and sexuality are mutually constitutive and has the potential to be highly agentic, but will always occur within the confines of the larger social structures of gender and sexuality, which is reinforced by the state and prison authorities (Diaz-Cotto, 1996). In other words, while potentially agentic, the performance of gender and sexuality will always yield a constrained form of agency. The idea of a slight shift or radical transformation in identity through corporeal expression and/or within a relational context within the prison environment is what some of the participants referred to as being "gay for the stay and straight at the gates." While women engaged in these types of relationships may not be part of a "traditional" nuclear family or engage in lesbian relationships at any other time in their lives, they do construct a different identity upon entering prison through participation in a pseudo-family or dyadic relationship.

While these women engage in gender binaries, they are simultaneously responsible for (actively) recreating and redefining the meaning of these dichotomous roles. To one extent, then, these women reproduce heteronormative relational standards and make sense of their position within their relationships specifically, and prison in general. As in the larger social environment, gender and sexuality tend to be conflated and women who abide by heteronormative standards of engagement in prison are rewarded through inclusion in social networks.² Participants suggest that gendered hierarchies are constructed by women to establish and exert power and control and subsequently regulate the behavior of other women within the prison. Exertion of power through fighting and/or controlling the sale of contraband helps certain women establish legitimacy which reinforces their power and stronghold in the prison's social and political economy.

Although many women engage in hetero-normative relations, participants emphasized a unique identity that emerged within the prison setting that does not neatly fit within the traditional gender binary: the aggressive-femme. This role is performed differently from traditional male/female roles and is the amalgamation of both masculine and feminine corporeal and behavioral traits. The roles that women play in prison, whether they are part of a pseudo-family or dyad, are, in part, dictated by politics of the larger socio-structural environment as well as by the political ambiance of the prison itself. Nevertheless, they simultaneously dictate the ways in which micro-level politics are understood and “institutionalized.”

Notwithstanding significant variation in narratives regarding the role of politicking in prison, one thing seemed apparent: Engagement in pseudo-families and lesbian relationships in prison is a political statement and is thus illustrative of a type of agency. Despite being constrained by the socio-political and economic structures of the larger social world and the authoritarian rules and physical confines of the prison itself, these women were able to describe ways in which they paradoxically used the structural systems that constrained them and (re)constructed a meaningful identity during the course of their incarceration.

Some of the women interviewed for this study explained how they moved from being a member of a street gang to a member of a play family within prison. They suggested that they moved from street life in which there was no trust of others to prison life in which there was no trust of others either. This would imply that self-preservation is the most important factor in the dangerous worlds of the streets and prisons. Relationships are necessarily forged, but they do not necessarily represent mutually satisfying relationships in the “traditional” (emotional) sense. This raises an important question: How can professionals help foster mutually satisfying, safe relationships within prison? How can they help model “healthy” relationships so that women are not only physically safe but emotionally secure as well? Bosworth (1999) states that women in prison “wear a mask.” If these women are truly agentic, they are capable of rejecting both street and prison life and reconstituting their relationships and themselves—to be whomever they choose to be. This is a task, however, that is easier said than done.

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Notes

1. Gendered roles within interpersonal dyads are discussed below.
2. On the contrary, it is important to note that some women do actively engage in hetero-normative behavior, but are excluded from different relationships because of their unwillingness to follow the rules, or engage in politics.

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Author Biographies

Abigail Kolb, PhD, is an assistant professor in the Department of Social Sciences, Clayton State University. Her current research interests include Latinas/Chicanas in gangs, politics among incarcerated women, identity politics, and qualitative research methods.

Ted Palys, PhD, is professor in the School of Criminology, Simon Fraser University. His most recent books include *Research Decisions: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Method Approaches* (5th ed.) and *Protecting Research Confidentiality: What Happens When Law and Ethics Collide?* His research and teaching interests include indigenous justice and privacy and surveillance issues.