

GAY INMATES AND SEXUAL INTIMACY BEHIND BARS: EVIDENCE FROM THAILAND

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ABSTRACT

Considerable research has found that gay men in Thailand are becoming more socially accepted. However, reliable information concerning gay prison inmates is scarce. This article investigates intimate relationships among gay inmates and the problems that derive from such relationships in a prison environment. Five gay inmates in the Nakorn Pathom Province Central Prison (Thailand) were given face-to-face interviews employing the qualitative research method. Findings indicated that newly-admitted gay inmates felt emotionally unstable because they feared strong social repercussions from straight inmates. However, after receiving support from senior gay friends, gay inmates felt more confident when projecting their gay identities. Gay inmates started their intimate relationships after making friends and having suggestive conversations with another gay inmate. Two major problems arising from same-sex relationships were identified. One is intense jealousy among gay inmates and the outbreak of sexually-transmitted diseases is the other. Very few wore condoms while engaging in sexually intimate acts due to a lack of safe-sex information and regular supply of condoms. Some gay inmates believed that sex without condoms showed sincerity. Others said that condoms were in short supply because of tight security checks from prison guards. In conclusion, there are very few gay inmates projecting their gay identity in prison. The number of hidden gay inmates still remains unreported. The alleviation of the problems from same-sex relationships is very difficult because guards fail to identify those inmates with hidden gay identities. The authors argue that the Department of Corrections realizes the presence and difficulties of gay inmates, but the budget to tackle their problems is lacking.

Keywords: Same-sex relationships, Gay men, Gay inmates, Gay in Thailand

INTRODUCTION

There is now a considerable amount of research documenting same-sex relationships in Thailand. Gay men in Thai society have gradually gained social recognition. This can be seen from gay tourist venues in several Thailand locations. Although many scholars have conducted research on gay men and women in Thailand, they have primarily put emphasis on health issues and risky behavior among gay men and women in society. There is little research on same-sex relationships among gay inmates. This article, therefore, aims to explore aspects of intimate relationships among imprisoned gay men.

Wagenbach (1997) argues that sexual identity associates with the awareness of sexual orientation. Sexual orientation may become obvious in the adolescent stage of human development. Until modern times, being gay was considered deviant. In the past, gay men suffered from being ignored (Duncan, 1990; Dutton, 1994; Allen and Demo, 1995; Diamond, 2003). They feared negative evaluation and rejection from heterosexual society. These negative impressions toward gay men from society have

been found to correlate significantly with the degree of anxiety these men also experienced. Meyer (2003) argues that a key psychological problem among gay men is the expectation of being socially rejected. When learning that their identity is not likely to be accepted, gay men usually attempt to hide their true nature.

Since the 1970s, sociologists have investigated the growing prominence of same-sex relationships. Scholars have shed light on, among other aspects, gay activism, identity issues, and culture. When compared to gay Thai women, gay Thai men are more socially advanced. Gay Thai men often include their identities and livelihoods on social media platforms and in the entertainment industry in such areas as films, plays, mainstream sit-coms, magazines, and on the internet (Clark, 2003; Jowett and Peel, 2010). It is obvious that same-sex relationships in mainstream society, in urban areas at least, are becoming more visible.

In prison, same-sex relationships are more complex because gay men live in confined spaces generally populated with heterosexual male prisoners. Interactions among prisoners are also complicated and likely to be prone to violence. Obvious gay men are rarely seen in everyday life in prison. Newly imprisoned gay men choose to hide their sexual identity from other prisoners because they fear sexual assaults and rejection. But as time passes, they feel more comfortable with other prisoners and will project their sexual orientation to attract other gay men.

The Department of Corrections considers gay men to be problematic as they are frequently involved in altercations concerning jealousy or theft. Most importantly, gay men who are infected with HIV could spread the disease to others. The Department has tried unsuccessfully to solve the problems caused by imprisoned gay men. One reason for the lack of success is that the Department staffs have little understanding of same-sex relationships. This leads to conflicts between them and imprisoned gay men. As a result, the main objectives of this article are to (i) investigate the lifestyles of imprisoned gay men, (ii) study the establishment of same-sex relationships among them, and (iii) examine the problems stemming from same-sex relationships in a prison environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study was accomplished with in-depth interviews and the use of the Qualitative approach. Five imprisoned gay men volunteered to provide personal information. The interviews were conducted in February, 2011. Since same-sex relationships in a Thai prison are rarely studied, data concerning imprisoned gay men is scarce and usually goes unrecorded. Therefore, the first phase of data collection was a reconnaissance survey to obtain fundamental information about imprisoned gay men. Based on this information, interview checklists were constructed and sent to the Prison Director for final approval. Electronic devices are not allowed in the prison. We, therefore, took notes to document the salient points of each interview.

The participants

The participants were gay men who had been imprisoned between two and five years. In order to protect their privacy, they were given fictitious names and their bio-data remains anonymous. After the interviews, we grouped responses by statement. All quotations were taken from these interviews.

The five inmates were aged 25, 27, 30, 33, and 43. Two were sentenced to two years and six months in prison for drug offenses, while three were sentenced to three years, four years and six months, and five years, respectively, for offences against property. The five participating inmates, all of whom come from Nakhon Pathom, were educated to a standard lower than the *Bachelor Degree*: one had completed primary school, three had completed junior high school, and one had been awarded a vocational certificate.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After grouping the responses, we began with the lifestyle of imprisoned gay men, followed by an examination of the establishment of same-sex intimacy among them and the problems stemming from those relationships.

Lifestyle of Imprisoned Gay Men

It is not unusual that a newly imprisoned gay man would feel physically and emotionally insecure because he might fear restrictive rules and regulations, the general prison environment, and other inmates. What may worry him the most is a physical attack or sexual assault if he projects his sexual orientation. Imprisoned gay men will feel more secure if they are befriended by senior gay inmates. As Jack told us:

'I didn't feel comfortable when I first came to jail because I have heard that straight inmates strongly hate homosexuals. If they discover that I am gay, I am not sure if my life is still safe. I learned many things about being gay in prison from senior gay inmates. Without their help, I would not know how to spend my time in jail with heterosexual inmates.'

Everyday activities of gay inmates are the same as those of straights. Everyone must abide by the rules and regulations and everything is under the close watch of the guards. As John mentioned:

'When you stay longer, you will know who is gay. However, it does not mean that being gay is privileged or non-privileged. Guards tell every inmate to follow the rules very strictly. Everyone, including gay men, has to exercise and do some assigned jobs. After finishing the assignment, we spend our time talking to other gay inmates.'

According to the responses, every activity of gay inmates comes under the rules and regulations of the Department of Corrections and is also closely supervised by the guards. However, we discovered that gay identities emerge when a new gay inmate socializes with other gay inmates. Being a group member is considered essential when in prison. Prison is considered a society, but it is a confined society. Inmates are still social beings and they need to be socially accepted. Gay inmates are usually uncomfortable in the presence of straights. They must belong to a particular gay group to comfort themselves and also to learn new things in prison. When he feels emotionally and physically secure, a gay inmate may find someone to be his partner. Sexual intimacy will usually follow. The establishment of sexual relationships starts with conversation. The ultimate goal of this friendly exchange is to weigh the possibility of having sex and then to become a gay couple.

The establishment of same-sex intimacy

There are three avenues that may lead to same-sex intimacy. First, a gay inmate might give a number of hints. Generally, for gay inmates, it is very difficult to find a partner to have sexual intimacy. Therefore, a gay inmate must understand the hint from his gay friend. As Smith reported:

'Gay men should know what the hints would be if they need sexual intimacy. Sometimes, a response means 'yes', but it can also be 'no'. Failing to read the hint correctly could destroy the opportunity for sexual intimacy. That gay inmate may find another, instead. However, based on my experience, hints given to another gay inmate usually means 'yes'.'

Second, sexual intimacy occurs because of behavior imitation. New gay inmates normally follow the lifestyle of the senior gay. Sexual intimacy among the senior gays set the example. Patrick told us about his sexual intimacy during his first month in jail:

'When I first came in, I thought that having sex among inmates is against the rules and regulations. But when I saw that many senior gay inmates could have sexual intimacy, I began thinking of doing so.'

It is clear that behavior imitation is a factor influencing sexual intimacy among gay inmates. When they realize that same-sex sexual intimacy is not unusual, they may start the search for a partner. Sexual intimacy among them starts from making friends with other gay inmates. This first phase is only general conversation which may happen over a number of days to make sure that everything is going along well. After feeling attracted, they might start to flirt. Then, either of them would refer to having sex. Interestingly, having sex does not refer to being a couple. Johnston explained to us that:

'Having sex does not mean a commitment. It is for sexual pleasure. If they fall seriously in love, they could become a couple. Every gay inmate will then be warned not to break up their relationship. There will be a big fight if one of them is unfaithful.'

Interestingly, one reason why a gay inmate agrees to be a partner with another as a couple is that he wants to have better treatment from his partner, such as extra money from work in the prison transferred to his account or toiletries. When they become a couple, it is very difficult to break them up. The only way the couple would be separated is if one of them is transferred to another zone or prison. Separation affords the opportunity to find another partner and begin again with flirtatious conversation.

One issue that remains unanswered is their privacy as a couple. No respondent told us about it. The Department of Corrections allows no inmate to be out of a guard's sight. Neither privacy nor private space is provided. One respondent said only that:

'It is our agreement to keep that area confidential. Although gay inmates live in an open space, we know where we can meet. Sorry that we cannot tell you about it.'

Since rules and regulations are strictly enforced in prison, letting other people know where they meet for sexual intimacy may result in the loss of private space. Keeping the location confidential among best gay friends is a must. However, being a gay couple is not easy. Even though gay inmates told us only about the establishment of same-sex relationships, there is an unspoken message that is understood: self-acceptance.

Gay identity appears only when a gay man accepts that he is gay. He may feel that his sexual orientation is same-sex, but if he hides it because he fears social denial, gay identity will be submerged (LaTorre, and Wendenburg, 1983; Hart and Heimberg, 2001). The reason why gay inmates can project their gay identity is that social denial towards gay inmates in prison is minimal.

Self-acceptance is very important for a gay inmate. Projecting a gay identity will lead him to a gay group faster (Muth and Cash, 1997; Morrison, Morrison and Hopkins, 2003). A gay inmate will meet an experienced gay man who can guide him to appear properly gay while in prison, especially how to maintain good friendships with gay inmates. Obviously, gay inmates set up common practices and they convince gay friends to follow such practices. This finding confirms Harry's arguments that gay couples adopted practices from the gay communities where they were residing (Harry, 1984; Land, and Kitzinger, 2007).

Problems stemming from same-sex relationships

Gay inmates are still considered a minority in prison. Despite the fact that they are small in number, problems resulting from same-sex relationships may impact negatively on other inmates. Two major problems reported to us are fights arising from jealousy and communicable diseases.

One respondent told us that gay inmates tend to be emotional. Intense jealousy among gay inmates when they flirt with one another can lead to altercations. Jacob explained that:

'Fighting only between two gay men could make the gay community in prison chaotic because the guards keep a close eye on us. If a fight happens, we will never feel comfortable when spending time with our partner. Guards will follow us.'

'A gay man will spend his time in prison with his partner only. A promiscuous gay man invites the possibility of conflict. They don't want to risk being transferred to another area. They don't want to provoke such intense jealousy.'

Communicable diseases are another problem. The spread of sexually communicable diseases has been alarming in prison. Most gay inmates do not use condoms when having sex. According to an in-depth interview, a condom is seldom used in prison. Jackson told us more about the reason:

'Wearing a condom suggests untrustworthiness, but I trust myself and my partner. I want to please him. So far, we are still doing fine.'

When Jacob was asked, a different response was obtained. He wanted to wear condoms, but he had none because of very tight security checks. He related that:

'I think gay inmates want to wear condoms and we know that it is the safest. But the problem is we have none. A pack of condoms comes from the outside. There are very tight security checks. Recently, a guard discovered that amphetamines were inside a pack of condoms. Since then, it hasn't been easy to get condoms.'

In this situation, communicable disease outbreaks, especially HIV, are inevitable. There are two major reasons explaining the outbreaks: false beliefs and lack of condoms. Some gay inmates believe that having sex without a condom shows sincerity and that they trust their partners (Kitzinger, and Peel, 2005). This is misleading because discovering communicable diseases requires blood tests, but these tests are not normally carried out in prison. A gay partner will never know whether his partner is free from sexually-transmitted diseases. However, some gay inmates fully realize the danger of the communicable diseases, but they take risks anyway because there are not enough condoms available. Problems from intense jealousy and the outbreak of communicable diseases are still not manageable. Ideally, the best way to solve the problem is to separate gay inmates, but the prison is already overcrowded. Transferring a hot-tempered gay inmate to another section may repeat the same problem in a new area. There are gay inmates in each section and the problems continue. The Department of Corrections needs a special space, such as a private room, but the budget for guards barely allows sufficient staff to monitor inmates closely.

CONCLUSION

In Thailand, gay people are gradually being accepted socially. Many sociologists have conducted research concerning the livelihoods of gay men. Homosexuality is a subculture and in many cases is hidden from the general public. In many cultures, heterosexuality is socially dominant, while same-sex relationships are perceived as sinful and receive strong social denial.

There is sizable research about the livelihoods of gay men in heterosexual society, but very few scholars are interested in gay men in different settings, particularly in prison. This article, therefore, presents information about the same-sex relationships of gay inmates in Nakorn Pathom Central Prison (Thailand). It offers insightful accounts of sexual intimacy among gay inmates and the problems arising from such intimacy.

The findings indicate that social denial toward gay inmates is less than in normal society outside the prison walls. As a result, gay inmates feel safe when projecting their gay identities. Gay inmates adjust themselves to their new environment quickly since they become members of a gay group. The gay community in prison will teach a new gay inmate the ways of gay prison life and also guide him to spend time with gay friends and straight inmates. Generally, everyday activities of gay inmates are under the rules and regulations of the Department of Corrections and under the supervision of guards. Talking among gay friends is usual. The topic of conversation centers on single gay men because they want to have partners.

A gay inmate will be told who is a single gay man. The establishment of a same-sex relationship occurs when a gay inmate knows that another inmate is also gay and single. The ultimate goal of being part of a gay couple is to have better treatment from another gay inmate. Gay inmates generally want to be loved and finding a partner is not unusual in prison. When they become a gay couple, their relationship will be obvious. It is agreed among gay inmates that a gay couple must be faithful to each other. Having sex outside the partnership will provoke intense jealousy which could result in physical altercations. Fighting brings the intervention of guards and gay inmates fear that such interventions could roil their gay groups. Guards will subsequently monitor the behavior of gay inmates, which may disrupt their opportunities for sexual intimacy.

A serious problem stemming from sexual intimacy among gay couples is the outbreak of sexually transmitted diseases. Gay couples do not use condoms when having sexual intimacy. Some gay inmates think that wearing a condom decreases sexual pleasure and could give rise to feelings of 'untrustworthiness'. This is an alarming situation because no gay inmate knows exactly who is free from sexually transmitted diseases because no blood tests are given. Very few gay inmates want to wear condoms, but even if did, none are available due to a lack of supply. Everything from outside the prison walls is thoroughly checked. Checking a pack of condoms takes time. Also, the condom supply does not meet the demand from gay couples.

More importantly, newly-admitted inmates should have their blood tested for communicable diseases, especially HIV. Early detection of sexually transmitted diseases is good for prison management because the Department of Corrections may use the information from blood tests to separate inmates and prevent the spread of disease.

It seems logical to argue that the prevention of same-sex relationships is not possible. The best way forward is to educate gay inmates about the consequences of sexual intimacy without a condom. Safe-sex practices should also be explained. Life for gays would improve if special rooms for gay couples were provided. However, such consideration depends on policies, budgets, and manpower. The Department of Corrections realizes the presence and difficulties of gay inmates, but the budget to tackle their problems is lacking.

We assume that different gay inmates in other prisons may offer different responses. We would, therefore, suggest that researchers broaden their focus to include lesbians and other prisons. In order to make the research on gay inmates more comprehensive, the research objectives should incorporate both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

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